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The French Revolution

How did the British react to July 1789?

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Introduction

1789 is one of the most significant dates in history - famous for the Revolution in France with cries of "Liberté! Egalité! Fraternité!" that led to the removal of the French upper classes. The French Revolution didn't just take place in 1789. It actually lasted for another six years, with far more violent and momentous events taking place in the years after 1789. However, here we examine the British reaction to the events in France during this famous year - were the British government extremely worried or did they see it as merely a few minor disturbances?

Looking at primary source material from 1789, including a London newspaper report, together with both official and personal letters sent from Paris, you will be asked to assess and investigate the reaction. The significance of 1789 is now well known, but did anybody at the time even dare to suggest how important it was?

Let's look at the evidence to find out.

Tasks

Look at Source 1

1. This is an extract from the London Gazette from Monday 13 July 1789.
 - a) What evidence is there that the population of Paris were worried?
 - b) What was wrong with the official police force?

Look at Source 2

2. This is an extract from the London Gazette from Tuesday 14 July 1789.
 - c) Why were the people outside the Bastille so outraged when the Governor gave the order to fire on them?
 - d) Some were then allowed in - on what condition?
 - e) What happened to the forty who went into the Bastille?
 - f) What happened to the Governor?

Look at Source 3

3. This is an extract from the London Gazette from Wednesday 15 July 1789.
 - a) According to the source, people lined the streets - how does the source describe their behaviour?
 - b) How pleased were people with the King's promises? How were people behaving?
 - c) What evidence in the source suggests further trouble could easily break out?

Look at Source 4

4. This is a letter from a Mr Jenkinson from Paris, dated 15 July 1789.
 - a) Examine Mr. Jenkinson's description of the storming of the Bastille - is there anything to doubt his claims? Give your reasons.

- b) Why, according to this source, did the King 'recant all his former words' and agree to the people's demands?
- c) What are the strengths and weaknesses of this evidence?

Look at Source 5

5. This is an extract from a confidential report from the British Ambassador.
 - a) How have the recent events affected newspapers?
 - b) Why does the ambassador have little to report?

Look at Source 6

6. This is another extract from the report seen in Source 5.
 - a) What is wrong with the account of the storming of the Bastille?
 - b) What reasons does the ambassador suggest for the quick and easy take over of the Bastille?
 - c) What reasons are given to 'lament' the death of the Marquis de Launay?
 - d) What does the small number of prisoners actually inside the Bastille suggest about the reign of King Louis XVI?

Look at Source 7

7. This is a further extract from the report seen in Source 5 and 6.
 - a) How many members of the royal family have fled?
 - b) What does the ambassador say it is 'scarcely possible to imagine'?
 - c) What main reason is suggested for wanting these people to return?

Look again at Sources 1-7

8. Using all the available sources, decide which of these descriptions best fit each source.
 - Serious revolution, leading to real danger for Britain.
 - A Paris-based revolt that the King was forced to agree to.
 - Minor disturbances, of no real consequence at all.

Explain the reasons for your decisions.

9. Using all your previous work, write a detailed paragraph explaining how serious the British took the events of July 1789. Use your source evidence effectively and think about the following issues:
 - What had been the reaction to the King's promises following the storming of the Bastille?
 - How serious and long lasting did the ambassador suggest the problems were?

Background

1789 saw the beginning of the French Revolution that lasted until 1794. King Louis XVI needed more money, but had failed to raise more taxes when he had called a meeting of the Estates General. This instead turned into a protest about conditions in France. On July 14 1789 the Paris mob, hungry due to a lack of food from poor harvests, upset at the conditions of their lives and annoyed with their King and Government, stormed the Bastille fortress (a prison). This turned out to be more symbolic than anything else as only four or five prisoners were found.

In October 1789, King Louis and his family were moved from Versailles (the Royal palace) to Paris. He tried to flee in 1791, but was stopped and forced to agree to a new form of government. Replacing the power of the King, a 'legislative assembly' governed from October 1791 to September 1792, and was then replaced by the 'National Convention'. The Republic of France was declared, and soon the King was put on trial. The Revolution became more and more radical and violent. King Louis XVI was executed on January 21 1793. In the six weeks that followed some 1,400 people who were considered potential enemies to the Republic were executed in Paris.

