

Unit 5: Conflict, Crisis, and Reaction in the Late 18th Century

Unit 5 covers the French Revolution, the rise and fall of Napoleon, the conservative settlement at the Congress of Vienna, and the cultural turn of Romanticism. It is the story of a revolution that promised liberty and equality, turned radical, was tamed by an emperor, and was then answered by monarchs and by artists.

AP European History

French Revolution · Napoleon

About 12 minutes to read

How to use this guide

Read it in order the first time because the events build on each other. The unfairness of the Estates System drives the Revolution's first phase. The Revolution's crisis produces the Terror. The Terror produces the reaction that lets Napoleon seize power. Napoleon's defeat produces the Congress of Vienna, and the whole upheaval feeds Romanticism.

After the first read, use the trap boxes and the confusions table to review the distinctions that exam questions test most often. Finish with the practice questions, then complete the recall check on the last page out loud and note any items you cannot explain yet.

What this unit is worth. Unit 5 sits inside Period 2 (c. 1648 to 1815), which together with Unit 4 covers the Period 2 span of the exam, about a fifth of the course by unit weighting. The French Revolution and Napoleon are the most tested topics in the unit. Exam questions often ask you to trace cause and effect across the whole arc, from the Estates System through the Terror to the Congress of Vienna, so keep the sequence straight.

5.4 The French Revolution: How It Started

The **French Revolution** overthrew the French monarchy, dismantled the **Estates System**, and proclaimed liberty and equality. It began as a fiscal and political crisis and became a revolution about what a legitimate society should look like.

The **Estates System** divided France into three legal orders. The First Estate was the clergy, the Second Estate was the nobility, and the Third Estate was everyone else, meaning the commoners. The unfairness of this arrangement fueled revolution. The first two estates held most of the privilege and paid little tax, while the Third Estate paid most of the taxes and had the least political power. When the king called the Estates-General in 1789 to approve new taxes, the Third Estate demanded real representation.

The Third Estate broke away and formed the **National Assembly**, claiming to represent the nation itself rather than one estate. Then came the **Tennis Court Oath**, the Assembly's pledge not to disband until a constitution was written. This was the moment a tax dispute turned into a revolution. The Assembly was saying it would not go home until France had a new political order.

The **Storming of the Bastille** on July 14, 1789 was the Revolution's symbolic first victory. A Parisian crowd seized the royal fortress-prison. The Bastille held few prisoners and had little military value, but it stood for arbitrary royal power, so taking it announced that the Revolution would defend itself.

Trap. At the Tennis Court Oath stage, the Revolution was still trying to reform the monarchy, not abolish it. The Oath demanded a constitution, not a republic. Do not read the radical phase of 1793 backward into the moderate phase of 1789. Exam questions test whether you can place events in the right phase of the Revolution.

5.4 The French Revolution: Ideals and Their Limits

The **Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen**, issued in August 1789, was the Revolution's founding charter. It proclaimed liberty, legal equality, and popular sovereignty. Its opening claim, that men are born free and equal in rights, made it the most famous statement of revolutionary ideals in Europe.

Those ideals had limits, and **Olympe de Gouges** exposed them. She was a writer who demanded women's rights during the Revolution, most famously in her 1791 *Declaration of the Rights of Woman*, written as a direct answer to the male-only language of the original. Her point was that a revolution claiming universal equality while excluding women was contradicting itself.

This contradiction runs through the whole unit and the exam loves it. The Revolution proclaimed universal principles while excluding women, while slavery continued in French colonies, and while the propertyless had fewer political rights than property owners. On the exam, a question about the limits of revolutionary ideals is really asking whether you know the ideals were applied selectively.

Trap. Do not confuse the two declarations. The *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* (1789) is the official revolutionary charter. Olympe de Gouges wrote her *Declaration of the Rights of Woman* in 1791 to criticize it. Questions about women in the Revolution usually want Gouges, and questions about the Revolution's stated principles usually want the 1789 document.

5.4 The French Revolution: The Radical Phase

The **Jacobins** were the radical revolutionary club that drove the Revolution's most extreme phase. Their leader, **Maximilien Robespierre**, is the figure most associated with the **Reign of Terror**, the radical phase of the Revolution marked by mass executions of perceived enemies under his leadership.

The Terror ran from 1793 to 1794. It was not the monarchy killing revolutionaries. It was the revolutionary government killing people it judged to be enemies of the revolution, using tribunals and the guillotine. France was at war with most of Europe at the same time, and the Jacobins argued that terror was necessary to save the republic from internal and external enemies. Robespierre himself was executed in July 1794, which ended the Terror.

