

The Western World

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**Five Centuries of Political and
Cultural Dominance**

Peter Franken

Cover Illustration Note

The front cover features the India Gate in New Delhi. Commissioned by the British Imperial War Graves Commission and designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, this monumental triumphal arch was erected to commemorate the tens of thousands of Indian soldiers who lost their lives fighting for the British Empire during the First World War.

Architecturally and symbolically, the monument stands as the epitome of Western political and cultural dominance. It embodies the profound reach—and inherent contradictions—of an imperial system that mobilised millions from the global periphery to defend an order centered in Europe. Rising in the heart of New Delhi, the arch serves as a poignant visual marker of how five centuries of Western expansion, governance, and cultural projection shaped the geopolitical foundations of the modern world.

***'L'histoire est une suite de mensonges
sur lesquels on est d'accord'
Napoleon Bonaparte***

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Preface

The sixteenth century opened with two pivotal moments of encounter that, in retrospect, marked the onset of globalisation and the spread of Western civilisation across the globe. The first was Christopher Columbus's arrival in the Americas, which brought an end to the continent's isolation. The second was Vasco da Gama's voyage into the Indian Ocean, establishing direct European contact with the Far East. These events formed the prelude to five centuries of Western political and cultural dominance, conferring a uniform veneer upon much of the world.

Christianity: History of a Civilisation addressed this development primarily through a religious lens, reflecting the centuries during which Christianity, Christendom, and Western culture developed in near-total alignment. *Totalitarianism and Fascism: A Century of Ideocratic Regimes* subsequently examined the secular, totalising ideologies of the twentieth century that sought to supplant traditional religious structures.

The present volume expands upon these foundations. Alongside an examination of post-Enlightenment and post-French Revolution secular thought, it places the mechanics, expansion, and eventual retreat of European colonisation at the centre of its inquiry. Scope and analysis remain bounded by the geopolitical shifts of the mid-twentieth century, leaving the subsequent Cold War realignments, the rise of energy-driven geopolitics, and the conflicts of the twenty-first century to be addressed in the fourth and final volume of this series.

By the mid-twentieth century, the unquestioned foundations of Western imperial hegemony had decisively fractured. Following centuries of expansion and decades of profound global conflict, the international order stood on the precipice of a new era of structural realignment. By tracing these historical trajectories over five centuries up to the mid-twentieth century, this volume illuminates the structural foundations of contemporary global conflict.

Peter Franken

Rotterdam, september 2026

1. Revolutionary France

The Revolution of 1789

Just as the Reformation was, in retrospect, the defining event of the sixteenth century—its political and social consequences helping to shape the Western world in the centuries that followed—so the Revolution of 1789 serves as a watershed between two eras. The notion that the revolution in France could be dismissed after the Restoration as a mere temporary outburst, after which continuous development could resume its course, has proven untenable. The Western world was irrevocably altered by it, though this could only be objectively established later in hindsight. A similar phenomenon would recur later with the Second World War, marking a epochal divide between 'before' and 'after'.

Prior to an overview of the events that began with the storming of the Bastille on 14 July 1789—which only later proved to be the onset of a revolution—a brief sketch is warranted regarding the background and circumstances under the *Ancien Régime*, the customary designation for the rule of the Bourbons, and in particular that of Louis XVI.

Renaissance and Enlightenment

The Renaissance was a late-medieval cultural movement that originated in Italy during the fourteenth century and spread across the greater part of Europe over the following centuries. The Italian humanists who introduced the term *rinascita* (French: *renaissance*) held that after a period of decline—the Middle Ages—a new golden age had dawned, representing nothing less than a rebirth of the achievements of classical antiquity. Modern historians, however, discern no sharp break with the Middle Ages across many domains, emphasising instead continuity and the further development of processes that had already begun in the medieval period.

The influence of the Renaissance manifested primarily in the thought and sensibilities of the elite. This intellectual elite developed a lifestyle detached from the religious sphere, a process termed secularisation. The new, secular sphere of life was made visible above all in the arts and letters, centered on questions of morality and the position of the individual within society. The significance of the Renaissance becomes apparent chiefly in the marked shift in attitudes regarding taste and

style, decorum, etiquette, and education. Many medieval—Christian—values were called into question. Where medieval doctrine had glorified poverty, contemplation, and chastity, the Renaissance spirit encouraged the acquisition of property, active participation in civic life, and the enjoyment of earthly existence. The medieval worldview was fatalistic and pessimistic: humanity was fundamentally sinful and entirely dependent upon divine grace.

The Renaissance counterposed an optimistic vision of humanity, placing the capacity for self-development and self-determination at its core. Dependence on the clergy for the salvation of the soul was no longer taken for granted. This shift is clearly illustrated by the contrasting maxims of each era. The prevailing motto of the Middle Ages was *memento mori*—'remember that you must die'. Medieval society was preoccupied with death: one was expected to live piously and confess frequently so that, when the time came, one would be fully prepared for death and attain salvation. In contrast stood the Renaissance motto *carpe diem*—'seize the day': the imperative to make the most of one's earthly life.

The Enlightenment was a cultural-philosophical and intellectual movement in Europe that roughly coincided with the eighteenth century. During this period, a movement of intellectuals emerged dedicated to advancing the use of reason. The Enlightenment thus imparted a powerful impetus to science and fostered intellectual exchange. Its proponents combated superstition, judicial and ecclesiastical abuses, and intolerance, while championing fundamental rights. The Enlightenment generated profound societal transformations through individualisation, emancipation, secularisation, and global integration. The principle of equality, human rights, and civil liberties emerged from it, as did liberalism, socialism, and anarchism. A concrete manifestation of this 'new current' was the Constitution of the United States, a young republic founded on enlightened principles.

The decisive rupture occurred at the close of the eighteenth century with the French Revolution. This was no mere upheaval in an arbitrary nation, but a politico-social earthquake in the dominant superpower of the era. France was by far the most populous country in Europe, and its political influence extended far beyond its borders. More significantly still was its cultural preeminence; France set the standard in every domain. That the established order was overthrown in precisely this state—and that, after an interim period, the form of government transitioned from a kingdom to a republic—sent shockwaves across the entire continent.

