



## HISTORY STORIES



# 7 Key Figures of the French Revolution

These people played integral roles in the uprising that swept through France from 1789-1799.

UNA MCILVENNA • NOV 1, 2022

*The French Revolution. Credit: Fine Art Images/Heritage Images/Getty Images*

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The [French Revolution](#) changed Europe forever, as centuries of oppression under an absolute monarchy saw France's "Third Estate" rise up in violent protest in July 1789. On July 14, Parisians [stormed the Bastille](#), the fortress that stood as a symbol of royal oppression, and would eventually execute the king, Louis XVI, and his queen [Marie-Antoinette](#) a few years later.

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Influenced by [Enlightenment](#) thought, the Revolution's ideals of "liberté, égalité, fraternité" led to the abolition of feudalism, suffrage for men, and state control of the Catholic Church.

But revolutionaries were by no means united in their vision of this new republic, and increasingly draconian measures designed to root out "suspects" and "traitors" led to the Reign of Terror, when thousands of people across the country were executed as "counter-revolutionaries."

### **WATCH: Origins of the French Revolution**

Only the inexorable rise of [Napoleon Bonaparte](#) would put an end to the Revolution a decade after it had begun. It was a period when ordinary people suddenly did extraordinary things. Below are some of the key figures of the time.

## Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès

Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès was a liberal member of the clergy who, shortly before the Revolution, wrote a highly influential pamphlet called 'What Is the Third Estate?' Its argument, that the third estate (98 percent of the population) should have genuine representation in government, became the *de facto* manifesto of the Revolution.

In May 1799, Sieyès was made Director of the Republic, but disagreed with its corruption. In November 1799, Sieyès and his allies overthrew the Directory, allowing the popular military leader Napoleon to seize power in the coup of 18 Brumaire, which effectively spelled the end of the Revolution. Bonaparte, Sieyès and *Roger Ducos* were appointed as *Consuls of the French Republic* after the coup.

## Marquis de Lafayette

A liberal aristocrat, [Marquis de Lafayette](#) led French forces in the [American Revolution](#), and was revered in France as a military hero and supporter of liberty. In consultation with Thomas Jefferson and Abbé Sieyès, Lafayette wrote the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*.

After the storming of the Bastille, he was made commander-in-chief of the National Guard. However, when the royal family tried to flee France in the Flight to Varennes in June 1791, Lafayette was accused of being involved. His reputation suffered further when in 1791 the National Guard opened fire on protestors in the Champ de Mars.

Lafayette's moderate stance against growing Jacobin radicalism resulted in a warrant for his arrest. He fled France, but was captured by Austrian troops, spent five years in prison and returned only once Napoleon had seized power.

## Jean-Paul Marat

Jean-Paul Marat was the Revolution's most influential journalist. His periodical *L'Ami du peuple* (The Friend of the People) took a radical uncompromising stance towards the leaders of the revolution, especially the more conservative ones. Marat was a vigorous defender of the working-class *sans-culottes*.

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As head of the Committee of Surveillance of the Commune, Marat is believed to have been involved in the organization of the September Massacres of 1799 when over 1200 "suspect" people were slaughtered. Marat also played a substantial role in the purge of the moderate Girondins.

He was assassinated by Charlotte Corday, a Girondin sympathizer, while he was in a medicinal bath for his skin condition. The entire National Convention attended Marat's funeral, and he was hailed as a Revolutionary martyr.

## Jacques Pierre Brissot

Jacques Pierre Brissot was the most prominent leader of the Girondins, the more conservative faction of the National Convention. This group was made up of businessmen, merchants and financiers, and supported the idea of constitutional monarchy, as opposed to the more radical Montagnards, who argued for the needs of the urban working class. His influence was such that the Girondins were often known as Brissotins.

Following Louis XVI's arrest for treason, Brissot argued against his execution, calling for a referendum of citizens on the matter. When Austria and Prussia warned of retribution if Louis XVI was harmed, Brissot urged the Legislative Assembly to declare war on Austria in 1792, initially a disaster for the French.

On June 2, 1793, armed Parisians surrounded the Convention building and forced the expulsion of the Girondins. Brissot and his allies were declared enemies of the revolution and were guillotined in October that year.

## Olympe de Gouges

Olympe de Gouges was a playwright and Girondin who campaigned for the abolition of slavery and the rights of women in the new republic. Her 1791 Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen argued that if women had the right to mount the scaffold they had the right to mount the speaker's platform.

Gouges wrote to the National Assembly offering to defend Louis XVI in his trial, causing outrage. Her 1793 pamphlet "Les Trois Urnes" argued for a constitutional monarchy, which was a capital offense: she was guillotined three days after the other Girondins had been executed. Her execution was used to warn other politically active women from speaking out.

## Georges Danton

Georges Danton was a Jacobin, and leader of the Cordeliers Club, one of the political clubs of the French Revolution. In 1792 he was Minister of Justice, and gave a speech on September 2 that launched the September Massacres. He was the first president of the Committee of Public Safety, but after the expulsion of the Girondins he began to campaign against the use of force.

His former friend Robespierre would accuse Danton of being a counter-revolutionary, claiming that he had profited financially from the Revolution, and Danton met the guillotine on April 5, 1794.

## Maximilien Robespierre

A lawyer and noted orator, Maximilien Robespierre was the leader of the radical Jacobins in the National Assembly. He campaigned from the Estates-General onwards for universal male suffrage, the abolition of slavery, and the rights of the sans-culottes.

Upon the expulsion of the Girondins in June 1793, Robespierre's faction, the Montagnards, formed the Committee of Public Safety, the de facto executive government in France, with Robespierre at its head.

Under the Committee's Reign of Terror, approximately 40,000 people were executed or massacred. By July 1794, growing paranoia around who would be guillotined next led to the coup d'état of 9 Thermidor which saw Robespierre arrested and guillotined the next day.

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