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# Revolution Threatens the French King

## TERMS & NAMES

- Old Regime
- estate
- Louis XVI
- Marie Antoinette
- Estates-General
- National Assembly
- Tennis Court Oath
- Great Fear

## MAIN IDEA

Economic and social inequalities in the Old Regime helped cause the French Revolution.

## WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Throughout history, economic and social inequalities have at times led peoples to revolt against their governments.

**SETTING THE STAGE** 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. However, the appearance of success was deceiving. 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.

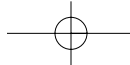
Peasants formed the largest group within the Third Estate—more than 80 percent of France's 26 million people. Peasants paid about half their income in dues to nobles, tithes to the church, and taxes to the king's agents. They even paid taxes on such basic staples as salt. Peasants joined the urban poor in resenting the clergy and the nobles for their privileges and special treatment. The heavily taxed and discontented Third Estate was eager for change.



This medallion bears the image of King Louis XVI of France.

## Vocabulary

**bourgeoisie:** the middle class. (The term derives from the walled cities, or *bourgs*, in which the middle class began to develop in the 1200s.)



## The Three Estates



### First Estate

- made up of clergy of Roman Catholic Church
- scorned Enlightenment ideas

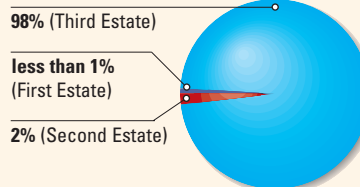
### Second Estate

- made up of rich nobles
- held highest offices in government
- disagreed about Enlightenment ideas

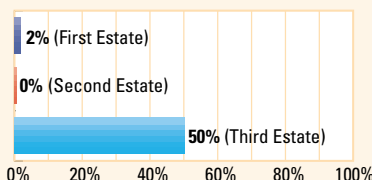
### Third Estate

- included bourgeoisie, urban lower class, and peasant farmers
- had no power to influence government
- embraced Enlightenment ideas

### Population of France, 1787



### Percent of Income Paid in Taxes



### SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Charts and Political Cartoons

The Third Estate intensely resented the wealthy First and Second Estates.

1. How do the chart and the graphs help explain the political cartoon?
2. Why might the First and Second Estates be opposed to change?

## The Forces of Change

In addition to the growing resentment of the lower classes, other factors were contributing to the revolutionary mood in France.

**Enlightenment Ideas** New views about power and authority in government were spreading among the Third Estate. The people began questioning long-standing notions about the structure of society and using words like *equality*, *liberty*, and *democracy*. The success of the American Revolution inspired them, and they discussed the radical ideas of Rousseau and Voltaire. Many shared the beliefs of the Comte d'Antraigues, a friend of Rousseau's:

### A VOICE FROM THE PAST

The Third Estate is the People and the People is the foundation of the State; it is in fact the State itself; the other orders are merely political categories while by the *immutable laws of nature* the People is everything. Everything should be subordinated to it. . . . It is in the People that all national power resides and for the People that all states exist.

COMTE D'ANTRAIQUES, quoted in *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution*

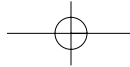
**Economic Woes** France's once prosperous economy was failing. The population was expanding rapidly, as were trade and production. However, the heavy burden of taxes made it impossible to conduct business profitably within France. The cost of living rose for everyone. In addition, bad weather in the 1780s caused widespread crop failures, resulting in a severe shortage of grain. The price of bread doubled in 1789, and many people faced starvation.

During this period, France's government sank deeply into debt. Extravagant spending by the king and queen was part of the problem. **Louis XVI**, who became king in 1774, inherited part of the debt from his predecessors. He also borrowed heavily in order to help the American revolutionaries in their war against Great Britain—France's chief rival—thereby nearly doubling the government's debt. When bankers, in 1786, refused to lend the government any more money, Louis faced serious problems.

