French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars

Society of 18th century France was divided into three classes or estates. The Clergy was the first estate, the Nobles were the second estate and the third estate, which formed the majority of population, included the middle classes, the artisans, the city workers and the peasants (80% of the population).

Clergy was the largest landowner in per capita terms. Nobility had a monopoly on all the important official positions in the government service, the army, and other public offices. The Third Estate did not have voting rights. On the other hand, the Clergy and the Nobles did not pay any tax and the tax burden was solely borne by the Third Estate. This was a major source for the grievance of people.

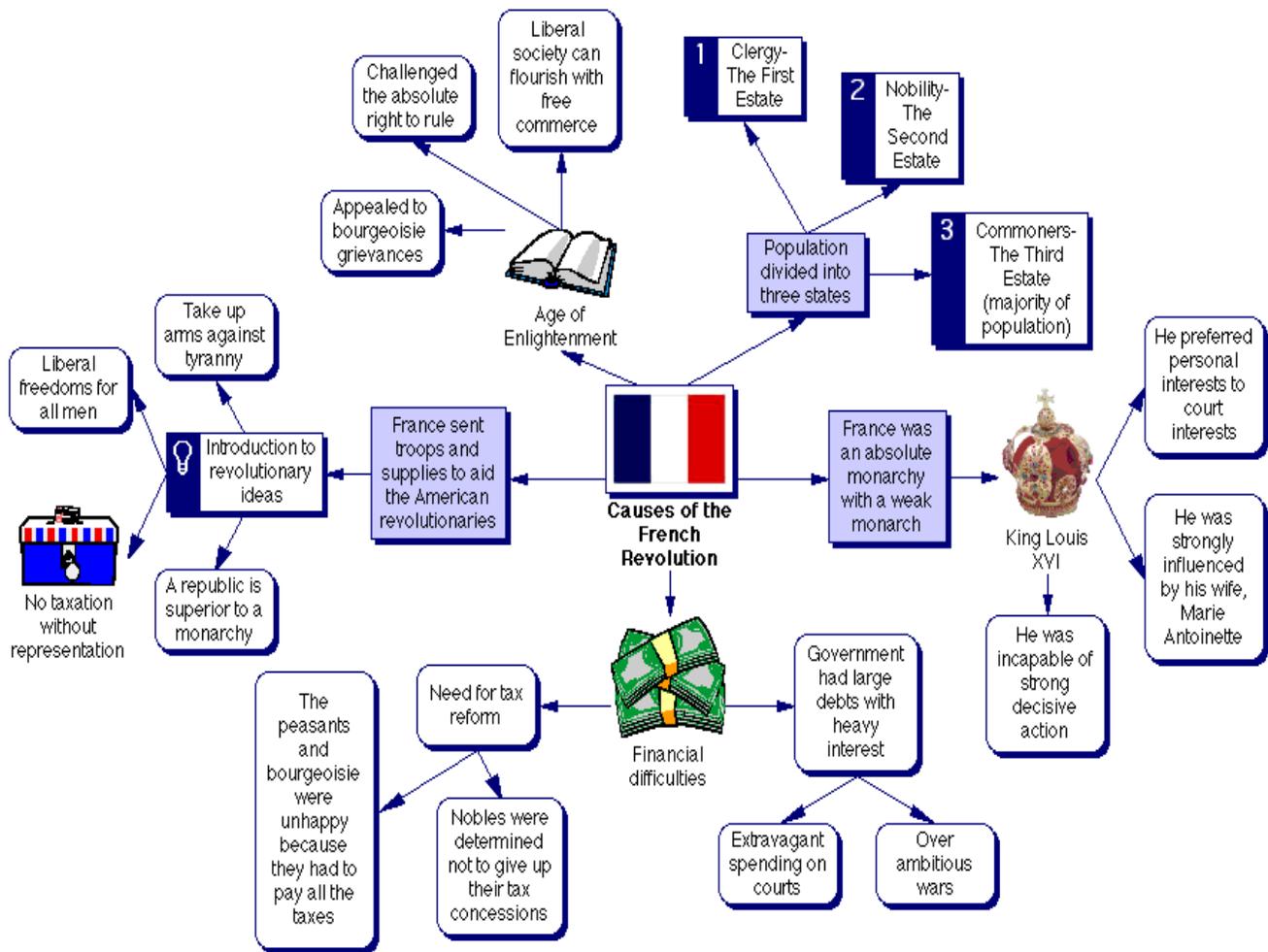## Unpopular Monarchy & financial troubles

