

French Revolution

In Europe, the status of the person was determined by the family one was born in and nothing could be done to change the status of the person, regardless of how hard he or she worked. The upper classes and the wealthy enjoyed an easy life full of comfort. The poor suffered greatly and led a harsh life.

In the history of France, the French Revolution covered the period 1789 till 1799. In France, the society was divided into three classes, known as estates. The first included the priests and religious leaders of the Church and they constituted 1% of the population. They controlled approximately 10% of the land in France and received great wealth from it. The second consisted in the nobility, which were around 2% of the population. They owned 25% of the land. The third consisted in around 97% of the population and they were required to pay taxes, tithing to the Church, and dues, which made their life very difficult.

In 1789, Louis XVI was king of France, however, he did not know much about the common people and the problems they faced. At the time, France had gone through a very hard winter, which made it lose a lot of its crops and the debt of France was increasing because it had supported the revolution in America against Great Britain. King Louis XVI decided to pay off the debts, he would tax the first and second classes, which were exempt from paying taxes. Exempt from paying taxes means that both the religious leaders and the nobility did not have to pay taxes. However, because of desperate times facing the country, Louis XVI called a meeting, known as Estates-General, to examine the issue of taxes so that they can help pay the debts of the country.

The Estates-General had not met for over 175 years and kings had governed the country through men who were responsible only to them. The kings did not have any knowledge what the issues of the common people were, what they wanted, or what they were thinking. So when the Estates-General was called, they began discussing how decisions should be made instead of discussing how to raise money and the issue of taxes. The Third Estate wanted all the estates to meet together to avoid closed sessions in which only the first two estates would make all the decisions. They also pushed that votes to be counted per person, not per class or estate. The estates did not agree how votes should be counted (by person or by order). So, the Third Estate called themselves the National Assembly and swore that they would not leave until France had a new constitution.

Discussions about the new constitution raised fears of unrest, so troops were sent in the city. The National Assembly was afraid that the troops were sent to stop them from finishing their work and making the necessary changes. This provoked people to riot in order to protect the National Assembly. On July 14th, 1789, mobs of people in Paris attacked the prison of Bastille to gain access to the weapons stored there. This day is known as Bastille Day.

Name _____

Date _____

French Revolution (Cont'd)

In August 1789, the National Assembly published the Declaration of the Rights of Man as a first step to writing the constitution.

All throughout France, people started to rise against the upper classes and many violent acts were committed. At first, the First and Second Estates were not willing to give up all their wealth and special privileges. Violence continued to spread until the First and Second Estates were forced to agree and submit to the will of the people.

Though Louis XVI was still king, however, his authority was limited. The National Assembly controlled France. The National Assembly made their ideas known on fraternity, liberty, and equality in the Declaration of the Rights of Man. The property owned by the church and the nobility was taken away, so were their special rights.

The king and his family tried to escape in June of 1791, but they were caught and were forced to accept all the demands requested of them. In 1792, the new assembly, called the Convention, got rid of the monarchy completely and established France as a republic.

In January 1793, King Louis XVI was beheaded. The "Reign of Terror" began September 1793 till July 1794. It was a period of violence caused by opposing parties that wanted to take power and was characterized by huge amounts of executions. People who had started out looking for freedom became tyrants who wanted to rule as they wished. During that time, people who did not agree with the rulers were executed by guillotine. Even after the Convention was overthrown and a new group called the Committee of Public Safety took power, still great numbers of people were guillotined, even without trial. A more moderate group came after them known as the Directory, but they also were corrupt. In November 1799, a general by the name of Napoleon Bonaparte overthrew the rulers by taking advantage of their weaknesses and declared himself emperor of France becoming one of the most powerful leaders in Europe.

Name _____

Date _____

French Revolution Questions

Multiple Choice:

1. The French Revolution covered the period:
 - a. 1679 - 1689
 - b. 1779 - 1789
 - c. 1789 - 1799
 - d. 1799 - 1809

2. During the French Revolution, the king of France was:
 - a. Louis XIV
 - b. Louis XV
 - c. Louis XVI
 - d. Louis XVII

3. The National Assembly consists of:
 - a. First Estate
 - b. Second Estate
 - c. Third Estate
 - d. None of the above

Matching:

- | | |
|------------------------|---|
| _____ 3. First Estate | a. Religious leaders and priests |
| _____ 4. Second Estate | b. Common people that included peasants and merchants |
| _____ 5. Third Estate | c. Nobility |

True or False:

- _____ 7. Before the French Revolution, the priests and nobility had to pay taxes.
- _____ 8. In 1792, France became a republic.
- _____ 9. The Reign of Terror is called as such because there was a lot of violence and hundreds of people were executed.

French Revolution Answers

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