

The French Revolution and Napoleon

Lesson 1

The French Revolution Begins

Key Terms and People

Old Regime system of feudalism

estate social class of people

Louis XVI weak king who came to French throne in 1774

Marie Antoinette unpopular queen; wife of Louis XVI

Estates-General assembly of representatives from all three estates

National Assembly French congress established by representatives of the Third Estate

Tennis Court Oath promise made by Third Estate representatives to draw up a new constitution

Great Fear wave of panic

Before You Read

In the last lesson, you read about the Enlightenment and the American Revolution.

In this lesson, you will learn about the beginning of the French Revolution.

As You Read

Use a chart to take notes on the causes and effects of the early stages of the French Revolution.

THE OLD ORDER

How was French society unequal?

In the 1700s, France was the leading country of Europe. However, beneath the surface there were major problems.

A political and social system called the **Old Regime** remained in place. The French were divided into three classes, or **estates**. The First Estate consisted of the Roman Catholic clergy. The Second Estate was made up of nobles. Only about two percent of the people belonged to these two estates. Yet they owned 20 percent of the land.

Everybody else belonged to the Third Estate. This huge group included the bourgeoisie—merchants and skilled workers—city workers, and peasants.

Members of the Third Estate had few rights. They paid up to half of their income in taxes, while the rich paid almost none.

1. What were the three classes of French society?

Lesson 1, *continued*

THE FORCES OF CHANGE

Why were the French ready for the revolution?

Three factors led to revolution. First, the Enlightenment spread the idea that everyone should be equal. The powerless people in the Third Estate liked this idea. Second, the French economy was failing. High taxes kept profits low, and food supplies were short. The government owed money. Third, King **Louis XVI** was a weak leader. His wife, **Marie Antoinette**, was unpopular. She was from Austria, France’s long-time enemy, and was known for her extravagant spending.

In the 1780s, France was deep in debt. Louis tried to tax the nobles. Instead, they forced the king to call a meeting of the **Estates-General**, an assembly of delegates of the three estates.

2. What three factors led to revolution?

DAWN OF THE REVOLUTION

How did the Revolution begin?

The meeting of the Estates-General began in May 1789 with arguments over how to count votes. In the past, each estate would cast one vote. The Third Estate now wanted each delegate to have a vote. The king and the other estates did not agree to the plan because the Third Estate was larger and would have more votes.

The Third Estate then broke with the others and met separately. In June 1789, its delegates voted to rename themselves the **National Assembly**. They claimed to represent all the people. This was the beginning of representative government in France.

At one point, the members of the Third Estate were locked out of their meeting room. They broke down a door leading to a tennis court. Then they promised to stay there until they made a new constitution. This promise was called the **Tennis Court Oath**.

Louis tried to make peace. He ordered the clergy and nobles to join the National Assembly. However, trouble erupted. Rumors spread that foreign soldiers were going to attack French citizens. On July 14, an angry crowd captured the Bastille, a Paris prison. The mob wanted to get gunpowder for their weapons in order to defend the city.

3. Why did the National Assembly form?

A GREAT FEAR SWEEPS FRANCE

What was the Great Fear?

A wave of violence called the **Great Fear** swept the country. Peasants broke into and burned nobles’ houses. They tore up documents that had forced them to pay fees to the nobles. Late in 1789, a mob of women marched from Paris to the king’s palace at Versailles. They were angry about high bread prices and demanded that the king come to Paris. They hoped he would end hunger in the city. The king and queen left Versailles, never to return.

4. Who led the events that happened during the Great Fear?

Lesson 1, *continued*

As you read about the dawn of revolution in France, write notes to answer questions about the causes of the French Revolution.

How did each of the following contribute to the revolutionary mood in France?	
1. The three estates	2. Enlightenment ideas
3. Economic crisis	4. Weak leadership

How did each of the following events lead to the French Revolution?	
5. Meeting of the Estates-General	6. Establishment of the National Assembly
7. Tennis Court Oath	8. Storming of the Bastille