

The French Revolution



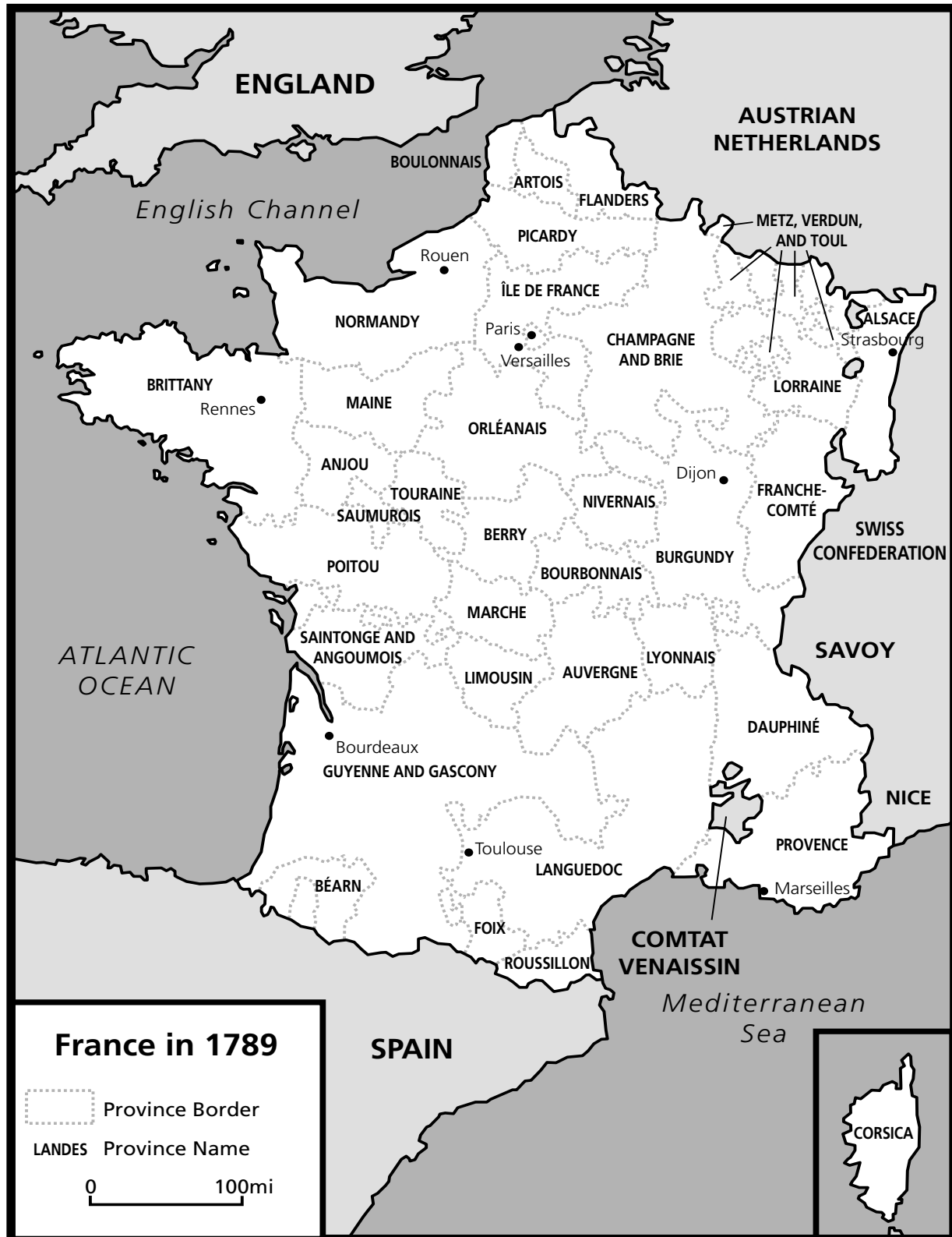
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France in 1789



Introduction: The Summer of 1789

On July 14 1789, several thousand French workers attacked and captured the Bastille—a military fortress and prison in the city of Paris. Many were hungry and looking for food. They were also looking for gunpowder to defend themselves against soldiers called to Paris by France’s King Louis XVI. The king had said that the soldiers were there to preserve public order. But the workers suspected the soldiers were there to disband the National Assembly, a new representative body that had just formed against the wishes of the king.

The National Assembly hoped to solve the serious problems facing France. Economic conditions were desperate and France’s government was nearly bankrupt from fighting a succession of wars. Most recently France had spent a fortune helping Britain’s American colonies achieve independence. Many of France’s people faced hunger and starvation. Riots over the price of bread were common.

Worries about the arrival of the king’s troops disrupted the work of the month-old National Assembly. When they found themselves locked out of the assembly’s regular meeting place, the delegates swore an oath on a nearby tennis court to remain in session until they created a new constitution for France. This, they believed, was an important step to solving France’s troubles.

“We swear never to separate ourselves from the National Assembly, and to reassemble wherever circumstances require, until the constitution of the realm is drawn up and fixed upon solid foundations.”

—The Tennis Court Oath, June 20, 1789

Today the fall of the Bastille is the event that France and the world use to mark the French Revolution. But the revolution did not occur in a single moment. In fact, the fall of the Bastille was closer to the beginning of the revolution than the end. The French Revolu-

tion would last for another ten years. During this time France would have three constitutions and repeated changes of government. It would fight a series of international wars and a civil war. It would go through a period of brutal dictatorship known as the Terror. It would also produce “The Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen,” a document that has had a profound impact on contemporary thinking about human rights and the role of government.

Why is the French Revolution important to understand today?

The ten years of the French Revolution were a time of intense debate and upheaval. The upheaval would have profound effects in France and beyond. Borders in Europe would change, many would suffer and die, and new ideas about politics and individual rights would emerge that would reshape the world. It is these far-reaching effects that contribute to our interest in the French Revolution today.

As you read in the coming days, try to consider the following questions: Why was there upheaval and change in France? What were the events that led to the storming of the Bastille and eventually to revolution? How did the French people determine what sort of government they would have? Why did efforts to create a democratic republic fail? Why did those committed to political rights resort to terror and dictatorship? How did the French Revolution contribute to new thinking about the relationship between people and their government?

In these readings and the activities that accompany them, you will explore the social, political, and economic conditions of France in the eighteenth century. You will then be asked to recreate the debate in the National Assembly as it pondered what should be in the constitution of France. Finally, you will consider the outcome of these debates and the course of the French Revolution.

Part I: France under the Old Regime

What was life like in eighteenth century France? It is safe to say that it was very different from the life we are familiar with today. Yet without some sense of the life and beliefs of the French people at the time, it is difficult to answer the question: why did the French Revolution take place?

To help you understand what led to the revolution that began in 1789, Part I of your reading traces the contours of French social and political life during the Old Regime (Old Regime was a name given to the system of rule in France before 1789). You will read about the economic conditions facing the French people. You will examine the role of social classes and of the Roman Catholic Church, and see how political decisions were made. You will also consider some of the new ideas about society that were beginning to circulate in France at that time.

A New King

In May 1774, a young man of nineteen became King Louis XVI of France. He succeeded his grandfather who died at the age of sixty-four from smallpox. His father had died when the king was eleven. Like his grandfather before him, Louis XVI came to the throne through dynastic succession (when members of a family continue to hold political power from generation to generation). The king was a member of the Bourbon family, which had ruled France since 1589.

How much power did the king claim for himself?

The king was at the top of the social and political order in France. At the time, most French people believed that God had given the king authority to rule. This idea is known as the “divine right of kings.” Not only did the king represent France, but all authority of the government resided in him. (This type of government is referred to as an absolute monarchy.)

“It is in my person alone that sovereign power resides.... It is from me alone that my courts derive their authority; and the plenitude of their authority, which they exercise only in my name, remains always in me.... It is to me alone that legislative power belongs, without any dependence and without any division.... The whole public order emanates from me, and the rights and interests of the nation...are necessarily joined with mine and rest only in my hands.”

—King Louis XV, 1766

King Louis XVI certainly also thought of his power as absolute, but France in the late eighteenth century was a complex society with competing ideas and political interests. Some in France were beginning to question the absolute authority of the king.

French Society

When Louis XVI became king, France had about twenty-six million inhabitants, not counting its colonies overseas. There were distinct social classes, complex political divisions, and rigid hierarchies. Roughly speaking, the wealthiest and most powerful group were the nobility, who numbered approximately 300,000. Beneath this group were the approximately three million *bourgeoisie*, a social class made up of professionals such as merchants, judges, legal officials, and small factory owners. The largest group was the peasants, numbering more than twenty million. (The word peasant is derived from the Old French word *paisent*, meaning “someone who lives in the country.”) The peasants were at the bottom of the hierarchy; the king was at the top. Life was often very difficult for those near the bottom.

Who were the peasants?

Peasants lived all over France, had different customs, and even spoke different

languages. The vast majority of peasants (more than 85 percent) worked in agriculture. Although there was no such thing as a typical peasant—life varied widely in the different regions of France—all shared certain experiences. Peasants were expected to obey their “betters” and pay dues and taxes to local nobility, the church, and to the crown. Life was filled with hardship, hunger, and suffering. Death was commonplace due to overwork, poor nutrition, and illness. One in five died before reaching the age of one. Less than half lived to the age of fifteen.

What was life like for peasants in the countryside?

Poverty was the greatest challenge for peasants in the countryside. Most peasant families could afford a one or two-room dirt floored house, which they might share with any farm animals that they owned. These houses generally had little to no ventilation and were breeding grounds for disease.

Even though most peasants worked in agriculture, their nutrition tended to be poor. Diets often did not include meat—it was too valuable to butcher—or even green vegetables. Child mortality rates increased in the months before and during harvests, when breast-feeding mothers had to work long hours in the fields and supplies of food from the last harvest were running low. Farming techniques were not innovative and relied heavily on manual labor. Agriculture was the most important economic activity in France, but harvests were often poor.

In addition, peasants were heavily taxed by a variety of sources. For example, a peasant renting land might be expected to pay the land owner half of all crops that he produced. In addition, the Roman Catholic Church collected a tithe (a tithe is from the Old English word meaning one-tenth, but the church collected anywhere from 8 to 15 percent of the value of the harvest). There were also likely to be fees paid to local nobility as well as other taxes. Peasants could hope for some profit from about 15 to 20 percent of their crops and livestock.



Drawing by Charles Eschard, 1748-1810. Wikimedia Commons.

This eighteenth century drawing is called “Peasants Resting.”

The difficulty of making enough to survive in farming forced many peasants to look for additional work. Many added to their income by spinning and weaving in their homes. Other peasants occasionally took jobs in rural towns as stone masons, chimney sweeps, ropemakers, and papermakers. In fact, most of France’s industry was in rural areas.

The financial pressures of having a family meant that men often waited until their late twenties to get married. Women usually married a few years earlier. Although these distinctions varied, men usually worked away from the immediate area of the home, for example in the fields, fulfilling obligations to local nobility, or fixing roads (a requirement regularly imposed by the state). Women tended to work closer to home, for example tending small livestock, or growing and selling produce at local markets.

