

The Old Order (pages 217–218)

I. How was French society unequal?

In the 1700s, France was the leading country of Europe. It was the center of the new ideas of the Enlightenment. However, beneath the surface there were major problems. Soon the nation would be torn by a violent revolution.

One problem was that people were not treated equally in French society. A political and social system called the **Old Regime** remained in place. The French were divided into three classes, or estates. The **First Estate** consisted of the Roman Catholic clergy. The **Second Estate** was made up of nobles. Only about 2% of the people belonged to these two estates. Yet they owned 20% of the land. They had easy lives.

Everybody else belonged to the **Third Estate**. This huge group included three types of people:

- the bourgeoisie—mostly well-off merchants and skilled workers who lacked the status of nobles
- city workers—cooks, servants, and others who were poorly paid and often out of work
- peasants—farm workers, making up more than 80% of the French people

Members of the Third Estate were angry. They had few rights. They paid up to half of their income in taxes, while the rich paid almost none.

The Forces of Change (pages 218–219)

II. Why were the French ready for the revolution?

Three factors led to revolution. First, the Enlightenment spread the idea that everyone should be equal. The powerless people in the Third Estate liked that. Second, the French economy was failing. High taxes kept profits low, and food supplies were short due to crop failures. In the 1780s, France was deep in debt. The government was almost bankrupt because it had borrowed money to help the Americans win the Revolutionary War and had its own war debt from fighting England. Third, King Louis XVI was a weak leader and made poor decisions. His wife, Marie Antoinette, was unpopular. She was from Austria, France's long-time enemy, and was noted for her extravagant spending.

To get France out of debt, Louis tried to tax the nobles. Instead, they forced the king to call a meeting of the **Estates-General**, an assembly of delegates of the three estates.

Dawn of the Revolution (pages 220–221)

III. How did the Revolution begin?

The meeting of the Estates-General began in May 1789 with arguments over how to count votes. In the past, each estate had cast one vote. The Third Estate now wanted each delegate to have a vote. The king and the other estates did not agree to the plan because the Third Estate was larger and would have more votes.

The Third Estate then broke with the others and met separately. In June 1789, its delegates voted to rename themselves the **National Assembly**. They claimed to represent all the people. This was the beginning of representative government for France.

At one point, the members of the Third Estate found themselves locked out of their meeting. They broke down a door leading to a tennis court. Then they promised to stay there until they made a new constitution. This promise was called the **Tennis Court Oath**.

Louis tried to make peace. He ordered the clergy and nobles to join the National Assembly. However, trouble erupted. Rumors flew that foreign soldiers were going to attack French citizens. On July 14, an angry crowd captured the **Bastille**, a Paris prison. The mob wanted to get gunpowder for their weapons in order to defend the city.

A Great Fear Sweeps France (page 221)

IV. What was the Great Fear?

A wave of violence called the **Great Fear** swept the country. Peasants broke into and burned nobles' houses. They tore up documents that had forced them to pay fees to the nobles. Late in 1789, a mob of women marched from Paris to the king's palace at Versailles. They were angry about high bread prices and demanded that the king come to Paris. They hoped he would end hunger in the city. The king and queen left Versailles, never to return.