UNDERSTANDING THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

With the rallying notion of 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity', the French Revolution, which began in 1789 and lasted up to 1799, was a time of great upheaval, both socially and politically, in the history of France as well as the rest of Europe. During this period the structure of the French government, which until then was an absolute monarchy, with the Catholic clergy and aristocracy enjoying feudal privileges, was changed radically into kinds that had the principles of Enlightenment as their basis, such as the rights of citizens, citizenship, and nationalism.

These changes, however, were brought about through violent times, which included executions by the thousands by the notorious guillotine and with repression, especially during the 'Reign of Terror', as well as military conflict, which involved all other European powers.

The Causes of the French Revolution

**1. Social Causes:**

By the last part of the 18th century, France was on the verge of the revolution. This had been building up for a number of years, although the main cause could be attributed to the great disparity of wealth and privilege between the Royalty, clergy and nobility on one side, and the middle classes and peasants on the other.

The population of France at that time was separated into three estates: The first estate, numbering about 100,000 people, comprised the clergy; the second estate, numbering about 400,000 people, comprised the nobility; and the third estate comprised the peasantry, wage earners, and the bourgeoisie, which made up 90 percent of the population of France.

Under this system, while the first and the second estates were conferred with great privileges, the third estate was downtrodden under oppressive conditions.

Even though they were the wealthiest, the first and the second estates hardly paid any taxes. Plus, they were the only ones who could hold high positions in French society. In addition, the monarchy, via the local officials and ministers, wielded absolute authority and power over France. The parliament, known as 'States General', had not met since 1614. These conditions gradually became cause for great resentment in the third estate.

The Privileges of the First and Second Estate:

•Tolls were collected by the aristocrats from people who used markets and roads.

•The aristocrats were exempted from paying most of taxes.

•The aristocracy were exempt from doing military service.

•The aristocrats had almost full authority over the peasant class.

•Most clergy and aristocrats lived extremely luxurious lives in palaces.

The Unfair Conditions of the Third Estate:

•The peasant class had no right to fish or hunt in the estates of the aristocrats.

•The peasant class was forced to pay taxes to the Church, the King, as well as to their noble master.

•The peasant class had to serve in the military.

•The peasant class had to use their noble master's winepress, oven, and mill, and pay for doing so.

**2. Monetary Causes:**

The brewing resentment amongst the common people of France may not have led to the political revolution without the financial crisis that the country was plunged into by the late 1780s, by which time the government of France was bankrupt, with a huge debt of money had been spent in waging expensive wars, with no gains to show for it.

The royals were accused by the people of spending enormous amounts of money on their luxurious lifestyles, particularly the highly unpopular Queen Marie-Antoinette, the wife of Louis XVI, whose extravagance and opposition to reform were contributory factors to the monarchy being eventually overthrown.

Others thought that the system of taxes was unfair and corrupt, accusing some tax collectors of not handing over their taxes to the government.

**3. Failure of Harvests**

During the 1700s, a large majority of the French people relied almost entirely on farming and agriculture to survive. From the years 1787 to 1789, the weather turned for the worse, with summers that were too hot, extremely hard winters, and unprecedented heavy rains, which resulted in three years of very poor harvests in the country. This, in turn, resulted in a reduction of incomes amongst farmers and peasants, while the prices of food rose acutely. The bad harvests also led to the unemployment of a large number of farmers. Thus, there was starvation amongst large sections of the poorer classes, but they could not get any employment and therefore could not afford to buy food.

In the meantime, the royals, the aristocrats, and the clergy continued living their luxurious lives in their grand chateaus and palaces. This was the time Queen Marie-Antoinette was supposed to have famously said: "If they have no bread, let them eat cake!" (although there is some dispute whether she had actually said those words)

**4. The Estates General called by King Louis XVI**

The King wanted the help of the aristocracy in reforming the tax system, which he asked them to do in 1787. He wanted them begin paying some of the taxes, a proposal that they rejected. Hence, the King called for a meeting of the Estates General in 1788, who were representatives from the three estates, which had last met in 1614.

The meeting was held at the palace at Versailles, in the year 1789. The King was hoping that the Estates General would give approval for new taxes. The clergy and the nobles wanted to carry on with their privileges. The middle classes wanted a democracy like the one in England and the peasants wanted their problems to be solved and their representatives asked them to make a list of their grievances.

While the King had made the palace of Versailles the venue for the meeting, he also had large numbers of troops there. Some thought that this was an attempt by him to control the representatives….but he did not provide them with any proposals that could be discussed, and they had to think of ideas themselves. This resulted in the King not having any control over the meeting.

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION...   
  
1.What was the rally cry for the revolution? (Try not to sing it.)   
2. What people were associated with each of the estates?  
3. Who were the bourgeoisie?  
4 Do you still have that song stuck in your head? La..la Lib-er-te   E..eh....Gal-i-te...   
5. What were some of the ad-dad-vantages (sorry, umm.. advantages) of living in the first two estates?  
6. What were some of the unfair conditions of living in the third estate?  
7. What caused France's huge debt?  
8. Why were the harvests so poor? How might that have effected the price of bread, bread, bread off with her head...? (sorry)  
9. What did the King hope to accomplish by calling together the Estates General?  
10. What did each of these estates want to accomplish here?  
11. Now, don't you want to go back to the home page and click that link?