World History Notes

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* French society was divided into estates (social classes). The nobles and the clergy, or officials of the Roman Catholic Church, represented the top two estates.
* Everyone else, from merchants to peasants, belonged to the Third Estate. This commoner class made up some 95 percent of the population.
* The 1700s was a century of continual warfare for France. To pay for their wars, including supporting the American Revolution, French kings had to borrow more and more money.
* By 1788, King Louis XVI faced severe financial problems. In fact, France hovered on the verge of bankruptcy.
* Louis considered a set of reforms for resolving the economic crisis. This included raising taxes.
* The peasants, however, could not afford to pay any more than they already did. The rich, however, were protected from new taxes by their exemptions and traditional rights.
* The only way out of this was for Louis XVI to call on the Estates-General for approval. This had not been done in almost 200 years.
* It gave commoners access to decision-making and compromised the king’s absolute power. This ended up being disastrous for Louis XVI.
* Louis XVI and the two upper estates were not open to many of the grievances that the third estate had. Very little in terms of change was being negotiated.
* On June 17, 1789 , the Estates-General declared themselves to be a National Assembly with the power to govern France. With this power, they started designing a constitution.
* The king took steps to stop the Assembly from meeting, which roused the people of Paris.
* On July 14, a mob destroyed the Bastille, a fortress and prison that symbolized royal power. This symbolized the start of the French Revolution.
* At first, the revolution did not have clearly defined goals. it was a broad-based war about class divisions powered by Enlightenment ideas.
* The revolutionaries originally hoped for a constitutional monarchy, but Louis XVI was not willing to give up absolute rule.
* This led to his imprisonment and ultimately the dissolution of the monarchy.
* The National Assembly kept control only for a few years. But by 1791, it had transformed France.
* 1. It had adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, a document that defined the individual and collective rights of all three estates as equal and universal.
* 2. It had turned the country into a constitutional monarchy.
* 3. It had forced the French Catholic Church to cut its ties with Rome.
* 4. It had abolished feudalism, the system of privileges held by the nobles and clergy.
* 5. It clearly established the idea that, “Men are born free and remain equal in rights.”
* Women also played a role in the revolution, but frequently faced opposition from men.
* The political activist Olympe de Gouges reacted by writing a Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Citizen. She wrote, “Woman is born free and lives equal to man in her rights.”
* Women played an integral part in the Revolution, despite much opposition from some men who thought they were unfit for political roles.
* After 1791, the French Revolution took a turn toward violence. Fearing a foreign plot to undermine its progress, France declared war on Austria and Prussia in 1792.
* Extremist politicians gained control of this new assembly during this time. They encouraged a thirst for blood among the people. This period became known as the Reign of Terror.
* In 1793, they beheaded King Louis XVI and Queen Marie Antoinette and replaced the monarchy with a republic.
* Their quest for absolute unity and loyalty led to the deaths of tens of thousands more citizens in the next year and a half.
* Moderates in the Convention took charge in 1794. They executed the main agent of the Terror, Maximilien Robespierre.
* For many, this marked the end of the French Revolution. For others, the end came five years later with the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte.
* In 1799, Napoleon, a skilled army commander, seized control of France in a coup d’état, bringing an end to representative government.
* Napoleon ruled as a dictator. Yet he also retained—in theory if not always in practice—many of the gains of the revolution.