Many historians now regard the French revolution as a turning point in the history of Europe but also in North America where many of the same ideas influenced the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution. The famous slogan 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity' called for every person's right to freedom and equal treatment. Across France and the rest of Europe the consequences of the Revolution were huge. There were many new developments including the fall of the monarchy, changes in society with the rise of the middle class, and the growth of nationalism.

Teachers Notes

This lesson encourages pupils to examine and investigate the British reaction to the outbreak of the French Revolution. Through the use of primary source evidence from a contemporary newspaper together with both official and private correspondence from the time, pupils are asked to decide how seriously the British government took the events of 1789 in 1789.

This lesson can form part of studies for Scheme of Work Unit 10: France 1789-94 - 'why was there a revolution?' It is useful specifically for part four of the unit that requires pupils to decide: 'Why was the Bastille attacked and destroyed?', although it can of course be used for any investigation into the French Revolution. Use of this snapshot covers National Curriculum requirements for History in relation to general requirements (2a), together with breadth of study requirements to examine a European study before 1914 (11).

Sources

Image : La Prise de la Bastille - Jean Pierre Hovell 1789

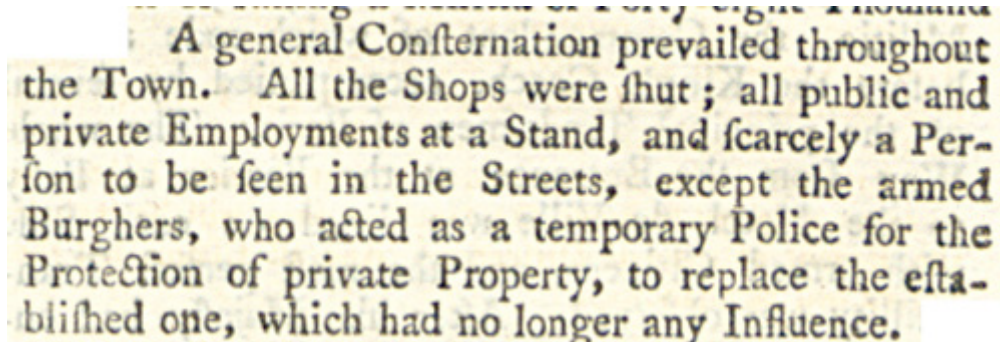
Sources 1-3 : The London Gazette - ZJ 1/85

Sources 4-6 Extracts from a confidential report from the British Ambassador, 30th July 1789 FO 27/32

Schemes of Work

France 1789-94 why was there a revolution?
Key Stage 3 Unit 10.

Source 1 : 'The London Gazette' - Monday 13 July 1789 (ZJ 1/85)



A general Consternation prevailed throughout the Town. All the Shops were shut ; all public and private Employments at a Stand, and scarcely a Person to be seen in the Streets, except the armed Burghers, who acted as a temporary Police for the Protection of private Property, to replace the established one, which had no longer any Influence.

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Glossary

Burghers : an inhabitant of a town, esp. a member of the middle class; citizen.

Source 2 : 'The London Gazette' – Tuesday 14 July 1789 (ZJ 1/85)

In the Evening a Detachment with Two Pieces of Cannon went to the Bastile, to demand the Ammunition deposited there. A Flag of Truce had been sent before them, which was answered from within: But nevertheless, the Governor (the Marquis de Launay) ordered the Guard to fire, and several were killed. The Populace, enraged at this Proceeding, rushed forward to the Assault, when the Governor agreed to admit a certain Number, on Condition that they should not commit any Violence. A Detachment of about Forty accordingly passed the Drawbridge, which was instantly drawn up, and the whole Party massacred. This Breach of Faith, aggravated by so glaring an Instance of Inhumanity, naturally excited a Spirit of Revenge and Tumult not to be appeased. A Breach was soon made in the Gate, and the Fortrefs surrendered. The Governor, the principal Gunner, the Jailer, and Two old Invalids, who had been noticed as being more active than the Rest, were seized, and carried before the Council assembled at the Hotel de Ville, by whom the Marquis de Launay was sentenced to be beheaded, which was accordingly put in Execution at the Place de Grève, and the other Prisoners were also put to Death.

