

LIBERTÉ ÉGALITÉ FRATERNITÉ:

Citizenship & Exclusion in Revolutionary France



WHO WE ARE

Woven Teaching is the human rights education practice of Woven Foundation. Through a combination of original programming and grantmaking, Woven Teaching advances the foundation's focus on long-term change towards a widespread acceptance of basic human rights for all.

Our programmatic work is dedicated to supporting classroom teachers with practical help for ethical and effective instruction. We believe that by weaving human rights education into the curriculum, we can help educators create socially responsible global citizens.

Woven Teaching envisions a world in which every student's education includes:

- A sense of historical perspective;
- The development of critical thinking skills;
- A feeling of global citizenship;
- The ability to identify bigotry—understanding its negative effects on both individuals and society—and the analytical tools to combat it.

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Do you have feedback on this lesson or want to share how you implemented it in your classroom? We'd love to hear from you!

Please take our short evaluation at surveymonkey.com/r/wt-eval or scan the QR code to the left.

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CONTENT LEVEL

Ages 14-18 (Grades 9-12)

TIME

90 Minutes

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- What are civil and political rights?
- What are the rights of a citizen as described by French revolutionaries?
- Which groups living in France were denied their basic human rights? How did this impact them and the rest of the country?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

At the end of these lessons, students will be able to:

- Understand the rights included in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* and who was afforded those rights
- Understand the rights and responsibilities of a citizen
- Consider the ways in which “human rights” have not always included everyone, and how groups today are still excluded

COMMON CORE STANDARDS

Reading Informational Text

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.6

History / Social Studies

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.2
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.4

Speaking & Listening

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4

INTRODUCTION

The French Revolution (1789-1799) was a major turning point in European history. For centuries, France had been ruled by an absolute monarchy. In just a few short years, revolutionaries in France:

- ended the feudal system;
- abolished the monarchy and privileges for nobility;
- diminished the power of the Catholic Church; and
- established Europe's first modern democracy.

Participants in the Revolution sought to establish fundamental individual rights, including freedom of the press, freedom of religion, and the right to equal protection under the law. Many of these are considered to be universal human rights today.

But were there limits to these rights? In *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité: Citizenship & Exclusion in Revolutionary France*, students explore the plight of social groups whose rights were limited or denied during the Revolution. In the process, they will consider who has rights in their own communities, and whether exclusion continues.

Focusing solely on human rights, *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* assumes a basic understanding of the issues, institutions, and people during the French Revolution and is intended as a supplemental resource. It does not include an historical overview of the period. For a brief but informative overview, see [Google Arts & Culture: The French Revolution](#) or [The French Revolution: Crash Course European History #21](#) (for transcript, see [p. 11](#)).



FOCUS ON HUMAN RIGHTS

Woven Teaching believes that **human rights education** is essential for students to understand and assert their own rights and to protect the rights of others. As a result, the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** (UDHR) lies at the core of Woven Teaching's materials. The document's 30 articles outline fundamental human rights: basic rights and freedoms which every human being is entitled to, regardless of the person's race, religion, birthplace, gender, sexual orientation, or other characteristic. Although its articles are not legally binding, the UDHR serves as the moral compass for the international community.

The activities in *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* connect directly to several UDHR articles, including:

- **Article 1:** Right to Equality, Dignity, and Respect
- **Article 4:** Freedom from Slavery
- **Article 18:** Freedom of Thought, Religion, and Belief
- **Article 26:** Right to education

CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHING ETHICALLY AND EFFECTIVELY

- Center learning on students.
- Integrate human rights and history.
- Complicate thinking and avoid oversimplification by avoiding stereotypes and asking students to be precise with their language.
- Nurture an environment of non-judgment, openness, and understanding.
- Support students in making connections between historical events and contemporary issues, as well as local and international contexts.
- Students may have very different responses to the lesson and the class discussions. Acknowledge that each of us has biases that inform our beliefs and actions; these biases may be implicit or explicit. When differences arise, address them openly and respectfully with your students.
- Remind students of the ground rules for discussion, including:
 - » Using “I” statements and speaking from their own experience
 - » Listening actively and respectfully
- Emphasize personal agency and responsibility.
- Promote student activism and action.
- Support students to work critically with source material, particularly on the internet. Recommend authoritative sources with factual, archival content.

THE RIGHTS OF MAN & OF THE CITIZEN

30 MINUTES

Students will work in pairs to translate the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* into simple, accessible language.

MATERIALS

- Student handout: The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, 1789 (Handout A)

PROCEDURE

1. Explain to students that this lesson examines the French Revolution through the lens of human rights. They will be learning about how the French Revolution established the concept of a 'citizen.' It also laid the groundwork for modern civil and political rights (rights which prevent the government from interfering with an individual or their freedom).

Share the following introduction with the class:

The French Revolution (1789-1799) was a major turning point in European history. For centuries, France had been ruled by an absolute monarchy. In just a few short years, revolutionaries in France:

- ended the feudal system;
- abolished the monarchy and privileges for nobility;
- diminished the power of the Catholic Church; and
- established Europe's first modern democracy.

Participants in the Revolution sought to establish fundamental individual rights, including freedom of the press, freedom of religion, and the right to equal protection under the law. Many of the rights established during this period are considered to be universal human rights today.

