

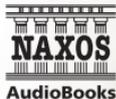
# THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

IN A NUTSHELL

Written by **Neil Wenborn**

Read by **Roy McMillan**



The logo for NAXOS AudioBooks, featuring the word "NAXOS" in a bold, serif font above the word "AudioBooks" in a smaller, sans-serif font, all enclosed within a decorative border.

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1	We all think we know the French Revolution.	7:02
2	It was the attempts of Necker's successors...	6:31
3	Three days later the three orders assembled...	6:06
4	As in Paris, so in the rest of the nation.	6:25
5	In the course of the next year...	7:30
6	At this point everything started to go wrong.	7:15
7	The successor to the Constituent Assembly...	6:10
8	'When you undertake to run a revolution,'...	6:16
9	The tide of war had turned in France's favour...	7:52
10	The Terror of 1793–4...	6:13
11	What followed was one of the murkiest periods...	5:34
12	Some histories of the French Revolution end here...	6:23

**Total time: 79:24**

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The French Revolution marked the birth-pangs of modern Europe. The events which convulsed France in the closing years of the eighteenth century, and which plunged the continent into the turmoil of war for a generation, are among the most stirring in modern history. They are also among the most disturbing. A struggle conducted in the name of liberty, equality and fraternity, the Revolution is also a story of repression, injustice and division. The famous opening words of Charles Dickens's novel of the French Revolution, *A Tale of Two Cities*, describe the Old Regime France of 1775. But it is unsurprising that they are often quoted in reference to the Revolution itself: 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times'.

Few of those who instigated the Revolution in 1789 could have imagined where it would lead. The hundreds of

representatives from all over France who gathered at Versailles for the fateful meeting of the Estates-General in May that year had no intention of dethroning King Louis XVI, let alone executing him. Neither did the Parisian crowds who marched on the Bastille on 14 July – a day still celebrated annually in France and French-speaking communities throughout the world. They wanted many things which had been denied them under the Old Regime – a fairer tax system, freedom from the payment of feudal dues, constitutional safeguards against the absolute power of the monarchy – but they would have laughed in derision at anyone who suggested that within four years they would be living in a republic. Still less could they have foreseen the phase of the Revolution now most indelibly printed on our collective memory: the period from

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1793 to 1794 known as The Terror. The men (and they were, of course, all men) who swore the so-called Tennis Court Oath at Versailles in June 1789 were well aware that they were making history. They might even have suspected that the colleague, a Parisian doctor and former Jesuit, who suggested the venue (an indoor 'real tennis' court) might feature as a footnote to that history. What none of them could have guessed is that his name would come to be associated with the ultimate symbol of the ruthlessness of Revolution. He was Dr Guillotin.

A footnote, nonetheless, he remains. Not so the giants (some might say ogres) of the Revolution – men such as Danton, Marat, Robespierre, and of course Napoleon Bonaparte, to whose military dictatorship the Revolution was ultimately to deliver France and her change-weary people. But the great revolutionary hero of 1789 was none of these. It was Honoré-Gabriel Mirabeau. Mirabeau was typical of the men who transformed a campaign for representation into a crusade for liberty: a nobleman of Enlightenment views and formidable oratory, a man of great political

courage and shameless opportunism, whose immense energies found a cause in the struggles of that extraordinary year. And it was Mirabeau who perhaps expressed most clearly the dynamics not only of the French Revolution but of other modern revolutions for which it would provide a template. 'When you undertake to run a revolution,' he said, 'the difficulty is not to make it go; it is to hold it in check.'

The French Revolution remains contested territory. More than 200 years after Napoleon famously declared the Revolution completed in 1799, the cataclysmic events of the preceding decade continue to divide historians and political scientists as sharply as they divided contemporary observers. Scholars still argue about what actually happened, and why. There is even disagreement about when the Revolution began and ended. If its origins have spawned a near-industrial volume of historical research, its legacy has proved still more controversial. Almost everyone agrees that the Revolution was a major force in shaping the modern world. But *how* it shaped it is another question;

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and – perhaps inevitably for a movement which first introduced the terms ‘left’ and ‘right’ into political parlance – the answer has often depended on where the observer was looking from.

