

**Year 11-12 Getting Ready for A Level History**  
**Unit 2: France in Revolution**

**What were people complaining about in early 1780s France?**

## **The French Revolution**

The French Revolution was a period of radical social and political disorder in France and Europe. French society underwent massive changes as feudal, aristocratic, and religious privileges ceased to exist. The monarchy was abolished, and old ideas about hierarchy and tradition gave in to new Enlightenment principles of citizenship and inalienable rights. The French Revolution changed the world and even today the French people celebrate the Storming of the Bastille on July 14th 1789 as their national holiday.

Start with the general resources on Youtube.

These are some of the better ones:

1. The French Revolution in a nutshell: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEZqarUnVpo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEZqarUnVpo)
2. The French Revolution Part 1 (The Old Regime):  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z2hWP3q5nXA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z2hWP3q5nXA)
3. God and Grain: The French Revolution Part 1:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=BvSod16wfgg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BvSod16wfgg)
4. Andres Marr – The French Revolution  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBTKGf1nFIA>
5. The History Channel [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5R8ZBm6\\_H9A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5R8ZBm6_H9A)

Then look at some key text-based resources:

I have attached a summary (see below) of the key areas. There are also some references to historians here too.

Other textbooks:

**Access to History: France in Revolution 1774-1815. 5<sup>th</sup> edition** (again a textbook which we will use a lot) *I have attached the first chapter of this book for you to use*

[https://www.hoddereducation.co.uk/media/Documents/History/Access-to-History\\_France\\_in\\_Revolution\\_sample-chapter.pdf](https://www.hoddereducation.co.uk/media/Documents/History/Access-to-History_France_in_Revolution_sample-chapter.pdf)

**Oxford AQA A Level History France in Revolution by Sally Waller**

Also look at some historical fiction on this topic:

***A place of Greater Safety*** by Hilary Mantel

***A Tale of Two Cities*** by Charles Dickens

***Scarlet Pimpernel*** by Baroness Orczy

Or start to read some historians views on the topic:

***Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution*** by Ruth Scurr

***Citizens*** by Simon Sharma

***The French Revolution*** by Christopher Hibbert

**I AM NOT EXPECTING YOU TO READ ALL OF THESE! BUT JUST START TO GET FAMILIAR WITH THE  
BACKGROUND: WHAT WAS FRANCE LIKE IN THE 1780S?**

### **TASK 1: A summary of the causes of the French Revolution**

Using the information below and your own research, create a spider diagram of the main causes of the French Revolution, highlighting the long/short term causes

### **TASK 2: Who was Louis XVI**

Research the life and reign of King Louis XVI and create an A3 Factfile on him. Include the following information:

- Family background
- Issues and problems inherited from his father
- Ability as king
- Marriage to Marie-Antoinette

### **TASK 3: Source Analysis**

Find one primary source (from the time) about Louis XVI and complete the following:

- Identify the overall message, nature, origin and purpose
- How useful is this source as evidence of Louis XVI as King of France?

### **TASK 4: Mini Essay**

This is a mini essay (500 words minimum) about the long term causes of the French Revolution. You will need to do some research to tackle the question. I have suggested some resources below. DO NOT go beyond 1789 (the question is early 1780s so I am looking for a general background not specific events of the revolution itself!)

You will need to cover the following points. You can divide your essay into these three sections:

1. What was unfair about the tax system and the system of government?
2. What was unfair about the class system?
3. What impact did the new ideas of the Enlightenment have?

### **TASK 5: Watch the film *Marie Antoinette* to get a feel for the reign of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette and life at Versailles.**

# CAUSES OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

## LONG TERM REASONS

The French Revolution was, like the Russian Revolution of 1917, the result of a combination of short-term and long-term factors, triggered off by the momentous events of a single year, in this case 1789.

**The Estates System.** France was a rigidly classified society divided into three estates. These estates had their own rights and privileges in the case of the first two, and lots of onerous duties and responsibilities in the case of the Third.