These new rights did not include everyone in France. In this lesson, students will explore groups and communities whose rights were limited or denied. In the process, they will consider who has rights in their own communities, what groups are still excluded from the protection of these rights, and why.

2. Distribute the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (Handout A, p. 10). Explain that this document was written during the French Revolution, when the people of France overturned the monarchy and established a republic.
3. Ask for a volunteer to read the Preamble.
4. Explain to students that they will be reading the Declaration and rewriting it in simple, accessible language. Provide the following example of how one could rewrite the Preamble:

Until now, previous governments have been corrupt and have not upheld people's rights. Members of the National Assembly declare that all men have rights that no one can take away. This Declaration outlines those rights and people's responsibilities as citizens.

The National Assembly declares the following rights of man and citizen:

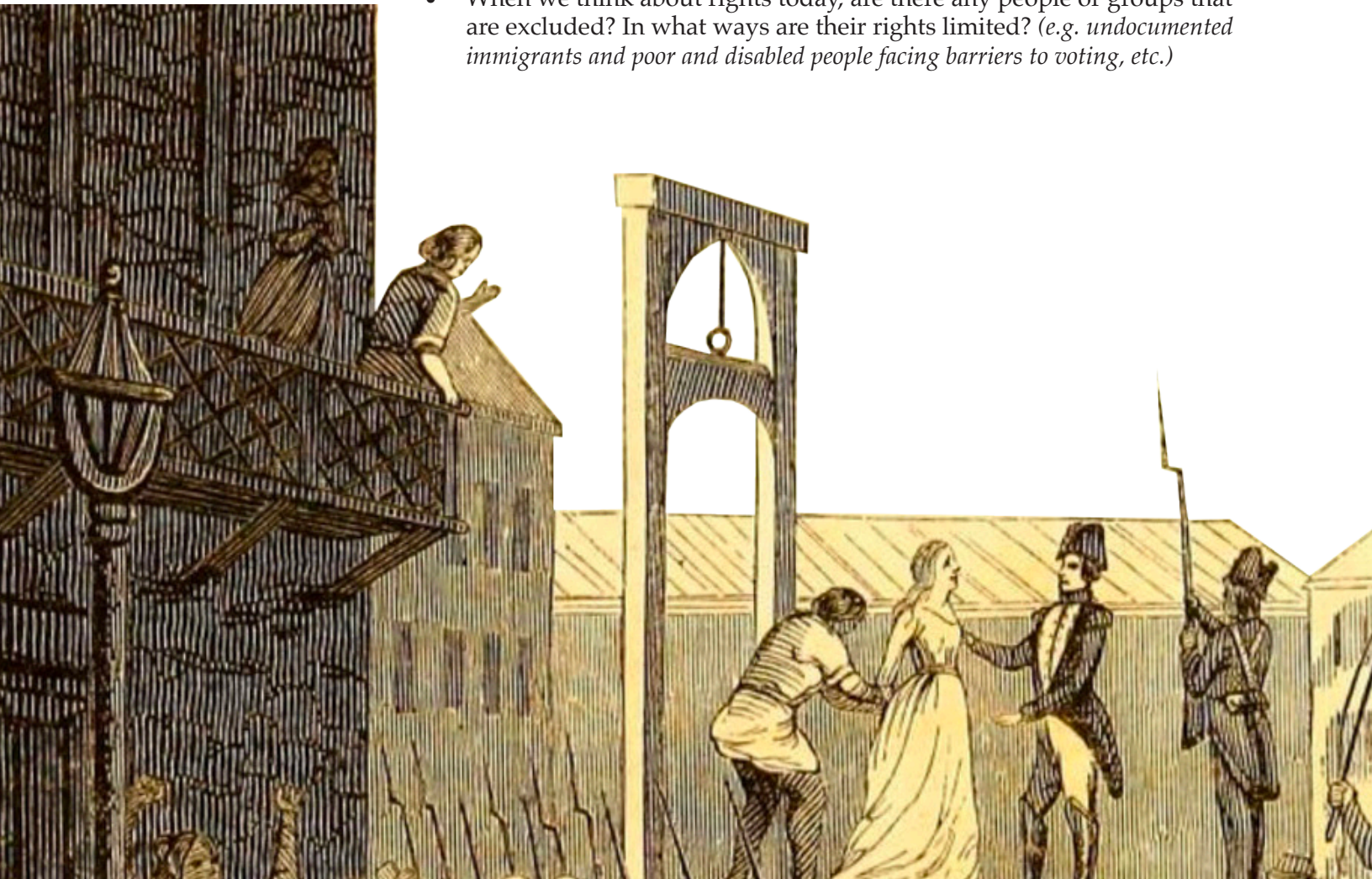
Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité: Citizenship & Exclusion in Revolutionary France

5. To ensure understanding, ask for a volunteer to share how they would rewrite Article 1.

Original text: Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be based only on considerations of the common good.

Example: Men are born free and have the same rights as everyone else. There should be no differences in how men are treated in society unless those differences are for the good of society.