One of the reasons the French Revolution continues to generate so much heat, in fact, is that we still see so much of recent history through its lens, and vice versa. We look at Stalin’s Soviet Union in the 1930s and we see behind it the Revolutionary Terror of 1793–4. We hear the Jacobins declare the beginning of a brave new calendar in human history and we pick up distant echoes of Pol Pot’s Year Zero. But if we find in the excesses of the Revolution a forerunner of the great totalitarian repressions of the twentieth century, we also find in its ideals the values which underpin today’s liberal democracies and the aspirations which still challenge us in the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Indeed, the issues with which the French revolutionaries wrestled, and by which so many of them were engulfed, remain as live and hazardous today as they were in 1789. They can be thought

of as the hammering-out, in the heat of prolonged social and military conflict, of a set of fundamental political relationships: between the citizen and the state; between liberty and the rule of law; between idealism and pragmatism; and – perhaps most resonantly for us, in an age still all too familiar with terror as a tool of ideology – between political means and political ends. Such issues may have the smell of the academy about them. But for millions of ordinary French men, women and children in the 1790s the outcome was a matter of life and death. It remains so for millions today. As Camille Desmoulins, one of the early firebrands of the Revolution and later one of its most prominent victims, wrote to his wife from his prison cell in 1794: ‘I dreamed of a republic that would be loved by the whole world. I could not have believed that men would be so cruel and so unjust.’ The French Revolution, in all its humanity and passion, stands not only for the timeless dream of freedom and justice but also as a terrible warning of how easily that dream can turn to nightmare.

**Notes by Neil Wenborn**



**Neil Wenborn** is a freelance writer and publishing consultant, whose work has appeared in both Britain and the United States. Co-editor of the highly respected *History Today Companion to British History* (Collins & Brown) and *A Dictionary of Jewish–Christian Relations* (Cambridge University Press), he has also written biographies of Haydn and Stravinsky, and is the author of *Dvořák* and *Mendelssohn* in Naxos's 'Life and Music' series. His most recent publication is a study of Jane Austen's *Emma* (humanities-ebooks.co.uk). A collection of his award-winning poetry, *Firedoors*, is published by Rockingham Press.



**Roy McMillan's** work for Naxos includes producing *An Introduction to Ancient Greek Philosophy*, as well as books by Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Virginia Woolf, Haruki Murakami and the Persian poet, Rumi. He directed the Radio 3 play *The Fiery World – A Play of William Blake* for Ukemi Productions and adapted and directed *The Duchess of Malfi*. He was arts editor, presenter and producer on Manx Radio, before which he spent 10 years as a writer, actor and director in the UK and Europe. He has also read *Aristotle: An Introduction* and the introduction to *Beyond Good and Evil* for Naxos AudioBooks.

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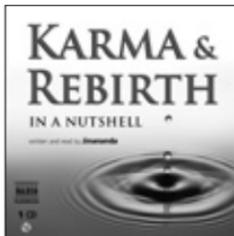
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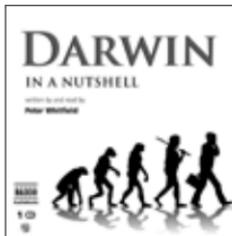
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The French Revolution marked the birth of modern Europe. From the storming of the Bastille to the horrors of the guillotine, the events of 1789 and after are among the most stirring – and most disturbing – in the continent's history. But what really happened in France during those turbulent closing years of the 18th century? And what does it mean for us in the 21st? This audiobook tells the story of a nation's traumatic journey from absolute monarchy through the shadow of Terror to military dictatorship. But it is also the story of a people's heroic struggle for the values of liberty, equality and fraternity which stand at the very heart of today's democracies.



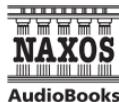
**Neil Wenborn** is a freelance writer and publishing consultant. He has written biographies of Haydn and Stravinsky, and is the author of *Dvořák* and *Mendelssohn* in Naxos's 'Life and Music' series.

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