

ORIGINS OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

The French Revolution was a significant historical event that challenged the absolute power of the monarchy and championed the concept of popular sovereignty. Studying its origins is important because it led to the establishment of a Republican government in France and influenced the spread of republican ideals throughout Europe. The Revolution also brought forth crucial questions regarding the rights of individuals, the role of the state in society, the values of a democratic society, the notions of "left and right" in political life, the concept of a "nation at arms," the place of religion in modern society and politics, the issue of economic freedom, and the sanctity of property. Additionally, the French Revolution played a role in the development of modern nationalism, as the revolutionaries proclaimed principles that they considered universal, such as the sovereignty of the nation and the rights of citizenship.

The long-term causes of the French Revolution can be traced back to the social structure of the Ancien Régime, the old order of French society. Under this system, Louis XVI held absolute power by divine right, considering himself the ruler by the will of God. The Estates General, a representative body, had not convened since 1614. The king's will held the force of law, allowing for arbitrary arrests without trial through a royal writ known as *lettre de cachet*.

The social hierarchy of France was characterized by three estates:

First Estate: This consisted of the clergy, who controlled education, provided support for the sick and elderly, and used the pulpit to convey royal messages. The Church had extensive powers of censorship. The clergy were exempt from paying the *taille*, a direct tax, and had their own assemblies. They could offer a lump sum known as *don gratuit* to the king, could only be prosecuted in Church courts, and were not required to perform military service or contribute to the funding of royal troops.

Second Estate: The second estate was composed of the nobility. They jointly owned between one-fifth and one-fourth of French land and derived their income from rents. They also held legal and administrative responsibilities. The nobility generally looked down upon business and trade, enjoyed privileged legal status, and had exemptions from direct taxes, including the *taille*, as well as most indirect taxes.

Hereditary nobility (Noblesse d'épée): This group had access to royal patronage and served as ambassadors and councillors.

Noblesse d'robe: This included individuals who acquired noble status through venal offices they held. The number of individuals in this group grew significantly during the 18th century, with over 70,000 noblesse d'robe by 1789.

Third Estate: This estate constituted the majority of the population, around 97%. They bore the burden of paying approximately 50% of their income in taxes.

Bourgeoisie: This group relied on their skills to earn a living and enjoyed a relatively comfortable standard of living. Although their numbers increased with the expansion of trade and commerce, they remained a minority compared to the larger population of urban workers and peasants.

Urban workers: These individuals, including semi-skilled and unskilled labourers, faced uncertain livelihoods dependent on trade fluctuations, the whims of their employers, and the price of food in towns and cities.

Peasants: Peasants were legally bound to the landowning nobles and had to pay seigneurial dues. Most were subsistence farmers, and they also had to pay banalities, which were fees for using certain facilities owned by the nobles, such as ovens, mills, or presses.

The social structure of the Ancien Régime in France imposed various taxes on the population. Direct taxes included the *taille* (a land tax), the *vingtime* (a tax on income), and the *capitation* (a poll tax). Indirect taxes encompassed the *gabelle* (salt tax), taxes on drinks, taxes on tobacco, and the *tithe* paid to the Church. Additionally, every male was liable for military service and unpaid labour service known as the *Corvée*, which involved maintaining the king's roads or providing other public benefits.

The imperial administration during this period was characterized by significant chaos rather than a well-organized system. There were 360 feudal codes of law, and some towns had more than 29 feudal law courts, contributing to a lack of uniformity and consistency in governance.

The drive towards revolution primarily came from the prosperous middle class, who, despite not facing an overwhelming financial burden, resented their exclusion from official positions in the army, navy, and diplomatic service. These individuals were influenced by the Enlightenment, an intellectual movement that emerged in the 18th century. Led by philosophers and writers known as philosophers, the Enlightenment questioned and criticized established traditions, including those related to nature, absolutism,

and the Church. The Enlightenment emphasized the use of logic and reason over tradition and belief to understand life, and its proponents aimed for liberty as a paramount value. While Enlightenment literature itself was not inherently revolutionary, as grievances regarding noble privileges, monopolies, and corrupt royal officials grew, the implications of Enlightenment thought began to inspire political action.

Voltaire, a prominent figure of the Enlightenment, was a relentless critic of the Ancien Régime and the Church. Having personally experienced the consequences of a *lettre de cachet* and being imprisoned in the Bastille, Voltaire used his sharp satire and wit to expose the flaws of the existing system. However, his impact was predominantly negative, as he did not propose concrete alternatives to replace the Ancien Régime.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was a prominent Enlightenment philosopher who addressed the issue of inequality in his work, "Discourse on Inequality." He argued that it is unnatural for a small group of people to indulge in luxuries while the majority suffers from basic necessities.

- In his influential work, "The Social Contract," Rousseau proposed the concept of the general will as the sovereign power in a society. He envisioned a system where a large state would be divided into a number of direct democracies that would be bound together in a federation.

Montesquieu, another Enlightenment thinker, advocated for the separation of powers. He argued that no single individual should possess all three forms of power: legislative, executive, and judicial. This idea influenced the development of constitutional systems and checks and balances in many countries.

The 18th century, often referred to as the "Siècle des Lumières" (Century of Enlightenment), saw a flourishing of intellectual and philosophical activity. Denis Diderot led a group of intellectuals known as the Encyclopédistes, who compiled existing knowledge and openly criticized the Church and the State. Censorship was lifted, allowing for the publication of pocketbooks by Voltaire and the dissemination of previously hidden or prohibited works, including those with explicit or controversial content.

