

The origins of the French Revolution

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The Bastille was stormed on 14 July 1789

How and why did the seemingly established old French regime collapse?

old regime This name was coined by the revolutionaries to describe the regime based on absolute monarchy, a privileged nobility, and the Catholic Church, that had ruled France for centuries and was overthrown by the revolution.

absolute monarchy Where the monarch holds all power to make laws and carry them out. Contrasts with constitutional monarchy, where the monarch shares power with a representative elected body, and the monarch's powers are limited by a constitution, or written body of laws.

Exam links

AQA 2H France in revolution, 1744–1815
Edexcel paper 2, option 2C.1 France in revolution, 1774–99
OCR Y243/Y213 The French Revolution and the rule of Napoleon 1774–1815

The French Revolution of 1789 marked the transition to what historians call 'modern history'. It transformed France from an **old regime**, based on **absolute monarchy** and the hereditary power of a privileged nobility, to politics based on representative government, popular sovereignty and 'the rights of man'. Its seismic impact was felt throughout Europe and beyond.

Why did the revolution break out?

Historians used to see the origins of the revolution in terms of class conflict between the landed nobility and the commercial bourgeoisie. It is now accepted that the causes were more complex, and that a variety of factors — political, financial, social and cultural — contributed to the fall of the old regime. In recent years historians have laid much more stress on the revolution's political causes.

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French politics before the revolution

France was a major European power. No one in the years before the revolution could have predicted that the French political system was verging on collapse. Louis XVI was latest in a long line of absolute monarchs. Louis wanted to emulate his ancestor, Louis XIV, the 'Sun King', builder of the palace of Versailles. In theory the king was the only political power in France; in practice the old regime functioned through a combination of privilege, patronage, faction and institutionalised corruption. France had no equivalent of the British parliament. The chief rival to the king's authority was the **Paris Parlement**, France's highest law court.

French society before the revolution

France was a largely rural society, and the great majority of its population were peasants, most of whom lived in great poverty. French society was deeply hierarchical; birth and hereditary privilege counted for a great deal. Society was traditionally divided into three orders (or estates):

- The first order was the clergy.
- The second order was the nobility.

* The third, the great majority, were the commoners or third-estate, including everyone from the lowliest peasant to the wealthiest non-noble.

The first two orders dominated society out of all proportion to their numbers and enjoyed many privileges. France's bourgeoisie (or middle classes) were steadily growing in numbers and wealth, but were still discriminated against as non-noble. It was a very unequal society, not least in its distribution of tax burdens. The nobles, the wealthiest group, paid little tax. The clergy gave the king a negotiated 'free gift' instead of tax. By far the greatest burden of taxation fell on the poorest section of society, the peasantry. In addition, most peasants paid seigniorial dues to local seigniors who, overwhelmingly, were nobles.

The crisis of the absolute monarchy

By 1786 the French state was on the verge of bankruptcy. The costs of government, especially military costs, had escalated. The Seven Years' War (1756–63) had resulted in large-scale losses of most of France's overseas territories. France's immense contributions to the American cause in the War of Independence were financed by a series of loans which the French state proved unable to repay, not least because it could no longer raise new credits. There was urgent need for wholesale financial reform and an end to tax exemptions for the privileged orders, yet the nobles in the Paris Parlement resisted reforms which would have ensured that nobles paid a greater share of taxation.

The Assembly of Notables

In February 1787 the finance minister, Calonne, summoned a special body, the Assembly of Notables, consisting of leading nobles and higher clergy in an attempt to bypass the Parlement and implement financial reform. But the Assembly refused to comply. Like the Parlement, the Assembly suspected that the crisis was of the monarchy's own making, and that the court, especially Marie-Antoinette, had been over-spending. Calonne, lacking support from the king, fell from power, and was replaced by Brienne, Calonne's chief critic in the Assembly. Brienne tried to push through a modified version of Calonne's reforms, but he also failed. The king dismissed the Assembly, and turned back to the Parlement.

Louis XVI

Louis XVI was ill-fitted to deal with the financial and political crisis. Although diligent and well-intentioned, he was irresolute, a poor communicator, and fatally indecisive. His greatest weakness was an inability to 'think outside the box', the 'box' being the system that had been handed down by his predecessors. Louis was incapable of thinking flexibly and generating new solutions. He neither acted decisively, nor permitted his ministers to do so.

Activities



- 1 Make a list of five factors that led to the outbreak of the French Revolution and put them in what you consider to be order of importance.
- 2 Make a diagram of reasons why Louis XVI summoned the Estates-General.
- 3 Create a short 'news broadcast' on the storming of the Bastille. You can record yourself as a journalist reporting on the build-up of events.

Marie-Antoinette had a bad reputation as promiscuous and pleasure-loving, much of it undeserved. She was, however, spendthrift, not very bright, and spent much time with her particular friends at court, on whom she lavished favours, snubbing some of the oldest noble families. As the crisis grew, Louis came to rely more on Marie-Antoinette but she had poor political judgement, was firmly reactionary and unwilling to compromise with more moderate reformers.

The Parlement resists the monarchy

Over the course of 1788 a series of struggles between crown and Parlement escalated, with the Parlement resisting the king's last-ditch efforts to force it to register fiscal reforms and new loans, an action the Parlement called 'despotic'. The magistrates of the Parlement were far from revolutionary in their intentions, most were conservative by instinct. But their resistance became identified with the cause of the French nation against a despotic monarchy that was trying to force its will on the magistrates.

The old regime had operated a system of censorship against anyone writing openly about politics. Now that system broke down, and people began to write and talk about the political crisis. Printing presses churned out pamphlets in support of the magistrates. Large crowds gathered to support them, and public unrest grew.

