On the Eve of Revolution

On April 28, 1789, unrest exploded at a Paris wallpaper factory. A rumor had spread that the factory owner was planning to cut wages even though bread prices were soaring. Enraged workers vandalized the owner’s home.

On the Eve of Revolution

Riots like these did not worry most nobles. They knew that France faced a severe economic crisis but thought financial reforms would ease the problem. The nobles were wrong. The crisis went deeper than government finances. Reform would not be enough. By July, the hungry, unemployed, and poorly paid people of Paris had taken up arms. Their actions would push events further and faster than anyone could have foreseen.

French Society Divided

In 1789, France, like the rest of Europe, still clung to an outmoded social system that had emerged in the Middle Ages. Under this system, everyone in France was divided into one of three social classes, or estates. The First Estate was made up of the clergy; the Second Estate was made up of the nobility; and the Third Estate comprised the vast majority of the population.

The Clergy Enjoyed Wealth

During the Middle Ages, the Church had exerted great influence throughout Christian Europe. In 1789, the French clergy still enjoyed enormous wealth and privilege. The Church owned about 10 percent of the land, collected tithes, and paid no direct taxes to the state. High Church leaders such as bishops and abbots

Vocabulary Builder

Use the information below and the following resources to teach the high-use word from this section.

Term: urban, p. 119
Definition: adj. of, relating to, or characteristic of a city
Sample Sentence: Jack grew up in an urban environment where few people had a back yard.
Third Estate is Vastly Diverse

The Third Estate was the most diverse social class. At the top sat the bourgeoisie (boor zhwah ZEE), or middle class. The bourgeoisie included prosperous bankers, merchants, and manufacturers, as well as lawyers, doctors, journalists, and professors. The bulk of the Third Estate, however, consisted of rural peasants.

Nobles Hold Top Government Jobs

The Second Estate was the titled nobility of French society. In the Middle Ages, noble insights had defended the land. In the 1600s, Richelieu and Louis XIV had crushed the nobles’ military power but had given them other rights—under strict royal control. Those rights included top jobs in government, the army, the courts, and the Church.

At Versailles, ambitious nobles competed for royal appointments while idle courtiers enjoyed endless entertainments. Many nobles, however, lived far from the center of power. Though they owned land, they received little financial income. As a result, they felt the pinch of trying to maintain their status in a period of rising prices.

Many nobles hated absolutism and resented the royal bureaucracy that employed middle-class men in positions that once had been reserved for them. They feared losing their traditional privileges, especially their freedom from paying taxes.

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Independent Practice

Have students work with a partner to write brief profiles for three of the following: nun, priest, nobleman, banker, manufacturer, lawyer, peasant, manufacturer, merchant, lawyer, farmer, merchant, or craftsman. In their profiles, students should identify the estate to which each person would have belonged in 1789, the privileges and complaints each might have had, and changes that each might have desired. After students have finished their profiles, invite volunteers to read them to the class.

Monitor Progress

- As students fill in their charts, circulate to make sure they understand that inequalities among classes was one of the causes of the French Revolution. For a completed version of the chart, see Note Taking Transparencies, 9
- If students need more instruction on identifying causes and effects, have them read the Skills Handbook, p. SH36.

Answers

Thinking Critically

1. It wanted to gain political power and recognition.
2. Its members were paying high taxes and dealing with unjust restrictions, but did not have any representation in government.

Vocabulary Builder

urban—(UR bun)—adj. of, relating to, or characteristic of a city

What Is the Third Estate?

"What is the Third Estate? Everything.
2. What has it been until now in the political order? Nothing.
3. What does it want to be? Something."

—Abbé Emmanuel Sieyès

Sieyès, a clergyman before the revolution, captured the spirit of the Third Estate with these words in a pamphlet published in January 1789. The vast Third Estate—peasants, dentists, laborers, and more—comprising more than 95 percent of France, was ready to fight for equality.

History Background

What Is the Third Estate?

