

OCR AS/A-level History

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AND THE RULE OF NAPOLEON

1774–1815

Mike Wells
Dave Martin



My Revision Planner



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1 The causes of the French Revolution from 1774 and the events of 1789

The structure of the Ancien Régime

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Social divisions

In the eighteenth century, France was divided into 'estates', or social classes. These were official divisions, and affected legal status and taxation.

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 one per cent of the population, but they owned between a quarter and a third of French land. There were three levels within the nobility:

- The *noblesse d'épée* lived with the King in the palace at Versailles and were very wealthy, provided the King's advisers, ambassadors, **intendants** and ministers and had access to **royal patronage**.
- The *noblesse de robe* were nobles created by the monarchy selling legal and administrative offices in return for 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 the rest of society and consisted of nearly 28 million people:

- At the top were the **bourgeoisie** (middle class), who lived mostly in towns. By 1789 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 one-quarter of French land. Often 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.

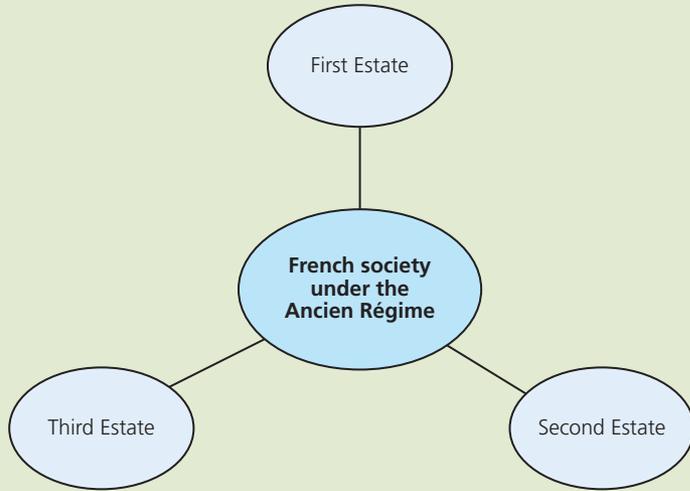
Privileges and burdens

The First and Second Estates had considerable privileges. 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 bourgeoisie, though often richer than the nobles, were frustrated because the nobles dominated the higher posts in the army and the Church and had tax privileges denied to commoners. Thus a well-educated and prosperous part of French society was increasingly resentful.

The peasantry which included some of 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 paid the *taille* and the *gabelle* (salt tax). They also did labour service on the roads. They could be conscripted or have soldiers **billeted** upon them. They paid the **tithe** to the Church. For many, their main concern was to stay alive and this was dependent on the price of bread. Many richer peasants resented the burden of dues and taxes.

! Mind map

Make a copy of the mind map below and use the information on the opposite page and page 10 to add detail to it, showing how French society was divided before 1789.



i Turning assertion into argument **a**

Below are a sample question and a series of assertions. Read the exam question and then add a justification to each of the assertions to turn each one into an argument.

‘The Ancien Régime was a deeply unjust society.’ How far do you agree?

The first two estates had too much privilege because ...

The peasantry was particularly harmed because ...

Middle-class grievances were important because ...

The qualities of Louis XVI as King of France

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Absolutism

The head of the Ancien Régime was the King. In theory he was an '**absolute monarch**'. At his coronation the King 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, however, his power was limited:

- **Louis XVI** had been taught to take advice on important decisions and it was usual to rely on career administrators and courtiers for this.
- Louis was bound by the laws and customs of France.
- Louis needed the consent of the noble elite.
- There were deep-rooted local and social privileges.

However, the personality and abilities of the King were still important.

Louis XVI (ruled 1774–92, executed 1793)

Louis Auguste de France, Duc de Berri, was the third child of Louis, son of King Louis XV. His parents took little interest in him and he did not become **dauphin** until he was eleven, following the death of both his elder brother and his father. He was not unintelligent and was adept in Italian and English, but was a withdrawn and shy boy. He was married at the age of fifteen to the fourteen-year-old Austrian princess Maria Antonia (**Marie Antoinette**). Their first child was not born until eight years later.