**A Weak Leader** Strong leadership might have prevented the coming crisis, but Louis XVI was indecisive and allowed matters to drift. He paid little attention to his government advisers, preferring to spend his time hunting or tinkering with locks rather than attending to the details of governing.

### Background

The ideas of Rousseau and Voltaire are also reflected in the United States Constitution.



**Vocabulary**  
deficit: debt.

Louis had married his wife, **Marie Antoinette**, when he was 15 and she was 14. Because Marie was a member of the royal family of Austria, France's long-time enemy, she became unpopular as soon as she set foot in France. As queen, Marie spent so much money on gowns, jewels, and gifts that she became known as Madame Deficit.

Rather than cutting expenses and increasing taxes, Louis put off dealing with the emergency until France faced bankruptcy. Then, when he tried to tax aristocrats, the Second Estate forced him to call a meeting of the **Estates-General**—an assembly of representatives from all three estates—to get approval for the tax reform. He had the meeting—the first in 175 years—on May 5, 1789, at Versailles.

## Revolution Dawns

The clergy and the nobles had dominated the Estates-General throughout the Middle Ages and expected to do so in the 1789 meeting. Under the assembly's medieval rules, each estate's delegates met in a separate hall to vote, and each estate had one vote. The two privileged estates could always outvote the Third Estate.

**The National Assembly** The Third Estate delegates, mostly members of the bourgeoisie whose views had been shaped by the Enlightenment, were eager to make changes in the government. They insisted that all three estates meet together and that each delegate have a vote. This would give the advantage to the Third Estate, which had as many delegates as the other two estates combined.

Siding with the nobles, the king ordered the Estates-General to follow the medieval rules. The delegates of the Third Estate, however, became more and more determined to wield power. A leading spokesperson for their viewpoint was a clergyman sympathetic to their cause, the Abbé Sieyès (AB-AY syay-YEHS), who argued, "What is the Third Estate? Everything. What has it been up to now in the political order? Nothing. What does it demand? To become something herein." In a dramatic speech, he suggested that the Third Estate delegates name themselves the **National Assembly** and pass laws and reforms in the name of the French people.

## HISTORY MAKERS

### Marie Antoinette 1755–1793

Marie Antoinette was a pretty, lighthearted, charming woman. However, she was unpopular with the French because of her spending and her involvement in controversial court affairs. She referred to Louis as "the poor man" and sometimes set the clock forward an hour to be rid of his presence.

Marie refused to wear the tight-fitting clothing styles of the day and introduced a loose cotton dress for women. The elderly, who viewed the dress as an undergarment, thought that Marie's clothing was scandalous. The French silk industry was equally angry.

In constant need of entertainment, Marie often spent her time playing cards. One year she lost the equivalent of \$1.5 million by gambling in card games.

### THINK THROUGH HISTORY

#### A. Analyzing

**Motives** Why did the Third Estate propose a change in the Estates-General's voting rules?

## HISTORY THROUGH ART: Fine Art



*A Woman of the Revolution [La maraîchère]*  
(1795), Jacques Louis David

The gap between rich and poor in 18th-century France is clear in these portraits. David, painter of the Revolution, depicted a common woman (*left*) whose appearance displays none of the luxury of the French court (*right*).

### Connect to History

**Comparing** What details of the women's expressions and clothing most clearly show the contrasts in lives?

 **SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R7**

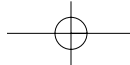
### Connect to Today

**Contrasting** How would you visually convey the gap between rich and poor in your country?



*Marie Antoinette*, Jacques Gautier d'Agoty





After a long night of excited debate, the delegates of the Third Estate agreed to Sieyès's idea by an overwhelming majority. On June 17, 1789, they voted to establish the National Assembly, in effect proclaiming the end of absolute monarchy and the beginning of representative government. This vote was the first deliberate act of revolution.