What was life like in the city?

During the reign of King Louis XVI, hardship in the countryside led many peasants to come to urban areas to find work. Paris,

France's largest city with a population of about 700,000 in 1789, grew by 100,000 during the eighteenth century. Most people who lived in urban areas were poor, unskilled workers. Poverty and hunger were the greatest challenges to those who lived in cities.

A central component of the diet of the working class was bread. The average male worker would spend about half of his wages just to buy this bread. In times of bread or grain shortages, the cost of bread would rise even higher—up to about 75 percent of income. Women workers earned considerably less than men. The challenge of providing for a family was high.

“Workmen today need twice as much money for their subsistence, yet they earn no more than fifty years ago when living was half as cheap.”

—Jean Marie Roland, manufacturing inspector, 1777

A large group of workers worked as servants to the well-off. Servants made up about 5 to 7 percent of the population of cities. Paris is thought to have had about fifty-thousand servants during the reign of Louis XVI. Many servants were new arrivals from the countryside. Although they enjoyed advantages, including regular food, clothing, and a place to sleep, the high turnover rate suggests that many servants found the disadvantages to be significant. Servants were forbidden to marry or have relationships, and often were poorly treated by their masters. Many servants despised their masters and many masters thought poorly of their servants.

“Today, servants who go from house to house, indifferent to masters whom they serve, can meet a master they just left without feeling any sort of emotion. They assemble only to exchange the secrets they have unearthed; they are spies, and being well paid, well dressed, and well

fed, but despised, they resent us, and have become our greatest enemies.”

—Louis Sébastien Mercier, 1783

The well-off were also worried about rioting and violence by peasants, particularly when shortages led to rises in the price of bread. There were numerous instances of riots and violence over high prices and shortages of bread during the reign of Louis XVI. Because of their role in preparing and providing food, women often participated and even led these demonstrations.

Shortages and high bread prices contributed significantly to public dissatisfaction and would play an important role in the early days of the revolution. Women, as important participants in these demonstrations, began to have a larger role in public life.

Who were the bourgeoisie?

The largest group of well-off people in France were the bourgeoisie, or what today would be called the middle class. In 1789, they numbered two to three million, about 10 percent of the overall population. Most made their money as merchants and businessmen in industry, commerce, and trade. As the economy grew between the reigns of Louis XIV (1661-1715) and Louis XVI, the number of bourgeoisie tripled. During the same period the population of France only grew by 25 percent. As a result, the role of bourgeoisie in French society became more important.

As the wealth of the bourgeoisie grew, they invested heavily in land and new businesses. They bought luxury goods like sugar and coffee from the Caribbean. They built new houses and decorated them with silks and wallpaper produced in France. They wore fancy clothing and had servants. Their lives were very different from the peasants who struggled to survive in the countryside, cities, and towns.

“The distance which separates the rich from other citizens is growing daily and poverty becomes more insupportable at the sight of the

astounding progress of luxury which tires the view of the indigent [poor]. Hatred grows more bitter and the state is divided into two classes: the greedy and insensitive, and murmuring malcontents.”

—Louis Sébastien Mercier, 1783

In addition to investing in land, the bourgeoisie bought public “offices” from the crown. For example, a Roman Catholic member of the bourgeoisie could buy an “office” (position) as a judge. (French law barred Protestants and Jews from buying offices.) By paying an annual tax, holders of these offices could keep them and then pass them on to their children. Under Louis XVI, there were approximately fifty thousand of these offices. They were a valuable source of revenue for the king. A few of the offices even gave the purchaser the status of nobility. The bourgeoisie saw these offices as an important means of achieving social status as well as providing a well-paying job.

Members of the bourgeoisie also invested in education, which they saw as a way to help future generations prosper. During the eighteenth century, the number of schools and universities increased. There was growth in the number of newspapers, public libraries, theaters and clubs. All of these factors contributed to the introduction and circulation of new ideas in France. More of the French bourgeoisie began thinking about the relationship of art, culture, philosophy and economics and to their own lives and society.

What was life like for the nobility?

Life in the nobility brought status that many members of the bourgeoisie found highly desirable. They had special privileges and were exempt from many of the numerous and complex taxes that the bourgeoisie and peasants had to pay. If they were accused of a crime they were entitled to be tried in a special court and they could not be drafted into the military.

While there were only about 300,000 members of the nobility, customs and tradi-



Louis XVI.

Antoine François Callet (1741-1823). Wikimedia Commons.

tion helped them amass wealth. The nobility owned about one-third of the land. They also held special rights over the rest of the land, which entitled them to collect fees and taxes on those who used or lived on the land. They owned most of the valuable public offices. About 25 percent of the revenues of the Roman Catholic Church went to those clergy who were also members of the nobility.

The nobility also had political influence and power. Most of the senior advisors to the king were nobles. It would have been extremely unusual for the king even to meet someone who was not a noble.

Nobility was no guarantee of wealth. (But great wealth for a member of the bourgeoisie did guarantee eventual membership in the nobility.) In fact, about half of the nobility were not as well off as an average member of the bourgeoisie. This had two important consequences. First: most of the wealth and political power in France was concentrated in very few hands. Second: nobility who were not wealthy relied on collecting the numerous fees and

taxes on their lands and asserting their social superiority—all of which heightened resentment against them.

What was life like for the king and the royal family?

The queen and the king lived a life of plenty, and they were the top of the hierarchy in France. King Louis XVI ruled France from his Palace of Versailles, which was about twelve miles from Paris. Approximately ten thousand people worked at the Palace of Versailles to serve the king and the court (the court was made up of the entourage of the king). The expense was tremendous; it was paid for with taxes and revenues that the king collected from the people of France.

A place at the royal court brought status and privilege and was therefore highly desirable. To be a courtier (a member of the court), one had to have a noble family stretching back to the year 1400, or have special permission from the king. Only a thousand families met this criterion. Many chose not to attend or simply could not afford to live the very expensive life at court. Those who could were the elite of France; they were from the wealthiest, most powerful families. By being close to the king, they had status and influence.

One example of the rituals of the court shows the exalted status of the king and queen—and the desire of the courtiers to be as close to them as possible. Every day courtiers

crowded into a large room simply to watch the king and queen eat their midday meal. Those most in favor got to sit on stools, others simply stood and found places to watch the royal couple who sat at a table facing the crowd and ate their meal.

The Political Structure

King Louis XVI wanted to be a conscientious ruler, but there were signs that he felt burdened by his responsibilities. He preferred working in his own locksmith shop or carving wood to consulting with his ministers on matters of the state or dealing with the large problems facing France. When one of his ministers resigned, the king said, “How lucky you are! Why can’t I resign too?”

What factors complicated the task of governing France?

The king inherited the throne and with it a political structure and organization to France that had developed over centuries. It was a tangled web of overlapping jurisdictions. This made governing France an extremely complex and often inefficient process.

One example of this was how France was divided internally. France had thirty-nine provinces that each had governors. (A province is a geographic area like a state.) At the same time, France was divided into thirty-six *généralités* (pronounced zhen-air-al-itay). It was the *généralités*, not the provinces, that

Marie Antoinette

King Louis XVI had married his wife Marie Antoinette when he was fifteen and she fourteen. She was the daughter of the empress of Austria who had sent her to help strengthen Austria’s relationship with France. Although the king and queen were both popular at first, Marie Antoinette became the target of pamphlets that attacked her in later years. Her failure to bear the king an heir for seven years, the fact that she was foreign born, and her financial extravagances made her the subject of gossip and criticism. Many in France distrusted her and even considered her to be a spy.

Although she was often harshly criticized, one of the most famous and lasting stories about Marie Antoinette is probably untrue. During one of the periods of famine, she is alleged to have been told that common people couldn’t afford bread to which she replied, “Then let them eat cake.” There is no actual evidence to support this story, but it was probably told to show that the queen was out of touch with the reality of her subjects’ lives.

assumed most responsibility for administering and governing the regions of France, including the essential function of collecting taxes.

The king claimed absolute authority throughout France, but the regions farthest from the site of his rule in Paris often exercised some autonomy. For example, the regions in southern France established their own rates of taxation in consultation with the king's ministers.

Although the peoples of France were unified by the fact that Louis XVI was their ruler, there were in fact great variations throughout the kingdom. For example, in the provinces around Paris French was the language spoken. But there were other dialects and languages spoken in other provinces, including Basque, Breton, and German. Taxes were also administered differently. For example, salt was taxed at different rates throughout France. In some areas people were taxed, in other areas, only land was taxed.

How was the king able to rule France?

Although the king claimed absolute power and final say over all decisions and policies of France, he depended on the nobility and officials to carry out his policies. Many of them did this simply because it benefitted them. For example, the tens of thousands of officials who had purchased "offices" and paid taxes so that they could pass the office on to their offspring wanted to preserve the source of their income. It served their personal interests to perpetuate the system of government. After all, if it had not made them wealthy, it at least made them financially secure. They were free from the fear of hunger, something that the vast majority struggled with daily.

France was a complex maze of jurisdictions and inconsistent rules that the privileged and powerful used to benefit themselves. Some historians have called the government of pre-revolutionary France a plutocracy (government for and by the wealthy). The king depended on a minority of the French people, who were in the nobility or clergy, to preserve his rule. This small minority depended on and used the system he headed for wealth, status, and power.

What was the role of the Roman Catholic Church?

France was primarily a country of Roman Catholics. The Roman Catholic Church was both wealthy and politically powerful. By law and tradition, clergy were considered the most important group in France, ahead of the nobility. All of the king's subjects were legally designated as Catholics and no one was permitted to practice any other religion publicly. Protestants, who numbered about 550,000, had no civil rights and were not tolerated except in the province of Alsace. About thirty thousand Jews lived in France and their rights were similarly curtailed.

The Catholic Church played an important role in the lives of ordinary people. The



This photograph shows the Roman Catholic Cathedral of Notre Dame in present-day Paris. The cathedral was built between 1163 and 1345 CE.

Photograph by Pline, Wikimedia Commons. GNU free documentation license.

church was responsible for most of the education system and provided aid and charity to the poor. It ran almost all of the hospitals and orphanages as well. For the many poor people of France, the church provided vital services that they would not otherwise be able to afford.

When life was filled with hardship, death, and uncertainty, the church also provided hope to peasants in the countryside. Priests blessed crops and animals. Church bells were rung in the belief that they could prevent thunderstorms, which would spoil a harvest.

The church also had an important administrative role. It kept records of births, deaths, and marriages. It had the power to censor or suppress publications of which it did not approve. Government decrees or warnings were often issued through the church.

The church owned about 10 percent of the land in France and earned revenue from the tithes it collected. While many French people loved their parish priests, they resented the wealth collected from the tithes by higher-ranking clergymen, for example, bishops and cardinals. These higher-ranking clergy were appointed by the king and were often members of the nobility as well.

The church and clergy paid no taxes of their own, but regularly gave the crown a gift of cash. Positions of power in the church were usually controlled by nobles, many of whom saw the church as way to increase their own family wealth.