Though he relished the ceremonies of kingship he did not enjoy the luxuries that went with it or the grandeur of monarchy. He enjoyed hunting, poring over naval plans, ship design and lock making. He was, by nature, anxious and apprehensive, and was oppressed by a sense of duty. He did not command immediate respect as a person, and was awkward and ill-at-ease on social occasions. He was indecisive and uncommunicative, and had limited ability to analyse problems and situations. He consistently failed to act decisively to solve the problems about which he worried so much.

Louis was kind, with a rough sense of humour. He believed in the divine nature of his kingship; he was religiously devout and had a strong sense of mission to protect the Church. In many ways he was a modern monarch and took an interest in improvements for his people and all affairs of state. However, he lacked the

decisive character needed to steer France through the problems it faced. He was too conscious of the importance of tradition and privilege to sweep it away, but too eager to be popular to rely on absolute authority and assert strong government.

Historians take different views on Louis' character and abilities. He has been variously described as:

- 'lacking in will; honest and well-intentioned ... 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)
- having taken 'an intelligent, if fluctuating interest in matters of government' (Peter Jones, 2010).

However, few disagree that he was simply not strong enough for the challenges that faced him.

Problems of government

Government, based in the Palace of Versailles, consisted of Louis, his advisers and ministers. Louis decided the overall direction of government policy and met his ministers individually to discuss the work of their department, rather than making decisions collectively. This created the problem of ministers and **court factions** working against each other, not co-operating. Dealing with these issues was hard for a King who lacked good communication skills and a decisive personality.

A second problem was the wide variation in laws and customs. France had no single representative body covering the whole country. All royal legislation had to be **ratified** by one of the thirteen 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. 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 hindered by local law courts and parlements and seen as overly authoritarian. What was needed was decisive modernisation and reform, but this could only come from strong leadership from the King or consistent support of able reforming ministers. Again, Louis was not able to deliver.



Delete as applicable

Below are a sample exam question and a paragraph written in answer to this question. Read the paragraph and decide which of the possible options (in bold) is the most appropriate.

'Louis XVI was an inadequate king.' How far do you agree?

It is **fair/unfair** to argue that Louis was in himself an inadequate king. The limits on his power in practice were **considerable/limited/minimal**. The system of government he inherited was **very effective/not very efficient/very disorganised** and weak. France itself was **divided/very united** and **under central control/easy to govern**. However, the royal intendants **could rule as they wished in the King's name/faced opposition/were very weak**. Louis' popularity was **helped/hindered/unaffected** by his marriage to Marie Antoinette. The King himself **took no interest in government/was very effective in bringing about reforms/took an interest in affairs of state**. An important part of his view of kingship was his **belief in/dislike of/determination to change** traditional privileges.



Support your judgement

Read the following sample exam question and two basic judgements. Support the judgement that you agree with most strongly by adding a reason that justifies the judgement.

Tip: Whichever option you choose you will have to weigh up both sides of the argument. You could use words such as 'whereas' or 'although' in order to help the process of evaluation.

'Before 1789, the French monarchy was absolute in theory but not in practice.'

The power of the King was more apparent than actual because ...

The monarchy was absolute because ...

Financial problems and attempts by Turgot, Necker and Calonne to deal with them

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Royal debt

In 1774 Louis XVI's biggest problem was money. The monarchy was heavily in debt due to the costs of foreign wars:

War	Estimated cost
War of Austrian Succession (1740–48)	1 billion livres
Seven Years' War (1756–63)	1.8 billion livres

Louis could not pay off the debt. Even in peacetime royal income was not enough to cover expenditure because of the size of the interest payments. In the short term the crown borrowed from international banks but in the long term this just made things worse. The decision to go to war in support of the **American colonies** against Britain made the financial situation worse.

Inefficient tax system

Most royal income came from taxation. This was not enough because:

- The nobles, the King's richest subjects, were exempt from most taxes.
- Tax collection was both chaotic and incomplete because of all the regional differences.
- **Tax farming** reduced the crown's income. The **Farmers-General** paid an agreed sum in advance for the right to collect certain taxes. What they collected above that sum was their profit.

