

Geography of the French Revolution: More Than Just Paris!

Materials Needed:

- Computer with internet access
- Online map tools (like Google Maps/Earth, or historical map websites) OR a physical atlas
- Blank outline map of France (can be printed from online resources)
- Colored pencils or markers
- Notebook or paper for notes
- Pen or pencil

Introduction: Setting the Scene

We often think of the French Revolution happening just in Paris – storming the Bastille, the Reign of Terror – but France is a large country! Its geography played a huge role in how events unfolded, how ideas spread, and the challenges revolutionaries faced. Let's put on our geographer hats and explore France during this tumultuous time!

Activity 1: Revolutionary Hotspots

Using your map tool (online or atlas), let's locate some key places:

- **Paris:** The heart of the revolution. Find key locations within Paris if possible (like the site of the Bastille, Tuileries Palace). Why was Paris so central?
- **Versailles:** The opulent palace of the King. How far is it from Paris? What symbolic importance did this distance have?
- **Varennes:** Where King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were captured trying to flee. Locate it. How far did they get? What does this location tell us about escape routes?
- **Marseilles:** This port city is famous for the French national anthem, "La Marseillaise." Where is it located? Why might a song from this city become the national anthem?
- **Lyon & Bordeaux:** Major cities outside Paris. Research briefly what happened in these cities during the Revolution. Did everyone support Paris?

Mark these locations on your blank outline map.

Activity 2: The Lay of the Land

Look at a physical map of France. Consider:

- **Size and Shape:** France is relatively large. How long would it take news or orders to travel from Paris to the borders in the 1790s (Hint: no trains or internet!)?
- **Rivers:** Identify major rivers like the Seine, Loire, Garonne, and Rhone. How might these have been important for transport and communication?
- **Mountains:** Note the Alps and Pyrenees. How might these mountains have affected France's relationship with its neighbors or movement within the country?
- **Regions:** France had distinct regions with different cultures and economies (e.g., Brittany, Normandy, Provence). How might regional differences have influenced support for or resistance against the Revolution?

Discuss how these geographic factors might have helped or hindered the revolutionaries.

Activity 3: Mapping the Spread of Ideas

The Revolution didn't happen everywhere at once. Events like the 'Great Fear' (rumors of aristocratic plots leading to peasant uprisings) spread rapidly in the summer of 1789. Research how revolutionary ideas and actions spread from Paris outwards.

On your outline map, use arrows or different colors to show the general direction and timing of the spread of revolutionary fervor or specific events (like the federalist revolts). Was the spread even? Why or why not?

Activity 4: Redrawing the Map

Before the Revolution, France was divided into provinces with historical roots. The revolutionaries reorganized France into 'départements' - roughly equal in size and often named after geographical features like rivers or mountains.

Find a map of pre-revolutionary French provinces and compare it to a map of the départements created in 1790 (you can search online for 'French provinces map' and 'French departments map 1790'). Why do you think the revolutionaries made this drastic change? What were they trying to achieve geographically and politically?

Conclusion & Reflection

Geography wasn't just a backdrop for the French Revolution; it actively shaped it! From the concentration of power in Paris to the difficulties of communication across the country and the strategic redrawing of internal borders, understanding France's geography gives us a richer understanding of this pivotal historical event.

Thought Question: How might the French Revolution have been different if France was a long, thin country like Chile, or an island nation like Great Britain?