

Lecture 2: The Outbreak of the French Revolution: 1789

1. Introduction

In our previous lecture, we explored the long-term and immediate causes that led to the French Revolution. In this second lecture, we will focus on the critical events of 1789, the year the French Revolution began in earnest. This year marked a turning point in French history, with the collapse of the Old Regime and the birth of a new political order.

2. The Estates-General of 1789

Background

The Estates-General was an assembly representing the three estates of French society: the clergy (First Estate), the nobility (Second Estate), and the commoners (Third Estate). It was last convened in 1614, and its reassembly in 1789 was a response to the dire financial crisis and the king's inability to push through tax reforms.

The Convening of the Estates-General

- **Date:** The Estates-General was convened by King Louis XVI on May 5, 1789, at the Palace of Versailles.
- **Representation:** Each estate had its own representatives, with the Third Estate having the most representatives due to the sheer size of the population it represented.
- **Voting System:** A critical issue was the voting procedure. Traditionally, each estate voted separately, and the First and Second Estates often outvoted the Third. However, the Third Estate demanded that votes be counted by head, which would give them more influence.

The Deadlock

The Estates-General quickly reached an impasse over the voting system. The Third Estate, frustrated by the refusal of the king and the privileged estates to meet their demands, took matters into their own hands.

3. The Formation of the National Assembly

Declaration of the National Assembly

- **June 17, 1789:** The Third Estate declared itself the National Assembly, claiming to represent the will of the French nation. This was a bold and revolutionary step, as they effectively bypassed the traditional structure of the Estates-General.

The Tennis Court Oath

- **June 20, 1789:** After being locked out of their meeting hall, the National Assembly met on a tennis court at Versailles. There, they swore the famous Tennis Court Oath, vowing not to disband until they had drafted a new constitution for France. This was a direct challenge to royal authority and signaled the growing power of the people.

Royal Response

King Louis XVI initially attempted to resist the formation of the National Assembly, but as support for it grew, including from some members of the clergy and nobility, he was forced to recognize it on June 27, 1789.

4. The Fall of the Bastille

Background

The Bastille was a fortress-prison in Paris that had become a symbol of the tyranny of the Old Regime. Although it only held a few prisoners by 1789, it was still a potent symbol of royal oppression.

The Storming of the Bastille

- **July 14, 1789:** Tensions in Paris were high due to economic hardship, political uncertainty, and rumors that the king was planning to use military force against the National Assembly. In response, a crowd of Parisians stormed the Bastille to seize weapons and ammunition. The fall of the Bastille was a pivotal event in the Revolution, symbolizing the end of royal authority and the power of the people.

Aftermath

The storming of the Bastille had profound consequences:

- **Louis XVI's Reaction:** The king was forced to acknowledge the power of the revolutionary forces. He withdrew troops from Paris and accepted the establishment of the National Guard, a citizen militia led by the Marquis de Lafayette.
- **The Great Fear:** In the countryside, rumors of aristocratic plots led to widespread panic and peasant uprisings known as the "Great Fear." Peasants attacked manor houses, destroyed feudal records, and sought to eliminate all remnants of the feudal system.

5. The Abolition of Feudalism and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen

The Night of August 4, 1789

In response to the widespread unrest, the National Assembly took dramatic action:

- **Abolition of Feudal Privileges:** On the night of August 4, 1789, the National Assembly abolished feudal privileges, effectively dismantling the feudal system in France. This included the elimination of seigneurial rights, tithes, and other forms of feudal oppression.

The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen

- **August 26, 1789:** The National Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, a fundamental document that laid out the principles of the Revolution. It proclaimed the equality of all men, the sovereignty of the people, and the inviolability of basic human rights, including liberty, property, and security.

Significance

The Declaration was heavily influenced by Enlightenment ideas and the American Declaration of Independence. It became the foundation of the new French political order and inspired revolutionary movements around the world.

6. The March on Versailles

Background

Despite the revolutionary changes, economic conditions in France remained dire. Bread prices continued to rise, and the common people were growing increasingly discontented.

The Women's March on Versailles

- **October 5-6, 1789:** Thousands of Parisian women, angered by the high cost of bread and rumors that the king was hoarding grain, marched to Versailles. They demanded bread and insisted that the royal family move to Paris, where they could be more closely watched by the people.

The Outcome

- **Royal Family Relocates:** The king and his family were forced to move to the Tuileries Palace in Paris. This event marked the end of the king's independence and his effective house arrest by the revolutionary forces.

7. Conclusion

The events of 1789 were transformative, marking the collapse of the Old Regime and the birth of a new era in French history. The formation of the National Assembly, the fall of the Bastille, the abolition of feudalism, and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen all signaled the end of absolute monarchy and the rise of popular sovereignty. However, the Revolution was far from over, and the coming years would see further turmoil and conflict.