

The Causes of the French Revolution

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By the late eighteenth century, France was on the brink of revolution. The reasons had been building up over many years, and mainly concerned the great divide between the nobility and the clergy, and everybody else. The French population was divided into three **estates**. The First estate was made up of the **clergy**. It numbered around 100,000 people. The Second estate was made up of the **nobility**. It numbered around 400,000 people. The Third estate was made up of the **bourgeoisie**, wage earners, and the **peasantry**. It made up the majority of the French population.

The first and second estates enjoyed certain privileges that that the third estate did not. Firstly, although they were the richest, they did not have to pay taxes. They were also the only members in society who could hold positions of importance such as Officers in the army. This caused great discontent within the Third Estate.



KEYWORDS

Revolution – a great change over a short period of time.

Estates – the class system in pre-revolutionary France.

Bourgeoisie – middle class.

Nobility – The upper class.

Clergy – The Church.

Peasants – The lower class, 90% of the population.



THE THIRD ESTATE

- Peasants were forced to do military service.
- Peasants could not hunt or fish on nobles' estates.
- Peasants had to pay taxes to their lord, the king and the Church.
- Peasants had to use the lord's mill, oven and winepress, and pay for them.
- Peasants made up 90% of the population.

THE FIRST AND SECOND ESTATE

- Nobles had almost complete authority over peasants.
- Nobles did not have to do military service.
- Nobles were exempt from most taxes.
- Nobles collected tolls from people using roads and markets.
- Many nobles and clergy lived in great luxury in chateaux and palaces.



The Kings, through their ministers and local officials **RULED ABSOLUTELY**. This meant that they had complete authority over France. The 'parliament' (States General) had not been called since 1614!



Psssst! Do you THINK it's fair? Which aspects of the French System might upset the Third Estate?





Source A cartoon of 1789

The Peasant, shown carrying the burden of maintaining the feudal lords and the clergy.

The caption reads 'One hopes this will

Source B An Englishman's view of French peasants, 1787 – 1790.

I was joined by a poor woman who complained of the times. Her husband had only a morsel of land, one cow and a poor horse. But they had to pay 20kg of wheat and three chickens as feudal dues to one lord, and 60kg of oats, one chicken and five pence to another, along with very heavy taxes to the king's tax collectors: "The taxes and feudal dues are crushing us."

(Travels in France - Arthur Young, 1792)

Source C Yearly incomes compared.

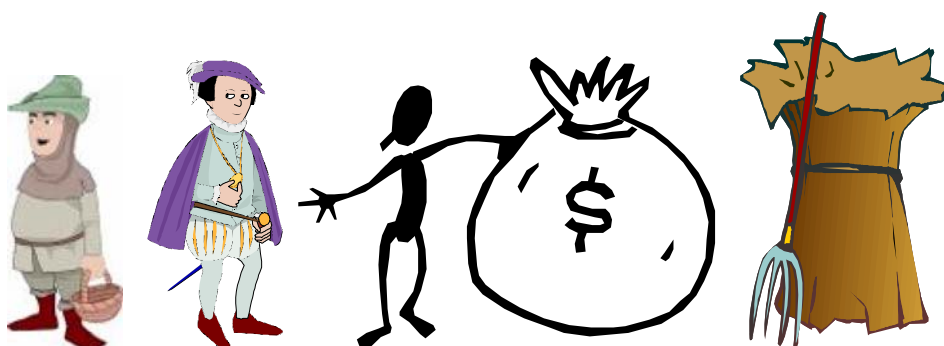
Archbishop of Paris	50,000 livres
Marquis de Mainvilllette	20,000 livres
Prince de Conti	14,000 livres
A Paris parish priest	10,000 livres
A typical village priest	750 livres
A master carpenter	200 livres

(The livre was replaced by the franc in 1795. In the 1780s, there were about 4 livres to £1).

Source D The People should have power, 1775.

Man is born free. No man has any natural authority over others; force does not give anyone that right. The power to make laws belongs to the people and only to the people.

(a pamphlet, banned by the French government in 1775, Jean Jacques Rousseau.)



As if the system of estates in France wasn't enough to cause resentment among the lower classes, towards the end of the 1700s, France was experiencing other problems too.

