

# THE ORIGIN OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION



## “HOW TO READ MORRIS”

### OVERVIEW – KEY ISSUES

3.1 What was the ancien regime?

*Questions...*

3.2 What was France like before the French Revolution?

*Questions...*

3.3 Was the French economy in crisis by 1789?

*Questions*

# HOW TO READ MORRIS...

## CHAPTER – KEY ISSUES:

- *How far was the authority of Louis XVI undermined by the social and economic problems facing France in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century?*
- *What was the impact of the Enlightenment on absolute monarchy in France?*
- *How successfully did Louis XVI respond to the problems faced?*

## QUESTIONS (SUBTITLES)

- 3.1 *What was the ancien regime?*  
3.2 *What was France like before the French Revolution?*  
3.3 *Was the French economy in crisis by 1789?*  
3.4 *How far were members of the French monarchy responsible for the outbreak of revolution in 1789?*  
3.5 *Were Enlightened ideas important in bringing revolution?*  
3.6 *How did French governments deal with the financial crises of the 1770s and 1780s?*  
3.7 *The calling of the Estates-General: What caused the revolution to slip out of the hands of the privileged classes?*  
3.8 *Historical interpretation: Why have historians differed in their view of why the French Revolution began in 1789?*

## FRAMEWORK OF EVENTS

<b>1740-48</b>	The War of Austrian Succession
<b>1756-63</b>	The Seven Years' War
<b>1771</b>	Exile of <i>parlements</i>
<b>1774</b>	Louis XV dies; Louis XVI becomes King
<b>1774-76</b>	Turgot is <i>Contrôleur-Général</i>
<b>1776</b>	The Six Edicts The onset of economic depression
<b>1771-81</b>	Necker is Director-General
<b>1778-83</b>	The American War of Independence
<b>1783-87</b>	Calonne is <i>Contrôleur- Général</i>
<b>1786</b>	Calonne warns the King of imminent bankruptcy The Assembly of Notables
<b>1787</b>	Brienne is <i>Contrôleur- Général</i>
<b>1787-88</b>	May Edicts Revolt of the Nobles Estates-General called for 1789 Necker's return
<b>1789</b>	Bread crisis Estates-General meet Tennis Court Oath.

### 3.1 What was the ancien regime?

As the historian William Doyle writes in *Origins of the French Revolution*, published in 1989:

*“The ancien regime was what the revolutionaries thought they were destroying in and after 1789. Ancien means not so much "old" as "former" ... By early 1790, ancien regime had become the standard term for what had existed before the Revolution.”*

There was no certainty that the ancien regime was destined to end in revolution. The revolution has acquired such epic status in historiography as a great “turning-point” that it is easy to assume that everything that preceded it must inevitably form the “causes of the Revolution”. French society and government were riddled with problems. It is just as valid to remind ourselves that contemporaries on the verge of revolution in 1789 not only failed to agree on what measures of reform should be adopted but also were deeply conservative. How did long-term problems faced by the ancien regime interact with events in the 1770s and 1780s?

In France, Divine Right was the foundation of monarchy. As the Bishop of Meaux claimed in the 17th century, *“Royal authority is sacred... God establishes Kings as His ministers, and reigns through them over the nations.... All power comes from God... Princes therefore act as ministers of God, and His lieutenants on earth.... The royal throne is not the throne of a man, but the throne of God himself.”*

This classical statement of Divine Right kingship formed the basis of Louis XVI's claims to absolute power. Kings were not accountable to any earthly power, although it was perfectly understood that, if the King failed to act according to reason, then he would face the judgement of God. As the source of all legal authority in the kingdom, Louis would also act as Chief Judge. It was essential that he should maintain the law and those customs and rights previously accepted by the Crown. This included protecting the various rights and privileges of his different subjects. In fact, the King's position rested entirely upon his legitimacy, as the eldest legitimate son in line to the succession. Just as the privileged orders recognized Louis' fundamental rights to the succession, so he in turn would recognize their fundamental liberties and privileges. As the King was chief noble and landowner, these mutual ties were accepted. Hence the powers of the Crown were heavily circumscribed. These Kings of France were not allowed to behave as arbitrary and irresponsible monarchs - as “*despots*”.