6. Ask students to find a partner. There should be 16 pairs for this activity. If there are more than 32 students in the class, some groups may include three students.
7. Assign each group one article from Articles 2-17 of the Declaration. Explain that they have two tasks:
 - a. Rewrite the article in simple language. If students do not understand what some of the words mean, encourage them to use context clues or consult the Key Terms (see [p. 18](#)) or a dictionary.
 - b. Based on what you know about the time period, who do you think is included in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*? Who is excluded and why? (e.g. *women, people of color, etc.*)
8. After 10 minutes have passed or all groups have finished, bring the class together. Ask each group to share their version of the articles and record them on the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen-Student Version* digital handout.
9. Briefly discuss students' answers to Question B above.
 - When the authors of this document refer to "citizens," who are they referring to? Who is excluded from the Declaration? When the document refers to "men" does that include women as well?
 - Based on this document, what rights do citizens have?
 - When we think about rights today, are there any people or groups that are excluded? In what ways are their rights limited? (e.g. *undocumented immigrants and poor and disabled people facing barriers to voting, etc.*)



EXCLUDED FROM THE REVOLUTION

55 MINUTES

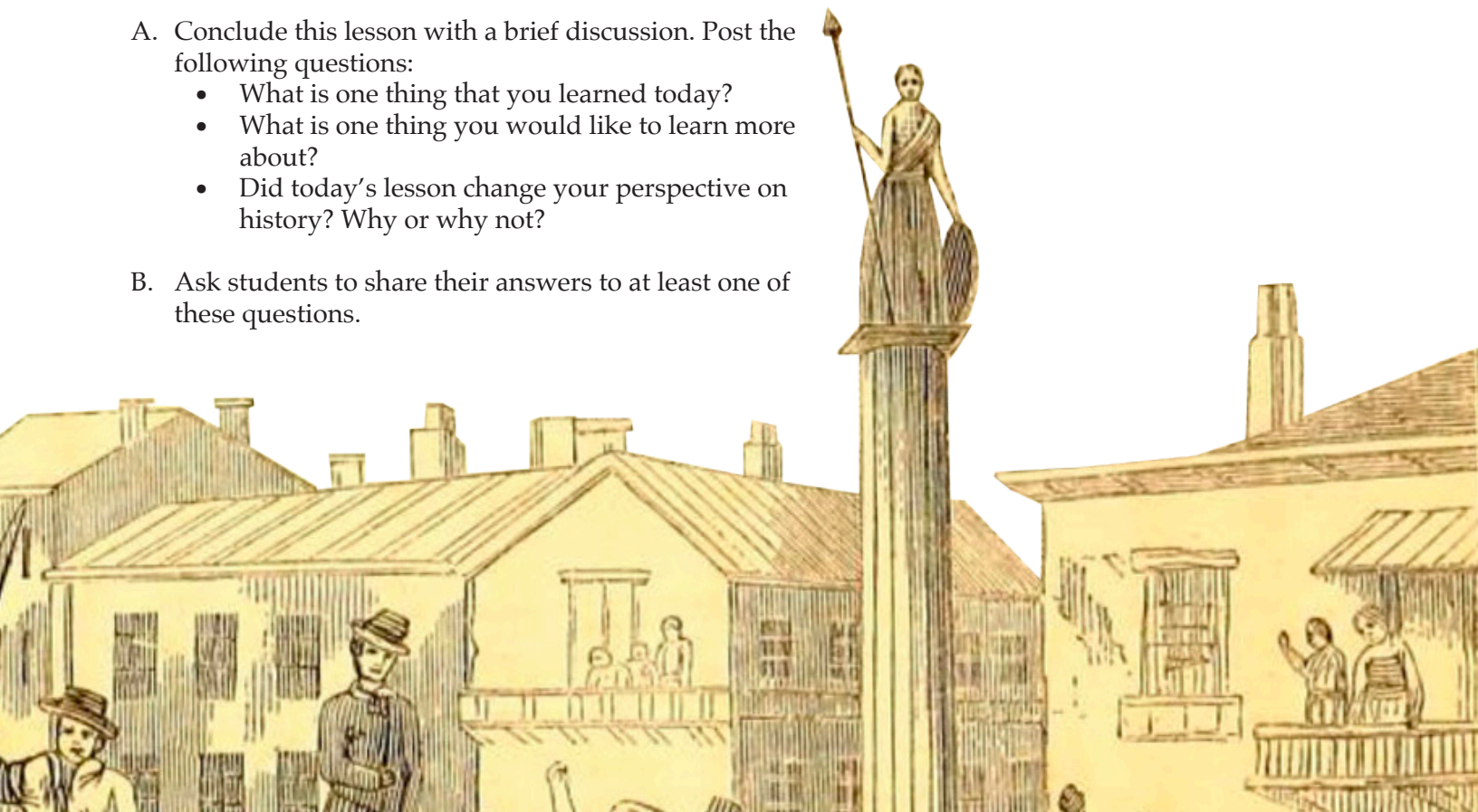
Students will examine primary source documents about the situation of some groups that were excluded from active citizenship in revolutionary France—women, Jews, and people of color.

