The French Revolution

Liberty, Equality, and a New World

A Journey into the Event that Changed History (1789–1799)

In 1789, the people of France stood up to the most powerful King in Europe. They wanted a voice. They wanted bread. They wanted freedom. This is the story of how they changed the world—and the violent price they paid for it.

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Act I: The World of Kings and Queens

The Fantasy: Versailles.

The Reality: The Peasantry.

Before 1789, France was an Absolute Monarchy. The King's word was law. He believed his power came directly from God (Divine Right).

While the royals held **expensive parties**, the country was **broke** from fighting wars, and the people were **starving**.

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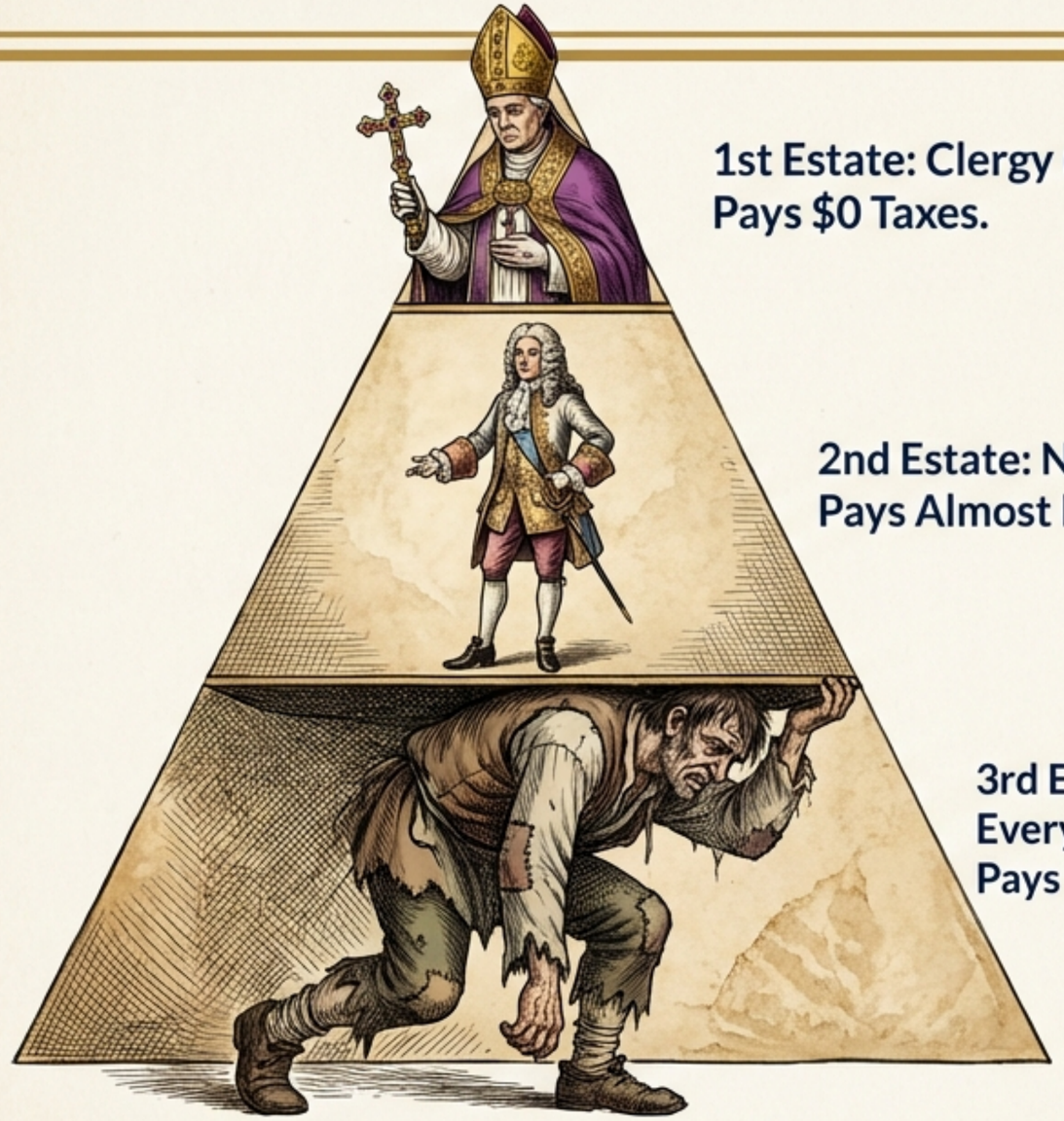
The Three Estates: A Rigged Game



1st Estate: Clergy (1%).
Pays $0 Taxes.

