

King Louis XVI

King of France

On May 10, 1774, Louis Auguste became Louis XVI, with the death of his grandfather Louis XV. Only 20 years old at the time, Louis XVI was immature and lacked self-confidence. He wanted to be a good king and help his subjects, but he faced enormous debt and rising resentment towards a despotic monarchy. His failure to successfully address serious fiscal problems would dog him for most of his reign. Louis lacked sufficient strength of character and decisiveness to combat the influence of court factions or give support to reformers in their efforts to improve France's government.

In the early years of his reign, Louis XVI focused on religious uniformity and foreign policy. On the homefront, he invoked an edict that granted French non-Catholics legal status and the right to openly practice their faith. Louis XVI's early foreign policy success was supporting the American colonies' fight for independence from France's archenemy Great Britain. However, the policy of taking out international loans and not raising taxes increased the debt and drove the country to near bankruptcy by the mid-1780s. This forced the king to support radical fiscal reforms not favorable with the nobles or the people.



When the pressure mounted, Louis XVI reverted to his earlier teaching of being austere and uncommunicative, posing no solution to the problem, and not responding to others who offered help. His failure to address France's problems set in motion the Revolution that would eventually descend upon him. He made matters worse by often escaping to more pleasurable activities like hunting and locksmithing. Modern historians attribute this behavior to a clinical depression that left him prone to paralyzing indecisiveness.

Louis's Reaction To The Revolution

After 1789 Louis XVI's incapacity to rule, his irresolution, and his surrender to reactionary influences at court were partially responsible for the failure to establish in France the forms of a limited constitutional monarchy. He allowed himself to be persuaded that royal dignity required him to avoid communication with the deputies assembled at Versailles, and he made no attempt to lay out a program that might have attracted their support. At critical moments, he was distracted by the illness and death of his eldest son, the dauphin (June 4, 1789).

By this time the fundamental weakness of the king's character had become evident. Lethargic in temperament, lacking political insight, and therefore incapable of appreciating the need to compromise, Louis continued to divert himself by hunting and with his personal hobbies of making locks and doing masonry. His dismissal of Necker in early July 1789 set off popular demonstrations culminating in the storming of the Bastille, which forced the king to accept the authority of the newly proclaimed National Assembly. Despite his reluctance, he had to endorse its "destruction" of the feudal regime and its Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in August. The king privately continued to believe that the Revolution would burn itself out. Publicly, however, he appeared ready to accept his new role as constitutional monarch, and gestures such as his visit to Paris after the storming of the Bastille led to an upsurge in his popularity; in early August 1789 the National Assembly proclaimed him the "restorer of French liberty."

Attempt To Flee The Country

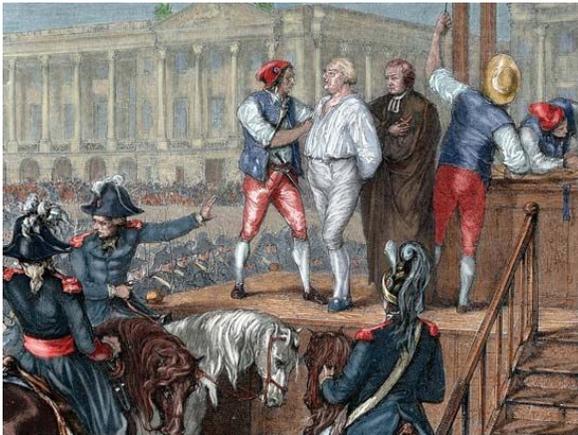
Louis's resistance to popular demands was one of the causes of the forcible transfer of the royal family from Versailles to the Tuileries Palace in Paris on October 6. Yet he made still more mistakes, refusing to follow the secret advice tendered to him after May 1790 by the comte de Mirabeau, abdicating his responsibilities, and acquiescing in a disastrous attempt to escape from the capital to the eastern frontier on June 21, 1791. Caught at Varennes and brought back to Paris, he lost credibility as a constitutional monarch. Thenceforward he seems to have been completely dominated by the queen, who must bear the chief blame for the court's subsequent political duplicity. From the autumn of 1791 the king tied his hopes of political salvation to the dubious prospects of foreign intervention. At the same time, he encouraged the Girondin

faction in the Legislative Assembly (which had succeeded the National Assembly in September 1791) in their policy of war with Austria, in the expectation that French military disaster would pave the way for the restoration of his authority. Prompted by Marie-Antoinette, Louis rejected the advice of the moderate constitutionalists, led by Antoine Barnave, to faithfully implement the constitution of 1791, which he had sworn to maintain, and committed himself to a policy of subterfuge and deception.

The outbreak of the war with Austria in April 1792, the suspected machinations of the queen's "Austrian committee," and the publication of the manifesto by the Austrian commander, the duke of Brunswick, threatening the destruction of Paris if the safety of the royal family were again endangered, led to the capture of the Tuileries by the people of Paris and provincial militia on Aug. 10, 1792. It also led to the temporary suspension of the king's powers by the Legislative Assembly and the proclamation of the First French Republic on September 21. In November, proof of Louis XVI's secret dealings with Mirabeau and of his counterrevolutionary intrigues with the foreigners was found in a secret cupboard in the Tuileries. On December 3 it was decided that Louis, who together with his family had been imprisoned since August, should be brought to trial for treason. He himself appeared twice before the Convention (December 11 and 23).

Downfall

By 1789, the situation was deteriorating rapidly. In May of that year, to address the fiscal crisis, Louis XVI convened the Estates General, an advisory assembly of different estates or socio-economic classes (the clergy, the nobility, and the commoners). The meeting did not go well. By June, the Third Estate declared itself the National Assembly, aligned with the bourgeoisie, and set out to develop a constitution. Initially, Louis XVI resisted, declared the Assembly null and void, and called out the army to restore order. Public dissension grew and a National Guard formed to resist the King's actions. By July 1789, he was forced to acknowledge the National Assembly's authority. On July 14, riots broke out in Paris and crowds stormed the Bastille prison in a show of defiance toward the King.



For a time, it seemed that Louis XVI could mollify the masses saying he would acquiesce to their demands. However, he accepted bad advice from the nobility's hard line conservatives and his wife, Marie Antoinette. He talked of reform but resisted demands for it. The royal family was forcibly transferred from Versailles to Paris on October 6, 1789. Louis ignored advice from advisors and refused to abdicate his responsibilities, and then agreed to a disastrous attempt to escape to the eastern frontier in June 1791. He and his family were brought back to Paris, and he lost all credibility as a monarch.

In the final two years of his reign, events moved rapidly. In the fall of 1791, Louis XVI tied his hopes on the dubious prospect of war with Austria in hopes that a military defeat would pave the way for a restoration of his authority. War broke out in April 1792. Suspicions of treason led to the capture of the royal palace and the temporary suspension of the king's powers.

On September 21, 1792, the Legislative Assembly proclaimed the First French Republic. That November, proof of Louis XVI's secret dealings and counter-revolutionary intrigues was discovered, and he and his family were charged with treason. Louis was soon found guilty by the National Assembly and condemned to death. On January 21, 1793, Louis XVI was guillotined in the Place de la Révolution. His wife, Marie Antoinette, met the same fate nine months later, on October 16, 1793. Their young son, Louis-Charles, died in prison where living conditions were horrible. Daughter Marie-Thérèse, was released from prison in December 1795 into the custody of her family in Austria.