However, there was a dilemma, which became increasingly apparent during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Effective government could be seen to mean efficient administration. Privileges, such as tax exemption, hindered government. On the one hand, how could the King maintain the law and customs of France while, on the other hand, increasing his power to run the State government more efficiently? An effective chief executive rather than a protector of privilege would run the risk of being called a “*despot*”, or a tyrant. Louis XIV (“*the Sun King*”), until the final years of the reign, succeeded in avoiding this type of criticism. However, neither Louis XV nor Louis XVI had the Sun King's ability. They were neither determined nor resourceful enough to seize the initiative and introduce reforms to stem the revolutionary tide that would eventually engulf the monarchy.

The Enlightenment had already undermined Divine Right monarchy, although both Kings failed to grasp this, so government remained archaic. There was a contradiction between the King, who claimed to be the source of earthly power, and the forces of privilege and customary right that prevented him from exercising that power. The historian Alfred Cobban argued in *History of Modern France* (1957) that such a “*system*” based on personal government did not add up to an effective administrative system.

Neither could the King exercise complete control over all aspects of government. Such were the complexities of administration that there were areas where the King's oversight of ministers was in name only. At least Louis XIV had the good sense to use ministers of ability. During the reign of Louis XVI, a minister was more concerned with the preservation of his post and safeguarding his reputation. The “*system*” relied to a large degree on the work of intendants - the instruments of the King's administration in each of the 34 *généralités* that made up provincial France. It is true they were men of quality, but dreadfully overworked. Anne Turgot, the Contrôleur-Général, complained that their role consisted of the “*constant tidying of endless lumber*”.

It was another feature of the confused administration that intendants shared authority with other individuals or groups. In the six areas of France known as *pays d'état*, the assemblies or estates had significant autonomy to vote a “*don gratuit*” (free gift) on their own decision. Provincial Governors, usually nobles of standing, combined military powers with authority to deal with the local parlements. The intendants could not always be guaranteed resolute support from Versailles - which was where Louis XVI seemed to be isolated.

Intendants were no substitute for a proper civil service. All they had to rely on was the *officer's* class, who had mostly bought their posts and who used their positions for personal gain. Their capacity for delay meant that the government's own officials could well hinder the smooth running of the government. Alfred Cobban called it “*absolutism qualified by indiscipline*”.

Although the King was Chief Judge, applying the law was by no means straightforward. Law differed significantly, from the largely **customary law** in the north to the **Roman law** of the south. Courts were slow, inefficient and corrupt. As the King was unable to hear all appeal cases, they were delegated to 13 sovereign courts, or parlements. The Paris Parlement was the most important of these and became the focus of persistent opposition to the Crown. Their magistrates were all noblesse de robe. The Paris Parlement had long held the view that it was the guardian of the nation's interests against arbitrary monarchy; claiming the right to remonstrate against royal edicts and amend them, before giving a final seal of approval by registering them. They would emerge in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a powerful force - although how powerful is still open to debate.

The King's financial system was chaotic. There was widespread abuse of the tax system and many groups in society were exempt from tax. Without a Central Treasury or efficient accounting system, the King was always financially embarrassed by debt. The administration lacked coherence and uniformity. Slow communications made it difficult to execute government business effectively. The King was hemmed in on all sides by limitations to his authority. No wonder Napoleon Bonaparte commented on “*this chequered France, more like 20 Kingdoms than a single State*”.

## QUESTIONS ON THIS SECTION:

1. *What were the limitations of absolutism?*
2. *To what extent was absolutism just a myth?*

## **ANSWER THE QUESTIONS**

**1. What were the limitations of absolutism?**

**2. To what extent was absolutism just a myth?**

## 3.2 What was France like before the French Revolution?

### *The First Estate: to what extent did the clergy support the Crown?*

The First Estate of the realm was the clergy. Their pre-eminence was guaranteed. Not only was the throne occupied by “*The Most Christian King*” and pillar of the Catholic Church, but also the clergy carried out important functions throughout society. Bishops and Archbishops rubbed shoulders with Cardinals and noblesse at Court. Some Churchmen, such as Loménie de Brienne, accepted high office. The King made appointments to senior church posts and this was an accepted career route for the sons of the nobility. Indeed great wealth was to be had, particularly since pluralism was still practiced. From Bishops at the top of the ecclesiastical ladder down to village cures, the clergy had a distinct social and religious status. It, in turn, added stability to absolute monarchy - a monarchy that clung to Divine Right as the basis for its authority.

