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*Causes of Tension
and Conflict in the
Old Regime
(pre-1789)*

France and its government in the reign of Louis XVI



DID YOU KNOW?

Dauphin is French for dolphin. It was the title given to the heir apparent from 1350 to 1791, and from 1824 to 1830. Count Guigues VIII de la Tour-du-Pin (1309–1333) had a dolphin on his flag, and took the nickname ‘dauphin.’ In 1349 one of his successors sold the family lands known as the Dauphiné to the King of France, Phillip VI, on the condition that the heir to the throne be known as the Dauphin. The first French prince to bear the title in 1350 became Charles V in 1364. The Dauphin’s arms would contain both the dolphin of Dauphiné and the French *fleurs-de-lys*.

Absolute divine right monarchy

Prior to the French Revolution – a period referred to as the ‘old regime’ or ‘*ancien régime*’ – France was an absolute monarchy. When the revolution began in 1789 the reigning monarch was King Louis XVI. Louis (1754–1793), who began life as Louis-Auguste, the Duke of Berry, was the third heir-in-line, but became heir-apparent (the *Dauphin*) following the death of his father and his older brother. He was twenty when he came to the throne in 1774 as an **absolute, divine right monarch**, appointing his own ministers and unrestricted by a written constitution. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, France had become the most influential of the European monarchies and so Louis ruled over a powerful and wealthy empire made up of the state of France itself, and islands in the Caribbean and in the Indian Ocean.

During the seventeenth century, Louis XIV (1638–1715) had strengthened the power of the monarch over his nobility and clergy. The nobility had wealth and privileges, but no real political power. Similarly, while Catholicism was the only recognised religion in France and the Church had spiritual authority and great wealth, the king claimed the power to appoint all the upper clergy and to rule by divine authority. Thus, when Louis XVI came to the throne it seemed as though his reign would be secure.



Louis XVI in Coronation Robes, an engraving by J. G. Müller, based on the painting by Duplessis. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

This is an idealised image of the King, accurate enough in regard to his facial features but representing him as vigorously able to rule his kingdom. He wears a lavish cloak with the royal blue ground and gold *fleur-de-lys* of the Bourbon dynasty, holding one symbol of his absolute royal power, the sceptre, with the crown on a stool behind him. The ermine trimming of his cloak is a reference to his role as supreme judge. In another engraving based upon this portrait, the artist Callet added the scales of justice on a medallion behind the King. Behind the medallion he also added the *fascis*, the rods and axe of the magistrates of ancient Rome. Copies of Callet’s engraving of the portrait by Duplessis would have adorned many of the official buildings of the kingdom and, for the majority of his subjects, this was the only image of their monarch that they might see.

THE KING'S GOVERNMENT

Louis XVI

Personality poorly suited to office.
Unable to make a decision.
'The weakness and indecision of the King are beyond description' – Comte de Provence, eldest of royal brothers.
Not respected by courtiers.



Administration

Incoherent and inefficient, leading to chaos.

Royal Ministers

Ministers of police, justice, navy, army and finance.
Directly responsible to the King.
Appointed by King, forming his Council.

Intendants

Ran the provinces or *généralités* and supervised the collection of taxation, the practice of religion, law and order, public works, communications, commerce and industry.

Overlapping jurisdictions

e.g. 39 provinces with governors, 36 *généralités* with Intendants, *Ressorts* controlled by Parlements.
Each authority would interpret laws differently.
Internal customs barriers.
Different customary taxes.
Different weights and measures.
French language not spoken throughout whole kingdom – many dialects.
Administration took place in French or Latin.

Absolute Divine Right Monarchy

Depended on personal qualities of ruler who was hereditary.
'The power to make the laws belongs only to me' – Louis XVI.

Finance

Taxation
Great inequality.
Privileged orders paid little or no tax.
Tax burden spread unevenly across Third Estate – varying by region, feudal and seigneurial custom.
Taxes collected through venal offices, i.e. positions which were bought.
Farmers-General collected indirect taxes, paid a lump sum to the government, kept the rest, often lending money to the Crown at interest, although it was the Crown's own money. Accountants collected direct taxes.

Treasury
No central treasury. Crown never received full amount collected in its name.
System inefficient, subject to corruption.

Backward Economy
Agriculture: traditional methods and subsistence farming.
Requirement to pay dues in grain or other crops therefore no diversification possible.
Internal customs barriers discouraged development of national market.
Technological advances not introduced: no money, no entrepreneurial instinct.
Manufacture: still run on traditional guild system.
Small workshops with masters and journeymen living and working together.
'Outworkers' still used in spinning and weaving.
No industrialisation of textiles as in Britain:

Evidence: spinning jennies in Britain = 20000 - in France = 1000;
Textile mills in Britain = 200, in France = 8.
Overseas trade: only area of French economy still booming in 1780s.
Marseilles – near monopoly on trade with Near East (Turkey, Greece, Syria, Egypt).
Bordeaux, Nantes, Le Havre, La Rochelle – booming Atlantic trade – slaves bought in Africa, taken to West Indies, sold for colonial products – sugar, coffee, tobacco, cotton and indigo brought back to France.
Atlantic merchants gained great wealth and lived in enormous opulence.

Marie Antoinette

Became very unpopular.
From Austrian background (traditional enemy of France).
Extravagant.
Totally out of touch with ordinary people's lives and ignorant of France.
Determined to keep power of monarchy intact.



Justice

Judges
The King was the supreme Judge of the Kingdom and the thus the final court of appeal.
Members of the legal profession purchased their office and usually a title to go with it, becoming *noblesse de robe*.
Differing jurisdictions
Parlements, ecclesiastical courts, military courts.
Roman code law in south, Germanic case law in north.
Justice arbitrary
Lettres de cachet issued by King.
Perception of corruption and abuse of privilege in *parlements*.

Legislation

Laid down by the King in edicts.
The Estates-General
The only body which by custom had the power to authorise new taxes, had not met since 1614.
The Assembly of Notables
Had not been called since 1626.

Parlements

The *parlements* were law courts, which also had the duty of issuing and administering laws passed by the King. The most important was the Parlement of Paris. There were 2300 magistrates, all *noblesse de robe*. No law could be applied unless registered by the *parlements*. The *parlements* had the Right of Remonstrance, to criticise a law. It was then sent back to the King to be reviewed. The King could insist on registration through the *lit de justice*, forcing his decrees to become law.

Little or no consultation

Chambers of commerce and guilds could write to the royal Intendants or directly to the royal Minister at Versailles. In extreme cases letters were addressed to the King.

The French economy in the eighteenth century



DID YOU KNOW?

Louis XVI was described as looking like ‘a peasant shambling along behind a plough; there was nothing proud or regal about him.’ In court dress, however, he looked magnificent, with heavily embroidered clothes and a diamond star on a ribbon around his neck.

The lands of the Kings of France covered some 277 200 square miles, with approximately twenty-eight million inhabitants, 24–26 million within France. (See map on page 299.) By 1789, Louis XVI was to be king over another million people. These lands had been built up since the Middle Ages by a process of conquest, intermarriage and dynastic inheritance and they were still being added to: in 1678, Louis XIV had acquired Franche Comté, on the border with Switzerland; in 1766, Louis XV inherited Lorraine; and in 1786, Louis XVI took over the island of Corsica. However, not all lands in France belonged to the French monarchy: the Pope, at that time Pius VI, owned Avignon and the surrounding area, while there were three self-governing German counties within Alsace.

France was divided into provinces, some extremely large, like Languedoc and Brittany, some very small, like Flanders. The exact number of provinces was uncertain, but in 1766 there were thirty-nine provincial governors, an honorific title rather than an administrative position. For administrative purposes, France was divided into thirty-six *généralités*, each governed by an *intendant*. The *généralités* were more uniform in size and were the means by which the provinces were governed.

Those provinces near the borders, which had generally been acquired by war or inheritance, were called the *pays d'état* and were treated differently for tax purposes to other provinces. Similarly, the *villes franches*, or major towns of the provinces, had emancipated themselves from direct taxation, were free from service in the militia (local guard) and were excused from the *corvée* (the peasants' obligation to do unpaid service mending roads).

To add to the confusion, apart from general royal edicts which all had to obey, the King's domains did not have a common law or a common system of taxation:

- Southern provinces were governed by code law, a written collection of laws first set out by the ancient Roman occupiers of Gaul, but northern areas used case law, based on medieval Saxon practices;
- In isolated regions, like those close to the Spanish border, local laws took precedence over French law, including those relating to marriage, inheritance and property. There were also *seigneurial* laws pertaining to medieval feudal rights;
- Every district had its own system of weights and measures;
- There was no uniformity of tax, with northern and central France bearing a heavier burden than the south;
- The *gabelle* or tax on salt, was levied at six different rates according to area, while six districts, including the whole population of Brittany, were exempt;
- The main direct tax, the *taille*, was levied on persons in central provinces, but on land in peripheral ones like Languedoc;
- Seigneurial dues ranged from three to twenty-five per cent;
- The whole country was also burdened with customs barriers at the gates of towns, on rivers and between provinces.



DID YOU KNOW?

In 1789, Paris was the second largest city in Europe, with a population of about 650 000.

Markets, therefore, tended to be local and regional rather than national. Transport costs were too high to allow goods or foodstuffs to be moved from one area to another. As goods moved between districts there were local customs and excise duties to be paid, adding to the producer's or distributor's costs. The historian William Doyle has noted that 'Goods shipped down the Saône and Rhône from Franche Comté to the Mediterranean, for example, paid duty at thirty-six separate customs barriers on the way, some public and some private.'¹ In addition, there was no common system of weights and measures throughout France.

The rural population was poor and extremely vulnerable. In times of good crops, such as from the period after 1750, the population increased as more babies survived. Crop failures due to disease or to poor weather conditions, however, meant disaster. Most peasant families lived a *subsistence* existence, with little or no surplus to sell. Thus, in bad seasons, there was nothing to fall back on. The poorest of all peasants were the daily farm labourers who owned nothing and had only a few crops and chickens behind their rented cottages to tide them over if the harvest failed.

France's colonies in the eighteenth century

In the mid-eighteenth century, France's overseas possessions were as widespread as those of Britain. In India, Britain's major trading area was around Calcutta, while France's was at Pondicherry further down the east coast. Both countries were involved in Africa and both traded with China at Canton.² France also had a direct influence in Indo-China (now Vietnam), although it was not fully claimed as a colony until the mid-nineteenth century. France claimed the Ile de France (Mauritius) and the Ile de Bourbon (La Réunion), which were islands in the Indian Ocean, and had trading interests in Madagascar. In America, there were French settlements around New Orleans. In Canada, France had a settlement in Quebec and a naval stronghold on Cape Breton Island located in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, named Louisberg after King Louis XIV. In the West Indies, France controlled the eastern part of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) as well as Guadeloupe and Martinique. These islands were known as the Antilles and were considered to be the jewels of the French Empire.

However, when France finally lost the Seven Years War with Britain (1756–63), much of this territory was ceded to Britain. In the peace settlement of 1763, France ceded all French territory on the North American mainland, that is, its territories in Canada and to the east of the Mississippi River, to Britain. To its ally, Spain, went the lands at the mouth and to the west of the Mississippi. In India, commercial interests remained, though France could not erect fortifications or in other ways mark a permanent government presence in India. France's Indian Ocean possessions, the Iles de France and Bourbon, were both retained. In the West Indies, France also retained Guadeloupe, Martinique and Saint-Domingue, largely because British sugar traders did not want added competition within the British Empire. France also retained its slave stations in Africa, which supplied the sugar and coffee plantations of the West Indies with labour.



DID YOU KNOW?

In 1790, the National Assembly concluded that one in ten French people could be classified as poor. Historians believe the figure was closer to one in five, maybe even one in three.



DID YOU KNOW?

Between 1738 and 1745, some 55 000 African slaves were transported by ship from Nantes to the West Indies. Sugar and coffee from Saint-Domingue supplied most of northern Europe. By 1789 there were over 500 000 slaves in the French Empire.



DID YOU KNOW?

In 1789 the French-controlled region of Saint-Domingue produced forty per cent of the world's raw sugar. The colony's 30 000 plantation owners and 28 000 free people of colour were armed to control the 465 000 slaves.

¹ William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 4.

² Now called Guangzhou (southern China).



DID YOU KNOW?

Inspired by the ideas of liberty being discussed in the National Assembly, 100 000 slaves revolted in August 1791 and seized control of the northern part of Saint-Domingue. By 1793 Commissioner Léger-Félicité Sonthonax, a Jacobin abolitionist sent by the National Assembly to maintain French control of Saint-Domingue, granted freedom to these slaves in order to secure their military support – under the leadership of Toussaint Louverture – in the fight against Britain in the Caribbean. The National Convention ratified the abolition of slavery on 4 February 1794.



Toussaint Louverture.

The importance of the Caribbean

The West Indian islands, particularly Saint-Domingue, were the greatest wealth-producing territories owned by France. Coffee, sugar and other tropical produce were shipped to France to distribute throughout Europe. The slave trade itself was a lucrative enterprise and supported other trades within France, such as shipping. As a result, seaports in France flourished and overseas trade grew by 500 per cent over the eighteenth century. Merchants in Bordeaux, Nantes, Le Havre and Marseilles grew wealthy as a result of this trade, with docks and warehouses, offices, housing and inns all thriving as an offshoot of the trade. Merchants, shipping agents, lawyers and bankers profited from Europe's appetite for coffee and sugar. Colonial demand for other agricultural goods led to specialisation, such as in the hinterland of Bordeaux (wine) and the plains outside Paris (wheat). William Doyle has commented that

There were therefore two French economies, only tenuously linked. Coastal regions ... were integrated with international and intercontinental trading networks and shared in their benefits, which seemed destined to go on improving. But most of Louis XVI's subjects lived in the interior where communications were poor, economic life sluggish, and such improvements as good harvests had brought in mid-century were being eroded by climatic deterioration and an inexorably rising population.³

The taxation system

Direct taxes (on income) imposed by the King accounted for ten to fifteen per cent of the peasants' gross product; *tithes*, which were supposed to contribute to the upkeep of the local clergy, took another eight per cent on average; the *corvée*, fourteen days of forced unpaid labour on the roads, took labourers away from the fields for substantial periods of the year. The major tax placed on all French subjects was the *taille*, a tax on land, from which the Church and most of the towns and the nobility were exempt. In addition, all commoners paid the *capitation* or tax per head, and indirect taxes on goods: the *gabelle* or salt tax (salt was a necessity, used to preserve meat); the *aides* on food and drink; and the *octrois* on the goods brought into towns to sell at market. The *vingtième*, a direct tax of about a twentieth on income levied in times of war, was one of the few of the direct taxes which the nobility had to pay along with the commoners. Because France was at war, supporting the American Revolution between 1778 and 1783, the *vingtième* was levied for the third time in the century, to last for the duration of a war and three years after. The American War of Independence ended in 1783, so the tax went until 1786.

