

Volume 21, Number 3, February 2019

## Revision

# The origins of the French Revolution

*Nicholas Fellows*

Consider the following question on the topic of the French Revolution, then take a look at the sample student response and examiner's commentary (in red).

## Question

How important were events in America in bringing about the French Revolution in 1789?

### Student answer with commentary

Although thousands of miles away, events in America from the Seven Years War of 1756 through to the War of Independence of 1776–83 had a profound impact on developments in France. This was most notable in areas such as finance and in the spreading of the ideas of liberty and democracy. French foreign policy and intervention in America worsened the financial problems in France and led to attempts at reform and the subsequent political crisis of the late 1780s. Events in America also helped to exacerbate tensions in society between the three estates, particularly over the issue of taxation. However, the old regime was already facing challenges from Enlightenment ideas without developments in America, and the economic crisis that would engulf France in 1788 had nothing to do with events across the Atlantic. Although it would be wrong to dismiss the role of events in America, it simply made worse a situation over which Louis XVI was gradually losing control, rather than directly causing the revolution in France.

The opening is clearly aware of many of the issues that contributed to the crises in France in the 1780s. A clear view as to the relative importance of events in America, including the financial issues as well as ideology, in contributing to the French Revolution is established and the answer shows a balanced approach.

French desire for revenge against Britain following its defeat in the Seven Years War led to its involvement in the American War of Independence on the side of the colonists. The provision of both military and financial support cost the French a great deal of money and worsened an already weak financial situation. Between 1740 and 1783 France was at war and the cost of helping the American colonists was some 1,066m livres, achieved by raising loans. Although this did not lead directly to revolution, the lack of an elected parliament to guarantee the loans did not give lenders confidence and meant that interest on the loans was high. As a result, the deficit in France grew rapidly, so that by 1786 the deficit was almost a quarter of the total income. It was anticipated that by 1789 interest payments on the deficit would have reached 62% of the receipts, playing a significant role in creating the financial crisis that led to the start of the revolution in 1789.

The response focuses on the named factor and explains clearly its contribution to the financial crisis. The explanation is well supported by precise details and there is an attempt to reach a judgement as to the importance of the factor in bringing about the revolution.

French soldiers who fought in the War of Independence were exposed to the ideas of liberty and democracy, which would resonate with them given their treatment back home. It is therefore hardly surprising that when they returned home they would demand similar rights. Not only was there no representative institution in France to put forward their concerns, but the lack of influence of the third estate and the taxation burden that they faced was already a grievance, and experience in America encouraged them to demand change.

The response continues to consider the role of events in America and examines the impact of ideas to which the French military were exposed. This is well linked to the class structure of France to show the relevance of the point being made.

Although the financial demands caused by involvement in America were important, they were not the only reason for the financial crisis that had been building up in France. First, the social structure in France played an important role in causing the financial crisis as the first and second estates were largely exempt from paying tax, which meant that the burden of taxation was largely borne by the third estate, which made them extremely resentful. All of the taxes they were forced to pay, particularly the *taille* and *gabelle*, increased enormously in the period from 1749 to 1783, and were taking between 5 and 10% of their income. At the same time, their rents, payable to their landlords, increased markedly in the second half of the eighteenth century. This was a particular grievance given that the nobility were exempt from taxation. Furthermore, the privileges relating to land ownership were also resented by the peasantry at a time of rising taxes, rents and prices as they saw the nobility avoiding their share of the tax burdens which they were forced to pay. However, the demands caused by the war served only to make the situation worse and pressure the government into considering financial reform.

The contribution of the cost of involvement in America is weighed up against other factors that caused the financial crisis and a judgement as to the relative importance of factors is reached. Once again there is precise factual support and clear understanding of the taxation system of the old regime and how and why it caused disquiet.

In the short term it was the failure to bring about financial reform that led to the revolution. In order to solve the crisis the crown needed to control its finances and tap into the wealth of the nobility. Attempts to reform the tax system, which were put off by Fleury and initially Calonne failed as an Assembly of Notables called in February 1787 to approve a series of reforms argued that an Estates-General, representing the nation, would have to be called. Instead, Louis replaced Calonne with Brienne and when his reforms were rejected by the Paris Parlement he exiled them. It was this action that provoked an aristocratic revolt, with riots in some provincial capitals. By August 1788 the royal treasury was empty, the crown was bankrupt, and Louis was forced to call the Estates-General, but Louis' failure to impose reform had shown there were limits to his power and that government was paralysed. Involvement in America had helped to create the financial crisis, but it was Louis' actions and management of the reform process in 1787–8 that ultimately created the political crisis.

The financial crisis is clearly linked to the political crisis and once again the response weighs up the role of events in America in bringing about the political crisis, concluding that this was due to Louis and his government. There is a clear argument, showing how it was government mishandling that brought about the crisis and again the response shows a good knowledge of events, but does not drift into a narrative of what happened. A clear line of argument is followed.

The failure of government was made worse by a series of economic crises. A series of disastrous harvests, most notably in 1788, increased the price of bread and led to unemployment as there was less demand for manufactured goods as income had to be spent on food. There were also accusations that landowners were hoarding grain to force prices up further and this led to food riots as grain stores were attacked. Many peasants believed that the crisis was due to the nobility and this encouraged the peasants to take direct action, with Rees arguing that the politicisation of the third estate was the result of the economic crisis. As a result, long-term grievances were brought to a head.

The economic crises that engulfed France and helped to further alienate and politicise the third estate is also considered, and it is clear that this had no link to development in America.

Attempts at reform had shown that changes were needed, and it was the failure to bring them about that showed how divided the nation was and ultimately led to revolution. The failure to approve the reforms had led to the summoning of the Estates-General, which served only to further fuel unrest because of the debate on how they should vote and the opportunity to express their grievances in drawing up of the *cahiers*. The government's failure to control the subsequent Estates-General and offer reforms alienated the third estate and led to the Tennis Court Oath and the declaration of the National Assembly, which would lead to the revolt in Paris. Therefore, although involvement in America had helped to bring about the financial crisis and create the need for reform as well as expose many to the ideas of democracy and freedom, it was the crown's failure to manage the demands for reform that ultimately caused events to spiral into revolution.

The conclusion brings together the factors that have been discussed and weighs up the importance of events in America against other issues to reach an overall judgement that builds on the argument in the main body of the essay. This is a very large topic and it would be impossible to cover everything in the time available. Many answers to this topic either focus on the social structure, but do not show how it caused the revolution or drift into a narrative of events, particularly of the summer of 1789, but this response avoids both these pitfalls. It analyses the importance of the named factor and clearly links it to developments in France explaining how French foreign policy contributed to 1789.

This resource is part of MODERN HISTORY REVIEW, a magazine written for A-level students by subject experts. To subscribe to the full magazine go to: <http://www.hoddereducation.co.uk/historyreview>