2nd Estate: Nobility (2%).
Pays Almost No Taxes.

3rd Estate:
Everyone Else (97%).
Pays ALL the Taxes.

"Is this fair? The 97% carried the burden for the 3%."

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Why Did It Happen? The Three Big Problems

1. Empty Wallets (Debt)

France was broke from fighting the British and funding the American Revolution.

2. Empty Stomachs (Famine)

Terrible weather destroyed the harvest. Bread prices skyrocketed. People were starving.

3. Full Minds (The Enlightenment)

Thinkers asked:
Why should a King rule
Why aren't we all equal?

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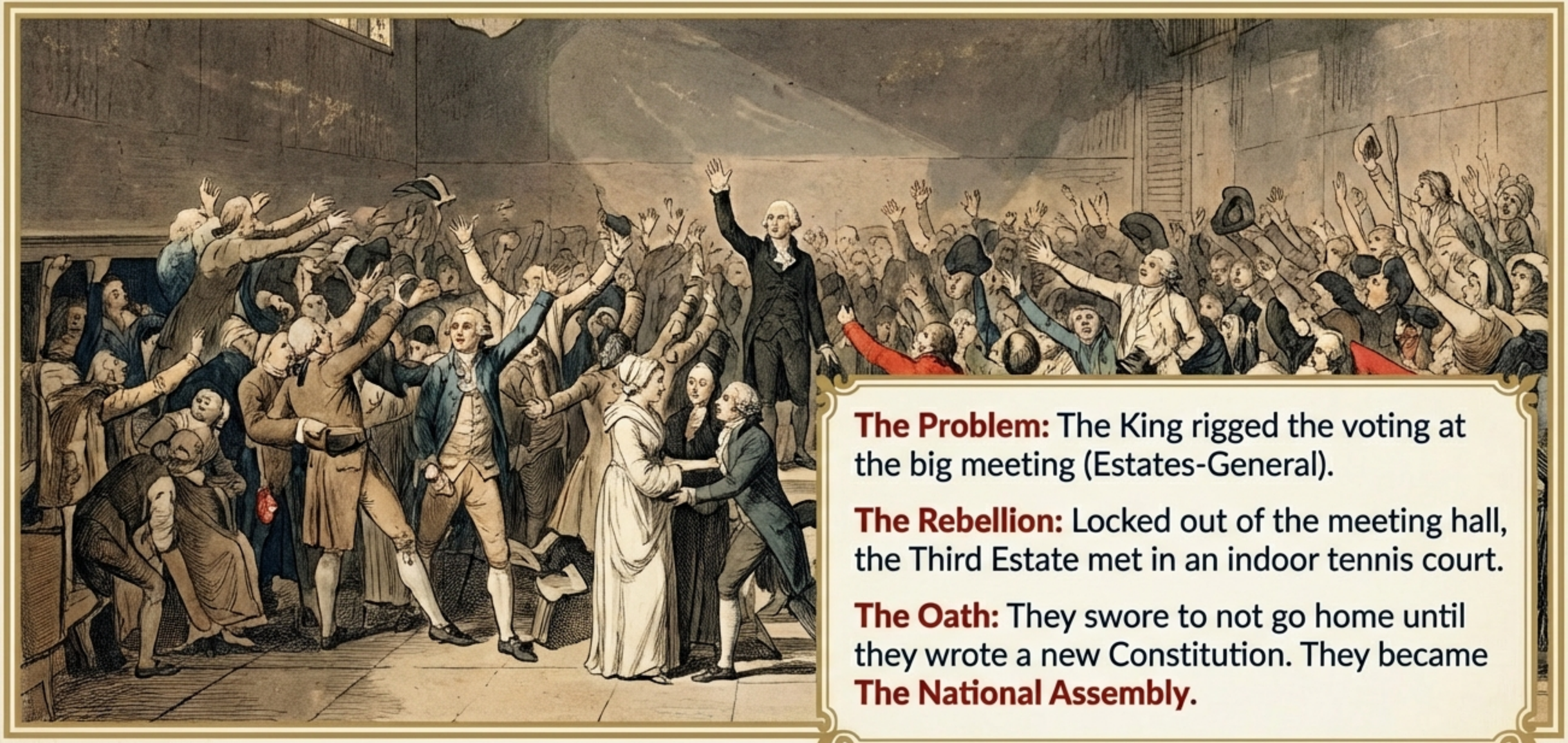
Act II: The Spark (1789)



