

Impact of the Enlightenment:

# The French Revolution

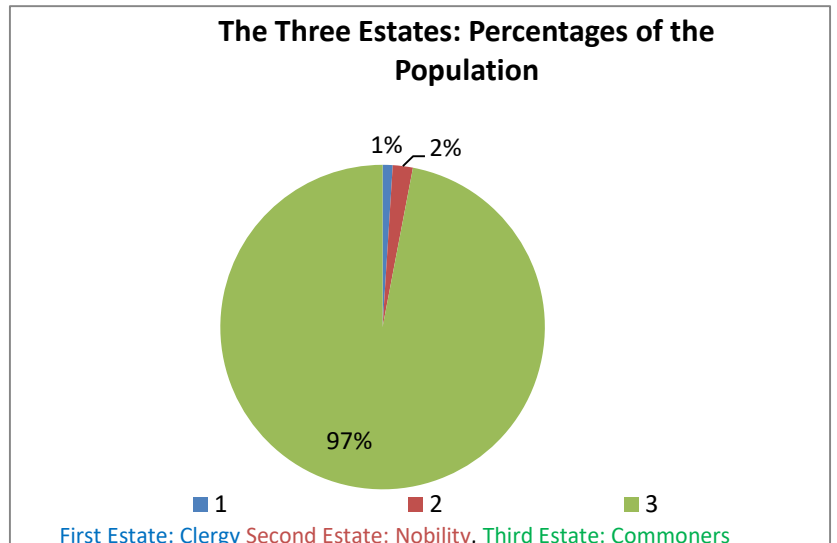


Cartoon showing the burden of the first two estates crushing the third



Marie Antoinette

France, 1788. The country was beset with problems. Citizens influenced by the Enlightenment were fed up with the old order. The Third Estate eyed the privileged First and Second Estates with a new jealousy. Bourgeoisie, the wealthy commoners felt entitled to the privileges held by the nobles. The Urban poor, suffering from low wages and frequent unemployment, often turned to attacking bread shops to steal the food they needed. The peasants could no longer bear to watch half their hard-earned incomes go to the church officials, the nobles, and the king, while member of the other estates paid almost no taxes.



The king and queen only made things worse. Ineffectual and unpopular, Louis XVI and his Austrian queen, Marie Antoinette lived in the lap of luxury in the palace at Versailles. Marie Antoinette's out-of-control spending on clothes and entertainment earned her the nickname "Madame Deficit".

The debts created by their wasteful lifestyle were part of a larger economic crisis. The economy was in decline, because members of the Third Estate found it difficult to run a business, since the high taxes ate up so much of their income. Poor harvests caused by bad weather doubled the price of bread, leaving many peasants and workers facing starvation. France had borrowed money to help America in its

revolution against France's greatest rival – Great Britain. Perhaps the situation could've improved, but Louis XVI procrastinated. When he could delay no more, he decided to tax the nobles.

In order to tax the nobles, however, Louis had to call the Estates General. When the delegates from each estate assembled, Louis offered each estate the traditional one vote. The Third Estate refused. They demanded one vote per delegate, so they, as representatives of 97% of France, would



Peasants rioting as the Chateaux of the noble burns

have a fair majority. Louis refused. In response, the delegates of the Third Estate formed the National Assembly, a lawmaking body representative of the French people.

With this act of defiance, the revolution had begun. Mobs took to the streets, to defend the people from the king. On July 14, the Bastille, the feared Paris prison, symbol of tyranny, was stormed by the mob. The revolution gathered steam and peasants throughout France revolted against their lords, terrorizing nobles and clergymen into giving up their feudal rights.



Storming the Bastille



The Declaration of the Rights of Man

The National Assembly, made up of upper-class members of the Third Estate, formed a constitution that created a Legislative Assembly and left Louis with a mere fraction of his original power. They also took over church lands and put the church under the control of the government. They adopted "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity (brotherhood)" as the slogan of the revolution and formalized the ideals of the revolution in the Declaration of the Rights of Man. The Declaration proclaimed that all men are entitled to equal rights under the law.

Despite the sweeping changes, many of the working-class Frenchmen were unsatisfied. When war broke out with France's long-time enemies, Austria and Prussia, who now sought to reinstate the monarchy, this

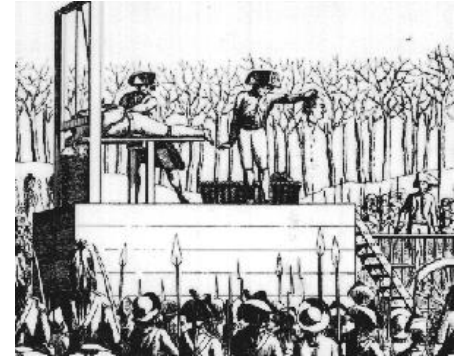
dissatisfaction joined with fear of traitors to ignite massacres. Fearful of counter-revolutionaries aiding the enemy, angry citizens took the law into their own hands and raided the prisons, murdering prisoners.

Under pressure from radicals, the royal family was arrested, the Legislative Assembly dissolved, and the constitution was set aside. The newly formed National Convention declared a republic, which was soon controlled by the most radical of the revolutionaries.



