1789-1791
NATIONAL (Constituent) ASSEMBLY

June 20, 1789  Tennis Court Oath
July 14, 1789  Storming of the Bastille
Aug. 4, 1789   “Abolition of Privilege”
Oct. 5, 1789   women’s march on Versailles

early 1790  first Church lands (*biens nationaux*) sold
July 12, 1790 civil constitution of the Clergy
July 14, 1790 Festival of Federation

more than a year passes

Sept. 30, 1791 final meeting of Constituent Assembly

LEGISLATIVE (National) ASSEMBLY

Oct. 1, 1791  first meeting of Legislative Assembly

Aug. 10, 1792 monarchy abolished

NATIONAL CONVENTION

Sept. 22, 1792 Republic declared
Introduction: Revolution as process rather than event
Why does it take so long to write a constitution?

- General principles have to become specific practices
- Assembly was not acting in a vacuum
- Assembly itself was increasingly polarized

Introduction: Why does it take so long?
The event: August 4-5, 1789

55 or more proposals
  60% made by nobles
  25% by the clergy

50% of proposals made by liberals* or radicals*
> 25% by ultra-conservatives *

3 proposals immediately rejected:
  total religious freedom for Protestants
  emancipation of slaves in the colonies
  abolition of nobility

“In the future, only wealth, talent, and virtue
will distinguish one man from another…. We are a nation of brothers. The king is our
father and France is our mother.”
Claude Gantheret (wine merchant)
deputy from Dijon, writing to his
brother-in-law, August 5, 1789.

* categories based on later votes; remember there were
no political “parties” in existence at this time

The National Assembly gives up all privileges
-the night of 4-5 August 1789

The general principle: abolish privilege
Night of August 4th-5th, 1789

Anxiety about
Events in Paris (lynching of accused grain hoarders)
“Great Fear” in the countryside
  disastrous 1788 harvest
  high levels of unemployment
  hopes raised by calling of Estates-General
  rumors of armed invasion

Idealism and the “heat of the moment”

But the entire “Old Regime” was based on privilege.
What does it mean to abolish it?

General principle: abolish privilege (why did they do it?)
September 4, 1789: twenty-one Ladies, all Wives or Daughters of Artists, Travel from Paris to Versailles to give their Jewelry to the Nation. They prefer to adorn themselves with their Virtues.

Patriotic Gift by Prominent Frenchwomen.

general principle: give things up, make sacrifices
The First and Second Estates make their confessions to the Third
“General absolution and complete forgetting of the past, as long as
you treat us as brothers, all children of the same fatherland.”

rejecting privilege meant giving up
what was particular and individual
in the name of the common, shared,
“universal”

rejecting privilege=embracing “public”

The general principle: give things up, make sacrifices
Jean de Pinteville, Baron of Cernon (elected as a representative of the Second Estate from central France)

“Last evening, the French showed a great patriotic character whose energy and heroism shall astonish Europe—or, rather, the universe. It is not a matter of sieges or of battles, but of having won the most complete victory over prejudices and personal interests.”
   (August 5, 1789; letter)

August 11: distinction made between abusive privileges and those that were a form of property

“The peasants don’t have enough money to pay off their champart [a percentage of the harvest owed each year] in cash. Instead, take back part of their land, and let them keep the rest without any payment. The lord will in this way acquire some magnificent possessions, far more advantageous than all these feudal dues.”
   (August 14, 1789; letter)

abolish feudalism: what does this mean in practice?
Abolish Privilege and “the Old Regime”

All taxes are illegal, but they should be paid anyway (June 17, 1789)

Abolish provinces
Divide France into uniform administrative units (departments)

Abolish venal offices
“nevertheless, officers holding these offices shall continue to exercise their functions and to enjoy their emoluments [fees] until the Assembly has provided a means to secure their reimbursement”

Venal officeholders among the deputies
Clergy 0%
Nobles 61% (mainly military officers)
Third 45% (judges, notaries)

abolish privilege: what does this mean in practice?
Dispersal of Power and Pressures on the Constituent Assembly

popular violence:  storming of the Bastille (July 14, 1789)
lynching of accused grain hoarders (July 22, 1789)
the Great Fear (summer 1789)
women’s march to Versailles (Oct. 5, 1789)
protests by mixed-race free people and enslaved in Saint Domingue (Oct.-Nov. 1790)

response in cities: creation of National Guard
municipal revolutions

“public opinion”: hundreds of new newspapers
Prudhomme, Les Révolutions de Paris
Desmoulins, Les Révolutions de France et Brabant
Marat, L’Ami du peuple
Royer, L’Ami du roi
Hébert, Le Père Duchesne
political clubs and local assemblies
Paris “sections”
 Jacobin Club (Society of the Friends of the Constitution)

And what about the King?  
Assembly was not acting in a vacuum
What about the King?