"We were the **First Estate**. Made up of around 130 000 members, we were the cardinals, archbishops, bishops, abbots, nuns, monks - and humble curates. We paid no taxes whatsoever, but every few years would present a monetary gift to the King. We owned about 10% of the land in France and even had our own courts. Many of us were fabulously wealthy and powerful and had served as ministers of the King, like Cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin. The wealth and power of the Church had led to a certain level of anti-clericalism in France. However, the majority of us were ordinary village priests who were loved by our peasant flocks".



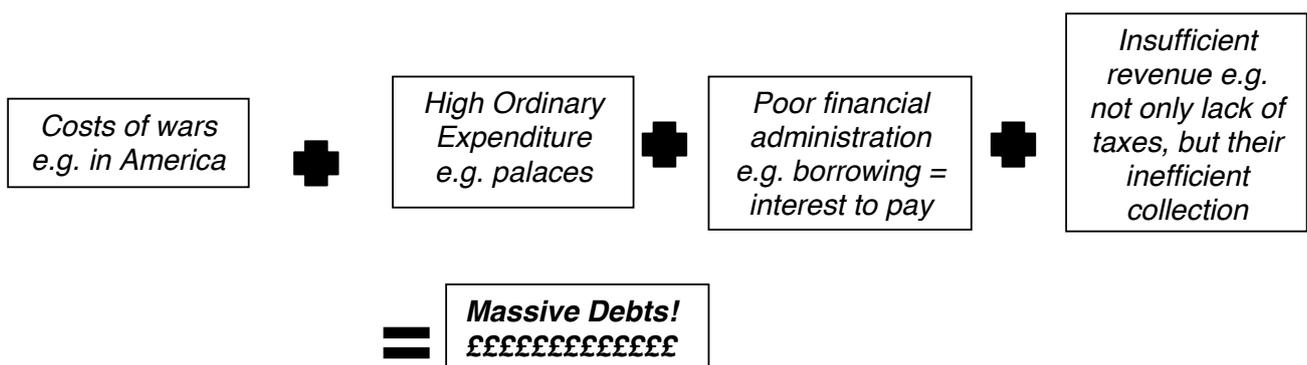
"We are the **Second Estate** and comprised the aristocracy of 400 000 members. We had enormous privileges and *droits* or rights. We paid a few taxes, but most of the truly onerous ones like the *taille* and the *corvée* we certainly did not. We even had a term for those who paid the former. We contemptuously called them 'the *taillable*' meaning those who were directly taxed. We were so snobbish and aloof that we divided ourselves into three hierarchies: with the court nobles being the true elite, then the nobility of the sword and those of the robe coming last, as many were government ministers and civil servants who had only been en-nobled in the last hundred years or so".

"We were the **Third Estate**. We made up the vast majority of France's 26 million people. We, however, were not really an homogeneous group like the others, as we comprised everyone from doctors and lawyers and rich merchants to artisans and peasants. We paid all the taxes and had onerous duties like paying for the roads and bridges to be repaired. We had no say in government, despite the fact that our members were often the best educated people in society. We detested the Second Estate, especially, which was holding us back and refusing to relinquish any of its enormous privileges or allow us to enter its ranks".



This rigid system meant even the 1<sup>st</sup> Estate was increasingly the preserve of the nobility, while just to be an officer in the army required generations of noble ancestry. The King was advised solely by the nobility. Opportunities were thus closed to men of education and talent with no title. It is not a coincidence that, as *Christopher Hibbert* has stressed, the main leaders of the Revolution would be highly educated members of the middle class and in particular failed writers and lawyers. Danton, one of the leaders of the Revolution, would say that "the *ancien regime* drove us [to revolution] by giving us a good education, without opening any opportunity for our talents".

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Estate was regarded as parasitical, as it enjoyed its many *droits* without living up to any of its responsibilities. The economic problems of the 1770s and 1780s were increasingly passed down to the peasantry by their noble landlords, who had nothing but contempt for their tenant farmers. In France, the local squire certainly did not play cricket on the village green with his tenants - nor did he pay his way. A bankrupt France was not allowed to tax the very people who had all the money!



The 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Estates may have detested each other, but they also despised the monarchy's absolutism and so had a common cause.

