

Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand, prince de Bénévent

Primary Contributor: [Jacques Godechot](#)

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Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand, prince de Bénévent, in full Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, prince de Bénévent (born Feb. 2, 1754, Paris, France—died May 17, 1838, Paris), French statesman and diplomat noted for his capacity for political survival, who held high [office](#) during the [French Revolution](#), under [Napoleon](#), at the restoration of the [Bourbon](#) monarchy, and under King [Louis-Philippe](#).

Education and clerical career

Talleyrand was the son of Charles-Daniel, comte de Talleyrand-Périgord, and Alexandrine de Damas d'Antigny. His parents came from old, aristocratic families but were not rich. Charles-Maurice was sent to be nursed in a Paris suburb, where, when he was four years old, he is said to have fallen off a [chest of drawers](#), dislocating his foot. It is possible, however, that his clubfoot was congenital. At any rate, Talleyrand's clubfoot was of cardinal importance in his choice of career.

As Talleyrand could not follow the family tradition by going into the army, his parents intended him for the church. From the age of eight he was a pupil at the Collège d'Harcourt in Paris, and at 15 he became an assistant to his uncle Alexandre, then coadjutor to the archbishop of Reims, in the hope that the luxurious life led by the princes of the church would awaken in him a taste for an ecclesiastical career. He liked what he saw, and in 1770 entered the seminary of Saint-Sulpice in Paris. There he certainly learned theology, but he also read, in the seminary's large library, the works of the Philosophes, the contemporary progressive thinkers. Thus he began his political education and acquired a skepticism regarding men and affairs that was never to leave him. In addition, while still a seminarian, he took his first mistress.

Expelled for his conduct (1775), he nevertheless received minor orders in April of that year and was, six months later, nominated by the King as abbot of Saint-Denis, at Reims. In March 1778 Talleyrand received his degree in theology from the Sorbonne, and in December 1779 he was ordained. The following day his uncle Alexandre, archbishop of Reims, appointed him his [vicar general](#).

At that time Talleyrand appeared to be a typical court cleric, spending more time with the most fashionable wits and beauties of the day than with churchmen. Yet he did not devote all his time to pleasure; he believed in his future and desired above all to become a [bishop](#). The surest way to his goal was appointment to the well-paid post of agent general of the clergy, who represented the French [church](#) in its dealings with the French [government](#) in the interval between meetings of the Assembly of the Clergy, which were held regularly every five years. Talleyrand was appointed agent general in 1780. There were, in fact, two agents general, but his colleague's reputation had been undermined, and Talleyrand was in practice the sole representative of the French church between 1780 and 1785. He seems to have taken his role very seriously; in any case, he showed great energy in defending the controversial privileges of the church. He fought vigorously for the right of the church to retain all its property. He also tenaciously defended ecclesiastical jurisdiction against the encroachments of royal justice, argued for the continued exemption of the clergy from ordinary taxes, and played a part in raising the [standard of living](#) of the lower clergy. His activities brought him into regular contact with various ministers of the crown. His participation in the meetings of the Assembly of the Clergy gave him an exceptional opportunity to acquire parliamentary experience. Finally, his activities won him the coveted bishopric: in November 1788 he was appointed bishop of [Autun](#). When he took possession of his see on March 15, 1789, the Revolution was on the verge of breaking out.

During the [Revolution](#)

Talleyrand's first task was to prepare the elections to the [States General](#), the [National Assembly](#) in which the Estates were separately represented. The assembly had not met in France since 1614 and was now summoned for May 5, 1789. Talleyrand, elected by his clergy as their deputy, like all delegates had prepared a list of grievances. His list contained demands for reforms in the status of the clergy as well as for a constitution that would provide a representative government guaranteeing equality for all citizens, especially fiscal equality, thus abolishing those financial privileges that he had defended four years earlier. This was the first of a series of reversals that were to be characteristic.

At the solemn opening of the States General at Versailles, Talleyrand attracted immediate attention and soon acquired great influence. During the earlier deliberations, the clergy and the nobility wanted to sit in separate chambers, as they had previously; Talleyrand, however, favoured uniting the three orders into one National Assembly, and his proposal was accepted. To the astonishment of his fellow bishops who remembered the zeal with which he had once defended church rights, Talleyrand urged the repeal of the [tithe](#) and the [nationalization](#) of French church property. The land thus appropriated was to be used to pay off the state's debts. When nationalization was voted on Nov. 2, 1789, Talleyrand emerged as one of the most revolutionary deputies, and when he celebrated mass at the Festival of the Federation on July 14, 1790, in commemoration of the taking of the Bastille the year before, he seemed the veritable "bishop of

the Revolution.” The same month, Talleyrand succeeded in having the [Civil Constitution of the Clergy](#) adopted, which, without papal approval, completely reorganized the French church on a democratic basis. The first bishop to take the [oath](#) of loyalty to this constitution, he also consecrated the first bishops elected according to the new procedure. The resulting [excommunication](#) by the Pope did not distress Talleyrand, who was already planning to leave the church. It no longer offered sufficient scope for his ambition, and, since, under the law expropriating the church he had been deprived of his property, a bishopric could no longer satisfy his monetary needs. Elected administrator of the *département* of Paris in January 1791, he resigned as bishop of Autun.

