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The French Revolution, Politics, and the Modern Nation

by Vanessa Schwartz

Vanessa Schwartz is a professor of Art History, History, and Film at the University of Southern California. As a historian she regularly incorporates aspects of visual culture into her research. The excerpt below from her book, The French Revolution: A Very Short Introduction, provides an overview of the events preceding and at the inception of the French Revolution.

Secondary Source:

In the late eighteenth century—an era of revolutionary **upheaval**—France was not alone. Between 1787 and 1789, revolts in the Dutch Republic, the Austrian Netherlands, and Poland also erupted in the name of liberty and equality. The United States, aided by French money and troops, had only recently declared its own independence from its mother country, England. But what made the French case so **compelling** was not simply that France was the most populous European state but also the wealthiest, a status on display day and night at the court in Versailles, alight with fireworks and glittering festivities hosted by the young queen, Austrian-born Marie Antoinette. The magnificent fountains at Versailles, complete with **gilded** statues of the king as Apollo, would soon stop flowing as the monarchy and its opulence came crashing to a halt. . . .

In the **tempestuous** summer of 1789, the relation between people and king in France changed. The overall economic health of the nation hovered in near crisis by virtue of a failure to reform the tax-collection system. French support for the American **insurgents** helped empty the state coffers, and a poor harvest in 1788 resulted in a food shortage in a kingdom used to relative **abundance**. The appeals for help from the king to the citizenry eventually transformed into complaints against him. Unable to solve the problem of the debt on his own, the king had earlier tried to reform the state by hand-picking a group called the Assembly of Notables. They refused to help. Instead they demanded that the king call the consultative body known as the Estates General, which had not met for 175 years. Although

Glossary:

upheaval: disturbance

compelling: significant

gilded: covered in gold leaf

tempestuous: turbulent;
stormy

insurgents: people
participating in a revolution

abundance: plenty

continued on next page

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The French Revolution, Politics, and the Modern Nation *continued*

that body represented the feudal social order of estates (the clergy: first estate; the nobility: second, and everyone else: third), it would, by the summer of 1789, **morph** into the body calling itself the National Assembly. By taking an oath on a tennis court when locked out of their regular meeting place, they swore they would not **disband** until they found the words to proclaim their authority by writing a constitution.

Other important official declarations soon followed, such as the abolition of the feudal regime in a night of deliriously enlightened **self-abnegation** when the deputies gave up their feudal privileges such as tax exemptions and **seigniorial** dues. Serfdom was thus ended for those peasants still tied to the land, and equality of opportunity, talent, and merit, rather than birth, would **henceforth** determine one's work and rank. This **meritocracy** would soon have a **flamboyant** example in the person of Napoleon Bonaparte, who also thrived on creating institutions and symbols. But first they needed the words. . . .

The question of applying the Declaration of the Rights of Man to half of the population, namely women, was also debated during the Revolution, but the results were far more mixed. On the one hand, women's political activity exploded during the Revolution. They forced the course of the revolution to the *Left* when, in October 1789, they marched on Versailles and demanded the royal family return to Paris. Many outspoken supporters of women's rights, both female (Olympe de Gouges) and male (Condorcet), met untimely deaths as "enemies of the Revolution." Although women in France would wait a remarkably long time for the most fundamental of rights, including the vote (granted only in 1944), feminist connections to claims for human rights emerged at the start of the modern era in France.

The young noble and friend of General Lafayette, Mathieu, the Duke de Montmorency, who had fought in the American war, exclaimed about the Declaration, "Let us follow the example of the United States: they have set a great example in the new hemisphere; let us give one to the universe." . . . The Declaration of the Rights of

Glossary:

morph: transform

disband: separate

self-abnegation: the denial of oneself

seigniorial: relating to a seignior, or a feudal lord

henceforth: from this moment on

meritocracy: a government comprised of people chosen to lead based on their individual abilities

flamboyant: lively

continued on next page

The French Revolution, Politics, and the Modern Nation *continued*

Man and Citizen also proclaimed freedom of the press and of religion, equality in taxation, and equality before the law.

The Revolution thus wrought fundamental changes to the long-standing French way of life. Whereas the American colonists had broken free from England, the challenge of the French Revolution was to reorder society from within. If the Revolution could succeed in France, its supporters also held firmly to the notion that it should, could, and would succeed everywhere. Thus, simplifying the meaning of the Revolution became part of its fundamental conceptualization, hence the importance in having a slogan: “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity.”

Glossary: