The French Revolution
A Brief Outline

FOUR STAGES

• Moderate (1789-1792)
• Reign of Terror (1793-94)
• Reaction (1794-98)
• Napoleonic (1799-1815)

Why? A fed up people revolt against old ways, economic injustice, and poverty

BEFORE THE REVOLUTION

The Old Regime – society before the revolution

Three Estates – divisions based on class and rank
1. Church – clergy which owned 10% of the land, paid no tax
2. Nobles – 2% of the population, owned 20% of the land, 70% of wealth
3. Third Estate – everyone else
   - bourgeoisie – craftsmen, merchants, professionals
   - working poor – worst off in the entire country
   - rural peasants – were de facto property of the landowners

1780s – A series of successive crop failures, food prices double
- government repeatedly raises taxes (esp. la taille – the salt tax)

Response of the Monarchy – Kings of the day believed they were put in their place by God
Louis XIV – died in 1715 leaving France with a huge debt after fighting numerous wars and building Versailles, his grand palace
Louis XV – Decadent, known for the line “Apres Moi, le deluge” (after me, the torrent)
Louis XVI – careless, heartless, spendthrift, foolish – wrong man at the wrong time
  • Most hated for his Austrian wife, Marie Antoinette
  • They lived extravagant lives
  • He left the treasury empty, but did aid America in its revolution

MODERATE STAGE

Money Troubles
1788 – poor harvests leave tax revenues low, many rebellions needed quashing
1789 – Louis tried to tax the nobles
  He calls the first Estates General (their congress) since 1607 (that’s 182 years!)
  King Louis unwittingly let intellectuals from around France gather

At the Estates General
The first and second estates dominated the talks, were given an uneven vote and advantage
The third estate urges reform, relief for the poor, and an equal voice
After weeks of arguing, the Third Estate leaves the talks and convenes on the King’s Tennis court.

_The Tennis Court Oath_ – a vow to save France from her ruin
  • Conservatives gather on the right, liberals on the left
  • They call themselves “The National Assembly” and start making laws in
the name of the French people

July 14, 1789
Known as Bastille Day (France’s 4th of July)
Random riots throughout the streets of Paris
• A mob showed up at the King’s prison – la Bastille, they were looking for guns
• The guards gave up voluntarily, but history recorded it as a massive rush for the gates.
Word of the success caused riots in other cities
In the country, landlords were attacked by peasants: Food stores were looted.

In the weeks that followed, the king acted indecisively
Sentiment for his removal began to grow

August 4, 1789
National Assembly passed laws ending serfdom and feudalism – all class privilege
“Liberty, equality, fraternity” became the slogan of the times

Wrote the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen
Very much like our Declaration of Independence
Called for the creation of a limited power monarchy – like that of Britain

1789-1792 – The National Assembly
Royal family caught during an escape in 1790 – they are kept under constant watch
Church lands confiscated and sold to pay extraordinary public debt
Radicals called for death of the king and nobles – moderates tried for calm
Ideas were discussed in political clubs like Paris’ Jacobin Club
Many parts of country periodically erupt into chaos
• The assembly gave up the idea of limited monarchy and dissolved the legislature
• Renamed themselves the National Convention and depose the king
The army won a key victory against Prussian and Austria

Emigres – nobles fled France for more friendly countries
• Upper class people being targeted by mobs in random violence
• Thousands of nobles killed by government decree

Summer of 1792 – Austria (then led by Marie Antoinette’s brother) threatens war with France
The actions of the lower classes in France have nobles throughout Europe nervous
A coalition of countries (Britain, Prussia) join in the fight

The National Assembly officially dissolves the monarchy and declare France a republic

THE REIGN OF TERROR
In a time of crisis, people look to the strongest leadership available
Radicals (called Jacobins) seize control of the legislature and round up nobles for execution
Thousands sent to the ‘national barber,’ the guillotine (thought to be humane)

January 21, 1793
Radicals execute Louis XVI and his family by a narrow vote of the convention
Thousands gather in Paris for the event

Dozens vie for power, but many turned to Robespierre for leadership
   Formed the Committee for Public Safety
   Wanted a “republic of virtue”
      Changed the names of the months and abolished Sunday (too old fashioned)
      People with royal sounding names were killed
      Kings and queens on playing cards were ordered changed