Alongside the Terror and price and wage controls, the Jacobin republic pursued **de-Christianization**, the policy of suppressing Catholic institutions and culture. Churches were closed, clergy were persecuted, and the Revolution tried to replace Catholicism with revolutionary cults. This tells you how far the Jacobins meant to go. They were not just changing the government. They were trying to remake French culture from the ground up.

The **levée en masse** was mass conscription. In 1793 the revolutionary government ordered all unmarried men of military age into the army, and in effect mobilized the whole society for war. It raised enormous revolutionary armies seeking to bring the changes initiated in France to the rest of Europe. This was a new kind of war, fought by citizen armies for an ideology rather than by professional soldiers for a king.

Trap. The Reign of Terror was revolutionary violence, not royal violence. A common wrong answer describes the Terror as the king's revenge on the revolutionaries. Robespierre was a Jacobin revolutionary, the king was already dead, and the victims were people the Jacobins called enemies of the republic.

5.6 Napoleon's Rise, Dominance, and Defeat

Napoleon Bonaparte was the French general who seized power in 1799, conquered much of Europe, and spread revolutionary legal reforms before his defeat. He is the bridge between the Revolution and the reaction against it. He kept the Revolution's administrative and legal changes but ruled as an authoritarian emperor, which is why historians argue about whether he continued the Revolution or ended it.

The **Civil Code**, also called the **Napoleonic Code**, was his most enduring reform. Issued in 1804, it established legal equality and property rights across the territories he controlled. It kept the Revolution's attack on feudal privilege and made the law the same for all men, which is why it outlasted his empire and shaped European law long after he fell.

The **Continental System** was Napoleon's economic warfare against Britain. It was a blockade meant to cripple Britain's economy by shutting European ports to British goods. It failed, and the attempt damaged the economies of France's own allies and occupied territories, which helped turn Europe against him.

Napoleon abdicated in 1814 and was defeated for good at Waterloo in 1815. His fall ended the wars that had consumed Europe since 1792 and set up the settlement at Vienna.

Trap. Napoleon holds both halves at once, and exam questions test both. He spread revolutionary reforms like the Civil Code across Europe, which counts as continuing the Revolution. He also crowned himself emperor, censored the press, and ruled as a dictator, which counts as ending it. An answer that picks only one half is usually the distractor.

5.7 The Congress of Vienna

The **Congress of Vienna** (1814 to 1815) was the settlement the great powers built after Napoleon's defeat. It restored monarchies, redrew the map of Europe, and established a **balance of power** meant to keep any one state from dominating the continent again.

Understand it as the conservative reaction to everything the unit has covered. The delegates at Vienna, led by figures like Austria's Metternich, believed the Revolution and Napoleon had shown what happens when old institutions fall. Their answer was legitimacy, meaning restored hereditary monarchs, and containment of liberal and nationalist ideas. It was a peace built on the idea that revolution was the disease and monarchy was the cure.

5.8 Romanticism

Romanticism was the early 19th century cultural movement that emphasized emotion, nature, and individualism in reaction to Enlightenment reason. Where the Enlightenment trusted reason and rules, the Romantics trusted feeling and imagination. It showed up in literature, painting, and music, and it carried nationalist energy with it, since celebrating a nation's folk culture and history fed the nationalism that would challenge the Vienna settlement.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 to 1827) bridges the Classical and Romantic eras in music. The German composer expanded the symphony's scale and emotional range, most famously in the Fifth and the choral Ninth, made the composer's individual expression central to music, and kept composing after going deaf. He is the Romantic ideal in a person, the solitary genius creating from inner feeling rather than following established rules.

Confusions That Cost Points

PAIR	HOW TO KEEP THEM STRAIGHT
Tennis Court Oath vs Storming of the Bastille	The Oath (June 1789) was the National Assembly's political pledge to write a constitution. The Bastille (July 14, 1789) was the crowd's violent symbolic victory. One is a promise, the other is a seizure.
The two Declarations	The 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen is the official charter. Gouges wrote her Declaration of the Rights of Woman in 1791 to attack its exclusions.
Reign of Terror vs royal repression	The Terror was revolutionaries executing perceived enemies of the republic under Robespierre. The monarchy was already gone. Get the direction of the violence right.
Napoleon continues vs ends the Revolution	He continued it through reforms like the Civil Code and ended it through dictatorship and empire. Both answers are true, so look for the question asking which side a fact supports.
Congress of Vienna vs revolutionary ideals	Vienna restored monarchies and balanced power against revolution. It was a conservative settlement, not a victory for liberty or nationalism.
Romanticism vs Enlightenment	The Enlightenment trusted reason and universal rules. Romanticism reacted with emotion, nature, and individual expression. Beethoven marks the turn in music.

