

WOMEN AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

A feminist overview of the year 1789



Unknown, La marche des femmes à Versailles le 5 Octobre 1789, 1789

July 14th in France is the National Day! On this occasion, let's put women in the spotlight! Do you know what role did women, such as Olympe de Gouges and Charlotte Corday, play during the French Revolution? By the way, what is the French Revolution? To find out, let's explore this digital book!

FOREWORD

The purpose of this digital book is not to retranscribe all the facts of the French Revolution, nor to retrace the lives of all the important figures of the period. It is an educational tool, necessarily simplifying, because of its format. It will give you a brief overview of the French Revolution and you will discover some feminist personalities of the period. To make this experience fun and interactive, don't forget to click on the web links: they will redirect you to videos, websites, interviews of historians, writers and specialists!

S. G

First of all, let's go back to the historical context of the end of the 18th century in France...

WHAT HAPPENED DURING THE FRENCH REVOLUTION?

The French Revolution broke out in a period of social, political and economic troubles. It is usually said that the French Revolution began with the opening of the last Estates-General of the Ancien Régime (May 5, 1789) and ended with Napoleon Bonaparte's coup d'état (November 9, 1799).

The French Revolution put an end to the Ancien Régime, by replacing the absolute monarchy with successive different regimes: first a constitutional monarchy, then the First Republic. As part of the French history, the French Revolution has always been celebrated as a victory of the people over absolutism and arbitrariness and over unequal society and privileges.

*Among the key dates of the French Revolution, one is particularly important, both from a historical and a symbolic point of view: **July 14**, which became French national day from 1880. Although this date is generally associated with the **storming of the Bastille** (in French 'Prise de la Bastille') and the popular uprising of **July 14, 1789** - 'the awakening of freedom', Victor Hugo wrote -, it also refers to the **Festival of Federation** (in French 'Fête de la Fédération'), held on **July 14, 1790**.*

WHAT DO THE FRENCH CELEBRATE ON JULY 14?

The celebration of July 14 is still debated today because it refers both to the evolution towards a democratic Republic and to Robespierre's bloody Terror.

*In his article '**Débats Actuels sur la Révolution en France**' (1990), the French historian **Maurice Agulhon** wrote on the occasion of the bicentenary of the French Revolution: "En politique, les Français ont révélé des penchants opposés et profonds, héritage d'une division originelle ; c'est de façon quasi instinctive que, en fonction de la culture reçue, les uns se sont trouvés favorables au souvenir de la Révolution (ah ! la Liberté, la Bastille abattue, les Droits de l'Homme...) et les autres hostiles (ah ! la guillotine, la Terreur...)." (1)*

In brief, on one hand, the French Revolution originated from the philosophy of the Enlightenment, whose main idea is rationalist and universalist humanism; on the other hand, the initial liberty of 1789 led to the Terror and the civil war between royalists and federalists four years later.

For more details on the French Revolution and its context, watch this video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fJl_ZX91l0

(1) Agulhon, Maurice, 'Débats actuels sur la Révolution en France', in. Annales historiques de la Révolution française, 1990, n° 279, p.1.



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The Estates-General, the Tennis Court Oath, the Storming of the Bastille...

WHAT ARE THE EVENTS THAT LED TO THE STORMING OF THE BASTILLE?

*In May 1789, **King Louis XVI**, with the hope to resolve the deep agricultural and financial crisis that was paralysing the country, convened in Versailles the **Estates-General**, a consultative assembly of the three estates of the society, namely clergy, nobility and commoners.*

*On June 20, the 300 representatives of the Third Estate, newly formed National Assembly, claimed their unity and legitimacy as lawmakers by proclaiming the **Tennis Court Oath** (in French, 'Le Serment du jeu de Paume'), which was a commitment to a national constitution and representative government. Swearing "never to separate [them]selves from the National Assembly, and to reassemble wherever circumstances require until the constitution of the realm is drawn up and fixed upon solid foundations", they vowed not to disband until the King had recognized their sovereignty. Representatives of clergy and nobility joined the National Assembly a few days later.*

*Becoming one of the most iconic scenes of the French Revolution, represented by the painter **J.-L. David**, the Tennis Court Oath was a revolutionary act and an assertion that political authority derived from the people rather than from the monarchy.*