What was the Estates General?

France did not have a representative body like a parliament or Congress when Louis XVI came to power. The king could convene what was known as the Estates General, which was meant to be a representative body. The Estates General was made of three groups: the First Estate, which was the clergy; the Second Estate, the nobility; and the Third Estate, which included everyone else. King Philip III had established the Estates General in 1302 to provide counsel in times of crisis. Normally French kings convened the Estates General in

order to get support for new taxes. By the time King Louis XVI came to the throne, the Estates General had not met since 1614.

What were parlements?

France had thirteen *parlements* that served as the highest courts of law in the land. The king registered all new laws and edicts with the *parlements*; the *parlements* had the right to criticize these edicts, but ultimately could not overrule the king.

The jurisdiction of these courts was geographic and often covered multiple provinces and *généralités*. These overlapping administrative boundaries often led to disputes over which laws should apply. The fact that the laws and legal code varied throughout the provinces complicated the situation further. The northern provinces of France relied on customary law (unwritten law established by being used over a long period of time). The southern provinces used laws with their origins in the Roman empire.

France and the Age of Enlightenment

There were many problems in France, including widespread poverty. In spite of this, the king was still a popular and exalted figure. For example, many wept with joy at his coronation or even fainted in his presence. The idea of the “divine right of kings” was still widely accepted in the eighteenth century.

During the reign of Louis XVI, about one-third of the French people were literate, and one in fifty-two boys would attend a high school. Only the well-off could afford to purchase journals or books or have time to read. Yet France was changing. Education and literacy rates had increased even among the poor. Newspapers and journals grew in importance. The number of libraries increased as did the places where political discussions could take place. For example, people gathered in public coffee houses to discuss issues. Private gatherings known as *salons*, often sponsored by wealthy women, were another place for the airing of new ideas.

It was in this environment that writers and philosophers introduced new ideas and ways of thinking about society and government. This period came to be known as the Age of Enlightenment and it occurred not only in France, but in all of Europe.

The beginning of this period in France can be traced to King Louis XIV's decision to eliminate the rights of French Protestants in 1685. Hundreds of thousands fled France to neighboring countries where some were able to publish works that criticized France's Old Regime.

Changes in scientific understanding also contributed to the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment. The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, with its emphasis on observation, measurement, and rationality as a means to understand the physical world, influenced the philosophers of the Enlightenment. Philosophers tried to address questions of government and society using the same approach. Although their goal was to improve society and increase human happiness through criticism and reform, they were not advocates for revolution.

“We will speak against senseless laws until they are reformed; and while we wait, we will abide by them.”

—Denis Diderot, Enlightenment philosopher

What was the object of the Enlightenment?

Not all of the writers of the Enlightenment agreed with each other or made the same arguments. What the philosophers and writers did share was the idea that society could be improved by using the principles of rationality and reason.

The ideas of the Enlightenment challenged the fundamental principles of French society, including the authority of the king and the Catholic Church. Enlightenment writers believed that rationality, not merely tradition or religious ideas, should be the driving force behind all decisions. Philosophers sought to shape the opinions of educated members of



By Jean-Honoré Fragonard, (1732-1806), Wikimedia Commons.

Denis Diderot.

the public. Many of the philosophers were exiled from France and their writings banned.

Who was Voltaire?

Voltaire was the pen name of Frenchman François-Marie Arouet who lived from 1694 to 1778. Early in his life Voltaire was exiled to England. There he published *Letters Concerning the English Nation*, in which he compared Britain's constitutional monarchy and parliamentary government to France's absolute monarchy. Voltaire admired the British Bill of Rights, which was written in 1689, because it made freedom of speech a right and gave Protestants freedom of religion. (He did not mention the fact that Roman Catholics did not have rights in Britain.) Although this book was banned in France, it nevertheless became a best seller. Voltaire spoke out frequently against the Catholic Church and religious persecution.

“If this world were as good as it seems it could be, if everywhere man could find a livelihood that was easy and

assure a climate suitable to his nature, it is clear that it would be impossible for one man to enslave another.... If all men were without needs, they would thus be necessarily equal. It is the poverty that is a part of our species that subordinates one man to another. It is not inequality, it is dependence that is the real misfortune. It matters very little that this man calls himself 'His Highness,' or 'His Holiness.' What is hard is to serve him.

—Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, 1765

Who was Montesquieu?

The Baron de Montesquieu was the noble title of the Frenchman Charles-Louis de Secondat who lived from 1689 to 1755. Montesquieu's most famous contribution to political thinking was his work *The Spirit of Laws*. In this work he outlined the principal of the separation of governmental power into three branches of government: the executive, the judicial, and the legislative. This form of government, he argued, was the best way to encourage political liberty. Montesquieu's ideas were important in France, and also influenced the authors of the U.S. Constitution.

“In order that power be not abused, things should be so disposed that power checks power.”

—Baron de Montesquieu,
The Spirit of Laws, 1748

Who was Diderot?

Denis Diderot lived between 1713 and 1784. He helped author and publish a multi-volume collection of knowledge. It was called *Encyclopedia*, but its purpose was more than simply summarizing what was already known. Diderot intended to promote an understanding of the world based on rationality, and also a critical attitude towards all things, particularly the church and the authority of the state. Although both church and crown tried to suppress publication, by 1789 about twenty-five

thousand copies had been sold in France and in other countries.

“I am a man, and I have no other pure, inalienable natural rights than those of humanity...the laws should be made for everyone, and not for one person [the king].”

—Denis Diderot, *Encyclopedia*, 1755

Who was Rousseau?

Jean-Jacques Rousseau lived from 1712 to 1778. He was also a philosopher of the Enlightenment, but he disagreed with many of the arguments made by others of the era. For example, he believed that progress in arts and science had hurt rather than helped humanity. One of his most important works was *The Social Contract*. Rousseau set out the ways that he thought government could legitimately establish authority while protecting the liberty of citizens. *The Social Contract* was condemned for its attacks on the church and priests and Rousseau fled France for eight years.

Rousseau's political ideas were radical for the time. He argued that all adult male citizens had the same innate rights, and that governments could only gain legitimacy by protecting the rights of each citizen. Rousseau also placed great importance on the “general will” of the populace as a guide for establishing political authority. He claimed that the king received his authority from the “general will” not from God.

“The Sovereign [king], having no force other than the legislative power, acts only by means of the laws; and the laws being solely the authentic acts of the general will, the Sovereign cannot act save when the people is assembled.”

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 1762

In Part I of the reading, you have explored the structure of French society during the era of King Louis XVI. You have read about the social distinctions in France. In particular, you have read how the vast majority often struggled to get by, while a much smaller group including the bourgeoisie and nobility, worked to ensure their own social and economic status.

You have seen how the king had absolute authority and there was no representative government, but also that France was a land with complex political jurisdictions and interests. You have seen how the political system was used to further the wealth, status, and power of the nobility, clergy, and the king. You have also read about the increased role of education and the growth in newspapers, coffee houses, and salons. Finally, you read about some of the important ideas of French writers of the Enlightenment.

In Part II of your reading, you will explore the events leading up to the beginning of the French Revolution. As you read Part II, try to keep in mind what you have read about here. Ask yourself what roles social classes, political structure, and ideas play in the events you are reading about. How important are each of these factors? These are the types of questions historians ask when considering events. For example, scholars have debated how much of an effect the Enlightenment had on the French Revolution. These questions will help you consider the reasons behind the next dramatic events in France.

Part II: Crises and Change—1774-1789

Louis XVI's coronation in 1775 coincided with the Flour War—not actually a war, but a series of riots and protests in France over the price of bread that had to be put down by the army.

The crisis began with the minister of finance's decision to stop setting the prices of grain at an artificially low and more affordable level. Freed from government price controls, merchants raised prices. Many people who could no longer afford this staple of their daily diet took to the streets in many cities, particularly around Paris. Violent protests erupted.

Why did the government want to reform France's agricultural production?

The king's finance minister had stopped setting the price of grain for a reason. He believed that low prices discouraged production and caused scarcity and, in turn, hunger. This had been a frequent problem. The new minister found inspiration in the principles of the Enlightenment and sought to reform France through rational, reasoned policies that put the latest knowledge to public use. He had the support of the king.

Agriculture was ripe for reform and improvement. The finance minister's goal was to increase production of grain by making it more profitable to grow. This was part of a larger reform effort to minimize government interference, simplify taxation, and increase efficiency. (Today, we would call these "free market" principles.)

French peasants and workers struggling to feed themselves and their families everyday reacted angrily to the price increases. Some decided to seize the grain and then sell it at what they saw as a fair price. Many of the poor even saw the government's action as an attempt to starve the lower classes and benefit the wealthy. The *parlement* (high court) of Paris objected to the legality of some of the reforms. Members of the middle class and nobility who benefited financially within the traditional system also felt threatened by the

new reforms. Their livelihoods affected, they too made their displeasure known.

The reforms were repealed, the minister of finance resigned, and his successors anxiously tried to avoid provoking protests. The Flour War illustrates the tightly tangled web that France was. Reform was needed, but changing the intricate and interconnected customs of the social, economic, and political spheres was no easy task. Despite his intentions to improve conditions, Louis XVI would prove neither confident enough nor decisive enough to implement change.

Financial Crises

The Flour War was one of many crises that would occur during the reign of Louis XVI. Many of these crises had financial causes. It was these financial problems that would expose the fault lines in French society and ultimately threaten the Old Regime and the rule of Louis XVI.

What were the causes of France's financial crises?

France was one of the great powers of Europe. Throughout the eighteenth century France had fought Great Britain in a series of wars. These wars were fought to gain wealth and power and prevent other countries from gaining power. At the same time, the wars were expensive. They became the primary source of France's financial difficulties. The wars extended to four corners of the globe and required France to have a powerful navy as well as an army. The government needed ways to pay for its expensive wars. For example, during the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748) the government introduced a new tax, which remained in place after the war ended.

Another war that began in 1756 ended poorly for France. Known as the Seven Years War, this war saw French military losses to Britain in India, Canada, and the Caribbean. In

the Treaty of Paris of 1763, France gave up all of its possessions in North America. Not only did this war cost France many of its overseas colonies, it had cost nearly twice as much per year as the previous war. The government had increased taxes, but was also forced to borrow money. When it turned out that the government could not repay its loans, it declared it would only pay back part of what it promised. (This is known as “writing off” debt.) This diminished confidence in the government. King Louis XVI decided that during his reign, writing off debt was something that he would avoid at all costs.

Why did France support the American Revolution?

The defeat suffered in the Seven Years War had wounded the pride of France. When thirteen of Great Britain’s North American colonies began to seek their independence, France saw an opportunity to restore its national pride while weakening Britain. King Louis XVI and his ministers certainly did not choose to support the North American colonies because of their basic aims, which included ending rule by the king and creating a more representative government. Instead they saw an opportunity to strike a blow at Britain’s power.

“Providence has marked out this moment for the humiliation of England.”

