

## Causes French Revolution:

### Absolutism and centralization

The king in Paris tried to centralize the power. He did this by putting France under one jurisdiction ("**Royal Law**"). He also made **French the common language** within the administration and in the courts. Finally he **set up a standing army** which was paid by taxes (the *taille*). Several conflicts with Spain made it necessary for the king to increase the royal incomes. He did this by:

- **Selling public offices.** This created a new class: "*Nobility of the Robe*". The problem with this system was that it was just a temporary income and later it seems like the office became heredity within the family – and the family was tax-exempt!
- **Bishops and Abbots appointed by the king:** According to the "Concordat of Bologna" the Pope had the right to receive the first year income from new bishops and abbots in France but it was the French king that elected them! This custom lasted to the French Revolution 1789.

### Henry IV

Henry IV (1589-1610): Henry and his prime-minister the "Duke of Sully" paved the road to French Royal absolutism. Henry did not forget the Huguenots. He issued the "**Edict of Nantes**" (which protected the liberties of the Huguenots; liberty of conscience and liberty of public worship + they were allowed to have their own fortified towns – over 200...). The Duke of Sully repaired the bad finances and increased the royal power by:

- Establishing a **new annual tax** (the Paulette): A tax paid by the people who had purchased any juridical or/and financial office
- **Establishing trading companies** who received state subsidizing (like the manufacture of fine textiles and tapestries)
- **Building new roads** which were necessary if you wanted to control the country...
- **Building new canals**
- **Improved agriculture**
- Encouraged a **French settlement in "the New World"** – at Quebec

### Cardinal Richelieu

**Richelieu:** In 1622 Armand Jean du Plessis was made a cardinal – Cardinal Richelieu. Two years later he became Chief Minister. The new king, Louis XIII disliked the cardinal but he also realized that he was indispensable. Therefore Richelieu became virtually the ruler of France. He succeeded in his two main aims: to **strengthen the power of the king in France** and to make France supreme in Europe...

- He **step by step destroyed the political rights of the Huguenots** - He attacked the "capital" of the Huguenots

La Rochelle – and forced them to give up their rights to give up their privilege of maintaining fortified towns with their own troops

- **He ordered all nobles castles to be destroyed** if they were not necessary for the national defense

- The **nobility also lost the jurisdiction over local districts**. They were given to “**intendants**” – appointed Royal Officials – who kept an eye on the kings enemies  
*How did he succeed on making France supreme in Europe?*

- **He weakened the power of the Hapsburgs** – by participating in the 30-year war

- To be able to carry his policies out **he put heavy tax loads on the French common people** who more and more came to resent the system of Royal absolutism

Louis XIV

Louis XIV ruled with unlimited power. He truly believed in this divine right of the king and he had the ambition to make his reign very glorious. Louis XIV spent many hours in consultation and over paper work. Some of the reforms of Louis XIV were:

- He **increased the power of the intendants...**

- He *reorganized the army* to make it more efficient

- He **strengthened the French Navy**

- He **decided to have the palace at Versailles built.**

- **He made his officials and many of the nobility move to Versailles** where their sole purpose was to serve and amuse him... In this way he made them dependent and he could keep an eye on them.

*But he also made some mistakes:*

- **Moving to Versailles** was a way to **isolate the king** – from the contact with the French people

- **Versailles cost a lot of money** which meant **more loans**.

- The **finances of France became weaker** which would have an effect on her foreign policies

- **He raised the taxes** to be able to keep his court which made him and his court unpopular

- He **revoked the “Edict of Nantes”** which deprived the Huguenots of their freedom of worship. **Ten thousands of prosperous, industrious citizens immigrated** to Prussia, England and the English colonies in America...

- *France was involved in several wars* which cost a lot of money...