J.-L. David, "The Tennis Court Oath" (detail), 1791-2, Musée du Louvre, Paris

*At the same time, the firing of Necker, Minister of Finances, and the rumor of an intervention by the royal troops made the people convinced to organise the revolution. On July 14 in the morning, a crowd, composed of craftsmen and storekeepers, decided to take up arms at the Place des Invalides, then take gunpowder in the Bastille Prison. Yet, the prison governor ordered the soldiers to shoot at the revolutionaries. After one day of fusillade, the governor was executed and the garrison surrendered. That is the **Storming of the Bastille**.*



Unknown, "Prise de la Bastille et arrestation du gouverneur M. de Launay, le 14 juillet 1789", Grand Palais, Paris

...and the French Revolution's legacy

WHAT HAPPENED AFTER THE STORMING OF THE BASTILLE?

One year after the storming of the Bastille, for the **Festival of Federation**, the French people, including local federations of the National Guard that had been created in every province during summer 1789, celebrated the first anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, marking the Republic's adherence to human rights and the rejection of all despotisms.

With the presence of the royal family, a Mass was celebrated by the bishop Talleyrand, followed by the declaration of the King's oaths to the Nation and to the Law. The Federation Day sealed the reconciliation between the King and the people, but this reconciliation was of short duration... As we all know, King Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette were guillotined in 1793, as were the remaining aristocrats in the Terror period.



Le Barbier, "Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen de 1789", 1789, Musée Carnavalet, Paris

The Revolution led to the abolition of the broad orders of social hierarchy, to a greater division of land ownership, the limitation of the exercise of political power, the rebalancing of relations between church and state and the redefinition of family structures. In its first article, the **'Declaration of the Human and Civic Rights of 26 August 1789'**, newly drafted by the National Assembly, lays down that "Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be based only on considerations of the common good." "Men, men, men": Have we forgotten anyone? Yes: **WOMEN!**

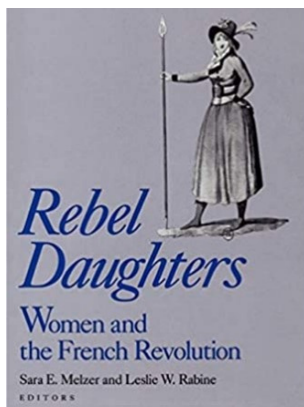
To have an overview of Marie-Antoinette's life, watch the eponymous film (2006), written and directed by Sofia Coppola, with the actress Kristen Dust. Here is the trailer:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yBWYKRoh98U>

Many scholars, historians, writers and artists have explored the essential yet paradoxical relation between women and the French Revolution

WHAT ROLE DID WOMEN PLAY IN THE FRENCH REVOLUTION?

It is true that the first years of the French Revolution saw the emergence of a movement to improve the status of women. But, as we have seen, the 'Declaration of the Human and Civic Right' concerned only the rights of men, and women were deprived of political rights. Despite that, many of them were educated, involved in the life of the city and participated actively in the events of the French Revolution. While the revolutionary government forbade women to be part of any political assembly in 1793, Parisian women remained active in the fight against the Girondins, federalism and the moderates. They were present in the public assemblies, supporting the 'Sans-culottes' (French revolutionaries) and the Jacobins. They were nicknamed the 'Knitters' (in French 'Les Tricoteuses') because it is said that they attended the political debates while working on their sewing.



Clyde Marlo Plumauzille, Research fellow at CNRS and PhD in History at the Institute of History of the French Revolution, University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, explains in an interview the involvement of women, from the storming of the Bastille to the last days of the Revolution. Women played the roles of rioters, 'Tricoteuses', polemicists and writers... Yet, the outcomes of the revolution are contrasted, including "both exclusion and emancipation". "In 1791, marriage became a civic contract; in 1792, people were allowed to divorce", Clyde Marlo Plumauzille explains. Yet, because of the progressive radicalisation of women in the French Revolution, men chose to exclude them for the political realm.

