The Storming of the Bastille

On July 14th, 1789 the people of Paris stormed the Bastille, the prison which was the symbol of the absolute monarchy which France had been suffering under for so long. The drama unfolded in the early morning hours, with the looting of the prison as the mob searched for arms to fight an expected attack from the army, which was loyal to the King. They managed to get their hands on thirty two thousand rifles, but no ammunition. The word soon spread that the much needed ammo could be found at the Bastille prison. That is where the mob now headed.

To the people of Paris, the Bastille was a symbol of brutality and totalitarian power. It was also hated because of the many stories that had emerged from its walls of horrible torture and brutality. The prison was a formidable structure. Its walls were ten feet thick and its towers were some ninety feet high.

The Bastille was guarded by cannon, eighty soldiers and an additional thirty Swiss Guards. The soldiers had six hundred musketoons, twelve rampart muskets complete with more than fifteen thousand cartridges and twenty thousand pounds of powder. The mob was temporarily halted by the sight of the cannons. A rumor went around that one of the cannons was being positioned to fire at the street of St. Antoine. This would pose a direct threat to the people of Paris. The mob became enraged, demanding that the cannon be redirected. They milled around outside of the prison with their empty weapons in their hands. Soon they had put together a message demanding that the prison allow them access to the ammunition. A delegation was invited into the prison by the Governor of the Bastille, Bernard de Launay. De Launay then invited the delegation to lunch with him. When they did not return the mob became angry, fearing that they had been detained. A second delegation was sent forth. These soon came out again with the message that the Governor had adamantly refused to surrender. The delegates also had the information that the cannon were unloaded. This piece of news was all that the mob needed to urge them on.

The cry of “We want the Bastille!” went up among the crowd. The army now became fearful and withdrew to the Champ de Mars. Then a group of youths climbed onto a perfumer’s shop built against a wall of the prison and dropped into the courtyard. They rushed to the drawbridge and soon had it falling open with a devastating crash. This actually killed one of the crowd. The mob, however, was now able to rush into the prison’s courtyard. But then fire came from the army and several of the protestors were cut down. Fierce fighting followed and carried on into the evening. Finally the mob got their hands on some cannons. They dragged them into position to blow down the gates of the prison. The soldiers guarding the prison now urged their Governor to surrender. Instead deLaunay threatened to blow up the whole prison. Finally, pressure put on him by his defenders changed his mind. Before the cannon could be fired, Governor deLaunay surrendered. This did not, however, spare his life. Before long his severed head was paraded to the mob.

The prison only held seven prisoners. But the storming of the Bastille had done far more than release these seven men. It had brought an ancient system of royal tyranny to an end. Upon learning that the Bastille had been taken, King Louis XVI asked an aid, “Is this a revolt?” The answer came swiftly: “No, sir. It is a revolution.”

Two days after the storming of the Bastille, the National Assembly ordered that this symbol of despotic power be burned to the ground. The crowds cheered as the prison walls crumbled and finally grass grew where the Bastille once stood.
Answer the following questions below in complete sentences

1. Why did the mob want to take the Bastille?

2. To the People of Paris, what was the Bastille a symbol of and why was it hated?

3. What were the dimensions of the Bastille that were mentioned?

4. What guarded the Bastille?

5. What temporarily halted the mob?

6. Did Governor de Launay accept the request to surrender?

7. What information did the second delegation have when they came out of the Bastille?

8. What cry went up from the Crowd?

9. How was one of the crowd killed?

10. Why did the soldiers urge the Governor to surrender?

11. What happened to Governor de Launay?

12. How many prisoners were in the Bastille when it was stormed?

13. What was the result of the storming of the Bastille?

14. What happened two days after the storming of the Bastille?