The Ancien Régime

By the mid-eighteenth century, France remained a predominantly agrarian society; trade and, in particular, manufacturing contributed marginally to the national product. Governance was highly decentralised, and customary law prevailed across many regions, rendering a uniform system of jurisprudence virtually impossible to achieve. Administrative and judicial offices were routinely purchased or acquired through inheritance. While the monarch possessed absolute power in theory, the *parlements* exercised a formidable counterweight in practice. These bodies were not legislative assemblies in the modern democratic sense, but judicial tribunals vested with the right to review and ratify royal edicts. By withholding ratification and returning decrees for amendment or revision, the *parlements* succeeded for decades in frustrating any attempt at administrative centralisation and modernisation. The members of these courts belonged exclusively to the clergy and the nobility, using their authority primarily to preserve their own class privileges at the expense of the unprivileged Third Estate. Nevertheless, the *parlements* enjoyed considerable popular favour, as the public perceived them as a bulwark against royal despotism.

Louis XV attempted to curb the power of the *parlements* drastically, but died shortly thereafter, before his program of administrative reform could be fully consolidated. In 1774, he was succeeded by his inexperienced nineteen-year-old grandson, who would reign as Louis XVI until his deposition on 10 August 1792.¹ Seeking to appease the unrest ignited when Louis XV dissolved the traditional *parlements* and replaced them with new judicial chambers, the young king immediately rescinded his predecessor's measures. The move proved counterproductive. The restored *parlements*—most notably that of Paris, whose jurisdiction encompassed fully half the kingdom—emerged from the episode emboldened in their resolve to obstruct royal authority and block any innovation threatening the interests of the First and Second Estates.

Compounding this constitutional struggle were severe financial crises. The Seven Years' War (1756–1763) had ended disastrously for France, particularly in its contest with Great Britain for global supremacy. France surrendered nearly all its overseas possessions, including *Nouvelle-France* in North America. The conflict drained the treasury and permanently deprived the Crown of colonial revenues, while inflicting a devastating blow to French prestige within the European balance of power. Ultimately, it would take until the twentieth

century for the two rival powers to enter into a formal political alliance, brought about only by the emergence of a common adversary.

The loss of *Nouvelle-France* served as a direct incentive for the French Crown to support the rebellious American colonies during the War of Independence (1775–1783). French intervention proved decisive in securing the British defeat and enabling the establishment of the United States. To what extent France unwittingly introduced a Trojan horse remains difficult to quantify. The spectacle of subjects in British overseas dominions repudiating their sovereign and establishing a modern republic must have given many critical French observers profound pause. Moreover, participation in the American war brought the French state to the verge of insolvency.

The decade preceding the fateful date of 14 July 1789 was characterised by continuous friction between the Crown and the *parlements*, fought primarily over fiscal policy and the tenacity of the clergy and nobility in defending their tax immunities. In 1786, the Controller-General of Finances, Charles Alexandre de Calonne, presented an ambitious reform proposal to the King. Having convinced the monarch of its necessity, the administration confronted the central obstacle: how to secure the acceptance and ratification of the *parlements*. Calonne's three-stage strategy anticipated this challenge. The final stage called for orchestrating public opinion and winning over key representatives of the First and Second Estates—a necessary precaution, as the cornerstone of the proposal was a universal land tax collected in kind immediately after the harvest, levied on all landowners without exemption.

The introduction of this tax threatened the core privileges of the First and Second Estates. The nobility clung to the traditional doctrine that their contribution to the realm was rendered in blood through military service, exempting them from monetary taxation. By the late eighteenth century, modern warfare had rendered this feudal notion obsolete; while aristocrats retained the right to wear a sword, personal military obligation to the sovereign had long ceased to be an exclusive burden. Yet this reality clashed with noble self-perception, reinforced by the structure of the officer corps, where commissions remained the exclusive preserve of the aristocracy, bought and inherited like other offices of the realm.

The clergy was likewise exempt from direct taxation, contributing instead an occasional "voluntary gift" (*don gratuit*) to the Crown, which fell far short of the revenue Calonne's proposal sought to generate. The tax-exempt status of the Church was arguably more defensible than that of the nobility, given that priests performed essential

social functions in education and pastoral care. Nevertheless, the immense wealth of the Church, derived from vast landholdings and tithes, made evident that a substantial portion of its income remained unaccounted for by the state.

The second component of Calonne's plan envisaged the abolition of internal customs barriers, the deregulation of the grain trade, and the commutation of the *corvée* (statute labor) into a monetary tax, enabling public works to be funded directly from state revenues. Additionally, Calonne proposed a stamp duty on official documents, reminiscent of the legislation that had provoked such intense resistance in the American colonies.

As part of the third stage, the King convened an Assembly of Notables. To allow the proposed reforms to take effect, the Crown needed to buy time—at least two years—and restore the confidence of financial markets. A swift endorsement by the Notables, drawn from the First and Second Estates, was intended to signal approval of Calonne's program (and effectively the royal will), thereby exerting overwhelming pressure on the *parlements* to concede. The Assembly convened in February 1787; by May, no progress had been made. The attempt to manoeuvre the Notables into compliance had failed completely.

This impasse catalysed growing demands for the convocation of the Estates-General, a representative body of all three estates authorised to advise the Crown. Over time, the Estates-General had been eclipsed by the *parlements*; it had not met since 1614, an interval that felt like an eternity. In the traditional assembly, voting was conducted by order rather than by head, placing the Third Estate at a permanent structural disadvantage. Given that by 1787 the Third Estate vastly outnumbered the other two orders and represented the economic backbone of the nation, this procedure was no longer tolerable. The resulting political struggle quickly shifted from whether the Estates-General should be convened to whether the representation of the Third Estate should be doubled, and how votes should ultimately be cast. If voting remained by order, doubling the number of delegates would prove meaningless; hence, individual voting (*par tête*) became the central demand, alongside the issue of how delegates were to be selected.