Three days later, the Third Estate delegates found themselves locked out of their meeting room. They broke down a door to an indoor tennis court, pledging to stay until they had drawn up a new constitution. Their pledge was called the **Tennis Court Oath**.

**Storming the Bastille** In response, Louis tried to make peace with the Third Estate by yielding to the National Assembly's demands. He ordered the nobles and the clergy to join the Third Estate in the National Assembly. At the same time, sensing trouble, the king stationed his mercenary army of Swiss guards in Paris, since he no longer trusted the loyalty of the French soldiers.

In Paris, rumors flew that foreign troops were coming to massacre French citizens. People gathered weapons in order to defend Paris against the king's foreign troops. On July 14, a mob tried to get gunpowder from the Bastille, a Paris prison. The angry crowd overwhelmed the king's soldiers, and the Bastille fell into the control of the citizens. The fall of the Bastille became a great symbolic act of revolution to the French people. Ever since, July 14 has been a French national holiday, similar to the U.S. Fourth of July.

#### Vocabulary

**mercenary army:** a group of soldiers who will work for any country or employer that will pay them.

## Daily Life

### The Women's March

When the women of Paris marched 12 miles in the rain to the luxurious palace at Versailles, they were infuriated. They deeply resented the extravagances of Louis and Marie Antoinette at a time when their own children were starving.

After forcing the king and queen out of the palace, the women followed Louis's family and entourage of almost 60,000 persons to Paris—another 12-mile march.

During their return, they sang that they were bringing "the baker, the baker's wife, and the baker's lad" to Paris. (They expected the "baker" to provide bread to alleviate the terrible hunger in the city.) Revolutionary leaders would later honor the women as heroes of the Revolution.

## A Great Fear Sweeps France

Before long, rebellion spread from Paris into the countryside. From one village to the next, wild rumors circulated that the nobles were hiring outlaws to terrorize the peasants.

A wave of senseless panic called the **Great Fear** rolled through France. When the peasants met no enemy bandits, they became outlaws themselves. Waving pitchforks and torches, they broke into nobles' manor houses, tore up the old legal papers that bound them to pay feudal dues, and in some cases burned the manor houses as well.

In October 1789, approximately 6,000 Parisian women rioted over the rising price of bread. Their anger quickly turned against the king and queen. Seizing knives and axes, the women and a great many men marched on Versailles. They broke into the palace and killed two guards. The women demanded that Louis and Marie Antoinette come to Paris. Finally, the king agreed to take his wife and children to Paris.

Three hours later the king, his family, and servants left Versailles, never again to see their magnificent palace. Their exit signaled the change of power and radical reforms about to overtake France.

#### THINK THROUGH HISTORY

##### B. Recognizing

**Effects** How did the women's march mark a turning point in the relationship between the king and the people?

## Section 1 Assessment

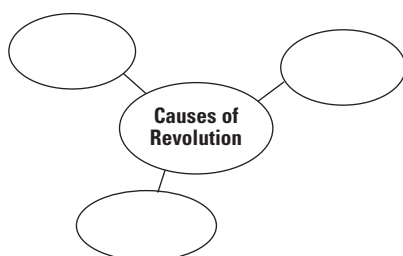
### 1. TERMS & NAMES

Identify

- Old Regime
- estate
- Louis XVI
- Marie Antoinette
- Estates-General
- National Assembly
- Tennis Court Oath
- Great Fear

### 2. TAKING NOTES

Use a web diagram like the one below to show the causes of the French Revolution.



### 3. FORMING OPINIONS

Do you think that changes in the French government were inevitable?

#### THINK ABOUT

- the leadership of Louis XVI
- the French national debt
- Enlightenment ideas
- other world revolutions

### 4. ANALYZING THEMES

**Economics** How were the economic conditions in France similar to or different from those in England and the American colonies before their revolutions?

#### THINK ABOUT

- France's three estates
- the role of taxation
- France's national debt
- conditions in England before the Civil War
- conditions in the colonies before the American Revolution