

Teaching About The French Revolution - A Play

By Michael Pezone

I have three goals when teaching about a complex series of events like the French Revolution: to “reduce” difficult history to a few fundamental themes and concepts; to help students become actively engaged in learning; and to promote public-speaking and literacy skills. This play presents, fairly it is hoped, several important issues, including the causes of revolution, conflict between social classes, and political violence. The performance involves all students, who find it both enjoyable and informative. Finally, the project culminates in a cooperative learning activity, in which groups of students rewrite the play in their own language, and then performed the new plays. Typically, the project spans 6 or 7 class periods, and has been a high point in my 10th grade Global History courses. The first day, the class reads the script together and discusses key questions. The second day, students perform the play in class.

Key Questions

- 1) What were the grievances (complaints) of the French people in 1789?
- 2) Why were the Jacobins unhappy with the National Assembly’s Constitution?
- 3) Why did the other kings of Europe want to undue the French Revolution?
- 4) Why did The Terror backfire against The Committee of Public Safety?
- 5) Why did the French people accept Napoleon as dictator?

Historical Characters: Necker, Turgot, Queen Marie Antoinette, King Louis XVI, De Mirabeau, Sieyes, Robespierre, Saint-Just, Danton, Marat.

Scene One

Narrator: Ladies and gentlemen, we are now to perform a play about the French Revolution, one of the most important and influential events of world history. The first scene takes place at Versailles, in the palace of the French king, Louis the 16th. The king is meeting with his wife, Queen Marie Antoinette, and two of his ministers, Turgot and Necker. The year is 1789, and they are discussing the economic crisis that France is suffering.

Necker: Your highness, my king, the royal finances are in terrible shape!

Turgot: Yes, my king, Monsieur Necker is right. The nation’s debts are rising higher and higher. We must cut expenses!

Necker: Turgot and I agree, my king: We must tax the royal treasury, your highness. It is the only way to put the budget in order.

The Queen: This is preposterous!! Cut royal expenses!! Tax the king and queen!! Preposterous!!

The King: True, our finances are in terrible shape. My predecessor, Louis the 14th, dreadfully mismanaged our money. And our loans to the Americans, to help them in their fight against England, did not help matters.

Turgot: So true, your highness! We must tax the royal treasury and cut back on royal expenditures!

The Queen: How dare you! We are the king and queen of France! We rule in the name of God, and of his only-begotten son, Jesus Christ! How dare you tell us how we should spend the wealth that is our due!

Necker: My queen, I beg your pardon! But the people are very angry. There are many now who say that your life of luxury is a slap in the face to the French people!

The Queen: Outrageous! You forget yourself, sir! Such talk is treasonous!

The King: I will hear no more of this! I am the king! The people must accept their burdens without complaint! It is the will of God! Enough of such talk, I say!

Scene Two

Narrator: King Louis the 16th disregards his ministers’ advice. The French people, no longer willing to endure their suffering, call for a meeting of the French Parliament, known as the Estates-General, which has not met since the year 1614. Leaders such as Sieyes and de Mirabeau speak passionately. Their words are inspired by Enlightenment ideas and by the example of the recent and successful American Revolution.

De Mirabeau: Gentlemen, the French people can no longer suffer under unfair debts and taxes! And why should the people suffer, while the nobility continue to enjoy their special privileges?

Sieyes: Yes, good de Mirabeau! And the government continues to interfere with our businesses! Let us not forget the words of our great philosopher, Rousseau: "Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains!"

De Mirabeau: Yes, nor let us not forget the great achievement of our brothers in America, who resisted tyranny and sent King George packing!

Sieyes: Indeed! Where would they have been without our support? If we can help the Americans gain their freedom, we can help ourselves to the same!

De Mirabeau: We must form a National Assembly, where the voice of the people can be heard!

Sieyes: Yes, and we must write a Constitution!

The People: Yes!!! A National Assembly!! A Constitution!!

Scene Three

Narrator: A National Assembly is formed and soon issues a famous document called the Declaration of the Rights of Man. In response, the King sends loyal soldiers into the city of Paris. The people, in anger, storm a fortress called the Bastille (every year, French people celebrate Bastille day as the first act of the French Revolution). Thousands of people march in protest to the palace at Versailles. The French Revolution has begun.

The People: Liberty!! Equality!! Fraternity!! Liberty!! Equality!! Fraternity!!

Scene Four

Narrator: By 1791, a new Constitution has been written, making France a limited monarchy. The King, and his royalist supports, are outraged by this limit on the King's power. They begin plotting to restore the King's full powers. The Constitution also creates a new legislature, but restricts the right to vote to middle and upper class men who own property. This angers some radical leaders called Jacobins, who want to extend democratic rights to everyone. Around the city of Paris, the Jacobins meet to discuss France's future. Men such as Robespierre, Danton, Saint-Just, and Marat lead them.

Robespierre: Citizens! The king and queen are plotting against our revolution! We must be on our guard!

Saint-Just: Robespierre is right! There are rumors that Antoinette is communicating with the King of Prussia and the King of the Holy Roman Empire, asking them to invade France and overturn our revolution!!!

