**The Great Fear**

The Great Fear (in French, *Grande Peur*) was a wave of peasant riots and violence that swept through France in July and August 1789. These riots were caused by economic concerns, rural panic and the power of rumor. Already excited by the summer’s political developments, France’s peasants began to hear rumors about roving bands of hired brigands, who were reportedly rampaging through the countryside, raiding villages and stealing grain. These rumors appeared in different places, took different forms and invoked different levels of response. Many peasants responded by arming themselves and mobilizing to defend their property. Some went further and engaged in revolutionary violence, taking to the road, looting the *châteaux* of landed aristocrats and destroying feudal contracts. The peasants, it seems, became the destructive brigands they had initially feared. While few people were killed during the Great Fear, millions of *livres* of private and feudal property was either stolen or destroyed.

The story of the Great Fear begins with paranoia about outsiders. French peasants were accustomed to outsiders arriving in their region, usually in the middle of the year when good weather made travel easier. Some of these outsiders were landless laborers or destitute townspeople in search of paid work. Others were beggars, vagrants and outcasts, who decided that living off the land or seeking the charity of farmers was better than starving in the cities. Peasant communities were, by their nature, insular and suspicious of outsiders. They considered these strangers with a suspicious eye. New arrivals competed for labor, food and charity provided by the local parish. The situation was particularly critical in the spring of 1789, as France endured its worst food crisis in years. Even the small stores of grain retained by peasants for their own survival were dwindling. According to John Albert White, who translated Georges Lefebvre’s pivotal study of the Great Fear, the numbers of itinerants in rural areas reached levels never seen before:



*A map showing the waves of movement and violence during the Great Fear*

These fears of royal and aristocratic retribution spread exponentially in late July (as Lefebvre himself put it, “fear bred fear”). Lefebvre and later historians have attempted to track the course of the Great Fear, albeit with only partial success. The circulation of rumor was both fast – almost too fast for the age – and sporadic. It did not always follow logical transport routes, such as rivers and roads. There are accounts of the same rumor appearing in places 20 miles apart on the same day. As these rumors circulated, some peasant communities became convinced that hired brigands were marching their way. In this paranoid climate even the most benign event – a sighting of strangers, movement in the distance, and smoke on the horizon – could trigger a panicked response. In Angoulême, for example, thousands of men were armed and mobilized after spotting a cloud of raised dust. A peasant militia in Champagne was raised after locals saw men sneaking through a nearby wood; the ‘invaders’ turned out to be cows.

1. What was the Great Fear?
2. What caused the Great Fear to Begin?
3. What was the root cause (anger) from the Great Fear?
4. What is the importance of the Great Fear?