The tithe to the Catholic Church

The French Catholic or *Gallican Church* was one of the largest land-owners in France and one of the chief employers of labour. The Church owned approximately ten per cent of the land and much of its income came from rent. The Third Estate paid a tithe to the Church, a tax on their produce of between five and ten per cent of their harvest. All church income was exempt from ordinary taxation. The Church paid only the *don gratuit* or voluntary

³ Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 113.

gift to the King. This was given every five years and the amount varied according to the power of the king or the mood of the Church. In 1789, for example, with the clergy opposed to Louis XVI's plan to extend taxation, the *don gratuit* was much smaller than in previous years.

Feudal dues

The rental of land was cheap, with peasants paying rent in kind (produce) to their seigneurial lord. But the peasants had the additional burden of **feudal dues**, so that from three to twenty-five per cent of their produce was paid over to the feudal lord. There were few areas of land without a feudal lord who exercised his rights over the local peasants. Usually, a peasant had to grind his corn in the *seigneur's* mill, bake his bread in the *seigneur's* oven, press his grapes in the *seigneur's* wine press. These manorial dues were called **banalités**. In addition, the *seigneur* had hunting and grazing rights over the land the peasant farmed, meaning that his doves were allowed to eat from the peasant's crops, while the hunt could pass over peasant land. Nor was the peasant allowed to kill game for food or fish in the *seigneur's* streams, a crime known as poaching. When land changed hands, either from father to son or by direct sale, a tax called the *lods et ventes* had to be paid; there was the *champart* or harvest dues and, in addition, when the peasant took his goods to the local town for sale he paid the *octrois* or customs duty. For the peasant, the honorific privileges of his feudal lord added to the onerous burden of royal and church taxes to make existence precarious. Thus, peasants remained impoverished. The poorest of all were the **métayers** or sharecroppers. With no land of their own to farm, up to eighty per cent of their produce was forfeit in rents, taxes and dues.

Taxation, from which the upper echelons were largely exempt, was, therefore, one of the greatest grievances of the common people. In 1789 the **cahier de doléances** (book of grievances) of the Third Estate of Berry asked that 'No tax be legal or collectable unless it has been consented to by the nation and that taxes remaining or to be established be borne equally ... by all orders of the state.'⁴ In its submission to the Estates-General, the **cahier** of the Third Estate of Marcilly also submitted that taxation be extended to the privileged Estates, pleading that

all financial privileges be abolished; consequently that the three orders no longer be exempt from any of the public responsibilities and taxes that the most unfortunate class of the Third Estate alone endures and pays, such as statute labour [*corvée*], lodging of soldiers and all incidental costs for the *taille* etc.⁵

Thus, as Peter McPhee points out,

It was the rural population above all which underwrote the costs of the three pillars of authority and privilege in France: the Church, the nobility and monarchy. Together the two privileged orders and the monarchy exacted on average one-quarter to one-third of peasant produce, through taxes, seigneurial dues and the tithe.⁶

Taxation collection

Taxes owed to the King were collected through agents called financiers who paid to hold the position – it was thus called a **venal office**. The agents

4 Philip Dwyer and Peter McPhee, eds., *The French Revolution and Napoleon: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2002), 10.

5 Dwyer and McPhee, *The French Revolution and Napoleon*, 12.

6 Peter McPhee, *The French Revolution 1789–1799* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2002), 13.

made their living by handling public funds. There were 200–300 agents in France and they made substantial profits from the office. Indirect taxes were collected by a syndicate called the **Farmers-General** (another venal office) which leased the monopoly under a six-year contract with the Crown. The profits from tax offices were spectacular; the officials lived luxuriously and had generally bought a title along with the office. They were, as a result, widely hated, being regarded as leeches on the ordinary taxpayer.

MARIE ANTOINETTE

The Archduchess Maria Antonia of Austria was fourteen when she married Louis XVI. Her bridal trousseau cost 400 000 livres, at a time when the annual income of a working family was about thirty livres. She travelled to the border with France in a cavalcade of fifty-seven carriages. At the river Rhine, a pavilion had been built on the Isle Des Epis, between the two kingdoms. Here Maria was stripped of all her garments and jewellery by her new French ladies-in-waiting and dressed in French clothing. She was only able to keep a small gold watch given to her by her mother, and her Austrian ladies-in-waiting were dismissed. Even Maria's dog, Mops, was sent back to Vienna. She had to formally renounce her homeland and adopt that of her husband-to-be. Only then was she married, by proxy, with her brother Ferdinand standing in for the bridegroom. She became Marie Antoinette, Dauphine of France.

Once married to the heir to the throne, Marie Antoinette was given a key to a cabinet containing almost two million livres' worth of jewellery and accessories, including the famous necklace of large pearls once owned by Anne of Austria, mother of Louis XIV.

Marie Antoinette with her Four Children, Elisabeth Louise Vigée-Lebrun, oil on canvas, 1787.

Queen Marie Antoinette with her children, the Dauphin or crown prince, the future Louis XVII on her left and Madame Royale, the eldest royal princess, on her right. While Marie Antoinette was severely criticised for her extravagant expenditure and lavish life at court, she was accounted a devoted mother. The Dauphin gestures to the empty cradle, a reference to the Princess Sophie, who died of tuberculosis in 1787.



As there was no central treasury, there was no specific accounting of the money collected. The tax agents paid a sum set by the Crown and were free to keep the balance for themselves. In a bad year they had to draw on their reserves of funds, but in a normal or good year they had a surplus. Often they lent money to the Crown, loans on which the Crown paid interest. Thus, when Louis XVI borrowed for the American War of Independence (1778–83) and, before that, the War of Austrian Succession (1740–48) and the Seven Years War (1756–63), he was literally borrowing his own money and paying interest on it.



DID YOU KNOW?

Marie Antoinette's lady-in-waiting wrote that Louis was so short-sighted he couldn't recognise anyone standing more than three paces away.

A

ACTIVITY 1

Focus Questions

- 1 Identify **three** major problems which held back the development of the French economy in the late eighteenth century.
- 2 Choose **one** of the problems identified above and explain what could have been done to create greater efficiency.
- 3 Explain Doyle's comment that there were two separate economies in France, one prosperous and one impoverished.
- 4 Identify the reforms which needed to be made to the system of taxation.
- 5 Name **three** major causes of tension and conflict in pre-revolutionary France.

The social structure of pre-revolutionary France

Eighteenth century French society was essentially corporate in nature. Each person had an assigned place in some part of the whole body of the Kingdom, belonging to an estate or order, to a guild or a parish, to a military regiment or to a local *seigneur*.

French society was divided into orders or *estates*. The First Estate was made up of the clergy of the Roman Catholic Church. This estate was made up of a mixture of classes: the cardinals, archbishops, bishops and abbots were of noble birth, while the priests or *abbés* were often of common estate. Those who were born noble or had acquired nobility belonged to the Second Estate, the aristocracy of France. The Third Estate contained those of common birth. The social structure of pre-revolutionary France was thus rigid: birth determined status, opportunity and privilege. There were few avenues for upward mobility and those who did manage to move themselves and their families from the Third Estate into the prestigious Second Estate paid heavily for their advancement.

PROBLEMS IN WORKING WITH STATISTICS

In considering the composition of the population of France in the eighteenth century, a warning note must be sounded about the difficulties the historian faces when working with statistics. The reader will be frustrated at finding contradictions in figures between almost every source he or she might read. This problem becomes particularly acute when looking at the pre-revolutionary period, when details of population were chiefly recorded in parish registries and documents of ennoblement were in the hands of individual families. Estimations of the numbers in each estate differ considerably between historians of eighteenth century France. For example, William Doyle wrote in 1989 that ‘credible estimates [of the numbers of nobles] vary between 120,000 and 350,000,’ while Peter McPhee commented in 2002 that ‘recent estimates have suggested that there may have been no more than 25,000 noble families or 125,000 individual nobles.’⁷ In this chapter, general estimations of the size of each estate have been taken from Peter McPhee’s *The French Revolution 1789–1799*, but other figures come from William Doyle’s *Oxford History of the French Revolution* and the second edition of Rees and Townson’s *France in Revolution*.⁸ The mixing of statistics from different sources can also create difficulties but the main point here is to get an idea of the general proportions between groups.

⁷ Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 28; McPhee, *The French Revolution*, 16.

⁸ Dylan Rees and Duncan Townson, *France in Revolution*, second edition (Hodder & Stoughton, 2001).

A rural society

Another important thing to understand about eighteenth century France is the fundamentally rural nature of the society. This was a society of about twenty-eight million people, over eighty per cent of whom were peasants who drew a living from subsistence farming. Surpluses were tiny, perhaps just some vegetables or a few eggs or some butter that could be sold at local markets. Local economies were very vulnerable to crop disease and weather, so whole regions could be at starvation level even while other regions were prosperous. At any time, there were three to five million people so poor they were reduced to begging. Most peasants earned just enough for their own needs and to pay the dues they owed to the *seigneur* (the feudal lord), the Church and the King. Bad weather or crop failure meant the peasants went hungry and poverty was ever-present. Arthur Young, a prosperous British landholder who travelled through France in 1789, wrote in his diary that ‘All the country girls and women are without shoes or stockings; and the ploughmen at their work have neither sabots nor stockings to their feet. This is a poverty which strikes at the root of national prosperity. It reminds me of the misery of Ireland.’⁹

Town dwellers

Town dwellers made up five to eight per cent of the population. While only one person in forty lived in Paris, France was dotted with small market towns based on a local economy. Approximately ninety per cent of French towns had fewer than 10 000 people, with only nine cities having more than 50 000. However, during the eighteenth century the population expanded markedly: Paris grew by more than 100 000, while the trading towns of Bordeaux and Nantes more than doubled in size.¹⁰ The merchant, often the best educated, richest and most active of the King’s subjects, lived well, but the most prominent feature of all cities and towns was the poverty of the unskilled workman. Over the century, prices had risen three times faster than wages and the result was a miserable underclass of labourers, porters, dockers, waiters and dealers. Jean-Marie Roland, Inspector of Manufactures

⁹ Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 14.

¹⁰ McPhee, *The French Revolution*, 8.

in Picardy in 1777 wrote that ‘Workmen today need twice as much money for their subsistence, yet they earn no more than fifty years ago when living was half as cheap.’¹¹ In 1772, a magistrate in Rennes recorded, ‘Misery has thrown into the towns people who overburden them with their uselessness, and who find nothing to do, because there is not enough for the people who live there.’¹²

The French Roman Catholic Church

The French (Gallican) Roman Catholic Church dominated most substantial cities and towns, physically, economically and psychologically. The Church and religion dominated people’s daily lives. The Church not only had the largest and most expensive building in the town, but often the local economy depended on it. In the town of Angers, for example, the Church owned seventy-five per cent of the town’s property. There were thirty-four parishes to cope with the needs of the people. Most of the town’s lawyers worked for the Church, as did many of the artisans and craftspeople: the carpenters, builders, glaziers, lace-makers, embroiderers and dressmakers. Many of the bourgeoisie (middle class) bitterly resented the power and wealth of the Church, particularly as the upper clergy were of noble birth.

The social system of France was, in theory, based on reciprocity, that is, interlocking obligations. The nobles were to provide military protection in times of war, but by the eighteenth century the King had a standing army and the nobles no longer maintained fighting forces of their own. The Church was to provide protection for the people, spiritual guidance, charity in time of need, services like baptism, marriage and burial. The priest was, in theory, the servant of the people but, again, this had eroded. While many parish priests did look after the people, the nobly born upper clergy often led very worldly and expensive lives which diverted funds from the work of the Church to the pockets of its elite. Thus, one of the major causes of tension was the system of privilege. Privilege, literally meaning special rights conferred by law on groups or individuals, related to every area of life, but for many it was symbolised by the taxation system.



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DID YOU KNOW?

Louis Sébastien Mercier wrote, ‘In the Faubourg of Saint-Marcel live the poorest, most restless common people of Paris ... One whole family lives in one single room. The walls are bare ... The inhabitants move every three months because they owe their rent and are thrown out.’

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DID YOU KNOW?

Pope Pius VI was head of the Catholic Church during Louis XVI’s reign. The Pope is held to be the successor of St Peter and to be infallible (never wrong) on matters of doctrine.



Above: Coat of arms of Pope Pius VI.

Left: Sainte-Chapelle, Paris.

11 Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 14.

12 Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 18.

THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF PRE-REVOLUTIONARY FRANCE

The Monarch, King Louis XVI



The King was an absolute, divine right monarch, accountable only to God. He held the throne by divine right, in the belief that God had appointed him to the task. He inherited the throne as the eldest male heir of the previous monarch and passed it on, in turn, to the next male heir. When Louis XVI died his son became Louis XVII; the latter died in childhood during the Revolution and never reigned. The throne then passed to the eldest of Louis XVI's brothers, the Comte d'Artois, who became Louis XVIII. In theory, all the lands of France belonged to the King and the people were all his subjects.

The Royal Family, Princes of the Blood

The King's wife, Queen Marie Antoinette, sister of the Austrian Emperor, was executed in 1793. The King's children, including the heir to the throne, the Dauphin, died in 1795. The King's brothers were the Comte de Provence, later King Louis XVIII (1814–1824) and the Comte d'Artois, later King Charles X (1824–1830). The King's cousin, the Duc d'Orléans, changed his name during the Revolution to Philippe Egalité.

