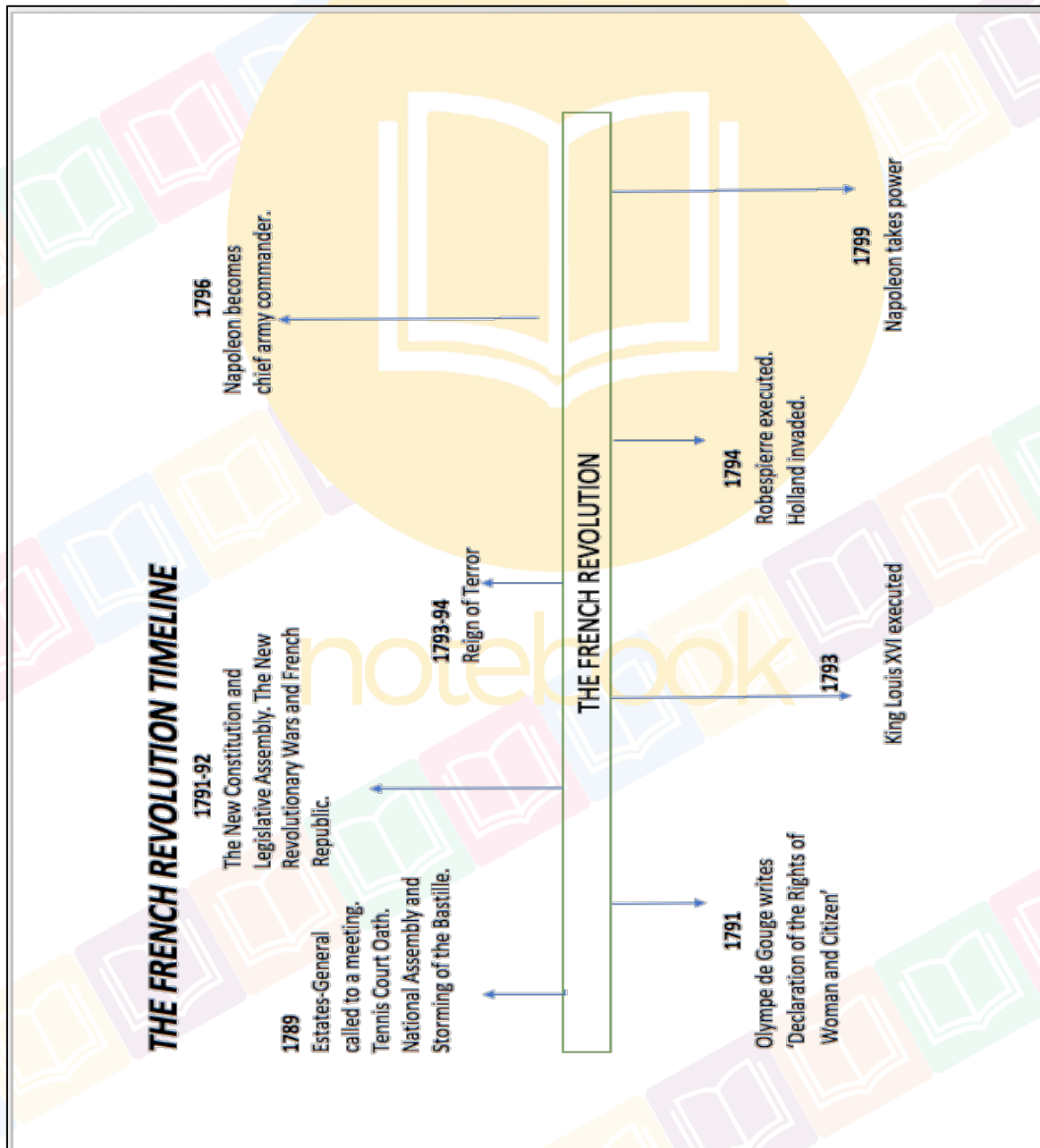




FRENCH REVOLUTION 1789-1799





Introductory Note

The French Revolution of 1789 was a milestone and a major turning point in human history. It revolutionised the social, economic and political condition of not only France but also entire Europe and later the entire world.