The church was also enormously rich, owning about 10% of all the land in France - second only to the King. Bishops, too, had a position to maintain. They amassed great wealth not only from their own sees but also by drawing from parish tithes. All clergy enjoyed privileges similar to the nobility.

However, a closer look reveals stresses within the clergy, and an ambivalent attitude to the Crown. Firstly, antagonisms existed between cures and upper clergy (socially superior and extremely wealthy - some Archbishops earned 500 times more than a cure). Jealousy about clerical income was only part of this hostility. The upper clergy who were unpopular because of pluralism made the most of their social exclusivity, while the cures worked hard and closely with the lower orders, most of whom were peasants. Village priests shared something of their precarious existence and understood the weight of taxation and feudal dues on their flocks. Historians have ascribed “democratic” ideas to parish priests (an odd concept so far removed from the 20<sup>th</sup>-century political vocabulary), although there is evidence in the cahiers of 1789 that cures wished to participate more in the running of the Church. They were exasperated by the abuse of the tithes, and by the bishops who demanded unquestioning obedience. Animosity spilled over into matters of faith. Lower clergy continued to be Gallican, unlike their clerical masters. Many of these tensions were not new, but they could well have been made worse by the radicalism that increased in 1789.

Secondly, how important was the Church to the King? It was certainly a keystone in the ancien regime. King and upper clergy shared the assumption that God had ordained the order of things and that was that. It was this kind of attitude, alongside the wealth of some clerics, which attracted the attention of the philosophes. They reserved particular spite for the clergy, blaming them for perpetuating superstition, dogma and privilege.

The Church also faced repeated campaigns waged against it by the King. It resisted him successfully, as it was very much a “*state within a state*”. Its income was a closely guarded secret and, instead of paying taxes, it paid an annual don gratuit (free gift) which it negotiated with the King and was normally quite modest. The Assembly of the Clergy undertook the negotiations. It met every five years and it proved a formidable body. Even under the “*grand monarch*” Louis XIV, the Assembly of the Clergy met at regular intervals and its representations were always carefully considered. Subsequent attempts by the government to make an assault on the Church's wealth were always beaten off.

In 1780, there was a proposal to value Church property so it could be taxed. Nothing came of it; the clergy had plenty of experience of passive resistance, closing ranks in the face of unwelcome interference.

### ***The Second Estate: a divided nobility?***

Nobles dominated French society. They were a tiny group. Historians estimate that nobles made up probably around 1% of the total French population. But they had immense wealth, owning between one-third and one-quarter of all the land as well as having a stranglehold on important positions of power. They were bishops and archbishops of the Church, army officers, judges and magistrates of parlements, King's ministers and intendants.

A booming economy up to the mid-1770s had enabled the nobility to take over high positions in the state. A century earlier, Louis XIV had reduced the nobility to nonentities at the palace of Versailles, trapped by court etiquette to playing out rituals which emphasized the pre-eminence of the King at the expense of the nobility. How things had changed! The noblesse had taken over most positions of State and were perfectly placed to safeguard their privileges and status, and to defend their self-interest if they were ever threatened by the government.

Revolutionaries were keen to keep an image of the nobility as a single, exclusive class, living a decadent life of luxury while viewing the rest of society with snobbish disdain. In 1789, they led the "*aristocratic reaction*" to defend their privileges from being undermined by the Crown's ministers and from the challenge of the bourgeoisie. A declining nobility fought back against a rising bourgeoisie, so the argument ran. Much of this is mythology and does not bear close analysis.

Firstly, did the nobility constitute a single class? In theory, they defended the King's realm because their sons provided officers for the army while their families drew income from the land in gentlemanly fashion. They would take snobbish satisfaction from studying their family trees that would stretch back into the mists of time.