What followed was unprecedented in European history. Indirect elections were organised across the realm, returning delegates from all three estates in every electoral district. From each of the 234 districts, the electors chosen in the first round selected eight representatives: two from the clergy, two from the nobility, and four from the Third Estate. This arrangement risked producing an unwieldy assembly

from the outset. Simultaneously, electors were required to compile their grievances, demands, and proposals into *cahiers de doléances*, with which their representatives were dispatched to Versailles. In several instances, the nobility submitted separate *cahiers* of their own. Europe would not witness another national election of such democratic scope until well into the nineteenth century.

The Estates-General convened on 27 April 1789 at Versailles, the seat of government and royal residence of Louis XVI. The First and Second Estates met separately to organise themselves, but the Third Estate refused to comply. Only by deliberating jointly could numerical parity be realised in practice; any separate organisation rendered the doubling of their representation void. An immediate stalemate ensued, as the nobility and clergy insisted on their traditional right to separate representation, citing the precedent of 1614.

Ultimately, the Third Estate took the initiative, declaring itself the sole legitimate representative of the nation and inviting the clergy and nobility to join its deliberations. A key figure in this manoeuvre was Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, an abbot from Chartres. In January of that year, Sieyès had caused a sensation with his pamphlet *What Is the Third Estate?*, in which he launched a devastating attack on feudal privilege. A nation, Sieyès argued, was a body of associates living under a common law; every privilege constituted an exception to that law and was therefore inherently illegitimate.

Because the electoral system permitted members of the First and Second Estates to be elected as delegates for the Third Estate, Sieyès had secured a seat among the commoners despite his clerical status. As the other two orders hesitated, Sieyès skilfully asserted his leadership over the assembly of the Third Estate, allowing debate to exhaust itself before seizing the initiative when momentum stalled. The assembly of the Third Estate was, Sieyès maintained, the National Assembly in its own right. If the other two estates chose to meet separately, that was their affair; the legitimacy of the Assembly was beyond question. Thus it was established, to the consternation of the Court and the nobility.

Primarily at the urging of his youngest brother, the Count of Artois, and his faction, Louis XVI attempted to reassert control by calling a *Séance Royale* of the Estates-General. When the delegates of the Assembly arrived at their meeting hall, they found themselves barred by the National Guard; by order of the King, the sessions of the Estates-General had been suspended. The clergy, which had voted to join the commoners, likewise found the doors locked. The delegates retreated to a nearby indoor tennis court, where they swore a solemn oath not to disband until a new constitution had been established.

With a substantial portion of the clergy now aligning with the Third Estate, the tide turned. The King himself dealt the final blow to the old order by yielding unexpectedly to pressure and instructing the nobility to join the National Assembly. The Assembly appeared to have triumphed. Under the influence of court conservatives, however, the King wavered, secretly ordering foreign regiments to march on Paris to quell potential unrest.

Initial disturbances broke out across the capital, as popular militias burned customs posts and raided armouries for weapons. The unrest intensified, culminating in the assault on the Bastille, where a large supply of gunpowder was believed to be stored. When the fortress garrison fired on the crowds, causing heavy casualties, the newly formed National Guard refused to fire on the populace. After mutinous guardsmen arrived with cannons to shell the drawbridge, the garrison surrendered. The date was 14 July 1789. In hindsight, this event is regarded as the defining onset of the Revolution. In reality, it was less an immediate ideological transformation than a collapse of royal authority: Louis XVI could no longer rely on the armed forces to maintain his rule. The absolute monarchy had effectively ended. The Assembly could now turn to the pressing issues that had prompted its convocation, above all the fiscal crisis. Yet fiscal reform suddenly lost its immediacy; the primary task was now the drafting of a new constitution, within whose framework all future measures would be determined.

The Constituent Assembly

The Assembly was not granted the tranquility to devote itself entirely to this monumental task. Unrest erupted rapidly in Paris and soon spread throughout the provinces. As ever, the exorbitant price of bread served as the immediate catalyst for riots and looting; the underlying cause, however, was a deep-seated resentment stemming from centuries of marginalisation beneath the social elite. This was the essence of the feudal system that still dictated French society.

This climate of instability afforded a faction of activist delegates the opportunity to execute a parliamentary coup within the Assembly. During the evening session of 4 August—a moment when attendance was expected to be relatively thin—two motions were introduced, both calling for the immediate abolition of feudalism as the structural foundation of society. In a state of collective euphoria, the assembly proceeded to pass a series of impromptu decrees, as though delegates were competing to outdo one another in revolutionary zeal. Not only

were noble and clerical privileges swept aside, but the property rights of bourgeois landowners were likewise dismantled.

When the smoke cleared, little remained of the established order. The clergy was effectively stripped of its revenues, while landowners were left to secure payment as best they could from tenants who no longer regarded themselves as subjects. While the statutory text provided for financial compensation for surrendered rights, the populace ignored these legal caveats entirely, acting instead in the radical spirit of total abolition. The result was years of unrest, marked by widespread violence and destruction across the countryside.

From its inception, the Assembly had maintained that the new constitution must be preceded by a preamble—a generic declaration serving as an overarching guide for subsequent legislation. On 26 August 1789, the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* was formally adopted. It reads as follows:

'The representatives of the French people, organised as a National Assembly, believing that the ignorance, neglect, or contempt of the rights of man are the sole causes of public misfortunes and of the corruption of governments, have determined to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, unalienable, and sacred rights of man, in order that this declaration, being constantly before all the members of the Social body, shall remind them continually of their rights and duties; in order that the acts of the legislative power, as well as those of the executive power, may be compared at any moment with the aim of all political institutions, and may thus be more respected; in order that the demands of the citizens, based hereafter upon simple and incontestable principles, shall tend always to the maintenance of the constitution and the happiness of all.

In consequence whereof, the National Assembly recognises and declares, in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being, the following rights of man and of the citizen:

1 Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be founded only upon the general good.

2 The aim of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man. These rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression.

3 The principle of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation. No body nor individual may exercise any authority which does not proceed directly from it.

4 Liberty consists in the freedom to do everything which injures no one else; hence the exercise of the natural rights of each man has no

limits except those which assure to the other members of the society the enjoyment of the same rights. These limits can only be determined by law.

