

The French Revolution Begins

By 1789, absolutism in France was coming under fire from all classes. For centuries, powerful kings ruled French subjects with an iron hand. But now the tide was starting to turn. The commoners were tired of high taxes, while the nobility and the Church were barely taxed at all. The nobility was concerned about its lack of authority and power at the hands of powerful monarchs. The Church was increasingly subordinate to the government.

When the king, Louis XVI, found himself strapped for money, he had no place to turn but to the very classes who were beginning to challenge his authority. In 1789, with the insistence of several key advisors, Louis summoned a meeting of the Estates General—the advisory body of the French people.

The Estates General consisted of the three medieval classes of French society. The first estate was the clergy—the Catholic churchmen including French abbots, bishops, archbishops, and cardinals. The second estate was the nobility—those members of the French aristocracy. Over the centuries, since the creation of the Estates General, those who qualified as members of the first and second estates had not changed significantly. They were still churchmen and the aristocracy.

However, the membership of the third estate had changed considerably by 1789. During the Middle Ages, the third estate consisted of the commoners, generally the peasants. However, by the late 18th century, the third estate now included not only peasant farmers, but everyone else as well—those who were neither peasants nor clergy nor nobility.

By 1789, France had a well-defined middle class which included professional persons, such as lawyers and doctors, as well as business people, merchants, lenders, bankers, shippers, and traders. Always the majority class, the third estate now represented people who came from many walks of life. Its leadership

recognized that the third estate represented many more French citizens than the first and second estates.

France's population in 1789 was approximately 25 million inhabitants. The clergy numbered about 100,000. The nobility was four times that figure, representing 400,000 citizens. However, the third estate represented 24.5 million people! Thus, the members of the third estate were prepared to take the

leadership role at their newly called meeting. (This meeting marked the first time a monarch had called the Estates General together since 1614.)

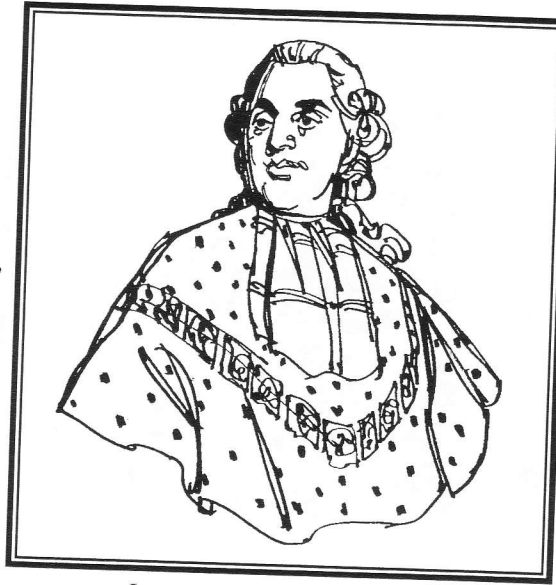
The estates gathered at Versailles for their meeting on May 5, 1789. The number of representatives for each class was as follows: 300 clergy, 300 nobles, and 600 commoners. With this distribution, the third estate hoped to dominate the negotiations, since they outnumbered either of the other two estates.

However, the king insisted that the estates vote as a block. This meant that the clergy and the

nobility could vote together and always outvote the third estate by two to one. (This was a poor decision by Louis XVI because the third estate represented 95 percent of his subjects.)

Feeling they had been cheated by the king, the third estate made a momentous decision. Rather than abide by the king's decree, they refused to meet with the other two estates, suspecting themselves the victims of a vast conspiracy. Instead, on June 17, 1789, the third estate declared itself a National Assembly, representing all French citizens, and invited delegates from the other two estates to join them. Two days later, the clergy voted to join them. This move began the destruction of the three-class social system in France.

The king's response was harsh. On June 20, he closed and locked the doors of the room in the palace at Versailles where the third estate was to meet. This brought the king and the third estate into direct confrontation.



