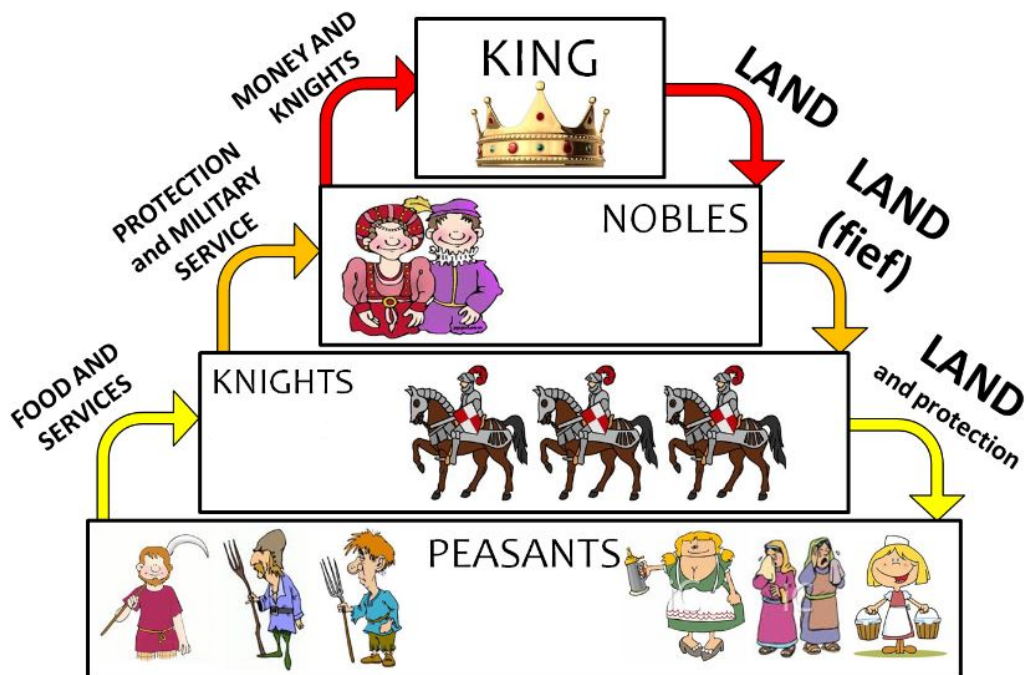


The French Revolution

In France, in the 1780s, the ordinary people wanted to overthrow the king and establish their rights. They wanted **freedom, democracy and equality**. This time in history was called the **French Revolution** and it changed France forever. It also changed the rest of Europe and was the beginning of **democracy** in other places. A democracy is a government that answers to the wishes of the people.

French Society Leading up to the Revolution

Before the revolution, France had a **feudal system**. The lords or **nobles** got land from the **ruler** and the **serfs or peasants** worked the land for the lord. The nobles had many privileges and paid few taxes. The Church was also privileged and had the right to tax peasants 10% of their income. This was called a **tithe**. There were also many more taxes and fees peasants had to pay such as: a head tax, salt tax, direct tax and fees to use the lord's wine press, mill and bakery. With all these expenses, the lower class had very little money left.



Feudal Pyramid of Power

In France in the seventeenth century, most farmers had only small farms and they still were using medieval farming methods. Their farms did not produce as much as those in England and Holland. They worked hard but stayed poor. Most were **illiterate** (could not read or write). They were often starving because of famines and sick because of epidemics. Their living conditions were brutal. They were forced to spend part of their time working the lord's property and on government projects. They weren't allowed to kill wild animals that ate their livestock because those animals were hunted by the upper classes.

The king of France was an **absolute monarch** who answered to no one but God.

City Life

Paris was the largest city in France in the 1700s with 600,000 people living there. Many people came from the countryside looking for work in the city. Not everyone could find jobs as shopkeepers, artisans (crafts people), clerks or labourers, so there were many beggars and thieves. Even people who had jobs did not live well because they had to spend half their incomes on food.

Just like in the country, there was a big difference between the classes. In Paris, there were some very rich people who were privileged and showed off their wealth while the lower classes lived in poverty. Because lots of people spent money in the city, the cost of goods rose quickly (**inflation**). This made even buying flour to make bread very expensive.

The middle class, or **bourgeoisie**, was important to the economy because they started new businesses. The king blocked the economy from growing by putting laws and restrictions in place to limit profits. He allowed only certain people to produce some goods (**monopolies**) and limited how many goods could be produced and controlled their cost. There were tolls to pay for using roads and bridges. The middle class was also unhappy.

Very few people were happy about the living conditions in France. These feelings led them to revolt.

The Rulers leading up to the Revolution

Louis XIV was known as the “Sun King”. He gave himself this name because he believed he was the source of all light in the nation. He thought he was the centre of French life and culture. He built a huge palace in Versailles and forced important nobles to live there with him. He had to approve everything they did. If Louis was happy with them, they were invited to all the ceremonies of the royal day such as the royal getting up, the royal breakfast, the royal lunch, the royal supper and the royal going to bed. He made the nobles take ballet lessons so they could learn how to move gracefully in the presence of their king.



