

The Causes of the French Revolution (1)

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

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



KEYWORDS

Revolution – a great change over a short period of time.
Estates – the class system in pre-revolutionary France.
Bourgeoisie – middle class.
Nobility – The upper class.
Clergy – The Church.
Peasants – The lower class, 90% of the population.



THE THIRD ESTATE

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

THE FIRST AND SECOND ESTATE

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



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

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



Causes of the French Revolution (2)

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

Problem 1 – MONEY

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

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



Problem 2 – Bad harvest.

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

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



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

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

The Estates General met at the palace of Versailles, just Outside Paris, in May 1789. There were 1100 members, or **deputies**, divided into three orders. The nobles, the clergy, and the third estate, which represented millions of ordinary French people, but only contained half the deputies (including some clever lawyers) The king hoped the Estates General would approve new taxes. The nobles and the clergy hoped they would control the affairs to continue their privileged lifestyles. The middle classes hoped for an English style democracy. The peasants hoped for solutions to their problems and were asked by their representatives to draw up lists of complaints. (**cahiers de doléances**).

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

Source A. Louis meets the States General at Versailles