Louis XVI provoked his subjects with high taxes

The French Revolution Expands

Tensions mounted in June of 1789 when the third estate refused to accept the king's instructions concerning voting. When Louis XVI ordered the estates to vote as blocks, the delegates of the third estate refused. After declaring themselves a National Assembly, they were joined by the first estate, the clergy. When Louis XVI refused them access to their meeting room in the palace, he caused a direct confrontation.

Not to be undone, the members of the National Assembly (largely the first and third estates, along with some members of the nobility), met together in a nearby indoor tennis court, where princely nobility normally played. There the members took an oath—known as the Tennis Court Oath—not to disunite or disband until they had drafted a constitution, reframing the government of France. This meeting constituted a direct challenge to the existence of Absolutism in France.

The king's response was to order the three estates to meet separately and refuse to recognize the existence of the newly created National Assembly. The National Assembly refused. One of its leaders, a nobleman named Comte de Mirabeau [mee rah BOH] stood in defiance in the assembly and said to de Breze, the master of ceremonies, "Go and tell those who sent you that we are here by the will of the people, and that we will go only if we are driven out by bayonets!" When he received word that the National Assembly was not disbanding, Louis XVI responded wearily: "They mean to stay! Well then, damn it, let them stay!"

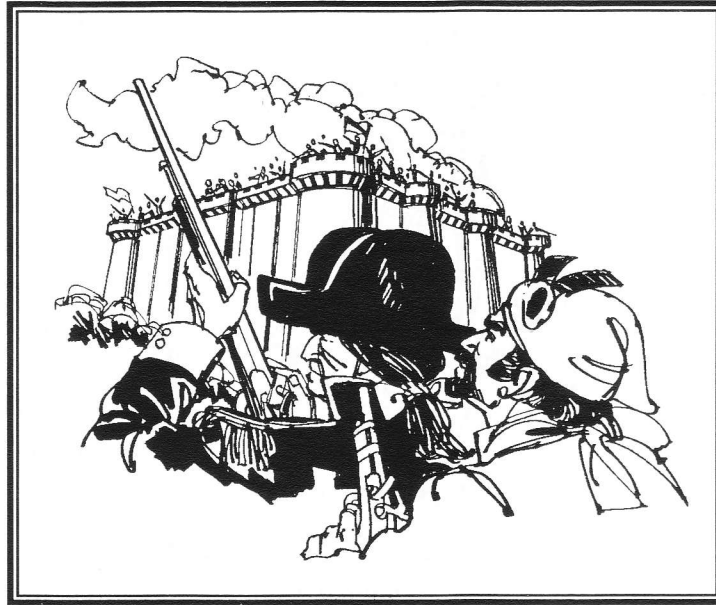
Louis' seeming acceptance of the National Assembly was a great encouragement to its members. They passed a declaration stating that any attempt to arrest a member during a meeting of the National Assembly was an act of treason. By June 27, after ten busy days of events, Louis ordered the clergy and the

nobility to meet with the National Assembly. However, Louis was not going to prove to be a loyal advocate of the third estate or the National Assembly.

With these events, France soon found itself on the edge of a major revolution. Events multiplied rapidly. Rumors circulated in the streets of Paris, feeding emotions. By July 13, the streets of the city were filled with mercenary soldiers hired by Louis XVI. Upward of 18,000 Swiss and German troops began collecting in

and around Paris. Stories of the king's intention to dissolve the National Assembly by force were told repeatedly. (The king's own guard sided with the National Assembly in June, when they were ordered to disperse the delegates.)

July 1789 proved a significant month in the history of the French Revolution. Advisers to Louis—those sympathetic to the causes of the National Assembly—were fired. By mid-month, frightened street



mobs attacked an old medieval prison-fortress in Paris known as the Bastille [bass TEE]. This ancient fortification was being used as a prison and was a suspected storage site for royal gunpowder. (Thousands of Parisians had already raided the Invalides, a military hospital, and removed 30,000 muskets, which needed powder and ammunition.) Others said the Bastille housed many political prisoners. On July 14, an angry Parisian mob marched on the Bastille. When they tried to cross the drawbridge into the fort, the garrison opened fire, killing about 100.

