

1789: The end of the *ancien régime*

The problems Louis faced compelled him to summon the Estates-General; this met in May 1789. Louis' attempts to control the situation, and the determination of his opponents to resist, resulted in a crisis that ultimately brought about the downfall of the *ancien régime*. The events of this momentous year are considered through the following themes:

- ★ The Estates-General
- ★ Revolt in Paris
- ★ Revolution in the provinces
- ★ Dismantling of the *ancien régime*
- ★ Reaction of the monarchy

The key debate on page 46 of this chapter asks the question: What was the impact of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen on France?

Key dates

1789 May 5	The Estates-General met at Versailles	1789 Aug. 4	Decrees dismantling feudalism passed
June 17	National Assembly proclaimed	Aug. 26	Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen
June 20	Tennis Court Oath	Oct. 5–6	'October Days'
July 10	Formation of the citizens' militia	Nov. 2	Church property nationalised
July 14	The storming of the Bastille		
July 20	Start of the Great Fear		

1 The Estates-General

▶ What was the significance of the debates surrounding the method of voting in the Estates-General?

By late 1788 the financial and political problems facing the Crown had forced Louis XVI to call the Estates-General. This was the first time it had been summoned since 1614, and presented the government with a number of significant concerns:

- What method would the Estates-General use to vote on any issue presented to it: by head or by estate?
- Who would be elected as deputies to the Estates-General?
- To what extent should the grievances noted in the *cahiers* be addressed?
- What would happen when the Estates-General met?

An important contribution to the debate was made by the Abbé Sieyès in a widely circulated pamphlet which he published at the start of 1789.

SOURCE A

From the Abbé Sieyès, 'What is the Third Estate?', January 1789.

The plan of this work is quite simple. We have three questions to put.

1. What is the Third Estate? – Everything.
2. What has it been hitherto in the political order? – Nothing.
3. What does it demand? – To be something.

We shall see if the answers are right. Until then it would be wrong to condemn as exaggerations truths which are as yet unproven. Then we shall examine the means that have been tried, and those which must be taken, so that the Third Estate may, in fact become something. Thus we shall state:

What ministers have attempted and what the privileged classes themselves propose in its favour;

What should have been done;

Finally, what remains to be done to allow the Third to take the place due to it.

The method of voting

The recently restored Paris *parlement* (see page 18) declared that the Estates-General should meet as in 1614 and that voting should be by estate or order. This would favour the two privileged orders, who wished to protect their privileges and tended to act together. Up to this point the bourgeoisie had taken little part in political agitation. The bourgeoisie had tended to follow the lead given by the privileged classes (the nobles and the clergy) in the *parlements* and the Assembly of Notables.

In 1789 bourgeois leaders of the Third Estate began to suspect that the privileged orders who wanted **voting by order** had opposed the government because they wanted power for themselves and not because they wanted justice for the nation as a whole. The Third Estate now demanded twice the number of deputies (so that they would have as many deputies as the other two orders combined), and **voting by head** instead of voting by order. This form of voting would give them a majority, as many of the First Estate's deputies were poor parish priests who were likely to support the demands of the Third Estate.

In Source A, what does Abbé Sieyès consider to be the demands of the Third Estate?

KEY TERMS

Voting by order Each estate votes separately on any issue. Any two estates together would outvote the third.

Voting by head Decisions taken by the Estates-General would be agreed by a simple vote with a majority sufficient to agree any policy. This favoured the Third Estate, which had the most deputies.

In December 1788 the King's Council allowed the number of Third Estate deputies to be doubled. Nothing was said about voting by head. When the Estates-General met there was confusion. The Third Estate assumed that there would be voting by head (otherwise doubling served no purpose), while the first two Estates believed that this was not the case.

Electing the deputies

The government made no attempt to influence the elections to the Estates-General and had no candidates of its own. Yet it was to a degree concerned that the deputies who were chosen would in general be sympathetic to the dire economic circumstances it was in, and be supportive to any proposals made by the King.

For the First Estate, the clergy overwhelmingly elected parish priests to represent them: only 51 of the 291 deputies were bishops.

In the Second Estate, the majority of noble deputies were from old noble families in the provinces, many of them poor and **conservative**, but 90 out of the 282 could be classed as **liberals** and these were to play a leading role in the Estates-General.

The 580 deputies elected to represent the Third Estate were educated, articulate and well-off, largely because deputies were expected to pay their own expenses. This was something peasants and artisans could not afford. Not a single peasant

KEY TERMS

Conservatives Those who did not want any reforms. They were deeply suspicious and sceptical of the need for any social or political change.

Liberals Deputies who were far more tolerant of differing political views and who supported a measure of cautious reform.