—Count Charles Gravier Vergennes, French foreign secretary, March 1776

France entered a formal alliance with the thirteen colonies in 1778. The French contributed men and financial support. All of this was funded by borrowing vast sums of money. The French navy played an important role in the decisive battle of the war at Yorktown in 1781 by preventing the encircled British forces from escaping by water. British forces surrendered at Yorktown and two years later, the 1783 Treaty of Paris gave the colonies their independence.

What effect did the American Revolution have on France?

Some of the ideas of the American rebellion were met with sympathy in France. Pamphlets like Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* and the Declaration of Independence were widely read. Noted leaders like John Adams and Benjamin Franklin were welcomed as “friends of liberty.”

Another important effect was the high cost to France of supporting the American colo-

France’s Colonies in the Caribbean

In its pursuit of wealth and power, France had created colonies in North America, Asia, and the Caribbean. Though it had lost its colonies in Canada and India to Britain in 1763, it kept colonies in the Caribbean, including the islands Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti), Guadeloupe, and Martinique. By 1789, Saint-Domingue produced more wealth than any other colony in the world. One in eight French people depended on commerce with the colonies to make a living.

The primary source of this wealth was the sugar grown on Saint-Domingue. Growing sugar was labor intensive and the French colonists relied on slaves brought from Africa. By 1789, there were 500,000 slaves, about 32,000 whites, and 28,000 free people of color on Saint-Domingue, which was smaller than the U.S. state of Maryland. (In comparison, there were about 700,000 slaves in the much larger United States at this time.) Conditions for slaves were extremely harsh. Although purchasing a slave was expensive, the sugar trade was so profitable that owners did not hesitate to work their slaves to death.

French law permitted and regulated slavery in its colonies. For example, non-Catholics were not allowed to own slaves and the laws, known as the “Black Code,” permitted brutal treatment of slaves. Slaves had no rights or privileges. Opposition to slavery grew very slowly in France and was led by a few French Enlightenment writers who criticized the harsh treatment of slaves.

nists. War was not cheap. France found itself unable to act on other foreign policy issues simply because it did not have the money to do so. France struggled to compete with Britain for a worldwide empire and the wealth that colonies brought. The high cost of its foreign policy put the government of France under severe strain. It desperately needed more money.

“It is impossible to tax further, ruinous to be always borrowing, and not enough to confine ourselves to economical reforms...”

—Comptroller General
Charles Alexandre de
Calonne, August 20, 1786

The ongoing financial crises forced the government to take loans, and also to raise taxes. New taxes were never popular, but France’s complex system of administration and traditional privileges made collecting enough taxes to meet the government’s needs nearly impossible. For example, the privileged and most wealthy were exempt from taxation. The Catholic Church did not have to pay nor did the nobility. France’s system of privileges meant the burden of taxes fell on those least able to pay them.

There were other complications. Various regions of France were taxed at various rates. For example, the government taxed salt at six different rates. In some locations, residents were obliged to pay tax on a minimum amount of salt each year, even if they did not use or buy that amount of salt. The taxes and inconsistencies were deeply resented and difficult to administer; people tried to avoid paying them when they could.

Throughout the reign of Louis XVI and particularly during the 1780s, the government



This French engraving from 1784 shows the British army’s surrender at Yorktown. The French General Rochambeau directs the British General to give his sword to General Washington.

By François Godefroy and Jean Lebarbier. Library of Congress, Division of Prints and Photographs. LC-USZ62-2663.

found itself faced with increasing budget deficits (spending more money than it received). By 1788, 55 percent of government spending was going to payments on loans. The high amount of money owed made it harder to get more loans, and increasing taxes again would meet with resistance. The economy was reaching the breaking point.

Political Evolution

The financial challenges faced by France led to efforts to reform the system of government throughout the reign of Louis XVI. You have already read about the reforms that led to the Flour War in 1775. Other efforts at reform picked up again in the 1780s, made necessary by the worsening financial situation.

How did the role of public opinion change in France?

The public was well aware of the financial troubles. The effects of the crisis were hammered home to them in the form of unequal taxes and high prices for basic goods like bread. People expressed their feelings in a variety of ways: in public and private gather-

ings, in pamphlets or other writings, and even in demonstrations and riots.

Officials began to recognize the increasing importance of public opinion in politics. With the permission of the king, Minister of Finance Jacques Necker published an account of the budget of France in 1781. This made Necker extremely popular, but the release of the *Accounts of the King* actually misled the public by inaccurately claiming more revenues than expenditures.

“This report would also allow each of the people—who are part of YOUR MAJESTY’S Councils—to study and follow the situation of Finances. Such an institution could have the greatest influence on public confidence.”

—Minister of Finance Jacques Necker, 1781

Nevertheless, the very idea that the king’s accounts could be subjected to public scrutiny represented a significant evolution in French politics. Some of the king’s ministers thought that this threatened France’s absolute monarchy. They worried that it could lead to a government more like Great Britain’s constitutional monarchy. Although the king still regarded himself as an agent of God, his actions indicated that he considered the interests of his people as important.

What was the outcome of a proposal for sweeping reforms in 1786?

Louis XVI dismissed Necker in 1781. His successor’s efforts to increase taxes were resisted by the *parlements*. Louis XVI appointed Charles Alexandre de Calonne in 1783 as minister of finance. Calonne was able to borrow vast sums of money to keep the government running. But he realized that such massive borrowing could not continue much longer and, with the support of the king, proposed massive reforms.

“[W]ith matters as they are, ordinary ways being unable to lead us to our goal...the only means of managing

finally to put our finances truly in order, must consist in revitalizing the entire state by reforming all that is defective....”

—Comptroller General Charles Alexandre de Calonne, August 20, 1786

Calonne’s proposal had three parts. First, there would be a uniform tax system on landowners with no exemptions. He suggested that the new tax system be administered by new provincial representative assemblies. Second, to increase efficiency and productivity, he wanted to end internal customs controls and stop regulating the price of grain. Finally, Calonne realized that France would need to borrow money again until his reforms took effect. Knowing that the *parlements* were opposed to borrowing more money, he proposed that the king pick an Assembly of Notables to approve of these reforms.

What was the purpose of the Assembly of Notables?

France had a means to establish a representative forum to deal with national crises. The Estates General (whose members would be elected, not picked by the king) was meant to be a national representative body that could be called to meet by the king. No king had called an Estates General since 1614.

Calonne, whose reform proposals met resistance from the *parlements*, thought the Estates General might prove difficult to control. He hoped that this Assembly of Notables, made up of hand-picked members of the nobility, would support his proposals and influence public opinion to support his reforms. Things did not go according to plan.

The king called the Assembly of Notables to meet in January 1787. Although the delegates generally supported some of Calonne’s ideas, Calonne was personally and politically unpopular and met resistance. The assembly refused to approve the idea of additional loans without seeing estimates of the budget. When Calonne realized that he was failing to convince the assembly, he began to publish anonymous pamphlets against the notables,

who in turn complained to the king. The king, who had hoped that reforms could be passed, realized that neither Calonne nor the Assembly of Notables would solve France's problems. Pressure began to mount to call the Estates General.

Even as the Assembly of Notables ended, the king attempted to register some of Calonne's proposed reforms as new laws with the *parlements*. Some were accepted (including the provincial assemblies), but the *parlement* of Paris refused to accept new tax increases. Public interest was high and crowds gathered to hear the *parlement's* debate about the tax issue in August 1787. The king ordered troops to keep public order and exiled the *parlement* temporarily to the city of Troyes for its refusal to accept the new taxes.

The Estates General

As the financial crises worsened, political challenges continued. The king attempted to restructure the justice system by reducing the role of the *parlements*. Violent protests broke out. There was a vast public outcry against "despotism" (the use of absolute power in a cruel way).

Other factors contributed to the growing crises. Terrible storms during the summer of 1788 destroyed much of the grain harvest and pushed the price of bread through the roof. Hunger and hardship were widespread, particularly during the winter months.

“The wretchedness of the poor people during this inclement season surpasses all description.”

—The Duke of Dorset, January 8, 1789

There was increasing unrest and protest, which some believed could lead to civil war. Not only was France financially weak, the king's inability to lead France out of its troubles had weakened him in the eyes of many.

“The king is carried along endlessly from one policy to another, changing

them, adopting them, rejecting them with an inconceivable capriciousness; exercising force, then weakly retreating. He has entirely lost his authority.”

—Adrien-Cyprien Duquesnoy, May 1789

The refusal of financiers to lend the government any more money meant that France was approaching bankruptcy. The king agreed to call the Estates General, which would meet in May 1789. He also reappointed Jacques Necker, who remained immensely popular, as minister of finance. Necker announced an end to government controls on the press and publishing. This allowed public debate about the future of France to flourish.

Who were the deputies of The Estates General?

The Estates General was made up of three groups of deputies: the First Estate, which was the clergy; the Second Estate, the nobility; and the Third Estate, which represented everyone else.

Elections for the Estates General were held. The First and Second Estates voted for their representatives. Men over the age of twenty-five who were property holders were permitted to vote for delegates to the Third Estate. (There were members of the nobility elected to each of the Estates.) Members of the Estates General were male, and tended to be well-off and educated.

Traditionally, each of the Estates had one vote, even though the First Estate and Second Estates represented only about 300,000 out of a population of twenty-six million. Because the clergy and the nobility shared an interest in preserving their privilege, many in the Third Estate worried that they could be outvoted 2-1 if the other two Estates wished to block reforms favored by the Third Estate.

An intense public campaign began in pamphlets and newspapers demanding a greater role for the Third Estate, which would represent most of the population of France.



Hippolyte Prudhomme. Library of Congress. LC-USZ62-99705.

Opening of the Estates General at Versailles, May 5, 1789.

“1. What is the Third Estate?

Everything.

2. *What has it been heretofore in the political order? Nothing.*

3. *What does it demand? To become something therein.”*

—Abbé Sieyès,
What is the Third Estate? 1789

The king went along with public sentiment and agreed to double the number of representatives in the Third Estate from three hundred to six hundred, but did not change the number of votes per estate from one each. The First and Second Estates each had three hundred delegates.

What were the lists of grievances?

In addition to voting, voters also contributed to a “list” or “register of grievances” that would be taken to the Estates General by the newly-elected representatives.

The lists of grievances were assembled and compiled for the Third Estate’s representatives in villages and towns throughout France. The grievances did not call for revolution. The most repeated themes were calls for fairness in taxation, a limit to the privileges of the nobility, and an end of tithes to the church. Many of them even expressed devotion to the king.

Women and Politics

The difficult economic conditions led many women to play an active political role during the early period of the French Revolution. Because women organized households and had an important role in feeding families, the shortages of bread spurred many to take political steps. For example, it was not uncommon for crowds led by women to seize bread and then to sell it at a “fair” price. Many working-class women participated in these demonstrations. Women who were well-off organized salons or meetings where political ideas were discussed. As France moved toward revolution, some believed that women should be given the same political rights as men. Many others were sceptical of that idea and thought that women should confine themselves to “traditional” roles.

