

# THE CAUSES OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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By the late 18<sup>th</sup> 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 everyone 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 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 military. This caused great discontent within the Third Estate.

## 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 chateaux and palaces.

## 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 about 90% of the population.

## PROBLEMS FACING FRANCE

**(A) Money**-By 1787, the French government was **bankrupt**. 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.

**(B) Bad Harvest**-Most of France depended heavily on agriculture and farming in the 1700s. During 1787 – 1789, terrible weather, heavy rain, harsh winters and 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 poor people were starving and could not afford food or find a job. Meanwhile, the nobility, the clergy and King Louis and his family continued to live in luxury, in their palaces and chateaux.

**(C) Estates General**-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 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. King Louis lacks leadership and control of the meeting.

**(D) National Assembly**-Deputies of the Third Estate, tired of arguments over how each order should vote, declared themselves a **National Assembly**. They represented 96% of the population and felt that they were the 'true' parliament. They wanted to draw up a **constitution** showing how France was to be governed. On June 20th, members of this assembly met at the royal Tennis Court, pledging an oath (**The Tennis Court Oath**) not to leave until the King agreed to meet their demands. He gave way and deputies of the First and Second Estates became part of the National Assembly.

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## Primary Source 1: French Political Cartoon from 1789



The Peasant depicted is carrying the burden of maintaining their feudal lords and the clergy. The original caption read “One hopes this will end soon.”

## Primary Source 2: Englishman’s view of French peasants 1787-1790

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

(Travels in France-Arthur Young, 1792)

## Primary Source 3: The People should have power, 1775.

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

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

## Primary Source 4: From the Collection of Cahiers take to the Estates General

O rich citizens be so good as to leave for a time your chateaux and palaces and be so good as to glance at those unfortunates whose muscles are only occupied in working for you. What do you see in our villages? A few weakened men, faces withered by poverty and shame, their wives having too many children, their children wearing rags...All the peasants in our neighbourhood –Brittany – are making ready to refuse the church tax-gatherers and state that nothing will be taken without bloodshed.

## Primary Source 5: Abbé Sieyès “What is the Third Estate?” January 1789

The plan of this book is fairly simply. We ask ourselves three questions.

1. What is the Third Estate? Everything.
2. What has it been until now in the political order? Nothing.
3. What does it want to be? Something...

Who then shall dare to say that the Third Estate has not within itself all that is necessary for the formation of a complete nation? It is the strong and robust man who has one arm still shackled. If the privileged order should be abolished, the nation would be nothing less, but something more. Therefore, what is the Third Estate? Everything; an everything free and flourishing. Nothing can succeed without it, everything would be better without the others...it is necessary to prove further that the noble order...may indeed be a burden upon the nation, but that it cannot itself constitute a nation...

The Third Estate embraces then all that which belongs to the nation; and all that which is not the Third Estate, cannot be regarded as being of the nation.

What is the Third Estate?

It is everything.