Reality was very different. Fortunes differed widely. The historian William Doyle notes in *Origins of the French Revolution* (1989) that only 250 families probably had incomes of over 50,000 livres a year which would support a lavish lifestyle of crippling expense at Versailles. At the other end of the scale, probably 20% had less than 1,000 livres, meaning that they were almost indistinguishable from peasants. It is hardly surprising that the concept of the nobles as a single class has been challenged. Such differences nurtured resentments that were never far from the surface. What privileges did nobles enjoy and how could anyone join their ranks?

Nobility could be conferred by birth. This was an accepted principle by which estates and titles were either handed down to the eldest son (the legal idea of primogeniture), or granted by the King's will, perhaps to someone who had come to the assistance of the Crown financially or militarily. Birth was widely acknowledged as the true mark of blue-blooded nobility. Just as the King's right of succession to the throne was never questioned, so neither was the right of the grandes noblesse to confer title, privileges and property on their sons. They had the bloodlines to prove it.

Nevertheless, ennoblement could be conferred by purchasing a post in the government's administration or in the law. If kept in the family for two or three generations, the title became hereditary. It may have taken time, then, before "*full*" status was acquired, but there was no shortage of demand - 2,477 joined the ranks between 1774 and 1789. If one's purse was particularly deep, then purchasing the position of King's Secretary brought instant hereditary nobility. In all, probably between 30,000 and 50,000 had become recently ennobled in the 18<sup>th</sup>

century. Given the large numbers of nobles, it is difficult to estimate what proportion this constitutes, but the current view is about one-quarter. It is not easy, therefore, to defend the myth of an exclusive caste when membership of the nobility was so open.

Aside from the recognizable honor of being “*noble*”, a title brought numerous privileges, particularly tax exemption. Nobles recognized that they should serve the Crown, either in the army or administration, and it was in their interests to maintain the ancien regime that was serving them so well.

Nevertheless, when challenged, would the members of the Second Estate prove capable of defending themselves? Apparently not. Everything from petty snobbishness and jealousy to downright antagonism prevented them from working with each other to defend their status and privileges. It is worth pointing out that co-operation between robe and sword was not unheard of. Members of ancient families, financially drained by lavish court expenses, could find marriage to less distinguished nobility worth their while. Inter-marriage and new forms of creating wealth blurred the distinctions between those who had gained their title by birth and those who gained them by venality. It was accepted that venality not only provided valuable income for the King, but was also an effective method of preventing dangerous social tensions from developing by providing a route for the bourgeoisie to rise up the social ladder and achieve their social aspirations. These are perfectly valid arguments. However, there is no disguising the hostilities between different groups of nobles who didn't need much of an excuse to start backbiting.

Extravagant, fashionable, proud and arrogant they may have been, but court nobles were able to petition the King personally Provincial squires (hobereaux) were rejected by the Parisians, and scorned for dressing like peasants. Meanwhile, bourgeoisie with neither a family tree nor a distinguished record of military service were leapfrogging them by purchasing offices, which gave them a social status to which they had no right by birth. To the provincial gentry and the old order, money could never enable an upstart to acquire the habits and gentlemanly outlook required by those who lived “*nobly*”. Nor would there be any love lost between “*robe*” and “*sword*” nobles. The **Segur Ordinance** (1781) was a deliberate attempt by the old nobility to prevent the recently ennobled from becoming army officers, thus closing down the most prized career route for those who knew that social ambitions would stand or fall on whether or not they won approval in military service. Frustrations and hostilities were, then, often based on money, status and snobbery It is easy to overpaint this picture for reality is seldom as clear cut. For contemporaries, however, these impressions were very real and remained a potent force.

The precise impact of the Enlightenment continues to be debated. Here, again, the nobility reflected all shades of opinion. It is likely that most nobles saw no reason to embrace reformist ideas (even if they were completely aware of them) and thereby challenge an ancien regime that enshrined their privileges. Church and government also provided career opportunities for their sons. There are numerous documented examples of magistrates in parlement exercising their powers of censorship over “*dangerous*” plays and books. On the other hand, there was a minority (e.g. the Marquis de Lafayette) who were eager to engage in debate in fashionable salons, literary societies, academies and wherever the Enlightened ideas flourished. Once again the chasm which separated conservative, self-satisfied noblesse from liberal thinkers would make it difficult for the Second Estate to act with any sense of purpose or find acceptable leaders when the Estates-General met in 1789.