5 Law can only prohibit such actions as are hurtful to society. Nothing may be prevented which is not forbidden by law, and no one may be compelled to do anything not provided for by law.

6 Law is the expression of the general will. Every citizen has a right to participate personally, or through his representative, in its foundation. It must be the same for all, whether it protects or punishes. All citizens, being equal in the eyes of the law, are equally eligible to all dignities and to all public positions and occupations, according to their abilities, and without distinction except that of their virtues and talents.

7 No person shall be accused, arrested, or imprisoned except in the cases stipulated by law and according to the forms which it has prescribed. Any person soliciting, dispatching, executing, or causing to be executed, any arbitrary order, shall be punished; but any citizen summoned or arrested in virtue of the law shall submit without delay, as resistance constitutes an offence.

8 The law shall provide for such punishments only as are strictly and obviously necessary, and no one shall suffer punishment except it be legally inflicted in virtue of a law passed and promulgated before the commission of the offence.

9 As all persons are held innocent until they shall have been declared guilty, if arrest shall be deemed indispensable, all harshness not essential to the securing of the prisoner's person shall be severely suppressed by law.

10 No one shall be disquieted on account of his opinions, including his religious views, provided their manifestation does not disturb the public order established by law.

11 The free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of man. Every citizen may, accordingly, speak, write, and print with freedom, but shall be responsible for such abuses of this freedom as shall be defined by law.

12 The security of the rights of man and of the citizen requires public military forces. These forces are, therefore, established for the good of all and not for the particular advantage of those to whom they shall be entrusted.

13 A common contribution is essential for the maintenance of the public forces and for the cost of administration. This should be equitably distributed among all the citizens in proportion to their means.

14 All citizens have a right to decide, either personally or by their representatives, as to the necessity of the public contribution; to grant

this freely; to know to what uses it is put; and to fix the proportion, the mode of assessment and of collection and the duration of the tax.

15 Society has the right to require of every public agent an account of his administration.

16 A society in which the observance of the law is not assured, nor the separation of powers defined, has no constitution at all.

17 Since property is an inviolable and sacred right, no one shall be deprived thereof except where public necessity, legally determined, shall clearly demand it, and then only on condition that the owner shall have been previously and equitably indemnified.'

The text was unambiguously inspired by Enlightenment principles, yet it drew no less heavily upon the American Declaration of Independence of 1776:

'When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. – That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, – That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.'

Both declarations articulate the fundamental distinction between legitimate governance and tyranny. By defining what is indispensable to the liberty and welfare of the populace, both texts expose the discrepancy between the existing order and the condition deemed imperative. For the American colonies, this entailed the outright repudiation of the British Crown in order to construct a new state upon modern principles—specifically, a constitutional republic on a democratic foundation.

In France, a parallel path was forged: the established regime was first indicted as despotic, followed by an exposition of the criteria a legitimate government must satisfy. The seventeen articles that followed served as a blueprint for the forthcoming constitution, heavily pre-determining its character.

Critically examined, the Declaration provides a concise definition of the modern constitutional state. Yet, much as remains the case two centuries later, freedom of religion and expression presented delicate dilemmas that elicited less decisive phrasing than other rights. Article 10 was calibrated to prove acceptable to a predominantly Catholic populace, even as the clergy resisted it, demanding that Catholicism remain the sole state religion. Henceforth, Protestants and Jews were granted liberty of worship, provided it remained discreet and avoided overt public display. Article 11 articulated a framework for freedom of expression that remains recognizable today. Article 6 summarily abolished the venality of public offices, opening them to all citizens. Given that roughly 70,000 offices had been distributed through purchase, this measure constituted not merely social democratisation, but deprived the Crown of a major revenue stream. While incumbent officeholders were displaced, this effectively constituted a seizure of vested financial interests. Article 17 addressed this conflict by mandating equitable indemnification in cases of state expropriation. Yet the status of numerous other feudal rights from which income was derived—rights that likewise represented a form of property—remained fraught. Here lies the clear divide between a legally regulated constitutional transformation and a revolution driven by popular force.

For the Assembly, the primary concern was not the volatility of the populace—which had temporarily subsided following the formal abolition of feudalism, only to reignite when it became apparent that little would change in the short term—but the position of Louis XVI. As long as the state remained a monarchy, the King remained its head. The Declaration of 26 August fundamentally transformed the monarch's status: he was no longer a King anointed by God. Article 3 established unequivocally that sovereignty resides in the nation, and that no individual may exercise authority not explicitly derived from it. Yet the dismantling of the *ancien régime* required royal assent to take legal effect. What if the King refused ratification? The same dilemma applied, albeit less fundamentally, to the abolition of feudalism.

This tension provoked fierce debate within the Assembly regarding the monarch's role in the envisioned constitutional monarchy, coalescing around the issue of a royal veto.

On 15 September, the Assembly voted 673 to 352 to grant the Crown a 'suspensive veto', allowing the King to delay the execution of legislative decrees for a specified period.

In so doing, the Assembly acted in direct defiance of public opinion and the radicalised populace that had secured its ascendancy in July. When the King subsequently procrastinated by sanctioning only portions of the decrees while summoning a royalist regiment from Flanders to Versailles, a political crisis erupted. The move bore all the hallmarks of another attempt to suppress the National Assembly. Behind these manoeuvres lay the machinations of Queen Marie Antoinette, her court faction, and the Count of Artois.

On 4 October, a spontaneous uprising erupted in Paris, led primarily by women. While ostensibly triggered by the exorbitant price of bread, it was fueled by the political instability and the looming threat of counter-revolution. Approximately 7,000 women marched on Versailles, occupied the Assembly's meeting hall in protest, and attempted to breach the palace. The confrontation ended with the King accepting an 'urgent invitation' from Paris to relocate to the capital. The crowd, which had swollen to some 70,000 people, escorted 'the baker, the baker's wife, and the baker's lad' in a triumphant procession to the Tuileries Palace. From that moment on, the royal family resided in an 'open prison'.