**Royal Absolutism.** Since the times of the dictatorial and bigoted Louis XIV, French kings had been invested with enormous powers (e.g. the infamous *lettres de cachet*, censorship, etc.).

Louis XIV had been heavily responsible through his innumerable wars for the parlous state of the French monarchy's finances by 1789. A megalomaniac, he had developed the ideas of absolutism and had strived for hegemony of Europe. His Chief Minister, Cardinal Mazarin taught him belief in divine kingship, along with a cynicism and contempt for his fellow Man. He was a spendthrift womaniser with an insatiable sexual appetite. However, Louis had also been capable, charming, accomplished and competent. He had been an ideal king.

However, unlike the Sun King, the present monarch, Louis XVI was not a prepossessing figure. Kind, generous, a loving family man, he was also indolent, indecisive and vacillating. A pious man with an enormous appetite, who preferred to hunt rather than attend to the affairs of state, it did not help that he was short and fat (1.70m and 120kg), and hardly looked very regal. His hobbies were also rather plebeian. His two brothers: the Counts of Provence and Artois were extreme reactionaries and rarely gave their elder sibling sensible advice.

His extravagant Austrian wife, Marie-Antoinette, hardly helped with his image. *Grant and Temperley* have even claimed that she was a "powerful and dangerous counsellor" to her husband. She had helped in the dismissal of the progressive finance minister Turgot, for instance.

The royalist system would be referred to as the *ancien regime*, so anachronistic was it. The nobility were becoming increasingly resentful of royal power and attacks on its institutions, like the *parlements* or law courts. They were also disinclined to pay any new taxes, which the increasingly insolvent monarchy needed to impose, in order to pay its debts. It was Louis' willingness to contemplate an erosion of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Estates rights that would drive them into an alliance of convenience with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Estate. They demanded the re-calling of the Estates General, a type of parliament that had not sat since 1614, hoping to put pressure on the King. To the 3<sup>rd</sup> Estate, the Estates General would give them a chance of representation, at last.

*S. J. Lee* is very critical of Louis whom he says oversaw the loss of direction of government policy and refers to his "chaotic economic and fiscal system" which, for example, saw him sign a free trade treaty in 1786 with GB, which unleashed the forces of *laissez faire* at the exact time when the struggling economy most needed protection. This made the 3<sup>rd</sup> Estate even more determined on a parliamentary monarchy so that its commercial interests could be represented. The well-meaning, but incompetent and ineffectual antics of the King's finance ministers like Calonne and Necker hardly helped matters or endeared the King to the nobility whom they were threatening to tax. It was this attack on the most privileged of classes (whose discontent had been apparent as early as 1787) that ironically spurred the French Revolution into life.