Why should the nobility have felt concerned about their apparent dis-unity? Nobles were the leaders of society and there seemed little, even on the eve of revolution, to dent their confidence. The lower orders might strike or riot, but usually it was just in protest about wages or bread

prices. The philosophes, apart from Rousseau, recognized the central role of an educated elite of nobles in government and society. This was hardly surprising given that many of them had noble titles, wrote for a noble audience and relied on noble patronage and support. Pierre Beaumarchais' play *The Marriage of Figaro*, once banned for its anti-noble sentiments, was performed in 1784, but only with noble backing and there was no shortage of aristocrats who wanted to see it. The nobles had little to fear so it seems. They felt assured and they dominated the government, which clearly could not carry on without them. The question is why were they consumed by the revolution so quickly?

### ***Nobles' privileges***

The most significant privilege was tax exemption. They did not pay *taille* (the most common direct tax) nor the salt tax (*gabelle*). They were exempt from forced labor on the roads (*corvee*), they could wear a sword in public places and could be tried in special courts. Also, despite the purist view of nobility that involved a duty to serve in the army, noble status did grant exemption from troops being billeted on them.

## **The Second Estate**

### **1. Noblesse d'epee** (“nobles of the sword”)

- *These were Princes of the blood.*
- *They were resident at Court.*
- *They numbered about 4,000.*
- *They held honorary and ancient titles, with family trees going back hundreds of years, to before 1400.*
- *Many had high rank in the Church and Army or held Provincial Governorships.*

### **2. Noblesse de robe** (“robe nobles”)

- *These were office holders in the government.*
- *They were King's ministers, magistrates a-q.,d judges of the parlements or sovereign courts.*
- *They were vital to the work of government, the law and in the raising of taxation and finance.*
- *As a class, robe nobles were considered inferior to those of the sword.*

### **3. Provincial nobility**

- *These were conservative and parochial.*
- *Some had old feudal titles and continued to live in their chateaux off rents and seigneurial dues.*
- *They led gentlemanly lives in rural France.*

### **4. Others**

- *These included the hobereaux (proud nobles but poor). As they often had to work in their own fields, barely scratching a living, they were the objects of scorn in the fashionable salons in Paris.*

### ***Third Estate: the bourgeoisie and peasants***

Problems of defining the Third Estate bedevil studies of the period. It consisted of bourgeoisie and peasants.

#### **Who were the bourgeoisie?**

This seems a crucial question given the Marxist view, now treated with skepticism, that it was this class which gave the initial impetus to the revolution. At the risk of over-simplification, they were not regarded as laborer's or peasants, nor were they nobles. They made their living largely in towns, where their wealth derived from trade investments or skills, or from inheritances. They managed small enterprises, bought and sold goods, or positions, financed others, invested or were professional people. Marxists thought the bourgeoisie included rentiers, lawyers, financiers, doctors, shopkeepers, ship-owners, commercial traders, low-ranking office holders, craftworkers, shopkeepers, and small-scale manufacturer's. The range is so wide as to defy any further kind of generalization. This did not stop Marxists from lumping them together as one class. It is tempting, in this pre-revolutionary period, to look for evidence of tensions within the bourgeoisie and between the bourgeoisie and the class they displaced, the noblesse. These tensions certainly existed but, according to historian J.H. Sherman in France before the Revolution (1983), "*There was no fundamental hostility between the bourgeoisie and the nobility before the Revolution.*"

Lacking any sense of belonging to a particular class, the bourgeoisie sought to join another - the noblesse. To gain social status and esteem involved rapidly shedding their past, particularly when their ancestors had been involved in trade and commerce. Being "trade" was socially unacceptable and, in an intensely snobbish culture, was not regarded as an activity fit for gentlemen to pursue. Strict rules prohibited nobles from dabbling in commerce, although these had been eroded by the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, as a significant but small group of nobility invested in capitalism. Demand for posts that brought ennoblement never slackened, despite the increasing expense of these kinds of offices: 6,500 families in France became *anoblies* (newly ennobled) during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The dividing lines between the rich bourgeoisie and the nobility were becoming blurred. Venality seemed to suit everyone: the Treasury raised income; older noble families could be supported by "*new money*" through inter-marriage with families *anoblies*; the bourgeoisie could aspire to, and achieve, social mobility; and, all the time, noble values were being asserted.