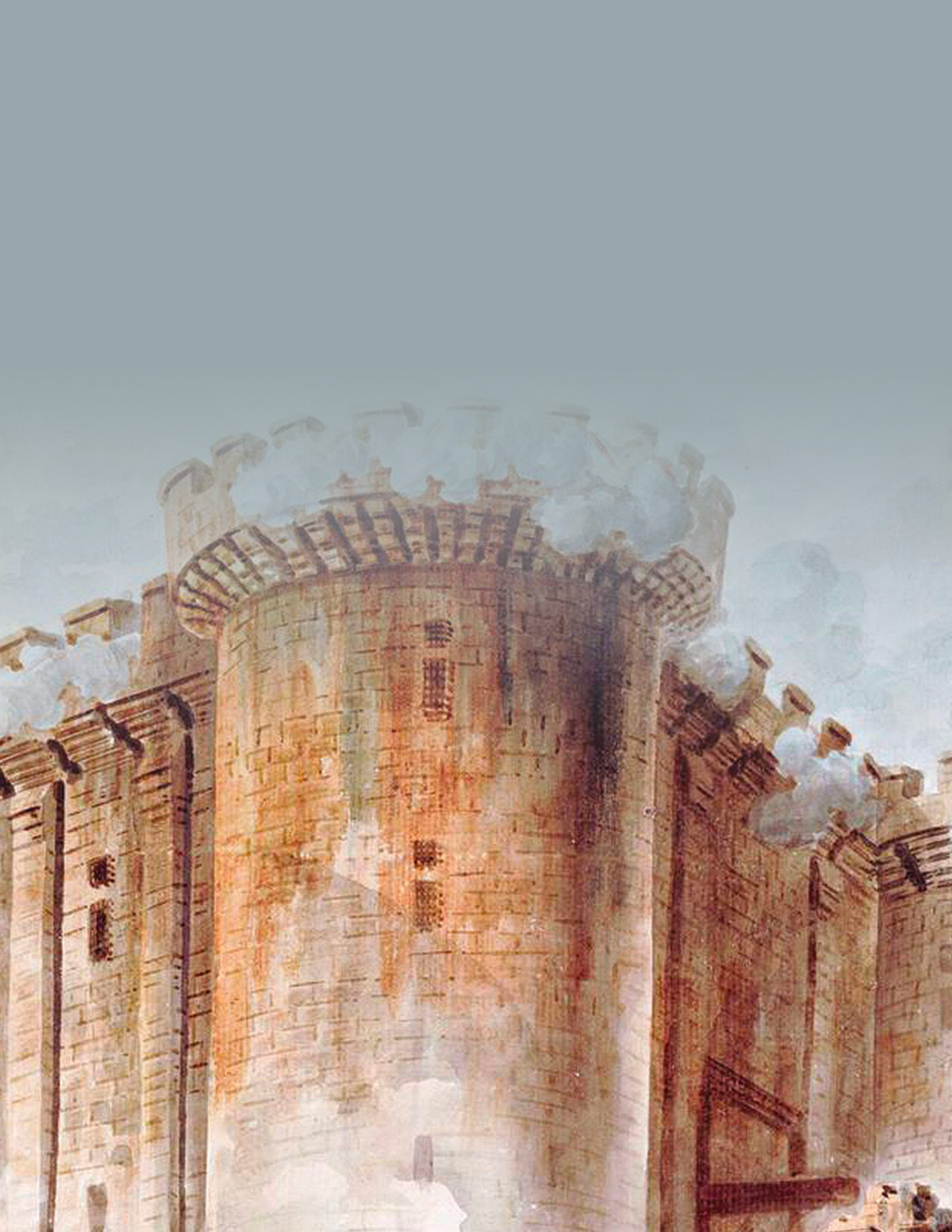
- A. Explain that students will be reading documents written during the French Revolution. Because some of the language in the documents can be difficult to understand, small edits have been made. The documents have also been edited for length. These edits are noted in [brackets].
- B. Divide students into groups of three. Distribute each of the three Narratives of Exclusion (Handout B, p. 12) to each group. Each student will be responsible for reading one of the narratives and teaching their group about it.
- C. Instruct students to read their narrative and complete the Document Analysis chart (Handout C, p. 15). When all members of the group have finished, students will take turns using their Document Analysis chart to provide an overview of their document to the rest of their group. Those not presenting should take notes while others share.
- D. After 30 minutes (or all groups have finished sharing), bring the class back together to debrief. Ask volunteers for a brief summary of each document, then ask students to share their answers to questions 6-9 of the Document Analysis chart.
 - What reason(s) does the author give for expanding rights to this group of people?
 - Does this document effectively argue for the expansion of rights? Why or why not?
 - What events or movements happening today does this document remind you of?
 - Why do you think we are studying this text?

FINAL THOUGHTS

5 MINUTES

- A. Conclude this lesson with a brief discussion. Post the following questions:
 - What is one thing that you learned today?
 - What is one thing you would like to learn more about?
 - Did today's lesson change your perspective on history? Why or why not?
- B. Ask students to share their answers to at least one of these questions.





STUDENT HANDOUTS



THE DECLARATION OF THE RIGHTS OF MAN AND OF THE CITIZEN, 1789

Preamble

The representatives of the French People, formed into a National Assembly, considering ignorance, forgetfulness or contempt of the rights of man to be the only causes of public misfortunes and the corruption of Governments, have resolved to set forth, in a solemn Declaration, the natural, unalienable and sacred rights of man, to the end that this Declaration, constantly present to all members of the body politic, may remind them unceasingly of their rights and their duties; to the end that the acts of the legislative power and those of the executive power, since they may be continually compared with the aim of every political institution, may thereby be the more respected; to the end that the demands of the citizens, founded henceforth on simple and incontestable principles, may always be directed toward the maintenance of the Constitution and the happiness of all.

