



The Origins of the French Revolution

This is a transcript of the [Origins of the French Revolution](#) podcast from www.mrallsophistory.com

As with all major world events, it is impossible to identify one single factor that caused the French Revolution. It's important, therefore, to understand the situation within Europe in general – and France in particular – towards the end of the 18th Century. Each of the factors I'm going to discuss contributed to the French Revolution in some way. As a history student, it is your job to explain how each one played a part, and analyse the relative contribution of each cause. This will help you to not only answer questions that seek a straight explanation of the causes, but also approach 'how far' type questions in which you show the extent to which certain factors were responsible.

Although most people would say that the Enlightenment was a not a direct cause of the Revolution, many scholars agree that that the ideas it produced had a major impact on French society. Great philosophers, such as Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Rousseau, questioned established traditions and systems of government – with a particular focus on the aristocracy, the church, and the functioning of the monarchy. Particular attention was paid to questioning the right to authority, and particularly the concept of divine right, where the king has been chosen to rule by God. These new ideas challenged the existing system, and quickly spread around Europe through printed works and popular culture. Enlightenment ideas became so widespread that even the guardians of the old system - members of the aristocracy and the clergy – were affected by them. However, it was within the emerging middle classes that Enlightenment ideas took most hold.

The upper middle class – the bourgeoisie – were at the forefront of a growing commercial capitalist economy that was struggling to develop in an effectively feudal society dominated by a privileged aristocracy. The bourgeoisie were skilled professionals such as doctors, lawyers and teachers, and many engaged in the development of industry. The richest aspired to achieve noble status by buying certain offices in government or by marrying into a noble family, but very few ever managed to move up the social ladder. Marxist historians often focus on this tension as a major cause of the revolution, although it is important to note that the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy did have some shared interests such as the protection of private property.

However, as members of the Third Estate, the bourgeoisie were denied the privileges that the Second Estate had. In particular, the system of taxation was hugely unfair. The two wealthiest estates – the First Estate of the Clergy and the Second Estate of the Aristocracy – were exempt from many taxes, while the Third Estate – a group that included people ranging from the richest bourgeoisie to the lowliest peasant farm labourers – was taxed severely. Where tax was collected, this was often done inefficiently by corrupt officials who lined their



own pockets before passing on the remaining funds to the government. Coupled with a monarchy that lived a luxuriously privileged life, and the huge costs associated with fighting a series of expensive wars between 1740 and 1783, the French government drove itself further and further into serious debt. Furthermore, French support for the American Revolution from 1776–1783 brought revolutionary questions to the forefront of everybody’s minds. The monarchy itself did little to help calm the situation. King Louis XVI was more interested in making locks than govern the country, and his wife Marie-Antoinette was nicknamed Madame Deficit due to her life of excess as exemplified by the necklace scandal in 1784.

Another major cause of the French Revolution, especially on the eve of 1789, was a substantial population increase from around 19 million in 1700 to roughly 22 million in 1790. This wasn’t matched by an equivalent increase in the amount of grain being farmed, which led to an increase in demand for basic foods and consequent price inflation. From the 1730s to the 1780s, wages rose by 22% but food prices increased by an enormous 65%. Most peasants – who made up the vast majority of the population – already struggled to meet their tax obligations, after which little money was left over to meet basic living needs. Urban workers had to pay 45% of their income in taxes and the tithe, making it impossible to afford food, rent and clothing. Increasing misery was evident during the 1770s and 1780s, and especially during two years of terrible weather – and therefore terrible harvests – in 1787-1788. This only made access to food harder. The overall effect was one of a significant decline in the standard of living, which was felt most acutely by the poorest people in society. In urban areas, where food needed to be transported in from the countryside, dire hunger coupled together with unemployment to produce atrocious living conditions. By early 1789, urban workers were spending in excess of 80% of their wages on bread alone. With no surplus money to spend on manufactured goods after purchasing their food, factories were in turn forced to cut production and reduce their workforce which led to even further hardship.

By the late 1780s, therefore, the King – Louis XVI – was ruling a country at breaking point. He, however, had not helped the situation. Louis was a weak king, unable to satisfy the demands of the aristocrats who wished to maintain their privileged positions, and unwilling to force reforms that would resolve the economic crisis. Matters were brought to a head in 1787 when an Assembly of Notables was asked to accept taxes on the aristocrats and clergy in order to solve the financial crisis. They refused to do so unless the king shared his power with them. So it could be said that, in the first conflict between the King and his subjects, the first people to revolt against the king were actually the aristocrats who refused to reform. Consequently this confrontation is often referred to as the pre-revolution.

This political deadlock, coupled with bankruptcy, forced King Louis XVI to summon the Estates General, a kind-of parliament drawn from all three estates, and which had last met in 1614. The King wished to run the Estates General in the same way as the previous one 170 years earlier, where each Estate sent a number of representatives but each Estate only had one



vote as a whole. This meant that the third estate, which constituted around 97 percent of the population, could easily be outvoted by the aristocrats and the clergy by a vote of 2 to 1. This brought tensions to a head between the middle classes (and some liberal aristocrats and clerics) and the more conservative elites. The status of the third estate was brought to everyone's attention when a liberal cleric called Abbé Sieyès published a pamphlet called, "What Is the Third Estate?" in early 1789. In it, he claimed that the masses of the third estate represented the nation while the aristocrats were parasites. Unsurprisingly, this increased tensions but fuelled the third estate's demands for greater representation – they wanted double the number of representatives in order to reflect the number of people in the third estate, and demanded 'voting by head' where each representative had one vote, rather than each estate. Although Louis agreed to increase the number of representatives, he refused to allow voting by head and in retaliation – on June 17, 1789 – the third estate declared themselves the National Assembly that truly represented the nation.

With the situation spiraling out of control, Louis prepared to bow to some of the more liberal demands but, before he could do this, on the 20th June the third estate issued the Tennis Court Oath after finding that their meeting hall was locked and guarded by royal troops. Interpreting this as a direct attack on his authority, the king granted some moderate reforms when he met with the estates on the 23rd June but dismissed the claim that the third estate represented the nation. This, funnily enough, didn't go down well and the Third Estate refused to leave the hall. Over the next few days the Third Estate was joined by members of the First and Second Estate and so, on June 27th, the king gave in and granted voting by head. But by this point the king had lost the third estate's trust. He had waited too long to grant relatively moderate reforms, and had meanwhile brought in more and more troops to Paris. Despite claims that they were there to preserve order, the presence of 30,000 soldiers around the capital fuelled rumours that the king planned to use force against the National Assembly. The situation was tense and, on 14 July, when the price of bread reached its highest point since 1715, the people of Paris responded. The popular revolution had begun.