The upper bourgeoisie did not stop there. They copied their social superiors by buying up land (probably about 25% of all land in the country) and thereby acquiring seigniorial rights. However, beneath the surface there were deep social tensions. Ennoblement of bourgeois families offended the pride of *grande*s with ancient titles who never accepted the idea that true nobility could be bought. The economic boom had made the division between businessmen and the non-commercial bourgeoisie (lawyers, office-holders and rentiers) rather more obvious.

As commerce prospered, particularly overseas trade, so there was an energy and assurance amongst those involved in it. They were impatient about the forces of privilege that hindered them, such as guilds, municipal immunities, customs dues, government regulation and tax exemptions. More importantly, the social ambitions of the rich were frustrated as the government was selling fewer and fewer offices after the 1730s. When the Depression squeezed their incomes, the government seemed to be conspiring against them by signing commercial treaties that opened markets to foreign competition. In 1784, the French West Indies trade was opened up and, in 1787, Charles-Alexandre de Calonne (Contrôleur-Général of Finances 1783-7) opened the French market to British textiles.

Nevertheless, rich businessmen became richer, while the poorer non-commercial bourgeoisie became poorer. Office-holders and investors in rentes (government stocks) must have felt especially aggrieved and jealous. Rentiers felt undermined by the economic downturn of the late 1770s. Office-holders struggled to come to terms with their inability to compete for ennobling offices with the wealthiest businessmen. Just short of 40,000 venal officers were suffering a decline in the value of their posts and falling profits. Not all these posts conferred ennoblement - some only conferred it after the family had been officers for several generations. There were just too many of them. The historian E.N. Williams notes, in *The Ancient Regime in Europe* (1970), that the city of Angers had 53 judicial courts, with insufficient business to support its lawyers. They would have endured the arrogance of les anoblis or the superior magistrates of parlement who looked down on those who dealt with minor cases in lower courts. All of these frustrations amount to little more than froth up to 1788. The bourgeoisie supported the noblesse without argument during the events that led to the calling of the Estates-General. Their language also attacked “*tyranny*”. However, when the forms of voting for the Estates-General were being debated and the nobility revealed their naked self-interest, the bourgeoisie assumed a role more dynamic than ever before.

### **The peasant**

The term “peasant” covers a wide range of groups, from gross fermiers to landless laborer’s. Peasants comprised 80% of the total population of France and most of the semi-agricultural, semi-industrial wage earners at the bottom of the heap bore the brunt of dues and taxes which probably led to the handing over of over 40% of their income.

As the King ran into increasing debt, peasants paid more, particularly after 1749. There was no escape - no peasant was exempt from taxation and, to make matters worse, tax-exempt nobles or bourgeoisie would buy land. The total paid by a village was normally sub-divided amongst the taxable population. Hence, when it came to paying the total amount owed, a larger proportion fell on the peasants to pay. As economic conditions worsened in the 1770s, dues had to be squeezed out with ruthless regularity. By far the largest burden in their cost of living was the increase in rents paid on each plot of land. For the landlord (who might normally be a noble, but increasingly was a member of the clergy or bourgeoisie), putting up rents, when the depression struck in the 1700s, was an effective and profitable answer to declining incomes.

It was also widely accepted that local seigneurs could demand feudal dues. Once again, they varied regionally. What is uncertain is how much criticism there was of feudalism, as a system. Apparently, there was little. Peasant revolts were spontaneous and involved the specific venting of anger against local dues, courts and seigneurs. Peasants' horizons were narrow, both physically and intellectually. But they would stretch to the local town, where the bourgeois moneylenders and profiteers preyed on the rural poor. It was towns that would pay only modest prices for peasants' goods - the cahiers of 1789 included plenty of complaints about the urban bourgeoisie.

It was difficult for peasants to escape from this cycle of economic misery. Urban capitalists exploited those peasants engaged in semi-industrial activities. For the great mass who eked out a living on the land, locked into primitive methods, there was little prospect of earning more money or feeding the rising population.