In 1715 Louis XIV died. He left France with **an empty treasury and in large debts...**

## Long-term Causes:

### Enlightenment

**Enlightenment** - especially the writings of Montesquieu, Rousseau, Voltaire and Diderot's encyclopedia. It's interesting to see that the country that had fostered these men and their ideas was one of the ones furthest away from adopting them. Several countries had enlightened absolute rulers but France just had absolute rulers who refused to reform the country

### Poor economy - taxes

The French monarchy had operated for over a century without resorting to a legislature. Since 1614, French kings had managed their fiscal affairs by **increasing the burden of the ancient and unequal system of taxes**, by **borrowing money**, and sometimes by **selling noble titles and other privileges**; however, because noble titles exempted the holder from future taxes, the purchasers of titles were effectively buying an annuity. The clergy was also tax exempted and the top of the Third Estate could buy tax exemptions. This meant that the rest of **the Third Estate paid nearly all taxes** (which did not give the state a lot of incomes).

Here is a description from Wikipedia about the taxes: Taxation relied on a system of internal tariffs separating the regions of France, which prevented a unified market from developing in the country. Taxes such as the extremely unpopular gabelle were contracted out to private collectors ("tax farmers") who were permitted to raise far more than the government requested. These systems led to an arbitrary and unequal collection of many of France's consumption taxes. Other taxes the peasants were required to pay included a tenth of their income or produce to the church (tithe), a (taille) to the state, a 5% property tax (vingtième) and a tax on the number of people in the family (capitation). Further royal and seigneurial taxes were collected in the form of compulsory labor (the corvée). The peasants also had numerous obligations to their landlords - rent in cash (cens), a payment related to their amount of produce (champari), and taxes on the use of the nobles' mills, wine presses or bakeries (banalités). In good times, the taxes were burdensome; in harsh times, they were devastating.

### French-Indian War 1756-1763

The French and Indian War in Europe known as the "**Seven Years War**" (England declared war on France 1756...) saw the British pitted against the French, the Austrians, and the Spanish. The war in the Americas started inauspiciously. George Washington was forced to surrender Fort Necessity in the Ohio Valley in 1754. The following year, British general Edward Braddock attempted to attack the French held Fort Duquesne.

British troops were ambushed by the French and the Indians. Braddock was mortally wounded. It fell upon George Washington to extricate both British and Colonial forces from the wilderness. In 1758, William Pitt came out of retirement and took over the British war effort. He directed additional war efforts in North America. He gave the colonists much greater independence in pursuing the war effort. This increased the enthusiasm among colonialists toward the war. (Also in 1758, the first Indian Reservation in America was founded – 3000 acres in New Jersey). By the end of 1758, the British had begun to turn the tide in the war in North America. In September 1759 the British attacked Quebec. After a five day battle, British and American forces captured Quebec, ending French control of Canada. This loss cost France a lot of prestige as well as money...

Extreme inequality

France was still organized as a feudal society. Every male person belonged to one out of three estates. The **First Estate** consisted of the clergy (**Church**). The **Second Estate** consisted of the **nobility** and the **Third Estate** was **everybody else**. The Third Estate was basically divided into three groups; the **upper level** (bourgeoisie - intellectuals, lawyers, doctors, merchants and businessmen - some very rich), the **city wage-earners** (skilled artisans, servants, laborers - they often lived on the very edge of poverty) and **the peasants (over 80%** - France had 5.3 million of Europe's 30 million male peasants). The First Estate owned 10% of the land even though they were only 0.5% of the population. The Second Estate received all the best positions within the government and the army. This group consisted of less than 1%.

Inequality in front of the law

Many public officials had to buy their positions from the king, as well as the right to keep this position hereditary; they of course tried to have these expenses repaid by making a profit out of their appointment. For instance, in a civil lawsuit, judges had to be paid some fees by the parties (the *épices*); this put justice out of reach of everybody but the wealthy classes

Political ambitions

Political ambitions among the bourgeoisie. This group resented the fact that they could not receive any privileges without paying for them and they were completely excluded from any political career

Weak absolute monarchs.

Louis XV ruled from 1715-1774. His main interest was pleasure - he paid no attention to the need of the people and he therefore never initiated any reforms. Louis XVI might have some interest in governing but as the textbook describes him - "he lacked a forceful

personality, had no will power, and was afraid to offend people in direct contact with him". You can find the following text in Wikipedia about the failure to reform: During the régimes of Louis XV (reigned 1715-1774) and Louis XVI (reigned 1774-1792) several ministers, most notably Turgot and Necker, unsuccessfully proposed to revise the French tax system to tax the nobles...

