

# Vive le France!

The French government was all too happy to help the American colonists gain their freedom from Great Britain, but not because they agreed with the ideas. While the French were sending supplies to colonists, they were brutally imprisoning all who spoke out against the government and taxing the poor people to the point that many of them were starving. By supporting the colonists with their struggle, little did King Louis XVI know that he was also signing his own death sentence.

## Versailles

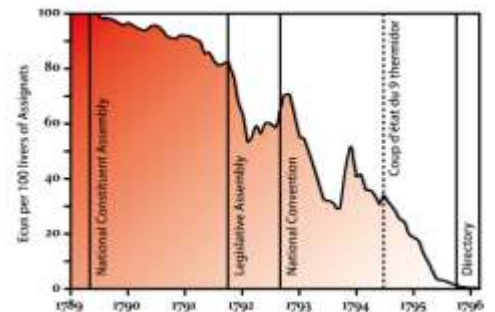
The French nobility lived uncommonly wealthy lives, even by the standards of other kings and nobles in European powers. France was one of the few monarchies left in Europe that remained connected to the Roman Catholic Church. The close connection between the Vatican and Paris gave power to nobles and clergy members alike in 18<sup>th</sup> century France. The best example of this came when King Louis XIV decided to take his summer home in Versailles, and remodel it.

Versailles cost the crown millions of dollars, which would have been \$2 billion in modern money, and the way it was paid for was by taxes on the peasants. The building alone at Versailles is 51,000 square meters, which is the same size as 13 football fields. The building has over 2000 windows, and 2000 acres of gardens. Since it was all paid for by French taxes, the people came to see the French king as being out of touch with the common people, and began to want a change.



## Financial Collapse

In 1790's France, the ideas of philosophers like Rousseau and Voltaire would inspire a revolution, but unfortunately the revolution would not turn out as well as it did for the American colonies. The French monarchy had spent so much money that the country was on the brink of ruin, and nobody could agree what to do about it. Rather than try something, Louis XVI continued to change advisors but not do anything about the problem. The revolution began in the national assembly where the representatives, led by Maximilien Robespierre and other lawyers, took control of the French government. One of the first events of the French revolution was the storming of the Bastille, where political prisoners were kept. Men



So much money was printed during the time of the French Revolution, that the value continued to drop. This occurrence, known as inflation, makes it so people's money is basically worthless. The graph above shows how many Ecu's you could buy with 100 Assignats (like dollars)

like Voltaire were sent to the Bastille for speaking out against the French King, and it became a symbol of the stripping of the French people's rights by the monarchy.

## Madame Guillotine

When Robespierre's party took over control of France, he quickly began to execute people. Among the first people to be executed were the French King and Queen. Robespierre didn't really believe that they needed to die because they were bad people, but he also didn't want anyone to try to set up the monarchy again, so he argued that they had to be killed.

Normally, nobility had the option of being executed by having their head cut off by a sword, but with so many enemies of the new government, the new French government needed to come up with a new execution method. The solution was the guillotine.



While Robespierre and others initially used the same arguments made by men like Voltaire and Rousseau, they quickly began to aggressively execute people who spoke out against the revolution. The time when Robespierre shifted the government into a violent dictatorship that ruthlessly sought out anyone against the

revolution was called the Reign of Terror. Even though it only lasted about a year, it is estimated that somewhere between 15,000 and 50,000 people were executed by government officials during the Reign of Terror, many without trials. Nobody was safe in the French Revolution. The youngest victim of the guillotine was less than 12 years old, while the oldest was over 90. The Reign of Terror ended with the execution of Robespierre himself, also by guillotine.

## Napoleon Bonaparte

Napoleon was a general in the French army during the time of the French Revolution. He had been very successful and was popular with his soldiers. In 1799, Napoleon and other commanders in the army successfully overthrew the French government and established a dictatorship. Napoleon went on to build his power in France, and soon set out to conquer Europe. In the next 10 years, Napoleon went on to win many battles across Europe, establishing France as a major European power.

While in control, Napoleon re-established the nobility which had been ended during the French Revolution and started giving titles and land to many of his loyal friends and family members. Napoleon was finally beaten in 1814 when four countries joined together to fight against him and forced him to give up control of France. After less than a year of exile, Napoleon came back, and took control of France again. He was finally beaten for good by the British at the Battle of Waterloo, and spent the rest of his life in exile. Despite re-instituting the nobles in many cases to pay back favors to his friends, Napoleon also wrote a system of laws, known as the "Napoleonic Code" which forced many countries to give peasants equal protection under the law as nobility.

### Reading Comprehension Questions

1. What three things contributed to the beginning of the French Revolution?
2. What would Voltaire and Locke think about what Robespierre did?
3. What kind of government did Napoleon Bonaparte establish in France?

Write about it.

Pretend you are a French peasant and write a newspaper article about the beheading of Robespierre or Louis XVI