

History

UNFOLDING

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION



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Introduction

The French Revolution

In many ways, the modern political era began with the French Revolution. The revolution put an end to an older concept of society as a hierarchy of hereditary orders of people. In its place, it substituted what was then the radical idea that all citizens are equal under the law. It provided a blueprint for secular revolutions that future radicals would study carefully. The very notion of a political spectrum of “left,” “right,” and “center” evolved from seating arrangements in the revolution’s Legislative Assembly.

The French Revolution’s central rallying cry was “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.” The phrase can actually be seen as a keynote for the central historical debates of the next 200 years—in which liberalism put its stress on “liberty,” socialism advocated “equality,” and nationalism fostered a strong sense of “fraternity.” The revolution’s excesses also pointed ominously to the future—to the ideologically motivated violence of Lenin, Stalin’s purges, Mao’s Cultural Revolution, and genocides by Hitler and Pol Pot. In ways both admirable and terrible, the French Revolution was indeed a key turning point in world history.

The 12 illustrations in this booklet focus on a number of central themes in the history of the French Revolution. These illustrations are presented in four lessons. Each lesson uses three of the illustrations to explore one broad topic in the overall story. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

The Approaching Revolution

The illustrations in this lesson focus on the abuses suffered by France’s poor and middle classes at the hands of a large class of privileged yet unproductive aristocrats.

The Overthrow of the Old Order

The scenes here illustrate the parts played by middle-class political leaders and the poor people of Paris in the early and more moderate stages of the revolution.

The Terror and the Reaction

From the start, radical agitation drove the revolution to the left. Then the threat and outbreak of war fueled the fears on which radicals played as they outbid one another for power. The Terror lasted as long as fears of war remained high. Then it faded quickly.

France Under Napoleon

Worn out by constant pressure to change, the French seemed to turn away from Robespierre’s idea of a “Republic of Virtue.” Instead, they turned to a single, powerful leader to impose order. Napoleon did this. He preserved many of the revolution’s biggest changes. But he also tried to restore in an altered form some of the glory of France’s age of the kings.

Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

DIGITAL IMAGES The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

*The French Revolution***OBJECTIVES**

1. Students will better understand some of the underlying causes of the French Revolution.
2. Students will better understand the differing points of view of the three estates making up the meeting of the Estates General.

The Approaching Revolution

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION**Illustration 1**

In the 1700s, France was the most powerful nation on the continent of Europe. But France was also in trouble. And a major cause of that trouble is suggested by what is shown here. This is the beautiful palace of Versailles, near Paris. Many rich nobles spent much of their lives waiting on France's king here. They passed the time flattering officials, seeking favors, gossiping, and living in idle luxury. On their own estates, they had done little to develop their farm lands. Increasingly, the nobles as a class were seen as unproductive, even silly. So, too, were the higher Catholic clergy, often nobles themselves. At the same time, the Enlightenment—a new spirit of reason and open debate—was spreading. Even the upper classes often approved of it. In doing so, they opened themselves up to growing criticism and attack.