Attempts to improve royal finances

Louis tried to follow a policy of reform to improve royal finances. The Controller General was the minister responsible.

Turgot

In 1774 Louis appointed Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot as Controller General. Turgot was influenced by the ideas of the **physiocrats**. He removed price controls and abolished guilds and proposed a new property tax. His reforms and the way he went about them aroused great hostility from those whose interests were threatened. Louis dismissed him in 1776.

Necker

Instead, in 1777, Jacques **Necker**, a Swiss banker, was appointed. He tried a different route of reforming royal expenditure and increasing the royal share of farmed taxes. He tried to cut venal offices, but this drew hostility from the nobles who held them.

Necker's key mistake was advising Louis that France could afford to enter the American War of Independence when it could not. This war cost an estimated 1.3 billion livres, so royal debt increased.

In 1781 Necker issued the first public report on royal finances to show that, in his view, they were in good order. However, some of the minor details of court expenditure were seized upon as examples of extravagant royal spending by enemies of the monarchy. This lost Necker the support of the court and he resigned.

Calonne

From 1783 Louis' chief minister, the Vicomte de Calonne, managed the royal finances by selling offices and by lavish spending. The spending maintained confidence in the monarchy, which meant that it could raise loans. However, Calonne recognised that this could not continue indefinitely and that reform was still needed. He hoped to make changes when a number of taxes were due for renewal in 1787. But events overtook him. Calonne was unsuccessful in raising loans in 1785, and in early 1786 and in August 1786 he told Louis that the government was close to bankruptcy.

The financial situation by 1789 was particularly bad, with a deficit of 126 million livres and interest on debt taking 51 per cent of total spending – more than the 36 per cent spent on defence.

Importance of financial problems

The financial problems were of great importance because they revealed the weakness of the crown and opened the King and Queen to accusations of extravagance. They also led to attempts to involve the nation in reforms of finance, first by calling a special Assembly of Notables in 1787 (see page 18) and then the consultative and legislative assembly of the different classes of France that had met intermittently between 1302 and 1614, the **Estates General**, in 1789. It was this that led to the Revolution.

i Introducing an argument

a

Below are a sample exam question, a list of key points to be made in the answer, and a simple introduction and conclusion for the answer. Read these and then, using the information on the opposite page, rewrite the introduction and the conclusion in order to develop an argument.

Assess the importance of financial problems for Louis XVI and his ministers before 1789.

Key points:

- Financial problems showed the weakness of the Ancient Régime.
- The crown had to raise more taxes to pay off interest payments.
- The privileged orders would not co-operate.
- Louis was forced to dismiss reforming ministers, which showed him to be weak.
- Financial problems forced Louis to agree to call the Estates General in 1789.

Introduction

There were many financial problems by 1789 which had been brought about by the debates caused by wars. Louis XVI added to the problems by entering the War of American Independence. The crown was near to bankruptcy and a number of leading ministers had tried and failed to bring about reforms. The financial problems showed everyone how selfish the nobles were in opposing new taxes and they also led to the calling of the Estates General in 1789, which began the chain of events leading to revolution.

Conclusion

To conclude, there were many reasons why finance was the most pressing problem for the French monarchy before 1789 and did most to bring about the Revolution. It is linked to the other main problem, the weakness of the King, and also to the great social problems of an unjust and privileged society.

i Develop the detail

a

Below are a sample exam question and a paragraph written in answer to this question. The paragraph contains a limited amount of detail. Annotate the paragraph to add additional detail to the answer.

Assess the reasons why finance remained such a problem for Louis XVI before 1789.

The financial problems remained such a problem because different royal ministers with different views about the issue could not find a permanent solution and their reforms caused unrest and opposition which the King could not overcome. The determination of the privileged classes not to accept any change which would seem to undermine their privilege was another important factor. They portrayed financial reform as 'tyranny' and undermined attempts by ministers to make changes. Also, the continuing failure to get reform led Louis to agree to special assemblies to discuss the issue and get agreement. This was to prove a major problem because when other meetings failed, he agreed to call the Estates General.