

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

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The storming of the Tuileries on August 10, 1792, during the French Revolution. Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Jean Duplessis-Bertaux

## *The first in a two-part series*

The people of France overthrew their old government in 1789. They believed in the famous phrase “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité.” In French, this means Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.

Equality was the most important. To the French people, it meant making sure that no one had more advantages in life than anyone else. To achieve equality, the French were willing to sacrifice some of their freedoms as well as their fraternity, or a sense of brotherhood with all men.

## Why the French wanted equality

The French had good reasons for wanting equality. Before 1789, there was much inequality in the government. Some groups of people got special treatment. The nobles and church leaders did not have to pay certain taxes. The class of people that had to pay most taxes was called the Third Estate. This was a lower class that included peasants, artists, merchants and other workers.

## Other inequalities

Life was unfair for the lower class in many ways. The peasants had to pay fees to nobles. A noble was someone whose family was a higher social class and had certain privileges. This was a leftover from the feudal system of the Middle Ages. In this system, peasants got a piece of land to farm on in return for serving a noble person. Peasants also had to pay fees to the church.

The conditions were no worse than they had been in previous years. Still, at the end of the 1700s, people were beginning to think about how unfair life was. The writers of the time helped stir up thoughts and unhappiness.

## Final steps before the Revolution

King Louis XIV was the king of France from 1643 until 1715. He got into expensive wars and lived a very rich lifestyle. So did the kings that came after him. The country was running out of money. The French people were especially angry about the \$250 million dollars that it cost France to aid the Americans in their fight for independence.

Two government officials wanted to save money by spending less on the court, which was the royal family and everyone who worked for them. However, the court was led by the irresponsible and wasteful queen, Marie-Antoinette. She would not listen. Finally, foreign bankers refused to lend any more money. Public opinion was deeply stirred by the Parlement of Paris, a different court that defied the king and refused to enforce new taxes.

In 1788, Louis XVI called a meeting of the Estates-General. The Estates-General included the three groups – the nobles, church leaders and the common people. Their representatives met at Versailles, outside 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 church leaders joined with them. They changed the name of the gathering from Estates-General, which represented classes of people, to National Assembly, which represented all the people of France.

On June 20, 1789, the group pledged not to separate until they had given France a constitution. When the king sent a messenger to remove them from where they were working, one revolutionary threatened violence.

People in Paris, 11 miles away, were alarmed by rumors of the troops gathering around 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."

### **The peasants finally have their say**

After the fall of the Bastille a revolutionary committee of middle-class citizens governed Paris. A national guard composed mainly of common people was organized and commanded by General Marquis de Lafayette. Lafayette had helped the Americans in their Revolutionary War. The other parts of the country followed the lead of the revolutionaries in Paris. They formed their own revolutionary governments. The peasants in many places burned the castles of the rich lords, and there was chaos in many country districts.

**Quiz**

- 1 Based on information in the article, which of these statements is TRUE?
- (A) General Marquis de Lafayette was an American.
  - (B) The National Assembly was led by the royalty.
  - (C) King Louis XVI supported a peaceful revolution.
  - (D) King Louis XVI did not support the Revolution.
- 2 Which sentence from the article BEST supports the idea that life in France before the Revolution was unfair?
- (A) To the French people, it meant making sure that no one had more advantages in life than anyone else.
  - (B) The nobles and church leaders did not have to pay certain taxes.
  - (C) The conditions were no worse than they had been in previous years.
  - (D) Finally, foreign bankers refused to lend any more money.
- 3 What effect did new ideas about equality and fairness have on the Revolution?
- (A) They inspired people to fight against unfairness.
  - (B) They inspired people to fight for more freedoms.
  - (C) They encouraged people to try to elect a more fair king.
  - (D) They encouraged people to support the revolution in America.
- 4 Which section of the article explains HOW the revolutionaries first took power?
- (A) "Other inequalities"
  - (B) "Final steps before the Revolution"
  - (C) "The Revolution"
  - (D) "The peasants finally have their say"

**Answer Key**

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