Listen to the interview of Prof. Plumauzille:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4exrrcu9eG8>

As Sara Melzer and Leslie W. Rabine wrote in Rebel Daughters. Women and the French Revolution (1992), "Although the male leaders of the Revolution depended on the women's active militant participation, they denied to women the rights they helped to establish. At the same time that women were banned from the political sphere, 'woman' was transformed into an allegorical figure which became the very symbol of (masculine) Liberty and Equality." In this essay, the two authors analyse "how the revolutionary process constructed a new gender system at the foundation of modern liberal culture."

“The French Revolution [...] led some women to lose power and others to hone the skills needed to win social influence.” - J. J. Lewis ('The Many Roles of Women in the French Revolution')

WERE WOMEN ALL ACTIVISTS?

*Specialist of the French Revolution and author of the article 'Women in the French Revolution' (2020), **Guillaume Débat** writes: "As they were participating in political clubs, in popular societies and taking an active part in the major revolutionary events, female activists got quickly close to the most radical revolutionaries to demand extensive societal reforms. Activists like **Pauline Léon** or **Claire Lacombe** remain well-known for their engagement. In 1793 they founded the Society of Revolutionary and Republican Women, with only female membership which put forward a great number of economic and political demands (right to vote, to carry arms)."*

*Yet, it is a cliché, even a legend, to think that all women throughout France were involved in the Revolution and fought for more civil and political rights. Revolutionary movements led by women in the provinces "should not be viewed as a mere copy of what was taking place in Paris, but, on the contrary, should be emphasised as original and unique", **Guillaume Débat** explains.*

Read the full article:

<https://sms.hypotheses.org/25827>



Unknown, La femme du sans-culotte, 1792, Musée Carnavalet, Paris

*Focusing on this minority of women involved in the French Revolution and on those who fled it, the historian **Jone Johnson Lewis** traces the lives of several female figures from the late 18th century in her article 'The Many Roles of Women in the French Revolution' (2019).*

*Among them, while supporting the ideals of the revolutionaries, Marie-Antoinette's official portraitist **Elizabeth Vigée Lebrun** had to go into exile for twelve years because she was too close to the royal family. On the other hand, **Charlotte Corday**, a revolutionary committed to the more moderate party, the Girondists, fought the Terror regime from the beginning. She is known to have killed the Jacobin publisher Jean Paul Marat in his bath on July 13, 1793. Her act, which sent her to the guillotine, was seen as a "symbolic outcry against the extremes to which the Reign of Terror had gone", J. J. Lewis writes.*

Read the full article:

<https://www.thoughtco.com/women-and-the-french-revolution-3529110>

If we had to remember only one...

OLYMPE DE GOUGES

A revolutionary woman, a feminist and a abolitionist

Alexandre Kucharsky, Portrait of Olympe de Gouges, 1788, private collection



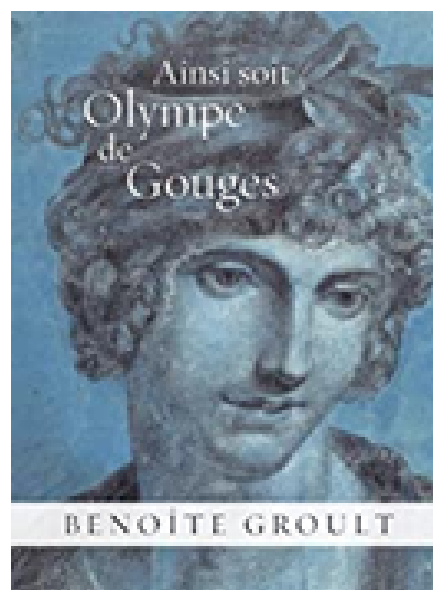
Marie Gouze, known as Marie-Olympe de Gouges, born in Montauban on May 7, 1748 and guillotined in Paris on November 3, 1793, was a French woman of letters, politician and polemicist. She is the author of the '**Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen**', written in 1791 in response to the male-oriented 'Declaration of the Human and Civic Rights of 1789'.

Olympe de Gouges left numerous writings in favour of the civic and political rights of women. She demanded the abolition of black slavery and of death penalty. She claimed the principle of gender equality and freedom for all, including sexual freedom. She fought against patriarchal society, defending divorce, women's autonomy, girls' education etc.

Guillotined because her ideas were considered too radical, she became an emblematic figure of the women's liberation movement and of humanism in general. The importance of her role in history and feminism has been considerably re-evaluated in academic circles.