KEY TERM

Primary assemblies
Meeting places for voters.

or urban worker was elected. The largest group of Third Estate deputies were venal office holders (43 per cent), followed by lawyers (35 per cent), although two-thirds of deputies had some legal qualification. Only thirteen per cent were from trade and industry. This meant that the industrial middle class did not play a leading role in events leading to the Revolution or, indeed, in the Revolution itself.

All the adult male members of the two privileged orders had a vote for electing their deputies. The Third Estate, however, was to be chosen by a complicated system of indirect election. Frenchmen over the age of 25 were entitled to vote in a primary assembly, either of their parish or their urban guild, if they paid taxes. At these **primary assemblies** they chose representatives, who in turn elected the deputies.

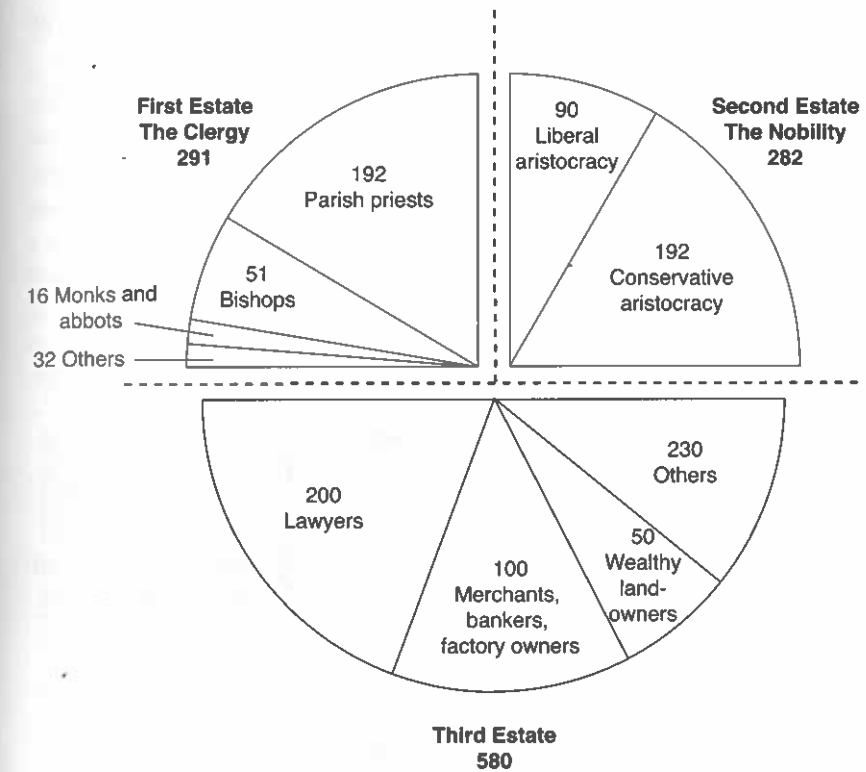


Figure 2.1 The composition of the deputies in the Estates-General 1789.

Cahiers

Before the meeting of the Estates-General, the electors of each of the three orders drew up *cahiers* – lists of grievances and suggestions for reform.

The *cahiers* of the First Estate reflected the interests of the parish clergy. They called for an end to bishops holding more than one diocese, and demanded that those who were not noble be able to become bishops. In return, they were

Abbé Emmanuel Sieyès

- 1748 Born in Fréjus to a bourgeois family
- 1773 Ordained as a priest
- 1787 Elected as a clerical representative at the provincial Assembly of Orleans, where he was particularly interested in issues relating to taxation, agriculture and poor relief
- 1789 Published a highly influential pamphlet, *What is the Third Estate?*, in which he argued that it was the most important part of the nation. Represented the Third Estate of Paris in the Estates-General. Drew up the Tennis Court Oath and contributed to the Declaration of the Rights of Man
- 1792 Elected to the Convention and voted for the King's execution but took no active part in the Terror

1793 Following Thermidor he served on the Committee of Public Safety (see page 104)



- 1794 Elected to the Council of 500
- 1798 Appointed ambassador to Berlin
- 1799 Elected Director and plotted the Coup of Brumaire with Bonaparte. Left public office during the Napoleonic Empire and retired from public life
- 1836 Died

Sieyès was one of the main constitutional planners of the revolutionary period. When asked what he had done during the Terror he declared 'I survived'. He helped to draw up the constitutions linked with the Revolution and was one of its most influential political thinkers.

prepared to give up the financial privileges of the Church. They were not, however, prepared to give up the dominant position of the Church: Catholicism should remain the established religion and retain control of education. They did not intend to tolerate Protestantism.

The nobles' *cahiers* were surprisingly liberal: 89 per cent were prepared to give up their financial privileges and nearly 39 per cent supported voting by head, at least on matters of general interest. Instead of trying to preserve their own privileges, they showed a desire for change and were prepared to admit that merit rather than birth should be the key to high office. They attacked the government for its despotism, its inefficiency and its injustice. On many issues they were more liberal than the Third Estate.