The First Estate, Clergy

Approximately 0.6% of the population. The French Catholic Church owned about 10% of land.

97% of population was Roman Catholic, the official religion of France.

The clergy were exempt from most taxes.

Instead of taxation, the Church gave the *don gratuit* (voluntary gift) to the monarchy at its discretion. The Catholic Church had its own ecclesiastical courts of law for trying clergy accused of crimes. The Church gained income from land rents and tithes (tax paid by land-owners). The Church controlled education, poor relief and hospitals, and kept the registers of births, marriages and deaths. It preached the laws of the country from the pulpit and was responsible for censorship, so that state and religion were intertwined.

- **Religious orders:** Monks and nuns in abbeys and convents.

The Second Estate, Nobility

The nobility formed about 0.4% of population but owned about 33% of land.

Noblesse de court

Technically had to be able to trace noble birth back to 1399. In reality, distinguished by wealth which allowed them to live at Versailles.

Noblesse d'épée

The *noblesse d'épée* (nobles of the sword) were privileged because of service to the crown in battle many generations before. They were not always wealthy; without court patronage it was difficult to support an estate or to live nobly. An estimated 60% of the *noblesse d'épée* were impoverished country nobility or *hobereaux*.

The *noblesse d'épée* fiercely guarded their privileges because these were often all they had to distinguish them from commoners.

Noblesse de robe

Members of this group had been recently ennobled, either by service to the monarch or purchase of one of 50,000 venal offices from the King. They served as magistrates in the *parlements*, tax farmers and other administrative positions.

These offices and titles could become hereditary upon further payment.

The Third Estate, Commoners

Commoners constituted up to 99% of the population and controlled about half of the land. Members of the Third Estate ranged from the wealthiest bankers to the poorest sharecroppers. None had privilege. All paid taxes and dues to the monarch. The Third Estate bore the burden of the other two privileged estates; it produced nearly all the wealth of France and paid nearly all the taxes.

Bourgeoisie

The bourgeoisie comprised between 2% and 8% of France's population. This group included merchants, manufacturers, lawyers, bankers, financiers, doctors, writers and civil servants. As a group it was rising in numbers and wealth.

Members of the bourgeoisie controlled about 25% of the land and owned 39,000 of 50,000 *venal offices*. This figure reflects their desire for self-improvement, to move away from 'common status' and into the higher ranks of society.

Urban workers

The urban (town) workers made up approximately 6% of the population. They were the tradesmen, shopkeepers, labourers and craftsmen (working in small workshops, not factories). One cause of resentment for this group was the 1786 Free Trade Agreement with Britain, which flooded France with cheaper imported textiles. The old guild system was still in place: workers were forbidden to 'combine' (i.e. strike) for better wages and conditions. In 1789, urban workers were spending up to 75% of their daily wage on bread.

The major grievances were the demand for a living wage and better working conditions. A fairly large proportion of this group was made up of servants, who lived in the households of their employers. They were fed and clothed but poorly paid and always on call. Some households forbade servants to marry.

Peasants

Peasants made up approximately 85% of the population but controlled about 32% of the land. While there were independent prosperous landholders, many were renters, *métayers*, cottagers or landless daily itinerant labourers. Their greatest grievances were taxes and feudal dues. They wanted tax relief, freedom from seigneurial dues and abolition of seigneurial rights.

A

ACTIVITY 2

Concept Map

After examining the diagram opposite, create a concept map which addresses the following questions:

- What were the main social groups in pre-revolutionary France?
- Which kinds of interactions and transactions occurred between groups?
- What were the broad aims of each group?
- How might a person move to a group with higher status?
- How might a person lose their privileged position?

Use arrows, annotations and a legend to show the interrelationships between groups.

Share your concept map with the class.

E

EXTENSION TASK 1

Post-Revolution Concept Map

After you have studied the post-revolutionary period in France, later in the book, update your concept map (see above) to show how each of the old-regime social groups were affected by the Revolution.

The First Estate: the clergy

Roman Catholicism was the only religion recognised by the state and therefore the only religion officially allowed to hold services. The Church in France was called the Gallican Church because it claimed it had certain privileges which were not permitted in other countries. In France, for example, archbishops and bishops were chosen by the king rather than the pope. By the time of Louis XVI, all the upper clergy came from the nobility, creating a rift between upper and lower clergy.

The total number of clergy was about 169 500 or 0.6 per cent of the total population, although nearly one-third of these were nuns. The Catholic Church had ownership of about ten per cent of the land, which was rented out to peasants in return for a proportion of the crop. Revenue was also derived from rental of church-owned properties and from the tithe, a tax on the income of parishioners amounting to six to ten per cent of produce.

The Gallican Church was excused from taxation because of the Church's role in poor relief, health care and education, paying only the *don gratuit* or gift to the monarch. The parish priest, the *curé* or *abbé*, often served as the authority for the whole community on royal edicts and as the mediator between peasants and nobility on issues of importance. He also baptised, confirmed, married and buried the people of the parish, educated the children and looked after the poor. He was usually poor himself and lived in a very similar fashion to his parishioners as part of the local community. The resentment, therefore, was of the tax-exempt status and wealth of the Church itself, and of the upper clergy.



DID YOU KNOW?

Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord (1754–1838) became a priest because of a childhood accident. Lame in one foot, he could not fence or dance, and thus could not become an officer or courtier. His family sent him to a seminary; he was ordained in 1779 and became Bishop of Autun in 1789.

A

ACTIVITY 3

Pair Work

With a partner, make a list of grievances against the French Catholic Church under the old regime.



Bishop Talleyrand.



DID YOU KNOW?

Bishop Talleyrand once said, 'Only he who has seen the years before 1789 knows what pleasure it can be to live.'



DID YOU KNOW?

The nobility of the court were unaware of the potential for violent revolution. 'Thinking people,' wrote Madame de la Tour du Pin, 'talked only of abolishing abuses. The word "Revolution" was never uttered. Had anyone used it, they would have been thought mad.'

The Second Estate: the nobility

There were two kinds of nobility. The *noblesse d'épée* (nobility of the sword) were those who had been born noble, having had a hereditary title passed down through generations. This included the group known as the *noblesse de court* – in theory, the families of very ancient lineage which attended the King at his court at Versailles, but in practice those noble families which were wealthy enough to survive the financially ruinous lifestyle at the court. The second kind of nobility was the *noblesse de robe* or *anoblis*, who had been made noble for some service to the King or who had purchased nobility by venal office – buying a position which had a title attached. To be noble was highly desirable, because along with nobility came wealth, power and privilege.

Noblemen had both honorific (conferring prestige) and 'useful' privileges, that is, those which conferred a material benefit, specifically tax exemption. In exerting his honorific privileges a nobleman could:

- Take precedence over others on public occasions;
- Carry a sword and display a coat of arms;
- Have an enclosed pew at the front of the Church;
- Be sprinkled with holy water in a special blessing;
- Have the Church draped in black when he died;
- Be tried in special courts;
- Be executed by the sword if found guilty of a capital offence;
- Have special hunting and shooting rights;
- Keep doves;
- Be exempt from military service;
- Be excused from the *corvée*, conscription into the militia, or having to billet troops in his house.

Along with nobility came tax exemption, a remnant of the time when the nobility provided the defence of the kingdom and its monarch. Nobles did not pay the main tax, the *taille*, placed on common people or on 'common' land. They were not subject to the *corvée*, which was for the upkeep of roads. However, they did pay smaller taxes like the *capitation* and the *vingtième* or twentieth tax. The bourgeoisie, particularly, resented what they saw as the arrogance of the tax-exempt Second Estate.

Nobility was also highly desirable because of social status. Nobles owned a quarter to a third of all land and had feudal rights over much of the rest. Most of the valuable venal offices belonged to the nobility, awarded by the King or simply theirs by inheritance. Up to twenty-five per cent of the Church's revenues went into noble pockets, as the higher positions in the Church went to the nobility. The nobility also invested in trade and industry, mining and

metallurgy, although they could not be directly involved. Thus, the growing wealth of the bourgeoisie also enriched the nobility. William Doyle put it like this: ‘Nobility was a club which every wealthy man felt entitled, indeed obliged, to join. Not all nobles were rich, but sooner or later, all the rich ended up noble.’¹³

Nobility also meant influence and power. Technically, only those of noble birth could meet the King. All his ministers were noble, all the members of the administration were noble and all those who held important offices in the kingdom were noble, as were senior officers in the army and navy and most junior officers too. Most of the great financiers had become noble, along with the upper judiciary. In the Church, all the cardinals, archbishops, bishops, abbots and canons were noble. The reasons for this were two-fold: as France was the leading Catholic country of Europe, the Pope had given the right to appoint these offices to the King, and successive kings favoured the nobility. Secondly, offices in the Church became a way of providing revenue for the poor nobility, particularly third sons, or for those whose physical disabilities made a career in the armed forces impossible. By the time of Louis XVI, noble appointments in the Church had become a matter of public policy.

The distance between the lives of the wealthy nobility and the majority of French people, who were part of the Third Estate, could breed bitterness and anger. In this extract, the journalist Louis Sébastien Mercier reflects his resentment as a member of the non-privileged Third Estate towards the nobility and the system of privilege itself; yet, alongside this can be seen the desperate search to maintain wealth and position – a search that must have bred, in its turn, resentment towards the absolute power of the monarchy:

The castles which bristle in our provinces and swallow up large estates possess misused rights of hunting, fishing and cutting wood: and those castles still conceal those haughty gentlemen who add their own taxes to those of the monarch and oppress all too easily the poor despondent peasant. The rest of the nobility surround the throne ... to beg eternally for pensions and places. They want everything for themselves – dignities, employments and preferences. They will not allow the common people to have either promotion or reward, whatever their ability or their service to their country.¹⁴

A

ACTIVITY 4

Paragraph

Write a 150-word paragraph explaining why nobility was so highly prized in pre-revolutionary France.

E

EXTENSION TASK 2

Paragraph

Write a 150-word paragraph explaining why having court-appointed nobles in almost every government post might have weakened or undermined the French monarchy.



DID YOU KNOW?

Madame de Staël noted that ‘The great noblemen of France were not particularly well informed, for they had nothing to gain by it. The best way of arriving at honours with the court was to have grace in conversation ... The superficiality of education was one of the causes of their ultimate defeat; no longer were they able to fight against the intelligence of members of the Third Estate whom they should have tried to surpass.’



Portrait of Madame de Staël by François Gérard c. 1810. From Renee Winegarten, *Mme de Staël*, Berg Publishers, Leamington Spa, 1985.

- 13 Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 28.
- 14 Louis Sébastien Mercier, *Tableau de Paris* 1783–89 (Amsterdam).

The Third Estate: bourgeoisie, urban workers and peasants

Bourgeoisie

The wealthiest group within the Third Estate was the *bourgeoisie*, a term used to identify those living in towns who made their money through a non-agricultural profession. The *haute* or high bourgeoisie – the financiers, bankers, industrialists and manufacturers – were often wealthier than the land-owning nobility. The *petite bourgeoisie* were lower down the scale: lawyers, accountants, master craftsmen, shop-owners.

Merchants were often the best educated, wealthiest and most active of the King's subjects. In 1783, Mercier commented that

The distance which separates the rich from other citizens is growing daily and poverty becomes more insupportable at the sight of the astonishing progress of luxury which tires the view of the poor. Hatred grows more bitter and the state is divided into two classes: the greedy and insensitive and the murmuring malcontents.¹⁵

As soon as a merchant grew rich, he invested in land, the very wealthy acquiring country estates, often with a title attached, while successful tradesmen tended to buy houses within their town or patches of land just outside. The very wealthiest 'lived nobly,' on the proceeds of investments or revenues from land. Some acquired nobility through venal office: more than 3700 offices had titles attached and for these titles to become hereditary, a family had to hold it for more than two generations. The other way for a bourgeois family to acquire a title was through marriage. Daughters of wealthy financiers were often welcome brides for the sons of impoverished noblemen. The Marxist historian George Rudé, however, points to a growing frustration within the upper bourgeoisie, particularly those engaged in manufacturing. Rudé illustrates this point by arguing that

The cause of the conflict had its roots deep in the old regime: while colonial trade, land values and luxury spending had enormously increased ... capital investment and expansion of manufacture were everywhere impeded by restrictions imposed by privileged corporations, feudal landowners and government ... [affecting] the freedom to hire labour, the freedom to produce and the freedom to buy and sell.¹⁶

A

ACTIVITY 5

Focus Question

Which aspects of the social structures of old regime France would have been frustrating to the ambitions of the high bourgeoisie?

Urban Workers

Urban workers were those who made their living working in the cities and towns as servants, labourers or industrial workers. Textile manufacturing was the largest industry: wool in Amiens, Abbeville, Sedan; cotton in Rouen

¹⁵ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris 1783–89*, 23.

¹⁶ George Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 33.

and Elbeuf; silk in Nîmes and Lyon. Most of the spinning and weaving was done in peasant households around the town centres, with the towns serving as market places. Most urban workers were unskilled and therefore poor, forming a cheap labour force. It was difficult to become a skilled craftsman, because to acquire the skills meant training under a master and most trades recruited from their own family or from families they knew. It took five years before an apprentice could become a journeyman (paid a daily wage) and enter a *guild*. Domestic servants were probably the largest single occupational group in towns and cities, making up five to seven per cent of the urban population. They appeared relatively well-off compared with the general population, receiving food, board and wages; on the other hand, they were not allowed to have romantic relationships or get married, they worked whatever hours were demanded by the family and lived almost totally within the household at the beck and call of their employers. Unskilled workers lived very poorly, particularly affected by the three-fold increase in prices over the century.