Louis XIV



Palace at Versailles

Louis XIV became involved in several wars to try to expand French territory. He lost most of these and spent lots of money in doing so.

Louis claimed that he had special rights in the Roman Catholic Church. He felt his religion should be the one that all his subjects chose. He persecuted the Calvinist Protestants in the country.

Louis XIV died in 1715. By the end of his reign, the country was in financial trouble from all of his spending.

Louis XV came to the throne at the age of 5 years old when his great-grandfather died. Things did not improve when he was on the throne. Spending continued and government failed to reform economic and social life.

Louis XVI came to the throne in 1774. He was not prepared to deal with all the troubles of France. He was not interested in governing and left the decisions to others. He did not understand his country's financial or social problems. There were different laws in different parts of the country. There were different languages spoken: French, Breton, German and other local languages and dialects. There were many borders within the country and taxes and duties to be paid for crossing these. Many people in France were living in poverty. Louis was not supported by the business class. They were frustrated because they couldn't understand why the government was not making the changes to improve things in the country.



Louis XVI



Marie Antoinette

Louis XVI was married to **Marie Antoinette**. She was a member of the Austrian royal family. The people of France did not like her from the beginning because of her family background. Austria had often been an enemy of France. Marie Antoinette loved the glittering life of the palace. She loved fine things and had very expensive jewelry. The people thought it was unfair that she spent a fortune on jewelry when so many French people lived in poverty and were unable to feed their children.

Marie Antoinette was strong-willed and had definite opinions on government. She did not have any learning or experience on which to base her judgments. She helped to select and fire government ministers based on whether she liked them rather than on their ability to do a good job for the country.

New Ideas

The ideas for change in France came from thinkers known as **philosophes**. These ideas were the **catalyst** or push for the revolution. These philosophes rejected the idea of absolute monarchy. They wanted a democracy like the ones in Britain and the United States. They also believed in the ability of science and scientific reasoning to explain the world rather than the Catholic Church's explanations. This time was called **the Enlightenment**. If a belief could not stand up to logic, then it was discarded.



The philosophes were influenced by developments in Britain. They knew about the English physicist Isaac Newton's work on the **law of gravity**. They read about John Locke's work on **empiricism** (knowledge is only possible through experiencing it through your senses). This was important since many religious beliefs could not be proven through empiricism... they required faith. The idea about the monarchy having the God-given right to power also was questioned.

Women were important in spreading these new ideas. They held **salons** or meetings of intellectuals to discuss exciting new ideas including the rights of women.



Voltaire was a famous philosophe who was against the Church and for freedom of thought. Many of his ideas were accepted by other rulers in other nations. He did believe in the absolute monarchy but he hated injustices caused by superstition or prejudice.

Montesquieu was a philosophe who believed that rulers should work with elected parliaments. His ideas were not popular because European monarchs weren't interested in sharing powers with the people.



Rousseau believed that society needed an social agreement in which everyone agreed to follow certain rules. He believed that people have a naturally good will that is destroyed by government and modern society. Many of Rousseau's ideas about living in harmony with nature have survived into present day.

The philosophes came into conflict with the Church and the country's rulers. They believed that the rulers either had to change, or go. Many philosophes were arrested or exiled from the country.

The Revolution Begins

When Louis XVI was king, France was almost bankrupt. Led by the philosophes, the French people spoke up against the government. Sometimes there were riots. The French people wanted a change. They wanted a democracy and individual rights and freedoms.



In the 1780s, the people of France were starving due to a series of famines. Families were breaking apart because parents couldn't feed their children. Over 40,000 children were abandoned each year during this time.

A Crisis

Britain's Industrial Revolution was putting French people out of work. In Britain, textiles were being made more cheaply and with fewer hands using machines. Many people in France were unemployed and starving. They were very unhappy and they began to demand change. The peasants began to revolt.

Louis put critics of the government in prison or had them killed. Even Louis's supporters began to doubt him and his popularity fell.

The Estates General

Desperate to raise money and get ideas about how to stop the rioting, Louis decided to call together representatives of the people (the **Estates General**) to try to find solutions for France's problems. This group of representatives only met upon the king's command. It included members of 3 social levels or estates: clergy or church representatives (first estate), aristocrats (second estate) and middle class (third estate). The privileged classes (clergy and aristocrats) always joined their votes (**bloc**) so they over-powered the voting power of the middle class. Louis wanted the help of the Estates General but did not want to give up his absolute power. He tried to give them a token responsibility of fixing the tax system but they were not happy with this.



After six weeks of meetings with little progress, the Third Estate, led by Count Mirabeau, broke from the other Estates. They decided to form a new government called the **National Assembly**. They wanted a new constitution for France. After much arguing with Louis, the other two estates were forced to join the National Assembly. The streets of Versailles and Paris were filled with joyful crowds as they felt their revolution had been successful.

