

# LOUIS XVI'S REIGN AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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## Part 1 – Louis XVI's reign (1774-1789)

After Louis XV's long reign, the beginning of Louis XVI's reign raises the hope of philosophers who wish the French monarchy to finally manage to reform and transform society in the directions they have been pointing to for years: administration of justice, taxation, economy, religious tolerance, a better division of powers and the softening of a range of privileges inhibiting society evolution. And indeed, at the beginning of the reign, Turgot, Controller-General of finances, launches a tax reform and a series of economic innovations aiming to foster creation of wealth and free flow of goods, especially wheat. He also abolishes the *corvée* and the corporations.

Broadly speaking, it may be noted that Louis XVI's reign promotes a series of important political, social and judicial reforms: abolition of serfdom in the seigneurial system in 1779, suppression of the *corvée* in 1787, an edict granting a civil status to Protestants, still in 1787, or the abolition of torture in legal inquiries in 1788. But this ambitious program of reform of the monarchy goes against the interests of many important groups. Turgot is dismissed in 1776, replaced by Necker who will in turn be dismissed in 1781. And in the meantime, economic circumstances are becoming increasingly difficult. As a result, riots take place in the lower classes. There are the Canut revolts in Lyon in 1786, and more importantly many agrarian riots throughout France in 1789.

But it is striking to see that the king himself is challenged, mainly through his family. Book historians such as Robert Darnton have shown that many illegal pamphlets circulate, halfway between pornography and political denunciation, featuring Marie-Antoinette and her entourage and peddling scandalous rumours.

Power also comes up against obstacles in its very exercise. The Assembly of Notables refuses the program of the Controller-General of Finances from 1783 to 1787. To calm the situation, Louis XVI convenes the Estates General on May 5, 1789. On June 17, the Third Estate proclaims itself National Assembly. On July 9, a National Constituent Assembly is formed. On July 14, as we all know, is the Storming of the Bastille.

On a literary level, it is at that time that Enlightenment's great authors pass away, like Voltaire and Rousseau in 1778 or Diderot in 1784. A significant part of Diderot's work, like *Jacques the Fatalist*, *Rameau's Nephew*, or *D'Alembert's Dream*, will only be known posthumously. A new generation is born, and create a continuity with the previous generation. In theatre, the "serious genre" drama theorised by Diderot will infuse Beaumarchais' comedies, such as *The Barber of Seville* in 1775 or *The Marriage of Figaro* in 1784. Epistolary novels popularised by the success of Rousseau's *New Heloise* become a dominant form that will reach some kind of peak with Laclos' *Dangerous Liaisons* in 1782.

It is also a time marked by an appetite for pathos and sentimental outpourings, a neoclassical aesthetic celebrating a return to ancient forms and a desire for exotic horizons. The immediate success of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul and Virginia* in 1788 is a testament to these trends and aspirations. The revolutionary period is so eventful that it cannot be summed up in a few lines.

## Part 2 – The revolutionary period (1789-1799)

Let's just recall a few significant dates. August 4, 1789, abolition of privileges; August 26, *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*; July 14, 1790, Festival of the Federation; September 21, 1792, abolition of monarchy and Proclamation of the Republic; January 21, 1793, execution of Louis XVI. The Reign of Terror led by the Committee of Public Safety in 1793-1794, ends with the fall of Robespierre on July 27, 1794. The Directory replaces the Committee of Public Safety on October 26, 1795, and Brumaire 18 of Year VIII, that is to say on November 10, 1799, Napoleon Bonaparte takes absolute power and becomes First Consul.

The importance of literary production has long been underestimated for these years of political turmoil. But the period of the Revolution and the First French Empire has experienced a surge of interest in recent years and has been dubbed “the Enlightenment’s Turn”. It is a particularly interesting time because its authors are living through a tipping point in history, the world they knew having disappeared to give way to a fairly different society.

For example, Sade starts writing one of his great novels, *Aline and Valcour*, while he is imprisoned in the Bastille before the Revolution and only publishes it in 1795, after the Reign of Terror. Casanova writes his *Story of My Life* in the Castle of Dux’s library, telling the story of a world that has already totally disappeared. The violence of history and its extraordinary turnarounds are reflected in their works and give pause for thought to thinkers and writers alike.

The emigrant nobility especially finds in the events inspiration for meditation and novelistic scenarii. Examples are Chateaubriand and his *Historical, Political, and Moral Essay on Revolutions, Ancient and Modern* in 1797, or Sénac de Meilhan with his beautiful *Émigré*, still in 1797. And above all Germaine de Staël, daughter of Necker, who was minister of Louis XVI. Germaine de Staël writes, from the exile Napoleon keeps her under because she opposes him, an important work of fiction, political and even literary reflections. Let’s only name *On Literature Considered in its Relationships to Social Institutions* in 1800 or the famous *Of Germany* in 1813.