The *cahiers* of all three orders had a great deal in common. All were against absolute royal power and all wanted a King whose powers would be limited by an elected assembly, which would have the right to vote taxes and pass laws. Only one major issue separated the Third Estate from the other two orders – voting by head. It was this that was to cause conflict when the Estates-General met.

The meeting of the Estates-General

The year 1789 is not only one of the most important in French history, it is also central to the history of Europe. As events escalated out of Louis' control, resulting in the collapse of the *ancien régime* in France, new structures were created. The emergence of a more democratic system of government as a consequence of popular upheaval set a precedent for other downtrodden people in other countries.

When the Estates-General met on 5 May 1789 the government had the opportunity to take control of the situation. The Third Estate deputies, lacking experience and having no recognised leaders, would have supported the King if he had promised reforms, but the government did not take the initiative and put forward no programme. Necker talked about making taxation fairer but did not mention any other reform. Nothing was said about a new **constitution**, which all the *cahiers* had demanded.

Although the Estates-General met as three separate groups, the Third Estate insisted that the credentials of those who claimed to have been elected should be verified in a common session comprising the deputies of all three estates. This appeared a trivial matter but was seen by everyone as setting a precedent for deciding whether the Estates-General should meet as one body (and vote by head) when discussing all other matters.

The nobles rejected the Third Estate's demand and declared themselves a separate order by 188 votes to 46, as did the clergy but with a slender majority of nineteen (133 to 114). The Third Estate refused to do anything until the other two orders joined them, so weeks of inaction followed, with the government failing to provide any leadership.

KEY TERM

Constitution A written document detailing how a country is to be governed, laws made, powers apportioned and elections conducted.

The declaration of the National Assembly

On 10 June the deadlock was broken when the Third Estate passed a motion that it would begin verifying the deputies' credentials, even if the other two orders did not accept their invitation to join in. A trickle of priests joined the Third Estate in the following days. After a debate on 15 June, the deputies of the Third Estate on 17 June voted by 490 to 90 to call themselves the National Assembly. The Third Estate was now claiming that, as it represented most of the nation, it had the right to manage its affairs and decide taxation. Events were rapidly moving out of the control of the government, especially when on 19 June the clergy voted to join the Third Estate.

The Tennis Court Oath

All of this was a direct challenge by the Third Estate to the authority of the King, who was at last forced to act. On 23 June he decided to hold a Royal Session known as a *séance royale*, attended by all three Estates, at which he would propose a series of reforms. On 20 June 1789 the deputies of the Third Estate found that the hall in which they met had been closed to prepare for the Royal Session. The deputies met instead on a tennis court nearby and took an oath, known as the Tennis Court Oath, not to disperse until they had given France a constitution, thus claiming that the King did not have the right to dissolve them. Only one member voted against the motion; since, only three days before, 90 had voted against a motion to call themselves the National Assembly, it was clear that the deputies were rapidly becoming more radical.

SOURCE B



An engraving of the Tennis Court Oath.

KEY TERM

Séance royale Session of the Estates-General in the presence of the monarch.

Look closely at Source B. How does the artist seek to portray the great importance and drama of this occasion?

The response of the Crown

To restore a measure of royal authority, Necker advised the King to hold a *séance royale*. It was hoped that the King would ignore the events of 10–17 June and accept voting in common on all important matters. Louis, under pressure from the Queen and his brothers, ignored this advice and came down very firmly on the side of the privileged orders. When the *séance royale* met on 23 June Louis declared the previous decisions taken by the deputies of the Third Estate on 17 June null and void. He would not allow the privileges of the nobility and clergy to be discussed in common.

The King was, however, prepared to accept considerable restrictions on his own power:

KEY TERM

Lettres de cachet Sealed instructions from the Crown allowing detention without trial of a named individual.

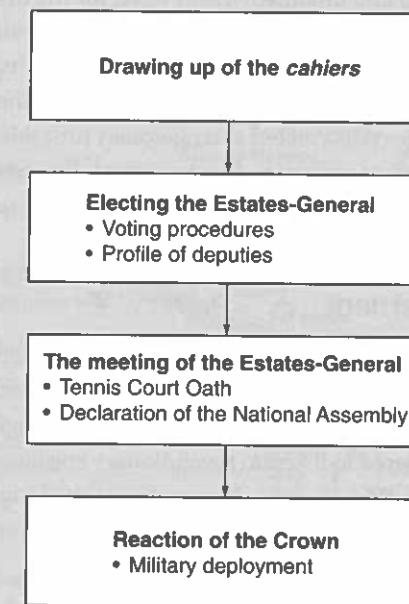
- No taxes would be imposed without the consent of the representatives of the nation.
- **Lettres de cachet** would be abolished.
- Freedom of the press would be introduced.
- Internal customs barriers, the *gabelle* and *corvée*, would be abolished.