Only when the revolutionists brought up cannons, did the commandant in the fortress surrender. Despite a promise not to harm him or his men, the mob attacked the surrendered commander, hacking him to pieces with their swords. The Bastille—a symbol of the royal abuse of power—was then destroyed, leveled to the ground. (Today, the French celebrate July 14 as Bastille Day—the date of French liberty.)

Louis Reacts to the Revolution

When the Parisian mob broke into the Bastille, the fortress-prison, they did not find exactly what they were looking for. The prison was not crowded with political prisoners, unfortunate victims of Louis XVI's power of the *lettre de cachet*. Such documents bearing the royal seal meant arrest and imprisonment without trial for any who fell out of the king's favor.

The Bastille held no political prisoners. Only seven inmates were found when the mob broke into the fortress—four counterfeits, two lunatics, and one guilty of sex crimes. However, the rioters did discover the ammunition they had not found at the Hotel des Invalides.

The National Assembly, informed of the fall of the Bastille and the bloodshed involved, was uncertain what steps to take next. Further violence erupted in the French countryside. Once rural peasants received word of the street demonstrations and of the collapse of royal authority in the capital, revolutionary fever passed from village to village. Peasants repeated the attack on the Bastille by invading the closest castles. They sometimes killed the local noblemen and their families. Many sought to find and destroy any written record of their serfdom.

A panic arose among the aristocracy. Many began to slip out of France, fleeing for their lives and the safety of their families. Even Louis' own brother left his homeland, making his way to sanctuary in Holland. Louis XVI was uncertain what move to make himself. Within two days of the fall of the Bastille, he agreed to leave Versailles and come to Paris and meet with the revolutionaries. Louis was so frightened of what might happen to him in the city that he wrote out his will before leaving the palace.

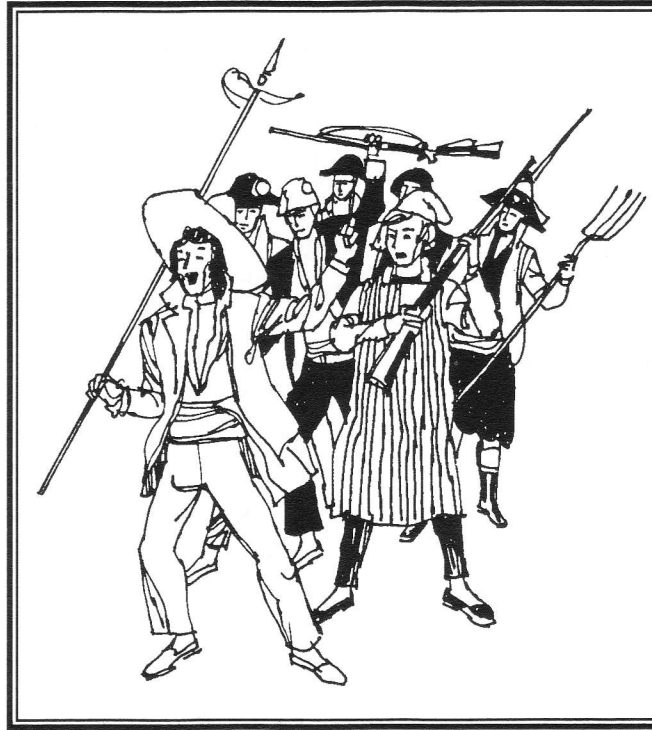
When he arrived in Paris on the 17th of June, Louis was well greeted by the crowd. The mayor of the city, Jean Sylvain Bailly, newly appointed by the revolutionaries who had seized control of the city's government, greeted the king and offered him the newly created symbol of the Revolution—a tricolor banner known as a cockade. (The tricolor was a

combination of three colors—red and blue denoting the city of Paris, and white, the color of the royal Bourbon family. Louis accepted it, placing it in the brim of his hat.)

