**The Fall of the Bastille**

**What was the Bastille?**

The Bastille was a medieval fortress, a castle in Paris. It was a symbol of royal power, and inside were prisoners of the King. They were there for crimes such as…

**What happened in 1789?**

On the 14th July 1789, the rebels in Paris attacked the prison and forced the guards to surrender. They released the prisoners inside, and together they took hold of the area around the prison. Although the king’s soldiers surrounded the city, he was advised that they might not be willing to shoot the rebels. In order to prevent an embarrassing loss, he ordered his troops to pull back, and the rebels kept control of the city.

**Why was it important?**

The fall of the Bastille is considered the first outbreak of violence of the French Revolution. Tension had been building for some months, so it isn’t the ‘beginning’ of the Revolution, rather the ‘end of the beginning’ of the Revolution.

There were only 7 prisoners inside the Bastille when they were released, so it didn’t have a big impact on helping the rebels. However, it was very symbolic – the people of Paris attacked the castle, and released those who had been imprisoned by the ‘tyrant king’. It was a symbol of overpowering the king that was so important.

**The National Assembly**

**How was it formed?**

Jacques Necker, the Finance Minister, tried to solve the financial problems caused by Louis in 1789. He demanded that the Estates-General would meet, and also stated that the Third Estate would now be allowed double the amount of representatives, as they made up a significant majority of the general public. Lists of grievances (problems to bring to the King) were written up, and people felt hopeful about the meeting.

However, when the Estates-General met in May 1789 it was a big disappointment. It looked as though nothing would change, and this went on for six weeks during which time bread prices became very expensive. At the beginning of June the Third Estate protested by breaking away from the meeting, and inviting the First and Second Estates to join them. Three days later, a handful of clergymen (Second Estate) joined them, and they decided to give themselves a new name: the National Assembly.

**Why was it important?**

The National Assembly’s first move was to cancel and re-authorise all taxes. This made a clear statement that the National Assembly had taken power from the king in the name of France. They gathered at an indoor tennis court on 20th June 1789, and took an oath to stay until they had introduced a new constitution (set of rules) for how France was to be run.

The king ordered the National Assembly to end and for everyone to join their own estates, but they refused, and, seeing the king’s weakness, more and more people from all estates joined the National Assembly. The king dismissed Necker, and the people of Paris were outraged. They began ransacking the city, looking for weapons and flour.

**The Declaration of the Rights of Man**

**What was happening at the time?**

The National Assembly had been working on a new constitution (set of rules) for how France should be run. In the summer of 1789 there was fear in the countryside that the country was falling apart. To try and stop the disruption some of the nobles (First Estate) offered to abolish some of the privileges of the wealthy, and to introduce equal taxes to make it fairer for the poor. This was very popular and calmed down the fears and disruption in the countryside.

**What was it?**

On the 26th August 1789 the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen was published. The Declaration set out a series of rights that all people were entitled to, including: liberty (freedom), property, security, resistance to oppression, equality, freedom of speech and the answerability of the government to the citizens. One of the most famous lines is: ‘Men are born, and always continue, free, and equal in respect of their rights.’ The aim was to ensure equality for all men. The Declaration was intended to work alongside a monarchy, but ensure that the people were given a fair share of power.

**Why was it important?**

Unlike the English Bill of Rights, signed after the Glorious Revolution in 1688, which focused on English rights, the Declaration stated a set of human rights for all, not only the French, to enjoy. Since 1789 every constitution-maker has felt obliged to consider the Declaration and whether to create one of their own. It had a significant impact on the United Nations’ Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the European Convention on Human Rights in 1953.

**The March on Versailles**

**Why were people worried?**

The king did not want to accept the Declaration put forward by the Revolutionaries. In Paris the Revolution had brought about a free press, meaning any news was allowed to be published without being checked and cut down first. This reported that the king was gathering troops of soldiers around Versailles, ready for an attempt to reclaim power.

**What happened?**

Women in the marketplaces of Paris were rioting over the high price of bread on the morning of the 5th October 1789. Their activities became intertwined with the Revolutionaries’, and they gathered more women. Eventually a mob of thousands of women ransacked the armoury for weapons, and marched to Versailles Palace to see the king.

They broke into the palace and threatened the life of the queen. They demanded that the royal family come with them to Paris, and on 6th October 1789, the king did so, accompanied by the triumphant women. The Assembly followed a few days later.