Days later, the National Assembly likewise transferred its seat to Paris, effectively placing the legislature under the surveillance of the Parisian populace, who would act as the guardians of the Revolution in the years to come. At the time, the peril of this arrangement went largely unrecognised; popular intervention appeared to be the sole mechanism capable of forcing the King to sanction the decrees and formalise the end of absolute monarchy. Yet in hindsight, the events of October 1789 proved far more decisive for the trajectory of the Revolution than those of July. In the autumn of 1789, the center of gravity shifted from the parliamentary chamber to the street. Thenceforth, the transformation became a *révolution populaire*—a upheaval driven and sustained by the crowd.

Against this backdrop, a passage from the American Declaration of Independence warrants reflection: *'Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.'* In short, one ought not to throw the baby out with the bathwater—an error France would commit repeatedly over the coming years.

Conversely, Mikhail Gorbachev's famous dictum from 1989 applies with equal force: *'Life punishes those who come too late.'* His remark was directed at Erich Honecker, who clung blindly to the rigid doctrine of the East German state while neighboring communist regimes were making concessions. The First and Second Estates had acted with similar intransigence, sabotaging every attempt at societal modernisation under Louis XV. It remains entirely plausible that a more constructive posture by the *parlements* might have averted the catastrophe of 1789 altogether.

The Constitution

The Declaration of 26 August served merely as a preamble to the constitution that remained to be drafted, though the most formidable hurdle had thereby been overcome: henceforth, the monarch was the head of state of a constitutional monarchy—no longer 'King of France', but *Roi des Français*. Subsequent efforts focused entirely on codifying the separation of powers as strictly as possible, while sharply curtailing the authority of the monarch. Executive power was to be exercised on behalf of the nation, while legislative authority was vested in a regular Assembly once the Constituent Assembly had concluded its work. The King was granted a suspensive veto over legislation passed by the legislative assembly. Through this mechanism, the head of state could delay the implementation of a law for up to two legislative terms, spanning a maximum of three years. Thereafter, the measure entered into force automatically, unless amendments had been introduced in the interim to expedite the process.

The election of delegates to the new Assembly proved a contentious issue. The mechanism used to convene the Estates-General was deemed excessively complex and susceptible to unwanted (read: counter-revolutionary) political currents. Consequently, a tiered system was adopted that distinguished between 'active' and 'passive' male citizens—effectively a property-based restriction designed to exclude the disenfranchised lower classes. This framework granted suffrage to approximately 4.3 million Frenchmen, who, through electors, ultimately returned 745 delegates to the Assembly. All public offices, with the exception of cabinet ministers, were henceforth to be filled by election, mirroring the system in the United States. While popular influence was thus constrained at the national level, citizens exercised direct control over local administration.

A crucial measure was the centralisation and administrative uniformity long advocated since the reign of Louis XV. The realm was parti-

tioned into 83 departments of roughly comparable size, population, and economic capacity. Each department was subdivided into districts and communes, with governance entrusted entirely to elected officials. The judiciary underwent a similar overhaul, marked above all by the abolition of the traditional *parlements*. These tribunals had combined legislative and judicial functions in a manner incompatible with the separation of powers. In any event, they remained too closely associated with the *Ancien Régime* and their history as an obstructive counterweight to administrative modernisation.

Meanwhile, the countryside lapsed into turmoil as the nobility alienated itself *en masse* from a society in which its institutional status had been formally extinguished. Looting, arson, and roving bands of brigands dominated the provinces and small towns. Universal tax evasion deprived the state of essential revenues. Many members of the former Second Estate fled abroad, joining the émigré courts of Louis XVI's brothers, the Counts of Provence and Artois, who had preceded them into exile.

In an effort to stem the fiscal crisis, the government adopted a drastic measure: the confiscation of ecclesiastical property. Two-thirds of the resulting revenues were earmarked for state funding of clerical functions, while the remainder was allocated to replenish the treasury. The underlying rationale rested on the premise that land belonged to the nation, not to the Church. Ultimately, the Assembly deemed partial confiscation insufficient; on 3 November, it voted 568 to 346 for full expropriation, committing the state in return to provide a reasonable allowance for the clergy. Where the nobility and other large landowners had previously lost substantial feudal rights, the former First Estate now suffered a decisive blow. While this measure appeared to conflict with Article 2 of the Declaration of 26 August, it was reconciled legally by invoking Article 17: national necessity (the impending bankruptcy of the state) justified expropriation, provided fair indemnification was promised.

The immediate problem lay in the disposition of these vast landholdings. Flooding the market at once risked saturating supply and collapsing property values. It was therefore decided to spread the sales over several years and, in the interim, issue government bonds (*assignats*) backed by the confiscated Church lands as collateral. These *assignats* were to be used to service and amortise the national debt; as the sale of Church property progressed, the state would redeem the bonds from holders. Because public confidence in the *assignats* remained low and state finances precarious, the government decreed on 17 April 1790 that these instruments would serve as legal tender.

Subsequently, the administration issued *assignats* far in excess of the actual value of the confiscated property. Predictably, rapid depreciation followed: by 1793, an *assignat* with a nominal value of 100 livres retained a market value of merely 40. Wealth itself had not evaporated; rather, it had transferred into different hands. Speculators who purchased land at depressed prices benefited enormously, while the state secured immediate liquidity during critical years. In lieu of straightforward taxation, the government had, in retrospect, resorted to an indirect mechanism for extracting capital from society.

These measures preceded the final ratification of the new constitution and were enacted by executive decree. Despite the severe impact on established interests, public confidence in the revolutionary process persisted sufficiently to frustrate the counter-revolutionary manoeuvres of Artois and his court. Nevertheless, the Revolution soon encountered severe turbulence, originating in the redefined status of the Catholic clergy in post-revolutionary France. Religion remains a potent social fissure, and revolutionary France proved no exception.