“The lands of nobles and the church, should they not be submitted to taxation? Why subject the lands of poor people exclusively to it, and why thrust thus upon the Third Estate all the burden of taxation?”

—From the list of grievances of the community of Saint-Vincent-Rive d’Olt

What led to riots and violence in the spring of 1789?

As the Estates General prepared to meet, many of the people of France were frustrated. Shortages in the winter of 1789 had caused the price of bread to double.

“Monsieur, are they thinking of lowering the price of bread? I have eaten none for two days...it’s so dear... Ah Monsieur don’t forget us, we will pray for you.”

—Unknown citizen in Paris to a delegate of the Estates General, April 27, 1789

Anger and resentment were widespread. There was a general distrust of the nobility, whom many assumed were trying to enrich themselves even if it meant starving the poor.

“Death to the rich! Death to the aristocrats! Death to the hoarders!”

—Crowd in Paris, April 27, 1789

In late April, violent riots broke out in Paris after the owner of a wallpaper factory was heard to say that lower bread prices would make it possible to lower wages. Apparently, he thought this would help the economy. His words quickly spread and led to protests, marches, and violence around the city. The army was called out to suppress the thousands who had taken to the streets. As the soldiers moved through Paris’s narrow streets after the crowds, hundreds of Frenchmen clambered to the rooftops and hurled stone shingles from the roofs at the soldiers. The soldiers began to fire on the crowds. Hundreds were killed and wounded.

“Liberty. Murderers! We won’t give way. Long live the Third Estate. Long live the king!”

—Crowd in Paris, April 28, 1789

There was violence not only in Paris, but across France during the spring of 1789. Peasants rioted against high grain prices, seized church property, and said they would refuse to pay the tithes of their harvests to the church. Starving peasants hunted wild game and took firewood from the estates of the nobility, things they were prohibited from doing. Tax offices were destroyed and many refused to pay the internal customs duties. Driven by hunger and fueled by resentment and mistrust of the privileged, the common people of France had struck a blow against those who they believed oppressed them. They had resisted the army and had stopped accepting the authority of the government.

As the Estates General prepared to meet, France faced insurrection (violent uprising). The traditions and institutions of France were being challenged by the peasants and workers, but also by the privileged classes who represented the Third Estate in the Estates General.

Why was the Estates General unable to make progress solving France’s problems?

The opening meeting of the Estates General took place on May 5, 1789. Each of the three Estates paraded in separately, wearing the clothing required by tradition. The First Estate (clergy) wore the robes of the clergy, the Second Estate (nobility) wore silk clothes, with gold cloth belts, swords, and white-plumed hats. The Third Estate (everyone else) were all in black.

The Estates General made little to no progress on the issues facing France. Much of its time was spent wrangling over whether each Estate would get one vote or whether each elected member of the Estates would get one vote, known as voting by head. A majority of the First and Second Estates opposed one vote per head, for though they represented a minority of delegates and of the French population, they hoped to preserve their ability to outvote

the Third Estate, 2-1. The Third Estate, with six hundred delegates, saw an advantage to voting by head.

The Estates met separately and debated what steps to take. While the nobility met in private, the Third Estate opened their sessions to the public. The debates were often chaotic. For example, the moderator of the Third Estate was once knocked to the floor by a group of deputies rushing to request a chance to speak.

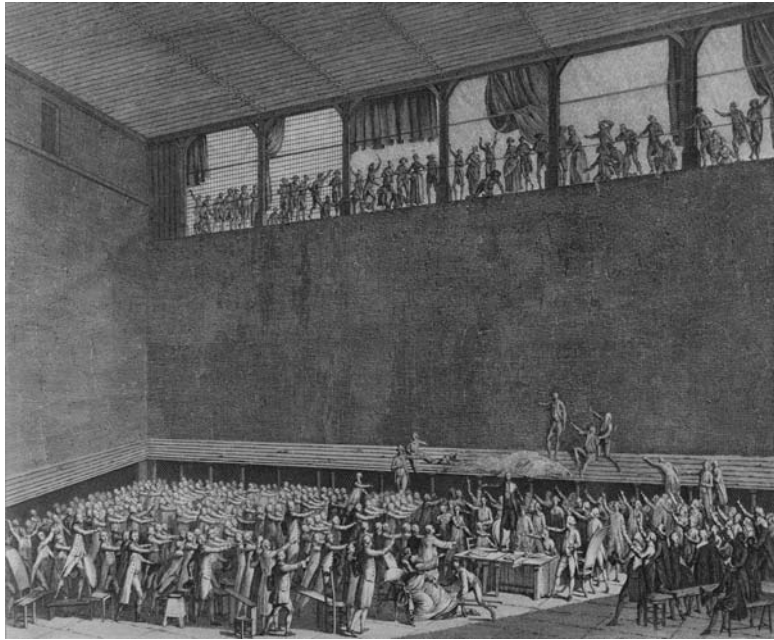
“[Imagine]...more than five hundred men thrown together in a room, brought in from different regions, unknown to one another, with no leader, with no hierarchy, all free, all equal, none with the right to give orders and none ready to obey them; and everyone in the French manner, wishing to speak before they listen.”

—Count Mirabeau, May 1789

The Third Estate tried to get the other Estates to meet with them, but the other Estates resisted at first. Abbé Sieyès, a member of the Third Estate, proposed that they call themselves the National Assembly and act on their own if the other two Estates would not join them. On June 19, the clergy voted to join the National Assembly.

What was the Tennis Court oath?

King Louis XVI had become frustrated at the lack of progress by the Estates General. He decided to call a meeting of all the Estates for June 23, 1789 where he would chart a course forward and assert his authority as king. He planned to use the hall where the Third Estate met for the meeting; it was large enough to hold all the delegates of all of the Estates. The king ordered the hall locked and prepared for the joint session of the Estates.



“Tennis Court Oath. June 20 1789.” This etching was done in 1789.

Pierre Gabriel Berthault. Library of Congress. Division of Prints and Photographs. LC-USZ62-117942.

When the delegates of the Third Estate arrived at their hall on the morning of June 20 and found it locked they reacted with anger. The king had not told the Estates what he was doing. The delegates feared the king planned to dissolve the assembly. They moved their meeting to a nearby indoor tennis court where they took an oath not to disband until a new constitution could be written.

How did the king respond to the Tennis Court Oath?

The king spoke to the full Estates General on June 23. The hall was surrounded by large numbers of soldiers. He proposed some reforms including trying to make the tax system fairer and ending arbitrary imprisonment. But he insisted that the three Estates continue to meet separately and that each have only one vote. He also said that the nobility and clergy had the right to veto any proposed changes to their privileges. He reminded the Estates that nothing they did was valid without his approval. He told the Estates to leave and resume meeting separately the next day and left the hall.

While the First and Second Estates filed out, the Third Estate remained as did some

members of the clergy. When they were reminded that the king had ordered them to leave, they refused.

“I declare that if you have been ordered to make us leave, you must seek orders to employ force, for we shall not leave except by the force of bayonets.”

—Count Mirabeau, June 23, 1789

The Fall of the Bastille

The king chose not to order the army to expel the delegates. But in the days that followed, he faced increasing turmoil and protests. Tens of thousands were on the streets in Paris intimidating and threatening those they saw as supporters of the Old Regime. Soldiers who had fired on rioters two months earlier now refused to help control the crowds.

On June 25, forty-eight nobles decided to sit with the National Assembly. Four days later the king changed course and decided to order the First and Second Estates to join the National Assembly. At Versailles, the king and the queen wept on their balcony as they were cheered by adoring crowds, who believed that the king truly supported reform.

“The whole business now seems over and the revolution complete.”

—Arthur Young,
British traveler,
June 27, 1789

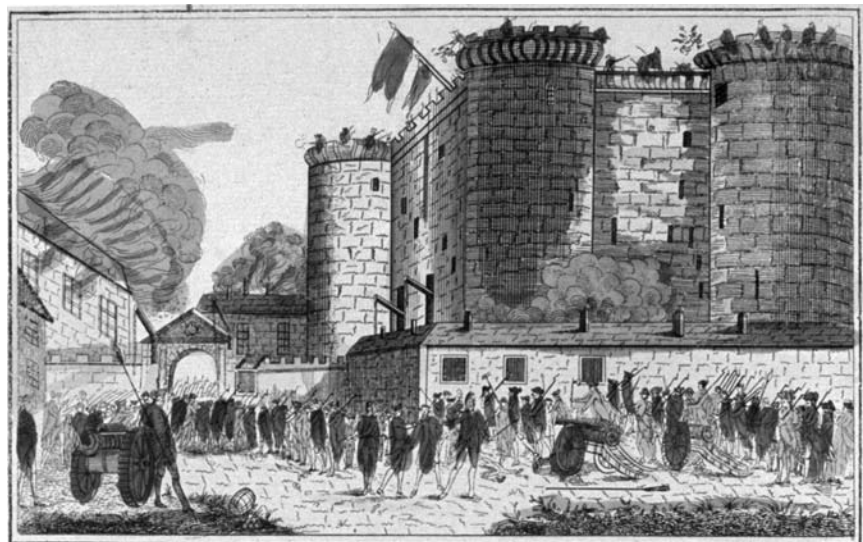
The revolution was not complete. In fact, it had just begun. While members of the National Assembly hoped finally to begin writing a constitution, popular unrest continued. Some members of the army in

Paris mutinied. As a consequence, the government ordered a military force of about twenty thousand from the border regions to Paris. Some of these soldiers were mercenaries (soldiers from other countries who had been hired by the king). Most believed that the mercenaries would be less reluctant to use force against French people than French soldiers. Members of the assembly worried that they would be arrested or even killed. Many people believed that the troops would forcibly disband the assembly.

What was the response to the king’s decision to replace his ministers?

In Paris, nerves were stretched taut by the presence of so many troops. The king’s decision to replace four of his ministers with more conservative ones proved to be a breaking point that prompted a powerful reaction from the people. One of the fired ministers was Jacques Necker, who was popular with many because he supported keeping the cost of bread low.

The king fired his ministers on July 11, 1789. The public discovered this the next day,



PRISE DE LA BASTILLE

*Par les Citoyens de Paris ayant à leurs têtes M^{rs} les Gardes Françaises, le 14 Juillet 1789
Cette Forteresse fut commencée en 1383 sous le regne de Charles V. Hugues Aubriot Prevot de Paris en posa la 1^{re} Pierre elle ne fut entièrement achevée qu'en 1382. Il étoit natif de Dijon. Il y fut un des premiers renfermés sous pretexte d'hérésie Il fut délivré par les Parisiens pendant les troubles qui agitént la Capitale, et se sauva dans sa patrie.*

“The Taking of the Bastille by the Citizens of Paris....” This print was done in 1789.

a Sunday, when most were not at work. Crowds gathered and were attacked by foreign cavalry (soldiers on horses). In response, the crowds burned the toll stations around the city, which they associated with the high price of bread. Worried that the mercenaries would move against them, the people of Paris tried to get their hands on weapons wherever they could find them.

Why did crowds attack the Bastille?

