

S4 The French Revolution

The French Revolution is seen as a major event in world history. Beginning in 1789 it saw French people overthrow their monarchy and bring about a republic based on equality, liberty, and fraternity. Before the French Revolution, the country was structured by a system called the Estates System. The estate a person belonged to decided what level of rights and status a person had in society. The first estate was the clergy (church), the second estate was the nobility, and the third estate was the peasants. The peasants made up the vast majority of the people (96%), but they held no political or economic power.

This lack of power caused the peasants to question the authority of their monarch, Louis XVI. At the same time, Europe was being transformed by the Age of Enlightenment, an intellectual movement that was causing people to challenge foundations of society, such as the role of the government and sources of authority. Louis XVI called a meeting of representatives of the three estates in 1789 to decide on how the country was going to face the economic crisis happening at the time. The three estates could not agree on a plan and the meeting failed.

The representatives of the third estate were angered by the result of the meeting and upset about their position in society. As a result, they formed the National Assembly, a new revolutionary government. On July 14, 1789 some citizen of Paris carried out the storming of the Bastille. The Bastille was a prison fortress and the citizens demolished it brick by brick. This is seen as the beginning of the French Revolution as the peasants successfully challenged the authority of Louis XVI.

Inspired by the ideas of liberty expressed by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence after the American Revolution, a French military officer wrote the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, which was adopted by the

National Assembly on August 26, 1789. The Declaration set out a series of individual rights protected by law.

A few months later, a group of working-class women marched to the Palace of Versailles, killed several of the king's guards and forced the royal family to return to Paris. From this point on, Louis XVI and his family were effectively held prisoner by the revolutionaries and the citizens of France. These two events helped to transform the country as the king's power began to dwindle.

On June 20, 1791 the king and his family tried to escape and get to Austria, to seek help from Queen Marie Antoinette's country of birth. They snuck out of the castle (where they were being held prisoners) disguised as servants. However, they were recognised before they reached the border and were forced to return to Paris. From this point on, Louis XVI was seen as a traitor to the revolution.

King Louis XVI was charged with treason for attempting to flee the country. He was put on trial and found guilty. The famous revolutionary, Maximilien Robespierre, commented that "Louis must die so the nation may live." Louis' punishment was death and on, January 21st, 1793, Louis XVI was beheaded by guillotine.

The Reign of Terror occurred from September 1793 until July 1794 and was a time period of extreme violence and paranoia, overseen by the National Convention. The more radical revolutionaries, the Jacobins, were concerned that foreign and internal groups would threaten the revolution and used their power to stop any perceived threat. The paranoia would cause the deaths of tens of thousands with most being beheaded by guillotine. It was during this time that the queen, Marie Antoinette was tried and executed.

After the execution of Marie Antoinette, the revolution became more and more violent. It was at this time that revolutionary Maximilien Robespierre began his own

rise to power. Robespierre began to fight with many other revolutionaries about their loyalty to the revolution. Many prominent revolutionaries were also beheaded for their perceived betrayal and on June 4, 1794, Robespierre is elected as head of the National Convention.

Robespierre declared a new religion called the Supreme Being and began to organise a festival to celebrate in Paris. This angered many members of the National Convention and made Robespierre many enemies. He was arrested on July 28, 1794 and was beheaded without a trial that same day.

After the execution of Robespierre and the excess of the Reign of Terror, the National Convention was replaced by the Directory in 1795. The Directory was made up of five members called directors who held great power. For the four years that the Directory was in power, Napoleon Bonaparte was a French military general that played a vital role in stopping uprisings in Paris and in foreign battles. In 1799, Napoleon Bonaparte carried out an overthrow of the Directory. In November 1799, soldiers loyal to Bonaparte took control over key points in Paris and begin the process of ending the reign of the Directory. By the end of the first day, Bonaparte had complete control over the country and appointed himself First Consul. The French Revolution was over.