In the winter of 1788–89, poor harvests were followed by a particularly severe winter, leading to great economic hardship. The price of a two-kilogram loaf of bread rose to twelve sous on 8 November 1788 and was 14.5 sous by 1 February 1789.¹⁷ By July 1789 Arthur Young was writing,

Everything conspires to render the present period in France critical. The want of bread is terrible: accounts arrive every minute from the provinces of riots and disturbances, and calling in the military. The prices reported are the same as I found at Abbeville and Amiens – 5 sous a pound (500 grams) for white bread and 3 1/2 to 4 for the common sort, eaten by the poor: these rates are beyond their faculties, and occasion great misery.¹⁸

For those living in towns, it was also a subsistence existence; this relied, like the peasant economy, on the cheap labour of women and children. Death rates were high, because towns were unsanitary and children were poorly fed. To this misery was added the plight of thousands of peasants who came to the cities in the hope of finding work. In 1774 a parish priest in Normandy had described the results:

Day labourers, journeymen and all those whose occupation does not provide for much more than food and clothing are the ones who make beggars. As young men they work and when by their work they have got decent clothing and something to pay their wedding costs, they marry, raise a first child, have much trouble raising two and if a third comes along their work is no longer enough for food, and the expense. At such time, they do not hesitate to take up a beggar's staff and take to the road.¹⁹

For poor women, prostitution was often the only answer to destitution, although almost inevitably it led to disease or death. In the 1760s, it was estimated that there were 25 000 prostitutes in Paris alone. Prostitution often followed from a pregnancy brought about when the woman was a household servant, leading to her dismissal. Another consequence of poverty was abandoned children – by the 1780s, perhaps 40 000 per year.

The failure of crops brought additional misery to peasants and urban workers in the form of starvation: without grain, there was nothing to sell and no bread to be baked by the peasants; for the urban workers, crop failures meant rises in prices for foodstuffs and unskilled peasant workers moving into towns and competing for employment. In the cities, bread riots led by angry women called on the King to control prices so that poor people could eat.



DID YOU KNOW?

Before the food crisis of 1788–89, a master craftsman would have spent thirty per cent of his income on flour or bread, a skilled worker forty per cent and an urban labourer up to sixty per cent.

¹⁷ Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution*.

¹⁸ Arthur Young, cited in Dwyer and McPhee, *The French Revolution and Napoleon*, 21.

¹⁹ Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 14.

ACTIVITY 6

Focus Question

What was the major grievance of urban workers?

Peasants

There were approximately twenty-two million peasants in France prior to the Revolution, holding around thirty-two per cent of the land. They carried the bulk of the tax burden, including taxes paid to the King, the tithe to the Church and feudal dues to the lord (*seigneur*). For most peasants, life was a continual battle to gain a living from farming. In bad seasons, the battle was lost; good seasons would yield a small surplus. Bad harvests meant shortages of food for the peasants and their animals and in the very worst years, starvation. Most peasants did not own land or owned an amount too small to support a family. They usually worked land belonging to someone else – their *seigneur*, the Church or other local land-owner. Around seventy-five per cent of the rented land in France was leased to peasants, with the owner providing the seed grain and the peasant providing labour and tools and handing over a proportion of the crop. There was also some communal land, where animals could be grazed or wood gathered. Scarcity of food was a common feature of peasant life and it has been estimated that around 250 000 people were vagrants, shifting from one community to another in search of food. Even those working the land had to find additional sources of income, perhaps hiring themselves out seasonally as labourers, setting up a small cottage industry or sending some members of the family to places where work was thought to be more readily available.

The King's government was not indifferent to the position of the peasants. The grain trade was regulated and stocks of grain were kept to offset the effects of bad harvests. This could be distributed to the poor by the King's orders. The King was, in theory, the 'father' of his people and it was his duty to see that they were not over-taxed and were not exploited by their landlords. However, this duty was more of an ideal than a reality and the peasants' needs were usually subordinated to the needs of the state.

In addition, it was the peasant who bore the brunt of the taxation burden. In 1766, Turgot, the royal Intendant (royally appointed administrator) for Limousin, estimated that the peasants in his district were paying some fifty to sixty per cent of the gross value of their produce in direct taxation to the Crown. While this was heavier than in other areas, he did not believe that it was generally much lighter in the rest of France. No peasant was exempt from taxes unless he was destitute. Only peasants paid the land tax (*taille*) and laboured on the roads for the *corvée*. In addition they had to pay the salt tax (*gabelle*), the head tax (*capitation*), and the *vingtième* or twentieth tax. Added to these, of course, were all the feudal dues owed to the *seigneur* as well as tithes to be paid to the Church. While there were some well-off peasants, for most life was extremely hard.

The feudal heritage of France was an increasing source of political tension by the late eighteenth century. The system of laws and privileges governing the provinces made the development of a national market almost impossible,

its inefficiencies frustrating the *physiocrats* and the bourgeoisie who sought a more rational system of laws and taxes. The peasants were overtaxed and impoverished, resenting both the taxes paid to the monarch and feudal dues. The twin systems of heredity and privilege created a corporate society which was, in itself, the source of growing conflict. Within the Church, the lower clergy were frustrated by a system which placed worldly men in positions of spiritual authority, as elevation into the clergy increasingly became a way of providing an income for the offspring of noble families. Moreover, the system of awarding multiple benefices to individuals made some clerics extremely wealthy while denying others the opportunity of promotion. Within the high nobility (the *noblesse d'épée*) the effort to maintain wealth became itself a burden. With the King as the dispenser of appointments, it was necessary to be within his circle to gain favour and this life involved high expenditure. Poor nobles saw rich merchants' lifestyles as insulting to their birth: the noble should be superior in wealth as well as status and without wealth, the nobleman could not maintain his superiority. The rich bourgeoisie was equally insulted to be ranked within the Third Estate, alongside the poorest peasant and worker. There was, overall, a lack of rationality in the system of privilege: nobles were lightly taxed because of their feudal role as defenders of the kingdom, yet the King now had a professional army. Moreover, regardless of their birth, intelligence or expertise, unless they were part of the King's ministry the nobles could influence the King's decisions only by influence or intrigue. Peasants, urban workers and the bourgeoisie bore the burden of supporting the kingdom, but with no control over how tax money was spent, no representation in any elected body and with no accountability from the King and his ministers as to how money was spent. New ideas were also shaping a vision of a society which would be different, a new start which would order society in a different and more egalitarian way: *Enlightenment* ideas and the 'American spirit' offered a glimpse of a new society without the inequalities and injustices of the old.



DID YOU KNOW?

The Marquis de Lafayette, a young French nobleman, was the first to volunteer to fight in the American War of Independence. His courage and idealism earned him the name 'George Washington's godson.' Just after the United States entered World War I in July 1917, Colonel Charles E. Stanton visited Lafayette's grave in Paris, saluted, and declared 'Lafayette, we are here.' The debt was thus repaid.

A

ACTIVITY 7

Focus Question

What were the problems facing peasants in France before the Revolution?

A

ACTIVITY 8

Brainstorm

In a group of three, list **long-term underlying tensions** in pre-revolutionary France. Consider:

- 1 Political tensions (who had the power, who wanted the power?);
- 2 Social tensions (who belonged to which group, how much status did they have, how was this status awarded, and could they improve their position?);
- 3 Economic tensions (taxation, public and private wealth and the means of creating it, agriculture, manufacture, trade, property).

Identify grievances in each of these areas that created dissatisfaction with the rule of the King. Compare with other members of your class to create a master list.

A

ACTIVITY 9

Table

After reading about the economy and social structure of France under the old regime, create a table like the one below and fill it in.

Economic and Social Life under the Old Regime

	By First Estate	By Second Estate	By Third Estate
BENEFITS ENJOYED	i) The Catholic Church ii) Upper clergy iii) Lower clergy	i) <i>noblesse d'épée</i> ii) <i>noblesse de court</i> iii) <i>noblesse de robe</i>	i) Bourgeoisie ii) Urban workers iii) Peasants
HARDSHIPS FACED	i) The Catholic Church ii) Upper clergy iii) Lower clergy	i) <i>noblesse d'épée</i> ii) <i>noblesse de court</i> iii) <i>noblesse de robe</i>	i) Bourgeoisie ii) Urban workers iii) Peasants
ASPIRATIONS/GRIEVANCES EXPRESSED	i) The Catholic Church ii) Upper clergy iii) Lower clergy	i) <i>noblesse d'épée</i> ii) <i>noblesse de court</i> iii) <i>noblesse de robe</i>	i) Bourgeoisie ii) Urban workers iii) Peasants

A

ACTIVITY 10

Short Essay

Write a 400–600 word essay on **one** of the topics below. Your essay should include an introduction, paragraphs supported by evidence and historians' views, a conclusion and a bibliography.

- 'Under the old regime the Church divided, rather than united, the people of France.' Do you agree?
- To what extent was social mobility possible under the *ancien régime*?
- 'By the late eighteenth century, it was not possible for absolute monarchy and a rigid social structure to survive a challenge.' To what extent do you agree with this statement?
- 'Under the old regime, the Church's spiritual role was compromised by its privileged position and this divided its clergy and their congregations.' Do you agree?
- To what extent was social mobility possible within the rigid structures of the *ancien régime*?
- To what extent was the lack of modernisation and growth in most sectors of the French economy a cause of tensions leading to revolution by 1789?

Bankruptcy and the Aristocratic Revolt

The foreign debt and Necker's *Compte Rendu* 1781

In February 1781, the King's chief financial officer, Comptroller-General Jacques Necker, published the first public account of the financial situation of the French state. Produced with the consent of the King, Louis XVI, the *Compte Rendu au Roi* sold as rapidly as a popular novel, with twenty thousand copies going to the public within a few weeks. It was then translated into Dutch, German, Danish, English and Italian. Thus, the seemingly prosperous state of the finances of France became a matter of public knowledge, as Necker had intended.

Louis had appointed Necker Comptroller-General in 1776. It was an unusual appointment because Necker was Swiss by birth, a commoner by estate and a Protestant. His passport to power, says historian William Doyle, was 'his opulence as a banker.'²⁰ It was this reputation as a financial genius that led, in part, to the acceptance of the *Compte Rendu* as a true indication of France's financial state.

The *Compte Rendu* showed ordinary revenues to be exceeding expenditure by over ten million livres, even after three years of French involvement in the American War of Independence and no increases in taxation. Thus, France's accounts appeared to have a healthy surplus. The *Compte Rendu*, however, did not include a record of the extraordinary accounts, where the real cost of the war was recorded. Had it done so, France's bankers would not have been so eager to lend money for the war: the war account was in deep deficit. As it was, Necker's reputation for financial management grew even greater.

Over the eighteenth century, the French monarchy had consistently spent more than its annual income and the major cost had been foreign wars. From 1740 to 1748, France had been engaged in the War of Austrian Succession. This was followed by the Seven Years War (1756–1763) in which France suffered a bitter defeat by Britain. As a result of this war, France lost almost all of its empire, especially its territories in India and Northern America, while Britain had also destroyed the French navy and merchant marine.

The Comte de Vergennes, Foreign Minister to both Louis XV and Louis XVI, reflected French feeling when he said,

The humiliating peace of 1763 shows the ascendancy which England has gained over France and ... how much that arrogant nation enjoys the pleasure of having humiliated us.²¹

Thus, when in 1776 the American colonists rose in revolution against Britain in the War of Independence, France supported the colonists. From 1778, France sent soldiers and equipment to America, as well as providing financial support, and this added greatly to the burden of debt already carried by the French state.

²⁰ Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 29.

²¹ Cited in Alberto Morales, *East Meets West*, Vol.1 (1760–1815) (Hong Kong: Macmillan), 160.

Necker certainly instituted some fiscal reforms in the attempt to balance the French budget. He reorganised central accounting procedures and began restructuring taxation, thus taking steps towards establishing a central treasury. He commissioned a nation-wide survey of venal offices, in order to determine how many there were and how much the Crown was receiving from them. Once this was accomplished venal officers could be replaced by salaried officials, who would be more accountable to the Crown. Necker also set up provincial assemblies of land-owners to offset the influence of the *parlements* (high law courts). However, the American War was a huge drain on France's resources and Necker had to finance it entirely by loans. Between 1777 and May 1781 he raised 520 million livres in loans, with generous terms and high interest rates. The interest on these loans was charged to ordinary expenditure.



DID YOU KNOW?

The Italian priest Abbé Galiani said that 'All France's wealth is concentrated on its frontiers, all its big opulent cities are on its edges and the interior is fearfully weak, empty and thin.' While this was an exaggeration, those port cities trading with Europe and the French colonies grew rapidly in size and wealth during the eighteenth century.

After Necker's departure from office in 1781, his successor, Joly de Fleury, was forced to raise another 252 million livres in loans and to increase taxation. Then, between 1783 and 1787, Fleury's replacement, Charles-Alexandre de Calonne, borrowed another 653 million livres, much of it in short-term loans. By the time the American War of Independence ended in 1783, the conflict had cost France over one billion livres,²² and this did not include debts from the earlier Seven Years War and War of Austrian Succession. In addition, the *vingtième* (twentieth) tax, levied for the duration of the war and three years after, would come to an end in 1786.

Thus, by 1786, France was facing bankruptcy. The income of the state in 1775 totalled 377.2 million livres, but expenditure was 411.4 million, making a deficit of some 34.2 million livres. Servicing of the debts was alone consuming 37.5 per cent of revenue.²³ In 1786, there would be a deficit of 112 million livres, almost a quarter of the total income. In addition, almost half of the income for 1787 had already been spent in advance, by taking out short-term loans in anticipation of tax revenue and, over the next ten years, there would also be a heavy burden of debt redemption from the American War. Calonne had no alternative but to institute major tax reform. In correspondence with Necker, for example, he noted that

it is impossible to tax further, ruinous to be always borrowing and not enough to confine ourselves to measures of economy ... Ordinary ways are unable to lead us to our goal ... The only effective remedy, the only means of managing finally to put the finances truly in order, must consist in reviving the entire state by recasting all that is unsound in its constitution.²⁴

Like the former comptrollers-general, Necker and Fleury, Calonne recognised that a taxation system which exempted the wealthy aristocracy and the Church was not sustainable. Also, the privileges accorded to the *pays d'état* (border provinces) and the various other bodies had created an overly complex system which was prone to corruption. At the heart of the problem, Calonne believed, was the system of privilege.

22 McPhee, *The French Revolution*, 35; Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 68.

23 Colin Jones, cited in Mark Fielding and Margot Morecombe, *The Spirit of Change: France in Revolution* (Australia: McGraw Hill, 2001), 20.

