

# The Causes of the French Revolution

Critical Thinking:

- ✓ #8: I can determine what factors led to particular events
- ✓ #1: I can examine evidence from various perspectives
- ✓ #4: I can analyse and critique information

By the late eighteenth century, France was on the brink of revolution. The reasons had been building up over many years, and mainly concerned the great divide between the nobility and the clergy, and everybody else. The French population was divided into three **estates**. The First estate was made up of the **clergy**. It numbered around 100,000 people. The Second estate was made up of the **nobility**. It numbered around 400,000 people. The Third estate was made up of the **bourgeoisie**, wage earners, and the **peasantry**. It made up the majority of the French population.



The first and second estates enjoyed certain privileges that that the third estate did not. Firstly, although they were the richest, they did not have to pay taxes. They were also the only members in society who could hold positions of importance such as Officers in the army. This caused great discontent within the Third Estate.

## KEYWORDS

Revolution – a great change over a short period of time.  
 Estates – the class system in pre-revolutionary France.  
 Bourgeoisie – middle class.  
 Nobility – The upper class.  
 Clergy – The Church.  
 Peasants – The lower class, 90% of the population.



### THE THIRD ESTATE

- Peasants were forced to do military service.
- Peasants could not hunt or fish on nobles' estates.
- Peasants had to pay taxes to their lord, the king and the Church.
- Peasants had to use the lord's mill, oven and winepress, and pay for them.
- Peasants made up 90% of the population.

### THE FIRST AND SECOND ESTATE

- Nobles had almost complete authority over peasants.
- Nobles did not have to do military service.
- Nobles were exempt from most taxes.
- Nobles collected tolls from people using roads and markets.
- Many nobles and clergy lived in great luxury in chateaux and palaces.



The Kings, through their ministers and local officials **RULED ABSOLUTELY**. This meant that they had complete authority over France. The 'parliament' (States General) had not been called since 1614!

Psssst! Do you THINK it's fair? Which aspects of the French System might upset the Third Estate?





## Source B

### An Englishman's view of French peasants, 1787 – 1790.

I was joined by a poor woman who complained of the times. Her husband had only a morsel of land, one cow and a poor horse. But they had to pay 20kg of wheat and three chickens as feudal dues to one lord, and 60kg of oats, one chicken and five pence to another, along with very heavy taxes to the king's tax collectors: "The taxes and feudal dues are crushing us."

(Travels in France - Arthur Young, 1792)

## Source C

### Yearly incomes compared.

Archbishop of Paris	50,000 livres
Marquis de Mainvilllette	20,000 livres
Prince de Conti	14,000 livres
A Paris parish priest	10,000 livres
A typical village priest	750 livres
A master carpenter	200 livres

(The livre was replaced by the franc in 1795. In the 1780s, there were about 4 livres to £1).

## Source D

### The People should have power, 1775.

Man is born free. No man has any natural authority over others; force does not give anyone that right. The power to make laws belongs to the people and only to the people.

(a pamphlet, banned by the French government in 1775, Jean Jacques Rousseau.)

## Tasks

Complete the following questions/tasks on a separate piece of paper.

1. Look back at the information on these sheets. List the reasons why many people in France were critical of a) the nobility; b) the King; c) the clergy
2. What might a French peasant have grumbled about in 1789?
3. How does the author of Source B describe the lives of French peasants? (remember: it is not enough to say 'good' or 'bad' – you need to give examples from the source!)
4. Study sources A, B and C together. Do these sources explain why poor people resented the rich? Explain your answer using evidence from the sources.
5. Rousseau (Source D) was an influential writer and philosopher at this time. He wanted France to have a more democratic form of government. Who would be most influenced by his words and why?
6. The pamphlet which Source D came from was banned in 1775. Why do you think this was? Which members of French society would want it banned?

## Extensions (choose ONE of the following to complete)

(Communication #5: I can share and present what I have learned)

### EXTENSION 1



An extended piece of writing titled: 'What was wrong with French Society in 1789?' Refer to sources A-D, use keywords and your own knowledge in your answer.

### EXTENSION 2

A graphic of a scroll with a wooden frame. The text on the scroll is written in a bold, sans-serif font.

JOIN THE  
FIGHT  
FOR A  
FAIRER  
WAY!

Design a poster to encourage members of the third estate to campaign for a fairer way. Include the reasons why people were resentful of the rich on your poster.