

## The Beginning of the French Revolution

### Causes of the French Revolution

The finances of the French Empire were a major cause for revolution. By 1789, France was bankrupt. The king's of France had abused their power and France became a victim of deficit spending. The French king began to borrow enormous amounts of money to pay for their spending and incurred debt. These debts were also a result of war. An example of this was by 1789; France was still paying off debts incurred by the wars of Louis XIV that occurred in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The country could no longer pay its debts, and the people of France began to suffer. Furthermore, a number of social groups and institutions did not pay taxes of any kind. Many universities were exempt from taxation as were the thirteen *Parlements*, cities like Paris, the Church and the clergy, the aristocracy and numerous member of the Bourgeoisie. And of course, it was simply brilliant planning to continue to tax the peasants- peasants who, having nothing to contribute were, over the course of the century, forced to contribute even more.

The French social structure was divided into three estates. The First Estate was made up of the clergy. The clergy were a very privileged group and had a number of responsibilities. They included the registration of births, marriages and deaths, they collected the tithe (usually 10%); they censored books; served as moral police; operated schools and hospitals; and distributed relief to the poor. They also owned 10-15% of all the land in France. The land was all held tax free. The Second Estate was made up of the nobility. They too were a privileged group. They nobility held the highest positions in the church, the army and the government. As an order they were exempt from paying taxes of any kind.

The Third Estate however, was the victim of the first two estates. The Third Estate was made up of every one who was not a member of the first two estates. This was around 25 million people. The Third Estate was composed of the bourgeoisie, the peasantry and the urban artisans. As a class, the bourgeoisie—merchants, manufacturers, bankers, doctors, lawyers, and intellectuals, all had wealth. Wealth was nothing without status. The bourgeoisie were influenced by the nobility and tried to imitate them whenever possible. By 1789, the bourgeoisie had numerous grievances they wished addressed. They wanted all Church, army and government positions open to men of talent and merit. They sought a parliament that would make laws for the nation. They desired a constitution that would limit the king's powers. They also desired fair trials, religious toleration and vast administrative reforms. These are all liberal ideas that were inspired by the Enlightenment and would appear after the summer of 1789.

The peasantry consisted of around 21 million individuals. The French peasants continued to live in utmost poverty. Peasants were victimized by heavy taxation- taxes were necessary to pay for the cost of war, something that had damaged the French economy. So, the peasants paid taxes to the king, taxes to the church, and indirect taxes on wine, salt and bread. By 1789 the plight of the French peasant was obvious. The price of bread soared and overall, prices continued to rise at a quicker rate than wages. The Third Estate was primed and ready for change.

1. What were some problems in France by 1789?
2. List the three estates and list the groups that make them up?
3. How was the Third Estate abused by the estates above them?

### The Storming of the Bastille

On July 14th, 1789 the people of Paris stormed the Bastille, the prison which was the symbol of the absolute monarchy which France had been suffering under for so long. The drama unfolded in the early morning hours, with the looting of the prison as the mob searched for weapons to fight an expected attack from the army, which was loyal to the King. They managed to get their hands on thirty two thousand rifles, but no ammunition. The much needed ammo could be found at the Bastille prison.

To the people of Paris, the Bastille was a symbol of brutality and totalitarian power. It was also hated because of the many stories that had emerged from its walls of horrible torture and brutality. The prison walls were ten feet thick and its towers were some ninety feet high.

The Bastille was guarded by cannon, and soldiers. The soldiers had enough ammunition and weapons to fight this battle. The mob was temporarily halted by the sight of the cannons. A rumor went around that one of the cannons was being positioned to fire on the people of Paris. The mob became enraged, demanding that the cannon be redirected. Soon they had put together a message demanding that the prison allow them access to the ammunition. A delegation was invited into the prison by the Governor of the Bastille. The Governor had refused to surrender. The delegates also had the information that the cannon were unloaded. This piece of news was all that the mob needed to urge them on.

The cry of “We want the Bastille!” went up among the crowd. Then a group of youths got over the wall of the prison and dropped into the courtyard. They rushed to the drawbridge and let them mob inside. As they rushed in, fire came from the army and several of the protestors were cut down. Fierce fighting followed and carried on into the evening. Finally the mob got their hands on some cannons. They dragged them into position to blow down the gates of the prison. The soldiers guarding the prison now urged their Governor to surrender. The pressure put on him by his defenders made him do so. This did not, however, spare his life. Before long his severed head was paraded to the mob. The prison only held seven prisoners. But the storming of the Bastille had done far more than release these seven men. It had brought an ancient system of royal tyranny to an end. Learning that the Bastille had been taken, King Louis XVI asked an aid, “Is this a revolt?” The answer came swiftly: “No, sire. It is a revolution.”

Two days after the storming of the Bastille, the National Assembly ordered that this symbol of despotic power be burned to the ground. The crowds cheered as the prison walls crumbled and finally grass grew where the Bastille once stood.

1. What was the Bastille to people of France?
2. How can this be seen as the start to the revolution?

### Role of Women

Women of France during the revolution played an important role. They were most directly involved with the state of food and they strongly felt the effects of the food shortage in Paris. By the beginning of October 1789, most women could no longer feed their children, let alone themselves. On October, 5, six thousand Parisian women marched out of the city toward Versailles. Many soldiers agreed to protect the women on this march. The women were armed with pikes, and they stormed the Palace at Versailles on October 6. They charged into the bedrooms of the palace and chased the queen Marie Antoinette from her chamber. They confronted Louis XVI with demands. Humiliated, Louis XVI agreed to return to Paris where he would manage the food problem himself. Louis XVI and his family were now prisoners of the revolution.

1. What was the role of Parisian women during the French Revolution?

### The Desperate State of Finance

“The desperate state of finances was apparent when Jacques Necker, who was neither French nor Catholic, was called in 1776 to restore the kingdom’s finances. Necker quickly reversed most of the former finance leader’s famous edicts. Following a policy of borrowing rather than raising taxes to finance state expenditures (then exploding because of the American war); Necker earned a good degree of popularity among the people of France. However, Necker’s short-term, high-interest loans pushed the government closer to bankruptcy. Necker’s reputation as a financial “genius” came with his 1781 report where, by cooking the figures, he made it appear that the French state accounts were in a surplus. His sky-high popularity and his belated attempts to curtail spending earned him enmity in the French court. Necker soon found himself isolated and unable to push his more serious financial reforms through. He was dismissed in 1781.

But this was no help to the government’s finances. In 1787, the national deficit had risen to 125 million livres (one livre is equal to a pound of silver). In addition 280 million livres of future revenue had already been spent in advance and additional loans of 650 million livres had been incurred.

Early that year, Louis called an Assembly of Notables to consider the appalling problems of the kingdom. But many felt that this was just a way of getting sanction for further taxation. The Notables were sent home in May without any new burdens having been agreed to.

The Paris Parliament, too, refused to allow the deficit to be reduced by means of a land tax. Instead they called for a detailed return of public income and expenditure. Abbe Sabatier of Castres said, “It is not the Statements of Account that we need, but the Estates General”, reviving a suggestion made by the King earlier. The Estates General consisted of representatives of the three estates and was assembled only on occasions of great national emergency and none had been held for a hundred and seventy-five years.

John Fisher, Six Summers in Paris 1789-1794, New York: Harper, 1966, pg 84.

1. Who was Jacques Necker? What was he supposed to do?
2. What was the major problem in France at this time? Use examples.
3. What is the Estates General?
4. Since the Estates General had not been called for 175 years, what can that say about France over that period of time?