



Revolution: France
History – Junior Cert
Quick Notes

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The French Royal Family were unpopular during the 1780s as King Louis XVI was a poor leader and more interested in hunting than politics. Marie-Antoinette was unpopular because she was Austrian and domineering. Louis also believed in the 'Divine Right of Kings' which meant that he had absolute power over society in France. This was known as the ancien regime. French society was divided into three classes – the first estate comprised of the hierarchy, the second estate was made up of the nobility and the third estate consisted of everyone else and this category paid the majority of the taxes. The people who wanted to change the ancien regime system were inspired by writers of the Enlightenment. France was almost bankrupt at this time, so the only way Louis could raise money was by taxation. The Estates General was a group of representatives of the three estates which Louis developed to try raise money through taxation. The third estate rejected block voting (one vote per estate) and so they organised a mass walkout and declared themselves to be the National Assembly. They claimed to represent 80% of the people of France. In 1789, members of the assembly swore the Tennis Club Oath, promising that they would keep meeting until their demands were met. Before long, the estates general diminished and the National Assembly was in charge. On 4th July 1789, an angry mob stormed the Bastille, which was the most famous and most hated prison in France. Violence erupted throughout the country. On 4th August, the National Assembly abolished the feudal system and established a National Guard to protect the assembly. The national Assembly passed the Declaration of the Rights of man, which guaranteed rights of liberty, equality and fraternity. They also passed the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, which brought the church under state control. In June 1791, Louis and Marie-Antoinette tried to flee France but they were stopped at Varennes, 50 km from the Belgian border. In September 1791, France was declared a constitutional monarchy, which combined democracy and monarchy. In April 1792, the assembly voted to declare war on Austria and Poland. The Austrians won many early battles and were soon threatening Paris. The home of Louis and Marie was attacked by the Sans-Culottes (without breeches – tradesman and shopkeepers of Paris). They demanded that Louis be dethroned and France be declared a republic. Louis and Marie fled to the National Assembly building for safety. Later in 1792, the combined Austrian and Prussian army was defeated at the Battle of Valmy. The assembly was replaced by the National Convention. This convention contained two rival groups – the Jacobins and the Girondins. In September 1792, France was declared a republic and Louis lost his remaining power. Louis was found guilty for treason and so was

executed by guillotine on 21 January 1793. This began a wave of executions. Maximilien Robespierre was largely responsible for the execution of 40,000 people between June 1793 and July 1794. He triggered the war with Austria again and conscription was introduced meaning that all men aged between 18 and 25 were forced to join the army. Robespierre himself was executed on 10 August 1794 and this brought an end to the Reign of Terror. In November 1795, the Directory (five member committee that took over from the Convention) was attacked by a group of Royalists, who wanted to restore the monarchy. The Directory was protected by a French army battalion under the command of Napoleon Bonaparte. Napoleon was replaced by King Louis XVIII, the brother of Louis XVI, who became ruler of France in 1815. 26 years after the revolution began, the monarchy was restored.

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