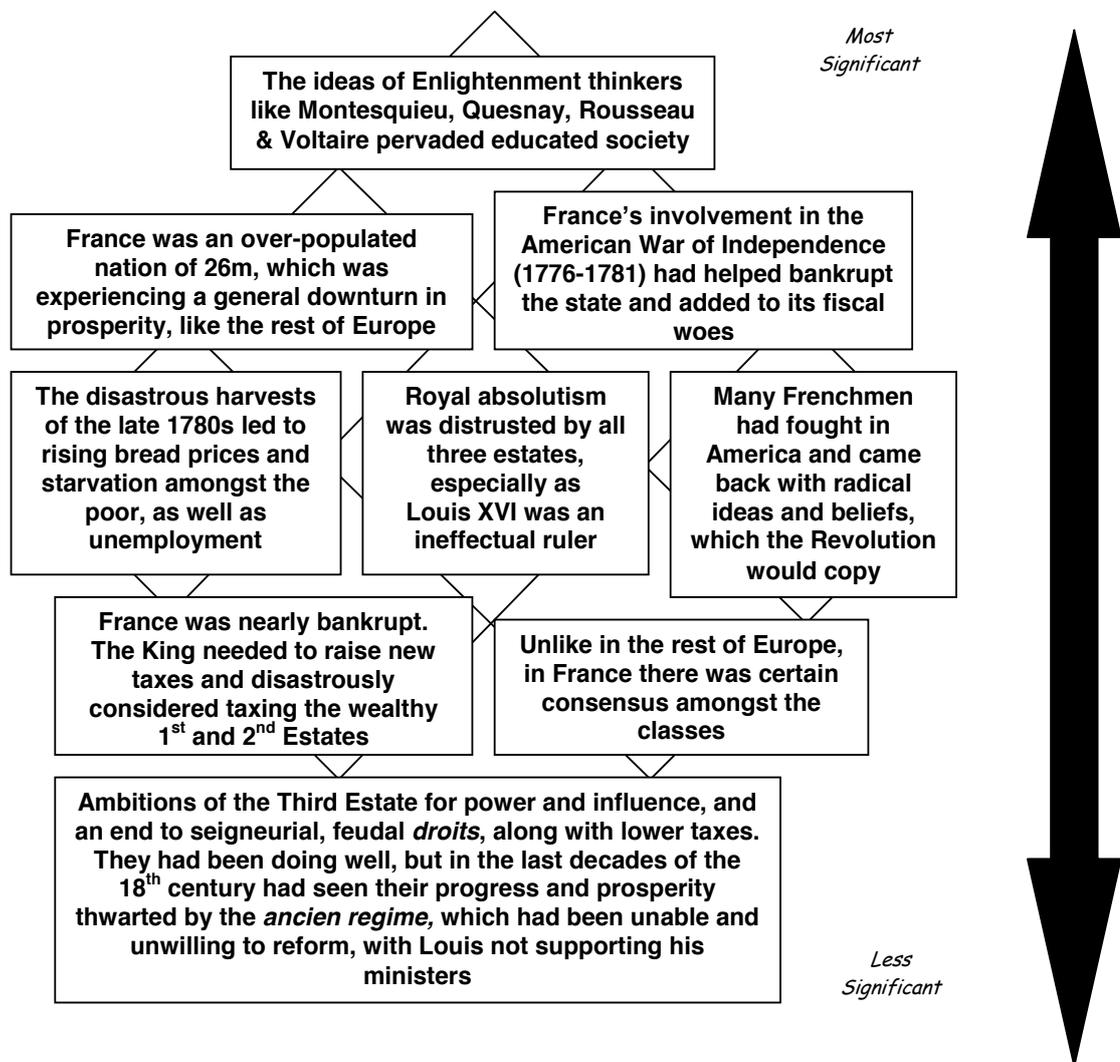
The 3<sup>rd</sup> Estate wanted a review of all the inequitable taxes and a reduction, but not abolition, of the monarchy's powers. These ideas were expressed often in the words of liberal and Enlightenment philosophers like Voltaire, Rousseau and Montesquieu, though *Lee* (and *Matthews*) stresses they were used merely to articulate the demands of the reformers rather than having drawn up their policies. In the same way, the American war of Independence (1775-1781), in which many Frenchmen had fought (and which more importantly had contributed to France's insolvency), had an influence on the thinking behind the demands of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Estate (and even some of the Second).

Louis XVI was not as astute and clever as Louis XIV who had used the support of the bourgeoisie to keep the nobility under control and so relatively docile. Nor was he as ruthless as other French kings like Louis XI, the infamous 'Spider King'. Such 'divide and rule' principles, as utilised by *Le Soleil Roi*, were beyond the later Louis' limited political understanding. By calling an Estates General, says *Lee*, Louis was acknowledging "the collapse of absolutism and the existence of a political vacuum at the centre". *Grant and Temperley* put it more clearly, describing how it was "not inflexibility, but weakness of will that

was his bane”. While *Matthews* comments that: “the king can be said to bear major responsibility for bringing things to a head in June 1789”.

**Common problems affecting Europe.** *Lee*, like *Palmer* and *Godechot*, has also stresses that France’s revolution was part of a general wave of unrest in Europe and even North America. Enormous population growth (from 100 to 200 million people between 1700-1800); the severe economic crises of the 1770s and 1780s, and the innate instability of government were not restricted to France. France, however, experienced the most momentous and lasting changes because it had the strongest bourgeoisie and elements of social co-operation, while the peasantry also supported the Revolution. Consensual factors that were absent in other countries.