When he stood before the new revolutionary Parisian leaders, he was cheered. Later, when the king went out on a balcony overlooking a large crowd gathered in the streets, they, too, enthusiastically greeted their monarch with great joy and relief. The cockade in his hat, and the fact that Louis had not unloosed his many mercenaries on the

people, meant to them that he favored the revolution. In their minds, he had become one of them.

For many, this indicated that the revolution was going to be accepted by the royal monarchy itself. Some even felt the revolution was over, that France was turning a corner, never to be ruled by an absolute monarch again. However, dark days lay ahead for the revolutionaries and the royal family.



Review and Write

The year 1789 was eventful for the French Revolution. List in chronological order what you think are the five most important events of the Revolution which occurred during the spring and summer of that fateful year.

A Declaration of Rights

With Louis' seeming acceptance of the Revolution, many people expected the *ancien régime* to quickly crumble. In that spirit, the National Assembly worked to tear down the old political system and create a new one.

Just over two weeks after Louis XVI's appearance in Paris, the National Assembly passed a series of sweeping reforms. In an explosion of enthusiasm, on the night of August 4–5, the Assembly ended all of the special privileges of the aristocracy. They also voted to bring serfdom to an end. By the next month, the National Assembly accepted a document known as the Declaration of the Rights of Man. This piece of writing expressed the goals of the revolution.

By and large, the Declaration of the Rights of Man contained a list of rights and liberties which the Assembly intended to recognize and protect. They included the right to own property, equality before the law, the right to resist tyranny, freedom of speech and of the press, and religious toleration. This work was one of the greatest efforts made by the leaders of the French Revolution.

In some respects, the French Declaration compares to America's Declaration of Independence. The language and philosophy are similar and share a common goal—freedom. Here is an excerpt from the Declaration of the Rights of Man:

Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. The aim of every political association is the preservation of the natural rights of man. These rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression . . . The source of all sovereignty is . . . in the nation; no body, no individual can exercise authority that does not proceed from it in plain terms.

Compare this portion of the French document to the following excerpt from Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these

rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the people to abolish it.

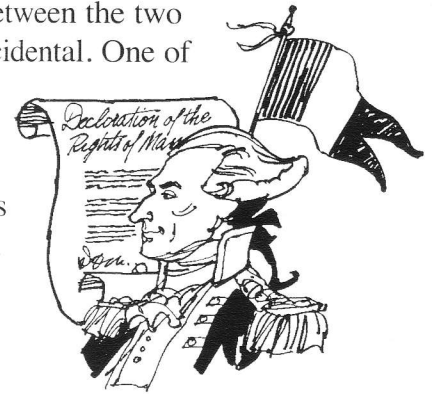
The similarities between the two documents are not accidental. One of the early drafts of the Declaration of the Rights of Man was written by the Marquis de Lafayette, a French nobleman who fought alongside George Washington in the American Revolution.

Lafayette was friends with Thomas

Jefferson, who was in Paris in the summer of 1789. Lafayette showed Jefferson copies of the Declaration while it was being written, and the great patriot leader helped edit a version of the French document. The final draft of the Declaration was adopted by the National Assembly on August 26, 1789. Soon thousands of copies were printed, reaching the hands of enthusiastic French men and women.

But the king did not give his approval to this far-reaching work. In fact, he had not yet accepted the decisions of August 4, calling for an end of privilege and serfdom. Rumors began to circulate that perhaps Louis did not support the revolution. Others claimed that the king was preparing to crush the revolution with military force. Some suggested that perhaps the king should be brought to Paris from Versailles, so the revolutionaries could keep an eye on him.

When the king ordered troops to his palace, Parisian revolutionaries responded. Within a week, a mob of women in Paris, many poor and starving, marched on the king's palace. Known as the March of the Women to Versailles, it involved 7000 women and some men. Before it was over, the king and his royal family would become prisoners of the French Revolution.



Marquis de Lafayette