**Causes of the French Revolution**

In the 1780s, long-standing resentments against the French monarchy fueled anger throughout France. The source of the French people’s ill will could be found in the unequal structure of French government and society. Social Inequalities A social and political structure called the Old Order created inequalities in French society. Under the Old Order, the king was at the top, and three social groups called estates were under him. The First Estate was made up of the Roman Catholic clergy, which comprised about 1% of the population. They had held several privileges since the Middle Ages. For example, neither the clergy not the church had to pay taxes. In addition, the church owned 10% of the land, which produced vast sums of money in rents and fees. The Second Estate was made up of the nobility, which was less than 2% of the population. They controlled much of the country’s wealth, but, like the First Estate, they paid few taxes. Many members of the Second Estate help key positions in the government and military. They lived on country estates where peasants did all of the work and were forced to pay high fees and rents to the landowner. The Third Estate was the largest estate, comprising 97% of the population. Many peasants were miserably poor and had no hope for a better life.

**Influence of the American Revolution and Enlightenment**

While social inequalities were driving poor people toward revolt, new ideas from the Enlightenment were also inspiring the French Revolution. Many educated members of the bourgeoisie knew about the writings of the great Enlightenment philosophers John Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau. Members of the bourgeoisie also knew that Great Britain’s government limited the king’s power. More recently, they had learned that American colonists, inspired by Enlightenment ideas, had successfully rebelled against Britain’s king. Ideas from the Enlightenment like, Life, Liberty, and Property, inspired the French Revolution’s slogan: Liberte, egalite, fraternite, which means “Liberty, Equality, and Brotherhood.” Seeing how these ideas were transforming government Third Estate Third Second Estate ß First Estate and society in other countries, some of the bourgeoisie began to consider how these ideas might be used in France.

**Financial Crisis and Famine**

On the eve of the Revolution, France was in a state of financial crisis, severe economic problems that affected much of the country. France was deeply in debt. Over the previous centuries, they had borrowed huge sums of money to spend on wars, including the American Revolution. But the king and his court continued to spend lavishly, leading to even more borrowing and debt. Marie Antoinette was called “Madame Deficit,” making fun of how much money she lost gambling. Louis XVI further added fuel to the fire by dismissing financial ministers who tried to bring about reform. By the 1780s, this pattern of spending and borrowing had taken the country deeply into debt. By 1787 King Louis XVI was desperate for money. He tried to tax the Second Estate, but the nobles refused to pay. The king, incapable of the strong leadership the situation required, backed down. A year later the country faced bankruptcy. Half the taxes collected were needed just to pay the country’s debt. At the same time, nature was creating other economic problems. First, a hailstorm and a drought ruined the harvest. Then the winter of 1788 was the worst in 80 years. Frozen rivers prevented waterwheels from powering the mills that ground wheat into flour. Food and firewood were scarce and expensive. As hunger and cold made life wretched for thousands of French citizens, misery grew into anger. The country was broke, and people were hungry and angry. Eliminating the tax exemptions for the First and Second Estates could have helped the situation, but the clergy and the nobility resisted all such efforts.

**Events of the Revolution**

One of the first events of the Revolution was a meeting that nobility pressed Louis to call. The nobles wanted a meeting of the Estates-General, an assembly made up of the three estates, to approved new taxes on the Third Estate. Each of the three estates had always had only one vote in the Estates-General. Usually the First and Second Estates voted together, outvoting the Third Estate. Inspired by ideas of the Enlightenment, members of the Third Estate wanted to change how the Estates General worked in France. They voted to create the National Assembly, which would pass laws in the name of the French people. The National Assembly effectively eliminated the monarchy and was the first real act of the revolution. That National Assembly was different from the Estates General because it gave the power to the majority group in France, instead of the nobility and members of the Church. The National Assembly reformed France by eliminating the Estates System and creating the Declaration of the Rights of Man. The declaration outlines the ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity. A few days later, members of the third estate were locked out of their meeting room. They broke down a door to the tennis court at the palace of Versailles. They vowed to stay until they had a new constitution. This became known as the Tennis Court Oath. Some Nobles and members of the Clergy who favored reform also joined the Third Estate delegates.

Rumors began to spread that King Louis XVI was going to use the army to stop the uprising. In response, the people of France began to gather weapons and gunpowder. On July 14th, 1789 a group of citizens stormed the Bastille, a prison that also served as a weapons stockpile. The fall of the bastille became a great symbolic act of Revolution. Before long, the rebellion spread, causing a wave a senseless panic called the Great Fear. They feared that the king would punish them and end the Revolution. Violence spread across France during the Great Fear and angry mobs forced Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI to return to Paris from Versailles. It was the last time that the King and his wife would see Versailles.

Other countries in Europe were fearful of the ideas of the French Revolution spreading to their own countries. Austria and Prussia wanted France to go back to an absolute monarchy. In July 1792, they issued a declaration warning against harming the French monarchs and hinting that any such action would provoke war. In response, the Legislative Assembly declared war. Due to their disarrayed army, however, France was defeated. In the chaos, National assembly’s constitution was removed and a group called the Jacobins (radicals in France who wanted a Republic, not a Democracy), took control. The Jacobins were led by Maximilien Robespierre. Robespierre led as a dictator and used fear to control the people of France. His rule became known as the Reign of Terror. Robespierre killed anyone who opposed his ideas. Approximately 40,000 people were killed during the Reign of Terror. Robespierre was also responsible for the execution of King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette.

***Directions: Answer the questions below based on previous notes, as well as the reading above***

1. What wars did France participate in that depleted their treasury?

2. How did the ideology of divine right explain why previous French monarchs had no problem spending money?

3. What was Marie Antoinette’s nickname among the poor French and why?

4. What Estate paid the most taxes? Was this a problem? Why or why not?

5. Why didn’t any financial reforms pass? Who opposed them?

6. How did nature contribute to the economic problems?

7. Summarize the primary causes/events of the French Revolution in one paragraph.

8. Evaluate: Image that you were a French citizen during the Revolution. What aspects of the French Revolution would you support? Be sure to include how you would feel about the king, the actions of the third estate, the storming of the bastille, and Robespierre/Jacobins. This should be a longer response.