In consequence whereof, the National Assembly recognises and declares, in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being, the following Rights of Man and of the Citizen.

Article 1

Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be based only on considerations of the common good.

Article 2

The aim of every political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of Man. These rights are Liberty, Property, Safety and Resistance to Oppression.

Article 3

The principle of any Sovereignty lies primarily in the Nation. No corporate body, no individual may exercise any authority that does not expressly emanate from it.

Article 4

Liberty consists in being able to do anything that does not harm others: thus, the exercise of the natural rights of every man has no bounds other than those that ensure to the other members of society the enjoyment of these same rights. These bounds may be determined only by Law.

Article 5

The Law has the right to forbid only those actions that are injurious to society. Nothing that is not forbidden by Law may be hindered, and no one may be compelled to do what the Law does not ordain.

Article 6

The Law is the expression of the general will. All citizens have the right to take part, personally or through their representatives, in its making. It must be the same for all, whether it protects or punishes. All citizens, being equal in its eyes, shall be equally eligible to all high offices, public positions and employments, according to their ability, and without other distinction than that of their virtues and talents.

Article 7

No man may be accused, arrested or detained except in the cases determined by the Law, and following the procedure that it has prescribed. Those who solicit, expedite, carry out, or cause to be carried out arbitrary orders must be punished; but any citizen summoned or apprehended by virtue of the Law, must give instant obedience; resistance makes him guilty.

Article 8

The Law must prescribe only the punishments that are strictly and evidently necessary; and no one may be punished except by virtue of a Law drawn up and promulgated before the offense is committed, and legally applied.

Article 9

As every man is presumed innocent until he has been declared guilty, if it should be considered necessary to arrest him, any undue harshness that is not required to secure his person must be severely curbed by Law.

Article 10

No one may be disturbed on account of his opinions, even religious ones, as long as the manifestation of such opinions does not interfere with the established Law and Order.

Article 11

The free communication of ideas and of opinions is one of the most precious rights of man. Any citizen may therefore speak, write and publish freely, except what is tantamount to the abuse of this liberty in the cases determined by Law.

Article 12

To guarantee the Rights of Man and of the Citizen a public force is necessary; this force is therefore established for the benefit of all, and not for the particular use of those to whom it is entrusted.

Article 13

For the maintenance of the public force, and for administrative expenses, a general tax is indispensable; it must be equally distributed among all citizens, in proportion to their ability to pay.

Article 14

All citizens have the right to ascertain, by themselves, or through their representatives, the need for a public tax, to consent to it freely, to watch over its use, and to determine its proportion, basis, collection and duration.

Article 15

Society has the right to ask a public official for an accounting of his administration.

Article 16

Any society in which no provision is made for guaranteeing rights or for the separation of powers, has no Constitution.

Article 17

Since the right to Property is inviolable and sacred, no one may be deprived thereof, unless public necessity, legally ascertained, obviously requires it, and just and prior indemnity has been paid.

Rewrite Article # _____: _____

NARRATIVES OF EXCLUSION – WOMEN

Nicolas de Condorcet, “On the Admission of Women to the Rights Of Citizenship” (July 1790)

Nicolas de Condorcet (1743-1794) was a French philosopher and member of the Legislative Assembly. He was a vocal advocate for equal rights for women and people of color.

Source: *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Lynn Hunt (Bedford/St. Martin's: Boston/New York, 2016), 109-112.

[...] have [men] not all violated the principle of equality of rights [...] by excluding women from the rights of citizenship? [...]

For this exclusion not to be an act of tyranny one would have to prove that the natural rights of women are not absolutely the same as those of men or show that they are not capable of exercising them. Now the rights of men follow only from the fact that they are feeling beings, capable of acquiring moral ideas and of reasoning about these ideas. Since women have the same qualities, they necessarily have equal rights. Either no individual in mankind has true rights, or all have the same ones; and whoever votes against the right of another, whatever be his religion, his color, or his sex, has from that moment [renounced] his own rights.

It would be difficult to prove that women are incapable of exercising the rights of citizenship. [...] It is said that no woman has made an important discovery in the sciences or given proof of genius in the arts, letters, etc. But certainly no one would presume to limit the rights of citizenship exclusively to men of genius. Some add that no woman has the same extent of knowledge or the same power of reasoning as certain men do; but what does this prove except that the class of very enlightened men is small? There is complete equality between women and the rest of men; if this little class of men were set aside, inferiority and superiority would be equally shared between the two sexes. Now since it would be completely absurd to limit the rights of citizenship and the eligibility for public offices to this superior class, why should women be excluded rather than those men who are inferior to a great number of women? [...]

It is said that women [...] do not really possess a sense of justice; that they obey their feelings rather than their consciences. This observation is truer but it proves nothing. It is not nature but rather education and social conditions that cause this difference. [...] It is therefore unjust to advance as grounds for continuing to refuse women the enjoyment of their natural rights those reasons that only have some kind of reality because women do not enjoy these rights in the first place. [...]

NARRATIVES OF EXCLUSION — JEWISH PEOPLE

Petition of the Jews of Paris, Alsace, and Lorraine to the National Assembly (January 1790)

Jewish people were a small minority of the French population: approximately 40,000 out of a population of 28 million.

