Special Presentation

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION



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A dethroned king, a flamboyant queen, the storming of a fortress prison and the terror of the guillotine – the French Revolution has all of the ingredients of an engrossing drama. Yet to delve beneath the surface of these characters and symbols is to discover the complexity of this transformative era. The events of the French Revolution, transpiring over the span of a decade, were part of a grander Age of Revolutions and at the same time were comprised of a series of smaller stories of individual French citizens becoming politically engaged amidst tremendous poverty, intellectual transformation, and ultimately… violence. A combination of factors including rising expectations spurred by the Enlightenment, massive starvation, and frustration with the mismanagement of an inept monarchy pushed the Revolution's initial aims. These aims were worn down as political conflicts splintered revolutionary groups and led to a frenzy of executions by guillotine. The special two-hour presentation, *The French Revolution*, peels through the layers of these remarkable years, from 1789 through the turn of a new century, to reveal an era of intense and lasting political and intellectual change.





While the complexity of the French Revolution might seem to present daunting challenges, its significance in shaping international currents merits a careful exploration. Within the course of a decade, the French monarchy was shorn of its political power, a framework was created for a universal understanding of basic human and civil rights, and countless French citizens across class backgrounds acted to achieve political power in an era of repression and economic uncertainty. The "Age of Reason," also known as the "Enlightenment," was the historical context which gave birth to a host of new ideas about the rights of individuals and the obligations of nations to their citizens. However, there was a devastatingly dark undercurrent to the political instability ushered in by the Revolution. The struggle to control the direction of the French Revolution unleashed a bloodbath known as the "Reign of Terror" in which tens of thousands of suspected political enemies were executed by guillotine.

The French Revolution provides a captivating introduction to these events, leading students from the grandeur of Versailles as King Louis XVI wed the teenaged wonder Marie Antoinette through the dramatic culmination of the revolutionary period as thousands of dead were left in its wake. This guide will supply teachers with suggestions for using this thought-provoking program to help students grasp the significance of the French Revolution and the broader political era in which these events occurred. This program is an excellent resource for understanding how political ideas develop, the causes and consequences of the Revolution, and how the French Revolution altered the course of world history. With compelling commentary from historians, fascinating tidbits about the fall of the monarchy, and colorful descriptions of the Revolution's key players, this program will engage students and prompt them to further investigate these vivid and often shocking years.



Curriculum Links

The French Revolution would be useful for World History, European History, World Civilization, and Global History courses. **Due to some sensitive and mature content, we would recommend it for high school students. We would also recommend that teachers view the program in its entirety before screening it to students.** This program fulfills the following guidelines outlined by the National Council for History Education: Patterns of Social and Political Interaction, Civilization, Cultural Diffusion and Innovation and Comparative History of Major Developments.

Vocabulary

aristocracy - a government in which power is vested in a minority; governing body or upper class usually made up of an hereditary nobility

assembly - a legislative body; the gathering of a political or social group

bourgeoisie - the middle class in a society

class - a group sharing the same economic or social status; social rank

courtiers - those in attendance at a royal court, often to entertain or bring concerns to a monarchy

despotism - a system of government in which the ruler has unlimited power

grandiose - impressive because of uncommon largeness, scope, effect or splendor

hierarchy - the classification of a group of people according to ability or to economic, social, or professional standing

incorruptible - not subject to decay or dissolution; incapable of being bribed or morally corrupted

ominous - having a menacing, alarming character foreshadowing evil or disaster

reason - the power of comprehending, inferring, or thinking especially in orderly rational ways

sans-coulettes - an extreme radical republican in France at the time of the Revolution



Discussion Questions

1. This program opens with a discussion of Louis XVI's inexperience as leader. How do you think Louis XVI's qualities as a leader led to the French Revolution?
2. What were some of the causes of the French Revolution discussed in this program?
3. What was the "Enlightenment"? Who were some of its major thinkers and writers?
4. Why did the French people have such negative feelings toward Marie Antoinette?
5. What was the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen"? How does it relate to the U.S. Constitution?
6. What was the Third Estate? Which groups in French society did it include?
7. One of the historians interviewed in this program calls the French Revolution "the crossroads of the modern world." What do you think this means? Do you agree with this claim?
8. At first, it seemed that King Louis XVI would cooperate with some of the demands of the Third Estate. Why do you think he ultimately reacted so violently against them?
9. What kind of leader was Robespierre? Do you think he did a good job of representing the wishes of the French people?
10. What was the role of women in the French Revolution? Can you think of some examples of their contribution to the Revolution from this program?
11. Why do you think the initial goals of the Revolution became so distorted during the "Reign of Terror"? Why do you think Robespierre had so much fear of political traitors?
12. What do you think were the most important long-term effects of the French Revolution? What were its legacies?

Viewing Suggestions

This program covers the major events of the French Revolution, which took place over the course of a decade. As it consisted of many events and phases, we recommend that students follow along with a guide as they watch the program in order to maximize their understanding of the events and prepare them for discussion after viewing the program. The following Fill in the Blank and Viewing Chart provide teachers with some additional resources to supplement the program.