- Louis XVI as a Young Prince
  Indecisive and easily influenced, Louis XVI was ill-prepared to guide France through turbulent times. When he was born in 1754, he was the fourth in line for the throne. By age 10, he was the direct heir. Uneasy with this responsibility, he set out to prepare himself emotionally and mentally for his duties. He was not a stellar student, but he was not a bad student either. He possessed a great memory, great skill as a locksmith, and great interest in history and languages. Nevertheless, he still preferred the quiet of the nearby woods to the pressures and politics of the court. When he became king at the young age of 20, he is said to have said, "I am the unhappiest of men."
Financial Troubles

Economic woes in France added to the social unrest and heightened tensions. One of the causes of the economic troubles was a mushrooming financial crisis that was due in part to years of deficit spending. This occurred when a government spends more money than it takes in.

National Debt Soars

Louis XIV had left France deeply in debt. The Seven Years’ War and the American Revolution strained the treasury even further. Costs generally had risen in the 1700s, and the lavish court soaked up millions. To bridge the gap between income and expenses, the government borrowed more and more money. By 1788, half of the government’s income from taxes went to paying the interest on this enormous debt. Also, in the late 1780s, bad harvests sent food prices soaring and brought hunger to poorer peasants and city dwellers.

To solve the financial crisis, the government would have to increase taxes, reduce expenses, or both. However, the nobles and clergy fiercely resisted any attempt to end their exemption from taxes.

Economic Reform Fails

The heirs of Louis XIV were not the right men to solve the economic crisis that afflicted France. Louis XV, who ruled from 1715 to 1774, pursued pleasures before serious business and ran up more debt. Louis XVI was well-meaning but weak and indecisive. He did, however, wisely choose Jacques Necker, a financial expert, as his adviser. Necker urged the king to reduce extravagant court spending, reform government, and abolish burdensome tariffs on internal trade. When Necker proposed taxing the First and Second Estates, how¬ever, the nobles and high clergy forced the king to dismiss him.

As the crisis deepened, the pressure for reform mounted. The wealthy and powerful classes demanded, however, that the king summon the Estates-General, the legislative body consisting of representatives of the three estates, before making any changes. A French king had not called the Estates-General for 175 years, fearing that nobles would use it to recover the feudal powers they had lost under absolute rule. To reform-minded nobles, the Estates-General seemed to offer a chance of carrying out changes like those that had come with the Glorious Revolution in England. They hoped that they could bring the absolute monarch under the control of the nobles and guarantee their own privileges.

In towns and cities, Enlightenment ideas led people to question the inequalities of the old regime. Why, people demanded, should the first two estates have such great privileges at the expense of the majority? Throughout France, the Third Estate called for the privileged classes to pay their share.

Financial Troubles

H-SS 10.2.1

Instruct

■ Introduce: Key Terms Ask students to find the key term deficit spending (in blue) in the text and define it. Ask students to speculate on the problems that could occur when a country’s government spends more than it takes in.

■ Teach Discuss how economic troubles contributed to growing unrest in France. Ask: How did economic problems affect the poorer members of the Third Estate? (When food prices went up, they went hungry.) Why did the nobles and clergy demand that the king dismiss Jacques Necker and summon the Estates-General? (Necker wanted to tax them, and they hoped the Estates-General would guarantee their privileges and help them gain more power from the king.)

■ Quick Activity Direct students to the image on this page and have them read the accompanying Primary Source quote. Ask: How does the image show the great hunger described by Arthur Young? (The peasants are all gathered around the open pot, with arms outstretched for food.)

Independent Practice

Link to Literature

To help students better understand the economic problems and social tensions during this time, have them read the selection From A Tale of Two Cities, by Charles Dickens and complete the worksheet.

Monitor Progress

To review this section, ask students to summarize how financial troubles added to the unrest.

Careers

Economist Jacques Necker was Louis XVI’s financial advisor. He directed the king to make reforms to help improve France’s economy. Today, economists advise heads of state and other world leaders on such matters. Economists study how society distributes limited resources, such as land, labor, and capital. Microeconomists study the economic decisions made by individuals and firms, while macroeconomists study trends of the whole economy. Other economists focus on the banking system, international markets, or the market structure of a particular industry. Some assess economic conditions for the government, or a business, some conduct their own research and teach at a university. Economists can be very influential, shaping economic policies that may have worldwide effects.

Answers

First Estate: clergy; Second Estate: nobles; Third Estate: the majority of the population and the lowest social class

Primary Source They were angry when nobles tried to reimpose old manor dues.

