



## European Statesmen (Illustrated)

*John Lord*

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Beacon Lights of History, Volume IX, by John Lord

EXCERPT:

Three events of pre-eminent importance have occurred in our modern times; these are the Protestant Reformation, the American War of Independence, and the French Revolution.

The most complicated and varied of these great movements is the French Revolution, on which thousands of volumes have been written, so that it is impossible even to classify the leading events and the ever-changing features of that rapid and exciting movement. The first act of that great drama was the attempt of reformers and patriots to destroy feudalism,—with its privileges and distinctions and injustices,—by unscrupulous and wild legislation, and to give a new constitution to the State.

The best representative of this movement was Mirabeau, and I accordingly select him as the subject of this lecture. I cannot describe the violence and anarchy which succeeded the Reign of Terror, ending in a Directory, and the usurpation of Napoleon. The subject is so vast that I must confine myself to a single point, in which, however, I would unfold the principles of the reformers and the logical results to which their principles led.

The remote causes of the French Revolution I have already glanced at, in a previous lecture. The most obvious of these, doubtless, was the misgovernment which began with Louis XIV. and continued so disgracefully under Louis XV.; which destroyed all reverence for the throne, even loyalty itself, the chief support of the monarchy. The next most powerful influence that created revolution was feudalism, which ground down the people by unequal laws, and irritated them by the haughtiness, insolence, and heartlessness of the aristocracy, and thus destroyed all respect for them, ending in bitter animosities. Closely connected with these two gigantic evils was the excessive taxation, which oppressed the nation and made it discontented and rebellious. The fourth most prominent cause of agitation was the writings of infidel philosophers and economists, whose unsound and sophistical theories held out fallacious hopes, and undermined those sentiments by which all governments and institutions are preserved. These will be incidentally presented, as thereby we shall be able to trace the career of the remarkable man who controlled the National Assembly, and who applied the torch to the edifice whose horrid and fearful fires he would afterwards have suppressed. It is easy to destroy; it is difficult to reconstruct. Nor is there any human force which can arrest a national conflagration when once it is kindled: only on its ashes can a new structure arise, and this only after long and laborious efforts and humiliating disappointments.

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