The Problem: The King rigged the voting at the big meeting (Estates-General).

The Rebellion: Locked out of the meeting hall, the Third Estate met in an indoor tennis court.

The Oath: They swore to not go home until they wrote a new Constitution. They became **The National Assembly.**

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Storming the Bastille (July 14, 1789)

The people of Paris needed gunpowder to defend themselves against the King's soldiers. They attacked the Bastille—a prison that symbolized the King's tyranny.
After hours of fighting, the prison fell. This was the start of the violence.

Today, July 14 is France's Independence Day ("Bastille Day").

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The Women's March on Versailles

October 1789: Mothers demanding bread marched 12 miles in the rain to the King's palace.

The Demand: They forced the King and Queen to leave their luxury in Versailles and move back to Paris.

The Result: The King was no longer the master; he was now a prisoner of his own people.

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Act III: Writing the Rules of Freedom

Core Values

- **Liberty, Equality, Fraternity**
- The end of Feudalism (no more lords and serfs).
- Freedom of Speech and Religion.
- Liberty, Property, Safety, and Resistance to Oppression.

"Men are born and remain free and equal in rights."

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Did “Equality” Include Everyone?

The “Rights of Man” left out half the population: Women.

Olympe de Gouges wrote the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman* in 1791. She argued: “Woman is born free and remains equal to man in rights.”

Tragic Outcome: The men of the Revolution did not listen. She was executed for her ideas.

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The Revolution Splits

The Girondins (Moderates)

They wanted a Republic but feared mob violence. Wanted slow, legal change.

The Jacobins (Radicals)

Led by Maximilien Robespierre. They wanted big changes NOW. They believed the King had to die for the Revolution to live.

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The Death of the King

- **The Betrayal:** King Louis XVI tried to escape France in disguise but was caught.
- **The Trial:** He was tried for treason against the nation. The verdict was death.
- **January 21, 1793:** “Citizen Louis Capet” was executed. The Monarchy was dead. France was now a Republic.

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Act IV: The Reign of Terror (1793–1794)

Surrounded by enemies, the government panicked.

- **The Leader:** Robespierre led the "Committee of Public Safety." He ruled through fear.
- **The Law of Suspects:** You could be arrested for anything—complaining about bread, not smiling enough, or using the wrong greeting.
- **The Toll:** 40,000 people were executed, including the Queen.

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A World Turned Upside Down

The Jacobins wanted to erase the past entirely.

New Time: They restarted the calendar. 1792 became "Year One." Weeks were 10 days long to eliminate Sundays.

New Religion: Churches were closed. Notre Dame was renamed the "**Temple of Reason.**"

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The Terror Eats Its Own

The violence spiraled out of control. Robespierre executed his own friends for suggesting the killing should stop.

- **The Thermidorian Reaction:** In July 1794, the people had enough. They turned on Robespierre.
- **The End:** Robespierre was arrested and guillotined. The Reign of Terror was over.

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The Directory: Five Men and a Mess

1795–1799: A new government of five leaders called **The Directory**. They were weak and corrupt. The economy was still in ruins. The people were still hungry. France needed a hero.

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Act V: Enter Napoleon Bonaparte

Napoleon was a famous young general who had won incredible battles.

1799: He returned to Paris and seized power (The Coup of 18 Brumaire). He declared himself "First Consul."

The Revolution was over. The Age of Napoleon had begun.