24 Letter to Jacques Necker, April 1787, cited in Fielding and Morecombe, *The Spirit of Change*, 18.

A

ACTIVITY 11

Document Analysis

Read the document and complete the tasks that follow.

Alexandre de Calonne, letter to Jacques Necker, 1787.

[The system of privilege] alone infects everything, harms everything and prevents any improvements ... a kingdom composed of pays d'état, pays d'élection, administrations provinciales and administrations mixtes – a Kingdom whose provinces are foreign one to another; where multiple internal frontiers separate and divide the subjects of the same sovereign; where certain regions are totally freed from taxes, the full weight of which is borne by other regions; where the richest class is the least taxed; where privilege prevents all stability ... Such a state is inevitably a very imperfect kingdom, full of corrupt practices and impossible to govern well. In effect, the result is that general administration is excessively complicated, public contributions unequally spread, trade hindered by countless restrictions ... agriculture crushed by overwhelming burdens [and] the state's finances impoverished.²⁵

- 1 Explain what Calonne means when he says that 'certain regions are totally freed from taxes, the full weight of which is borne by other regions.'
- 2 Why might Calonne have said that 'privilege prevents all stability'?
- 3 What difficulties would Calonne experience if he tried to abolish the existing system of privilege?
- 4 Find statistical support for the statement that agriculture was 'crushed by overwhelming burdens,' and for the description of state finances as 'impoverished.'
- 5 From your broader knowledge, explain why increasing taxes on the Third Estate to raise revenue was not an option for Calonne.

Calonne's plan for taxation reform

On 20 August 1786, Calonne presented his Plan for the Improvement of the Finances to Louis XVI. He proposed that the three *vingtièmes* (the 'twentieth' tax imposed in time of war) be removed altogether, that the tax privileges traditionally held by various groups be abolished, and that a new direct tax be created, a 'territorial subvention,' or tax on all land-owners without any exemptions. This would be evaluated according to the land-owner's income and be paid in produce, thus moving the burden of tax from the Third Estate to a more uniform system which would also tax the wealthy, whatever their birth. Calonne anticipated that this tax alone would bring in revenue of around thirty-five million livres.²⁶ The tax would be assessed and collected through provincial assemblies comprised of land-owners, working in co-operation with the Intendants of the various provinces. In addition, the stamp tax on all documents would be extended and the *corvée*, the forced labour on the roads, would be replaced with a direct tax. The nobility were to be excused from the *capitation* and remained exempt from the *taille*.



Charles-Alexandre de Calonne, Comptroller-General of France (1783–1 May 1788), Elizabeth Vigée-Lebrun, 1784.

Finally, Calonne attempted to stimulate trade within France by abolishing internal tax barriers and removing controls over the grain trade.²⁷ With the removal of internal customs duties and of fixed prices for grain, France would move towards the creation of a national market and this, in turn, would stimulate France's economy. The removal of the *corvée* and its substitution by a monetary tax would be another encouragement to the peasants to produce more. In the meantime, while these reforms were put in place, Calonne needed to borrow still more money until the new revenues began to flow in. The combination of the new tax, increased efficiencies in management and on-going debt redemption would, he believed, avert the looming financial disaster.

In order to borrow more, Calonne had to convince the bankers that his reforms would pass into law and to do this he needed to demonstrate that they had support from the most powerful groups in France. He knew that his plan would face formidable opposition from the nobility and the upper hierarchy of the French Catholic Church, both of which were financially and socially advantaged by the system of privilege. Thus, Calonne proposed that Louis XVI convoke an Assembly of Notables. As in 1626, the year the Notables had last been summoned by their sovereign, the members of the Assembly would be nominated by the King and would comprise

the principal and most enlightened persons of the kingdom, to whom the king deigns to communicate his views and whom he invites to apprise [tell] him of their reflections ... People of weight, worthy of the public's confidence and such that their approbation [support] would powerfully influence general opinion.²⁸

Calonne's thinking was that if the hand-picked upper nobility and princes of the Church lent their support, the display of unity and loyalty to the monarchy would both reassure lenders that their money was safe and would persuade the *Parlement of Paris* that the plan should be registered without protest.²⁹ He also calculated that the status of the members of the Assembly of Notables would impress the Parlement of Paris, the high court whose responsibility it was to register the King's edicts. The nobles and prelates (churchmen of high office) chosen by Calonne would be unlikely to challenge the King's authority and thus the tax reforms should gain their support. With both Church and nobility endorsing the plan, the magistrates of the Parlement would give a smooth passage to it. Yet this was a risky procedure, as Peter McPhee has pointed out, because the nobility already felt its position to be under threat from two sources, the monarchy itself and the rising bourgeois class beneath it. More specifically McPhee observed that

The entrenched hostility of most nobles towards fiscal and social reform was generated by two long-term factors: first, the long-term pressures of royal state-making, which reduced the nobility's autonomy; and, secondly, by the challenge from a wealthier, larger and more critical bourgeoisie and an openly disaffected peasantry towards aristocratic conceptions of property, hierarchy and social order.³⁰

On 29 December 1786, the list of Notables was announced. There were to be 144 nominated members: seven princes of the blood, fourteen bishops, thirty-six noblemen, twelve members of the Council of State and Intendants, thirty-eight magistrates, twelve representatives of the *pays d'état*, and twenty-five mayors.³¹ Among them was the Queen's favourite, the ambitious Loménie de Brienne, Archbishop of Toulouse, and the Marquis de Lafayette, hero of the American War. Although over ninety per cent of the population belonged to the Third Estate, this group remained largely unrepresented, with fewer than thirty members drawn from the common people.³²



DID YOU KNOW?

Loménie de Brienne, Archbishop of Toulouse, was said to be a churchman for practical rather than spiritual reasons. When his name was put forward for a position in the capital, Louis XVI asked, 'But isn't it necessary that the Archbishop of Paris should at least believe in God?'

25 Cited in Fielding and Morecombe, *The Spirit of Change*, 18.

26 Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 96.

27 Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 69.

28 J. Egret, *La Prérevolution Française 1787–1788* (Paris, 1962), cited in Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, 97.

29 The Parlement of Paris registered the king's laws. If magistrates were not happy with a law they could exercise their right of remonstrance by returning it to the king's ministers for redrafting (though they could not technically block it). They often cited the interests of the people when challenging a law.

30 McPhee, *The French Revolution*, 35.

31 Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, 98.

32 A. Goodwin, *The French Revolution* (UK: Hutchinson University Library, 1970). Peter McPhee, by contrast, says that 'only ten were non-noble,' *The French Revolution*, 35.

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ACTIVITY 12

Discussion

With your class, discuss Calonne's reasons for convening the Assembly of Notables to approve his tax plan in February 1787.

Political crises

The meeting of the Notables 22 February 1787

The success of Calonne's plan depended on two things: the support of the King and the compliance of the Notables. Neither of these proved to be reliable. When the Notables convened at Versailles in February, Louis XVI was personally distracted by the illness of his fourth child, Princess Sophie, who was to die of tuberculosis in the summer of that year, and Calonne himself was ill. Nor did the Notables come in a compliant mood, ready to approve whatever was suggested. Indeed, William Doyle has argued that 'in a controversial career Calonne had made many enemies and they were well represented in the Assembly ... The first president of the Parlement of Paris was ... a personal enemy.'³³ Doyle has suggested, therefore, that 'if Calonne's proposals had come from anybody else there is little doubt that the Notables would have welcomed them more warmly.'³⁴ In the wider community there was also much suspicion about Calonne's motives. In the attempt to reassure creditors that France's finances were healthy, he had spent lavishly on public works, including the beautification of royal residences. Then, there was the extravagant lifestyle of the court at Versailles – were the people being asked to pay for the entertainment of the rich? Finally, there were questions to be answered about Calonne's management of the finances: how was it possible that the surplus of ten million livres under Necker had become an enormous debt by 1787? Was it not due to poor management by Calonne?

Calonne presented a persuasive argument. The new land tax would simplify the taxation system. Land-owners' liabilities would take into account fluctuations in the seasons and the personal wealth of the land-owner. The local provincial assemblies, representing the land-owners, would help assess and collect the taxes. The eradication of customs duties and the *corvée* and their replacement by a single tax on imports would help create a more efficient national economy.

The Aristocratic Revolt

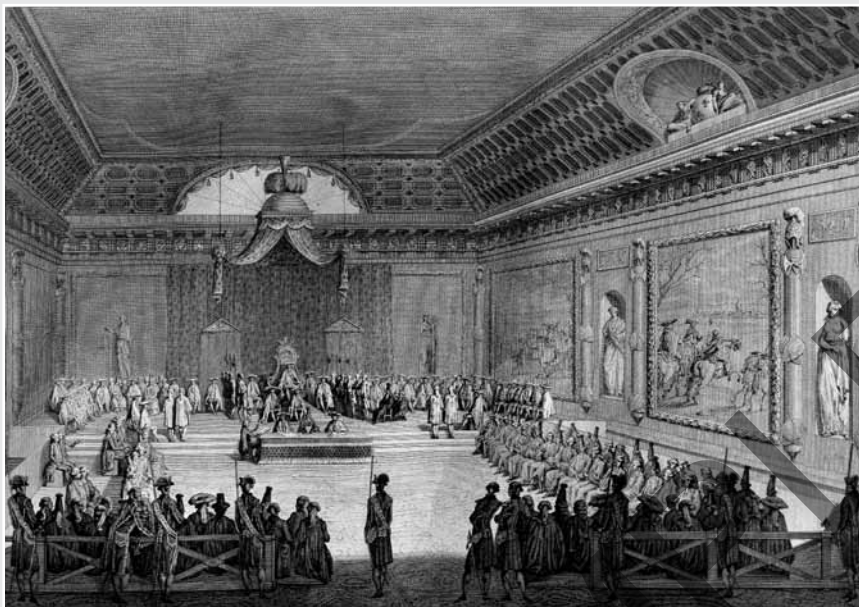
Most of Calonne's proposals met with the approval of the Notables, subject to some changes. The Notables accepted the idea of local assemblies, stating only that the nobility and clergy should be guaranteed a fixed proportion of seats and that the decisions of the assemblies should not be able to be overturned by the Intendant. They agreed to the changes to the *corvée* but went further than Calonne, suggesting that the tax be applied to all as a

³³ Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 71.

³⁴ Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 71.

THE ASSEMBLY OF NOTABLES

Michael Adcock has drawn our attention to the importance of the concept of representation in the French Revolution, which is clearly demonstrated in the visual arts of the period. Adcock has defined the idea of 'representation' as the meeting of a specific number of people to represent the wishes of society in general.³⁵ Adcock has analysed this engraving of the Assembly of Notables to show how political representation in the last decade of the old regime was 'a highly formalised and controlled process.'³⁶ The arrangement of those taking part in the Assembly was carefully worked out according to the precedent set in 1626 when the last Assembly of Notables



had met. Simon Schama has included the floor plan used in 1787 in his account.³⁷

The hierarchy, formality, pomp and ceremony are very clear in this image.

The Assembly of Notables, engraving by Berthault and Prieur, 1787. Private collection of Michael Adcock.

³⁵ Michael Adcock and Graeme Worrall, *The French Revolution: A Student Handbook* (Melbourne: HTAV, 1997), 40.

³⁶ Adcock and Worrall, *The French Revolution*.

³⁷ Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1989), 239.

public works tax, not just to those who had been previously liable. They also agreed to the elimination of internal customs charges.

However, when it came to the question of relinquishing their fiscal (taxation) privileges, there was widespread dissent. The bishops argued that they could not give up the Church's right to self-assessment of tax without first obtaining the assent of the Assembly of the Clergy. The magistrates said they had to consult their fellow magistrates in the courts. Some of the Notables wanted the new 'territorial subvention' to be assessed differently and paid as a monetary tax, rather than in produce. The largest impediment, however, was that the Notables, while declaring themselves in favour of tax reform, refused to approve the new tax unless they were fully informed of the state of the finances.

Lafayette wrote to George Washington,

We were not the representatives of the Nation but ... we declared that altho' we had no right to impede, it was our right not to advise unless we thought the measures were proper and we could not think of new taxes unless we knew the returns of the economy.³⁸

This demand to scrutinise the royal accounts put the Notables in conflict with the monarchy. As an absolute monarch, Louis XVI was the sole authority in the state, as his predecessor Louis XIV had indicated when he said '*L'etat, c'est moi*' ('The State, it is I'). He alone had power over taxation and his authority was not subject to the consent of his people. The Notables, in demanding access to the full accounts, were making the King responsible to them. They were, effectively, claiming to be the 'representatives of the

³⁸ O. Browning, ed., *The Letters of Lafayette to George Washington 1777-1799*, cited in Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 72.

nation.' In March, Leblanc de Castillon from the Parlement of Aix extended the political debate still further by claiming that the Assembly of Notables lacked the power to approve new taxation: this right belonged to an Estates-General representing the whole of the people.³⁹

With no consensus possible, Louis XVI dismissed Calonne and appointed his rival, the Queen's favourite, Archbishop Loménie de Brienne, as Principal Minister and Head of the Committee of Finance. Brienne, however, was not able to negotiate any agreement with the Assembly of Notables and it was dissolved in late May 1787.

- 39 Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 72.
40 Albert Soboul, *A Short History of the French Revolution 1789–1799* (University of California Press, 1977), 37.
41 Soboul, *A Short History of the French Revolution*, 38.
42 Rudé, *The French Revolution* (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 8.
43 Schama, *Citizens*, 245.
44 Schama, *Citizens*, 244.
45 David Andress, *French Society in Revolution 1789–1799* (Manchester University Press, 1999), 37.
46 Andress, *French Society in Revolution*, 39.
47 Andress, *French Society in Revolution*, 42.

HISTORIANS' VIEWS

Why did the Notables challenge Calonne's plan? The Marxist historians, like George Rudé and Albert Soboul, viewed all history as a struggle between the classes that had wealth and power – the clergy and nobility – and those who did not – the bourgeoisie, urban workers and peasants of the Third Estate. They believed that the Notables' main purpose was to defend their own privileges.

