

Lesson Thirty-Six

The French Revolution

LESSON IDEA

To dispel myths about the French Revolution, and show that it was a grab for power by men with sinister designs, not a fight for freedom.

PREPARATION

Become familiar with the terms Bastille (Bas-teel) and Duc d'Orleans (Duke d'Or-lay-ahn) so they can be easily pronounced when during the lesson. encountered in the story. Other words which members of the family may not understand also should be defined or simplified.

IN 1789 there was in France an ancient prison called the Bastille. It has become the focus of a legend in most history books. Does any one know why, and what kind of prison it was? [Encourage discussion to determine how much your family knows about the French Revolution and the storming of the Bastille.]

Such authors as Thomas Carlyle and Charles Dickens have portrayed the Bastille as a grim, stone fortress with dark dungeons and monstrous torture chambers crawling with toads, lizards, rats, and spiders. They have claimed that it was populated by poor peasants rotting away for petty crimes. Perhaps most gruesome of all is the legend of the special room scented with flowers and lit by fifty candles where captives would be brought before the head of the prison and promised their liberty. Then, the story goes, as the prisoners' eyes began to brighten at the prospect of freedom, their sadistic jailer would give a signal. The floor would open and the victims would fall upon a wheel of knives and be sliced to pieces.

Such is the legend. If we accept it as fact, as many have, it becomes plausible that such a monstrous facility could spark a bloody revolution, and that it would be similar to the American Revolution: an authentic struggle for freedom from despotism. But the legend of the French Revolution is false, and no one came to know it better than the French people themselves, who longed for liberty but received misery, death, and dictatorship instead.

Let us begin our discussion of the myths with

the Bastille. It was indeed an ancient prison, with high stone walls, drawbridges, and cannon. It had dungeons, but they had not been used for a quarter-century. All the rooms in use had windows, stoves or fireplaces, good beds, and furniture. The food was excellent and plentiful. Prisoners were allowed to occupy themselves in various ways (books, music, and drawing, for example) and were in some cases were allowed to meet in each other's rooms for games.

The Bastille had never been a prison house of the poor; most of its inmates were noblemen and aristocrats. By 1789 it was nearly empty and plans were already underway to have the symbol of bygone tyranny torn down and replaced with a public square. The architectural plans for the transformation has been published as early as 1784.

When the mob stormed this fortress in 1789, it found only seven inmates in the entire prison, all of whom were living comfortably. Four were forgers, two were lunatics who had been imprisoned to protect others, and one was a count who had been jailed for "monstrous crimes" at the request of his family. There were no captives in chains, no skeletons or corpses, no torture chambers — none of the legendary horrors.

Why, then, did the mob march on the Bastille? Writers at the time agree that the motive was not to liberate prisoners or protest against authority, but simply to obtain guns and munitions stored there.

The governor of the prison had three possible courses of action: surrender to the demands of the mob; train his cannon on the throng and massacre thousands; or ignore the mob, trusting in the security of the thick walls and drawbridges.

He opted for surrender, fearing to use his power and refusing to rely on the Bastille's fortifications. In exchange for this appeasement and capitulation, he was given a promise that no one would be injured. Within hours, however, he and others in the Bastille were beaten, bayoneted, and beheaded. Their skulls were affixed to long steel-tipped