Illustration 2

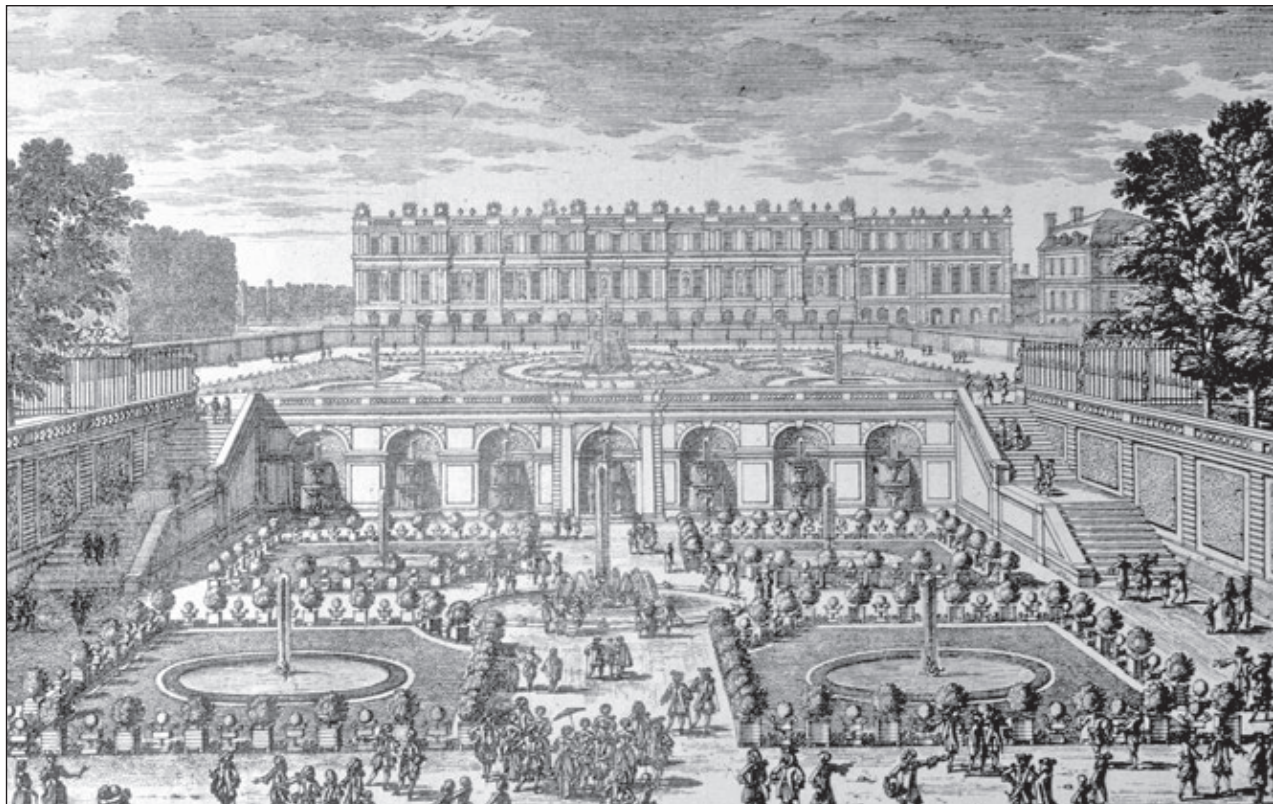
By the 1780s, France was deep in debt from its wars and other wasteful expenses. Poor peasants in the countryside were paying a huge share of the taxes. The nobles and clergy paid little or nothing. Anger was building due to food shortages, rising prices, and constant government demands for more taxes. Yet this drawing offers a very different view of French society at the time. It is titled "France Receives the Three Orders." It shows France presenting the three orders (called "estates") to King Louis XVI. These three estates are the clergy (first estate), the nobility (second estate), and commoners (third estate). The king's portrait is on top, and that of his popular minister of finance Jacques Necker is below it.

Illustration 3

By 1789, France was a bomb set to go off. The fuse was lit at the meeting shown in this illustration. This is the Estates General on May 5, 1789, at Versailles. The Estates General was a meeting of representatives of the three estates. The Estates General had not met since 1614. But in 1789, King Louis XVI was forced to call such a meeting if he hoped to persuade the nobles and clergy to accept new taxes. Necker convinced the king to double the third estate's representation to equal that of the other two combined. Louis wanted the meeting to make a few changes, accept new taxes, and go home. That was not to be.

Lesson 1 – The Approaching Revolution

Illustration 1



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Discussing the Illustration

1. This drawing shows the formal gardens at the most important palace in France. Can you name it and the French king who had it built? How would you describe the style of these gardens and the palace itself? What features impress you most?
2. In the 17th century, Louis XIV required thousands of wealthy French nobles to spend much of their time at Versailles. What is meant here by “nobles”?
3. At Versailles, many of the nobles had little to do but gossip, engage in intrigue, and compete for the king’s attention and favors. Elaborate rules even governed how the king would get dressed in the morning and which nobles would assist him. What reason might Louis XIV and other French Kings have had for insisting on these rules and rituals?
4. Do you think France's millions of poor peasants resented this elaborate court life, or might they have admired its splendor and the spectacle of it all?

Follow-up Activities

1. People always seem to be fascinated with the way the rich and famous live. Look through several recent magazines for photos of wealthy people today. Try to find five illustrations of French nobility at Versailles or elsewhere. Also look in magazines for five photos of wealthy people today relaxing in glamorous settings. Share these illustrations with the class and discuss the differences and similarities between the lifestyle of the French nobles and the lifestyles of the rich and famous as suggested by the photos you have found.
2. Read a biography or an article about King Louis XIV of France. Louis XIV lived from 1638 to 1714. Make sure the book or article describes in detail the daily duties of courtiers at Versailles. Based on what you learn, make up an imaginary daily schedule for a courtier at Versailles. Use this schedule to spark a class discussion about why Louis XIV had the courtiers live this way and whether this was good or bad for France as a whole.