

Reading Essentials and Study Guide



The French Revolution and Napoleon, 1789–1815

Lesson 1 The French Revolution Begins

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

What causes revolution? How does revolution change society?

Reading HELPDESK

Academic Vocabulary

estate one of the three classes in French society before the revolution: First Estate (clergy, or church officials); Second Estate (nobles); and Third Estate (peasants and townspeople). Also, a large piece of land with a grand house

consumer one who consumes or uses economic goods

exclusion the act of excluding

Content Vocabulary

taille an annual direct tax, usually on land or property, that provided a regular source of income for the French monarchy

bourgeoisie the middle class, including merchants, industrialists, and professional people

sans-culottes “without breeches”; members of the Paris Commune who considered themselves ordinary patriots wearing long trousers instead of the fine knee-length breeches of the nobles

TAKING NOTES: *Differentiating*

ACTIVITY Use a graphic organizer like the one below to identify long-range and immediate causes of the French Revolution.

The French Revolution	
Long Range	Immediate

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The French Revolution and Napoleon, 1789–1815

Lesson 1 The French Revolution Begins, *continued*

IT MATTERS BECAUSE

Two very important events occurred in 1789. One was the beginning of a new United States of America, and other was the beginning of the French Revolution. The French Revolution was more complex and caused more extreme changes than the American Revolution. It established a new political and social order.

Causes of the French Revolution

Guiding Questions *How did the structure of social classes in France lead to discontent? How did the economic crises in France lead to the meeting of the Estates-General?*

The French Revolution has often been seen as a major turning point in European history. The institutions of the Old Regime were destroyed. A new order emerged. It was based on rights of the individual, representative government, and the idea of loyalty to the nation rather than to the king or queen.

The long-range causes of the French Revolution are found in the structure of French society. Before the Revolution, French society was not equal. Since the Middle Ages, France's population was divided into three groups, or **estates**.

The First Estate, or clergy, included about 130,000 people (out of a total population of 27 million). The clergy owned about 10 percent of the land. The clergy was extremely divided. The higher clergy included cardinals, bishops, and heads of monasteries. They were usually from noble families, and they shared the outlook and interests of the nobility. In contrast, parish priests, were often poor, and they came from the class of commoners.

The Second Estate was the nobility. It had about 350,000 people who owned about 20 to 30 percent of the land. The nobility played an important role in French society in the 1700s. They held many of the top positions in the government, in the military, in the law courts, and in the Roman Catholic Church. The clergy and nobles controlled most of the wealth of the kingdom, but they did not have to pay the **taille** (TAH-yuh). France's main tax.

The rest of the French citizens—26.5 million—were in the Third Estate. Members of the Third Estate were divided by large differences in jobs, education, and wealth. Peasants, or farmers, made up 75 to 80 percent of the Third Estate, but they owned only about 35 to 40 percent of the land. Middle class members of the Third Estate owned the rest. At least half of the peasants had little or no land.

Peasants owed certain duties to the nobles. These duties were practices that had continued from medieval times when serfdom was common. For example, peasants had to pay nobles fees to grind their flour or press their grapes. This was because the local noble controlled the flour mill and wine press. Peasants also had to work a certain number of days harvesting the noble's crops. Peasants strongly disliked these duties to nobles.

Another part of the Third Estate included urban craftspeople, shopkeepers, and other wage earners. These workers were struggling to survive. In the 1700s, the price of goods that **consumers** bought rose much faster than their wages, and as a result, these urban groups had less money to buy things.

The **bourgeoisie** (burzh-wah-ZEE), or the middle class, was another part of the Third Estate. The group included about 8 percent of the population, or more than 2 million people. They owned about 20 to 25 percent of the land. The bourgeoisie included merchants, bankers, and industrialists. The bourgeoisie also included professional people such as lawyers, government workers, doctors, and writers.

Reading Essentials and Study Guide

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The French Revolution and Napoleon, 1789–1815

Lesson 1 The French Revolution Begins, *continued*

Many in the middle class were unhappy because nobles had many privileges. The middle class actually did not want to abolish the nobility. They mostly wanted to better their own situation. Some bourgeoisie were able to become nobles under the Old Regime. Those appointed to certain public offices gained nobility. About 6,500 new nobles were created in this way, by appointment, during the 1700s.

