

Unit 4: French Revolution Phase #1 Outlined Notes

I. Background to the Revolution

A. The French Revolution and the beginning of a new United States of America both happened in 1789, and both had far-reaching consequences.

B. Both long-range problems and immediate forces caused the French Revolution. The long-range problems concerned the condition of French society. It was based on inequality, as feudalism always had been.

C. France was divided into three orders, or **estates**—the first, second, and third. About 130,000 people made up the First Estate, the clergy. The clergy were exempt from the *taille*, France's chief tax. The Second Estate, the nobility, had about 350,000 people. They held many of the leading positions in the state and had their own privileges.

D. Nobles wanted to increase their power at the expense of the monarchy.

E. The Third Estate, the commoners, was about 97 percent of the population. The Third Estate was divided by differences in occupation, education, and wealth. Peasants were 75 to 80 percent of the total population. Serfdom had been abolished, but peasants had obligations to landlords or **relics of feudalism** that they resented.

F. Artisans, shopkeepers, and other wage earners were another part of the Third Estate. They were hurting economically from a rise in prices higher than any increase in wages. They were ready for revolution.

G. The **bourgeoisie**, or middle class, was another part of the Third Estate. It was about 8 percent of the population. They owned about 20 to 25 percent of the land. They were merchants, teachers, and other professional people. They were unhappy about the privileges given to the nobles.

H. Both aristocrats and members of the middle class were drawn to the political ideas of the Enlightenment. The opposition of these elites to the existing order led them to drastic action against the monarchy.

I. The immediate cause of the French Revolution was the near collapse of the government's finances. The French economy suffered a series of crises for 50 years, and the number of poor reached as high as one-third of the population. The poor lived in absolute squalor.

J. The French government continued to spend lavishly on wars and court luxuries. The queen, Marie Antoinette, was especially known for her extravagance. The government of **Louis XVI** was finally forced to call a meeting of the Estates-General, the French parliament, which had not met since 1614.

II. From Estates-General to National Assembly

A. Each order of French society had representatives in the Estates-General. In order to fix France's economic situation, most members of the Third Estate wanted to set up a constitutional government that would abolish the tax exemptions of the clergy and nobility.

B. The Third Estate was much larger than the other two. It favored a system of each member voting, but the king upheld the traditional voting method of one vote per estate. The Third Estate reacted by calling itself a National Assembly and deciding to draft a constitution. They were locked out of their meeting place and moved to a tennis court next door. There they swore they would continue to meet until they had finished drafting a constitution. This oath is known as the **Tennis Court Oath**.

C. The commoners saved the Third Estate from the king's forces. The commoners stormed and dismantled the Bastille, the royal armory and prison in **Paris**. The king's authority collapsed. Local revolutions broke out over France against the entire landholding system.

D. Peasant rebellions took place and became part of the Great Fear, a vast panic that hit France in 1789. Fearing invasion by foreign troops in support of the monarchy, people in the countryside formed militias.

Unit 4: French Revolution #1 (continued)

III. The Destruction of the Old Regime

A. One of the National Assembly's first acts was to destroy the relics of feudalism, or aristocratic privileges. In August the assembly adopted the **Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen**. The declaration proclaimed freedom and equal rights for all men, access to public office based on talent, and an end to exemptions from taxation. All citizens were to have the right to take part in the making of laws. Freedom of speech and press were recognized.

B. The question arose of whether "all citizens" included women. Many deputies said it did, as long as women stayed out of politics. **Olympe de Gouges** would not accept this exclusion of women from political rights, such as the vote. She wrote a Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen. The National Assembly ignored her plea.

C. Louis XVI stayed at Versailles and refused to accept the laws of the National Assembly. Thousands of Parisian women armed with pitchforks, swords, muskets, and the like marched to Versailles. A delegation of these women met with Louis XVI and told him how their children were starving. They forced the king to accept new decrees.

D. At the crowd's insistence, the royal family returned to Paris, escorted by thousands of women with pikes. As a good will gesture, the king brought along flour from the Crown's storerooms. The royal family was virtually held prisoner in Paris.

E. Since the Church was a pillar of the old order, it too had to be reformed. The National Assembly seized and held the lands of the Church. Bishops and priests were to be elected by the people and paid by the state. Because the French government now controlled the Church, many Catholics became enemies of the revolution.

F. The Assembly adopted its Constitution of 1791, which set up a limited monarchy with a king and a Legislative Assembly with the power to make laws. Only the most affluent members would be elected. Only men over 25 who paid a specified amount in taxes could vote.

G. By 1791 the old order was destroyed. Many people—Catholic priests, nobles, and lower classes hurt by economic hard times—opposed the new order, however. The king tried to flee France, but he was recognized and returned to France. The Legislative Assembly met for the first time in 1791.

H. Other European monarchs, including the rulers of **Austria** and **Prussia**, threatened to help Louis XVI. In response, the Legislative Assembly declared war on Austria. France lost the battles with Austria, and distrust began to grip France.

I. Defeats in war and economic shortages led to new political demonstrations. Radicals formed the Paris Commune and organized a mob attack on the royal palace and Legislative Assembly. They captured the king and demanded the end of the monarchy.

J. The French Revolution was about to enter a more radical phase. Power went to the Paris Commune. Many members proudly called themselves the *sans-culottes*, or ordinary people without fancy clothes. The *sans-culottes* were made up of working people and the poor, as well as merchants and artisans who were the elite of their neighborhoods.