As argued in *Christianity: History of a Civilisation*, medieval Western Europe constituted a totalising society constructed upon a Christian foundation. While the Enlightenment had eroded this structure, the Church's grip on French society remained deeply rooted. The Concordat of 1516 had defined the balance of rights and obligations between the French Crown and the Papacy for centuries. Under that framework, Catholicism's status as the sole recognized religion granted the Papacy disproportionate influence over societal life. In post-revolutionary France, such an arrangement was untenable. The estate-based society had been abolished, and the First Estate as a semi-autonomous administrative entity acting on behalf of Rome had ceased to exist. Ecclesiastical officeholders were reduced to public functionaries whose duties were strictly confined to pastoral care, with all secular matters falling to the state.

The expropriation of Church property was merely an initial step, accelerated primarily by fiscal desperation. A specialised parliamentary committee was tasked with drafting a comprehensive reform of the clergy, which ultimately concluded that the Concordat of 1516 must be repudiated. The clergy was to be rationalized: the episcopate was reduced to 83 bishops—one per department—and the number of parishes was drastically curtailed, restricting communes with fewer than 600 inhabitants to a single priest. Everything was ordered toward tangible social output; monasteries dedicated exclusively to contemplative monasticism were deemed parasitic communities lacking public utility and ordered closed.

This program aligned with broader measures designed to modernise society, paralleling the overhaul of the judiciary. The critical rupture, however, occurred over the appointment of clergy. The state admitted only one method of appointment: election and confirmation by a representative body—a departmental assembly for a bishop, the Assembly for a metropolitan (one of ten), and a communal council for a parish priest. Because clerical functionaries were now state employees equal before the law to their civil counterparts, the state viewed this requirement as logical. Given the religious nature of the office, however, the clergy maintained that appointments ought to remain an internal matter subject to papal confirmation. While the reduction of offices left numerous priests unemployed, this was not the primary catalyst of crisis.

Tensions escalated rapidly, opening the first structural fractures within the revolutionary front. For counter-revolutionaries, the issue proved ideal: the new regime could be depicted as godless and inherently anti-religious. Compounding the conflict was the territorial dispute over the papal enclave of Avignon, which the French government sought to annex in conjunction with the repudiation of the Concordat.

The regulations governing the clergy were codified in the *Civil Constitution of the Clergy*. Its central requirement was an oath of loyalty that every cleric was mandated to swear to secure or retain office. On 26 December 1790, Louis XVI reluctantly sanctioned the decree, influenced in part by persistent silence from the Vatican. On this occasion, however, papal silence did not signify consent; Pope Pius VI was waiting to assess the balance of forces. As substantial numbers of French clergy refused the oath, prospects for resistance mounted. Despite widespread clerical unemployment, the government proved unable to fill vacant posts due to deep-seated opposition to the loyalty oath.

When the Pope issued a pastoral letter on 13 April 1791 formally condemning the Civil Constitution, the schism became absolute. Thenceforth, two distinct categories of clergy existed: 'constitutional' priests who had taken the oath, and 'refractory' priests who refused. Refractory clergy went underground, and many of the faithful refused sacraments from oath-taking priests—a stance shared by the King himself. Refractory priests were treated as enemies of the Revolution, and violent clashes frequently erupted when they were caught performing illegal pastoral duties.

This schism placed Louis XVI in an untenable position. He had assumed the new ecclesiastical arrangement would gain acceptance, much as previous reforms had been absorbed. Yet for a large segment of the population, the Revolution had crossed a critical line. Material

and institutional transformations, however radical, could be accommodated; religion, however, was non-negotiable. For many believers, eternal salvation depended entirely on the validity of the sacraments. Priests served as indispensable intermediaries between God and man, and the Pope remained the supreme earthly authority. The nation was deeply divided as a consequence—a rift so profound that Napoleon would later prioritise restoring relations with Rome through a new concordat, sacrificing ideological consistency for national unity, much as Henri IV had concluded that 'Paris is well worth a mass'.

Meanwhile, the Assembly continued its systematic restructuring of French society, at least on paper. It was not until September 1791 that the constitutional text was finalized, bringing about a moment of truth: the head of state was required to affirm its legitimacy. Neither the Assembly nor the public favoured a prolonged interim period resulting from a suspensive royal veto lasting up to three years.

At this junction, events took another dramatic turn. On 20 June 1791, Louis XVI and his family escaped from the Tuileries Palace disguised as the entourage of an aristocratic lady. The royal party traveled north by carriage toward Montmédy, near the border with the Austrian Netherlands—a destination the King later claimed was chosen to confer with his brother Artois. The escapees were recognized at Varennes and returned to Paris under armed escort.

The flight to Varennes presented the government with a profound crisis. The monarch had clearly intended to leave the realm. He had left behind a detailed manifesto outlining his objections to the developments of the preceding two years, explicitly repudiating the measures enacted by the Assembly, including the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. Louis XVI had exposed himself unequivocally as a counter-revolutionary; his flight was a calculated attempt to align with foreign supporters and émigrés to effect a restoration—if not of every feature of the old regime, then certainly of his own absolute authority and the status of the Catholic Church.

Rather than charging the King with high treason, the government initially suppressed his manifesto, propagating the official fiction that the monarch had been abducted. By maintaining this narrative, the Assembly avoided the immediate necessity of rewriting the nearly completed constitution to accommodate a republican form of government. It was widely assumed that from Montmédy, Louis XVI intended to return to Paris supported by his brother Artois and an Austrian army to suppress the Revolution and restore the pre-1789 order, so far as practicable—specifically abolishing the constitutional monarchy and

restoring the traditional position of the Church. When the King of Prussia and the Austrian Emperor issued the Declaration of Pillnitz on 27 August 1791 following a meeting near Dresden, it acted as a catalyst for further escalation. The declaration called upon European powers to intervene if the French monarch were threatened. It was intended as a warning to French radicals rather than a commitment to military action or an effort to restore Louis XVI to the throne in the event of a formal deposition. Indeed, the Conference of Pillnitz itself had focused primarily on the partition of Poland and the Austro-Ottoman War.