France had a large national debt in 1789 and soaring food prices, forcing many people to go hungry. Angry townspeople and peasants attacked the nobles’ manor houses.
Louis XVI Calls the Estates-General

As 1788 came to a close, France teetered on the verge of bankruptcy. Bread riots were spreading, and nobles, fearful of taxes, were denouncing royal tyranny. A baffled Louis XVI finally summoned the Estates-General to meet at Versailles the following year.

Estates Prepare Grievance Notebooks

In preparation, Louis had all three estates prepare cahiers (kah YAYZ), or notebooks, listing their grievances. Many cahiers called for reforms such as fairer taxes, freedom of the press, or regular meetings of the Estates-General. In one town, shoemakers denounced regulations that made leather so expensive they could not afford to make shoes. Servant girls in the city of Toulouse demanded the right to keep service when they wanted and that “after a girl has served her master for many years, she receive some reward for her service.” The colors testified to boiling class resentments. One called tax collectors “bloodsuckers of the nation who drink the tears of the unfortunate from goblets of gold.” Another one of the cahiers condemned the courts of collectors “bloodsuckers of the nation who drink the tears of the unfortunate.”

Delegates Take the Tennis Court Oath

Delegates to the Estates-General from the Third Estate were elected, though only propertied men could vote. Thus, the delegates were mostly lawyers, middle-class officials, and writers. They were familiar with the writings of Voltaire, Rousseau, and other philosophes. They went to Versailles not only to solve the financial crisis but also to insist on reform. The Estates-General convened in May 1789. From the start, the delegates were deadlocked over the issue of voting. Traditionally, each estate had met and voted separately. Each group had one vote. Under this system, the First and Second Estates always outvoted the Third Estate two to one. This time, the Third Estate wanted all three estates to meet in a single body, with votes counted “by head.”

After weeks of stalemate, delegates of the Third Estate took a daring step. Claiming to represent the people of France, they declared themselves to be the National Assembly in June 1789. A few days later, the National Assembly found its meeting hall locked and guarded. Fearing that the king planned to disband them, the delegates moved to a nearby indoor tennis court. As curious spectators looked on, the delegates took their famous Tennis Court Oath. They swore “never to separate...”
and to meet wherever the circumstances might require until we have established a sound and just constitution.”

When reform-minded clergy and nobles joined the Assembly, Louis XVI grudgingly accepted it. But royal troops gathered around Paris, and rumors spread that the king planned to dissolve the Assembly and to meet wherever the circumstances might require until we have established a sound and just constitution.”

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Parishians Storm the Bastille
On July 14, 1789, the city of Paris seized the spotlight from the National Assembly meeting in Versailles. The streets buzzed with rumors that royal troops were going to occupy the capital. More than 600 Parisians assembled outside the Bastille, a grim medieval fortress used as a prison for political and other prisoners. The crowd demanded weapons and gunpowder believed to be stored there. The commander of the Bastille refused to open the gates and opened fire on the crowd. In the battle that followed, many people were killed. Finally, the enraged mob broke through the defenses. They killed the commander and five guards and released the handful of prisoners who were being held there, but found no weapons. The Bastille was a symbol to the people of France representing years of abuse by the monarchy. The storming of and subsequent fall of the Bastille was a wake-up call to Louis XVI. Unlike any other riot or short-lived protest, this event posed a challenge to the sheer existence of the regime. Since 1880, the French have celebrated Bastille Day annually as their national independence day.

Standards Check
What actions did delegates of the Third Estate take when the Estates-General met in 1789? H-SS 10.2.1

Assess and Reteach

Assess Progress
- Have students complete the Section Assessment.
- Administer the Section Quiz.

Reteach
- Progress Monitoring Transparencies, 75

Extend
- Have groups research how the French celebrate Bastille Day. Then have them compare and contrast this holiday with Independence Day in the United States and present their findings to the class.

Answers
- They declared themselves the National Assembly representing the people of France and took the Tennis Court Oath, swearing to meet until they created a new constitution.
- Parishians showed their extreme discontent with the old regime.

Quick Write: Make a Cause-and-Effect Organizer
Choose a specific event from this section and write it in the center of a piece of paper. List causes above it and effects below it. This will give you the details to include in your cause-and-effect essay. You may need to do additional research to gather more details.