The bourgeoisie also shared certain goals with the nobles. Both groups were becoming more and more unhappy with the monarchy. The system in France rested on privileges and on an old and rigid social order. Both the bourgeoisie and nobles were interested in the new political ideas of the Enlightenment.

Criticism of the old order was a part of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. The philosophes, or the thinkers and writers who promoted Enlightenment ideas, did not advocate revolution. However, their ideas were widely spread among the educated middle class and the noble elites of France. Revolutionary leaders often quoted Enlightenment writers at the beginning of the revolution. They especially liked to quote Rousseau.

The social situation and Enlightenment ideas, then, formed an underlying background to the French Revolution. An immediate cause of the French Revolution was the near collapse of the French budget (plan for spending money). The French economy had been growing for fifty years, but there were economic crises at different times. Bad harvests in 1787 and 1788 and a slowdown in manufacturing led to food shortages, higher prices for food, and unemployment.

Just before the revolution, the French economy was in crisis. However, the French king and his ministers continued to spend enormous amounts of money on wars and court luxuries. The queen, Marie Antoinette, was known for her extravagance, and people resented this. When the government decided to spend huge amounts of money to help the American colonists against Britain, the budget was in very serious trouble.

The finances of the French government were about to fail, and so Louis XVI was forced to call a meeting of the Estates-General. The Estates-General was the French parliament, and it had not met since 1614.



Reading Progress Check

Identifying Cause and Effect How were economic problems a contributing cause of the French Revolution?

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The French Revolution and Napoleon, 1789–1815

Lesson 1 The French Revolution Begins, *continued*

The National Assembly

Guiding Questions *Why did the Third Estate declare itself to be the National Assembly? What were the French peasants reacting to in their rebellions of 1789?*

Louis XVI called a meeting of the Estates-General at Versailles on May 5, 1789. In the Estates-General, the First Estate and the Second Estate each had about 300 representatives. The Third Estate had almost 600 representatives. Most members of the Third Estate wanted to establish a constitutional government to fix France's financial problems. It would make the clergy and nobility pay taxes too.

From the start, there were arguments about the system of voting. In the past, each estate had one vote. This meant that the First and Second Estates could outvote the Third Estate two to one. The Third Estate now demanded that each deputy have one vote. Under this new system, with the help of a few nobles and clerics, the Third Estate could control a majority of the votes. The king, however, stated that he favored the current system.

On June 17, 1789, the Third Estate boldly declared that it was the National Assembly and that it would write a constitution. Three days later, on June 20, the deputies of the Third Estate arrived at their meeting place, but the doors were locked. Then they moved to a nearby indoor tennis court. There they took an oath that they would continue to meet until they had a new constitution. The oath they took is known as the Tennis Court Oath.

Louis XVI was ready to use force against the Third Estate. On July 14, 1789, about 900 Parisians gathered outside the Bastille (ba•STEEL). The Bastille was an old fortress in Paris used as a prison and a place to keep weapons. The crowd attacked the Bastille. After four hours of fighting, the prison warden surrendered the fortress to the rebels. The rebels then cut off the warden's head, and they began to take down the Bastille brick by brick. The rebels took control of Paris.

When King Louis XVI returned to his palace at Versailles after a day of hunting, a duke told him about the fall of the Bastille. Louis reportedly said, "Why, this is a revolt." "No, Sire," the duke answered. "It is a revolution."

Louis XVI was told that his royal troops would not shoot at the rebels. The king's authority had collapsed in Paris. At the same time, all over France, revolts were occurring. People's hatred of the entire system of control over land, with its fees and obligations, had finally led to action.

Peasant rebellion became part of the vast panic called the Great Fear. People heard that foreign troops were coming to end the revolution. Rumors like this spread from village to village. In response, peasants attacked houses of nobles and destroyed records of obligations.



Reading Progress Check

Making Connections What was the connection between the actions of the representatives of the Third Estate and the Estates-General and those of the peasants during the Great Fear?

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The French Revolution and Napoleon, 1789–1815

Lesson 1 The French Revolution Begins, *continued*

End of the Old Regime

Guiding Question *How did the French Revolution enter a new phase after the storming of the Bastille?*

The National Assembly reacted to news of peasant rebellions and rumors of an invasion by foreign troops. The National Assembly reacted quickly. They took action against parts of the government in France. On August 4, 1789, the National Assembly voted to abolish all legal privileges of the nobles and clergy.

