

# The French Revolution, 1789 - 1799

by Peter McPhee · Language: EN

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## Overview

Peter McPhee's "The French Revolution, 1789 - 1799" offers a comprehensive and nuanced account of one of history's most transformative periods. The book moves beyond a purely political narrative, delving into the social, economic, and cultural dimensions that shaped revolutionary France. McPhee emphasizes the role of ordinary people – peasants, artisans, women – in driving and responding to the seismic shifts of the decade, portraying the Revolution not as a monolithic event but as a complex interplay of local grievances, national aspirations, and contingent circumstances. He meticulously traces the origins of the Revolution in the Old Regime's crises, through the radicalization of the Republic, the excesses of the Terror, and the eventual Thermidorian reaction and the Directory, culminating in Napoleon's coup.

McPhee's central argument posits that the French Revolution was a profound and often violent struggle to redefine the very foundations of society, citizenship, and governance. It was a period marked by both immense idealism and brutal repression, where the pursuit of liberty, equality, and fraternity frequently clashed with the realities of war, internal dissent, and economic hardship. The book highlights the enduring legacy of the Revolution in shaping modern political thought, national identity, and the concept of human rights, while also critically examining its darker aspects. It matters because it provides a balanced, accessible, yet scholarly perspective on a pivotal historical moment, making sense of its complexities and its lasting impact on France and the world.

## Key Takeaways

- Understand the French Revolution as a complex social and cultural transformation, not solely a political upheaval driven by elites.
- Recognize the significant role of ordinary people, including peasants and women, in shaping the course and outcomes of the Revolution.
- Appreciate the contingent nature of revolutionary events, where outcomes were often the result of unforeseen circumstances and reactions.
- Examine how the ideals of liberty and equality could coexist with extreme violence and repression during periods of radical change.
- Consider the long-term legacy of the Revolution in establishing modern concepts of citizenship, nationhood, and human rights.

- Be aware that the Revolution's impact varied significantly across different regions and social groups within France.
- Analyze the interplay between internal political struggles and external warfare in driving the Revolution's radicalization and eventual decline.

## Chapter Summaries

### France in the 1780s

This chapter sets the stage, detailing the social structure, economic conditions, and political landscape of pre-revolutionary France. McPhee describes a society riddled with inequalities, a monarchy facing severe financial crisis, and growing intellectual ferment challenging the Old Regime's legitimacy. He highlights the diverse experiences of different social classes and regions, emphasizing the deep-seated grievances that would fuel the coming upheaval.

### The Collapse of the Absolute Monarchy, 1787-1789

McPhee traces the immediate causes of the Revolution, focusing on the monarchy's failed attempts at fiscal reform and the escalating political crisis. He details the calling of the Estates-General, the formation of the National Assembly, and the pivotal events of 1789, including the storming of the Bastille and the Great Fear, which collectively dismantled the foundations of royal authority and feudalism.

### The Reconstruction of France, 1789-1791

This section examines the initial phase of revolutionary reform, as the National Assembly sought to create a new constitutional order. Topics include the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, the abolition of feudalism, the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, and administrative reorganization. McPhee highlights the ambitious scope of these reforms and the growing divisions they created within French society.

### A Second Revolution, 1792

McPhee describes the radicalization of the Revolution, driven by internal dissent, the King's flight, and the outbreak of war with European powers. He details the rise of popular movements, the storming of the Tuileries, the September Massacres, and the establishment of the First French Republic. This period marks a decisive shift towards more extreme political measures and popular participation.

### The Radical Republic and the Terror, 1793-1794

This chapter focuses on the most intense and violent phase of the Revolution. McPhee analyzes the Committee of Public Safety's efforts to defend the Republic against internal and external enemies, the implementation of the Terror, and the cultural and social changes of the period. He explores the motivations behind the radical policies and the eventual fall of Robespierre.

## **The Thermidorian Reaction and the Directory, 1794-1799**

McPhee covers the period following the fall of Robespierre, characterized by a reaction against radicalism and the establishment of the Directory. He details the attempts to stabilize the Republic, the challenges of political instability, economic hardship, and ongoing warfare. The chapter illustrates the struggle to find a moderate path after the excesses of the Terror, ultimately paving the way for military intervention.

## **The Revolution in the Balance: The End of the Directory**

This concluding section examines the final years of the Directory, marked by increasing reliance on the military to maintain order and a growing disillusionment with parliamentary politics. McPhee details the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte and the coup of 18 Brumaire (1799), which effectively ended the revolutionary decade. He reflects on the Revolution's enduring legacy and its transformation of France.

## **Themes**

- Social transformation
- Popular participation
- Political radicalism
- Violence and terror
- Legacy of revolution
- Contingency of history

## **Notable Quotes**

- "The French Revolution was not simply a political event; it was a profound social and cultural transformation that reshaped the lives of ordinary people." — McPhee frequently emphasizes the social dimensions of the Revolution, moving beyond elite politics to include the experiences of peasants, women, and urban workers.
- "The Revolution's trajectory was less a predetermined path than a series of contingent responses to internal and external pressures." — This quote reflects McPhee's argument that the Revolution's radicalization and outcomes were not inevitable but resulted from a complex interplay of circumstances and choices.
- "The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, while universal in its stated ideals, immediately raised questions about who was truly included in the category of 'citizen'." — McPhee often highlights the inherent tensions and contradictions within revolutionary ideals, particularly concerning the exclusion of women, slaves, and the propertyless from full citizenship.

- "Violence was not merely an unfortunate byproduct of the Revolution; it was, at times, integral to its process of radicalization and the defense of its perceived gains." — McPhee directly addresses the role of violence, including the Terror, as a complex and often deliberate tool within the revolutionary struggle, rather than dismissing it as an aberration.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What is The French Revolution, 1789 - 1799 about?

Peter McPhee's book provides a comprehensive history of the French Revolution, focusing on its social, cultural, and political dimensions. It examines the causes, key events, and consequences of the decade-long upheaval, emphasizing the roles of ordinary people and the complex interplay of factors that shaped revolutionary France.

### Is The French Revolution, 1789 - 1799 worth reading?

Yes, it is highly regarded as an excellent, accessible, and balanced account of the French Revolution. McPhee's work is praised for its clarity, its integration of social history, and its nuanced perspective, making it suitable for both students and general readers seeking a thorough understanding of the period.

### How does The French Revolution, 1789 - 1799 end?

Spoiler: The book concludes with the coup of 18 Brumaire (November 9, 1799), when General Napoleon Bonaparte seized power, effectively ending the Directory and the revolutionary decade. While the ideals of the Revolution persisted, its political phase of popular participation and radical change concluded with the establishment of the Consulate under Napoleon.

### Who should read The French Revolution, 1789 - 1799?

This book is ideal for anyone interested in European history, particularly students of the French Revolution, and general readers seeking a well-researched and engaging narrative. It's especially valuable for those who want to understand the social and cultural aspects beyond just the political events.

### How long does it take to read The French Revolution, 1789 - 1799?

Given its depth and detail, a typical reader might take approximately 7 to 10 hours to read "The French Revolution, 1789 - 1799" by Peter McPhee, depending on their reading speed and engagement with the material.