Robespierre, a prominent figure during the French Revolution, embraced Enlightenment ideas and incorporated them into legal cases. His opponents accused King Louis XV of acting despotically when he exiled the Parlement of Paris in 1771 and attempted to establish new law courts that were expected to be more subservient than the parlements had been. This adoption of Enlightenment discourse contributed to the revolutionary climate and the push for political and social change in France.

Economic Crisis: Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths:

France had a large population of 27 million by the late 1780s, more than three times the population of Great Britain.

- The country was politically united and stable, benefiting from the decline of Spain as a great power.
- French agriculture, despite its backwardness compared to countries like Great Britain and the Dutch Republics, experienced a high demand for agricultural products, resulting in high prices and prosperity for landowners.
- French commerce grew significantly between 1715 and 1771, making France the second-largest trading nation after Great Britain.
- Trade with colonies expanded, and industrial production doubled during this period, with Paris becoming a centre of banking.

Weaknesses:

- The French economy was mostly agrarian and lagged behind countries like Great Britain and the Dutch Republic.
- The division of land between sons and seigneurial arrangements hindered agricultural productivity.
- The rural population faced overpopulation, high taxation, and low agricultural yields, leading to difficulties in meeting the food demands of a growing population.
- The French economy had high state regulations and internal trade barriers, including variations in weights and measures across the country.
- The decline of the French textile industry due to British competition in the 1780s contributed to the economic downturn.
- France experienced a series of poor harvests and disastrous winters from 1785 to 1789, with the worst harvest in 40 years in 1788.
- The French banking system was not advanced, making it difficult to raise capital due to the absence of paper money.
- During the 1780s, France experienced a series of bad harvests and general agricultural decline. Disastrous harvests

occurred in 1778-1779, 1781-1782, 1785-1786, and 1787. The situation worsened significantly in 1788, leading to a major disaster.

The consequences of the bad harvests were severe:

- Massive unemployment: As the price of food increased, people had less disposable income, resulting in decreased demand for manufactured goods. Employment in textile industries fell by 50% in 1789.
- Impact on the wine market: Harsh winters and rising food prices severely affected the wine industry.
- Rising cost of living: The scarcity of food led to food shortages and price inflation, making it increasingly difficult for ordinary people to afford basic necessities.
- Many ordinary people blamed tithe owners and landowners for exacerbating the situation. They accused them of hoarding grain and speculating on prices. Food riots and disturbances erupted in various areas during the spring and summer of 1789 when grain prices reached their peak.

The economic crisis and food shortages played a significant role in politicizing the third estate and fueling grievances against the nobility. Ordinary people, feeling the effects of the crisis, began taking tentative steps towards direct political action. The mishandling of the political situation by King Louis XVI further aggravated matters.

In addition to the economic crisis, the taxation system in France was chaotic and inefficient. The tax burden fell disproportionately on the peasantry and the poorer classes. Direct taxes, such as the *taille*, were supposed to be paid by those who did not belong to the Church or nobility but often burdened the peasants. Indirect taxes levied on goods further strained the poorer classes. The tax collection system, known as tax farming, was also inefficient and allowed for corruption.

The combination of the economic crisis, food shortages, and a burdensome tax system contributed to the growing discontent and served as short-term causes of the French Revolution.

Calonne, although more of a traditionalist who was okay with the excesses of the Ancien Régime, recognized the urgent need for financial reform. He sought to secure a much-needed loan but faced opposition from the Parlement of Paris, which had to approve the loan. To overcome this deadlock, Calonne proposed a reform package that included a land tax that would affect the hierarchical structure of the Ancien Régime.

However, his reform package encountered significant opposition. Louis XVI was forced to convene an "Assembly of Notables" in an attempt to break the political deadlock. While the Notables agreed in principle to the idea of universal taxation, they rejected Calonne's specific proposals and demanded the right to scrutinize the royal accounts. They also insisted that new taxes should be approved by a truly national body, the Estates General, rather than by the handpicked Assembly of Notables.

The tensions between the Crown, the Notables, and Louis XVI's ministers increased as the reform efforts faltered. The failure of the ministers to provide a solution to France's economic and social problems was linked to the deep-rooted structure of the Ancien Régime, its laws, and customs, which hindered meaningful reforms. As the government became more complex, Louis relied more on ministers, which weakened his position and led to criticism from the Second Estate, claiming that Louis was no longer fulfilling his role as defender of the laws.

Louis attempted to assert absolute power through a "lit de justice" on August 6, 1787, but the Paris Parlement rejected his right to do so and claimed the power to veto royal edicts. This led to the exile of the Parlement to Troyes, but it was later recalled in September 1787. Compromise attempts failed, and in May 1788, the Paris Parlement proclaimed the "Fundamental Laws of the Realm," asserting that only the Estates General could register new taxes.

On May 8, 1788, Louis used a "lit de justice" in an attempt to register new taxes and suspend the Parlements. However, this action further solidified support for the Parlements, which were seen as champions of the people. The political crisis deepened, and Louis was ultimately forced to call for the convening of the Estates General in May 1789.

The failure of financial reforms, the resistance from the Parlements, and the growing political crisis set the stage for the unfolding of the French Revolution.