The Fall of The Bastille



Peace didn't last long. There were riots over the high price of bread in the cities. Rioters attacked the prisons to try to get political prisoners released. Louis sent foreign **mercenaries** (paid soldiers) to calm the riots. On July 14, 1789, a large mob attacked the royal prison and fortress called **The Bastille**. The mercenaries joined the mob and took over the Bastille. They freed the prisoners and cut off the governor's head and paraded it through the streets.

Louis was scared by this and sent the mercenaries away. Citizens who wanted to keep the peace in Paris formed a new army called the “National Guard”.

The Great Fear

Most of the revolution took place in Paris and Versailles. Peasants living in the country knew that changes were taking place but were worried. They thought the king’s soldiers and aristocrats would stop the revolution. These feelings resulted in a panic in some areas of the country. It was called the “**Great Fear**”. Peasants stormed the mansions of the aristocrats and burned them to the ground, killing hundreds of people. They invaded offices and burned papers that recorded their obligations to the lords.



Paris and the King

On August 4, 1789, the National Assembly met in Versailles. It **abolished all feudal rights and privileges** and ended serfdom. It declared **all people equal before the law**. These changes were huge.

The people were pleased with the progress of the National Assembly but wanted more. They wanted the government to be in Paris where they could see and understand the conditions in the city rather than in Versailles at the palace. There was still a food crisis felt mostly by women and children. In



October, crowds of women marched 50 kilometres from Paris to Versailles to meet the king. By the time they reached Versailles, the original crowd had been joined by hundreds of others including the National Guard. They stormed the palace and they attacked the National Assembly. The king and queen appeared and reluctantly agreed to go back to Paris.

Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen

In August, the **Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen** was passed by the National Assembly. This document set out basic human rights that the government had to ensure. It guaranteed freedom of thought, speech, religion, security and property. It also put limits on the power of the government.

The National Assembly established a new **constitution**. With it in place, there were no more noble titles. Everyone was a “citizen”. The government took control of the Church and its property. The new government believed it was well on its way to solving the country’s financial problems.

Meanwhile, many aristocrats left for other countries such as England and Switzerland. They worked outside of France to restore the old system.



Louis and his family tried to escape the country but they were recognized and thrown into prison. The citizens of France saw the king’s attempt to leave as proof that he did not support the democratic changes. They no longer felt he could be trusted.

A newly formed **Legislative Assembly** met for the first time on October 1, 1791. It tried to form a workable government but failed because there were too many groups struggling for power. Some people wanted a republic (democracy). Others wanted a constitutional monarchy (a monarch acting as head of state within the guidelines of a constitution). Still others wanted to go back to way it was before the revolution with an absolute monarchy. There was a lot of violence at this stage in the revolution and many people who did not support democracy were arrested and executed.

Political Clubs

In the new French democracy, there were no political parties. Instead people joined **political clubs**. The two most important clubs were the conservative **Girondists** (from the Gironde area of France) and the **Jacobins**, a more radical group who met in Paris. The two groups had a power struggle. The Jacobins overtook the Girondists, sending most of them to the **guillotine** for beheading.

Other groups that were battling at this time were the **sans-culottes** (poor people of the cities) and the bourgeoisie (business class). The sans-culottes were against reforms that benefited the business class. They wanted the government to lower prices and supply bread to the poor. The sans-culottes were very violent, attacking anyone they thought might be against the revolution. They were led by Jean-Paul Marat.



War broke out between France and Austria in 1792. The people of France fought and won to keep their hard-earned rights and freedom.

The war made many French people suspicious of the royal family. A newly elected body called the **National Convention** decided that the king should be tried for his crimes against the country. He was found guilty and Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were sent to the guillotine.

The Reign of Terror



The years 1793 and 1794 were known as the **Reign of Terror**. The revolutionary government passed laws and threatened or eliminated anyone who disagreed with the Jacobins. They reorganized the armed forces and new legislation was passed to regulate business and all graneries and bakeries were placed under state control. It is estimated that over 37,000 people were guillotined during this reign of terror.

Robespierre eventually took control of the National Assembly and the revolution. He ruled France with the powers of a **dictator**. He destroyed all opposition to the government and made major changes in France. It was modernized by the introduction of the metric system which survives to this day. He also introduced the Revolutionary Calendar which was not very scientific and didn't last.

As France grew stronger, the people began to fear the dictatorship of Robespierre. When he tried to condemn more people, the people turned on him. He and his closest friends were guillotined. This was the end of the Reign of Terror and the radical Jacobins.

The Directory

The Jacobins were replaced by a group called the Thermidoreans who were anxious to bring peace to the revolution. The new government called the Directory was controlled by the middle class. The new government gave most of the power to people with property. The days of equality and the title of citizen were over. But the Directory did not survive. It was swept away by Napoleon Bonaparte who wanted to establish a new type of monarchy.



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