

French Revolution Notes

Noble and clergyman riding on the back of a peasant

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, France continued to spend much more than it received in income, taking out loans to pay for wars with England and government operations. By 1788 France spent half its annual budget for the interest payments on the ever-increasing nation debt. In addition, 25 percent of the annual budget paid for military expenditures and 6 percent paid for the extravagant life-style of the king and his court at Versailles. With no other financial options available to the government, a sharp rise in taxes became inevitable. This new tax burden was born largely by the peasants, since the clergy and nobility were largely exempt from taxes. At the same time, the peasants were beset by poor harvests, and the price of bread soared.

The Meeting of the Estates General

Desperate to solve the financial crisis, King Louis XVI called for the Estates General to meet. This medieval representative body, which had not been convened since 1614, divided France into three orders, or estates: the clergy, nobility, and commoners.

The Tennis Court Oath

In the actual meeting of the Estates General, the Third Estate refused to conduct any business until the king broke tradition and ordered the three Estates to sit together as a single representative body. When it became clear that the Estates General would meet and vote as separate orders, the Third Estate adopted the title National Assembly and declared itself the true representative body of France. On June 19th a majority of the clergy voted to join the Third Estate. On June 20, 1789, members of the National Assembly, excluded from their hall in Versailles because of “repairs”, moved to a large indoor tennis court in town and swore the famous Tennis Court Oath, pledging never to disband until they had written a new constitution for France.

The Storming of the Bastille

By July 1789 about one fourth of the people of Paris were unemployed, and the bread prices soared so high many people were left without food. As rumor spread that the king’s troops were coming to sack Paris, angry crowds seized arms for defense of the city. On July 14, 1789, hundreds of people marched to the Bastille, a medieval fort and prison, to search for gunpowder. The commanding officer of the Bastille refused to relinquish the gunpowder and fired on the crowd, killing 98 people. The soldiers finally surrendered hours later, and the revolutionary crowds took the Bastille. As the news spread across France, peasants began to rise in spontaneous revolt against their lords. The storming of the Bastille symbolized the beginning of the French Revolution.

The Women’s March on Versailles

As the financial crisis heightened in the months following the Storming of the Bastille, unemployment and hunger increase. On October 5th, 7,000 desperate women marched the 12 miles from Paris to Versailles to demand bread. The women invaded the palace and killed several guards. The king

promised to give them bread immediately and to accompany them back to Paris with his family. The heads of two nobles, stuck on pikes, led the way followed by the unarmed royal guard. The king and his family never returned to Versailles.

The Execution of Louis XVI

On June 21, 1791, the royal family attempted to flee France, but was caught a few miles from the French border and returned to Paris. The king agreed to sign the Constitution of 1791 and then proceeded to veto key revolutionary decrees. A new, more radical government, the National Convention, was popularly elected in September 1792. France fought to preserve the Revolution in “a war of people against kings” against Austria and Prussia. In November 1792 incriminating royal documents were found that showed that the king was negotiating secretly to restore his authority and thwart the Constitution. The National Convention overwhelmingly voted to convict Louis XVI of treason and then voted to sentence him to death in January 1793 by one vote (361 of the 720 members). Just before he was guillotined, he declared calmly, “I die innocent of all the crimes of which I have been charged.” The Queen was executed in October 1793.

Opponents of Robespierre’s rule being taken to the guillotine during the Reign of Terror

Now at war against every major European power, the National Convention led by **Maximilien Robespierre**, called for drastic measures to save France from “enemies of the nation.” By the spring of 1794, a fervently patriotic army of one million had successfully defeated the united European armies on all fronts. At home, Robespierre and his fellow republicans believed that French citizens would have to be taught the virtues of the new Republic. The National Convention established 1792 as Year One of the Republic and created an entirely new calendar with new months, weeks, and days. Robespierre set up special revolutionary courts responsible only to him, which tried citizens for treason against the revolution. Crimes ranged from saying, “Down with the Republic” to maintaining a book with the king’s seal on it. For those not deemed virtuous enough for the Republic, terror was the order of the day. In two years, roughly 40,000 French men and women were executed, often by guillotine. Finally, in July 1794, after the Reign of Terror had wiped out many of Robespierre’s own friends, Robespierre himself was executed by guillotine.

The Coronation of Napoleon Bonaparte

After five years of disastrous rule by a five-man executive called “**The Directory**”, Napoleon Bonaparte ruled France as dictator and emperor for 15 years, from 1799 to 1814. Napoleon turned France into a centrally controlled police state where revolutionary ideals of freedom of speech and press were constantly violated. Yet Napoleon maintained many moderate reforms of the revolution, abolishing feudal privileges and securing the advances of the middle class and the peasantry. Napoleon’s armies took most of continental Europe until losing decisively in Russia. He abdicated in 1814.