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Source 3 : 'The London Gazette' – Wednesday 15 July 1789 (ZJ 1/85)

The whole Way from the Entrance at the Barrier at Passy to the Hotel de Ville was lined on each Side with armed Citizens, and the most perfect Tranquillity was observed. After his Majesty had entered the Hotel de Ville, he declared that he appeared there to gratify the Wishes of the Citizens of Paris, and to assure them of his Readiness to do every Thing in his Power to quiet their Minds, and restore Tranquillity to the City. On his Majesty's Return he received every Testimony of Loyalty and Affection from a most numerous and orderly Populace; and it is computed that this Day there were not less than 150,000 Men bearing Arms in Paris.

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Source 4 : A letter from a Mr Jenkinson from Paris, dated 15 July 1789 (FO 27/32)

The Bastille made some Resistance but was taken yesterday Evening. The Governor and Sub-Governor had their Heads cut off, which were carried in Triumph round the City.

The King was at first very resolute. His thoughts however of the Danger he was in have this Evening induced him to recant all his former words & to submit in every thing. Deputies have arrived this afternoon from Versailles with his good news, and it is reported that the King will be here tomorrow, but I own I very much doubt it. The Consternation that has prevailed in Paris for the last two days, is beyond all power of description. Few People have gone out of their doors, & all Public Amusements for the first time have been stopped. I however have seen every thing of Importance from the first Entrance of the Troops to the taking the Bast which I was present at yesterday Evening, & indeed the whole sight has been such, that nothing would have

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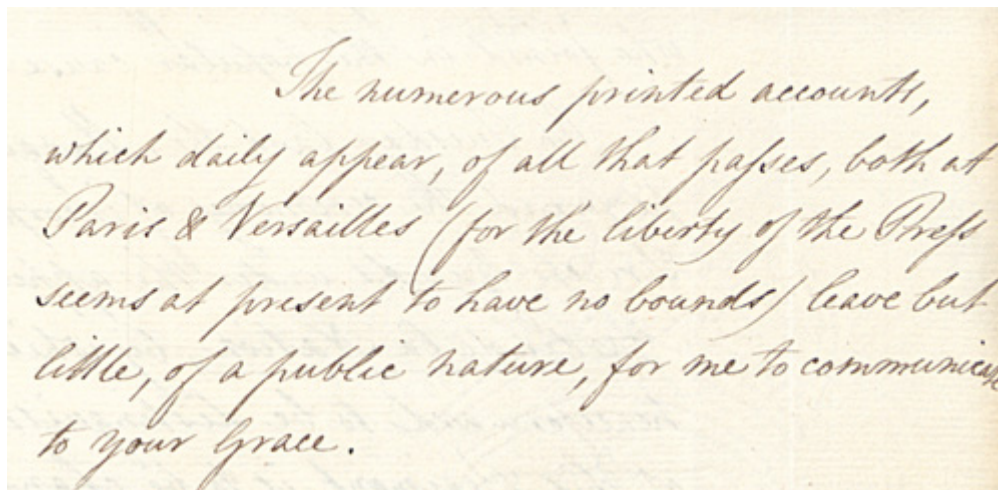
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Source 5 : Extract from a confidential report from the British Ambassador, 30th July 1789 (FO 27/2)



The numerous printed accounts, which daily appear, of all that passes, both at Paris & Versailles (for the liberty of the Press seems at present to have no bounds) leave but little, of a public nature, for me to communicate to your Grace.

