

from
**FRENCHMEN, IS THIS WHAT
YOU WANT?**
1791

King Louis XVI

On October 5, 1789, several thousand women stormed King Louis XVI's palace at Versailles, forcing him and his family to move to Paris. A virtual captive, the king saw his governing powers drained as the revolutionaries formed a new French government. In June 1791, on hearing a warning that his life was in danger, Louis and his family tried to escape. However, they were caught before they could cross the French border. The following selection comes from the king's explanation for leaving Paris.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Forming and Supporting Opinions

Do you think King Louis XVI is persuasive? Does he convince you that the revolutionaries are wrong? Support your opinion with reasons.

As long as the King¹ could hope to see order and prosperity restored to the kingdom by the measures employed by the Assembly² and by his residence near that Assembly in the capital, he counted as naught any personal sacrifices. Had this hope been fulfilled, he would not even have argued the nullity attaching to all his proceedings since the month of October 1789 on account of his total lack of freedom. But now, considering that the sole recompense for so many sacrifices is to behold the destruction of the monarchy, authority flouted, the sanctity of property violated, the safety of the citizen everywhere endangered, crime go unpunished, and total anarchy trample on the laws without the semblance of authority given him by the new constitution being sufficient to cure any of the ills afflicting the kingdom, the King, having solemnly protested against all acts emanating from him during his captivity, believes it right to lay before the eyes of Frenchmen and of the whole world the record of his conduct and that of the form of government which has been introduced into the kingdom.

Witness that His Majesty, in the month of July 1789, to remove all grounds of mistrust, sent away the troops which he had only summoned to him after the sparks of revolt had already manifested themselves in Paris and even in the regiment of his Guards.³ The King, armed with a clear conscience and pure intentions, was not afraid to go alone among the citizens of the capital.

In the month of October of the same year the King, who had long been aware of the rising which the men of faction were seeking to instigate on the 5th, was

1. **the King:** Louis refers to himself not as "I," but in the third person.

2. **Assembly:** the National Assembly, set up as the government of France in 1789

3. **his Guards:** the volunteer National Guards whose job was to protect the king

given sufficient warning to be able to withdraw wherever he pleased. But he feared that such a proceeding would be exploited to kindle civil war and he preferred to make personal sacrifices and—what was more heart-rending—to expose the lives of those most dear to him. Everyone knows what happened on the night of 5–6 October and how it has gone unpunished for nearly two years. God alone prevented the perpetration of even greater crimes and saved the French nation from permanent dishonour [Marie-Antoinette, the King's wife, narrowly escaped death].

The King, yielding to the wish expressed by the army of Parisians, installed himself and his family in the Palace of the Tuileries. The kings had not resided there regularly for over a hundred years, except during the minority of Louis XV. Nothing was ready to receive the King and the disposition of the rooms is far from affording the comfort to which His Majesty was accustomed in the other royal residences and which any private individual with a competence may enjoy. Despite the duress which had been exerted and the inconveniences of all kinds which followed the King's change of abode, His Majesty, faithful to his policy of personal sacrifice for the sake of peace, thought it right on the morrow of his arrival in Paris to reassure the provinces concerning his residence in the capital and to invite the National Assembly to join him by coming to the same city to continue its work.

But an even more painful sacrifice was reserved to His Majesty: he must needs send away his bodyguard who had just given him a striking token of their fidelity during the fatal morning of the 6th. Two of them had perished for their loyalty to the King and his family and several others had been grievously wounded whilst strictly executing the King's orders not to fire on a crowd which had been led astray. The men of faction showed great ingenuity indeed in painting so darkly such loyal troops who had just crowned the fine conduct they had always maintained. But they were not aiming so much at the bodyguard as at the King himself: they wanted to isolate him entirely by depriving him of the services of his bodyguard, whom they had not succeeded in corrupting as they had the regiment of French Guards—the paragon of the army but a short time previously.

It was the soldiers of that same regiment, a force now paid by the city of Paris, and the volunteer National Guards of the said city who were entrusted with the safety of the King. These troops are entirely under the orders of the municipality of Paris from whom the commander-in-chief holds his authority. With such a guard, the King has seen himself become a prisoner in his own territories; for how otherwise can one describe the condition of a king whose authority over his guard is restricted to ceremonial matters, who does not make any appointments and who is obliged to see himself surrounded by several people whom he realises are ill-disposed towards himself and his family? The King does not bring up these facts in order to blame the Parisian National Guard and its paid troops but to make known the full truth—and in so doing he is happy to do justice to the zeal for order and the attachment to his person which these troops have in general shown

him when left to themselves and not led astray by the shouts and lies of the men of faction.

However, the more the King made sacrifices for the good of his peoples, the more the men of faction⁴ have worked to devalue the cost and paint the monarchy in the most false and lurid colours. . . .

When the Estates-General,⁵ having styled themselves the National Assembly, began to occupy themselves with the Constitution of the kingdom, remember the memoranda which the men of faction contrived to have sent in from several provinces and the agitation in Paris tending to make the deputies renege on one of the main clauses in all their *cabiers* providing that *legislation would be carried out in conjunction with the King*. In contempt of this clause, the Assembly has denied the King any say in the Constitution by refusing him the right to grant or withhold his assent to the articles which it regards as constitutional, by reserving for itself the right to place such articles in that category as it sees fit and, as regards those deemed purely legislative, by restricting the royal prerogative to the right of a suspensive veto for two parliaments—a purely illusory right as is proved only too well by so many examples.

What remains to the King but the vain shadow of royalty? He has been given 25 million francs for the expenses of the civil list; but all of this must be consumed by the maintenance of a household of sufficient splendour to do honour to the dignity of the crown of France and by the burdens subsequently imposed on this fund—even after its size had been determined.

He has been left a life—interest in a few crownlands, with several restrictions on their enjoyment. These lands are but a tiny fraction of those possessed by the kings from time immemorial and of the patrimonies which His Majesty's ancestors added to the crownlands. It can be said without fear of contradiction that if all these properties were added together they would bring in far more than the monies allocated for the maintenance of the King and his family, which in that case would cost the people nothing. . . .

Frenchmen, is that what you wanted when you sent your representatives to the National Assembly? Did you want anarchy and the despotism of the clubs to replace the monarchical form of government under which the nation has prospered for fourteen hundred years? Did you want to see your king heaped with insults and deprived of his liberty whilst he was exclusively occupied with establishing yours?

Source: Excerpt from declaration by Louis XVI, June 20, 1791, in *Archives Parlementaires* (Parliamentary Archives of France), Volume 27, translated in *The French Revolution* by John Hardman (New York: St. Martin's, 1982), pp. 124–134.

4. **men of faction:** the revolutionaries

5. **Estates-General:** a meeting of leaders from the three estates, or social classes; similar to England's Parliament

from FRENCHMEN, IS THIS WHAT YOU WANT?

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: ANSWER

Answers will vary. Most students may say that Louis did not explain how he would rule better than the new French government. Instead he calls on tradition to support his right to rule and complains about the loss of his powers.