Talleyrand’s skill as a clever negotiator was noted, and when at the close of 1791 the French government wanted to prevent [England](#) and [Prussia](#) from joining Austria in a coalition against France, the [foreign minister](#) sent Talleyrand to London to persuade England to remain neutral. Arriving in London in January 1792, Talleyrand proposed to [William Pitt](#), the [prime minister](#), that both countries guarantee each other’s territorial integrity. Returning to Paris in March without a definite answer from the British, Talleyrand persuaded the new foreign minister to appoint the young marquis de [Chauvelin](#) as [ambassador](#) to London and returned there as his assistant. The two men arrived in London on April 29, just after France had declared war on Austria, with whom Prussia then allied itself. Although Talleyrand secured a declaration of neutrality from the British government on May 25, the storming of the Tuileries palace by the Paris mob on June 20 made his position difficult, and he left London on July 5. The overthrow of the monarchy on August 10 and the massacre of royalist prisoners in September alienated what sympathy the London government had for France and, at the same time, made it advisable for Talleyrand to leave Paris. After drafting—as a pledge of loyalty to the Provisional Executive Council—a circular to all European governments attributing responsibility for the events of August 10 to [Louis XVI](#), he obtained a passport to go to London in a private capacity. Arriving on September 18, he made every effort to avert war with Great Britain, but the invasion of Belgium by the French, followed by the execution of Louis XVI in January 1793, made war inevitable. Talleyrand, who had been denounced in the [National Convention](#) (the assembly elected after the overthrow of the monarchy), also became undesirable in England, where the most counterrevolutionary of the French émigrés were demanding his expulsion. Expelled in January 1794, he embarked for the [United States](#) in March. He remained there for two years, engaging in profitable financial speculations that enabled him to rebuild his fortune.

During the [Directory](#)

After the fall, in July 1794, of [Maximilien Robespierre](#), the chief instigator of the [Reign of Terror](#), Talleyrand petitioned the National Convention to remove his name from the list of émigrés, as he had left France on an official passport. His request was granted and he reached Paris in September 1796, immediately taking the seat in the Institut National (a creation of the National Convention reestablishing, in a new form, the 18th-century academies, among them the Académie Française), to which he had been elected in his absence. The paper that he read there in July 1797, in which he concluded that France would be unable to reconquer its [American colonies](#) and should therefore attempt to establish colonies in Africa, showed that he again hoped to enter politics. A few days later, his paper, which raised him in public esteem, and his connections with a member of the ruling Directory gained him the post of foreign minister.

Talleyrand confirmed [Napoleon](#)'s conclusion of the [Treaty of Campo Formio](#) (October 1797) following his great victories against Austria and negotiated the agreements annexed to the treaty, which are said to have brought him more than a million francs in bribes. Jointly with Napoleon he urged on the Directory his idea of a military expedition to Egypt, which ultimately ended in failure. Talleyrand alone, however, was responsible for a breach between France and the United States, following the indignant withdrawal of three U.S. envoys from whom Talleyrand had demanded enormous bribes. Acknowledging the failure of his policies, Talleyrand resigned, but after two years as foreign minister he had amassed an "immense fortune" that he deposited abroad.

During the [Consulate](#) and the empire

Five months after Talleyrand's resignation, Napoleon returned from Egypt, and, following his coup d'état of Nov. 9–10, 1799, established the Consulate, consisting of him as the actual ruler and two other consuls. Talleyrand supported him and returned to the [foreign ministry](#) on November 22. Talleyrand's principal aim was the pacification of Europe, and he began negotiation with the belligerent countries. His negotiations with Austria and England resulted in the treaties. For the first time in six years, Europe was at peace. Talleyrand contributed to the realization of Napoleon's ambitious plans to remodel Europe by helping him to establish French supremacy in Italy, Germany, and Switzerland. Much to his own profit, he supervised the allocation of numerous secularized church lands. At home Talleyrand urged the signing of the concordat between Napoleon and Pope [Pius VII](#) (July [1801](#)), which reestablished religious peace. Then, taking advantage of the concordat's provisions, he married his mistress, Catherine Grand, the divorced French wife of an English employee of the [British East India Company](#).

Talleyrand's [policy](#) would have been completely successful had he been able to prevent the renewal of war between France and England in May 1803. This time, however, he did not resign. He had helped Napoleon establish himself as "consul for life" in 1802, and he continued to support him when Napoleon wanted to show that he would never come to terms with the [Bourbons](#); Talleyrand therefore participated in one of the most dreadful crimes. When Talleyrand and [Joseph Fouché](#), the minister of police, learned that a Bourbon prince, whom they believed to be the [Duc d'Enghien](#), was planning the assassination of the First Consul, they advised his abduction. Although the Duke was living in neutral territory, Talleyrand promised that he would smooth over any protests to the violation of [international law](#). And so the Duc d'Enghien was kidnapped, arrested, and transferred to Paris, where he was tried, condemned, and executed. Later, Talleyrand tried to remove from the archives documents proving his involvement. It was this crime that consolidated Napoleon's power, and when on May 18, 1804, he was proclaimed emperor, he appointed Talleyrand grand chamberlain, with an annual income of 500,000 francs.