Practice Questions

Original questions written for this guide in the style of the AP exam. Answers and explanations are on the next page, so complete the questions before checking them.

- 1.** Which of the following best describes the Estates System in France before the Revolution?
 - A. Three elected assemblies that shared legislative power with the king
 - B. Three legal orders, clergy, nobility, and commoners, in which privilege and tax burdens were distributed unfairly
 - C. A system of regional parliaments that blocked all royal decrees
 - D. Three social classes with equal legal rights but unequal wealth

- 2.** The Tennis Court Oath is best understood as
 - A. a declaration of war against Austria and Prussia
 - B. the National Assembly's pledge not to disband until a constitution was written
 - C. the Jacobins' vote to begin the Reign of Terror
 - D. Olympe de Gouges's demand for women's rights

- 3.** The levée en masse is most significant because it
 - A. abolished the French monarchy and proclaimed a republic
 - B. established legal equality and property rights across Napoleon's empire
 - C. created mass citizen armies that spread revolutionary changes across Europe
 - D. restored the Catholic Church after de-Christianization

- 4.** The Congress of Vienna (1814 to 1815) is best characterized as
 - A. a conservative settlement that restored monarchies and established a balance of power
 - B. a democratic peace conference that spread constitutions across Europe
 - C. a military alliance formed to support Napoleon's return
 - D. a trade agreement that ended the Continental System

Answer Key

1. B. The Estates System divided France into the clergy, the nobility, and the commoners, with the first two holding privilege and paying little tax while the Third Estate carried most of the tax burden. A describes a constitutional arrangement France did not have. C confuses the estates with the parlements, the regional courts that resisted the king. D gets the inequality backward; the estates had unequal legal rights, which was the point.

2. B. The National Assembly pledged not to disband until a constitution was written, turning a tax dispute into a revolution. A confuses the Oath with the war that came years later in 1792. C places the Terror, which began in 1793, four years too early. D belongs to Olympe de Gouges and her 1791 Declaration of the Rights of Woman.

3. C. Mass conscription in 1793 raised enormous revolutionary armies that carried France's changes into the rest of Europe, creating a new kind of ideological war fought by citizens. A describes what the National Convention did, not the levée en masse. B describes the Civil Code of 1804. D never happened; the Concordat of 1801 reconciled Napoleon with the Church, not the levée en masse.

4. A. Vienna restored hereditary monarchs, redrew borders, and built a balance of power to prevent another revolution or another Napoleon. B reverses the settlement's character; it was conservative, not democratic. C reverses its purpose; the powers met to keep Napoleon down, not bring him back. D describes an economic effect of Napoleon's defeat, not what the Congress was.

One-Page Recall Check

- Describe the three estates and explain why the system was unfair.
- Explain what the National Assembly was and what the Tennis Court Oath pledged.
- State the date of the Storming of the Bastille and explain its symbolic importance.
- Summarize the three principles of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen and give its date.
- Explain how Olympe de Gouges challenged the Revolution's ideals.
- Identify the Jacobins and Maximilien Robespierre and their role in the radical phase.
- Describe the Reign of Terror, its dates, and who its violence was directed against.
- Explain de-Christianization and what it shows about Jacobin goals.
- Define the levée en masse and explain why it changed warfare.
- Explain how Napoleon both continued and ended the Revolution.
- Describe the Civil Code and the Continental System and what each was meant to do.
- Summarize the Congress of Vienna, its dates, and its three main goals.
- Define Romanticism and explain how it reacted against the Enlightenment.
- Explain why Beethoven is described as bridging the Classical and Romantic eras.

Where to go next. Turn every missed item above into flashcards and drill them spaced out over several days rather than in one sitting. In Rycal, open the AP European History deck. The deck covers the terms in this guide, and its practice questions target the same traps named here. If you have a test date, add it in the Test Planner. You can also start your next review with a Brain Dump, then check what you missed against this guide.

Key terms for this unit

De-Christianization, French Revolution, Jacobins, Levée en masse, Maximilien Robespierre, Reign of Terror, Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, Estates System, National Assembly, Olympe de Gouges, Storming of the Bastille, Tennis Court Oath, Napoleon Bonaparte, Civil Code (Napoleonic Code), Continental System, Congress of Vienna (1814–1815), Romanticism, Ludwig van Beethoven.

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