Soboul claimed that 'the Assembly of Notables, by definition a group of aristocrats, met ... and after criticizing the planned tax, demanded a statement of the Treasury's accounts.'⁴⁰ The paralysis of the monarchy that resulted from the quarrel between the King and the nobility led to revolution:

The bourgeoisie, the leading element in the Third Estate, now took over. Its aim was revolutionary: to destroy aristocratic privilege and to establish legal and civic equality in a society that would no longer be composed of orders and constituted bodies. But the bourgeoisie intended to stay within the law. Before long, however, it was carried forward by the pressure of the masses, the real motive force behind the revolution⁴¹

Similarly, George Rudé wrote, 'The Notables refused to endorse ministerial reforms because their own cherished fiscal immunities were threatened.'⁴²

Simon Schama's interpretation is radically different from that of the older generation of historians. Schama has claimed that 'though they are usually dismissed as the tail-end of the old regime, with respect to political self-consciousness the Notables were the first revolutionaries.'⁴³ He based this assessment on three main points: that the Assembly was 'marked by a conspicuous acceptance of principles like fiscal equality,' that the 'social personality of the notables as landowners and agrarian businessmen gave them a strong sense of the redundancy of privilege,' and that they 'matched Calonne's radicalism step by step and in many cases even advanced beyond him.' In supporting this argument Schama used this analogy:

It was rather as though [Calonne] had set out to drive an obstinate mule with a very heavy wagon, only to find that the mule was a racehorse and had galloped into the distance, leaving the rider in the ditch.⁴⁴

Schama is a cultural historian, who looks at the details of a moment and finds meaning in small symbols. In his view, the nobility and clergy of France were not only willing to bring an end to their own privileges, but were more radical and egalitarian than Calonne could possibly have anticipated.

David Andress has struck a balance between these two positions. He has acknowledged that the Notables 'rejected both the methods of the past and the state's [monarchy's] solutions with almost one voice.'⁴⁵ While Calonne interpreted this as the continued resistance of 'privilege' to reform, Andress has claimed that 'much in the deliberations of the Notables suggested they, too, were finding new ways of thinking.' Andress, like Schama, has suggested that the Notables were assessing matters in the practical terms of land-owners concerned about the efficient use of property and adequate security for its returns. The Notables spent much time raising the issue of excessive state expenditure, which in itself was a method of criticising the court and its excesses. This, Andress has asserted, became a method of expressing a new phenomenon in political life, public opinion, which by 1788, with its support of the *parlements'* resistance to royal despotism, was to explode in a way that would have been unthinkable under a securely entrenched absolute divine right monarchy.⁴⁶ While the Notables' appeal to 'rights' and 'public opinion' against 'ministerial despotism' both accentuated the wider debate about citizenship and taxation, it finally exposed them once it became evident (later, in September 1788) that they had no intention of renouncing the privileges of a corporate social order.⁴⁷

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ACTIVITY 13

Historiographical Exercise

Discuss the varying interpretations of the Notables by Rudé, Soboul, Schama and Andress. How do you account for the differences in points of view?



Étienne Charles de Loménie de Brienne (1727–1794), Principal Minister and head of the Committee of Finance between May 1787 and August 1788.

Brienne and the Parlement of Paris

Regardless of the objections of the Assembly of Notables, the bankruptcy crisis meant the government could not abandon Calonne's reforms. In July 1787 Brienne proposed a new plan which would retain the land tax but which modified Calonne's other reforms. With the Notables dissolved, Brienne took the tax decrees directly to the Parlement of Paris for registration.

The Parlement of Paris was the sovereign court of appeal, one of whose roles was to register royal edicts so that they became law. It was the most important of the thirteen appeal courts. In the eighteenth century, the aristocracy monopolised all the highest offices in the land, from the government and military to the Church and judiciary, so the magistrates of the Parlement of Paris were all members of the Second Estate, either by birth or because they had paid to acquire the office of magistrate (a venal office). While some of the provincial *parlements* insisted that only *noblesse de robe* could be appointed as magistrates, Sutherland states that this was not so with the Parlement of Paris. Rather,

The Parlement of Paris, whose jurisdiction covered one-third of the country, never bothered to restrict its entry and remained amazingly open to the rich men of banking, high finance and government service, most of whom were noble already.⁴⁸

The role of the Parlement of Paris in registering edicts was also to scrutinise (verify) them, in order to determine whether they accorded with France's ancient constitution, that is, with previous laws. If difficulties appeared, the *parlementaires* had the **right to remonstrate**, that is to point out any defects in the new legislation and return it to the King for reconsideration and, perhaps, redrafting. However, they did not have the power to reject the King's edicts, only to delay them. It was, according to William Doyle, a significant power:

By deferring registration pending the king's reply, they were able to delay and obstruct government policy, and since the death of Louis XV, they had developed this technique into a major vehicle of opposition.⁴⁹

Furthermore, by publishing the remonstrance, the *parlementaires* could rally public opposition to the legislation and, as a last resort, go on strike or even make a mass resignation. In the end, however, the French king was an absolute monarch. In spite of any tactics the Parlement might use, he could, through a **lit de justice**, come to the court in person to witness the reading of a royal command to force the registration because, as the supreme source of justice, his presence cancelled the authority of the magistrates.

Increasingly, however, the *parlements* attempted to convert the right of remonstrance into a right to veto (disallow) royal legislation. This was based on the argument that the King held his throne and his legitimacy as a



DID YOU KNOW?

The Parlement of Paris had jurisdiction over a third of French land and two thirds of French people, making it the most powerful court in the country.

48 D.M.G. Sutherland, *France 1789–1815 Revolution and Counter-Revolution* (London: Fontana, 1985), 16.

49 Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 17.

monarch from fundamental laws which were unchangeable. The function of the *parlements* was to 'maintain the citizens in the enjoyment of rights which the laws assure them.'⁵⁰ This claim placed the *parlements* as guardians of the rights of the people, defenders of both their liberty and their money. Indeed, the *parlements* argued that they had a special right to scrutinise new taxes:

The infraction of the sacred right of verification [of laws] simultaneously violates the rights of the Nation and the rights of legislation; it follows that the collection of a tax which has not been verified is a crime against the Constitution.⁵¹

These claims were more strongly made in theory than in practice. For the most part, the *parlements* accommodated the monarch's policies with little protest. Rabaut Saint-Etienne, later to be a deputy to the Estates-General, said the nation saw the *parlements* 'as a barrier to despotism of which everyone was weary,' while the Abbé Morellet wrote that they let the people 'be overwhelmed [with taxes] for over a century [permitting government] all its waste and its loans which it knew all about.'⁵²

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DID YOU KNOW?

Louis XVI was in favour of inoculation against smallpox but as the Parlement of Paris opposed it, the public was swayed by the latter.

⁵⁰ Sutherland, *France 1789–1815*, 23.

⁵¹ Sutherland, *France 1789–1815*.

⁵² Sutherland, *France 1789–1815*, 24.

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ACTIVITY 14

Focus Question

Why could Calonne expect difficulties in registering the tax edicts?



Bed of Justice Held in the Parliament at the Majority of Louis XV (1710–74), 22 February 1723, oil on canvas, Nicolas Lancret, Louvre, Paris.

The Parlement of Paris as the champion of the people 1787–88

Brienne's tax reforms were presented to the Parlement of Paris, sitting as a Court of Peers: that is, some of the dukes and peers of France sat alongside the magistrates of the Parlement, making it a much more self-confident body, especially as some peers had also been part of the Assembly of Notables. Instead of accepting the tax bills, on 2 July 1787 the Parlement rejected them, arguing that only the nation, assembled through an Estates-General, possessed the right to determine the need for tax reform. It was not, therefore, solely the prerogative of the monarch. Without the consent of the people, the Parlement would not consent to registration of the edicts. In the remonstrance presented by the Parlement, its position was clearly stated: 'The constitutional principle of the French monarchy was that taxes should be consented to by those who had to bear them.'⁵³

On 6 August 1787, Louis attempted to assert his absolute power through a *lit de justice*. The Parlement declared that such an action was invalid. The tension which emerged from this action was so great that on 15 August 1787 Louis exiled the Parlement to Troyes. This decision encouraged popular uprisings against the monarchy, with many of the lower courts protesting against the King's action, supported by demonstrations in the streets and markets in support of the magistrates of the Paris Parlement. Ex-minister Guillaume de Lamoignon de Malesherbes, who supported the Parlement's stand, observed that

The Parlement of Paris is, at the moment, but the echo of the public of Paris, and ... the public of Paris is that of the entire nation. It is the *parlement* which speaks, because it is the only body that has the right to speak; but let there be no illusion that if any assembly of citizens had this right, it would make the same use of it. So we are dealing with the entire nation; it is to the nation that the king responds when he responds to the Parlement.⁵⁴

What was at the heart of the dispute? The bankruptcy crisis and Calonne's decision to call on the Assembly of Notables demonstrated that the monarchy's power was, at least momentarily, weak. This allowed the aristocracy represented in the Notables and the Parlement of Paris to attempt to gain some of the power they had lost since the time of Louis XIV. The Parlement of Paris moved the struggle further along: while the Notables demanded the monarchy be responsible to the people for the way it used taxation revenue, the Parlement was demanding that its right to register laws and edicts be recognised as the power to veto royal tax legislation if it did not have the consent of the nation. It claimed this power as the people's representatives in policy making. Thus, the Parlement appeared as the people's champions against the 'despotism' of the King's ministers. Absolute power was thus confronted by popular power.

It was, perhaps because of this recognition that a truce was sought. In mid-September the magistrates and the King's minister reached a compromise: the Parlement would be recalled and Brienne's tax plan would be modified. The government withdrew the territorial subvention and the stamp tax, but retained the *vingtièmes*. This seemed to be a win for the Parlement. Certainly the magistrates' return to Paris was greeted as a triumph, although not by everybody.

⁵³ Schama, *Citizens*, 264.

⁵⁴ Malesherbes, cited in Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, 107.

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ACTIVITY 15

Focus Questions

- 1 Why was Brienne unable to register the tax reforms?
- 2 What was the fundamental issue in the dispute between the King and the Parlement of Paris?

The Royal Session of 19 November 1787: absolutism in action

Among those who had hoped for political reform there was a sharp sense of disappointment. The provincial *parlements*, which had supported Paris, felt abandoned. Mirabeau and Lafayette, both peers who had supported the *parlements*, deplored the concessions to royal power and the Abbé Morellet wrote bitterly,

On whom would you have the nation rely today? The *parlements*, which defended it so badly, have again deserted it ... We need some bar to the repetition of abuses; we need an Estates-General or the equivalent. That is what people everywhere are saying.⁵⁵

Brienne was forced into a programme of financial cutbacks and loans which, again, had to be authorised by the Parlement. He proposed borrowing 420 million livres between 1788 and 1792, to be used to pay off short-term debts due over the period, and promised in return that financial cut-backs would be imposed on the royal household, the military and the bureaucracy. In return for registration he made a series of concessions, including the calling of an Estates-General by 1792. The compromise, however, was doomed. Louis XVI's minister for justice, Chrétien François de Lamoignon, antagonised the magistrates by using the royal sitting (*seance royale*) on 19 November to reiterate the King's absolute authority. Lamoignon stated that

Sovereign power in his kingdom belongs to the King alone ... He is accountable only to God for the exercise of supreme power ... The link that unites the king and the nation is by nature indissoluble ... The king is the sovereign ruler of the nation and is one with it ... Legislative power resides in the person of the sovereign, depending on and sharing with no-one.⁵⁶

Louis XVI then ordered that the loans be immediately registered, with discussion occurring only after the registration. William Doyle has reported that the Duc d'Orléans, head of the junior branch of the royal family and 'heir to a long tradition of obstructionism,' astonished everyone by protesting that this action was illegal.⁵⁷ Louis replied, 'That is of no importance to me ... It is legal because I will it.'⁵⁸

This led to outright rebellion. Doyle has written that 'no reply could have been more catastrophic ... The King's words turned what seemed destined to be a government triumph into a disaster.'⁵⁹ The next day, after three-and-a-half hours of debate, the Parlement of Paris refused to register the loan. D'Orléans and two of the leading magistrates were exiled to the country by *lettres de cachet*. Then the peers were refused the right to sit in the Parlement. It was, says William Doyle, 'open war.'⁶⁰ The provincial *parlements* supported the magistrates, refusing in their turn to register the loans and

55 Morellet, cited in Sutherland, *France 1789–1815*, 30.

56 Lamoignon, cited in McPhee, *The French Revolution*, 36.

57 Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 80.

58 Sutherland, *France 1789–1815*, 31.

59 Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 80.

60 Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*.

condemning the use of *lettres de cachet* as illegal. In January 1788, Louis publicly stated the basis for his decision:

When I come to personally hold my *Parlement*, it is because I wish to hear a discussion of the law that I have brought with me and to learn more about it before I decide on its registration. This is what I did on November 19 last ... If, in my courts, my will was subject to the majority vote the monarchy would be nothing more than an aristocracy of magistrates, as adverse to the rights and interests of the nation as to those of the sovereign. Indeed, it would be a strange constitution that diminished the will of the King to the point that it is worth no more than the opinion of one of his officers, and requires that legislators have as many opinions as there are different decisions arising from the various courts of law in the kingdom.⁶¹

The split between the King and the Parlement of Paris widened. It was widely rumoured that the intention of the King's ministers was to get rid of the Parlement altogether. Thus, the Parlement went on the offensive, condemning the forcible registration of the loans in November, forbidding tax collectors to apply the new taxes. On 3 May 1788 the Parlement issued a solemn declaration of what it regarded as the 'fundamental laws of the realm,' including 'the right of the Nation freely to grant subsidies' (taxes) through regular meetings of the Estates-General; 'the right of the *Parlements* to register new laws; and the freedom of all Frenchmen from arbitrary arrest.'⁶² On 4 May it further responded to the King's accusations by declaring,

The heir to the throne is designated by the law; the nation has its rights; the Peerage likewise; the Magistracy is irremovable; each province has its customs ... each subject his natural judges, each citizen his property; if he is poor, at least he has his liberty. Yet we dare to ask: which of these rights, which of these laws can stand up against the claims by your ministers in Your Majesty's name?⁶³

Such a challenge to the King's authority could not be tolerated. An order was made for the arrest of the magistrates involved, but when troops went to the Parlement, it refused to hand over the magistrates or to close its session. For eleven hours there was a stand-off. Finally, with soldiers surrounding the Palais de Justice (law court), the magistrates were arrested. On 8 May 1788, the King held another *lit de justice* where Brienne attempted to introduce a programme of reforms, the most contentious of which was a proposal to replace the *parlements* with a new Plenary Court which would register royal decrees; this was designed to quell the rising tide of opposition to the monarchy. Although he also promised to establish a new central Treasury, introduce codification of the laws, reform the education system, extend religious tolerance to Protestants and Jews and develop a new and more efficient (but less costly) army, the message was clear. The Parlement of Paris and the provincial *parlements* were suspended. In the struggle between judicial power and the absolute monarchy, the monarchy had won, but only temporarily. The Revolution had begun.