Declaration of the Rights of Man

On August 26, the National Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. This charter declared that all men had basic rights to liberty, property, security, and the right to fight against oppression. It took many of its ideas from the English Bill of Rights of 1689 and the American Declaration of Independence and Constitution.

The declaration reflected Enlightenment thought. It stated that all men were free and equal before the law. The Declaration also said that people should obtain public offices because of their talent, not because of their birth. It ended unfair tax rules and said that every group had to pay taxes. It clearly supported freedom of speech and of the press. The declaration also raised an important question. Should equal rights include women? Many deputies answered yes, but they felt that women should not have political rights, such as the right to vote. A writer named Olympe de Gouges (oh-LEP day GOOzhe) refused to accept the **exclusion** of women from politics. In 1791, she boldly wrote a declaration of the rights of women that included many of the ideas of the Declaration of the Rights of Man. She insisted that women should have the same rights as men.

The King Concedes

In the meantime, Louis XVI remained quiet at Versailles. However, he refused to accept the decrees of the National Assembly. On October 5, thousands of women marched to Versailles from Paris. They were carrying swords, guns, and even broomsticks. The king met with some of the women, and they told him that their children were starving because there was no bread. The women's actions forced Louis to accept the decrees of the National Assembly.

The crowd then insisted that the king and his family come to Paris. The royal family returned there on October 6. To show their goodwill, they brought wagons full of flour from the palace. Women went along with the king and his family on the trip.

Church Reforms

Under the Old Regime, the Catholic Church was an important part of the old order. The revolutionaries (people who want political change) felt that they had to reform the Church, too. They had another reason for wanting the reforms. They needed the money that the church had. The National Assembly seized many of the Catholic Church's lands and sold them. In this way, the Assembly was able to increase the state's revenues.

Finally, the Church was formally brought under the control of the state. A law was passed called the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. It said that bishops and priests were to be elected by the people and that the pope and the Church hierarchy (or church leaders) would no longer appoint them. The state would also pay the salaries of the bishops and priests. Because of these changes, many Catholics became enemies of the revolution.

Reading Essentials and Study Guide

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The French Revolution and Napoleon, 1789–1815

Lesson 1 The French Revolution Begins, *continued*

New Constitution and New Fears

The new Constitution of 1791 established a limited monarchy. The king remained, but a Legislative Assembly would make the laws. The Legislative Assembly had 745 representatives. However, the method of choosing the representatives meant that only relatively wealthy people could be elected to the assembly.

By 1791, the old order had been destroyed. However, the new government did not have the support of the whole country. Political radicals wanted more reform. The king hated the new order and his loss of absolute power. In June 1791, the royal family tried to leave France in disguise, and they almost succeeded. However, they were recognized, captured, and brought back to Paris. In this uneasy situation, the new Legislative Assembly first met in October 1791. France's relations with rest of Europe soon led to the downfall of Louis XVI.

War With Austria

Over time, some European leaders began to fear that revolution would spread to their countries. The kings of Austria and Prussia threatened to use force to restore Louis XVI to full power. As a result, the Legislative Assembly decided to act first and declared war on Austria in the spring of 1792. The early fighting went badly for the French. In panic, people started looking for someone to blame. Everywhere people were saying the king is betraying us or the generals are betraying us and that no one could be trusted.

Rise of the Paris Commune

In the spring of 1792, angry citizens demonstrated to protest food shortages and defeats at war. In August, Parisian radicals again decided the future of the revolution. They declared themselves a commune—a city council run by the people. They then organized an attack on the royal palace and Legislative Assembly.

The French Revolution was entering a more radical and violent stage. Members of the new Paris Commune took control of the king. They forced the Legislative Assembly to suspend the monarchy and call for a National Convention. This time they wanted a more extreme change. All the representatives who would decide the nation's future would be elected through universal male suffrage. This meant all adult males would have the right to vote. The new group of voters would include men who had not met the requirements for citizenship first established by the Assembly and would include even peasants.

Many members of the Paris Commune proudly called themselves **sans-culottes**. This term means “without breeches.” They wore long trousers like common people, not the knee-length breeches of the nobles. This showed that they were ordinary people who did not wear fancy clothes like aristocrats. Often historians describe the sans-culottes as poor workers. However, many were actually merchants or artisans. They were the “elite” of the neighborhoods. The revolution was now entering a more radical stage.



Reading Progress Check

Analyzing In what ways did the end of the old order move the revolution toward a more radical phase?