Nevertheless, after 1805 Talleyrand's influence diminished, and his advice was not always beneficial. Alarmed by Napoleon's insatiable ambition, which, as he clearly saw, could lead only to disaster, he resigned his office in August 1807. It was not without pleasure that Napoleon accepted his resignation.

Between empire and restoration

Though no longer a minister, Talleyrand was still consulted by Napoleon, and in September 1808 he accompanied Napoleon to a congress of European sovereigns at [Erfurt](#), Prussia. There Talleyrand had secret talks with Tsar [Alexander I](#), urging him to oppose Napoleon, and thereafter conducted a clandestine correspondence with both Russia and Austria. This treasonable activity did not, in fact, involve Talleyrand in great risk, since it was approved by Fouché, the minister of police, who shared Talleyrand's opposition to Napoleon's policies.

After Napoleon had annulled his marriage to the empress Joséphine, Talleyrand played a part in arranging the Emperor's marriage with [Marie-Louise](#) of Austria, in the hope that this union would modify Napoleon's ambition. But nothing, apparently, could accomplish that. After the disastrous retreat from his invasion of Russia, Napoleon asked Talleyrand to return to the foreign ministry in order to negotiate with the allies, but Talleyrand, who was already planning to restore the Bourbons, refused, unmoved by the Emperor's anger. When the allies entered Paris, on March 31, 1814, the Tsar took up residence at Talleyrand's mansion and was eventually convinced by him that only the restoration of the Bourbons could guarantee peace in Europe. Talleyrand persuaded the Senate to establish a provisional government of five members, including himself, and to declare Napoleon deposed. The new government immediately recalled [Louis XVIII](#), who on May 13, 1814, appointed Talleyrand his foreign minister.

During the [Restoration](#) and the July Monarchy

As France's representative at the [Congress of Vienna](#) (1814–15), Talleyrand exhibited his diplomatic skill to the full, but it is doubtful whether it benefitted France. He managed to divide the Allies, urging Austria and England to conclude secret agreements with France to prevent Russia from annexing the whole of Poland and Prussia from annexing the whole of [Saxony](#). This new triple alliance succeeded in reducing the territorial claims of the other great powers and led to the agreement by which France retained the frontiers of 1792 (which were pushed back to those of 1790 after the [Hundred Days](#), the period during which Napoleon reigned in Paris after his escape from Elba). In accepting the cession to Prussia of the greater part of the left bank of the Rhine, however, Talleyrand created a serious danger for France that became especially clear in 1870, 1914, and 1939.

Talleyrand remained in Vienna during the Hundred Days. On Louis XVIII's return to Paris, he was appointed president of the council, while retaining the office of foreign minister. The ultraroyalists now in power were violently opposed to a ministry dominated by two former revolutionaries, Fouché and Talleyrand, and Talleyrand was forced to resign. He then lived in retirement, writing his memoirs, until 1829, when his scheming political sense led him to ally himself with the Liberals in order to remove [Charles X](#), the brother and successor of Louis XVIII. He established contact with [Louis-Philippe](#) and helped to make him king during the [July Monarchy](#) of 1830. As ambassador to London, from 1830 to 1834, he played a vital part in the negotiations between France and Great Britain that resulted in the creation of a neutral kingdom of [Belgium](#). His diplomatic career was crowned by the signing of an alliance between France, Great Britain, Spain, and Portugal in April 1834.

Talleyrand died in 1838 and received the last sacraments, having signed, a few hours before his death, a document in which he declared himself reconciled with the church. He was buried at his château of Valençay. He had separated from his wife in 1815 and left no legitimate descendants.

Jacques GodechotEd.

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Additional Reading

Sources

Talleyrand's *Mémoires* were edited by the Duc de Broglie, 5 vol. (1891–92; Eng. trans. of vol. 3–5, 1891–92, reissued 1998). They are unreliable and should be used with discretion. A number of Talleyrand's letters and dispatches have been published in the following works: Georges M. Pallain, *Correspondance diplomatique de Talleyrand: La Mission de Talleyrand à Londres en 1792* (1889), *Le Ministère de Talleyrand sous le Directoire* (1891), *Correspondance inédite du prince de Talleyrand et du roi Louis XVIII pendant le Congrès de Vienne* (1881), and *L'Ambassade de Talleyrand à Londres, 1830–1834*, 2 vol. (1891); P. Bertrand, *Lettres inédites de Talleyrand à Napoléon, 1800–1809* (1889); H. Huth and W.J. Pugh (trans. and eds.), *Talleyrand in America as a Financial Promoter, 1794–96: Unpublished Letters and Memoirs*, 3 vol. (1942).

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