King Louis XVI was an inefficient ruler & under him France was in financial trouble due to costly wars like the Seven Year War. The American Revolution had pushed France to bankruptcy as France had aided the Americans against Britain.

While France supported the American Revolution (which aimed self-rule, liberty, equality & democracy for the People), the way the Monarchy ruled in France was an anti-thesis to the ideas that formed the foundation of the American Revolution.

Role of Enlightenment Thinkers

- Enlightenment thinkers grounded their arguments on Rationalism, happiness of Man, Democracy, Liberty & Secularism.
- The Doctrine of Nature brought the Clergy under attack by the thinkers. Voltaire believed that all religion was absurd as it was against the logics of reason.
- Atheists and Materialists gained popularity as it was emphasized that man's destiny lay in his own hands.
- The principles of Laissez Faire and No Taxation without Representation were stressed which brought the Nobility under criticism.

Some other major factors were → Renaissance of 14th century, Reformation of 16th century, the Scientific Revolution from 17th century onward that helped undermine the authority of the Church, the Enlightenment that started from 1600s and the American Revolution (1765-83)

Liberal society can flourish with free commerce

Challenged the absolute right to rule

Appealed to bourgeoisie grievances

Age of Enlightenment

1 Clergy- The First Estate

2 Nobility- The Second Estate

3 Commoners- The Third Estate (majority of population)

Population divided into three states

Take up arms against tyranny

Liberal freedoms for all men

Introduction to revolutionary ideas

France sent troops and supplies to aid the American revolutionaries

No taxation without representation

A republic is superior to a monarchy

Causes of the French Revolution

France was an absolute monarchy with a weak monarch

King Louis XVI

He preferred personal interests to court interests

He was strongly influenced by his wife, Marie Antoinette

He was incapable of strong decisive action

The peasants and bourgeoisie were unhappy because they had to pay all the taxes

Need for tax reform

Nobles were determined not to give up their tax concessions

Financial difficulties

Government had large debts with heavy interest

Extravagant spending on courts

Over ambitious wars

Events in French Revolution of 1789

In 1789, King Louis XVI called a meeting of Estate's General to get consent for additional funds. Third estate representatives opposed additional funding since they were the ones who were the only taxpayers and would have to bear the tax burden from any such additional funding.

Although they had demanded and secured double representation for the Assembly, they were infuriated when they came to know that all the 3 estates were to have equal votes irrespective of the number of representatives.

When the debates reached a dead end, Third Estate representatives declared themselves the National Assembly, an assembly of the people rather than an assembly of the Estates.

Soon they moved their meeting to the nearby Royal Tennis Court. Their goal was to draw up a constitution for France in which the Third Estate could also have voting rights. The Second Estate saw this as an attempt to do away with the Old Order, and forced the King to crush the National Assembly.

When the King sent in troops to dispel the leaders of third estate, the people got enraged and they went on to break open the Bastille Prison. They freed the inmates and took control of the arms and ammunition stored in the prison. This was a symbolic revolt against the King and marked the de-facto end to his authority.

After Bastille event, the National Assembly started legislating and it adopted the now famous document of French Revolution, called the Rights of Man and Citizen. They abolished Feudalism, removed the Roman control on the French Church and curtailed the powers of the Church so as to reduce their influence in polity.

The French revolutionary wars were fought from 1792 to 1802, by France, against the absolute monarchies of Austria, Prussia and Savoy (Italian State) as the latter desired to protect their own hold on power from being eroded by ideas of liberty and equality.

