Your notes

GCSE History: revision notes

The French Revolution, c1780–99

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The origins of the Revolution, c1780–87

- French society was split into three Estates: the clergy (First), the nobles (Second) and everyone else, about 97% of the people (Third). The first two had privileges and paid little tax, while peasants paid taxes, tithes to the Church and dues to their lords.
- Enlightenment writers such as Voltaire, Rousseau and Montesquieu questioned privilege and the absolute power of kings.
- Helping the Americans in their War of Independence cost France a fortune and spread ideas of liberty among French soldiers.
- King Louis XVI was well-meaning but indecisive. His Austrian queen, Marie Antoinette, was unpopular and blamed for extravagance. The government was deep in debt, and Necker's report of 1781 hid how bad things were. Poor harvests made bread dear.

From the Assembly of Notables to the National Assembly, 1787–89

- Finance minister Calonne proposed a tax on all land, but the Assembly of Notables (1787) refused. His successor Brienne also failed, and the king had to call the **Estates-General**, which hadn't met since 1614. The bad harvest of 1788 pushed bread prices higher.
- The **Estates-General** met at Versailles in May 1789. The Third Estate wanted voting by head, not by Estate, declared itself the **National Assembly** in June, and swore the Tennis Court Oath not to break up until France had a constitution.
- On 14 July 1789 a Paris crowd stormed the Bastille, a royal fortress and prison. In the countryside, the Great Fear saw peasants attack nobles' châteaux. In August the Assembly abolished feudal privileges and passed the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen.

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Developments, 1789–92

- The Constituent Assembly reformed France: it took over Church land, made the clergy swear loyalty to the state (the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, 1790) and made Louis a constitutional monarch.
- In June 1791 the royal family tried to escape and were caught at Varennes. Many people stopped trusting the king, and calls for a republic grew.
- The **Jacobins** were a radical club, later led by Robespierre. The Girondins were more moderate republicans who wanted war. The **sans-culottes** were the working people of Paris, who pushed the Revolution further.
- War was declared on Austria in 1792, and Prussia joined in. With enemies threatening Paris, a crowd attacked the king's palace in August 1792, the monarchy fell, and a new National Convention declared France a republic.

The Terror and Napoleon, 1792–99

- The Convention offered help to any people overthrowing their king (the Edict of Fraternity), tried Louis XVI, and executed him in January 1793.
- Facing war, rebellion and food shortages, the Committee of Public Safety, led by Robespierre, ran **the Terror** (1793–94). The Girondins were expelled, and thousands of suspected enemies were guillotined, including Marie Antoinette.
- In July 1794 (Thermidor) Robespierre was overthrown and executed, and a White Terror struck at the **Jacobins**. The **Directory** (1795–99), run by five Directors, was weak and corrupt, and needed the army to crush a royalist challenge in the coup of Fructidor (1797).
- In November 1799 the successful general Napoleon Bonaparte seized power in the coup of Brumaire and became First Consul.

Key terms

Estates-General	The assembly of the three Estates (clergy, nobles and commoners) that met in 1789.
National Assembly	The assembly the Third Estate declared in June 1789, claiming to speak for the nation.
Sans-culottes	The working people of Paris, who pushed for radical change.
Jacobins	A radical revolutionary club whose leaders included Robespierre.
The Terror	The period of 1793–94 when thousands of suspected enemies of the Revolution were executed.
Directory	The government of five Directors that ran France from 1795 to 1799.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

Your notes

1. Which Estate made up about 97% of the French people?
2. Which war left France deep in debt before 1789?
3. What was the Tennis Court Oath?
4. What happened on 14 July 1789?
5. What was the Great Fear?
6. Where was the royal family caught trying to escape in 1791?
7. Who led the Committee of Public Safety during the Terror?
8. When was Louis XVI executed?

Answers

1. The Third Estate
2. The American War of Independence
3. A promise not to break up until France had a constitution
4. The storming of the Bastille
5. Peasants attacking nobles' châteaux in 1789
6. Varennes
7. Robespierre
8. January 1793

What to do next

Practise 10 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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