The French Revolution had been building up for years. It was caused by bad government and enormous differences between the rich and the poor, encouraged by new Enlightenment ideas about people's rights and hastened by the American Revolution.

In the 18th century, France was in a crisis. Food was scarce, prices were high, and the government was facing bankruptcy. To get more money, Louis could either borrow it or raise taxes. But first, he needed approval and support from a traditional assembly, the Estates-General, which had not met for 175 years. All the three classes or 'Estates' of the French society, the First, consisting of its clergy, the Second consisting of noblemen and aristocracy, and the Third, consisting of professionals, merchants, artisans and farmers, could send their representatives to this gathering.



At the assembly, the representatives of the professional classes rebelled against the nobles and clergy, who wanted to tax the third estate to fund the impoverished state coffers. They took an oath to start a new National Assembly and demand reform. They wrote a new constitution abolishing the old order, nationalising Church lands and reorganising local government. Louis sent troops to try and dismiss the Assembly.

When the citizens of Paris heard this, they took up arms. On July 14, 1789, a mob stormed the Bastille, the king's prison in Paris, which was much hated as it stood for the supreme monarch's unquestioned power. The riot marked the beginning of a bloody revolution in which the rebels demanded, 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity'.

Louis XVI fled but was captured and imprisoned. In 1792, the monarchy was abolished and in the following year, Louis and his wife, Marie Antoinette, were tried and executed. By then, the revolutionary government was at war with most other European states, who were afraid that revolution might spread to their countries.

As often happens in revolutions, chaos broke out, and there was a struggle for power. The new revolutionary



government began rounding up its rivals, royalist or popular, calling them 'enemies of the revolution'. There was a political battle between two groups, the Jacobins and Girondins, which the Jacobins won. They then dominated a new ruling body, called the Committee of Public Safety. The committee mobilized French armies against invasion, and from September 1793 to July 1794, they executed anyone who opposed them in a Reign of Terror. During the Terror, around 18,000 lost their heads to the guillotine. Soon, one man, Robespierre, wielded dictatorial power. Even he was not safe, and in 1794, he was accused of treason and executed.

A new Constitution was written in 1795 and a weak government, called the Directory, was formed. War had already broken out, and French revolutionary armies had conquered the Netherlands and south Germany. A young general, Napoleon Bonaparte, took over the army, invading Italy, Switzerland and Egypt. The Directory came to rely on him. He grew popular and powerful, and in 1799, he removed the Directory and took control as the Emperor of France.



CAUSES OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

i) An unequal and unjust social order - French society was feudal in nature. It was divided into three main classes called the Estates.

- The First Estate consisted of the clergy (church officials).
- The Second Estate consisted of the nobles and rich aristocrats and their families.
- The Third Estate was composed of 90 per cent of the population which included the peasants, artisans, workers and the middle class consisting of merchants and professionals like teachers, doctors, lawyers, etc.

While on one hand, the first and second estates enjoyed a luxurious life with a lot of privileges, the third estate suffered on the other hand. The upper classes owned almost all the land in France and did not have to pay any taxes. They were wealthy and lead a very comfortable life. The entire burden of taxation fell upon the third estate. They did not get to enjoy any of the privileges enjoyed by the first and second estates. Taxation was imposed on everything including the bare necessities like salt. Life was very hard for them.



ii) The growing power of the middle class - The middle class including the merchants, traders, manufacturers and other professionals had started to acquire great wealth and had become economically powerful by the 18th century. They were however denied social equality and political rights which caused great resentment amongst them. So, they used their economic power to overthrow the Old Regime.

iii) Influence of new ideas - The revolutionary writings of famous French philosophers like Voltaire, Rousseau and Montesquieu created an intellectual awakening in France. The middle class was inspired by their revolutionary ideas of liberty, equality, fraternity and popular sovereignty. They exposed the evils of the society and the government and inspired the people to revolt and fight for their rights.

iii) An autocratic and absolute monarchy - The French king was an autocrat. He enjoyed absolute powers and his will was law. There was no check on his powers by any parliament. He ruled by Divine Right and was answerable to God and not to the people.