Although the declaration stopped short of threatening immediate military intervention in French domestic affairs, it was widely interpreted as an existential threat within the volatile atmosphere that followed Varennes. This perception contributed significantly to France's subsequent willingness to initiate offensive warfare against its neighbours. Shortly after Pillnitz, the finalized constitution was presented to the King on 4 September 1791. At the last moment, the *Civil Constitution of the Clergy* had been excised from the constitutional text itself. Consequently, swearing an oath to the Constitution did not automatically imply acceptance of the clerical oath—a concession to the King and to a substantial portion of the Catholic populace. A practical advantage of this separation was that future modifications to ecclesiastical law would not require a formal constitutional amendment; the clerical oath remained ordinary legislation that a future Assembly could amend at will.

On 13 September 1791, Louis XVI formally appended his signature to the Constitution. On 14 September, as its final act before dissolving itself, the Assembly voted to annex Avignon. Thenceforth, governance was transferred to a newly elected, regular Legislative Assembly.

From Monarchy to Republic

Although the Assembly had chosen, for reasons of political expediency, to absolve the King of all blame following Varennes, public confidence in the monarch was severely damaged. Consequently, every subsequent action—and inaction—of the Crown was scrutinized with deep suspicion. Various political groupings outside the Assembly played a pivotal role in this escalating tension. Following the relocation of both the Assembly and the royal court from Versailles to Paris, the legislative and executive authorities operated under the direct surveillance of the Parisian populace. While traditional historiography often dismisses their interventions as the mere influence of the 'mob',

the populace possessed a solid institutional foundation in the form of the Paris Commune.

The Commune was the revolutionary municipal government established after the storming of the Bastille and legally recognized in 1790 (*Commune légale*). It was headed by a mayor (*maire*) and a General Council (*Conseil Général*), elected across the 48 sections into which the capital was divided. Each section maintained a primary assembly where active citizens elected local administrative bodies and officials: a civil committee, a revolutionary committee, a prosecutor, a police commissioner, and a magistrate. On 25 July 1792, the franchise within the sections was broadened, drastically increasing the political weight of the lower social classes. Thenceforth, the sections functioned as the institutional base of the *sans-culottes*—a designation derived from their attire, as working-class men wore full-length trousers rather than the knee-breeches (*culottes*) and stockings characteristic of the affluent.

Members of the section committees and the Commune served extremely brief terms of office, rendering the political composition of these bodies subject to rapid shifts. Officials acted entirely within the immediate political moment—a structural dynamic that would recur a century later in the soviets that emerged in Russia after 1905 to form the structural base of a revolutionary government.

Furthermore, the sections commanded their own armed forces. By acting in concert, the sections could mobilize a formidable militia capable of imposing specific political outcomes through physical force. This capability propelled the revolutionary process in directions favoured by the Parisian populace, inevitably generating a profound structural tension between Paris, where political outcomes were dictated, and the provinces, which pursued vastly different interests.

Simultaneously, political clubs emerged as formal societies where members gathered regularly to debate the revolution and the future of the state. Certain clubs admitted the general public to their proceedings, transforming structured debates into mechanisms for shaping public opinion. Prominent clubs of the era included the Girondins, the Jacobins, and the Cordeliers. Supported by a proliferation of widely circulated newspapers and pamphlets, the Revolution was driven forward by a public opinion that continuously influenced both club leaders and parliamentary delegates.

Despite underlying tensions, the formal entry into force of the Constitution marked a fleeting moment of national reconciliation. Nominally, the King had acquiesced and accepted his redefined role. Whether his compliance was merely a calculated maneuver to buy time until the

Revolution fractured through internal division—or until foreign powers intervened—cannot be objectively determined. Nevertheless, two years after the outbreak of the Revolution, a royalist counter-revolution remained a distinct possibility. Louis XVI had by no means conceded defeat, and he deployed the sole effective constitutional weapon remaining to him with maximum impact: the suspensive veto. In addition to the King's brothers, the Counts of Provence and Artois, a substantial body of émigrés had fled the realm, congregating around these figures of the *Ancien Régime* in Koblenz and Mainz. The émigrés actively plotted a counter-revolution, posing a direct national security threat. In response to Varennes and the Declaration of Pillnitz, the newly elected Legislative Assembly passed legislation decreeing the sequestration of all property belonging to émigrés residing abroad without valid justification, explicitly including the estates of the King's brothers. The émigrés were ordered to return to France no later than 1 January 1792; failure to comply would be treated as high treason, punishable by death. The decree was presented to Louis XVI on 11 November 1791 and met with an immediate royal veto, abruptly terminating the period of reconciliation.

Simultaneously, the crisis surrounding refractory priests was escalating. The Assembly attempted to resolve the impasse by offering non-juring clergy a final reprieve. Under earlier legislation, refusal to swear the oath resulted in dismissal from office while preserving pension rights. The new decree imposed a renewed obligation to swear the clerical oath, this time under penalty of total loss of income and deportation. A clergyman opposed to the state was viewed as a wolf in sheep's clothing, capable of exerting subversively harmful influence over the faithful who secretly frequented non-juring sacraments.

On 19 December, this decree was likewise vetoed by the King. This veto, however, had been preceded by a shrewd diplomatic maneuver. In response to the veto of 11 November, the Assembly had resolved that if direct action against the émigrés was blocked, it would target their foreign protectors—specifically the Elector-Archbishops of Trier and Mainz. On 14 December, the King appeared in person before the Assembly to announce that he had dispatched an ultimatum to the Elector of Trier, demanding the cessation of all support for émigré activities by 15 January under threat of military invasion. This aggressive stance elicited immense enthusiasm, largely neutralizing the immediate political fallout from the veto of 19 December.

The King's underlying strategy, however, was transparent. Had war erupted with the German princes, Austria and Prussia would inevitably have intervened, thereby forcing a foreign invasion of France. Yet

this outcome was temporarily averted when the Electors yielded, ordering the émigrés to disband. Trier, Koblenz, and Mainz were geographically proximate to the French border and exceptionally vulnerable. Nevertheless, the Austrian Emperor could not resist issuing a fresh threat following Pillnitz, warning that Austrian forces would march immediately if the Electors were attacked, while asserting that other European sovereigns would undoubtedly join the conflict.

