AWESOME stories

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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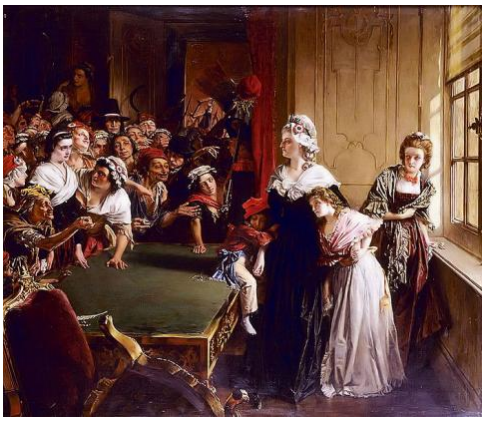

Marie Antoinette with her children and Madame Élisabeth, facing the mob which had broken into the Tuileries Palace on June 20, 1792. This painting (located at the Musée de la Révolution française) depicts that event.

Madame Campan, in her *Mémoires sur la vie de Marie-Antoinette* (Paris: Nelson Éditeurs, 1823), provides the facts behind this episode:

Sitting behind a large table and surrounded by her children and entourage, Marie Antoinette was insulted by one of the most rabid Jacobin women. The queen replied: "But did you ever see me before?"

"No."

"Did I ever harm you personally?"

"No, but you harmed the nation."

"That is what others told you, but you were all deceived. I am the wife of the King of France and mother of the Dauphin. I am a French woman and will never see again the land of my birth. Thus, I can only be happy or wretched in France...and I was happy when the people loved me."

At these words, the Jacobin began to weep and said: This happened because I did not know you, but now I see how good you are." (Campan, page 336.)

Louis XVI inherited a job that would have been nearly impossible for just about anyone. His predecessors—who believed they had a divine right to rule absolutely—had fought long wars with England, consistently overspent and, most significantly, created an unfair tax structure.

The clergy and nobility, who owned most of the land and had most of the wealth, enjoyed tax-exempt status. Common people, who had no meaningful say in political matters, were largely responsible for funding the government's needs.

Louis' decision to help the American colonies in their war of independence made matters worse. Historians believe America may not have won the war without French help, but France's involvement was costly—both for the purse and for the king.

Did Marie Antoinette support her husband's decision to aid the Americans? According to her closest assistant, she did not:

> *The Queen spoke out more plainly about the part France was taking respecting the independence of the American colonies, and constantly opposed it. Far was she from foreseeing that a revolution at such a distance could excite one in which a misguided populace would drag her from her palace to a death equally unjust and cruel. She only saw something ungenerous in the method which France adopted of checking the power of England.* (Campan, Book 3, Chapter 10—scroll down 80%.)

Insecure about his role as king, Louis increasingly seemed not to like his job. After one of his ministers resigned, he was heard to ask:

> *Why can't I resign too?*

Although the king tried to do what was best for his people, he was unable to relate well to them. When he thought taxing the clergy (the "first estate") and the nobility (the "second estate") might relieve the financial strain, members of those two classes were outraged. A cartoon of the time makes the point.

Looking at the chests, the king asks: "Where is the tax money?" Jacques Necker, the financial minister, answers: "The money was there last time I looked." Sneaking out the door, carrying sacks of money, the clergy and nobility say: "We have it."

By the time of the revolution, in July of 1789, about half of the national income was used to make interest payments on the ever-increasing national debt. As Simon Schama notes in his seminal work, *Citizens, A Chronicle of the French Revolution*:

> *At the root of its* [the government's] *problems was the cost of armaments when coupled with political resistance to new taxes and a growing willingness of governments to accept high interest-bearing obligations from both domestic and, increasingly, foreign creditors.* (Schama, page 71.)

It was no coincidence that two years after the new American republic created a constitution, the French people revolted against their own monarchy. French help with the war meant that longsuffering Frenchmen returned with ideas they could apply in their own country.

If the British king could be deposed in America, why not the French king in France? Alexis de Tocqueville, after studying his country's historical sources fifty years after the revolution, said this:

> *The Revolution was least of all an accident. True, it took the world by surprise, and yet it was the result of a very long process, the sudden and violent climax of a task to which ten generations had contributed.* (Alexis de Tocqueville, The Old Regime and the Revolution, Volume 1, page 106 - translated by Alan S. Kahan.)

When the country developed a new constitution, diminishing his role, the king showed the document to his son, the dauphin Louis-Charles. As rebellion took hold, and a mob stormed the Bastille on July 14, 1789, Louis was told the ancient fortress had fallen.

It is said the king asked one of his ministers: "This is a revolt?" His aide replied:

> *No, sire, it is a revolution.*

Indeed ... three months later, the previously unthinkable happened. About 6,000 women marched to Versailles, planning to confront the King, en massee. Demanding bread for their children, they also insisted the King - and his court - move to Paris.

It was a turning point in the lives of Louis XVI and his family.

Then ... on the 21st of September, in 1792, the French National Convention voted to abolish the monarchy altogether. It would not be long before the French people executed their King.

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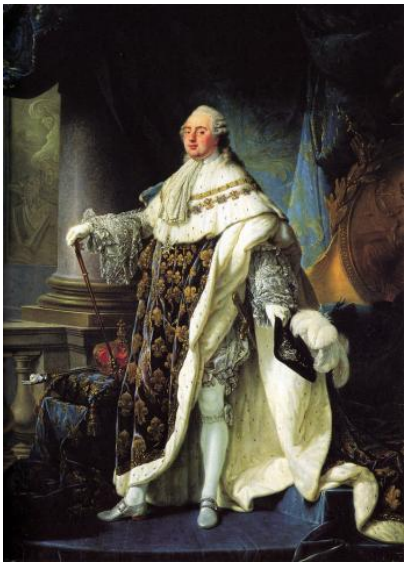
Media Stream



Louis XVI in 1788

Image described above, online courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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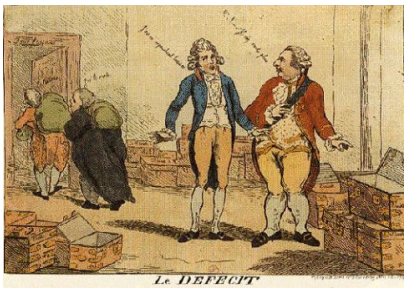

Le Defecit - 1788 Cartoon

Image described above, online courtesy Boise State University.

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Alexis de Tocqueville

Image online courtesy Conseil de l'Ordre des avocats de Paris website.

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