**French Society Ch 7 Sec 1**

In the 1700s, France was considered the most advanced country of Europe. It was the center of the Enlightenment. It had a large population and a prosperous foreign trade. France’s culture was widely praised and emulated by the rest of the world. There was great unrest in France, caused by high prices, high taxes, and disturbing questions raised by the Enlightenment ideas of Rousseau and Voltaire.

**The Old Regime**

In the 1770s, the system of feudalism left over from the Middle Ages—called the **Old Regime**—remained in place. The people of France were still divided into three large social classes, or **estates.**

**The Privileged Estates**

Two of the estates had privileges, including access to high offices and exemptions from paying taxes, that were not granted to the members of the third.

The Roman Catholic Church, whose clergy formed the First Estate, owned 10 percent of the land in France. It provided education and relief services to the

poor and contributed about 2 percent of its income to the government.

The Second Estate was made up of rich nobles, much of whose wealth

was in land. Although they made up only 2 percent of the population, the nobles

owned 20 percent of the land and paid almost no taxes. The majority of the clergy

and the nobility scorned Enlightenment ideas as radical notions that threatened

their status and power as privileged persons.

**The Third Estate**

About 98 percent of the people belonged to the Third Estate. The three groups that made up this estate differed greatly in their economic conditions.

The first group—the bourgeoisie (BUR•zhwah•ZEE)—were merchants and artisans. They were well-educated and believed strongly in the Enlightenment ideals of liberty and equality. Although some of the bourgeoisie were as rich as nobles, they paid high taxes and lacked privileges like the other members of the Third Estate. Many felt that their wealth entitled them to a greater degree of social status and political power.

The workers of France’s cities—cooks, servants, and others—formed the second group within the Third Estate, a group poorer than the bourgeoisie. Paid low wages and frequently out of work, they often went hungry. If the cost of bread rose, mobs of these workers might attack carts of grain and bread to steal what they needed. Peasants formed the largest group within the Third Estate—more than 80 percent of France’s 26 million people. Peasants paid about half their income in dues to nobles, tithes to the church, and taxes to the king’s agents. They even paid taxes on such basic staples as salt. Peasants joined the urban poor in resenting the clergy and the nobles for their privileges and special treatment. The heavily taxed and discontented Third Estate was eager for change.