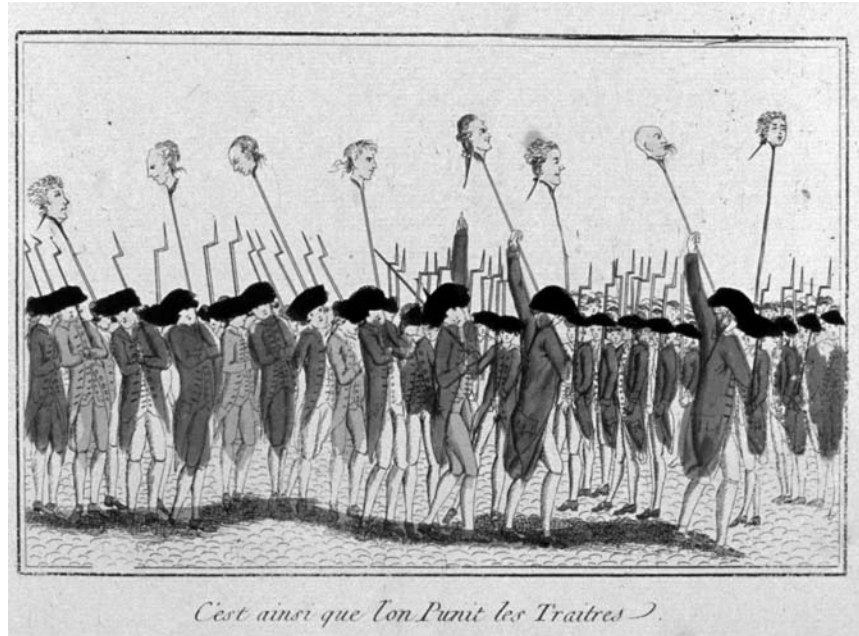
The search for weapons led the crowds, who had been joined by mutinous members of the army, to the gates of the Bastille. The Bastille was a prison, but also Paris's largest arsenal of gunpowder. An initial attempt to break in was unsuccessful. When the crowds dragged a captured cannon to the gates of the prison, the governor of the Bastille decided to surrender. About one hundred Parisians died attacking the Bastille; only one defender died. Crowds killed the governor of the Bastille, put his head on a pike, and paraded it through the streets. The king's ministers told him he could no longer rely on the loyalty of his soldiers.

“The defection of the army is not one of the causes of the Revolution, it is the Revolution itself.”

—Antoine Rivarol, writer, 1789

On July 15, the king told the National Assembly that he was ordering all troops withdrawn from Paris and agreed to work with the assembly. He also agreed to reappoint Jacques Necker as finance minister. His announcement was greeted with applause, cheers, and shouts of “long live the king.”

The members of the Estates General were



“This is how we punish traitors.” 1789.

swept up in a tide of emotions. The fear of violence against them was temporarily replaced with patriotic fervor and hope. Nobles and clergy were now attending sessions of the assembly with members of the Third Estate. Newly renamed the National Constituent Assembly, it was now an integrated representative body of the three Estates.

When the king visited Paris on July 17, he accepted a red, white, and blue cockade (a decorative knot of ribbons), which was the symbol of the revolution. There were 150,000 citizens carrying weapons on the streets of Paris. When they saw the king wearing the revolutionary cockade, they cheered him.

What was the “Great Fear”?

During the second half of July 1789, the insurrection that had torn through Paris spread to about two-thirds of France. This period, which would last into August, has become known as the “Great Fear.”

Hunger and grain shortages drove many to desperation and violence. Rumors spread throughout the countryside among peasants that they would be attacked or their crops

stolen by bandits. Peasants lashed out against the tax system, refusing to pay tithes and even burning the records that showed how much they owed the nobility. Many peasants suspected the nobility of hoarding grain and of hiring criminals to steal their crops. Others thought that the British government was paying to incite riots throughout France. Unrest spread to small towns and cities. In the city of Rouen, textile workers destroyed machines that they thought might replace them in the factories. Rumors flew. Fear spread.

“There is no longer any governing authority and Louis XVI is no more king than you are.”

—Jean André Périsset Du Luc, member of the National Constituent Assembly, in letter to a friend, July 24, 1789

In its first weeks of existence, the National Constituent Assembly faced severe challenges. For the time being, the delegates were united by hope and the desire for change. Nevertheless, the economic and political problems that had led to insurrection throughout France remained. The assembly had integrated the three estates into a single representative body. Now would come the challenge of fixing the problems facing France.

“The union existing among the three orders, held together by a rapprochement of ideas and a unity of desires,...will eliminate the arrogant and destructive principles of the aristocracy... Frenchmen of all ranks and all classes bring to an end the vain distinctions which have divided them and will unite to build the foundations of freedom and happiness.”

—Antoine-Francois Delandine, member of the National Constituent Assembly, July 1789

Members of the Constituent Assembly were proud they had integrated all the three Estates. Many shared a sense of optimism and hope for the future. But the task of constructing a new France would prove formidable.

“It is not enough to destroy; we have to rebuild and I confess that the task frightens us.”

—Jacques-Athanase de Lombard-Taradeau, member of the National Constituent Assembly, August 13, 1789

In Part II of the reading, you have explored the origins of France’s financial crises. You have seen how these crises created momentum for reform and political change. By 1789, all segments of French society, the peasants, clergy, bourgeoisie, and the nobility were caught up in the process and uncertainties of a changing France. The authority of the king had been undermined and the king himself appeared to accept a new role for the assembly. In truth, he had little choice in the matter. The assembly faced the daunting challenge of creating a new system of government while trying to deal with instability and the continuing economic crisis.

The National Constituent Assembly and the Future of France

The deputies faced the enormous task of trying to develop a new constitution while governing a country torn by unrest and fear. They began working long days. New city governments were formed throughout the country and support for the National Constituent Assembly increased. Some deputies felt overwhelmed by the size of their task.

“I am far from sharing the optimism of some of our colleagues. The masses of starving people, the numbers of discontented, the difficulties of every sort imaginable...all combine to discourage me.”

—Jean-François Campmas, member of the National Constituent Assembly, August 13, 1789

As stories of the Great Fear spread, the assembly made a radical decision. Swept up by the spirit of reform and working late into the night on August 4, 1789 the assembly decided to end many of the privileges of the nobility. The deputies hoped that this would calm the peasants and decrease unrest. Some also hoped that it would reduce the power of the nobility, particularly those they worried were out to end the revolution. In a single evening, the assembly upended the centuries-old social hierarchy of France. Some historians believe that this was the most significant result of the French Revolution.

Many of the rights and privileges of the nobility were eliminated. For example, the assembly (which included nobles) ended the system of dues and taxes that peasants had to make to the nobility. These had been deeply resented and had appeared often in the “lists of grievances.” The nobility’s exclusive hunting rights and private tolls also were

abolished. The deputies ended the payment of tithes and the purchase of public offices. In theory, positions would be obtained based on ability.

“In the future, only wealth, talent, and virtue will distinguish one man from another.... We are a nation of brothers. The king is our father and France is our mother.”

—Claude Ganttheret, member of the National Constituent Assembly, letters of August 5 and 11, 1789

A few voices in the assembly of more than a thousand also called to end slavery in France’s colonies, to give Protestants full religious freedom, and to ban nobility outright.

These issues were not acted on, but would become issues for debate in the coming months. After the assembly’s action, unrest in the countryside slowly began to decrease.

“Men are born and remain free and equal in rights.”

Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen

Why did the deputies write the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen?

On the afternoon of August 4, the deputies had agreed to write a preface to the new constitution as quickly as possible. After several weeks of discussion, prolonged by members of the clergy reluctant to allow complete freedom of worship, the assembly voted to approve this preface, now called the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. The document was influenced by the Virginia Declaration of Rights written in 1776 by George Mason. The Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen promised liberty and equality to citizens and emphasized the need for constitutional protections for these rights. It also said that sovereignty (the right to rule) rested in the people of the nation and not just the king.



“Quick, quick, quick
Hit it while it's hot
quick, quick, quick
Keep at it!
Our hearts must be in the work.”

This print shows the Three Estates working cooperatively to forge the new constitution.

The approval of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen raised many important questions and issues about how to interpret and enact this document. What was the role of the king? Did he have the final say (or veto power) over new laws? What exactly was a citizen? Who would be eligible to vote? Were women citizens? Did they have equal rights? Should there be a bicameral legislature? Should there be religious freedom in France? If men are born and remain free, should slavery be abolished?

What were the divisions in the assembly?

As the assembly began to consider just what the principles laid out in the Declaration

meant, three factions began to emerge. The differences that had been temporarily put aside in the revolutionary fervor of July had resurfaced.

The first group made up the majority of the assembly and were considered moderates. This group believed the revolution was over and imagined that France would become a constitutional monarchy, perhaps like Great Britain.

A second and much smaller group of conservative nobility and clergy thought that maybe the revolution had gone too far. They believed that the king should retain his authority and that the privileges renounced on August 4th by nobility and clergy should be reclaimed.

The third group was also a small minority of the assembly. These were the radical “patriot” deputies, who wanted more rights for all. For example, they wanted political rights and legal equality for Protestants. It is important to note that they did not argue for ending the monarchy.

The seating of the assembly was arranged in an oval with the president sitting on one side. The conservatives sat to the right of the president, the radical patriots to the left. The moderates, in the middle. This is the origin of the political terms we use today: conservatives are referred as the “right”; moderates are called “the center”; liberals are referred to as the “left.”

In the coming days, you will recreate the debate among these three groups as they tried to write a new constitution for France.

You will consider whether the king should have a veto over laws and who is eligible to vote. You will consider questions of religious freedom, the role of women in politics, the role of the Catholic Church and religion in society, and whether slavery should be ended in the colonies.

The actual debates took place over a period of months and were complicated by the fact that the assembly needed to govern France as well as write a constitution.

“Overwhelmed with responsibilities and distracted by endless contingencies, we must work now on one question, now another, despite our strong desire to concentrate on one issue at a time.”

—Jacques-Athanase de Lombard-Taradeau,
member of the National Constituent
Assembly, October 15, 1789

The people of France followed the arguments in the assembly closely. The number of newspapers had increased from one daily paper in 1777 to more than thirty by end of 1789. Those who could not read could go hear the news read aloud in public. All over France, people formed political clubs where they argued about the issues in front of the assembly.

While the members of the assembly, most of whom were well-off, began to debate the future of French government, the people of France followed events closely. As you will see, they would find ways to make their opinions known.

Options in Brief

Option 1: Conserve the Power of the King

France is one of the world's great powers. We have achieved this through the greatness of our kings and their leadership. Our system is based on the will of God. We have followed this system since the eleventh century. How dare we consider replacing it? While our views are not popular, we must work to conserve the power of the king. It is only this way that we can conserve France's greatness. The king is the source of all authority and we must remind all the French people that they are his subjects. Let us band together to protect the power of the king, the sanctity of the church, and the future of France.