### Immediate causes:

Acute economical problems.

France in 1789, although facing some economic (and especially fiscal) difficulties, was one of the richest and strongest nations in Europe. The problem with the wealth was the poor distribution (described above). The wealthier classes (upper clergy, nobility and the richer bourgeoisie) owned most of it and they did not pay tax - so the state did not have an annual income and France was so deeply in debt as to be effectively bankrupt. Extravagant expenditures by Louis XVI on luxuries such as Versailles were compounded by heavy expenditures on different wars...

War – American Revolution

The debt described above increased even more when France 1778 joined the Americans in their struggle for Independence. This decision also had a political impact - Many Frenchmen admired the colonists' rebellion and their fight for political rights - independence. This was especially true among the educated bourgeoisie!

Famine

Wikipedia gives us the following information: These problems were all compounded by a great scarcity of food in the 1780s. A series of crop failures caused a shortage of grain, consequently raising the price of bread. Because bread was the main source of nutrition for poor peasants, this led to starvation. The two years previous to the revolution (1788-89) saw bad harvests and harsh winters, possibly because of a strong El Niño cycle caused by the 1783 Laki eruption at Iceland... A normal worker earned anywhere from 15 to 30 sous a day while skilled workers received 30 to 40 sous. A family of four would need about 2 loaves of bread a day to survive. The price of bread rose by 88 percent in 1789, going from 9 sous to 14.5/15 sous. Many peasants were relying on charity to survive. The peasantry became a class with the ambition to counteract social inequity and put an end to food shortages. The "**bread riot**" evolved into a central cause of the French Revolution. Mass urbanization coinciding with the beginning of the industrial revolution led residents to move into French cities seeking employment. French cities became overcrowded and filled with the hungry and disaffected.

The peasantry suffered doubly from the economic and agricultural problems.

#### Calling the Three Estates

Unable to collect more taxes or borrow money Louis XVI had to call the Estates-General in. This old semi-feudal body had not been called in since 1614 - now it was 1788! **The nobility was very much behind this development** since they thought they would be able to better their positions in the French autocracy. The first meeting was going to take place in May 1789

#### Disagreement about the Estates

In 1614 the Estates-General consisted of three "orders" - one for each Estate. Each order had the same number of representatives and they voted as one body. That meant that the clergy (First Estate) had one vote, the nobility (Second Estate) had one vote and the rest (Third Estate) had one vote. Several more liberal reformers protested against this traditional order. Their first demand was to have as many representatives as the other two Estates together. The king yielded to their will. The second demand was that each representative's vote should be counted instead of a "body vote" remained unsolved.

#### Tennis Court Oath

When they were supposed to meet the Third Estate T refused unless they second demand - to meet as one big body with an individual vote for each representative was accepted. After weeks of arguing the Third Estate (plus a few members of the clergy) invited the others to create a National Assembly. On June 20th 1789 they met (on an indoor tennis court) and they vowed to not disband until a new constitution had been written for France. This event is called the "Tennis Court Oath". After some resistance the king gave in and ordered the two other Estates to join the Third Estate in the National Assembly. The old Estates-General had ceased to exist! Meanwhile the king also ordered royal mercenary troops to surround Versailles and Paris...

#### National Assembly

Due to the famine and the economic depression the king and his action became the target of the people. Crowds in Paris started to go out and look for weapons. A misunderstanding led them to storm an old fort, the Bastille, in this search for weapons at July 14th 1789. The mob stormed the place and killed the small garrison but did not find any weapons (they had been misinformed). Ever since this day the 14th of July has been the French National Day). The king ordered his royal troops to leave. In many rural areas the peasants revolted. They refused to pay any taxes, attacked castles and manor houses of the nobility, destroyed records of feudal dues and in some cases burned the manors to the ground. ***The French Revolution had started.***