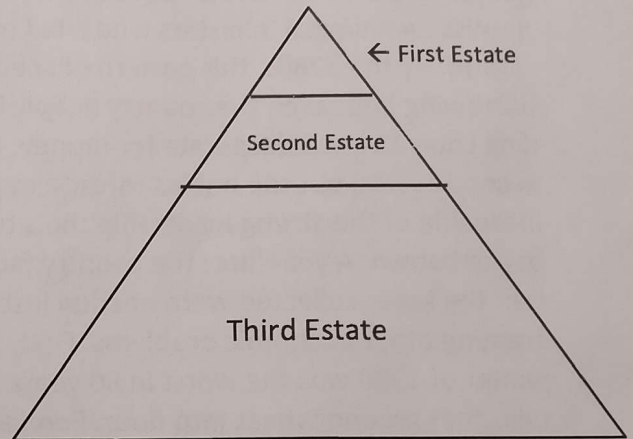


Causes of the French Revolution

In the 1780s, long-standing resentments against the French monarchy fueled anger throughout France. The source of the French people's ill will could be found in the unequal structure of French government and society.

Social Inequalities

A social and political structure called the Old Order created inequalities in French society. Under the Old Order, the king was at the top, and three social groups called estates were under him. The First Estate was made up of the Roman Catholic clergy, which comprised about 1% of the population. They had held several privileges since the Middle Ages. For example, neither the clergy nor the church had to pay taxes. In addition, the church owned 10% of the land, which produced vast sums of money in rents and fees. The Second Estate was made up of the nobility, which was less than 2% of the population. They controlled much of the country's wealth, but, like the First Estate, they paid few taxes. Many members of the Second Estate held key positions in the government and military. They lived on country estates where peasants did all of the work and were forced to pay high fees and rents to the landowner. The Third Estate was the largest estate, comprising 97% of the population. Within this estate, there were several groups. At the top were the bourgeoisie, which were the city-dwelling merchants, factory owners, and professionals (lawyers, doctors, etc.). Under the bourgeoisie were the artisans and workers of the cities. These were the shoemakers, carpenters, bricklayers, dressmakers, and laborers. These workers were also known as the *sans culottes*, or those "without knee breeches." If these people had no work, they went hungry. At the bottom of the Third Estate were the peasants who farmed the nobles' fields. Not only did they pay rent and fees to the landowners, but they also paid a tenth of their income to the church. They had to perform labor, such as working on road, without pay. Many peasants were miserably poor and had no hope for a better life.



Influence of the American Revolution and Enlightenment



While social inequalities were driving poor people toward revolt, new ideas from the Enlightenment were also inspiring the French Revolution. Many educated members of the bourgeoisie knew about the writings of the great Enlightenment philosophers John Locke, Baron de Montesquieu, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Members of the bourgeoisie also knew that Great Britain's government limited the king's power. More recently, they had learned that American colonists, inspired by Enlightenment ideas, had successfully rebelled against Britain's king. Ideas from the Enlightenment like,

Life, Liberty, and Property, inspired the French Revolution's slogan: *Liberte, egalite, fraternite*, which means "Liberty, Equality, and Brotherhood." Seeing how these ideas were transforming government

and society in other countries, some of the bourgeoisie began to consider how these ideas might be used in France.

Financial Crisis and Famine

On the eve of the Revolution, France was in a state of financial crisis, severe economic problems that affected much of the country. France was deeply in debt. Over the previous centuries, they had borrowed huge sums of money to spend on wars, including the American Revolution. But the king and his court continued to spend lavishly, leading to even more borrowing and debt. Marie Antoinette was called "Madame Deficit," making fun of how much money she lost gambling. Louis XVI further added fuel to the fire by dismissing financial ministers who tried to bring about reform. By the 1780s, this pattern of spending and borrowing had taken the country deeply into debt. By 1787 King Louis XVI was desperate for money. He tried to tax the Second Estate, but the nobles refused to pay. The king, incapable of the strong leadership the situation required, backed down. A year later the country faced bankruptcy.



Half the taxes collected were needed just to pay the country's debt. At the same time, nature was creating other economic problems. First, a hailstorm and a drought ruined the harvest. Then the winter of 1788 was the worst in 80 years. Frozen rivers prevented waterwheels from powering the mills that ground wheat into flour. Food and firewood were scarce and expensive. As hunger and cold made life wretched for thousands of French citizens, misery grew into anger. The country was broke, and people were hungry and angry. Eliminating the tax exemptions for the First and Second Estates could have helped the situation, but the clergy and the nobility resisted all such efforts.