**Why was it important?**

These events ended the king’s independence and signified the change of power in France. The old order had been replaced by the common people (Third Estate).

**The Flight to Varennes**

**Why did the king run away?**

During 1790 the Revolutionaries had made significant changes to the Church. They decided that, like the rest of society, the Church needed to be reformed, and insisted that the people should vote for the priests and clergymen they wanted. They then had to swear an ‘oath of obedience’ to the Revolution, and everyone was encouraged to go and receive communion from one of these new ‘constitutional’ priests. Although the king publicly announced his support for this, secretly he wasn’t following the new rules and this became public knowledge by spring 1791. There were big protests around the king’s palace, and the royal family decided it was safest to run away.

**What happened?**

On the night of the 20th June 1791 the king and his family slipped away, heading for Austria where Queen Marie-Antoinette’s brother was the emperor. The king left behind him a public letter, denouncing (criticising) the Revolution. They managed to make it to a town called Varennes, in disguise as peasants. However, the king was recognised from his banknote picture, and they were captured and brought back to Paris in disgrace.

**Why was it important?**

Until this point most people wanted to keep the monarchy, but change the political system to make it fairer. After his attempt to run away, known as his Flight to Varennes, there were calls for a Republic (a country without a monarchy), and for Louis to be ‘dethroned’. Some people claimed that the king had been kidnapped. The National Assembly decided that they needed to get things back to normal as quickly as possible. They finished writing the constitution, and made some changes that the king would like. He accepted it, and they reinstated him as the monarch. The National Assembly came to an end, and the new Legislative Assembly was created.

**The Monarchy is overthrown**

**War**

Some other European monarchs were very concerned about the Revolution going on in France. They didn’t want the ideas to spread to their own country, and so the Emperors of Prussia and Austria threatened war on France. Some of the Revolutionaries feared that the French army wasn’t strong enough to win. The king shared this view, but saw it as an opportunity to be rescued, and therefore declared war on the Emperors on the 20th April 1792.

**Why was it important?**

The war made everyone take sides. This meant that anyone who was against the war was seen as a traitor to the Revolution, and the king himself was seen as the greatest traitor, as he wanted France to lose and to be rescued. The war looked like it might be lost, so National Guard volunteers (Revolutionary soldiers) were called upon to reinforce the lines. The Prussian commander said he would destroy Paris if the king was harmed, which confirmed the view that he was a traitor. On the 10th August Revolutionaries attacked the royal palace, voted to suspend the monarchy, and drew up a republican constitution.

**The September Massacres**

**What happened?**

The overthrow of the monarchy left Paris panicked. The Revolutionaries arrested people in a frenzy, filling the prisons with people who might be against them. As volunteers were called up to fight in the war against Prussia, there were fears that the prisoners might break out and escape. On the 2nd September 1792 the Prussians captured the French town of Verdun, frightened Revolutionaries broke into the prisons and massacred the prisoners, many of them priests. Over the next four days, around 1,400 people were killed.

**Why was it important?**

Jean-Paul Marat, a journalist, tried to encourage the rest of France to join in with the violence, but most people were horrified by the killings. People in Paris now lived in fear that more massacres would happen again.

**The execution of King Louis XVI**

**What happened?**

The French began to win victories in the war, and began to confidently offer to support anyone wishing to ‘recover their liberty’ (freedom). The Revolutionaries say they could not be calm ‘until Europe, all of Europe, is in flames’. It was decided that Louis XVI should be put on trial. Some people wanted to grant him clemency (forgiveness). He went to court in December 1792 and was found guilty. On the 21st January 1793 Louis was publicly executed.

**What did it lead to?**

A civil war broke out between the Revolutionaries and those dedicated to returning power to the sons of the martyred king. Even within the Revolutionaries there were different factions (groups). First, there were the Girondins. They were moderate Revolutionaries, and didn’t like the violence of the September massacres. They wanted a more peaceful revolution, and had argued to keep the king. The massacres had been carried out by the ‘sansculottes’ (the name meant ‘without breeches’ – the trousers worn by the rich), who were a particularly violent. Finally the Jacobins, who decided the best policy was to agree with the sansculottes and do as they demanded.

By the end of May 1793, the Jacobins had decided that the Girondins were causing problems for the Revolution by asking too many questions and needed to be silenced. On the 2nd June 1793, 29 Girondins were arrested in what is known as the ‘Purge of the Girondins’. This ‘terror’ would continue over the coming year.