Legislative Assembly

When the National Assembly finished its job in September 1791, the new Legislative Assembly took its place. The Legislative Assembly consisted of a single house, its members elected by a process of voting. As Sieyès wrote, "The people or the nation can have only one voice, that of the national legislature. The people can speak and act only through its representatives." One of its most lasting legacies was its scheme for local governments within France. It erased the historical provinces that had composed the kingdom and redivided the territory into eighty-three departments. These regions were roughly the same size, and they were given the exact same institutions. This made France much more centralized. The departments administered their own rule, electing their own officials, but they still fell under the single control of the new French government. The Legislative Assembly also introduced a new judicial system. They put in place civil and criminal courts at the district and department level, they determined that tribunals were to be elected rather than appointed, and they established procedures regarding juries, right to counsel, and arbitration and mediation. The Legislative Assembly took steps to improve the economy and alleviate the financial pressures of the state.

The Austrian War, 1792

France and Austria had a complicated relationship in the second half of the 1700s. They were allies, but they were both battling for control over European lands. Austria was keenly aware of the happenings in France at the rise of the French Revolution. The Austrian emperor, Leopold II—successor to Joseph II and another of Marie Antoinette's brothers—was concerned. If revolutionaries could overpower the monarchy in France (similar to what the American colonists had done to the British government), what would stop radicals in Austria from doing the same?

Louis XVI's Flight to Varennes

Louis XVI was desperate. He felt that he and his family were prisoners in the city. With the help of a Swedish officer in the French army named Axel Fersen, he devised a plan to flee to the northeast, near the Austrian border, where he believed he had supporters and could be protected by royalist troops.

The plan: They would have a visitor frequent the palace for a few days, wearing a dark cloak. The guards would get used to seeing this visitor, and therefore think nothing of it when Louis left the palace dressed in the same dark attire. The family would be waiting in a coach. The children would all be dressed as girls, their governess dressed as a Russian aristocrat in charge of the group, and Marie Antoinette dressed in plain black, acting as a governess. The king would be the valet.

Fersen thought the group should travel separately. Marie Antoinette wanted them all together. Their weighted coach traveled slowly, causing them to fall behind their planned military escorts. News of their escape soon spread. The National Guard was alerted. The royal family was recognized when they reached Sainte-Menehould, but it was in Varennes that the party was officially identified and then caught.

The royal family was escorted back to Paris by thousands of armed citizens and guardsmen. They were sent to prison, and the National Assembly proclaimed France a republic. To this day, many argue that Austria played a role in devising their plan of escape.

The Girondins

The Girondins were a loosely organized group of republican members of the Legislative Assembly, along with businessmen, bankers, merchants, and intellectuals. They were harsh critics of the court and strongly supported foreign war as a way to rally others around the cause of the Revolution and to reveal the king's wrongdoings against the *émigrés*, nobles who had fled violence in France and settled in other countries. The Girondins were at their height of power in the spring of 1792.

Marie Antoinette heard rumors that the Girondins, now part of the king's ministry, were planning a military attack on the Austrian Netherlands. She warned her brother Leopold.

The Girondin ministry pushed for war on Austria in spring 1792. At their urging, the Legislative Assembly declared war. A month later, it did the same against Sardinia (kingdom of the house of Savoy). Lafayette and the French minister of foreign affairs expected a short, quick war. They, unfortunately, were not prepared for the ambitious undertaking. The national financial crisis was exploding, the army was weak and divided, and the public was not supportive. Sensing the disaster, Louis XVI dismissed the Girondin ministry. The Girondins and their supporters fought back for their power.

Royal Prisons

Le Temple

Built in the 1100s, Le Temple in Paris was originally a monastery of the Knights Templar. By the 1200s, it was being used as a storehouse of Templar and royal treasures. After the collapse of the Templars in the 1300s, the buildings of Le Temple served as a royal prison and homes for artisans.

In 1792, after the attack on the Tuileries, the royal family was moved to Le Temple until their trials in 1793. The buildings of Le Temple were demolished in 1811.

The Conciergerie

In the early 1300s, Philip the Fair chose a site in Paris to be his royal palace. There, he built one of the finest palaces of its day. It was known as the Palais de la Cité. Later in the same century, Charles V chose the palaces of Louvre and Vincennes to inhabit, and the Palais de la Cité was turned into administrative offices. It became known as "The Conciergerie," named after a man known as the Concierge. The palace was then converted to a prison. By the 1400s, wealthy prisoners were sent there for the course of their imprisonment. During the Reign of Terror, the Conciergerie became the famous location where several thousand prisoners were held before being taken to the guillotine—including the French queen, Marie Antoinette. Even after the Reign of Terror, it was used as a prison. Many famous faces passed through its doors.