Agriculture was backward. The revolution in farming techniques taking place in Britain seemed to bypass the French countryside, where farmers were locked into old fashioned and ineffective practices. Admittedly there were exceptions, such as Flanders where that bane of farmers' existence, the fallow, had been discarded. Eighteenth-century writers were well aware of the doleful effect of leaving land uncultivated so the soil might recover.

A spiral of low productivity began, with the need to feed more hungry mouths and grow more arable crops. This led to a reduction in the number of animals kept, and less and less manure to fertilize soil which had already been over-ploughed.

It is remarkable that enough food was produced to feed the population, although it seems clear that this could only be achieved by pressing more land into use rather than by improving crop productivity.

There were formidable obstacles in the way of change, even if anyone had thought it worthwhile to do so. Peasants were not keen to make improvements that would catch the eye of the tax collector, while landowners preferred to push up rents (easily done when there was such demand for land). The death of the head of the family usually meant that estates were divided up between the surviving sons, making it more difficult to farm the smaller plots.

The trend in Britain was towards enclosure, which had enabled farmers to introduce new, and specialized, crops. In France there was opposition, which slowed the urgent need for change. Laborers, particularly, needed common land grazing and they put paid to numerous plans for enclosure.

It is worth noting that the poor state of rural transport, before the advent of railways, made it almost impossible to move goods to the markets where they could get decent prices.

As the cost of living rose, many semi-landed peasants took refuge in waged employment. But this was just at the time when so many others were doing the same and, as prices rose, wages failed to keep pace. With no shortage of labor, it is likely that rising wages lagged far behind rising prices, possibly by up to one-third.

It is a feature of rural society that groups of migrant, landless peasants were an unwelcome sight. However, up to 1788, these groups of peasants played no significant part in the unrest that started the King's crisis and the calling of the Estates-General. But when the harvests failed in 1788, these lower orders became a force to be reckoned with.

Millions of peasants had barely enough land to guarantee their survival and they lived a nightmare existence of semi-starvation. In the year of a good harvest they might scrape through. They made ends meet, living from hand to mouth on tiny plots of land. They might try to earn wages from a rich farmer or weave cloth in their homes for the bourgeois industrialist from the town. Many had to migrate in search of work; they may have borrowed heavily and, when they defaulted on their payments, the urban bourgeois moneylenders would dispossess them.

It didn't take much of an economic downturn to expand the ranks of the landless laborers. They begged, and drifted into criminality for casual work.

### **Feudal rights**

These could consist of the following:

- The landlord could run his own seigniorial court and exact punishments for the infringement of his feudal rights, such as enforcing dues for using the lord's oven, mill, wine-press and stretch of river for fishing or area of wood for hunting.
- Harvest dues were payable and the seigneur could exact heavy fines when the ownership of land or houses changed.

### **Taxes and dues paid by peasants**

- **Taille:** the main direct tax
- **Gabelle:** salt tax, collected by tax farmers who had bought the monopoly to collect the tax in particular areas.
- **Tithes:** the proportion of each year's crop paid to the Church. Normally around 8% of all produce, but in Brittany it could be up to 25%.
- **Corvee (forced labour on the roads):** extremely unpopular even when peasants could pay a money tax to avoid it.

### ***Was life any better in the towns?***

There was no shortage of friction between town and country. The urban bourgeoisie provided loans to peasants in debt. They then acquired that land when the debtors were in default, so the towns got the blame for expanding the class of landless workers. Markets were carefully super-vised so that peasants, who had already paid substantial transport costs, did not always receive the prices for their goods that they would have wished.

The guilds were an obvious target as they clung to ancient privileges that enabled them both to control prices and output, and to protect them-selves from outsiders who might try to undercut their trade.

Rural laborer's and urban workers alike were the victims of long hours, falling standards of living, unemployment, and bread prices, which rose alarmingly after the disastrous 1788 harvest. Bread consumed over three-quarters of an urban worker's wages in 1789, which was the final ingredient in an already difficult situation.

