

The French Revolution

Change is a simple topic; it means to make or use something different than before. People find it easy to talk about change--they always have, but change is not so easily received. Often times, change is something people have to fight for. These fights could last hours, days, or even years. One of the world's biggest fights for change and justice is now known as the French Revolution.

The revolution took place during the 18th century, just after the American Revolution had finished. At the time, France was one of the most powerful countries in Europe, and even in the entire world. During the American Revolution, the French had spent massive amounts of money and put all of their effort into making sure the Americans won. This, among other things, caused the revolution. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, "Although historians disagree on the causes of the Revolution, the following reasons are commonly adduced: the increasingly prosperous elite of wealthy commoners—merchants, manufacturers, and professionals, often called the bourgeoisie—produced by the 18th century's economic growth resented its exclusion from political power and positions of honour; the peasants were acutely aware of their situation and were less and less willing to support the anachronistic and burdensome feudal system; the philosophes, who advocated social and political reform, had been read more widely in France than anywhere else; French participation in the American Revolution had driven the government to the brink of bankruptcy; and crop failures in much of the country in 1788, coming on top of a long period of economic difficulties, made the population particularly restless."

A key point in the revolution is the fact that the French were still using the old feudal system. The system was divided into three different classes, known as estates; the First Estate which held the clergy of the Roman Catholic Church and was only one percent of the population, the Second Estate which held the nobility and was less than two percent, and finally the Third Estate. This final estate held the rest of France's entire population. In the Third Estate was the middle-class, otherwise known as the Bourgeoisie; which were merchants, trade professionals, doctors, and lawyers. Still after the Bourgeoisie were city workers and artisans, and finally, the peasants at the very bottom of the system. The peasants were the largest group of all, but they had the least wealth and rights. The first two estates were the wealthiest of all and had the most privileges. The first estate did not have to pay taxes either, and the second estate could easily avoid or get around them. Lastly, at the top of the system, was the king and other royalty. This was a monarchy that was lasting into a time where they were becoming less popular. The entire country was set up on an old, fragile system that was already growing unpopular in the rest of the world. The system was meant to fail at this point; revolution was inevitable.

While the reasons why the revolution began are many and can be unclear, there is one real place where it started: the Third Estate. During this time, resources were low and taxes were high. To counter this, people of the higher estates would raise taxes on those lower than them while at the same time, avoiding the taxes being put on them. The peasants began to make riots and protests in the streets against the taxes and the inequality they suffered as compared to the rest of the population. At the same time, the Bourgeoisie were doing very well and wanted the freedom from taxes that the First and

Second Estates had. Between the Bourgeoisie and the peasants, while they did not share the same demands, they began to join each other in protest.

“A popular insurgency culminated on July 14 when rioters stormed the Bastille fortress in an attempt to secure gunpowder and weapons; many consider this event, now commemorated in France as a national holiday, as the start of the French Revolution.” (French Revolution — History.com Articles, Video, Pictures and Facts) As the king attempted to raise taxes and work with all three estates who refused to cooperate with each other, tensions between the population rose. Finally, the revolution had begun with the storming of the Bastille, a prison in Paris that was a monument of the monarchy’s power and control. They looted the building for weapons and gunpowder to fuel their riot. The revolution spread and trapped the country in chaos.

This time came to be known as the great fear. As the lower classes fought for their rights, many of the nobles fled the country in order to keep as much of their money and power as they could, or even out of fear of losing their lives. “The French Revolution began in 1789 with the meeting of the States General in May. On July 14 of that same year, the Bastille was stormed: in October, Louis XVI and the Royal Family were removed from Versailles to Paris. The King attempted, unsuccessfully, to flee Paris for Varennes in June 1791. A Legislative Assembly sat from October 1791 until September 1792, when, in the face of the advance of the allied armies of Austria, Holland, Prussia, and Sardinia, it was replaced by the National Convention, which proclaimed the Republic. The King was brought to trial in December of 1792, and executed on January 21, 1793.” (“French Revolution.” The Victorian Web: An Overview) Without the king, the country hopped between leaders and constitutions, the chaos that

was created before only growing. As time went on, people began to wish for the return of the monarchy.

More people began to want the monarchy back and to want the end of the revolution. A new power stepped up in the country with the goal of keeping the revolution alive. Anyone who did not believe in the revolution, anyone who spoke out against it, and anyone who was suspected to be against the revolution was killed. This time was called the Reign of Terror. “Over 17,000 people were officially tried and executed during the Reign of Terror, and an unknown number of others died in prison or without trial.” (French Revolution — History.com Articles, Video, Pictures and Facts) Even those who headed the Reign of Terror, when they started to stray from the idea, were killed. Every one of the leaders of the movement were executed by means of the same mechanism they used to do the same to thousands of others. The Reign of Terror ended with those who began it, but the revolution was not yet over without a leader.

In 1795, the National Convention, which was at the time France’s government, attempted to form a new form of leadership for the country to finally put an end to the revolution. They were stopped, however, by the military that had been taken under control by a man named Napoleon Bonaparte. He, using the power of his military, took the country for his own. With Napoleon, the problems the country was facing were not yet over, but his rise marked, finally, the end of the revolution.

Napoleon’s rise marked the end of the revolution, the end of the chaos and turmoil France had faced. It meant the end to the old feudal system France had lived under for so long, and while wars and deaths would still come, they would no longer be within the country, killing their own. There would still be problems faced under this new

government and leadership, and other countries were not in favor of this rule, but peace between the people still lasted. Change had finally been found by the people of France and the toughest of times could finally come to an end.

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