

my **revision** notes

AQA AS/A-level History

# FRANCE IN REVOLUTION

1774–1815



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# 1 The origins of the French Revolution, 1774–89

## Absolutism and the structure of the Ancien Régime, part 1

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### The Ancien Régime

The Ancien Régime is the name used for the French system of government before the Revolution. It was first used in 1790, after the Revolution began, as an insult and means ‘old rule’ or ‘old Régime’.

### Absolutism

The head of the Ancien Régime was the king, Louis XVI. In theory he was ‘an **absolute monarch**’. At his coronation Louis swore an oath to God, not to his subjects. Absolutism means that there were no legal limits to the king’s power over his subjects. In reality, Louis’ power was limited by four factors:

- He had been taught to take advice on important decisions.
- His advisers/ministers came from a pool of career administrators and courtiers.
- He was bound by the laws and customs of France.
- He needed the consent of the noble elite.

### Louis XVI (1774–92)

Louis was born in Versailles in 1754. He became **dauphin** following the early deaths of his older brother and father. He succeeded his grandfather in 1774. He was well educated, fluent in English and Italian, enjoyed hunting and the hobby of lock making. In 1770 he married **Marie Antoinette**, daughter of the Austrian Empress Maria Theresa. This was unpopular, as Austria was blamed for France’s defeat in the **Seven Years’ War** (1753–63). It was 1778 before they had a child and 1781 before they produced a male heir.

Historians differ on his character and abilities:

- ‘... lacking in will; honest and well-intentioned, he was far from being a great mind.’ Georges Lefebvre (1939)
- ‘... devoted to his subjects, committed to reform, more the victim of circumstance than his own failings.’ Paul Hanson (2009)
- ‘... took an intelligent, if fluctuating interest in matters of government.’ Peter Jones (2010)

### Government

Government consisted of Louis, his advisers and ministers. They were based in the palace of Versailles, 12 miles south west of Paris. Ministers did not meet to make decisions collectively. Instead, Louis met each individually to discuss the work of their department. So Louis decided the overall direction of government policy. This created the problem of ministers and **court factions** working against each other, not co-operating.

A second problem of government was the wide variation in laws and customs across France. France had no single representative body which could pass laws covering the whole country. All royal legislation had to be **ratified** by one of the 13 regional **parlements**. France was a patchwork of different forms of administration, different legal systems, different taxes and different rules on who paid them. So there was no single solution to any problem.

### Intendants

Previous kings had attempted to create one system by splitting the country into 36 **généralités** or administrative areas, each under the control of a royal official, an **intendant**. The intendants were responsible for carrying out government policy but they were hindered by local law courts and parlements and seen as overly authoritarian.



## Identify relevant content

Read Source A and the question below.

Go through the source and highlight the sections that are relevant for the focus of the question, and annotate in the margin the main points.

How valuable is this source for understanding how Louis XVI ruled?

### SOURCE A

An extract from a letter written by Marie Antoinette to her brother Joseph II of Austria reporting on a session of the Paris Parlement four days earlier, attended by the King on 19 November 1787.

On Monday the king went to the Parlement to register two edicts: the first for loans to be spread over a five-year period in order to repay loans with a fixed date for redemption. There was a majority of opinions in favour of registration, but the king presides over the Parlement as he presides over his council, i.e. without being bound by the majority opinion. Consequently, after everyone had given his opinion, the king, without counting votes, said: 'I order the registration.' The duc d'Orleans dared to protest and say that this form was illegal.

...

The king has exiled him to Villers-Cotterets and forbids him to see anyone but his family and household. Two councillors in the Parlement, M. Fréteau and the Abbé Sabattier, had spoken with lack of respect in the king's presence; they have been conveyed to two fortresses.



## Identify the significance of provenance

(a) Look at what is said about Source B:

- Who wrote it
- What type of source it is
- When it was written
- Where it was written
- And – crucially – why: what was the speaker's purpose?

(b) What does this suggest about its value as a source of evidence?

### SOURCE B

From the book *Travels in France During the Years 1787, 1788 and 1789* by the Englishman Arthur Young, first published in 1792. He travelled through France and wrote about its people and the conduct of public affairs. Initially critical of the condition of the peasants, he came to oppose the violence of the Revolution. Here he criticises the power of intendants.

The kingdom was parcelled into generalities, with an intendant at the head of each, into whose hands the whole power of the crown was delegated for everything except the military authority; but particularly for all affairs of finance. ... The rolls of the *taille*, *capitation*, *vingtiemes*, and other taxes, were distributed among districts, parishes, and individuals, at the pleasure of the intendant, who could exempt, change, add, or diminish at pleasure. Such an enormous power, constantly acting, and from which no man was free, must, in the nature of things, degenerate in many cases into absolute tyranny. It must be obvious that the friends, acquaintances, and dependents of the intendant, and the friends of these friends, to a long chain of dependence, might be favoured in taxation at the expense of their miserable neighbours; and that noblemen in favour at court, to whose protection the intendant himself would naturally look up, could find little difficulty in throwing much of the weight of their taxes on others, ...