When the king dismissed the Parlement, popular protests were held in support of the magistrates. Resistance spread to the other law courts, and lawyers began a strike in support of the magistrates. Debating societies and clubs formed in which people debated public issues and called for political reform.

Paris Parlement A powerful body, a higher law court (one of several in France), made up of noble magistrates who had bought their posts.



Public opinion of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette was low prior to the revolution

Estates-General France's only representative body, made up of elected deputies for the three main orders: clergy, nobility and third estate.

Summoning the Estates-General

The Parlement said that the only institution with the authority to endorse financial reform was the **Estates-General**. The Estates-General was made up of elected representatives of the three orders, but the kings of France had ruled without calling it since 1614. In August 1788, with the coffers empty, government paralysed and unable to raise credit, and the country in an increasing state of unrest, the king capitulated and summoned the Estates-General to meet in May 1789.

Economic hardship and the spread of popular unrest

A key part in the origins of the revolution was the connection between demands for political reform from the elite, and popular unrest. Bread formed the staple diet of the poor. Even in a good year urban workers spent about half their wages on bread. In July 1788, torrential weather in the Paris region decimated crops, adding considerably to the misery of the lower orders, and driving up bread prices to an all-time high in the summer of 1789. The winter of 1788 was the worst in many years, and cold and hunger took many lives.

Growing political expectations of the Estates-General

The process of holding elections for the Estates-General, and the appearance of many political pamphlets, gave a new politicised consciousness to large sections of the populace. People expected political reform, though not yet a revolution.

Necker, the new finance minister, secured the king's agreement to doubling the numbers of third-estate (commoner) deputies in the Estates-General. A pressing question, left unresolved, was whether the three orders in the Estates-General would vote as individuals (which would favour the third-estate deputies), or as an order (meaning the nobility and

clergy could outvote the third-estate). One of the many pamphlets to appear was Sieyès, *What is the Third Estate?* Sieyès argued that the third-estate deputies should form themselves into a National Assembly.

The revolution begins

The Estates-General met on 5 May at Versailles. Third-estate deputies were exasperated at the hostility of most nobles to the idea of political reform, and at the king's failure to give any kind of concession to the third estate, or even to communicate with them. On 17 June the third-estate deputies took the revolutionary step of defying the king, and forming themselves into a 'National Assembly'. Then, on 20 June, finding themselves locked out of their assembly hall, they congregated at a tennis court, where they took an oath never to separate until they had given France a constitution.

In a collective session on 23 June, Louis reacted by ignoring decisions taken by the deputies. But the third-estate deputies persisted in calling themselves the National Assembly. Parish priests, along with a small, but high-profile group of reformist nobles began to join with the National Assembly.

Louis initially appeared to accept the National Assembly but his dismissal of Necker on 12 July, together with the movement of troops close to the capital and Versailles, provoked rumours on the streets of Paris that a crackdown against the revolution was about to begin. On 14 July a crowd stormed the Bastille, a fortress in Paris. This was the moment when the revolution can truly be said to have been established, with the Parisian crowd and some soldiers joining forces in support of the political revolution forged by the deputies.

The Rights of Man, August 1789

The National Assembly wrote a statement of principles called 'The declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen'. It was based on the Enlightenment idea that

The *poissardes*, or market women, march to Versailles to demand bread



Further reading



Campbell, P. R. (ed.) (2006), *The Origins of the French Revolution*, Palgrave. See the chapter on the financial origins, by Joel Felix, and the chapter on the influence of the Enlightenment, by Marisa Linton.

Doyle, W. (1999) (3rd edn) *Origins of the French Revolution*, Oxford University Press.

Linton, M. (August 2006) 'Robespierre and the Terror', *History Today*, Vol. 56, pp. 23–9.

Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution. An excellent website, with introductory essays, many images and documents: www.tinyurl.com/3hvgh.



The Estates-General meet at Versailles in May 1789

every human was entitled to fundamental or natural rights. The declaration enshrined the principle that government did not exist to protect only the rights of the rich and powerful, but should be answerable to ordinary people. The deputies then settled down to write a constitution based on these principles, but in practice many, including Sieyès, were reluctant to extend these theoretical rights to all people.

A small but vocal minority of radical deputies argued that the 'rights of man' should be for all, regardless of poverty, religion or race; they also argued that the right to liberty should extend to slaves in the French Caribbean, a policy later implemented in 1794 at the height of the revolution.

France became a constitutional monarchy. Most people were personally loyal to the king, and believed the revolution to have been completed. Three years later, after Louis had attempted to flee the country, and war had polarised the political situation, a second revolution broke out, which overthrew the monarchy. This second revolution would prove much more radical than the first.

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Using this article in your exam



How could this article be useful in your exam?

The French Revolution is a relatively popular topic for study but one that you might initially find quite bewildering. Part of the challenge is getting a grip on some of the technical terms and concepts that are deployed in sources. Of equal demand is the necessity to assimilate a vast range of factual material in the form of dates, names and events over long periods of time.

Marissa Linton's article is an excellent example of how to pull out and explain key components of the origins of the revolution to make them easily understandable and accessible. Notice how she stresses that a factor, rather than a narrative-based approach, to looking at the origins of the revolution is more beneficial. You should also be able to spot how she incorporates a long and short-term analysis of the factors highlighted, thus ensuring that the origins of the conflict are placed in a wide context.

Finally, the article is very adept at introducing the importance of historiography when studying the revolution without getting bogged down in this. From the article alone, you should be able to have a good stab at an exam-type question that reads, 'The most important factor in determining the start of the French Revolution was taxation.' How far do you agree with this view?