Ultimately, though the fundamental reasons for the events of 1789 were the result of the above factors, the short-term more direct considerations were of even more paramount concern. *Grant and Temperley* are certainly convinced that France was in no danger of revolution until the *late 1780s*.



## ***What were the causes of the revolution?***

The causes of the French Revolution are two sides of the same coin; one side were the long-ranging problems, such as the condition of French society. Since the Middle Ages the French population had been divided into three orders or estates\* which enjoyed different rights.

The First Estate was the clergy whose members did not have to pay France's main tax, the *taille*\*, and who owned about ten per cent of the land. However, the clergy was not a homogenous group: the higher clergy were often the younger sons of the most important noble families, and the lower clergy were often poor parish\* priests who were overworked and whose interests lay with the common people.

The Second Estate of the *Ancien Régime*\* was the nobility. Just as the First Estate, its members possessed several privileges and were exempt from taxes, especially the *taille*\*. The nobles held the best jobs in the army and the government. Nevertheless, some of the nobles had debts because of their expensive lifestyle. Therefore, they tried to raise the dues\* paid by the peasants. Although the nobles enjoyed their economic advantages, they tried to expand their power at the expense of the monarchy while keeping their central positions in the military, the church, courts, and administration.

The overwhelming majority of the French belonged to the Third Estate, or the commoners of society. These commoners were divided by major differences in occupation, education, and wealth. The peasants constituted the largest segment of this order (about 80 per cent of the total population), owning about 40 per cent of the land. They had to give dues\* to their local landlords as well as the tithe\* to the clergy. They also had to work for the lord, especially at harvest time. The peasants' crops were often ruined when the nobles went hunting which was one of the nobles' privileges.

But not all common people were poor peasants. Although the majority of the people lived in the country, the people in the towns and cities, especially in Paris, played a crucial role in the French Revolution. Among them were workers whose living conditions were very harsh. They often had insecure jobs in workshops or factories or worked at home. In times of economic trouble, they were often hungry and desperately poor as prices rose faster than wages. The streets they lived in were dirty and unhealthy. Other commoners in the cities were better off. Some members of the Third Estate became rich as bankers, manufacturers, or merchants. Others went to university and became lawyers or university teachers, often criticizing absolutism and the privileges of the First and Second Estate.

Although they were different in many aspects, all the members of the Third Estate had something in common: they were the ones who had to pay for their country, they did not have a voice in politics, and they did not have any access to higher government posts.

Another long-term cause of the French Revolution was the Enlightenment and its ideas. The American War of Independence") also paved the way for revolutionary ideas, for example that everyone is born equal or has the right to resistance against an unjust ruler. But many of these ideas and social injustice had existed for a long time before the

outbreak of the French Revolution. Something must have changed in a relatively small period of time which led to violent protests and finally to revolution. These changes were the immediate causes of the French Revolution.

One of these causes was the economic crisis of the late 1780s. The beginning of a manufacturing depression and bad weather led to serious problems. The number of unemployed workers rose as well as the price for bread after a series of bad harvests in 1787 and 1788. As a result, the poor were likely to suffer from malnutrition and diseases, some even starved to death. In July 1789, those urban workers who still had their jobs had to spend 75 per cent of their wages on food. Peasants and townspeople even rioted and attacked the nobles' castles since they could not bear the situation any longer. Another cause was the king's financial situation. Louis XVI was in dire financial straits because of France's involvement in the American War of Independence (the French supported the Americans against England) and due to other wars that had been fought less successfully, increasing the national debt. The royal court was costly, civil servants had to be paid, the military needed financial support – all factors leading to the king's bankruptcy. The poorly run tax system did not help to ease the situation, as many taxes were collected by private companies and did not reach the king. Consequently, he wanted to get more money, but to achieve this, he needed to call an assembly of the three estates, the *Estates-General*,\* which had not met since 1614. In August 1788, Louis XVI called the Estates-General for the next year. The hopes of what this assembly should accomplish were high: The king hoped to raise new taxes which even the Second Estate should pay, the nobles hoped to limit the powers of the king, and the people hoped that it would solve all their current problems, shown in the lists of grievances\* and hopes for the future.