SOFTWARE & TECH

Chapter 7 Section 1 The French Revolution Begins

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Introduction: A Nation on the Brink of Transformation

The year 1789 stands as one of the most pivotal turning points in modern European history. When we examine **Chapter 7 Section 1 The French Revolution Begins**, we are not merely studying a single political event but rather the unraveling of an entire social and political order. The French monarchy, which had stood for centuries as the symbol of absolute power, faced a crisis so profound that it would forever alter the trajectory of France and, indeed, the entire Western world. Understanding how the French Revolution begins requires us to look closely at the conditions that made such a dramatic upheaval not only possible but perhaps inevitable. From the opulent halls of Versailles to the bread lines of Paris, the stage was set for a conflict between tradition and enlightenment, between privilege and equality. This article explores the foundational events, key figures, and underlying causes that mark the opening chapter of the revolution, providing a thorough and accessible account of this transformative period.

The Ancien Régime: The Old Order Under Strain

To appreciate the dramatic events of 1789, one must first understand the structure of French society before the revolution. The **Ancien Régime**, as it came to be called, divided France into three distinct estates. The First Estate comprised the clergy, the Second Estate the nobility, and the Third Estate everyone else—roughly 97 percent of the population. This system, while long established, had become a source of deep resentment and frustration.

The Privileged Estates and Their Burden on Society

The First and Second Estates enjoyed significant privileges, including exemption from most taxes. The clergy owned vast lands and collected tithes, while the nobility held judicial rights, feudal dues, and prestigious positions in the military and government. The Third Estate, by contrast, bore the entire tax burden of the kingdom. This included peasants, urban workers, and the burgeoning middle class known as the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie, despite growing wealthy through trade, industry, and professional careers, were excluded from high office and social prestige. They paid taxes on their income and property, while nobles paid almost nothing. This fundamental inequality created a simmering anger that would soon boil over.

Economic Catastrophe and Royal Bankruptcy

The immediate trigger for the crisis was financial. France had spent enormous sums supporting the American Revolution, a war that brought victory but at a crippling cost. The monarchy was deeply in debt, and King Louis XVI inherited a treasury that was effectively bankrupt. Attempts to reform the tax system and make the privileged estates pay their share were fiercely resisted. The king's ministers, including the capable but unpopular Jacques Necker, struggled to find a solution. Poor harvests in the late 1780s made matters worse. Bread prices soared, and widespread hunger gripped the countryside and cities alike. The winter of 1788-1789 was especially harsh, and the people of France were not only angry but desperate. This combination of fiscal crisis and food scarcity created an explosive atmosphere across the nation.

The Meeting of the Estates-General: A Long-Dormant Assembly

In a desperate bid to solve the financial crisis, Louis XVI agreed to convene the **Estates-General**, a representative assembly that had not met since 1614. This decision, made in the summer of 1788, would prove to be a catastrophic miscalculation. The king hoped the assembly would approve new taxes. Instead, it became a platform for revolutionary debate.

The Question of Voting: A Dispute That Changed Everything

From the outset, the Estates-General was mired in controversy. Traditionally, each estate met separately and cast one vote. This meant that the First and Second Estates could always outvote the Third Estate two to one, even though the Third represented the vast majority of the population. The Third Estate demanded that voting be by head, not by order, which would give them a fair voice given their numbers. They also wanted the number of their deputies doubled, a concession the king eventually granted. However, he refused to decide on the voting method, leaving the question unresolved when the assembly opened in May 1789. This ambiguity set the stage for a direct confrontation.

The Cahiers de Doléances: The Grievances of a Nation

As part of the process, the king ordered the compilation of **cahiers de doléances**, or lists of grievances, from across the kingdom. These documents provide a remarkable insight into the hopes and frustrations of the French people. While the cahiers from the First and Second Estates largely sought to preserve their privileges, those from the Third Estate called for far-reaching reforms: fair taxation, equality before the law, freedom of the press, and an end to feudal dues. These documents reveal that the desire for change was widespread and deeply felt, well before the dramatic events of the summer.

The Birth of the National Assembly: A Revolutionary Act

When the Estates-General convened at Versailles on May 5, 1789, the Third Estate immediately began to push for procedural changes. For weeks, debate stalled as the privileged estates refused to meet jointly. The Third Estate grew increasingly impatient. On June 10, 1789, the Abbé Sieyès, a radical clergyman who had been elected as a deputy of the Third Estate, proposed that the body invite the other estates to join them in a single assembly. If they refused, the Third Estate would proceed alone. This was a direct challenge to the authority of the king and the traditional order.

The Tennis Court Oath: A Pledge of Unity

On June 17, 1789, the Third Estate voted to call itself the **National Assembly**, claiming the right to represent the French people. When the king tried to prevent them from meeting by locking their usual chamber, the deputies moved to a nearby indoor tennis court. There, on June 20, they took the famous **Tennis Court Oath**, swearing not to disband until a new constitution was established for France. This was a moment of extraordinary defiance. The deputies, many of whom were lawyers and merchants, committed themselves to a cause greater than their own interests. The oath was a powerful symbol of unity and determination, and it marks a critical turning point in Chapter 7 Section 1 The French Revolution Begins.