Popular revolts support the Parlement: the Day of Tiles

Within a week the country was in uproar: the magistrates were hailed as defenders of the people's rights and there were protests and demonstrations

61 Cited in M.J. Mavidal and M.E. Laurent, eds., *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860*, première série (1787–1799), second edition, 82 vols. (Paris: Dupont, 1879–1913): 1: 284.

62 Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 81.

63 Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*.

demanding their recall. The provincial *parlements* refused to be dismissed and stood behind the Parlement of Paris. There were increasing demands for an Estates-General. In five provincial *parlements*, the magistrates were exiled through *lettres de cachet*. The *parlements* were supported in many places by craftsmen, wig and lace makers, domestic servants and other common people whose livelihoods would be threatened if the *parlements* were abolished. In Grenoble on 10 June 1788, the inhabitants of the town stood on the roofs of their houses to shower tiles on the soldiers below, who had come to arrest the magistrates. While one regiment of soldiers obeyed orders not to shoot, a second opened fire, killing two people. The governor's house was looted and the magistrates, in their red robes, were led back in triumph to the court. Simon Schama has described the Day of the Tiles as

a three-fold revolution. It signified the breakdown of royal authority and the helplessness of military force in the face of sustained urban disorder. It warned the elite ... that there was an unpredictable price to be paid for their encouragement of riot and one that might very easily be turned against themselves. And most important of all, it delivered the initiative for further political action into the hands of a younger, more radical group.⁶⁴

Amongst this more radical group were Anotine-Pierre Barnave, a lawyer, and Jean-Joseph Mounier, the son of a draper, who were to make their mark upon the nation as deputies to the Estates-General in 1789.

There were riots in Paris, Rennes, Pau and Dijon, fuelled in part by the high price of food following crop failures. The nobility of Brittany sent a delegation to the King asking him to condemn his ministers as criminals, but they were arrested as they approached Paris and thrown into the Bastille. Hostile pamphlets – some 534 between May and September – were published, attacking the ministers. Even the clergy joined in the protests, refusing to pay more than a small *don gratuit* to Louis as a signal of their disapproval. On 5 July 1788, Brienne announced that the King would welcome submissions on the composition of an Estates-General. The ‘aristocratic revolution’ had succeeded.

Bankruptcy

The truth was, the King's government had little choice. There were only 400 000 livres left in the Treasury. This was, according to Simon Schama, ‘enough money for the government to function for one afternoon.’⁶⁵ The government had already borrowed against ‘anticipations’ of future revenue and, on 13 July, a massive hail storm had destroyed much of the grain harvest in the areas around Paris. Similar events around the country meant that tax revenues from the peasants would be much lower in the year to come.

Faced with an empty treasury and a tidal wave of protests, on 8 August Louis XVI announced the calling of an Estates-General for 1 May 1789 in an effort to initiate a return of confidence in the government. On 16 August, Louis' government was forced to suspend all payments to the bureaucracy and the army and for repayment of foreign debts. Brienne himself resigned on 24 August, having suggested that Necker be recalled as ‘the only man I know who could restore the confidence of the people.’

⁶⁴ Schama, *Citizens*, 277.

⁶⁵ Schama, *Citizens*, 282.

A

ACTIVITY 16

Focus Questions

- 1 What had the Parlement of Paris hoped to achieve in refusing to register the tax reforms?
- 2 Did it expect to begin a revolution?

A

ACTIVITY 17

Discussion

With a partner, discuss the extent to which the people have rights in a state governed by an absolute monarchy.



DID YOU KNOW?

In Notre Dame cathedral, clergy were expected to sit to the right of the aisle, nobility to the left, and commoners at the back. The more rebellious commoners, however, seized benches at the front.

The Third Estate finds its voice

Up to this point, the revolt against absolute government had been led by the nobility in the Assembly of Notables and the Parlement of Paris and, because they were seen to be fighting against new taxes, they were depicted in the popular press and in the streets as defenders of the rights of the people. However, the declaration by the Parlement on 25 September 1788 that the Estates-General should be constituted as it was in 1614 radically changed public opinion. Overnight, the Parlement of Paris lost the support of the bourgeoisie and common people. To this point, the Third Estate had supported the aristocracy in its challenges to the King. Now the Third Estate suspected that the First and Second Estates simply wanted to appropriate power to themselves, not to fight for justice for the whole nation.

In 1614, when the Estates-General had last been called, each Estate had comprised a roughly equal number of deputies and had sat separately. They had discussed the issues presented to them and then voted on them. Each Estate had then voted as a whole on the issue: one vote for the First Estate; one vote for the Second Estate; and one vote for the Third Estate. As a result, the First and Second Estates could always outvote the Third and, as they had interests in common, they did.

Now the Third Estate demanded change. As its members represented more than ninety per cent of the population, they demanded a doubling in the number of their deputies to the Estates-General, from 300 to 600. Furthermore, they wanted voting by head, not by chamber or estate; that is, that the deputies to the Estates-General should sit as one body, with majorities to be decided upon the basis of the individual's vote. On 5 December 1788, the King announced his decision: he would grant double representation to the Third Estate, but did not make a decision on the issue of voting.

A Swiss journalist, Mallet du Pan, recorded the political controversy that arose as a result of the King's indecision, stating that

The public debate has assumed a different character. King, despotism and constitution have now become only secondary questions. Now it is war between the Third Estate and the other two orders.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Cited in Rees and Townson, *France in Revolution*, 22.

The cobbler Joseph Charon had much the same memories of the time, observing that

from men of the world of the highest rank to the very lowest ranks through various channels ... people have acquired and dispensed enlightenment that one would have searched for in vain a dozen years earlier ... and they have acquired notions about public constitutions in the past two or three years.⁶⁷

Not all voices were raised in support of change. A memoir to Louis XVI from the Princes of the Blood stated that

the rights of the throne have been called into question; the rights of the two orders of the State divide opinions; soon property rights will be attacked; the inequality of fortunes will be presented as an object for reform; the suppression of feudal rights has been proposed ... May the Third Estate therefore cease to attack the rights of the first two orders; rights which, no less ancient than the monarchy, must be as unchanging as its constitution.⁶⁸

The Princes asked that the Third Estate restrict itself to asking for changes to taxes and promised that, in return, 'the first two orders ... will, by the generosity of their sentiments, be able to renounce those prerogatives which have a financial interest.'⁶⁹ Thus, battle lines were being drawn between those who wanted their honorific privileges preserved, like the Princes, and those who called for fundamental changes to the way in which France was governed. One of these voices was the Abbé Sieyès.

The pamphlet war

By January 1789, elections for the deputies had commenced, *cahiers de doléances* (books of grievances) were being drawn up all over France and a 'pamphlet war' had begun. Outpourings of complaint, advice, rhetoric, political theory and enlightened ideas were available to the public in the over 4000 pamphlets published between May 1788 and April 1789. The debate was everywhere, from the salons of the wealthy and powerful to the cafés and taverns where the poor drank, in the churches and in the streets, from the heart of Paris to the provincial towns, villages and farms. This had resulted from the relaxation of censorship, in order that the people of France could discuss freely the electoral procedure for the Estates-General. A flood of words and images swept over France, as the public debated the issues surrounding the Estates-General and the state of France itself.

Of all of these pamphlets, the most powerful was that of Abbé Sieyès in his challenge to royal absolutism and the established order: *What is the Third Estate?* Produced over the last months of 1788, the priest's 20 000 word article became the most powerful and influential attack on the social and political order of France.

What is the Third Estate? A call to revolution

Sieyès challenged the old order of Estates and, with it, the system of privilege. Under the old order, the clergy and nobility were deemed to be more useful to the state than the Third Estate, because the First Estate ministered to the spiritual needs of the people and the Second Estate defended the kingdom.

?

DID YOU KNOW?

The king's brothers and male cousins were known as Princes of the Blood. In Louis XVI's case they acted as both advisers and critics.

?

DID YOU KNOW?

In its *cahier* the Third Estate of Bossancourt called for a law preventing horses and sheep from grazing together, on the grounds that horses needed 'healthy fodder, not infected by the bad breath of sheep and lambs.'

⁶⁷ Cited in McPhee, *The French Revolution*, 38.

⁶⁸ Rees and Townson, *France in Revolution*, 38–9.

⁶⁹ Rees and Townson, *France in Revolution*.

The Pamphlet War 1788–89. New Pamphlets and Journals Poured from the Presses, Anonymous. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

An anonymous colour print showing one of the printing workshops which did enormous business in the early part of the Revolution.

After the announcement in May 1788 that there would be an Estates-General called in 1792, custom decreed that the King should relax the strict censorship laws so that issues pertaining to the Estates-General could be generally discussed. On 5 July 1788 the King invited 'all erudite and educated people' to send their opinions on the convocation of the Estates-General to the Keeper of the Seals. The result was an explosion of activity. People sought to enlighten not just the King but the whole nation, and they did not feel restrained by a lack of 'erudition.' Over 4000 pamphlets were published between May 1788 and April 1789 and the number of newspapers in Paris had increased to 250 by December 1789.



Sieyès began with three powerful questions:

What is the Third Estate? Everything
What had it been before in the political order? Nothing
What does it demand? To become something therein.⁷⁰

He followed with a comprehensive attack on the privileged orders, pointing out that it was the Third Estate which both engaged in private enterprise and fulfilled public duties. Members of the Third Estate were the people who farmed, manufactured, sold and traded goods; furthermore, it was the Third Estate which provided every type of public service 'from the most distinguished scientific and liberal professions to the least esteemed domestic service.' And what of the privileged orders? They took 'only the lucrative and honorary positions,' wrote Sieyès, claiming that the utility of the privileged orders to the state was a myth because 'all that is arduous in such service is performed by the Third Estate.' For Sieyès, the Third Estate was the nation:

Who, then, would dare to say that the Third Estate has not within itself everything that is necessary to constitute a nation? It is the strong and robust man whose one arm remains enchained ... Thus, what is the Third Estate? Everything, but an everything shackled and oppressed.⁷¹

These statements were a call to revolution. The issue was privilege and the battle ground was to be the Estates-General. 'Legalised privilege in any form,' Sieyès thundered, 'deviates from the common order ... A common law and a common representation are what constitutes one nation.' Sieyès called on the deputies of the Third Estate to take their rightful place as representatives of the people of France:

What must the Third Estate do if it wishes to gain possession of its political rights in a manner beneficial to the nation? ... The Third Estate must assemble apart: it will not meet with the nobility and clergy at all; it will not remain with them, either by order or by head. I pray they will keep in mind

?

DID YOU KNOW?

In the 1780s, French newspapers reached up to 500 000 people; most papers added to calls for political change.

⁷⁰ Abbé Sieyès, *What is the Third Estate?*, cited in Herbert Rowen, ed., *From Absolutism to Revolution: 1648–1848* (London: Macmillan, 1968), 190.

⁷¹ Abbé Sieyès, *What is the Third Estate?*

the enormous difference between the Third Estate and that of the other two orders. The Third represents 25,000,000 men ... the two others, were they to unite, have the powers of only about 200,000 individuals, and think only of their privileges. The Third Estate alone, they say, cannot constitute the Estates-General. Well! So much the better. It will form a National Assembly.⁷²

The challenge issued by Sièyes is echoed in the *cahiers* from all Estates, asking for political representation, the end of privilege, government responsibility to the people through regular meetings of the Estates-General and personal liberties. Its strongest influence comes from the *philosophe* of the Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose ideas on the liberty of the individual, law by 'general will' and government with the consent of the governed had been widely discussed among the literate French. In particular, Sièyes reiterated Rousseau's belief that 'a law not made by the people is no law at all.'

After the announcement in May 1788 that there would be an Estates-General called in 1792, custom decreed that the King should relax the strict censorship laws so that issues pertaining to the Estates-General could be generally discussed. On 5 July 1788 the King invited 'all erudite and educated people' to express their opinion on the convocation of the Estates-General and to send these opinions to the Keeper of the Seals. The result was an explosion of activity. People sought to enlighten not just the King but the whole nation, and they did not feel restrained by a lack of 'erudition.' Over 4000 pamphlets were published between May 1788 and April 1789 and the number of newspapers in Paris had increased to 250 by December 1789.⁷³

⁷² Abbé Sièyes, *What is the Third Estate?*

⁷³ John Gilchrist and William Murray, eds., *The Press in the French Revolution: A Selection of Documents taken from the Press of the Revolution in the Years 1789–1794* (Melbourne and London: Ginn & Cheshire, 1971), 5.

⁷⁴ Cited in John Hall Stewart, *A Documentary Survey of the French Revolution* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 42.

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ACTIVITY 18

Document Analysis

Read the document and complete the tasks that follow.