Option 2: Create a Constitutional Monarchy

We continue to love our king with all of our hearts. But the world is changing. We need only to look across the water to our eternal foe Great Britain for a model of what kind of government works well. Here in France we should create a constitutional monarchy and a representative assembly. Rationality and reason can help us create a new constitution for France. It is time to cast away the ancient traditions that prevent France from moving forward, but let us be cautious. We must be careful so that we do not discard what makes us great and what has unified us. Let us all join together and celebrate the beginning of a new glorious era for France. Long live the king!

Option 3: Liberate France from the Old Regime

Men are born free, but everywhere they are in chains. So began the Enlightenment writer Rousseau's famous work, *The Social Contract*. Like Rousseau, we wonder: why must this be so? Now it is time for us to begin to break the chains. We must work to create a new, just, and fair society. The social distinctions of the past too often are used to tyrannize and preserve the privileges and wealth of a few. We must use all of our rational abilities and reason to improve conditions in France, to end hunger, and to create a society based upon the principles of liberty and equality.

Option 1: Conserve the Power of the King

France is one of the world's great powers. We have achieved this through the greatness of our kings and their leadership. We have established colonies overseas that bring great wealth and glory to France. It is the soundness of our system that has allowed us to achieve so much. The system of Estates reflects the right and true order of the world. The king is nearest to God and then each of the Estates follow in order. The lowest-ranked priest must take precedence over any member of the nobility. Any member of the nobility must take precedence over even the wealthiest and most successful member of the Third Estate. Our system is based on the will of God. We have followed this system since the eleventh century. How dare we consider replacing it?

The financial crises of the past years have swept France into a kind of revolutionary fever. This is a dangerous path to follow. While our views are not popular, we must work to conserve the power of the king. It is the only way that we can conserve France's greatness. God has made the king the source of all authority and we must remind all French people that they are his subjects. They are here to serve him. The king must have an "absolute" veto that gives him final say over all legislation. We must not allow the uneducated masses into the political process. The idea that religions other than Roman Catholicism should be tolerated is both dangerous and absurd. That would only bring chaos and violence to France. We also know that women are not capable of participating in politics, and ending slavery is naive and foolish. Democratic ideas are dangerous as are the delusions of those in love with abstract ideas. But abstract ideas are no basis for governing. Ideas such as equality and liberty threaten the foundations of our society, including the king, the church, and our own wealth and privilege. Let us band together to protect the power of the king, the sanctity of the church, and the future of France.

Beliefs and Assumptions Underlying Option 1

1. The king is God's agent on earth. The power to rule the nation remains in the king alone and comes from God.

2. The system of privileges for the nobility and clergy are what have made France a great empire. They must be preserved.

3. Change will bring instability and chaos to France and Europe.

4. The French masses are not worthy or capable of participating in politics. They are dangerous and must be ruled by their betters.

Supporting Arguments for Option 1

1. The king remains well-loved and is best-positioned to help solve the financial crisis.
2. Radical change could embolden the uneducated mobs like the ones seen at the Bastille. This is a danger to public safety.

3. Our eternal enemy Great Britain will take advantage of us if we weaken the authority of the king.

From the Historical Record

General Principles

Abbé Barruel, priest and writer, 1791

“You subject God’s agent [the king] to the people; you substitute the will of the people for the will God! What is this theology which puts the people in the place of God!”

Abbé Maury, Archbishop of Paris, member of the National Constituent Assembly, January 23, 1790

“The tyranny of a king is better than the tyranny of twelve hundred deputies.... If the people, as is claimed, are the source of all the political powers, the throne, in a monarchy, is their reservoir.”

Comte d’Antraigues, member of the National Constituent Assembly, pamphlet dated April 1790

“One could perhaps say that the existence of the throne is by divine right in this sense: that God himself has traced the duties of subjects toward kings; that as a result this form of government has received in advance the divine sanction, and that the duties of peoples toward kings and of kings toward peoples form a part of the obligations imposed on Christians by the law of God.”

Letter of King Louis XVI, August 26, 1789

“I will never consent to the plundering of my clergy and my nobles. Fine actions had earned them their privileges; the King of France must conserve those privileges for them.”

Jean-Joseph Mounier, member of the National Constituent Assembly, 1789

“We will never abandon our rights, but we cannot exaggerate them. We must not forget that the French are not a new people, recently emerged from the depths of the forest in order to form an association, but a society of 24 million men which wishes to strengthen the ties between its various parts, which wishes to regenerate the kingdom so that the principles of a true monarchy might be forever sacred.”

André-Boniface-Louis, Vicecount of Mirabeau, pamphlet

“The same factions, the same conspirators who in France have sapped the foundations of throne and altar, who have delivered the royal family, the clergy, nobility, magistrates, and proprietors of all classes to the fury of a blind, unbridled people, would like to entrain in the same downfall all the princes and governments of Europe; the scoundrels see safety only in increased numbers of victims and accomplices.”

Veto

André-Boniface-Louis, Vicecount of Mirabeau, pamphlet dated 1789

“It is not for his particular advantage that the monarch intervenes in legislation, but for the very interest of the people; ...the royal sanction is not the prerogative of the monarch, but the property, the domain of the nation.”

Jean-Joseph Mounier, member of the National Constituent Assembly, September 5, 1789

“Democracy is a foolish dream in a large state. If the throne loses authority only to give way to the degrading yoke of aristocracy; and

feudal tyranny was established in France by the successive invasions of those who composed the general assemblies under the first and second dynasties of our kings; thus defense of the crown's independence is defense of the people's liberty.

"Therefore, we must give the greatest possible attention to the means by which we may secure executive power from all encroachments by legislative power. The most obvious means is to make the king an integral part of the legislative body and to require that the representatives' decisions be invested with the royal sanction in order to become laws."

Political Participation

Petition of property owners, December 1788

"It must be recognized that there is a class of men who, by nature of their education and the kind of work to which they are doomed by their poverty, are equally devoid of ideas and willpower, and incapable, at present of taking part in public business."

Jacques Antoine Marie de Cazalès, member of the National Constituent Assembly, February 5, 1791

"I do not think it necessary to point out... that proprietors [owners of property] alone are veritable citizens, that they constitute society itself, that it is only for the conservation of property that society is formed, that the public functions must be confided only to proprietors."

Women's Role in Politics

Jean-Baptiste Amar, deputy to the Convention, October 30, 1793

"Should women exercise political rights and get mixed up in the affairs of government? Governing is ruling public affairs by laws whose making demands extended knowledge, an application and devotion without limit, a severe impassiveness; governing is ceaselessly directing the action of constituted authorities. Are women capable of these required attentions and qualities? We can respond in general: no... In general, women are hardly capable of lofty conceptions and serious cogitations."

Religion

Abbé Maury, archbishop of Paris, member of the National Constituent Assembly, December 23, 1789

"Calling Jews citizens would be like saying that without letters of naturalization and without ceasing to be English and Danish, the English and Danish would be French... The sweat of Christian slaves waters the furrow in which the opulence of the Jews germinates... People feel for the Jews a hatred that cannot fail to explode as a result of this aggrandizement. For their own safety, we should table this matter.

"It should not be concluded from what I have said about Jews that I confuse Protestants with them. Protestants have the same religion and the same laws as us, but they do not have same creed... I see no reason to deliberate on the section that concerns them in the proposed motion."

Slavery

Governor of Guadeloupe, October 1789

"We must expect strange revolutions. Not only must we fear an insurrection by the whites but even one by our natural enemies [the slaves], whose behavior suggests hidden cabals [plots]."

Monseron de L'Aunay, deputy of the Nantes Chamber of Commerce, December 24, 1789

"You send me alarming news from our sugar islands, principally from Saint Domingue. The inhabitants of that island may all be currently being held at knife point by negroes in revolt....

"Consider that these colonies are France's destiny. Consider the sixty million [francs] profit from their exports each year. Consider that their capital of three billion [francs] is the sacred property of their owners....

"Our eternal rival [Great Britain]...smiles at our misfortunes and...foresees the scepter of their world-wide domination that no human force would be able to take from them."

Option 2: Create a Constitutional Monarchy

We continue to love our king with all of our hearts. But the world is changing. We need only to look across the water to our eternal foe Great Britain for a model of what kind of government works well. Here in France we should create a constitutional monarchy and a representative assembly. The king is a great man who loves his people, but he is not well served by the courtesans whose primary goal is to preserve their wealth and privileges. Look where that has gotten us. We have faced an ongoing financial crises and many of the people of France go hungry. This need not continue. Times have changed. As our understanding of the principles that govern the universe has changed so has our understanding of what principles should govern the people of France. Rationality and reason can help us create a new constitution for France that gives the king a role in a more representative government.

It is time to cast away the ancient traditions that prevent France from moving forward. But let us be cautious. We must be careful so that we do not discard what makes us great and what unifies us. The king must understand that his purpose is to serve the people of France, and that it is only through their consent that he rules. The king must not be given an “absolute” veto over legislation. A “suspensive” veto, which will allow him to reject legislation unless it is passed by three consecutive assemblies is a better approach. This is one step towards creating a system of checks and balances between the different branches of government. Although the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen embraces equality, let us define carefully what we mean by equality. For example, although the system of slavery is oppressive, we can not afford to end it. We must create a representative assembly that property-owning Frenchmen can select. Neither women nor those who do not pay taxes are ready to participate in politics. We must open our minds and tolerate other religions besides Roman Catholicism. Let us not be divided by our religious beliefs; let us be united by the fact that we are citizens of a new France. Let us all join together and celebrate the beginning of a new glorious era for France. Long live the king!

Beliefs and Assumptions Underlying Option 2

1. The king remains the rightful ruler of France. A constitutional monarchy is the way for France to solve its problems.

2. We must rely on rationality and reason to improve the function of our government.

3. A well thought-out system of checks and balances in our new constitution will prevent abuses of power, tyranny, and corruption.

4. Radical political ideas and too much change would be dangerous.

Supporting Arguments for Option 2

1. Preserving a central role for the king in governing France is supported by the majority.

2. Great Britain provides an excellent model of a functioning constitutional monarchy. Although they are our great rivals, we would be happy to match their success.

3. Ending corruption and unfair privileges of the nobles and clergy will unshackle the French economy and allow France to prosper.

From the Historical Record

General Principles

Jérôme Pignon de Villeneuve, member of the National Constituent Assembly

“There is said to be a contract between the king and the nation. I deny the principle. The king can only govern according to the laws that the nation presents to him.”

Pierre Victor Malouet, member of the National Constituent Assembly, August 1, 1789

“The nation is waiting for us; it wants order, peace, and protective laws.... I believe, sirs, that it is necessary in a large empire for men placed by circumstances in a dependent condition to see the just limits on [liberty] as much as the extension of natural liberty....”

Jean-Baptiste-Penon Robinet, writer and scientist, November 1789

“There are no longer any provinces!... Instead, say that there are provinces, and that they are all national, all French, because there are no longer any distinctions, or privileges, or interests or spirit of particularism. Patriotism is not in the names, but the soul.... Let us conclude that new divisions are not necessary.