Royal Backlash and the Gathering Storm

Louis XVI initially appeared to yield, ordering the First and Second Estates to join the National Assembly. However, behind the scenes, the king was preparing to use force. He began assembling troops around Paris and Versailles, a move that alarmed the people and the deputies alike. The king dismissed his popular finance minister, Jacques Necker, on July 11, 1789, which was seen as a sign of royal intransigence. Word of this dismissal spread quickly, and Paris erupted in fear and anger. The people feared that the king was about to dissolve the Assembly and arrest

its leaders. The revolution was about to enter its most dramatic phase yet.

The Storming of the Bastille: A Day That Shook Europe

On July 14, 1789, a crowd of Parisians gathered outside the **Bastille**, a medieval fortress-prison that stood as a symbol of royal tyranny. The crowd was not seeking to free prisoners—the Bastille held only a handful of inmates at the time. Instead, they were demanding gunpowder and weapons to defend themselves against the king's troops. The governor of the Bastille, the Marquis de Launay, initially refused, but the situation quickly spiraled out of control.

The Fall of the Fortress

After hours of tension and sporadic fighting, the crowd stormed the fortress. De Launay surrendered and was killed, along with several of his guards. The fall of the Bastille was a stunning victory for the people of Paris. The king, upon hearing the news, reportedly asked, "Is it a revolt?" to which a duke replied, "No, sire, it is a revolution." The storming of the Bastille became a defining moment not only in **Chapter 7 Section 1 The French Revolution Begins**but in all of world history. It demonstrated that the people were willing to take up arms to defend their cause, and it forced the king to back down. The Bastille was later demolished, and July 14 is now celebrated as France's national day.

The Creation of the National Guard

In the aftermath of the Bastille's fall, the people of Paris organized a new municipal government and created a citizen militia, the **National Guard**, led by the Marquis de Lafayette, a hero of the American Revolution. The National Guard was intended to maintain order and protect the revolution from royalist counterattack. Its creation marked the transfer of legitimate force from the crown to the people. The king, recognizing the new reality, visited Paris on July 17 and accepted the revolutionary cockade, a red, white, and blue symbol that became the emblem of the revolution.

The Great Fear and the End of Feudalism

While Paris was in ferment, the countryside also exploded into action. In the summer of 1789, a wave of panic and violence known as the **Great Fear**swept across rural France. Peasants, fearing that nobles were hiring brigands to attack them, armed themselves and attacked manor houses. They destroyed documents recording feudal dues, burned châteaux, and refused to pay the traditional obligations owed to their lords. This was a grassroots insurrection, born of years of oppression and the immediate uncertainty of the political situation.

The August Decrees: A New Legal Order

The National Assembly, alarmed by the chaos in the countryside, took decisive action. On the night of August 4, 1789, in a dramatic session, nobles and clergymen renounced their feudal privileges. This led to the **August Decrees**, which abolished feudalism in France. Serfdom, tithes, hunting rights, and exemption from taxes were all swept away. It was a breathtakingly rapid transformation of the social order. Within a matter of hours, the legal framework of the Ancien Régime was dismantled. These decrees were a direct response to the popular uprising and demonstrated that the revolution was not merely a political event but a social revolution as well.

The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen

Shortly thereafter, on August 26, 1789, the National Assembly adopted the **Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen**. This landmark document proclaimed that "men are born and remain free and equal in rights." It asserted the principles of liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression. It guaranteed freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and equality before the law. The Declaration became the philosophical foundation of the

revolution and has inspired democratic movements around the world ever since. While its promises were not immediately fulfilled for all—women, slaves in the colonies, and the poor were largely excluded—it established a powerful set of ideals that could not be ignored.

The Women's March on Versailles: The King Becomes a Captive

By October 1789, the king had still not formally accepted the August Decrees or the Declaration of the Rights of Man. Furthermore, bread shortages continued to plague Paris. On October 5, thousands of women, angry and hungry, marched from Paris to Versailles. They were joined by the National Guard, who forced Lafayette to lead them. The women stormed the palace, demanding to see the king. The next day, the king agreed to return to Paris, effectively becoming a prisoner of the people. The royal family was installed in the Tuileries Palace in Paris, where they could be watched closely. This event marked the end of the king's independence and the beginning of a new phase of the revolution.

Key Figures Who Shaped the Beginning of the Revolution

To fully understand **Chapter 7 Section 1 The French Revolution Begins**, it is useful to recognize the individuals who played pivotal roles in these early events. King Louis XVI, though well-intentioned, was indecisive and lacked the force of personality needed to navigate the crisis. His queen, Marie Antoinette, was deeply unpopular and seen as a symbol of royal excess. The Abbé Sieyès, a clergyman and political thinker, provided much of the intellectual leadership, particularly with his pamphlet "What is the Third Estate?" which argued that the Third Estate was the true nation. The Comte

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