Abbé Sièyes, *What is the Third Estate?*

The Third Estate wishes to have real representatives in the Estates General, that is to say, deputies drawn from its order, who are competent to be interpreters of its will and defenders of its interest. But what will it avail to be present at the Estates General if the predominating interest there is contrary to its own! Its presence would only consecrate the oppression of which it would be the eternal victim. Thus, it is indeed certain that it cannot come to vote at the Estates General unless it is to have in that body an influence at least equal to that of the privileged classes; and it demands a number of representatives equal to that of the first two orders together. Finally, this equality of representation would become completely illusory if every chamber voted separately. The Third Estate demands, then, that votes be taken by head and not by order.⁷⁴

- 1 Suggest why Abbé Sièyes might have referred to the Third Estate as 'the eternal victim.'
- 2 In your own words explain the danger facing the Third Estate at the Estates-General, as suggested in the extract.
- 3 Identify two changes to voting procedures proposed by Sièyes.
- 4 Discuss the strengths and limitations of this document as a representation of the revolutionary forces at work in France in 1789.

The cahiers: historiography

In the spring of 1789, as the date for the first meeting of the Estates-General approached, *cahiers de doléances* or books of grievances were drawn up by the Estates in each electoral region to guide the deputies who would be sent to Versailles to advise the King. Some were conservative, like that of the First Estate of Bourges which asked that the Estates-General 're-establish the empire of morals, make religion reign, reform abuses, find a remedy for the evils of the state, be an era of prosperity for France and profound and durable glory for his Majesty.'⁷⁵ Others, like the *cahier* of the Third Estate of Paris were radical, enlightened and revolutionary. This *cahier* noted that

In every political society, all men are equal in rights. All power emanates from the nation and may only be exercised for its well-being ... In the French monarchy, legislative power belongs to the nation conjointly with the King; executive power belongs to the King alone.⁷⁶

This idea provides the foundation for the reformed monarchy which many hoped would be the outcome of the Estates-General. The Third of Paris had closely followed the model *cahier* written by the Society of Thirty, which was circulated in the country and gave local commoners, often largely illiterate, a framework within which to express their grievances. Thus, many Third Estate *cahiers* were remarkably similar in stating fundamental political grievances and then identifying very local problems.

In the eyes of Marxist historians, such as Rudé and Soboul, the Revolution can be seen as a class struggle, where the Third Estate challenged the aristocratic order for power. Notice how Rudé saw the Revolution proceeding in distinct phases and by separate classes:

As we saw, the aristocracy, including the *parlements* and upper clergy, made a bid for extension of power in the noble revolt of 1787–8 ... By 1789 ... the main thrust of the 'aristocratic revolt' was past and it was now time for the two main other contenders – the bourgeoisie and the common people (peasants and *sans-culottes*) ... to make their own distinct contribution to the revolution that now took place.⁷⁷

Similarly, Soboul attributed the Revolution to the bourgeoisie, arguing that a rising class, with a belief in progress, the bourgeoisie saw itself as representing the interest of all and carrying the burdens of the nation as a whole ... But the ambitions of the bourgeoisie, grounded in social and economic reality, were thwarted by the aristocratic spirit that pervaded laws and institutions.⁷⁸

These interpretations differ significantly from that of Simon Schama, with his representation of the Assembly of Notables as 'the first revolutionaries,' intent on doing away with much of the old structure of France to bring about a more liberal political and economic regime.

The interpretations of Rudé and Soboul are also not supported by research into the *cahiers* themselves: of 282 *cahiers* from the nobility, ninety reflected liberal ideas. With regard to financial privileges, eighty-nine per cent were prepared to forego them and thirty-nine per cent supported voting by head. In general the noble *cahiers* showed a desire for change, were prepared to admit that merit rather than birth should be the determinant for high office and attacked the government for its despotism, injustice and inefficiency. In many cases they were more liberal than those of the Third Estate.⁷⁹



DID YOU KNOW?

On 17 March 1789 the King's cousin, the Duc d'Orléans, sent a letter to parishioners asking them to write *cahiers* in favour of property rights, equal taxation and the abolition of hunting rights. He said he wanted to be able to support 'with all his authority the well-founded grievances of his good vassals.'

75 Dwyer and McPhee, *The French Revolution and Napoleon*, 7.

76 Fielding and Morecombe, *The Spirit of Change*, 37.

77 Rudé, *The French Revolution*, 36.

78 Soboul, *A Short History of the French Revolution*, 5.

79 Rees and Townson, *France in Revolution*, 23.

Overall, the *cahiers* were remarkable for the level of agreement shown between the three orders over the expectation that the Estates-General would thereafter meet in a regular cycle and in the demand that the King, after disclosing the level of state debt, should concede to the Estates-General, or *nation assemblée*, control over income (taxation) and expenditure. The *cahier* of the nobility of Crépy asked that ‘no tax or subsidy may be consented to except by the three Orders, and then only until the following session of the Estates General.’⁸⁰ There was general consensus that the Church should instigate reforms to stop abuses and to improve conditions for its parish priests. Surprisingly, it seemed to be generally accepted that there should be some form of fiscal equality – that the nobility and clergy would have to renounce, to some degree, their exemption from taxation. It was to be expected that the Third of Paris would call for the replacement of current taxes with ‘general taxes born equally by citizens of all classes,’ but the Clergy of Troyes agreed: ‘Whatever the tax adopted, ... it shall be generally and proportionately borne by all individuals of the three orders,’ although with the provision that there be ‘consideration of the debts of the clergy.’⁸¹ Similarly, it was recognised that the laws of the nation should be made uniform and more humane and that justice should be more freely available to all. Finally, the need to abolish internal customs barriers and to encourage internal free trade was widely agreed upon.

However, some clear differences emerged as indicators of the divisions to come. The clergy was not prepared to renounce the privileged position of the Gallican Church as the official church of the state: ‘The Catholic, apostolic, and Roman religion shall be the only one taught, professed and publicly authorized; its services and teachings shall be uniform throughout the Kingdom,’⁸² proclaimed the Clergy of Troyes. For the provincial nobles, Peter McPhee has claimed that ‘seigneurial rights and noble privileges were too important to be negotiable, and from this came the intransigence of most of the 270 noble deputies elected to go to Versailles.’⁸³

A high proportion of peasant *cahiers* were explicit in their targeting of absolutism, seigneurialism and taxation exemptions. Peter Jones, a specialist in the peasantry during the French Revolution, has alerted us to the problems this group faced in making its demands known. Meetings were often run by one of the peasants’ major adversaries: the mayor or a seigneurial representative, or even the *seigneur* himself. Jones has given the example of the village of Pouillenay in the Auxois where two *cahiers* were submitted: the first called for constitutional and fiscal reforms in general terms, whereas the second, written later, contained a whole list of ‘specific complaints’ about seigneurial abuses. In the parish of Frenelle-la-Grande, the first *cahier* was written in advance and dated 8 March, a week before the meeting. On 26 March, twenty-five villagers signed a protest describing how they had been brow-beaten. Nevertheless, while model *cahiers* circulated in many rural districts, this does not imply that peasant grievances were necessarily watered down. Jones informs us that there is ‘ample evidence to show that peasants were prepared to amend the documents submitted to them when they imperfectly coincided with local needs, and this notwithstanding the baleful presence of the seigneurial judge.’⁸⁴ In his study of a large number of parish *cahiers*, John Markoff has shown that over a third demanded the abolition of seigneurial rights without compensation. An additional forty-five per cent criticised the seigneurial system in either general or specific terms and over forty-two per cent wanted reform or abolition of various taxes. In comparing the peasantry’s demands with those of the Third Estate in general, and those of the nobility, Markoff has observed



DID YOU KNOW?

In 1790 the King’s personal accounts were made public. Between 1774 and 1789 Louis spent twenty-nine million livres on his brothers, eleven million on himself and the queen, two million on salaries and pensions, and 254 000 livres on charity.

80 Cited in Fielding and Morecombe, *The Spirit of Change*, 36–7.

81 Fielding and Morecombe, *The Spirit of Change*, 36–7.

82 Fielding and Morecombe, *The Spirit of Change*, 37.

83 McPhee, *The French Revolution*, 41.

84 Peter M. Jones, *The Peasantry in the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 63.

that ‘on the three great socio-economic issues of taxation, seigneurial rights and payments to the Church, the peasants were consistently the most radical and, unsurprisingly, the nobles the least.’⁸⁵

Thus, the *cahiers* are important to the historian because they give a detailed view of the grievances of all groups in society. In France in 1789 they raised expectations of reform, which contributed to the development of a revolutionary situation.

The Society of Thirty

A Marxist interpretation also cannot account for the numbers of nobility, from both the sword and the robe, who played an active role in supporting the Revolution. Of these, in 1789 the most prominent role belonged to the Society of Thirty, the so-called ‘conspiracy of well-intentioned men’⁸⁶ whose goal was to design a new constitution for France based on principles of the Enlightenment.

In late 1788 and early 1789, this group, which later formed the Constitutional Club, met twice weekly at the house of the *parlementaire* Adrian Duport, to debate the nature of representation to the Estates-General. Originally comprised of thirty members, it grew to about sixty members, of whom only five were commoners. The members of the Society of Thirty included the Marquis de Lafayette, the hero of the American War; the Duke de Noailles; the Duke de la Rochefoucauld, who also had returned from the American War and was one of the highest members of the peerage; the Marquis de Condorcet, a noted *philosophe* and mathematician; Count Mirabeau, soon to be hailed as ‘the voice of the revolution’; from the clergy, Bishop Talleyrand, Abbé Sieyès and Pastor Rabaut Saint-Etienne; and, finally, the journalist and diarist Louis-Sébastien Mercier, and the young radical Adrian Duport. Schama says that they were ‘courtiers against the court, aristocrats against privilege, officers who wanted to replace dynastic with national patriotism.’⁸⁷

The Society of Thirty embraced three principles. First, they rejected outright that there was some ‘fundamental constitution’ of France that the *parlements* had been attempting to conserve. Second, they believed that the only fundamental law was ‘the welfare of the people.’ Finally, they believed that as France had no constitution it was necessary to write one. The majority of members also believed that the Third Estate should have double representation because, as the Comte d’Antraigues and Sieyès argued, the state and people were one and the same: ‘The Third Estate is not an order, but the nation itself.’ This statement strongly reflected the ideas of the Enlightenment, with its concepts of law by ‘general will’ and the division of the powers of government.

Paris in early 1789 was caught up in a political fervour and a belief that, in calling the Estates-General, Louis XVI was committed to political, economic and social change. The *cahier* of the flower-sellers of Paris reflected this belief when it began:

The freedom given to all citizens to denounce abuses that press on them from all sides to the representatives of the nation is doubtless a certain omen of impending reform.⁸⁸

From all sides in the political debate, great hopes were placed in the deputies who made their way, in the spring of 1789, to the Palace of Versailles.

85 Cited in Andress, *French Society in Revolution*, 51.

86 Schama, *Citizens*, 299.

87 Schama, *Citizens*, 298.

88 Dwyer and McPhee, *The French Revolution and Napoleon*, 13.

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ACTIVITY 19

Visual Analysis

Look carefully at the representation and complete the tasks below.

- 1 Identify two features in the representation that suggest criticism of the relationship between social groups in pre-revolutionary France.
- 2 Identify two revolutionary ideas (not identified in Question 1) evident in the representation.
- 3 Using your own knowledge, explain the key specific events and developments that contributed to this view of the old regime.
- 4 Explain to what extent the representation presents a reliable view of the crises of the old regime. In your response refer to different views about the crises leading to the revolution.



France on the Eve of the Revolution.

Notes on image

Lowest figure riding: *Féodalité: Foi et hommage du' au seigneur* – 'Feudalism: Loyalty and Homage owed to the Lord.'

Middle figure on his back: *Inquisition; Dîme, Bien du Clergé.*

'Inquisition' was the universally hated and feared Church court set up by Pope Gregory IX in 1233 to try French heretics called Albigensians or Cathars. It became powerful throughout Europe during following centuries.

'Dîme': a tenth, or tithe – a tax payable to the Church.

'Bien du Clergé': the wealth and property of the Church.

Upper figure: *Parlement; Assemblée des grandes du royaume* – Assembly of the Notables of the Kingdom.

Chains: reference to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's famous work *The Social Contract*, published in 1762. In it he said: 'Man is born free, and yet everywhere he is in chains,' i.e. chained up by the restrictions of government.

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ACTIVITY 20

Diagram

Create a diagram showing the challenges faced by the government of Louis XVI in the 1780s. Using colour, annotations, arrows and boxes, show the following elements:

- Long-standing problems and tensions;
- New problems and tensions;
- Economic crises;
- Political crises;
- Ideas that challenged divine right monarchy;
- Reforming and rebellious groups/institutions;
- Louis XVI's decisions (or lack thereof);
- Factors contributing to a revolutionary situation;
- The 'trigger' – the point at which the calling of the Estates-General became unavoidable.

A

ACTIVITY 21

Paragraphs

Write **five** summary paragraphs addressing the tensions and conflicts that led to a revolutionary situation by 1789. See the list of guiding questions below.

Paragraph answers should commence with a strong topic sentence which answers all parts of the question. Explain your topic sentence with three or four separate points which contain strong factual information, consisting of precise names, dates, events and information about policies, proposals, decisions which escalated tensions and conflicts leading to a revolutionary situation by 1789.

Tensions = underlying long-term conditions

Conflicts = clashes of interest; short-term crises

Guiding questions (choose **five**):

- 1 Explain the chief characteristics of autocratic monarchy which created revolutionary tension prior to 1789.
- 2 How did *economic crises* contribute to the outbreak of revolution in 1789?
- 3 How did *fiscal grievances* contribute to pressure for revolutionary change in France in 1789?
- 4 How did *Necker's Compte Rendu* of 1781 contribute to a revolutionary situation in France by 1789?
- 5 How did *social grievances* of old regime France contribute to pressure for revolutionary change in 1789?
- 6 How did the *government's failure to reform* contribute to pressure for revolutionary change in France 1781–89?
- 7 How did the actions of the *Assembly of Notables* and *Parlement of Paris* contribute to pressure for revolutionary change between 1787 and 1789?

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ACTIVITY 22

Pair Work

With a partner, read about discussions over the establishment of a new Estates-General and answer the questions below.

- 1 In the Estates-General of 1614, what proportion of members came from each of the three Estates? How had votes been conducted?
- 2 What changes to representation and voting were proposed for the new Estates-General?
- 3 In your view, who would be most likely to benefit from the changes above and why?

SAMPLE