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Source 6 : Extract from a confidential report from the British Ambassador, 30th July 1789 (FO 27/2)

Your Grace receives, among other Papers, a Précis of the taking of the Bastille, which I have reason to believe gives a pretty exact detail of the operations against that Fortress,

excepting that it greatly exaggerates the number of persons killed; not more than seven or eight having lost their lives during the whole of that affair. The plan herewith enclosed, which I am told is ~~x~~ very accurate, serves to illustrate the account that is given of the attack and subsequent advances. Either the misconduct or the pusillanimity of the Garrison (which indeed consisted of not more than eighty Invalids) rendered the capture of the Bastille a work of no great difficulty nor of long duration. The fate of the Governor M. de Launay, is generally lamented, for he was an Officer of great merit and always treated the prisoners committed to his charge with every degree of lenity & humanity of which the nature of their situations would admit: it may be observed that the mildness of the present reign is strongly characterised by the small number of persons who were discovered in confinement in the Bastille: yet these considerations were not sufficient to check the fury of the populace, animated by the success of the enterprise and heated with the spirit of vengeance.

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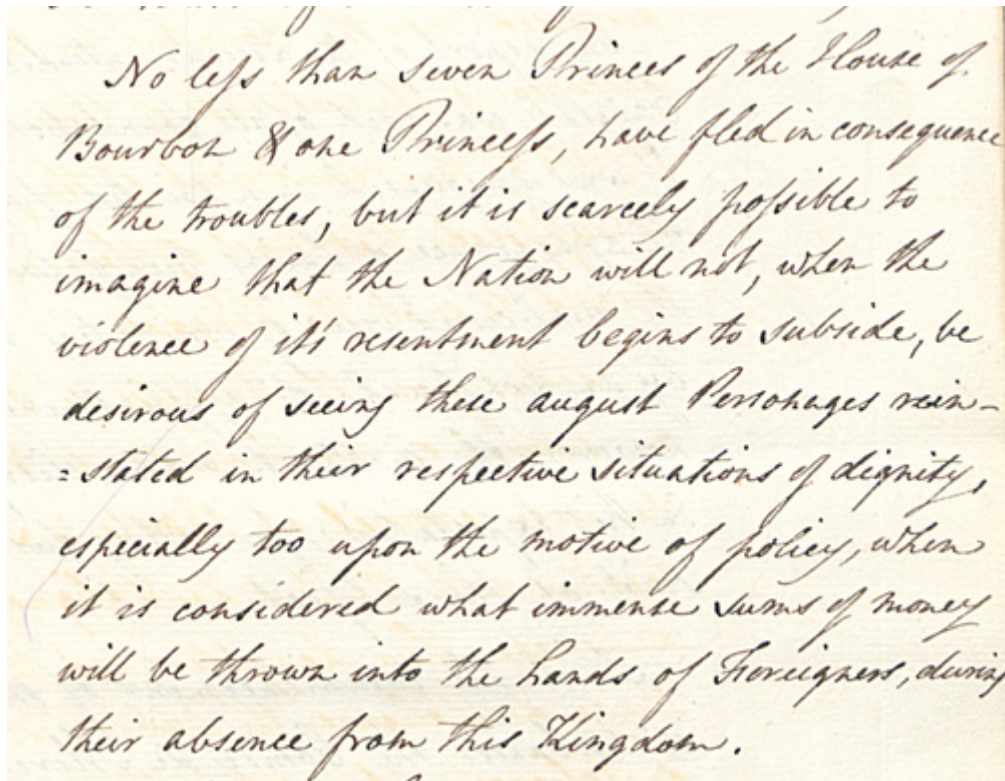
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Glossary

pusillanimity - cowardliness

Source 7 : Extract from a confidential report from the British Ambassador, 30th July 1789 (FO 27/2)



No less than seven Princes of the House of Bourbon & one Princess, have fled in consequence of the troubles, but it is scarcely possible to imagine that the Nation will not, when the violence of its resentment begins to subside, be desirous of seeing these august Personages reinstated in their respective situations of dignity, especially too upon the motive of policy, when it is considered what immense sums of money will be thrown into the hands of Foreigners, during their absence from this Kingdom.

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Glossary

august = Inspiring awe or admiration; majestic: the august presence of the monarch.