“You have made some indispensable destructions, some advantageous and infinitely useful destructions. It is necessary to take care not to push too far. It will no longer be regeneration: it will be abuse and excess.”

The National Constituent Assembly, August 4-11, 1789

“The National Assembly solemnly proclaims King Louis XVI Restorer of French Liberty.

“The National Assembly abolishes the feudal regime entirely....”

Feynaud de Montlosier, member of the National Constituent Assembly

“Obviously, I had no desire for the exaggerated liberty and Revolutionary equality as they were conceived...but neither did I wish to return to the despotism of the Old Regime. [I seek] suppression of past abuses, while respecting the principal foundation of the previous system.”

Pierre Victor Malouet, July 21, 1789

“It is important to be sensible, deliberate, moderate, cool...otherwise we will destroy and tear and break everything, and whatever we build will not stand.”

Administrative Department of Cantal message to the National Constituent Assembly, 1790

“Subservient to the will of a single individual, debased by the feudal regime, they groaned under arbitrary laws that favored the rich and powerful and weighed down only those whom they were supposed to protect. They were not free and [now] they are free under the single dominion of a common law found on reason and equality.

“We reiterate, gentlemen, in the name of all the inhabitants of the Department of Cantal, the inviolable oath that they carry in their hearts to be forever faithful to the constitution, to the nation, to the law and to the king.”

Veto

Abbé Henri Grégoire, member of the National Constituent Assembly, September 4, 1789

“Unfortunately, kings are men; flattered by courtesans, and often escorted by lies, truth reaches their thrones only with difficulty.

Unfortunately, kings, badly brought up for the most part have tumultuous passions. One of the most deeply rooted in the human heart, one of the most ardent, is the thirst for power and the penchant for extending its empire. A king capable of dominating by the ascendancy of his genius, like Louis XIV, who did everything out of vanity, and who will always put himself before his people; by virtue of an absolute veto, such a king will rapidly encroach upon legislative power by the facility of wielding the lever of executive power alone.... You will have a despot.

“I opine for the suspensive veto, which being only an appeal to the people retains their right to it; but I am opposed with all my might to an absolute veto, which reduces the Nation to a subaltern role, whereas it is everything, and which becomes the most terrible arm of despotism.”

Political Participation

Abbe Seyès, member of the National Constituent Assembly, August 1789

“All the inhabitants of a country should enjoy the rights of a passive citizen; all have the right to the protection of their person, their property, their liberty, etc.; but all do not have the right to take an active part in the formation of the public authorities: all are not active citizens. Women, at least in the present state, children, foreigners, those who contribute nothing to maintaining the public establishment, should have no active influence on public affairs.”

Women’s Role in Politics

Louis-Marie Prudhomme, newspaper publisher, *On the Influence of the Revolution on Women*, February 12, 1791

“Many women have complained to us about the revolution. They report to us for two years now it seems there is but one sex in France. In the primary assemblies, in the sections, in the clubs, etc., there is no longer any discussion about women, as if they no longer existed. They are accorded, as if by grace, a few benches for listening to the session of the National Assembly.

“Citizenesses of all ages and stations! Leave your homes all at the same; rally from door to door and march toward city hall.... Once the country is purged...we will see you return to your dwellings to take up once again the accustomed yoke of domestic duties.”

Abbe Seyès, member of the National Constituent Assembly, August 1789

“Women, at least in the present state, children, foreigners, those who contribute nothing to maintaining the public establishment, should have no active influence on public affairs.”

Religion

Count de Clermont Tonnerre, member of the National Constituent Assembly, August 1789
December 23, 1789

“...an honorable member has explained to us that the non-Catholics of some provinces still experience harassment based on former laws, and seeing them excluded from the elections and public posts, another honorable member has protested against the effect of prejudice that persecutes some professions....

“[Some] say to me, the Jews have their own judges and laws. I respond that is your fault. We must refuse everything to Jews as a nation and accord everything to Jews as individuals.... In short, Sirs, the presumed status of every man resident in the country is to be a citizen.”

Slavery

Antoine-Pierre Barnave, member of the National Constituent Assembly, March 8, 1790

“Abandon the colonies, and these sources of prosperity will disappear or diminish.

“Abandon the colonies, and you will import, at great price, from foreigners what they buy today from you.”

Antoine-Pierre Barnave, member of the National Constituent Assembly, September 1791

“This regime is oppressive, but it gives a livelihood to several million Frenchmen. This regime is barbarous but a still greater barbarity will result if you interfere with it without the necessary knowledge.”

Option 3: Liberate France from the Old Regime

Men are born free, but everywhere they are in chains. So began the Enlightenment writer Rousseau's famous work, *The Social Contract*. Like Rousseau, we wonder: why must this be so? Now it is time for us to begin to break the chains. Our ideas are sharply different from those of the past, but they will create the kind of radical change that France needs. We must work to create a new, just, and fair society. The social distinctions of the past too often are used to tyrannize and preserve the privileges and wealth of a few. This must end. We must use all of our rational abilities and reason to improve conditions in France, to end hunger, and to create a society based upon the principles of liberty and equality.

France's new constitution must give the will of the people the most prominent place in the political decisions of France. The king must subordinate himself to the will of the people. We are reluctant to give the king any veto power, because it implies he puts his own opinion above that of the nation. By what right does he claim that power? From God? We think the authority to rule only comes from the people. We must create a society where people are able to advance based on their abilities and talents. All men and women from all walks of life should have the right to participate in politics. France must break the shackles of slavery in its colonies—the freedom of all from birth is one that we hold dear. And let us end the monopoly of the Roman Catholic Church in France on religious practice. That tyranny is unjust and serves to fill the pockets of wealthy clergy with money. A new day is dawning in France; we must use all of our energy to forge ahead and remain wary of those nobles and others who want a counter-revolution.

Beliefs and Assumptions Underlying Option 3

1. All are born free and equal before the law. Adhering to the principles of liberty, equality, and opportunity will allow us to create a better France.

2. We must end the old privileges and false social distinctions that have divided France.

3. The authority to rule France comes from the people of France and not a single person. The purpose of the government of France should be to serve the people.

4. We can use reason and rational thought to reorganize France and make a better society.

Supporting Arguments for Option 3

1. The vast majority of French people have had no voice in political decisions. Increasing participation will appeal to them and give them a stake in making change succeed.

2. Ending unfair privileges and creating a society with equality, opportunity, and justice

as its centerpiece will strengthen France.

3. France has no choice but to attempt radical change. In the past, moderate reforms have been blocked at every turn by those seeking to preserve their wealth and privileges.

From the Historical Record

General Principles

Voltaire, 1765

“Does a dog need another dog, or a horse, another horse? No animal depends on any other of its species. Man, however, has received that divine inspiration that we call Reason. And what has it wrought? Slavery almost everywhere we turn. If this world were as good as it seems to be, if everywhere man could find a livelihood that was easy and assured a climate suitable to his nature, it is clear that it would be impossible for one man to enslave another.”

Richard de la Groye, member of the National Constituent Assembly, July 20, 1789

“Ah, the good people, the good French people. How slandered they have been by those who have said that liberty would never suit them.”

Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, August 26, 1789

“1. Men are born free and equal in rights. Social distinction may be based only on common utility.”

Government of Bas-Rhin in Strasbourg, April 14, 1790

“Until the moment of the most successful revolution, France could be regarded only as a vast body, in which no tie bound the parts. The provinces, isolated from each other, formed to some extent different nations: manners, customs, language, forms of administration all tended to disunite them, and to make them indifferent to each other.

“Today everything has changed. Our rights, our duties, our interests are the same;

the privileges that divided us no longer exist; we are all brothers, all equal, all free: in a word, we are all French.”

Veto

Thodore Vernier, member of the National Constituent Assembly, August 1789

“I have come increasingly to realize that our Assembly is divided and that the nobles and the clergy want to make use of the veto to have all of our reforms rejected.”

Maximilien Robespierre, member of the National Constituent Assembly

“...the person [king] who can impose a condition on the constitution has the right to prevent it [the constitution]; he puts his will above the right of the nation.”

Abbe Seyès, 1789

“The absolute or suspensive veto, no matter which, seems to me to be no more than an arbitrary order: I can only see it as a *lettre de cachet* [king’s warrant for arrest or execution] launched against the national will, against the entire nation.”

Political Participation

Abbe Seyès, member of the National Constituent Assembly

“The people of the nation can have but one voice, that of the national legislature.”

Maximilien Robespierre, member of the National Constituent Assembly, October 22, 1789

“All citizens, whoever they are, have the right to aspire to all levels of officeholding. Nothing is more in line with your declaration

of rights, according to which all privileges, all distinctions, all exceptions must disappear. The constitution establishes that sovereignty resides in the people, in all the individuals of the people. Each individual therefore has the right to participate in making the law which governs him and in the administration of the public good which is his own.”

Women’s Role in Politics

Nicolas de Condorcet, philosopher and mathematician, July 3, 1790

“...[I]t would be completely absurd to limit the rights of citizenship and the eligibility for public offices...why should women be excluded rather than those men who are inferior to a great number of women?”

“Mothers, daughters, sisters, female representatives of the nation ask to be constituted as a national assembly. Considering that ignorance, neglect, or contempt for the rights of woman are the sole cause of public misfortune and governmental corruption, they have resolved to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, inalienable, and sacred rights of woman....”

Olympe de Gouges, playwright and political activist, Declaration of the Rights of Woman, September 1791

“1. Woman is born free and remains equal to man in rights. Social distinctions may be based only on common utility....”

Religion

Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, August 26, 1789

“10. No one should be disturbed for his opinions, even in religion, provided that their manifestation does not trouble public order as established by law.”

Zalkind Hourwitz, political activist, 1789

“The means of making the Jews happy and useful? Here it is: stop making them unhappy and unuseful. Accord them, or rather return to them the right of citizens, which you have de-

nied them against all human laws and against your own interests, like a man who thoughtlessly cripples himself....”

Brunet de Latuque, member of the National Constituent Assembly, December 21, 1789

“I have the honor of proposing to you, Sirs, a decree in the following form that requires no further interpretation:

“1. That non-Catholics who have fulfilled all the conditions laid down in preceding decrees in order to be electors and eligible for office can be elected to every level of the administration, without exception.

“2. That non-Catholics are eligible for every civil and military post, like other citizens.”

Slavery

Jean-Louis Viefville des Essars, □On the Emancipation of Negroes,□1790

“Freedom is the first right that man receives from nature. It is a sacred and inalienable right, and nothing should take it from him. Slavery is therefore nothing more than an abuse of power.”

The Revolutions of Paris (Newspaper), September 5, 1790

“As for the slave trade and the slavery of Negroes, the European governments will find it useless to oppose the cries of philosophy and the principles of universal liberty that germinate and spread throughout the nations.... The new order of things will rise up despite all the precautions that have been taken to prevent it. Yes! We dare to predict with confidence that the time will come, and that is not far off, when you see a frizzy-haired African, with no other recommendation than his good sense and virtues, come and participate in the legislative process at the heart of our national assemblies.”