Jews were discriminated against in France before the Revolution. They were discriminated against in all other European nations as well. They were restricted from owning property and banned from most professions except usury (lending money and collecting interest). At the beginning of the Revolution, the National Assembly removed restrictions from another religious minority, the Calvinists. In this petition, the Jews of the eastern provinces of France ask to also have restrictions against them removed.

Source: *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Lynn Hunt (Bedford/St. Martin's: Boston/New York, 2016), 88-91.

A great question is pending before the supreme tribunal of France. Will the Jews be citizens or not? [...]

First, the wish of the Jews is perfectly well-known, and cannot be [open to interpretation]. [...] They ask that all the degrading distinctions that they have suffered to this day be abolished and that they be declared CITIZENS. [...]

In truth, [the Jews] are of a religion that is condemned by [Catholicism]. But the time has passed when one could say that it was only the dominant religion that could grant access to advantages [...] in society. [...] Today, [Protestants] have just been reestablished in the possession of this status; they are assimilated to the Catholics in everything; the intolerant [principle] that we have just recalled can no longer be used against them. Why would they continue to use it as an argument against the Jews?

In general, civil rights are entirely independent from religious principles. And all men of whatever religion, whatever sect they belong to, whatever creed they practice, provided that their creed, their sect, their religion does not offend the principles of a pure and severe morality, all these men, we say, equally able to serve the fatherland, defend its interests, contribute to its splendor, should all equally have the title and the rights of citizen [...]

Excluded from all the professions, ineligible for all the positions, deprived even of the capacity to acquire property, not daring and not being able to sell openly the merchandise of their commerce, to what extremity are you reducing them? You do not want them to die, and yet you refuse them the means to live: you refuse them the means, and you crush them with taxes. [...]

Everything [must be done] in this moment of universal regeneration, when all ideas and all sentiments take a new direction; and we must hasten to do so. [...] Everything is changing; [...] This is therefore the moment, the true moment to make justice triumph: attach the improvement of the lot of the Jews to the revolution; [change], so to speak, this partial revolution to the general revolution. Your efforts will be crowned with success, and the people will not protest, and time will consolidate your work and render it unshakable.

NARRATIVES OF EXCLUSION — PEOPLE OF COLOR

Pamphlet, *The Abolition of Negro Slavery or Means for Ameliorating their Lot* (1789)

This pamphlet was written by French men who favored ending the slave trade and the eventual freeing of enslaved peoples. The authors note that immediate abolition of slavery would have drastic consequences for the French economy. As a result, they propose a gradual emancipation.

Source: *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Lynn Hunt (Bedford/St. Martin's: Boston/New York, 2016), 95-97.

At a time when a new light has come to enlighten minds in all Europe; when the French National Assembly has already destroyed the [monster] of feudalism in the kingdom; when it has established the Rights of Man and recognized that God *has created all men free; that this liberty should only be hampered by chains that they give themselves voluntarily, to prevent the strongest from making an attempt on the liberty, the life or the property of the weakest*; then slavery should only continue to exist for criminals condemned according to the laws. In consequence liberty ought to be restored to that multitude of unfortunate beings, our brothers though of different color, whom European greed has kidnapped annually for nearly three centuries from the coasts of Africa and condemned to an eternal captivity, hard work, and harsh treatment.

The political interests and property rights that would be [violated] if freedom was suddenly restored to the Negroes of our colonies are without doubt great obstacles to fulfilling the wishes that humanity has made in favor of these unfortunate Africans. If the French nation entirely prohibited the Negro slave trade, if it broke at the same time the chains of all those who live in our colonies, that would jolt commerce too violently; that would risk the loss of the plantations in the colonies and the immense shipping that they feed. . . . Moreover, if France alone undertook something similar, it would render itself [weaker than] the other nations that possess sugar colonies and which would keep their slaves. . . .

