

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 took as their slogan the famous phrase “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité”— Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. Equality was the most important of these to the French revolutionists. Their goal of achieving equality was in making sure that no one had more advantages than other people. To achieve equality, they were willing to sacrifice some of their freedoms as well as their fraternity, or sense of brotherhood with all men.

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 the people who worked in the church were privileged. They did not have to pay certain taxes. Most taxes were paid by the Third Estate — a social class that included peasants, artists, merchants and professional men. Even among these groups,

taxes were not equal. Some areas of the country did not have to pay the same taxes as other areas. 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. The peasants had to pay dues to nobles. This was a leftover from the feudal system of the Middle Ages, in which a peasant got a piece of land in return for serving a noble person. Nobles collected these dues eagerly in the late 1700s. Rabbits might destroy the peasant's garden and pigeons might 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 second half of the 18th century than they had been earlier. Now, however, the people were beginning to think more about it. The writers of the time helped to stir up thoughts and unhappiness.

Final steps before the Revolution

King Louis XIV was the king of France from 1643 until 1715. He and the kings that came after him got into expensive wars and lived a very extravagant lifestyle. The country was running out of money. The \$250 million that it cost France to aid the Americans in their fight for independence was the last straw.

Jacques Turgot and Jacques Necker, the ministers of finance, had tried to ward off bankruptcy by cutting court expenses. However, the court was led by the irresponsible and wasteful Queen Marie-Antoinette. She would not listen. 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 court that defied the king and refused to enforce new taxes.

In 1788, Louis XVI called a meeting of the Estates-General as a last resort. This included the three groups – the nobles, the religious leaders 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, with some of the nobles and many of the religious leaders joining in. They changed the name of the gathering from Estates-General, which represented classes, to National Assembly, which represented 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. "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," he said.

People in Paris, 11 miles away, were 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."

Governments of the people

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 Marquis de Lafayette. Lafayette had helped the Americans in their Revolutionary War. The other parts of the country followed the lead of Paris. They formed their own revolutionary governments. The peasants in many places burned the castles of the lords, and there was chaos in many country districts.

Quiz

- 1 Select the paragraph from the section "The Revolution" that suggests the royalty was surprised by the Revolution.

- 2 Which section of the article MOST highlights the idea that the French Revolution was based on ideals?
 - (A) Introduction [paragraph 1]
 - (B) "Why the French wanted equality"
 - (C) "Other inequalities"
 - (D) "Final steps before the Revolution"

- 3 What is MOST LIKELY the reason why the author included the detail about rules against killing rabbits?
 - (A) to show the problems rabbits created for farmers
 - (B) to show details of the daily lives of peasants
 - (C) to show how French society could be unfair
 - (D) to show why hunting for rabbits was a useful activity

- 4 When the king sent a messenger to stop the revolutionaries from working on a new constitution, how did one revolutionary respond?
 - (A) He emphasized his beliefs in freedom and liberty.
 - (B) He pretended to act tough in front of the messenger.
 - (C) He angrily said he wanted to hurt the king with a bayonet.
 - (D) He implied he was ready to use and face violence for his cause.

Answer Key

- 1 Select the paragraph from the section "The Revolution" that suggests the royalty was surprised by the Revolution.

Paragraph 10:

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