Orders thousands of executions, used spies all over the country
Public executions were relished by crowds in cities
People put to death for having undesirable views of the revolution
   Including famous revolutionary leaders whom Robespierre saw as a threat to his
      own power
   40-50,000 killed in all (including thousands of peasants!)
      some killed for ridiculous reasons (one bartender for selling sour wine)
      things were clearly out of control

REACTION STAGE
The Moderates React (1794-1798)
   Former members of the National Assembly turn on Robespierre, he’s executed (7-28-94)
   People are sick of the killing and disorder
   The terror did not help to advance the revolution
   Food prices still out of control

1795 – The National Assembly writes a new constitution
   Much of the power given to intellectuals
   Five-man directory formed
   Army again under control of the Paris government
      Other countries still threaten France for fear of spreading revolution

NAPOLEONIC STAGE
Napoleon Bonaparte (b. 1769)
   Born on the island of Corsica, studied military history as a young man
   Joined the army at 16 and trained as an artillery expert
   By early 1790s, he is an upwardly mobile young officer
      1795 – defends the National Assembly from a royalist uprising
         “give them a whiff of grapeshot”

Given his first command out of France
   1796 – captures the Italian city of Milan
   1797-98 – assigned to disrupt British trade on the Mediterranean
He decides to invade Egypt, but his campaign did not go well
His navy was defeated by the famous Horatio Nelson, British admiral

HOWEVER, he controlled the information that got back to France
   The people thought he was winning great battles
   By 1799, he was the most famous man in France

COUP D’ETAT (overthrow of the state)
   Upon his return, some urged him to seize power

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He quickly made connections and deals to have himself placed in charge of the army.
The legislature voted out the 5-man directory for a 3-man counsel.
Napoleon was made one of the three, but used his army to control the government.
He assumed the role of a dictator, or supreme ruler.

Early Accomplishments
1. Strengthened and organized the military
2. A peace treaty with the Coalition (countries opposing France) was signed by 1802
3. Economic reforms
   - more equitable taxation
   - national bank to control inflation (increasing prices)
   - loans to businesses
4. Government reforms
   - reduced corruption
   - created public schools for many
   - appointed officials by merit
5. Religious reforms
   - promoted freedom and tolerance
   - government took control of church land
   - signed a peace agreement with the pope
6. The Napoleonic Code
   - new laws that guaranteed rights of speech, press, and religion
   - did put limits on individuals that favored the government

1803 – 23,000 French soldiers defeated by former slaves on the island of Haiti.
-Napoleon sells Louisiana territories to the U.S.A. for profit and to spite Britain

1804 – France has an Emperor
At Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, the Pope crowned Napoleon Emperor.
French voters approved of this overwhelmingly.

Why did they have a revolution only to elect another king/emperor?

THE GREAT MILITARY CAMPAIGN TO CONQUER ALL OF EUROPE
Very aggressive and determined style of leadership
The continent’s biggest army, best equipped
1805 – His navy is destroyed soundly by Admiral Nelson at Trafalgar, off of Spain
   He’d have to do his conquering on land
1805-1809 – He’ll control all of Europe clear to Russia
   His empire was big, but too hard to control
   He placed puppet monarchs in every country he conquered
   He’ll only be able to control all these peoples and lands until 1812

NAPOLEON’S FALL
1811 – He divorces his wife Josephine, marries her grand-niece who bore him a son
1812 – A British blockade (denial of ships into ports) hurts France’s economy
   (the stopping of US ships will cause a war between America and Britain)
1808-1813 – He has trouble in Spain against guerillas (non traditional fighters)
   Soldiers were usually lined up against one another on a battlefield
1812 – HIS BIGGEST BLUNDER – he tried to invade Russia
He left France with 422,000 men, he’ll return with 28,000
Russians simply fled and burned their cities so the army had no food

1813 – other countries quickly ally themselves against France
they meet him in battle in Germany where Napoleon’s young troops are trounced
the armies of Russia and Prussia march through France and into Paris
1814 – Napoleon accepts defeat and is banished to Elba, a small island south of France
Louis XVIII is named king (brother of beheaded Louis XVI)

THE HUNDRED DAYS
1815 – Upon hearing news that the new king was in trouble, Napoleon escapes and
returns to France
His troops eagerly join his side once again
The allied coalition quickly marshaled their troops back to Belgium where Napoleon was
trying to invade
-he is defeated by the British commander, the Duke of Wellington

His exile was to St. Helena, halfway between Africa and South America

1815 – The CONGRESS OF VIENNA
Austria will host all of the royal families from around Europe to devise ways to keep revolutions like
that in France from happening elsewhere