One did not need to be a paranoid conspiracist in the Paris of 1792 to perceive encirclement and treason against revolutionary France. The persistent support enjoyed by refractory priests was widely interpreted as foreign interference, orchestrated by émigrés under the leadership of Provence and Artois. Austrian and Prussian threats to intervene militarily to restore Louis XVI to his full authority emboldened internal opponents of the Revolution, who anticipated the imminent collapse of the regime. Conversely, these threats intensified alarm among radical revolutionaries. This dynamic created a political flywheel that propelled France almost irreversibly toward war—a preventative strike executed before foreign powers could consolidate their forces. The formal military alliance concluded between Austria and Prussia proved the final catalyst.

War as a forward escape—designed to divert attention from domestic crises and forge national unity by focusing on a foreign enemy—is a time-honoured political strategy. On this occasion, it initially yielded results beyond expectations. On 20 April 1792, France declared war and launched an offensive against the Austrian Netherlands, amidst widespread popular enthusiasm, particularly in Paris. Reverse followed swiftly, producing precisely the outcome Louis XVI had envisioned when he so readily endorsed the declaration of war. Prussia, however, indicated it was not yet prepared for immediate operations, delaying its full mobilization until June and granting France a brief respite.²

Despite this delay, widespread domestic chaos prevailed as localized civil conflicts erupted across various departments, frequently coalescing around non-juring clergy. In Paris, suspicion mounted against the King, the court, cabinet ministers, generals, and any figure eligible for blame. In particular, the King's repeated deployment of the suspensive veto to obstruct Assembly decrees was viewed as deliberate sabotage. The veto had been designed to prevent the total erosion of royal authority, preserving the executive balance necessary for a constitutional monarchy. Yet by deploying it systematically rather than exceptionally, Louis XVI transformed a constitutional safeguard into an instru-

ment of obstructionism, while his uncompromising posture toward Austria was increasingly interpreted as treasonous double-dealing.

Compounding these domestic crises, a massive slave rebellion erupted in Saint-Domingue in October 1791, initiating a conflict that would persist for years. The outbreak was hardly surprising, given that the white population constituted a small minority on the island. The Revolution had inaugurated its statutory program with a Declaration emphasising the equality of all men; slavery and racial hierarchies were fundamentally incompatible with its principles. Yet two years into the Revolution, the Assembly had failed to resolve the colonial question—an omission understandable given domestic turmoil, but unacceptable to the enslaved population of the Caribbean.

While geographically distant, the rebellion inflicted severe economic consequences on the metropole by disrupting the supply of sugar and coffee. While coffee was a luxury, sugar represented a primary caloric staple, comparable in dietary importance to bread. The resulting shortages fueled popular unrest, while the exposure of prominent politicians in financial corruption scandals linked to Saint-Domingue introduced another element into the growing catalog of perceived counter-revolutionary conspiracies.

On 25 July 1792, at the instigation of Georges Danton, the franchise within the Paris sections was broadened, effectively abolishing the distinction between active and passive male citizens. Initially executed extralegally, the measure was subsequently ratified by the Assembly, enormously expanding the political influence of the *sans-culottes* beyond the capital. Within the Paris Commune, a renewed revolutionary fervor gathered momentum, creating an atmosphere reminiscent of July 1789.

This tension culminated on 10 August 1792 in the armed assault on the Tuileries Palace, aimed at forcing the deposition of the King. Louis XVI and his family had already fled the palace to seek sanctuary within the Legislative Assembly. Nevertheless, the Swiss Guard defended the Tuileries against the insurrectionists, resulting in heavy casualties. Once the National Guard fraternised with the populace, the insurgents overwhelmed the defenders, and the majority of the Swiss Guard was massacred. In retrospect, 10 August 1792 was the decisive turning point of the Revolution; though less prominent in collective memory than 14 July 1789, it warrants equal historical weight.

Thenceforth, the Commune dictated the political agenda, reducing the Legislative Assembly to an executive instrument. The King and his family were incarcerated in the Temple, a medieval fortress turned prison near the present-day Place de la République. In the aftermath

of 10 August, the *sans-culottes* initiated a sweeping purge, crowding the prisons with suspected counter-revolutionaries and perceived enemies of the state.

Simultaneously, the war proceeded disastrously: Austrian and Prussian forces breached French defenses at Verdun and advanced toward Paris. Demands for the immediate summary liquidation of suspected traitors intensified, culminating in the September Massacres. Between 2 and 7 September, popular tribunals were improvised to conduct summary trials; during this period, approximately half of the Parisian prison population—between 1,100 and 1,400 individuals—was executed. For decades thereafter, political opponents would brand one another with the epithet *Septembriseur*, illustrating how deeply this stain marked the memory of the Revolution.

This purge had immediate military ramifications. By decree of the Commune, all citizens became eligible for voluntary military enlistment. This democratisation enabled the mass mobilization of manpower, allowing French forces to numerically outnumber the professional armies of Austria and Prussia, which relied on mercenary soldiers and aristocratic officer corps. The *sans-culottes* had initially resisted leaving Paris for the front out of fear of a prison uprising by counter-revolutionaries; once that perceived danger was liquidated, military deployment proceeded rapidly. On 20 September 1792, French forces unexpectedly halted the Prussian advance at the Battle of Valmy, prompting Prussia to initiate immediate diplomatic negotiations.

Simultaneously, elections were conducted to replace the Legislative Assembly. On the very day of the victory at Valmy, the newly elected National Convention assumed office, immediately decreeing the abolition of the monarchy and the proclamation of the French Republic. Thereupon, Prussia broke off negotiations, initiating a sequence of coalition wars that would persist intermittently until 1815.

Louis XVI had been imprisoned since 10 August and was now formally deposed. Referencing the ancient lineage originating with the Capetian monarch Hugh Capet in 987, the former sovereign was reduced to the status of citizen 'Louis Capet'. The revolutionary regime intended to settle a profound political account with the former monarch—a process legally more complex than it appeared. Nominally, his sole offense lay in violating his constitutional oath by conspiring with domestic and foreign counter-revolutionaries, a charge difficult to substantiate under strict judicial standards. Many radicals favoured an extrajudicial solution, arguing that Louis Capet was self-evidently guilty of treason against the Revolution and that a formal trial was