Problem 1 - MONEY

By 1787, the French government was bankrupt. It was 4000 million livres in debt. France had spent a lot of money fighting costly wars, but had nothing to show for it. Many people accused the royals, especially Queen Marie- Antoinette of spending too much money on luxuries. Others said that the tax system was corrupt and some tax-collectors did not hand all their taxes over to the government.

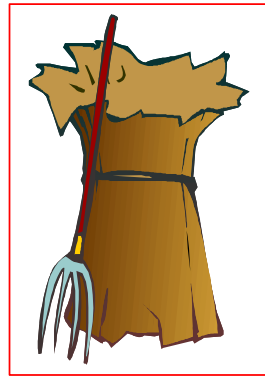


In 1787 the King asked the nobility to help him reform the tax system. As we already know, members of the first and second estate did not have to pay some taxes. King Louis XVI wanted them to start paying some of them. It is not surprising that they refused to do so.

Problem 2 - Bad harvest.

Most people in France depended heavily on agriculture and farming in the 1700s. In the years 1787 - 1789, terrible weather, heavy rain, hard winters and too hot summers led to three very bad harvests in France.

This led to peasants and farmers having smaller incomes, while food prices rose sharply. The poor harvests also meant that many French farmers became unemployed. Many poorer people were starving, but could not afford food and could not find a job. Meanwhile, the nobility, the clergy and King Louis and his family continued to live in the lap of luxury, in their palaces and chateaux.



Problem 3 - Louis calls the Estates General. May - June 1789

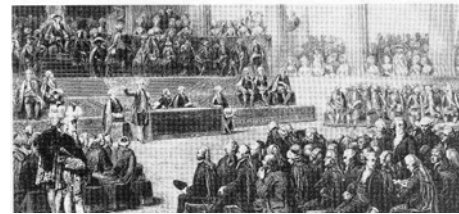
In August 1788, King Louis XVI called the Estates General (a gathering of representatives from all three estates) for the first time since 1614.

The Estates General met at the palace of Versailles, just Outside Paris, in May 1789. There were 1100 members, or deputies, divided into three orders. The nobles, the clergy, and the third estate, which represented millions of ordinary French people, but only contained half the deputies (including some clever lawyers)

The king hoped the Estates General would approve new taxes. The nobles and the clergy hoped they would control the affairs to continue their privileged lifestyles. The middle classes hoped for an English style democracy. The peasants hoped for solutions to their problems and were asked by their representatives to draw up lists of complaints. (cahiers de doléances).

The King summoned the Estates General to Versailles, where he had a body of troops. Some saw this as an attempt to frighten the representatives. He did not present them with any proposals for discussion, so they were left to think up their own ideas. This meant that Louis did not have control of the meeting.

Source A. Louis meets the States General at Versailles



Problem 4 - The National Assembly, June 1789.



Source B. Members of the Third Estate swearing not to separate until they have given France a constitution.

The deputies of the third estate, having grown tired of the arguments over how each order should vote, declared themselves a 'national assembly'. They represented 96% of the population and felt that they were the 'true' parliament. They wanted to draw up a constitution showing how France was to be governed.

On June 20th, the members of this assembly met at the royal tennis court. They pledged an oath (The Tennis Court Oath) not to leave until the King agreed to meet their demands. He gave way and deputies of the first and second estates became part of the National Assembly.

Source C. – From the collection of Cahiers taken to the Estates-General.

O rich citizens be so good as to leave for a time your chateaux and palaces and be so good as to glance at those unfortunates whose muscles are only occupied in working for you. What do you see in our villages? A few weakened men, faces withered by poverty and shame, their wives having too many children, their children wearing rags...

...All the peasants in our neighbourhood - Brittany - are making ready to refuse the church tax-gatherers and state that nothing will be taken without bloodshed.

Source D. – A modern view of the calling of the Estates General.

The King wanted to hear the voice of his people in order to right all wrongs. What a surprising development. The King was all-powerful: therefore, the people thought, the wrongs must be about to end. The peasants chewed over their suffering with growing bitterness now that they had been invited to speak. They dredged up from the depths of their minds memories from past sufferings.

(The modern French Historian, Lefebvre, *La Revolution Francaise*, 1951)