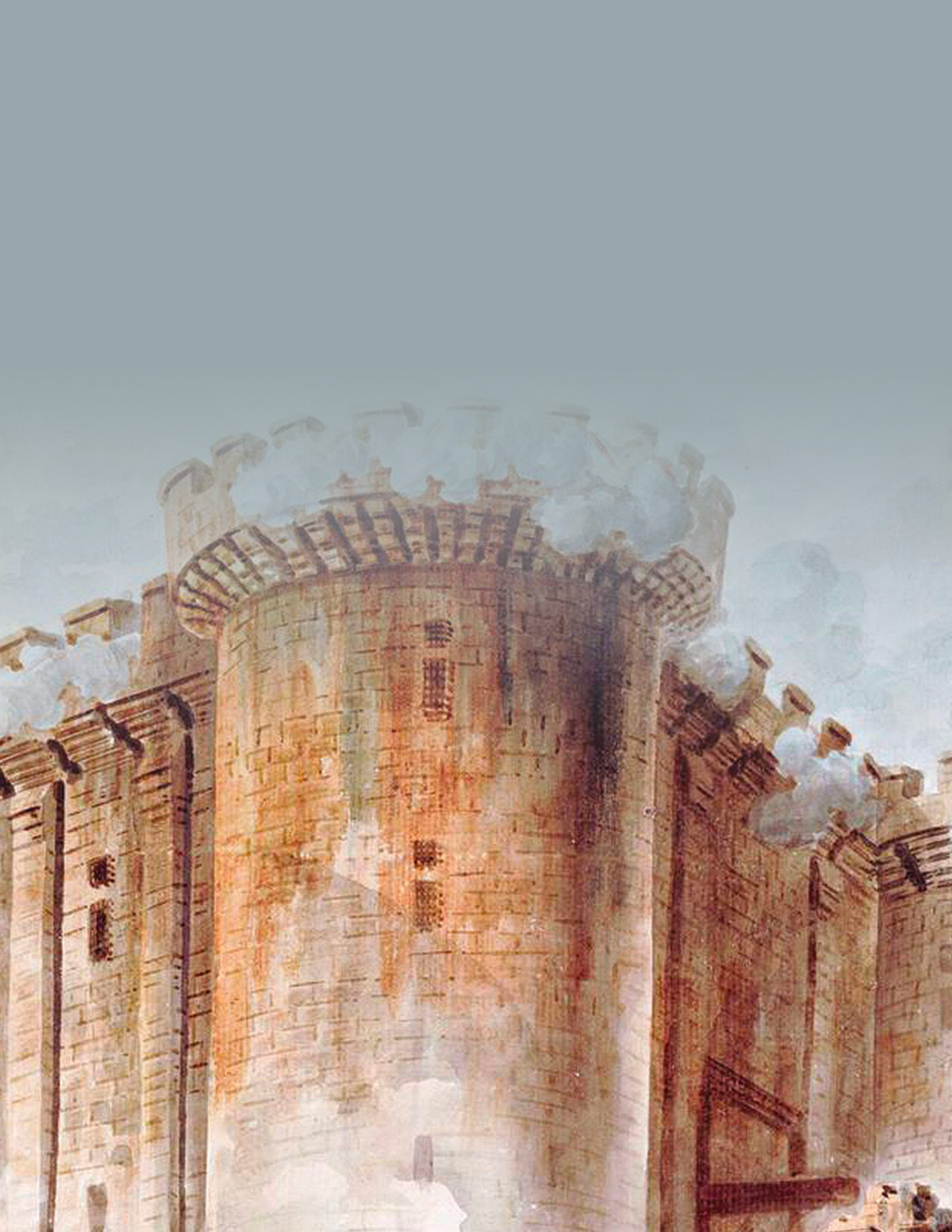
I propose making Negro slavery like the condition of soldiers by providing an enlistment for a definite time at the end of which freedom would be restored to them. [...]

To carry out this proposition, it would be necessary to [pass] a law that would decide: (1) That [for a period of time] the blacks transported from Africa to our colonies could only be sold on the condition that the inhabitants who bought them would restore their freedom at the end of ten years and give at that time to each Negro a sum sufficient to pay his passage to return to his country [...] By this means at the end of ten years all the current slaves will have recovered their freedom, except for those who freely took up new enlistments as previously explained. . . .

Nevertheless, if according to the representation of the inhabitants of the colonies, whom it is suitable to consult before ruling on this subject, this sacrifice on their part is judged too great, could not the state accord them a compensation proportionate to the individual value of the blacks to whom freedom would be restored? [...]

NARRATIVES OF EXCLUSION – DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

1. Author	
2. Date	
3. Who is the intended audience?	
4. Why did the author write the document?	
5. Summarize the document in 2-3 sentences.	
6. What reason does the author give for expanding rights to this group of people?	
7. Do you think that the author of this document effectively argues for the expansion of rights? Explain why or why not, with examples.	
8. Today, groups still struggle for equal rights. What events or movements happening today does this document remind you of?	
9. Why do you think we are studying this text?	



APPENDIX



KEY TERMS

Ancien Régime (*ahn-see-ahn ray-zheem*): the social and political system of France before the Revolution (translation: Old Regime)

aristocracy: the highest classes of society

Bastille (*ba-stee*): a fortress in Paris where the French king imprisoned his opponents. Parisians stormed the Bastille on July 14, 1789.

Bonaparte, Napoleon (*bone-ah-part*): French leader and military commander who conquered much of Europe in the early 19th century

civil rights: rights that prevent the government from interfering with an individual or their freedoms

clergy: formal religious leaders (e.g. priests)

Committee of Public Safety (CPS): body created by the National Convention in 1793 to protect France from foreign and domestic enemies. The CPS soon controlled the National Convention and the government of France before its end in 1794. The Committee of Public Safety is considered to be responsible for the Reign of Terror.

Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen: human rights document adopted by the National Assembly in August 1789

De Gouges, Olympe (*day-goozh*): French political activist, playwright, and author of *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen*. She was executed by guillotine during the Reign of Terror.

Directory: the government that ruled France after the Reign of Terror. The Directory was eventually overthrown in a coup by Napoleon Bonaparte.

Estates-General: an advisory body in France before the revolution. The Estates-General consisted of representatives from the three estates, or social classes: clergy (First Estate), nobility (Second Estate), and commoners (Third Estate).

guillotine (*gee-uh-teen*): a device used for beheading people

Haitian Revolution: successful rebellion of enslaved people in the French colony of Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti), 1791-1804

Jacobin (*jack-uh-bin*): a member of a radical left-wing political club (Society of Friends of the Constitution) during the French Revolution. The group took their name from their meeting place, a Jacobin (Dominican) monastery in Paris.

Louis XVI: King of France from 1774-1792. King Louis XVI and his wife Queen Marie Antoinette were executed during the Reign of Terror.

