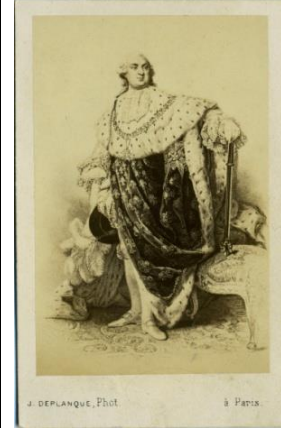


Chapter 22 -- The French Revolution Begins



Dates:
1789

Sections:

- French Commoners Storm The Bastille And Assert Their Sovereignty

July 14, 1789 Bastille

French Commoners Storm Bastille Prison And Assert Their Sovereignty



As America is about to embark on its great experiment, “government of the people,” the citizens of France rise up to overthrow their monarchy – which has endured since July 3, 987, when Huger Capet is crowned King of the Franks.

In 1789 the Capetian Dynasty rests with King Louis XVI, who has ascended the throne in 1774, at 19 years old.

Ironically the French Revolution stems from a tax revolt, which mirrors the rebellion in America.

In seeking world dominion over Britain, France has fought two international wars – the disastrous Seven Years War from 1756 to 1763, waged by Louis XV, and the successful “alliance war” with America ending in 1783 at Yorktown. Together they have bankrupted the royal coffers.

King Louis XVI (1754-1793)

The King tries to maneuver his way around the monetary crisis, first by borrowing from abroad, and then by “investing” to stimulate economic growth. Neither strategy works. As the crisis grows, the King’s authority begins to erode.

On May 5, 1789 he is forced to convene the Estates General to seek solutions to the nation’s finances. This body was abolished in 1641 by King Louis XIII, and its assembly now is another signal of growing internal turmoil.

The assembly includes representatives from the three classes of French society:

- The Catholic Clergy (First Estate), some 10,000 strong, exempt from all taxes.
- The hereditary Nobility (Second Estate), 400,000 in number with vast wealth and also no taxes.
- The Commoners (Third Estate), 25 million including the bourgeoisie (middle class property owners), who also avoid taxes, and the vast mainstream of peasants, constantly more squeezed for money.

The convention falls apart before it can even get to the topic of finances – with the Commoners leaving the hall after a series of procedural power plays by representatives of the clergy and nobility.

By June 17, the Commoners have organized their own convention, which they call the National Assembly. They invite the clergy and nobles to attend, but make it clear that they intend to run French affairs with or without them, “on behalf of the people.”

The King steps in to stall this move by shutting down the assembly center, but this only stiffens the will of the delegates. On July 9, they re-convene as the National Constituent Assembly and commit to writing a Constitution for the new government they plan to create.

As the people of Paris take to the streets to express their displeasure, law and order breaks down. The King and the nobles try to rally troops of the French Guard to restore discipline.

On July 12, violent clashes break out, with cavalry units charging into crowds in the center city. This convinces the rebels that a widespread crackdown is about to begin, and they assault various armories and food warehouses around Paris to prepare for battle.

At Hotel des Invalides they acquire muskets, but not the gunpowder needed to fire them. This is stored in the Bastille Prison, which they storm on the morning of July 14. The tide has now turned in favor of the commoners, and they push on toward their own assertion of sovereignty.

The first step comes in the form of a “Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen” issued on August 20, 1789. This lays out general principles for a constitutional monarchy, leaving King Louis on the throne, but transferring power to a national assembly elected by the people. The country operates this way for the next two years until work on a more detailed Constitution begins in 1791.

For the moment at least, France appears to be headed toward a permanent government run by a legislature similar to the American Congress and the British Parliament.