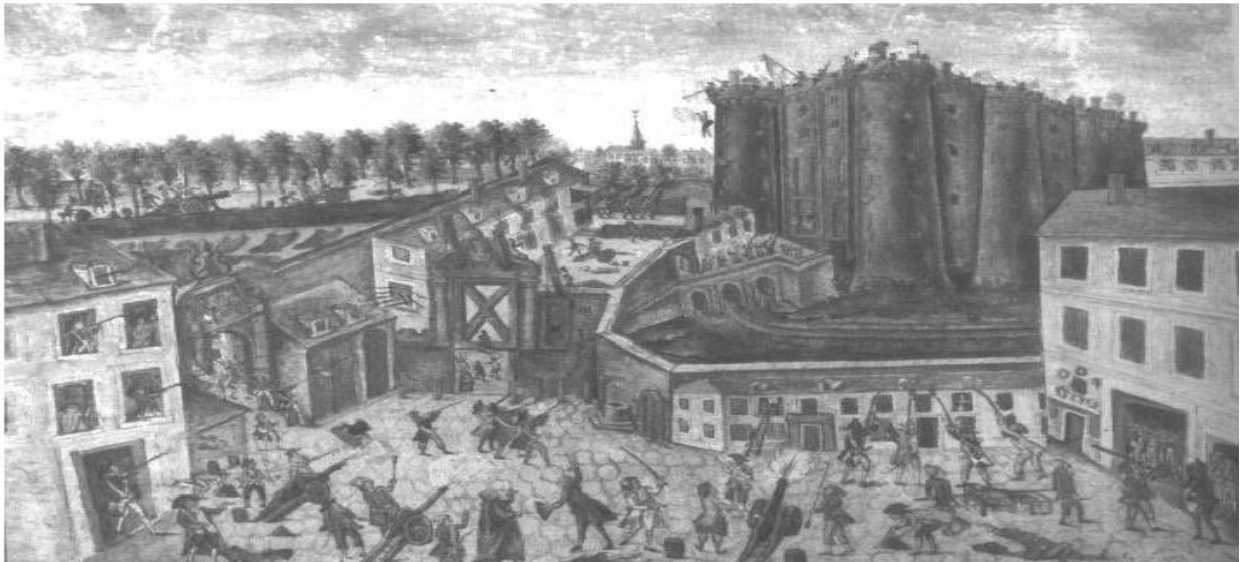


France: A Prison Falls and a Revolution Begins

In the year 1789, France was suffering from a severe economic crisis. King Louis XVI decided he had to raise taxes in order to finance the operation of the government. To do this, he called a meeting of the Estates General, the French parliament. The organization of the parliament revealed the basic inequality of French government. The parliament was divided into three sections, or estates. The First and Second Estates consisted of high-ranking clergy and nobles. Together, these two estates stood for what has been called the Old Regime—the system of injustice and privilege that led to revolution. These classes, although rich and influential, were a small minority of the population, and they paid few taxes. The Third Estate consisted of professional people, peasants, laborers, and minor clergy. They represented 98 percent of the population. But they had little voice in political decisions, and most of them paid high taxes.

The First and Second Estates each had 300 representatives in the Estates General. The Third Estate had 600. Yet each estate had only one vote when it came time to vote on a resolution. This meant that the First and Second Estates could override the Third Estate by a margin of two to one. Determined to end the oppression under which the majority of the French people lived, the representatives of the Third Estate proposed that all three estates meet together and decide matters as one group. This would give those seeking reforms an edge in passing needed legislation. When the king denied their request, the members of the Third Estate left the Estates General and set up a new government. They called this body the National Assembly. The king then threatened to arrest the leaders of the assembly, and riots broke out all over France.

On July 14, 1789, a city mob joined by members of the Parisian militia seized the Bastille. The Bastille was the notorious prison where French kings kept political enemies. People were imprisoned in the Bastille for long periods of time without any legal process having taken place. The July 14 revolutionaries freed the Bastille's prisoners and armed themselves with the weapons stored there. This was the beginning of the revolution that eventually overthrew the Old Regime.



The artist who created this picture lived at the time, and perhaps witnessed the event. The illustration shows citizens fighting in the streets to bring down the imposing fortress.

Every July 14, the French people celebrate Bastille Day as a national holiday. For them, it has the historic and emotional importance that July 4 has for United States Citizens.

Review Questions

1. How did the Estates General illustrate the inequality of the French government?
2. Why was the National Assembly created?
3. How does the illustration show the significance of the attack on the Bastille?
4. If you were a French citizen how do you think you would respond to the city mob? Would you join? Explain.