# Absolutism and the structure of the Ancien Régime, part 2

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## Social divisions

French society was divided into three estates.

### The First Estate – the Clergy

The clergy formed less than 0.5 per cent of the population but the Church owned roughly one-tenth of French land. It controlled almost all education, most hospitals and **poor relief**. It had powers of censorship and published the government's messages. In many towns the clergy dominated while in the countryside the parish priest (**curé**) was influential.

### The Second Estate – the nobility

There were roughly 120,000 nobles, less than 1 per cent of the population, but they owned between a quarter and a third of French land.

- **Noblesse de court** at Versailles were very wealthy, provided the king's advisers, ambassadors, intendants and ministers and had access to royal patronage.
- **Noblesse de robe** were nobles created by the monarchy selling legal and administrative offices with a hereditary title. In 1789 there were over 70,000 **venal offices**.
- Most other nobles lived on their country estates. Many were not wealthy. They were jealous of court nobles, protective of their own status and privileges, and dependent on their **feudal rights**.

### The Third Estate

The Third Estate made up were the rest of society and consisted of nearly 28 million people. At the top were the **bourgeoisie**, mostly in towns. They were growing in wealth and numbers. They owned most industrial and all commercial capital, about one-fifth of all private French wealth and roughly a quarter of French land. Their ambition was to become part of the nobility.

In the countryside were the peasants, over 80 per cent of the population. The majority farmed at **subsistence** level and worked as labourers on the land, in industries or as migrant workers in towns.

In the towns were the small property owners, skilled workers and unskilled labourers.

## Privileges and burdens

The clergy paid no taxes. Instead the Church made a voluntary annual grant of about 16 million **livres**, just 5 per cent of total Church income.

The nobility were exempt from the heaviest tax, the *taille* (land tax), and the *corvées royales* (labour service on the roads). They paid some newer taxes linked to income but were often able to avoid paying the full amount. They were exempt from military conscription although many volunteered to fight by buying **commissions**.

The peasantry, the poorest in society, carried the heaviest burden. To the lord of the manor (the **seigneur**) they paid rents and taxes on their grain harvest and some had to do labour service. To the state they performed labour service on the roads and paid the *taille* and the *gabelle* (salt tax). They could be conscripted or have soldiers **billeted** upon them. They paid the **tithe** to the Church. Their main concern was to stay alive and this was dependent on the price of bread.

## Strengths and weaknesses

In 1783 France was arguably the most powerful European country and had just defeated Britain. Although the structure of the Ancien Régime was inefficient and unfair, it worked. However, the king could not make radical changes so its key weaknesses, the problems of government and of taxation, could not be reformed and tensions in society grew.

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## Complete the paragraph

a

Below are a sample exam question and a paragraph written in answer to the question.

The paragraph contains a point and specific examples, but lacks a concluding analytical link back to the question. Complete the paragraph adding this link back to the question in the space provided.

'Ancien Régime France was a deeply divided society.' Explain why you agree or disagree with this view.

*The French nobility or Second Estate numbered over 100,000 people. It was made up of three types of noble. The noblesse de court lived at Versailles, had access to royal patronage and served as Louis' ministers. The noblesse de robe had bought their offices and in return had a noble title. This was one way the middle classes could join the nobility. Most nobles belonged to a third group, nicknamed 'sparrow hawks'. These tended to be poorer and lived on their estates across France. They were keen to protect their feudal rights. Overall the three groups...*

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## Identify the tone and emphasis of a source

Study Source A below. Focus on the:

- language
- sentence structure
- emphasis of the source
- overall tone.

What does the tone and emphasis of the source suggest about its value in terms of the:

- reliability of the evidence?
- utility of the evidence for studying Ancien Régime government?

### SOURCE A

From the journal of the Marquis de Castries, Minister responsible for the navy June 1780 to August 1787. He reports a conversation he had with Queen Marie Antoinette on the subject of his successor, 27 June 1787.

I said that if there were any possibility of a lawyer (homme de robe) succeeding me then I should consider myself obliged to tell the king that his navy would be ruined; that we needed at the head of this department a man who knew how to command, who was used to it and who had the authority to make himself obeyed, and that Marquis de Bouillé seemed to me to deserve preference over those of his rank whom the king could consider.

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## The ideas of the Enlightened philosophes

### The Enlightenment

The Enlightenment was an intellectual movement that spread across Europe (c1740–c1789). Writers and thinkers challenged a wide range of views that were accepted at the time, about religion, nature and absolute monarchy. They considered the nature of society and people's relationships with each other, exploring ideas of freedom, liberty and equality. The Enlightenment had a particularly strong influence in France.

### Extent of influence in France – the philosophes

The leading Enlightenment writers and thinkers in France were the philosophes. Many of them contributed to the most important work of the French Enlightenment – The Encyclopaedia – edited by Diderot and published in 1750–72. Its aim was 'to change the way people think'. Articles dealt with topics like 'reason' but also with agricultural techniques, printing and metalworking. Its scientific approach directly challenged ideas held by the Church and other institutions and caused huge controversy. Some in the Church wanted it suppressed.

