The French Revolution: Crash Course European History #21

Crash Course: European History
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Hi I'm John Green and this is Crash Course European History.

It's 1789 and Europe has been through an endless number of wars. Territory has changed hands, hundreds of thousands of people have died, and crop yields have been bad lately.

War is bad for agriculture, for one thing, but also the weather hasn't been too cooperative. Reformers across the Dutch states and the Habsburg Netherlands want to be more like the new United States, while Poles are demanding that the partition of their country be undone. And one kingdom had emerged a hero from all the overseas revolutions because of its support for the rebels in the thirteen North American colonies.

France has stood up for liberty and democracy and fraternity--in North America, anyway. At home, it remained an absolute monarchy, and was virtually bankrupt from all the warring. Its countryside was full of beggars--as was much of the European countryside even as aristocrats grew ever wealthier.

And the poor and middle-class paid virtually all the tax collected to support these ceaseless wars. All of which is to say that in 1789, France--the strongest and most populous country on the continent--was in crisis. [Intro] In 1789 Louis XVI ruled France. He loved to hunt and tinker with mechanical objects, especially locks.

His wife Marie Antoinette was the daughter of Maria Theresa of the Habsburg Empire and the sister of Joseph II, its current ruler. In a world where the marriage of two powerful royal families had long been seen as key to stability and prosperity, what could go wrong? Marie Antoinette was a big spender who had trouble relating to the poor of which France had many.

As bad harvests made the price of bread soar, more families couldn't afford to eat, or else were eating bread that was cut with up to 50% sawdust. In response to unaffordable bread, Marie-Antoinette reportedly said, "Qu'ils mangent de la brioche," which is a great opportunity to trot out my amazing French accent. And also, to talk about brioche, which is in the center of the world today.

IIn English, the line is usually translated "let them eat cake," but as you can see, brioche isn't cake exactly. It's just a different fancier more delicious kind of bread. Mmm!

It's delicious. Fluffy, eggy, quite light. I don't understand why the peasants couldn't just eat this stuff...

Stan says I'm hopelessly out of touch, to which I say, can I have some more of that brioche? At any rate, France as a whole was broke. Now, its reform-minded ministers tried to revise the tax system so that the church and the aristocracy would have to pay at least some taxes.

But you'll recall, there was a group of appellate judges, the Parlement, who had to register royal decrees, and they refused to register this one. Bankers, meanwhile, refused to provide the Crown with additional loans. Which led to a proper financial crisis.

Let's go to the Thought Bubble. 1. In response to this crisis, Louis XVI was forced to summon the Estates-General 2. —that is, a group of representatives of the clergy (the first estate), 3. the aristocracy (second estate), 4. and ordinary people (third estate). 5. In cities, towns, and villages across the kingdom, people met to set out their grievances in cashiers or register books 6. for their representatives to take to this historic meeting. 7.

Meanwhile, discontent was rising as Marie-Antoinette played at being a shepherdess 8. in a pretend farm that was built for her on the grounds of Versailles 9. so she could imbibe the air of nature and play at the work so many were forced to do. 10. On May 5, 1789 members of the Estates-General paraded in great ceremony through Versailles to begin deliberations. 11. Louis XVI wrote of the events that day "Nothing happened.

Went hunting." 12. Which just goes to show you that history is about perspective. 13. Members of the Third Estate, meanwhile, immediately protested that their one vote as a group would always be beaten by the two votes of the first two estates. 14.

So members of the third estate retreated to a nearby tennis court, declaring themselves the National Assembly 15. and claiming to represent all French people better than the Estates General did. 16. These representatives swore (in the so-called Tennis Court Oath) that they would not disband until they had constructed a nation of individual citizens instead of a kingdom of servile subjects. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So, the National Assembly's moves toward enacting a reform program were backed by the muscle of ordinary people—many of them furious about injustice and poverty. On July 14, the people of Paris seized the Bastille fortress—a prison full of weapons and a symbol of the monarchy's ability to imprison anyone arbitrarily. And in the countryside peasants took over chateaux and destroyed aristocratic titles to land and peasant services.

