Under France’s ancient régime, there were three social classes, or Estates. The First Estate was the clergy, who enjoyed great wealth and privilege. The Second Estate was the titled nobility. They held top jobs in government, the army, and the courts. The vast majority of the population, including the bourgeoisie, or middle class, formed the Third Estate. The bulk of the Third Estate consisted of rural peasants. The poorest members of the Third Estate were urban workers.

Members of the Third Estate resented the privileges enjoyed by their social “betters.” The First and Second Estates, for example, were exempt from most taxes, while peasants paid taxes on many things, including necessities. Then Enlightenment ideas led people to question the inequalities of the old social structure. The Third Estate demanded that the privileged classes pay their share.

Economic troubles added to the social unrest. Deficit spending had left France deeply in debt. In the 1780s, bad harvests sent food prices soaring. Louis XVI chose Jacques Necker as an economic advisor. Later, the king was forced to dismiss Necker for proposing to tax the First and Second Estates. The crisis deepened. Powerful nobles and clergy called for a meeting of the Estates-General to try to control reform. Louis XVI finally set a meeting at Versailles. Beforehand, the king asked all three estates to prepare cahiers listing their grievances. Some lists demonstrated the high level of resentment among the classes.

The Estates-General met in May 1789. After weeks of stalemate, delegates of the Third Estate abandoned the Estates-General and formed the National Assembly. Later, when they were locked out of their meeting place, the members of the new legislature took their famous Tennis Court Oath. They swore never to separate until they had established a just constitution.

On July 14, 1789, the streets of Paris buzzed with rumors that royal troops were going to occupy the city. More than 800 Parisians assembled outside the Bastille, demanding weaponry stored there. When the commander refused, the enraged mob stormed the Bastille, sparking the French Revolution.

Review Questions
1. How was society structured under France’s ancien régime?

2. What economic troubles did France face in the 1780s?
In France, the political crisis of 1789 coincided with a terrible famine. Peasants were starving and unemployed. In such desperate times, rumors ran wild. Inflamed by famine and fear, peasants unleashed their fury on the nobles. Meanwhile, a variety of factions in Paris competed to gain power. Moderates looked to the Marquis de Lafayette for leadership. However, a more radical group, the Paris Commune, replaced the city’s royalist government.

The storming of the Bastille and the peasant uprisings pushed the National Assembly into action. In late August, the Assembly issued the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. It proclaimed that all male citizens were equal before the law. Upset that women did not have equal rights, journalist Olympe de Gouges wrote a declaration that provided for this. The Assembly did not adopt it, however. Nor was King Louis XVI willing to accept reforms. Much anger was directed at the queen, Marie Antoinette, who lived a life of great extravagance.

The National Assembly produced the Constitution of 1791. This document reflected Enlightenment goals, set up a limited monarchy, ensured equality before the law for all male citizens, and ended Church interference in government.

Events in France stirred debate all over Europe. Some applauded the reforms of the National Assembly. Rulers of other nations, however, denounced the French Revolution. Horror stories were told by émigrés who had fled France. Rulers of neighboring monarchies increased border patrols to stop the spread of the “French plague” of revolution.

In October 1791, the newly elected Legislative Assembly took office, but falling currency values, rising prices, and food shortages renewed turmoil. Working-class men and women, called sans-culottes, pushed the revolution in a more radical direction, and demanded a republic. The sans-culottes found support among other radicals, especially the Jacobins. The radicals soon held the upper hand in the Legislative Assembly. Eager to spread the revolution, they declared war against Austria and other European monarchies.

Review Questions
1. What was the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen? Why were some people dissatisfied with it?

2. How did rulers of European monarchies react to the French Revolution?
In 1793, the revolution entered a frightening and bloody phase. The war with Austria was not going well for France. Some felt the king was in league with France’s enemies. Others wanted to restore the king’s power. On August 10, 1792, a mob stormed the royal palace. Radicals then took control of the Assembly and called for the election of a new legislative body called the National Convention. Suffrage was to be extended to all male citizens, not just to those who owned property. The Convention that met in September 1792 was a more radical body than earlier assemblies. It voted to abolish the monarchy and establish the French Republic. Louis XVI and his queen were executed.

War with other European nations and internal rebellions concerned the government. The Convention created the Committee of Public Safety to deal with these issues. It had almost absolute power. Jacobin Maximilien Robespierre led the Committee. He was one of the chief architects of the Reign of Terror, which lasted from September 1793 to July 1794. During that time, courts conducted hasty trials for those suspected of resisting the revolution. Many people were the victims of false accusations. About 17,000 were executed by guillotine.

In reaction to the Terror, the revolution entered a third stage, dominated by the bourgeoisie. It moved away from the excesses of the Convention, and moderates created the Constitution of 1795. This set up a five-man Directory to rule, and a two-house legislature. However, discontent grew because of corrupt leaders. Also, war continued with Austria and Britain. Politicians planned to use Napoleon Bonaparte, a popular military hero, to advance their goals.

By 1799, the French Revolution had dramatically changed France. It had dislodged the old social order, overthrown the monarchy, and brought the Church under state control. Nationalism spread throughout France. From the city of Marseilles, troops marched to a rousing new song that would become the French national anthem. Revolutionaries also made social reforms. They set up systems to help the poor and abolished slavery in France’s Caribbean colonies.

**Review Questions**

1. What type of government did the National Convention establish in September 1792?

2. Identify three changes that the French Revolution brought to France.
The final phase of the revolution is known as the Age of Napoleon. When the revolution first broke out, Napoleon Bonaparte was a young lieutenant. Battle victories fueled his ambitions and his rise through army ranks. By 1804, Napoleon had acquired enough power to assume the title Emperor of the French. At each step on his rise to power, Napoleon had held a plebiscite. However, he still had absolute power, although he was elected.

Napoleon consolidated his power by strengthening the central government. His economic and social reforms won support across classes. Among his most lasting reforms was the Napoleonic Code. This new code of laws embodied Enlightenment principles of equality, religious tolerance, and the abolition of feudalism.

From 1804 to 1812, Napoleon battled the European powers and created a vast French empire. A brilliant general, before each battle Napoleon developed a new plan. In this way, opposing generals could never anticipate what he would do next. He rarely lost. Napoleon annexed the Netherlands, Belgium, and parts of Italy and Germany to build his Grand Empire. However, Britain remained outside Napoleon’s grasp. His attempt to wage economic warfare against Britain through the Continental System failed. Many Europeans resented the scarcity of goods. Growing nationalism led to resistance against French influence. In Spain, patriots waged guerrilla warfare against the French.

In 1812, Napoleon invaded Russia with 600,000 soldiers. To avoid battles with Napoleon, the Russians retreated, burning crops and villages as they went. This scorched-earth policy left the French hungry and cold. Most of the Grand Army was destroyed. Fewer than 20,000 soldiers survived. The retreat from Moscow through the long Russian winter shattered Napoleon’s reputation for success.

In 1815, British and Prussian forces crushed the French at the Battle of Waterloo. Napoleon was forced to abdicate. After Waterloo, diplomats met at the Congress of Vienna to restore stability and order in Europe after years of revolution and war. The Congress strived to create a lasting peace through the principle of legitimacy and by maintaining a balance of power. Leaders also met periodically in the Concert of Europe to discuss problems that threatened peace.

Review Questions
1. How did the French respond to Napoleon’s economic and social reforms?

2. Why did Napoleon’s invasion of Russia fail?