Robespierre

In 1793, with the execution of Louis XVI on charges of treason, the Reign of Terror descended on France. Every trace of the old order was stamped out. A new calendar was declared and religion was decreed old-fashioned and dangerous. Any citizen suspected of being an enemy of the revolution was swiftly executed. 30,000 Frenchmen, from all three estates, met their deaths at the Guillotine. The Guillotine was an enlightened method of execution: equal for all classes and supposedly nearly painless. Maximilien Robespierre, leader of the Committee of Public Safety and architect of the terror justified it by saying: "Terror is nothing other than justice, prompt, severe, inflexible" .



The execution of Louis XVI

By 1794, even the most radical had had enough. Robespierre was executed, the last victim of the Terror he began. A third plan of government was adopted – the Directory, an executive branch of five accompanied by a legislature. This government, while far more moderate than its predecessor, was ineffectual.

Into this vacuum of power returned the war hero, General Napoleon Bonaparte. In the original coup d'état, Napoleon used his army to force the Directory to give him the powers of a dictator. First, he restored France. He stabilized the economy by setting up an efficient taxation system and establishing national banks. He diminished government corruption by setting up public schools for students of all social classes. Successful graduates of these schools could be appointed to government positions. Napoleon pleased the clergy and many peasants by signing a new agreement with the pope. Napoleon created a system of laws that limited some of the freedoms of the revolution for the sake of justice, order, and authority.

With France under control, Napoleon set his sights on expansion. He first tried to reassert



French authority on its Caribbean colonies. When that failed, he sold the Louisiana Territory to the United States, both to gain needed funds for his ambitions in Europe and to ensure that America would remain a formidable rival to England. He fought the other powers of Europe, winning nearly every battle. He soon controlled almost all of Europe. By 1812, he had conquered much territory, including the Netherlands and parts of Italy, and set up puppet governments in Spain, parts of Germany, and Poland. He also controlled Austria, Prussia, and Russia through alliances. The French soldiers carried the ideas of the Enlightenment and the revolution with them to nearly every corner of Europe.

Napoleon

The huge French empire was highly unstable. Napoleon's mistakes caused it to collapse quickly. Seeking to crush Britain, Napoleon set up a blockade against all trade between England and the European continent. However, his allies and even family members disobeyed the blockade. In an attempt to force Portugal to submit to the blockade, Napoleon sent an army, through Spain, to invade it. When the Spanish people protested, he replaced their king with a relative of his. The people were outraged and also feared that Napoleon would attack the church, as the revolution had done. Groups of guerillas, peasant fighters who attacked in small groups and then fled to hiding, wreaked havoc on the French forces. Britain, all too happy to strike back at France because of the blockade, helped Spain inflict great losses on the French. Throughout the empire, nationalism (loyalty to one's country) became a force to contend with. People who had originally welcomed the French and their new ideas of liberty and equality now saw them as abusive foreign conquerors.

Next, Napoleon invaded Russia. The Russians retreated, burning food and killing cattle as they went, to leave nothing for the French to eat. When Napoleon reached Moscow to find it destroyed, he began to retreat. Russia's "General Winter", cold and snow, weakened the army, as well as raids from Russian forces. Recognizing his weakness, Britain, Russia, Prussia, Sweden, and Austria united to defeat Napoleon. In 1814, a defeated Napoleon was banished to the island of Elba, in the Mediterranean.

The allies set up Louis XVIII (Louis XVI's brother) as king of France. News of his unpopularity motivated Napoleon to escape Elba and return to France. Still popular, he quickly formed an army. The European allies responded with a force of their own, defeated him once again and, taking no chances,



exiled him to the island of St. Helena in the South Atlantic. There, lonely, died a military genius, a brilliant administrator, who had caused millions of deaths in his unquenchable thirst for power.

In 1814, after defeating Napoleon, Russia, Prussia, Austria, Great Britain, and France met for eight months at the Congress of Vienna. At the Congress, the diplomats strengthened weak countries around France in order to contain it and restored many of the monarchs that Napoleon had deposed. This collaborative effort brought a long period of peace to Europe. In fear of revolts inspired by the French Revolution, Europe formed a system of alliances to ensure that countries would aid each other in the event of a revolution. The revolution frightened European leaders into retreating into conservative, pre-Enlightenment policies. They tried to end the influence of the French revolution, but the ideas it spread, as well as the growing concept of Nationalism would soon spark revolutions around the world.

Sources:

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Brainard, Jennifer. *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité: The French Revolution* . <http://www.historywiz.com/frenchrev-mm.htm>

Questions:

1. How did the Enlightenment lead to the French Revolution? What were some other causes?

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2. What was the first act of revolution?

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3. How did feudalism end in France?

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4. What form of government was set up at first?

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5. What was the slogan of the revolution? What was the Declaration of the Rights of Man?

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6. Why did the revolution turn violent? What form of execution was used? Why?

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7. What form of government was set up after the Reign of Terror?

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8. How did Napoleon take power? How did he help France?

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9. What did Napoleon conquer? How did his conquests impact the spread of the Enlightenment?

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10. What mistakes caused the downfall of Napoleon's empire?

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11. What did European countries do at the Congress of Vienna after defeating Napoleon? Were they successful in maintaining peace and preventing revolutions?

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