Danton: These are dangerous times! What is our National Assembly doing to protect our revolution!?

Marat: Good question, Danton! The Assembly members are nothing but a group of bourgeois and noble dogs! They do not care at all about the rights of the common people!

Saint-Just: Marat is right! See how they have denied the vote to all but men of property!

Marat: Disgraceful!!

Narrator: Just then, a messenger runs in with extremely important and troubling news!

Messenger: Citizens! I have amazing news! The king and his family have been arrested as they were trying to flee France to join our enemies! And there is more! King Leopold and King Frederick Wilhelm have threatened to invade France and restore absolute monarchy!!

Robespierre: It is counter-revolution!!

Danton: Our enemies are ready to pounce on us!!

Marat: The National Assembly will not protect the revolution!! We must abolish it!!

Saint-Just: We must form a National Convention!! A new government that represents the common people!!

Robespierre: We must write a new Constitution!! One that insures the rights of the people!!

Danton: We must abolish the monarchy!!

Marat: We must declare a republic!!

Saint-Just: Yes! A republic!!

Robespierre: The king cannot be allowed to organize his supporters! He must be put to death!

Danton: We must declare war against our foreign enemies!!

Marat: Louis to the guillotine!!

The People: Death to the king!!! Long live the Republic!!!

Narrator: The King and Queen of France are led to the guillotine, and beheaded!

Scene Five

Narrator: It is 1792. The Jacobins form a National Convention, but real power is held by a group of 12 Jacobins on the Committee of Public Safety. Civil war soon breaks out between republicans and royalists. The new Republic of France creates a new calendar and the metric system of measurements, abolishes imprisonment for debt, and eliminates slavery in the French colonies. But at the same time, the Committee of Public Safety begins ordering the deaths of thousands of people whom it considers enemies of the Republic. This time of suspicion and mass murder is known as the Terror. The Terror increases in intensity after a noblewoman assassinates the popular leader, Marat. Soon the Committee's leader, Robespierre, turns the violence upon Committee members themselves.

Robespierre: Saint-Just, my friend, the way in which Danton was speaking was outrageous! He clearly wishes to compromise with our enemies!

Saint-Just: Yes, Robespierre. He is calling for an end to the Terror! He might as well ask us to surrender to our enemies!

Robespierre: He is a great danger to the Revolution! If he is allowed to divide the Committee, our enemies will surely take advantage!

Saint-Just: He must be arrested!!

Robespierre: He must be put to death!!

Saint-Just: We have no choice!

Robespierre: Yes, justice and virtue demand no less!!

Narrator: Danton is led to the guillotine, and beheaded!

Scene Six

Narrator: By 1795, France is at war with the kingdoms of Europe. Soon, the French people turn against the Committee of Public Safety. Robespierre is arrested and guillotined! The next day, his friend Saint-Just is also beheaded! The National Convention creates a new Constitution, one even less democratic than the National Assembly's Constitution. In response, a radical leader, Babeuf, tries to organize a democratic movement called the Conspiracy of Equals, but he too is arrested and killed! From 1795 to 1799, the people of France still suffer, as war against the royalist nations of Europe continues. By 1799, the French people long for a strong leader who will put an end to their suffering. A victorious general named Napoleon Bonaparte seizes power and becomes first consul of the Republic. In 1802, he is elected consul for life, and in 1804 he becomes Emperor of France. His armies win victory after victory until Napoleon controls most of Europe. But in 1812, Napoleon faces a new challenge:

Napoleon: My people, let us pause a moment to consider the great benefits our victories have brought to Europe. We have abolished feudal privileges and eliminated serfdom. We have created a system of more equal taxation. We have given every man the right to vote. We have guaranteed freedom of religion. But perhaps our greatest achievement is the code of laws we have put in place throughout Europe. I am honored that some people refer to these laws as the Napoleonic Code. We have created equality under the law, and guaranteed *habeus corpus*, the right to a fair trial, and the right to be represented by counsel. What's more, under our code, a person is innocent until proven guilty. But, my loyal subjects, our enemies are still trying to undo the great achievements of the revolution. Our one-time friend, Russia, has now declared war against us. But with your support, I shall lead our armies into Russia and on to victory! We must put an end, once and for all, to those who wish to restore the tyranny of kings! Long live the French Empire!

Narrator: Napoleon leads his armies 500 miles into Russia, all the way to the city of Moscow. But all his army finds there is a burning city, set on fire by the Russians themselves so that its riches will not fall into French hands. Now Napoleon's army, short of supplies, has to retreat hundreds of miles through a bitter Russian winter. A large part of Napoleon's army dies from cold, starvation, and disease. As a result of this famous defeat, the European powers unite against Napoleon. In 1814, Napoleon is defeated and captured. In France, monarchy is restored, and Louis the 18th is made the new king. But despite this restoration of monarchy, the memory and example of the French Revolution and its cry of "liberty, equality, fraternity" lives on to inspire democrats and revolutionaries throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

The People: Liberty!! Equality!! Fraternity!! Liberty!! Equality!! Fraternity!!