The French Revolution – Fill in the Blank

To the student: The following assignment will help you remember key events and figures from the program.

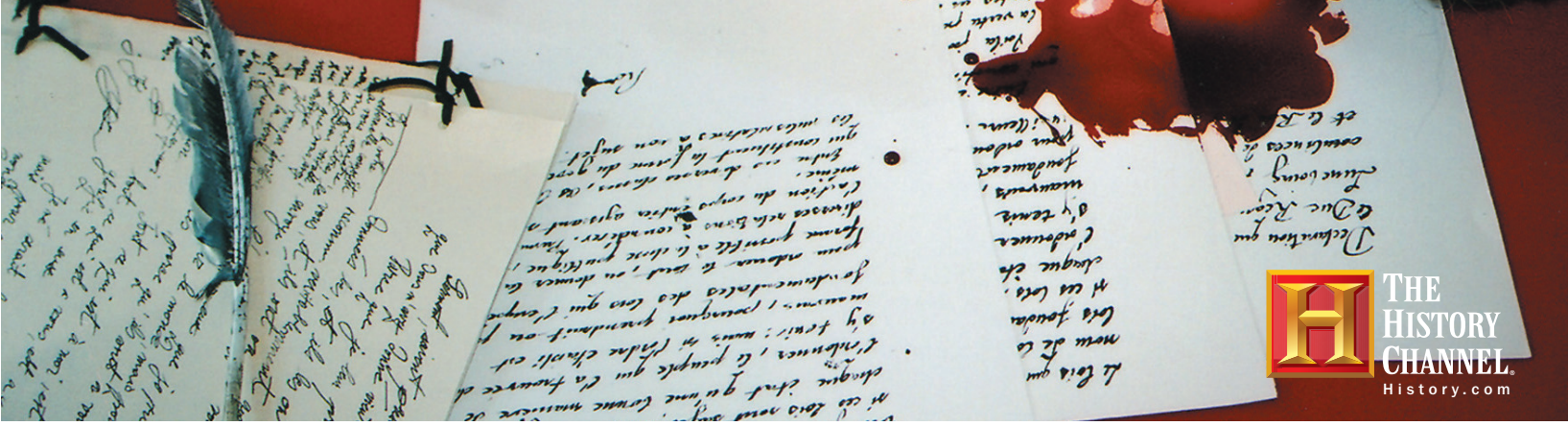
At the seat of the French monarchy in _____, an alliance between _____ and _____was created as King Louis XVI married Marie Antoinette. The king had inherited a financial crisis as France had sent millions of dollars and resources overseas to support the _____. Poverty and malnourishment devastated the nation as the population in France continued to increase. Unrest was brewing as King Louis XVI called a meeting of the Estates-General to be held in May of _____. Meanwhile, a brilliant orator who will later become a leader of the French Revolution named _____ sharpened his debating and political skills.

There were three major social groups in France, referred to as "estates." The three estates were the nobility, the clergy, and the common people known as the _____. This estate comprised over 95% of the French population. A political and philosophical awakening spearheaded by thinkers such as Voltaire and Rousseau inspired the members of the Third Estate. This transformation, known as _____, created rising expectations among the French people at the same time that malnourishment and harsh taxes turned them against an inept crown. Politically inspired, the Third Estate demanded popular representation, forming a political body known as the _____. They demanded that France become a Constitutional Monarchy in which the Third Estate would be more fairly represented politically.

After declaring their wishes to reorganize the French government in the "Tennis Court Oaths," the Third Estate was met with violent repression. Though he recognized the need to compromise politically, Louis XVI soon started a campaign to re-establish power and put an end to the Revolution. The king's repression incensed the French people, and hundreds of protestors stormed the _____ on July 14, _____. Later that summer, the National Assembly outlined a basic human rights platform in a document written by the Marquis de Lafayette entitled _____. Furious at the monarchy, a group of Parisian women marched to Versailles and demanded that the king and queen return to Paris.

The Revolution continued over the next few years, as the king ordered repressive measures against protestors and as factions emerged among the Third Estate. In 1791, Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette attempted to flee Paris but were recaptured and, in _____, Louis XVI was executed by _____. Robespierre, who had been a major leader in the Revolution, responded to the chaos in France by handing over power to the _____ with the goal of returning order. This attempt spiraled out of control as thousands of people suspected to be traitors of the Revolution were executed by guillotine. This chapter of the Revolution is known as the _____.

Toward the end of the Revolution, in _____, Robespierre himself was put to death by guillotine and a more moderate group assumed a leadership role. This transfer from radicalism to a more moderate form of government is known as a _____. Overall, the Revolution had transformed France. The era of divine right was over, the monarchy had been eliminated, and basic standards of human rights were established. The next phase of French history started shortly thereafter, as _____ took over through a coup in 1799 to become Emperor of France.