They are known as Revolutionary wars because France was trying to protect the revolution of 1789, which was under threat from neighbouring monarchies which were afraid of the French revolution spreading to their countries. Hence they wanted to reinstate Monarchy in France.

The French forces tried to enlist the support of the people of the territory they gained control of, by offering them assistance and the ideas of fraternity, liberty and equality. In 1793, the King and the Queen of France were executed and then France declared a pre-emptive war against Britain, Holland, Spain and Hungary.

Jacobins & Napoleon

To qualify as voter, a person had to have income above a certain threshold. Due to this conditional Right to Vote, majority of the Third Estate could still not become voters. The Aristocracy was now replaced by the Bourgeois and the conditions of the peasants and city workers did not improve as they had expected. Soon after, in 1793, the radical Jacobins came to power in France. They made the Right to Vote unconditional by removing the income clause.

Robespierre, the leader of the Jacobins was the man behind, what came to be known as, the Reign of Terror, where the regime sought to execute via guillotine all those who opposed the revolution. King and the Queen were executed in 1793. Soon the guillotine was used to punish anyone voicing dissent. Under the Jacobins, France descended into anarchy with little scope for the Rule of Law.

Soon the Jacobins themselves turned against Robespierre and the Reign of Terror came to an end with his execution via guillotine. Bourgeois again came to power and their government was called Directorate. In 1795 they rewrote the constitution reinstating the conditional Right to Vote. In 1799, Napoleon, in a coup, brought France under military rule. He declared himself the Emperor a few years later and the Monarchy was restored in France.

The years between 1803 and 1815 are known for Napoleonic wars, wherein the French fought against rest of Europe and brought the ideas of French Revolution to the conquered territories. Napoleon's forces abolished serfdom and modernized the administration of the conquered territories in Europe.

After Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo (United Kingdom of Netherlands-present day Belgium), the monarchies in rest of the Europe helped the old dynasty to come to power in 1815. But the monarchy could never restore its control to the level witnessed prior to the 1789 revolution and soon France saw four waves of revolutions to finally become a Republic in 1871.

Impact / Constructive Criticism of French Revolution

The wars with France weakened the European colonial powers like Spain and Portugal and their colonies in South and Central America declared themselves as independent republics.

Simon Bolivar from 1813 to 1824 liberated many South American countries and later tried to organize them into a US type federation in form of Gran Columbia. He freed Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia from the Spanish rule through an armed revolt.

The abolition of Slavery after French revolution was the first move against this repressive system and Britain followed suit in 1833 while USA banned it in 1865.

It led to destruction of feudalism in France as all laws of old feudal regime were repealed and lands of the nobles and church were confiscated and redistributed. The privileged classes i.e. first and second estate, were abolished. Anti-Feudalism wave that hit Europe in 19th century owes its origin to the events in France. French revolution ushered in the new economic system of Capitalism as against the prevalent Feudalism.

Jacobian constitution, which although never came into effect, was the first genuinely democratic constitution. It gave the right to vote to all, and even the Right to Insurrection, which implies the right to revolt or rise against the government. The Government under the Jacobin constitution had the responsibility to give work to all and 'Happiness' of people was to be overarching state policy.

Under Napoleon's rule, Napoleonic Code as a civil code for France, was introduced and some of its provision like merit based recruitment to government jobs and focus on clearly written law, continue to effect the present legal system in France and other nations.

French Revolution inspired movements against colonialism in colonies around the world, while movements for democracy and self-rule rose in whole of Europe.

Negatives of French Revolution

French Revolution had limited success in achieving its objectives. In reality, post-revolution regime failed to resolve the grievances of the workers, who were the main force during the uprising of 1789; only the peasants benefited (as they became owners of land confiscated from the privileged classes).

The revolution failed to bring in democratic rule and the Reign of Terror under the Jacobians was a mass slaughter characterized by nothing but brute force and breach of rule of law.

Napoleon, due to his continuous warfare resulted in rise of nationalism in the invaded territories and he came to be perceived, not as a liberator, but a conqueror. This Nationalism was to prove advantageous to the unification of Germany and Italy in 1870s.