Marie Antoinette: Queen of France from 1774-1792. Queen Marie Antoinette and her husband King Louis XVI were executed during the Reign of Terror.

monarchy: a form of government with a king or queen at the head

National Assembly: revolutionary assembly created by representatives of the Third Estate when Louis XVI refused to give them more power in the Estates-General; later known as the National Convention

nobility: the people of the highest social classes

political rights: rights that allow individuals to participate freely in the political system

Reign of Terror: period of the French Revolution from September 1793 to July 1794. During this period, the revolutionary government took harsh measures against anyone who was suspected of opposing the revolution. Approximately 17,000 people were executed during the Reign of Terror. More than 20,000 others died in prison or were killed in massacres during the period.

republican: a person who supports a republican form of government (a government in which the people, directly or indirectly, are the source of authority)

Robespierre, Maximilien (*row-bez-pee-air*): lawyer, member of the Committee of Public Safety, and revolutionary leader during the Reign of Terror

Saint Domingue (*sahn doh-meng*): former French colony in the Caribbean Sea (present-day Haiti)

Tennis Court Oath: commitment taken by members of the Third Estate in June 1789. In the oath, they pledged to continue working together until they produced a constitution for France.

Versailles (*ver-sye*): royal residence of the King and Queen of France, located approximately 12 miles west of Paris

Women's March: spontaneously organized march to Versailles by Parisian women in October 1789 to protest of the high price and scarcity of bread

RESOURCES

The French Revolution

Google Arts & Culture

artsandculture.google.com/story/the-french-revolution/tAWhmFYf8c0SUg?hl=en

This illustrated timeline covers major events during the French Revolution

The French Revolution: Crash Course European History #21

CrashCourse

youtu.be/5fJl_ZX91l0

This video (15:28) provides a concise overview of the Revolution, its phases, and its guiding philosophies.

History Lesson Plans: The French Revolution

Ohio State University College of Arts & Sciences

hti.osu.edu/history-lesson-plans/european-history/french-revolution

This lesson plan ensures that students understand the basic political events of the French Revolution and includes a comparative analysis of the American and French national anthems.

Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité: Exploring the French Revolution

Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media (George Mason University) and American Social History Project (City University of New York)

revolution.chnm.org

In addition to supplemental historical information, this site contains more than 600 primary source documents from the French Revolution.

What Caused the French Revolution?

TED-Ed (Lesson by Tom Mullaney)

ed.ted.com/lessons/what-caused-the-french-revolution-tom-mullaney

This short video (5:39) provides a summary of the Revolution's causes, including the push for individual rights.

IMAGE CREDITS

Cover: The Third Estate carrying the other two orders (Bibliothèque nationale de France), Maximilien Robespierre (Musée Carnavalet), Poissardes parisiennes (Musée Carnavalet), Marie Antoinette (Musée Antoine-Lécuyer), Louis XVI (Palace of Versailles), Festival of Unity (via Paris Parcours Revolution)

Pp. 6-7: Execution of Madame Roland (Internet Archive)

Pp. 8-9, 16-17: The storming of the Bastille, July 14, 1789 by Jean-Pierre Houël (World History Encyclopedia)

CRASHCOURSE EUROPEAN HISTORY: THE FRENCH REVOLUTION (TRANSCRIPT)

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 pretty 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.

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 of the tax collected to support those ceaseless wars. All of which is to say that in 1789, France—the strongest and most populous country on the continent—was in crisis.

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. And in a world where the marriage of two powerful 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. And 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.

In 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 that 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 did try 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 that one. And bankers, meanwhile, refused to provide the Crown with additional loans. Which led to a proper financial crisis. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

In response to this crisis, Louis XVI was forced to summon the Estates-General—that is, a group of representatives of the clergy (the First Estate), the aristocracy (the Second Estate), and ordinary people (the Third Estate). In cities, towns, and villages across the kingdom, people met to set out their grievances in cahiers or register books for their representatives to take to this historic meeting.

Meanwhile, discontent was rising as Marie Antoinette played at being a shepherdess in a pretend farm that was built for her on the grounds of Versailles so she could imbibe the air of nature and play at the work that so many were forced to do.

On May 5, 1789 members of the Estates-General paraded in great ceremony through Versailles to begin deliberations. Louis XVI wrote of the events that day: "Nothing happened. Went hunting." Which just

goes to show you that history is about perspective.

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. So members of the Third Estate retreated to a nearby tennis court, declaring themselves the National Assembly and claiming to represent all French people better than the Estates-General did. 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 you know, they 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 the monarchists sat on the right. An array of others grouped themselves as parties across the hall. And from this arrangement, we get 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 altogether and a call for every other kingdom to do the same: “All governments are our enemies, all people our friends,” read the Edict of Fraternity.

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 eventually 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. And 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 charismatic, 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 was composed of citizens. Mostly citizen men at first—a fraternity or brotherhood that replaced a kingdom in which a monarch ruled subjects. And this was a huge change for Europe, and eventually the world, because it helped to 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 in many sectors, exemplified in the writings of English journalist Mary Wollstonecraft, who witnessed the revolution first-hand by going to Paris. She defended the “rights of man” in a 1791 book and then in 1792 published the classic *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 later revolutions, as we’ll see, the nation in times of stress can jettison this consensus about the rule of law and individual rights and become dictatorial, searching out enemies within and relying on force instead of consensus building.

After 1795, there were big changes 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.