The most influential philosophes were Montesquieu, Voltaire and **Rousseau**. They expressed a deep dislike of organised religion and discussed how social and political institutions might be changed for the good of the people. They questioned the institutions of the Ancien Régime but did not advocate revolution.

- Montesquieu criticised royal absolutism but argued that it was the role of the aristocracy to limit royal power, not the people.
- Voltaire criticised the Catholic Church and religious intolerance but believed religion was necessary to preserve public morals. He defended royal authority.
- Rousseau went furthest. He argued that a **despotic** monarch could be overthrown by their subjects and that sovereignty resided in the people rather than in the person of the king.

The ideas of the philosophes reached a wider audience through their stories and plays. Voltaire's popular novel, *Candide*, was banned for blasphemy and Voltaire was imprisoned in the Bastille.

### Salons

Enlightenment ideas were spread through the **salons**. An aristocratic hostess would invite a range of guests, nobles and bourgeoisie to discuss art, literature and politics. Sometimes political decisions were taken and deals made between the king's ministers in salons.

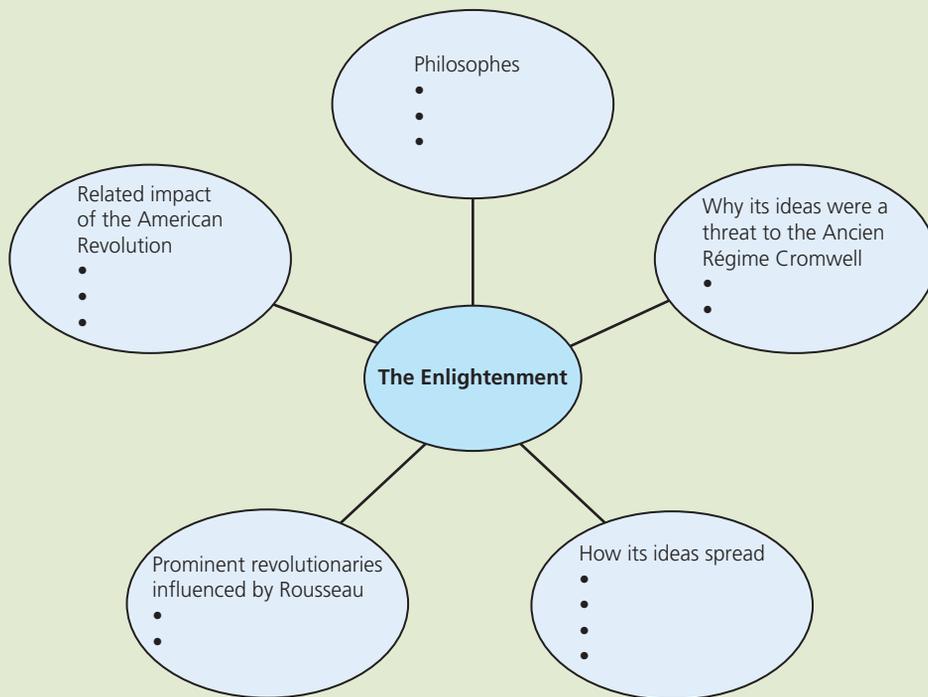
The new ideas were also discussed in the increasing number of cafés and **Masonic Lodges** and in the growing numbers of newspapers – whereas there were only three in 1700, there were over 80 by 1785.

### The impact of the American Revolution and War of Independence

America was another source of ideas challenging the Ancien Régime. Louis XVI had taken the fateful decision to enter the War of Independence in 1778. The American colonies had been in revolt against British rule for two years and many in France were sympathetic to the colonists' cause of freedom (liberty) and democracy. Some idealistic French aristocrats, notably the **Marquis de Lafayette**, had already crossed the Atlantic to enlist in the American forces. When they and the 8,000 troops who served in America came home after 1783, they brought with them renewed ideas of liberty and democracy, plus the example and experience of the overthrow of an existing political authority and the building of a new order in its place.

## ! Mind map

Complete the mind map with brief detail or explanation to help answer the following question:  
How influential were Enlightenment ideas in the period 1774–89?



## i Moving from assertion to argument

a

Below are a sample exam question and a series of assertions made by the candidate, within a paragraph devoted to discussing Enlightenment ideas as part of their overall answer. Read the exam question and then add a justification to each of the assertions to turn it into an argument.

‘Economic and financial problems were the most important factors that led to the start of the French Revolution.’ Explain why you agree or disagree with this view.

*The Enlightenment was an important factor in the coming of the French Revolution because...*

*Among the Philosophes Rousseau believed that the people could overthrow a despotic ruler. This idea was dangerous because...*

*People heard and read Enlightenment arguments in a variety of places such as...*

*This was important because...*

*In many ways the Enlightenment was an important/very important/crucial contributing factor to the coming of the Revolution.*

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