September 1789: National Assembly votes that he has “suspensive” veto
Refuses to endorse decrees that “abolish privilege”

February 1790: Personal appearance in the Assembly

May 1790: Constitution prohibits “offensive wars”

July 14, 1790: Festival of Federation

*General Federation of the French on the Champ de Mars, 14 July 1790.*
But the King, too, was not acting in a vacuum:
recalls Necker, but financial crisis continues

brother (Comte d’Artois) leaves France in July 1789; coordinates émigrés

What about the Queen?

My dear brother,

I agree with you: the situation is bad and it is getting worse. … All around me, it seems they are resigned to accepting a very small role to play, but I do not like to see the power of the throne given up so cheaply. … The Assembly is the source of all evil; it is trying to take all the power and completely annihilate the King; it seemed to me we should have tried to make a deal with the leaders and win them over. The most dangerous of them all is Mirabeau… but I have such a horror him that I cannot imagine having any dealings with him… Moreover, there would have to be secret coordination with the King’s ministers. Mr. Necker would never agree and Mr. Lafayette, who has great power over the people, would also make trouble because he is too proud …

letter, Feb. 26, 1790 to her brother, Emperor Joseph I of Austria.
Nobody acted in a vacuum; as action and re-action continued, debate (in the Assembly, in the press, in clubs and cafes, etc. etc.) became increasingly polarized.

“Heavens above, this is unpardonable!”
Debt, Deficit, and the Costs of Revolution

*biens nationaux* (national properties)

8-10% of property in France estimated to be far greater

Nov. 1789 Church properties put “at disposal” of the nation

spring 1790 first sales of *biens* at auction

not acting in a vacuum: general principles have to be put into practice, which polarizes debate

Time gathers ashes from the Altar of the Fatherland where the papers and parchments of privilege are still smoldering; Time marks the foreheads of Bishops, Princes, and nobles with ashes and says “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust”
Civil Constitution of the Clergy (decree voted July, 12 1790)

parish priests all paid by the state

State becomes responsible for poor relief, nursing, education

bishops to be elected by all active citizens (including Protestants and Jews)

all members of the clergy have to take oath of loyalty to the Nation

March 1791 condemned by Pope

May 1791 priests who refuse to take oath can still preach, but have to find their own buildings, pay own expenses, etc.

“I swear to uphold the Constitution with all my power”
The Event: the “Flight to Varennes” (June 20, 1791)

“The King has abandoned not just the nobility, the clergy, and the whole right side of the Assembly to the fury of the mobs, but he has also abandoned his friends, his servants, and his ministers. Such conduct is atrocious.”

[former Marquis de] Ferrieres, letter to his wife, June 1791.

June 20   royal family flees Paris; caught near the border
June 25   royal family returns to Paris; king’s power provisionally suspended
July 16   after days of debate, Assembly decides:
          the person of the king is inviolable
          the royal family had been victims of a plot (they were “abducted”)
          Louis to regain full power when he ratifies the new Constitution
Credits
1. Varennes (Meuse), France; photo credit misplaced.
2. Jacques Louis David, sketches for The Tennis Court Oath (unfinished); www.photo.rmn.fr
3. The National Assembly gives up all privileges; Night of August 4-5, 1789; hand-colored print; gallica.bnf.fr
4. citation mislaid
5. …Wives and Daughters of Artists print; gallica.bnf.fr; Noted Frenchwomen www.photo.rmn.fr
6. The Third Estate, Confessor; print, 1789; gallica.bnf.fr
10. The Third Estate, Confessor; print, 1789; gallica.bnf.fr
11. Time marks the Foreheads… gallica.bnf.fr
12. plate, Carnavelet Museum, Paris; photo, RLSpang