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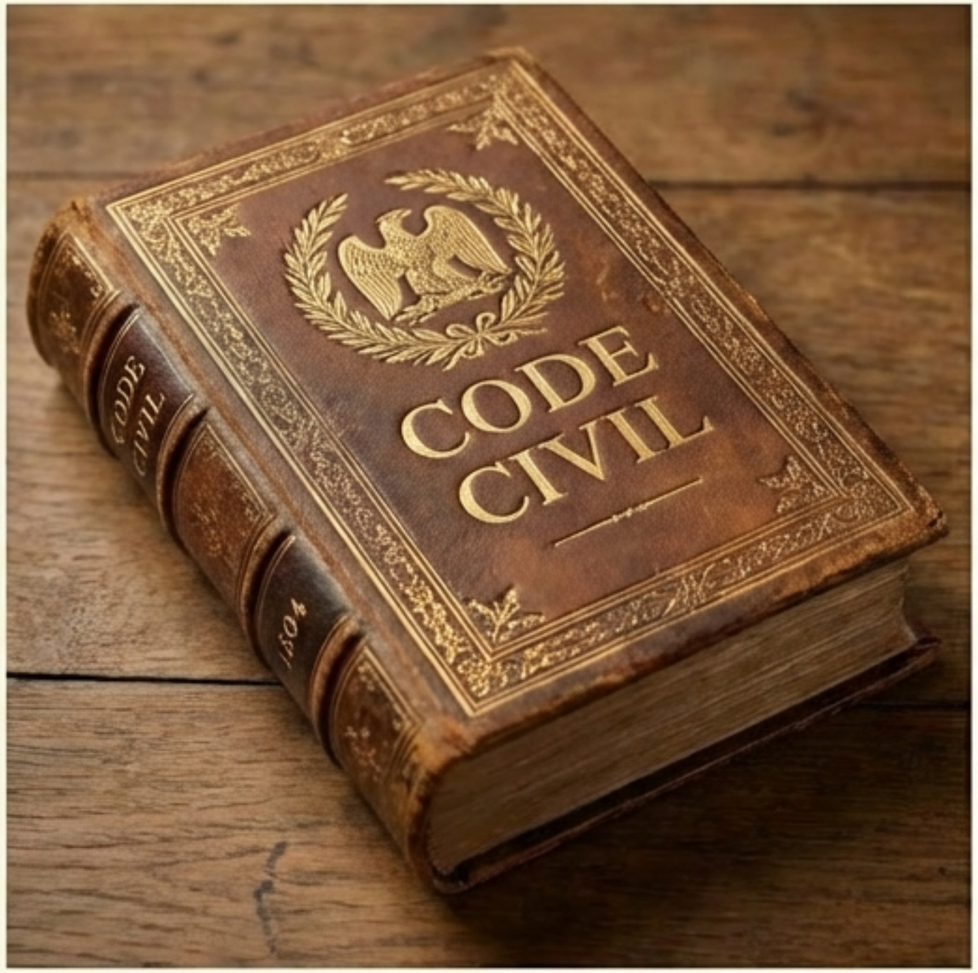
Did the Revolution Survive Napoleon?



Napoleon became an Emperor (a new King), but he kept some Revolutionary ideas:

The Napoleonic Code: One set of laws for everyone. No special privileges for nobles.

Meritocracy: You got a job because you were good at it, not because of your family name.

Education: He built new schools (*Lycées*) to train citizens.

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The Revolution's Global Legacy

Democracy: Proved people could overthrow tyranny.

Human Rights: Inspired the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Nationalism: Created deep pride in one's country (and the National Anthem).

Symbols: The Tricolor (Blue, White, Red) became the colors of freedom.

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Liberty, Equality, Fraternity

The motto—*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*—is still the motto of France today.

The Lesson: The Revolution showed us the power of hope, but also the danger of extremism. It reminds us that freedom is precious and hard-won.

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Comprehension Check

1. Who paid the most taxes in the “Three Estates” system?
2. What was the name of the prison stormed on July 14, 1789?
3. What pledge did the National Assembly take in a tennis court?
4. Who marched to Versailles to demand bread?
5. What document declared that “Men are born and remain free”?
6. Who was the radical leader of the “Reign of Terror”?
7. What machine was used for executions?
8. Which woman wrote the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman*?
9. What general seized power in 1799?
10. What are the three words of the Revolution’s motto?

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