BENOÎTE GROULT

Among those who paid tribute to this pioneer of feminism, **Benoîte Groult** (1920-2016) gave her rightful place in the French Revolution in her book **Ainsi soit Olympe de Gouges** (2013).

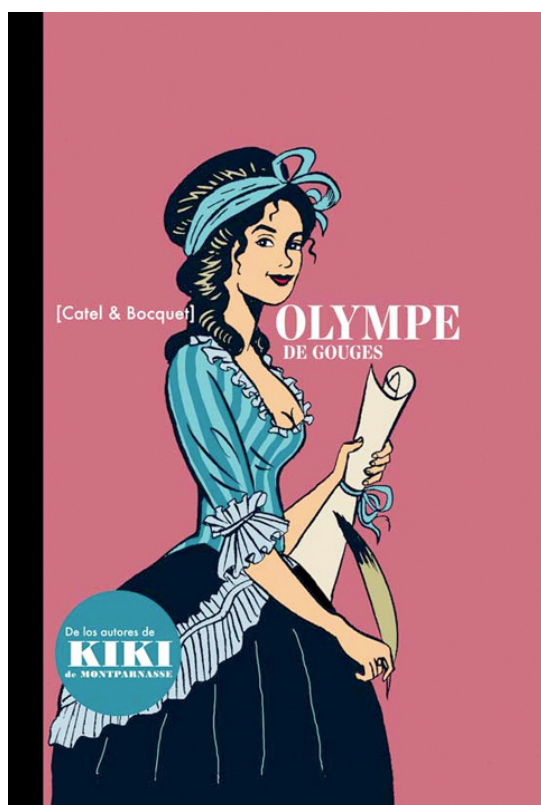


Watch an interview of Benoîte Groult, presenting her book (esp. from 5' to 17'20"):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BblQ-4L141I&t=1046s>

CATEL & BOCQUET

*Biographer and friend of Benoîte Groult, the comic strip artist **Catel** designed with the writer **José-Louis Bocquet** the graphic novel entitled **Olympe de Gouges** (2012).*

Catel and Bocquet tell in a fictionalized way, but with a historical rigor, the life of this exceptional woman, whose ideals, far ahead of her time, forged some of the key values of our societies today. With more than three hundred comic book pages, it is a magnificent portrait of one of the essential figures of feminism.



Have a look on Catel's blog:

<https://www.catel-m.com/>

Listen to this interview of Catel:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=80s8hfHXU4>.



Catel & Bocquet, Olympe de Gouges, 2012, p. 141 (detail).

MICHEL FAUCHEUX

*In this biography of Olympe de Gouges, the historian **M. Faucheux** recounts the issues facing women in the 18th century. How can we ensure that "if women have the right to go to the scaffold", they can also have the right to go to the podium", as Olympe said?*

Olympe de Gouges

par Michel Faucheux

INÉDIT



OLYMPE DE GOUGES

The Declaration of the Rights of Woman (September 1791)

1. WOMAN IS BORN FREE AND REMAINS EQUAL TO MAN IN RIGHTS. SOCIAL DISTINCTIONS MAY BE BASED ONLY ON COMMON UTILITY.

2. THE PURPOSE OF ALL POLITICAL ASSOCIATION IS THE PRESERVATION OF THE NATURAL AND IMPRESCRIPTIBLE RIGHTS OF WOMAN AND MAN. THESE RIGHTS ARE LIBERTY, PROPERTY, SECURITY, AND ESPECIALLY RESISTANCE TO OPPRESSION.

3. THE PRINCIPLE OF ALL SOVEREIGNTY RESTS ESSENTIALLY IN THE NATION, WHICH IS BUT THE REUNITING OF WOMAN AND MAN. NO BODY AND NO INDIVIDUAL MAY EXERCISE AUTHORITY WHICH DOES NOT EMANATE EXPRESSLY FROM THE NATION.

Source: The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Lynn Hunt (Boston/New York Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996), 124–129.



Unknown, La femme du sans-culotte, 1792, Musée Carnavalet, Paris

This e-book has been created, documented and written by Sara Giugliano, intern at the Alliance française du Bengale, Calcutta. She is responsible for the entire content of this book (veracity of the dates, events and historical figures). In order to respect copyrights, quotations and works have been correctly referenced.