Terrified aristocrats met on August 4, 1789, and surrendered their privileges as feudal lords. The National Assembly then elaborated in a series of decrees declaring feudal society had come to an end. That same month the Assembly passed the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen—a document that protected property, ensured trial by jury, and guaranteed free speech.

It read, in part: "Men are born and remain free and equal in rights." And that included freedom of religion. It's hard to overstate how radical a change that was from a France in which, just months earlier, peasants were seen as neither free nor equal, and Catholicism was the kingdom's official religion. On October 5, market women from Paris marched to Versailles in the so-called Women's March to bring the king and royal family to Paris, where they could be monitored by the people.

Although the family was unharmed, some members of the royal circle, including the queen's best friend, were violated, murdered, and mutilated. Their heads and genitals were displayed on pikes. And aristocrats began fleeing the country.

Critically, the Declaration of the Rights of Man also stated that the power of the monarch flowed not from some divinity, but from the nation. And to that end, the Assembly proceeded to draw up a constitution, making the monarchy a constitutional one. then in 1790, they adopted the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, ultimately confiscating church property and mandating the election of priests by their parishioners. And then in 1791, the royal family was like, "we should try to get out of here." And they tried to flee but were caught.

Meanwhile, war broke out between the revolutionary government in France and Austria and Prussia, who were intent on crushing the revolution and putting the royals back in full control. Partly because they, you know, had a vested interest. Their relatives were on the French throne, but also, as a general rule, monarchs like monarchy.

As the republic began to take shape, so did political parties. They arranged themselves in the assembly hall so that republicans, who wanted to do away with monarchs entirely, sat on the left and monarchists sat on the right. An array of others grouped themselves as parties across the hall.

And from this arrangement, we got the modern idea of politicians' ideas being left, center, or right. The Jacobin club, a rising political party, was to the left. But it soon broke into several factions that were on the center, left, and radical left of the political spectrum.

Ah, politics, where the left has a right and the right has a left and they both have centers that no one listens to. Amid these tremendous changes, women were claiming their rightful place as citizens to match the official expressions of equality and rights for all. In 1791, Olympe de Gouges, author and daughter of a butcher, published the Declaration of the Rights of Woman, stating explicitly women's equality with men.

Women participated in political clubs and successfully pushed for laws that ended men's power over the family and also ended the practice of men getting a larger percentage of inheritances than women. As war advanced, women also lobbied for the right to serve in the army. And was war ever advancing!

In 1792 the Parisian masses, threatened by the approach of foreign royal armies, took extreme action. They invaded the Parisian palace where the royal family lived—and forced new elections for a National Convention. Then in the fall of 1792, further violence produced the abolition of the French monarchy and a call for every other kingdom to do the same: "All governments are our enemies, all people our friends," the Edict of Fraternity read.

Once the Convention had declared France a republic, in January 1793, Louis XVI was executed after a narrow vote. A new instrument of execution called the guillotine carried out what would soon become a bloodbath against many supposed enemies of the people. Because it killed so swiftly and allegedly painlessly, the guillotine was considered an enlightened form of execution.

And that brings us to Maximilien Robespierre. With the king dead and the church legally abandoned, the Jacobins under Robespierre's leadership, committed the nation to a so-called reign of virtue and complete obedience to Rousseau's idea of the general will of the people—despite all those freedoms agreed upon in the Declaration of the Rights of Man. The Jacobins transformed culture: festivals celebrated patriotic virtue; churches were turned into temples of reason; dishware carried patriotic mottos; a new "rational" calendar was created; and clothing was in red, white, and blue—the colors of the revolutionary flag.

Meanwhile the Committee of Public Safety, with its Orwellian name and Orwellian mission, presided over the "Terror" in which people from all classes and walks of life—at least 40,000 of them—were executed in the name of supporting the nation through purges of enemies of the general will. Among these in the autumn of 1793 were Queen Marie-Antoinette, Olympe de Gouges, former mistresses of Louis XVI's grandfather, and other well-known women. Spies and traitors were said to be lurking everywhere, especially in women's political clubs and anywhere women congregated.

