The French Revolution, Part One: A Timeline of the Revolution

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The first in a two-part series

The people of France overthrew their ancient government in 1789. They took as their slogan the famous phrase “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité”—Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. Equality, or doing away with privilege, was the most important part of the slogan to the French revolutionists. For equality, they were willing to sacrifice their political liberty. Fraternity, or brotherhood with all men, was also sacrificed, but they did win equality before the law.

Why The French Wanted Equality

The French had good reasons for wanting equality. Before 1789, inequality was typical of the old government. The nobles and clergy were the privileged orders. They were exempt from such direct taxes as the taille, or land tax. Most taxes were paid by the Third Estate—a class that included peasants, artisans, merchants and professional men. Even among these groups,
taxes were not equal. Some provinces were exempt from certain assessments, such as the gabelle, or salt tax. In addition, the collection of some taxes was made by contractors or tax farmers, and the tax gatherers collected whatever they could.

**Other inequalities**

There were social and economic inequalities as well as political ones. The peasant suffered under the burden of out-of-date feudal dues. These were collected with renewed vigor by the nobles in the latter part of the 18th century. Rabbits might destroy the peasant’s garden and pigeons eat his grain, but he must not kill them because they were protected for the lord’s hunting. In addition to the dues to the king and the nobles, the peasants had to pay dues to the church.

The conditions were no worse in the latter part of the 18th century than they had been earlier. Now, however, the people were beginning to think. The writers of the time helped stir up thought and discontent.

**Final steps before the Revolution**

At last, the day of reckoning came. The national treasury had been exhausted by the wars of Louis XIV and by his extravagance and that of his successors. The 250 million dollars that it cost France to aid the Americans in their fight for independence was the last straw. Jacques Turgot and Jacques Necker, ministers of finance, had tried to ward off bankruptcy by cutting court expenses. The reckless court, led by the sprightly, frivolous, extravagant queen, Marie-Antoinette, would not listen to the word “economy.” Turgot and Necker were dismissed and other ministers took their place. Finally, foreign bankers refused to lend more money. Public opinion was deeply stirred by the Parlement of Paris, a judicial body that defied the king and refused to enforce new taxes.

In 1788, Louis XVI as a last resort called a meeting of the Estates-General, which included the three estates of the nobles, the clergy and the common people. Their representatives met at Versailles, a suburb of Paris, early in May 1789.

**The Revolution**

With the meeting of the Estates-General on May 5, 1789, the Revolution began. The representatives of the Third Estate led the way. Some of the nobles and many of the clergy joined with them. They changed the name of the gathering from Estates-General, which represented classes, to National Assembly, which represented the people of France. When the king shut them out from their usual place of meeting, they took the famous Oath of the Tennis Court (June 20, 1789), pledging themselves not to separate until they had given France a constitution. When the king sent a messenger to remove them from their hall, the fiery Mirabeau cried out: “Go tell your master that we are here by the will of the people and that we shall be removed only at the point of the bayonet.”
Paris, 11 miles away, was alarmed by rumors of the troops gathering about Versailles. A Paris mob stormed and captured the old royal prison in Paris, called the Bastille, on July 14. When the king was told what had taken place he exclaimed, “Why, this is a revolt!”

“No, sire,” was the reply, “it is a revolution.”

After the fall of the Bastille, a revolutionary committee of middle-class citizens governed Paris. A national guard composed mainly of citizens was organized and commanded by General Lafayette. Then the provinces followed the lead of Paris and formed revolutionary governments. The peasants in many places burned the castles of the lords in order to destroy the papers that contained the records of the lords’ manorial rights and there was anarchy in many country districts.
Quiz

1. Read the excerpt from the section “Final steps before the Revolution.”

   *Jacques Turgot and Jacques Necker, ministers of finance, had tried to ward off bankruptcy by cutting court expenses. The reckless court, led by the sprightly, frivolous, extravagant queen, Marie-Antoinette, would not listen to the word “economy.” Turgot and Necker were dismissed and other ministers took their place.*

   Which of the following can be inferred from this excerpt?
   
   (A) Marie-Antoinette is now seen as the main reason for the Revolution.
   
   (B) Marie-Antoinette feared the ministers’ actions would start the Revolution.
   
   (C) Marie-Antoinette was seen as out of touch with the people and their concerns.
   
   (D) Marie-Antoinette believed she could ward off the coming conflict by choosing better ministers.

2. Which of the following aspects of the article is NOT thoroughly discussed?

   (A) the problem of unfair taxes and feudal dues
   
   (B) French involvement with the American fight for independence
   
   (C) the evolution of the Estates-General to the National Assembly
   
   (D) why equality was seen as the most important virtue

3. Which sentence BEST summarizes how traditional French society affected the ideas of the Revolution?

   (A) People on the lower levels of society were not allowed to protect their gardens and grain; they wanted a more free society.
   
   (B) People belonging to minority groups had to pay numerous taxes; they wanted a society free of the burden of taxes.
   
   (C) People belonging to minority groups were treated unfairly by the majority groups; they wanted a more equal society.
   
   (D) People on the lower levels of society were treated unfairly by the wealthy; they wanted a more equal society.
4 Which answer choice would BEST describe the situation in France in the early stages of the Revolution?

(A) Revolutionary France was celebratory and optimistic.
(B) Revolutionary France was quietly simmering with anger.
(C) Revolutionary France was organized and determined.
(D) Revolutionary France was chaotic and violent.
Answer Key

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