### **QUESTIONS ON THIS SECTION:**

- 1. How serious were the tensions between the First, Second and Third Estates?***
- 2. How far did social tensions threaten the stability of the state?***

## **ANSWER THE QUESTIONS**

**1. How serious were the tensions between the First, Second and Third Estates?**

**2. How far did social tensions threaten the stability of the state?**

### 3.3 Was the French economy in crisis by 1789?

The problems faced by the economy and by successive Contrôleurs-Général in trying to meet government expenditure, intensified the conflict within French society. There was a turn for the worse in August 1786 when Calonne, the Contrôleur-Général, reported to Louis XVI that bankruptcy was staring the government in the face. Debts had been rising steadily since the King's accession, but by 1786 the estimated shortfall in the royal finances amounted to 25% of the Crown's yearly income. What had brought France to this situation? Had this happened recently, or did it represent a gradual deterioration in finances that had affected the ancien régime over decades?

Potentially, France was a prosperous country. The population was growing (see pan I), dragging the economy lowly behind it. Trade flourished, particularly with the colonies (quadrupling since 1715), and industrial production doubled. Up to 1776, the French economy had been enjoying boom conditions. *“The sickly 17<sup>th</sup> century was finally over, and gone were the depressed prices and stunted trade, the slumps and the famines”*, wrote historian E.N. Williams in 1970. Even peasants must have noticed a difference; widespread famine no longer stalked the land.

However, by 1776 the boom was almost over, and the onset of an economic depression would dash people's expectations of better times. What they had enjoyed, they would clearly miss. Under the strains and stresses of depression, the weaknesses of government finance and the economy would re-emerge.

Investment in agriculture continued to stagnate. France was still dominated by local village markets, backward agricultural practices and poorly developed transport. Mechanization and factory-scale production lagged behind European rivals. Britain had 200 cotton mills in 1789, while France had eight, and was hence in no position to compete. France's financial structure was hardly robust. During Louis XV's minority, under the Regency of Philip, due d'Orleans, France's venture into state banking was a spectacular failure. This was in sharp contrast to England where, from 1694 onwards, the Bank of England underwrote the cost of the Spanish Succession War. John Law's bold scheme was to develop a state bank of France, which would issue notes and credit, and control the collection of taxation and the distribution of investments. All this depended on the success of colonial enterprise and, when investments in Louisiana failed, the bubble burst. Those who had speculated in John Law's schemes found their investments worthless, all of which left a legacy of suspicion against a banking system.

France was left without a system of financing credit to raise capital. As a result, the old abuses of the tax system returned. Absolutism had proved incapable of reforming its confusing, corrupt and inefficient finances. It was unequal to the task of protecting investments. Hence the old ways seem safer. Tax-farmers collected indirect taxes in return for generous commissions. Officers who collected the taille had purchased their post, so their self-interest was paramount. There was always a shortfall between the amount collected and the amount the government received in taxation. Its own officials saw themselves as independent contractors with the discretion to use the King's money to conduct private business. The King continued to be short of revenue and had to fall back on short-term loans from numerous speculators, many of whom were its own officers. Hence, servicing these loans (paying the interest) could easily absorb government spending for years into the future.

Of course, while the King was seen as the guarantor of privilege - as he had to be - the government was unable to tax those specific groups in society who possessed most of the country's wealth. Tax exemption on such a scale made it unlikely that the Crown's financial problems would ever be solved. None of this was helped by the ambition of the bourgeois

entrepreneurs, which was to leave the wealth-creating sector and become ennobled, and exempt from tax.

**Growth of population in France**

1700 - 22,000,000

1789 - 28,000,000

**Scale of debt of the French government**

1763            50 million livres

1774            40 million livres

1786            112 million livres

One of the problems faced by Contrôleurs-Général was the absence of accurate accounting methods and precise figures of revenue and expenditure. Without a state bank or central treasury, book-keeping was completely unreliable.

**QUESTIONS ON THIS SECTION:**

- 1. What were the fundamental weaknesses of the French economy before 1789?*
- 2. How did the depression of the late 1770s increase France's financial difficulties?*

## **ANSWER THE QUESTIONS**

**1. What were the fundamental weaknesses of the French economy before 1789?**

**2. How did the depression of the late 1770s increase France's financial difficulties?**