The French Revolution - Viewing Chart

From Monarchy to Revolution

- King Louis XVI inherited the French throne in 1774
- France was in financial crisis; as taxes rise, a huge percentage of the population was suffering from starvation
- At a meeting of the Estates-General in 1789, the Third Estate revolts and forms the National Assembly
- With the "Tennis Court Oaths" the Third Estate demanded the formation of a Constitutional Monarchy to provide them with more political representation

Questions

1. Which groups in France made up each one of the three estates?
2. What are some of the reasons the documentary gives for the dissatisfaction of the Third Estate?
3. Why do you think King Louis XVI gave in at first to some of the demands of the Third Estate?
4. Marie Antoinette's nickname was _____ , indicating her uncontrolled spending habits as many French suffered from starvation.

The French Revolution in Action

- Leaders of the Third Estate outlined their desire for basic human rights with the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen" in 1789
- Maximillian Robespierre assumed a major leadership role in the French Revolution
- Facing repression from the crown, hundreds of French citizens destroyed the Bastille in July of 1789
- The more radical faction of the Revolution, known as the Jacobins, assumed power
- Many French commoners took to the streets to demand change; the monarchs tried to escape but were driven back to Paris in 1791 to face trial

Questions

1. What role did the "Enlightenment" play in driving the French people to participate in the Revolution?
2. Why was the guillotine considered a more humane form of punishment?
3. Jean-Paul Marat published a newspaper called _____ which supported the main political group leading the Revolution, the Jacobins.
4. What do you think the majority of French people wanted to see changed as a result of the Revolution? Why were they so upset?

From Revolution to "Reign of Terror"

- Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were both executed in 1793 as the Revolution continued
- Robespierre formed the Committee of Public Safety to try to restore order in the streets as chaos ruled
- The radical faction within the Revolution seized control and tens of thousands of French were executed by guillotine
- In 1799 the revolutionary phase was officially over as Napoleon seized power

Questions

1. Robespierre stated "Louis must die, that the country can live." What do you think this quote means?
2. Why do you think the executions by guillotine in France were public events?
3. The _____ was the phase of the Revolution in which huge numbers of French people were executed.
4. What do you think is the greatest legacy of the French Revolution?



Extended Activities

1. One of the most important documents to emerge from the French Revolution was the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen" written by the Marquis de Lafayette in 1789. This document was based on the United States Constitution, which had just been drafted and stood as a model for the French republic. There are many similarities between these two documents, but there are also ways in which they are distinct. Break up into groups of four or five. At the library or using the Internet, locate these two documents. Read the first sections of both documents and explore their similarities and differences. Then, on a piece of posterboard or large construction paper, create two columns, one for each document. In each column, list the five major rights each document secures for its citizens. Be sure to note as well which members of society were afforded these full citizenship rights and which were not.

2. There were many grievances among the French people which led them to revolt. This program discusses many of the reasons the French were so frustrated with the monarchy and why the momentum for the French Revolution gathered steam in the late 1780s. Keeping in mind some of these reasons, pretend that you are a member of the Third Estate who has gone to Versailles to protest the monarchy. On a piece of construction paper or posterboard, write a slogan that you think captures one of the central concerns of the revolutionaries. You can decorate your poster or sign with images or flags from the French Revolution that you find on the Internet or with photocopies from the library or textbooks. (Bonus: Include on the back of your poster or sign additional information such as the occupation, age, and basic biography of your intended member of the Third Estate.)

3. One of the most dramatic episodes of the French Revolution was the storming of the Bastille. Pretend that you are a reporter sent to cover these events. In a short newspaper article of five paragraphs or less, describe the events of July 14, 1789. You can use details from the books you have read or pursue additional research at the library or using the Internet. You may also choose to write an article from the first-person perspective as if you were a witness of or participant in the events at the Bastille.

4. Marie Antoinette's fondness for clothing and material things gave her the reputation for being an insensitive queen, as so many of the French people were poor and starving. One key event captured the feelings of the French toward their queen. "The Affair of the Diamond Necklace," as it became known, was a famous misunderstanding which confirmed her reputation in the eyes of many French citizens. At the library or using the Internet, research this event and discover what happened. Then, pretend that you are a member of the Third Estate. Write a letter to the editor of a French paper describing your opinion of Marie Antoinette based on what you have discovered from learning about this scandal.



Resources

Books

Banfield, Susan. *The Rights of Man, the Reign of Terror: The Story of the French Revolution.* Lippincott, Williams. & Wilkins, 1990.

Doyle, William. *The French Revolution: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford University Press, 2001.

Fraser, Antonia. *Marie Antoinette: The Journey.* Anchor, 2002.

Schama, Simon. *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution.* Vintage, 1990.

Websites

An excellent website with a timeline, important biographies, and activity links:
http://library.thinkquest.org/C006257/default.shtml

A helpful basic timeline of important events in the French Revolution:
http://campus.northpark.edu/history/WebChron/WestEurope/FrenchRev.html

An informative site with timelines and primary sources:
http://www.historyteacher.net/APEuroCourse/WebLinks/WebLinks-RevolutionaryFrance.htm

A colorful site with interesting facts and links on the French Revolution:
http://www.historywiz.com/frenchrev.htm

An excellent lesson plan for young people on the French Revolution:
www.coreknowledge.org/CKproto2/resrcs/lessons/699frchrev.pdf

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