Women seen in public were said to be threats to the revolution. But as French soldiers began to win their wars abroad, people tired of revolutionary bloodshed and mounted an effective opposition. Counterrevolutionary uprisings in the Vendée region of France and activism by moderates led to the overthrow and execution of Robespierre and several of his closest allies.

And by 1795 new factions headed a conservative government called the Directory. It inspired the French army to spread revolution to other parts of Europe. That army was enthusiastic for good reason: the revolution's anti-aristocratic spirit allowed for ordinary soldiers to become officers—positions that were formerly allotted exclusively to noblemen.

One such commoner was named Napoleon Bonaparte. He was extraordinarily charismatics, not particularly short, and with other ambitious newcomers, took revolution across the low countries, German states, and even into Italy. But even without French armies advancing it,revolution was erupting.

During the French Revolution, Poles had revised their constitution, for instance, in 1791 and granted rights to urban people. But a far different outcome from that in France awaited: while the French pursued revolution, the other continental powers--Russia, Austria, and Prussia--finished divvying up Poland among themselves so that it no longer existed. But Enlightenment ideas of freedom continued to spread.

They spread in Spanish colonies in South America, and also in the rich French sugar colony of St. Domingue. The French Revolution, or maybe more properly, the French Revolutions helped people in Saint Domingue understand that they, too, could seek freedom.

And the ensuing Haitian Revolution inspired slave activism in other places, which you can learn much more about in an episode of Crash Course World History on that topic. So when we think about why The French Revolution is so important, one of the big reasons is that it consolidated the idea that the nation is composed of citizens. Mostly citizen men at first—a fraternity or brotherhood that replace a kingdom in which a monarch ruled his subjects.

And this was a huge change for Europe, and eventually the world, because it helped usher in the idea of nation-states, and the idea that the most important people within those nation-states are the citizens. And so enthusiasts for freedom flocked to France from all corners of Europe—if not in person then at least in their imaginations. "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive," wrote poet William Wordsworth. In contrast, opponents like the British statesman and thinker Edmund Burke deplored the rapid change and attacks on traditional institutions and the abandonment of accumulated wisdom from past ages.

Burke's theories launched conservative political ideology in the revolution's aftermath. And we should be clear that the revolution was extremely violent, and in many cases replaced poverty with poverty, and injustice with injustice. History, again, is as much about where you sit as it is about what happened.

But for the moment, however, revolutionary ferment remained alive, exemplified in the writings of English journalist Mary Wollstonecraft, who witnessed the revolution first-hand by going to Paris. She defended the quote "rights of man" in a 1791 book and in 1792 she published A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. This enduring work compared the women of her day to the aristocracy--little educated, simpering and ignorant.

Lacking any rational, developed skills, women in Wollstonecraft's formulation were, like aristocrats, conniving and manipulative instead of being forthright, skilled, and open like Emile in the eponymous Rousseau novel. To end this debased condition, women needed education and legal protection of their person and their property. That is, legal equality.

In the long run, the French Revolution had many important outcomes; as we've discussed, a nation formed by consensus of legally equal citizens came to replace a kingdom of subjects ruled by a king. The nation's bedrock was a set of values including the rule of law, the right of free speech, and the ownership of property. Rather than the nation's bedrock being a king, or a religion.

This idea of individual rights, which would later be called human rights, of course becomes extremely important in the 20th century and beyond. Yet in the French Revolution and in many other

revolutions, as we'll see, the nation in times of stress could jettison this consensus about the rule of law and rights and become dictatorial, searching out enemies within and relying on force instead of consensus building. After 1795, further big changes lay ahead for France and Europe as Napoleon Bonaparte came to play an outsized role on the world stage, and the new republic became a dictatorship once more.

But we'll get to that shortly. Thanks for watching. And yes, that was a Napoleon joke.