If these reforms had been put forward in May, a majority of the Third Estate would probably have been satisfied, but now they did not go far enough. The King ended by ordering the deputies to disperse and meet in their separate assemblies:

- On 24 June 151 clergy joined the Third Estate.
- On 25 June 47 nobles, including one of Louis' leading opponents, the Duc d'Orléans, did the same. There were popular demonstrations in Paris in favour of the Assembly.
- On 27 June the King gave way. He reversed his decision of 23 June and ordered the nobles and clergy to join the Third Estate and vote by head.

Louis was, however, considering another strategy – military force. He had ordered troops to be moved to Paris and Versailles on 22 June. By late June nearly 4000 troops were stationed around Paris. Many of these troops were elite units of the army, the French guards, whose loyalty to the Crown Louis believed to be certain. This caused alarm in the capital despite government claims that they were there simply to preserve order. Further troop movements increased the strength of army units in and around the city from 4000 to over 20,000, in little more than a week. Louis and his advisors appeared to be contemplating using force if necessary to dissolve the National Assembly. In this desperate situation, the Assembly was saved by the revolt of the people of Paris.

Summary diagram: The Estates-General



2 Revolt in Paris

▶ What was the importance of the storming of the Bastille?

The population of Paris was facing difficult times in the spring and summer of 1789. The economic crisis (see page 19) was causing hardship, which led to anti-government feelings and fuelled the rise of the **popular movement**.

The economic crisis in Paris

In normal times, a worker spent up to 50 per cent of his income on bread. In August 1788 the price of a 1.8 kg loaf was 9 *sous* (1 *livre* = 20 *sous* – a *livre* would be equivalent to about eight pence). By March 1789 it had risen to over 14 *sous* per loaf (see Figure 1.3, page 20). By the spring of 1789 a Parisian worker could be spending 88 per cent of his wages on bread. This caused hardship and unrest among the Parisian population. On 28 April, for example, the factory of a prosperous wallpaper manufacturer, Réveillon, was set on fire, following a rumour that he was going to reduce wages. But this riot was more a violent protest against the scarcity and high price of bread than a protest against wages. At least 50 people were killed or wounded by troops.

KEY TERM

Popular movement
Crowds of politically active Parisians who periodically took to the streets to protest.

The situation was getting very volatile when the Estates-General met. Economic issues (the price of bread and unemployment) were, for the first time, pushing France towards revolution. Falling living standards were creating dissatisfaction, which in turn led to discontent. Political opponents of the King were harnessing this discontent to bring crowds on to the streets to support the National Assembly. The economic crisis created a dangerously unstable situation and contributed to the emergence of a popular movement. Protests among workers and small traders were directed against the government because of its inability to deal with the economic crisis.

The popular movement

In late June journalists and politicians established a permanent headquarters in the Palais-Royal in Paris, home of the Duc d'Orléans. Its central location (see Figure 2.2 on page 35) made it a popular venue. Each night, thousands of ordinary Parisians gathered to listen to revolutionary speakers such as Camille Desmoulins. The Palais-Royal became the unofficial headquarters of the popular movement, whose activities were directed through its speakers.

By 11 July Louis had about 25,000 troops located in the Paris–Versailles area. The King felt strong enough to dismiss Necker, who was at the height of his popularity and was considered as the only minister able to tackle the financial crisis. The deputies of the Estates-General expected Louis to use force to dissolve the Assembly and arrest its leading members. News of Necker's dismissal reached Paris on 12 July, where it inspired large-scale popular demonstrations against the King. Parisians feared that this marked the start of Louis' attempt to restore his power by force. Many flocked to the Palais Royal, where speakers called on them to take up arms. A frantic search began for muskets and ammunition. Gunsmiths' shops were looted and many ordinary people began arming themselves. There were clashes with royal troops guarding the Tuileries.

KEY TERM

Gardes-françaises An elite royal infantry regiment, many of whom deserted to join opponents of the King in July 1789.

When the **Gardes-françaises** were ordered to withdraw from Paris many disobeyed their orders and deserted to the representatives of the people of Paris. Discipline in this elite unit was deteriorating rapidly. Fearing attack by royal forces loyal to the King, barricades were thrown up across many streets to impede their progress.

The capture of the Bastille

The search for weapons by many ordinary Parisian demonstrators drew them to Les Invalides, an old soldiers' retirement home that also served as an arsenal, where over 28,000 muskets and 20 cannon were seized. The demonstrators were still short of gunpowder and cartridges, so they marched on the fortress of the Bastille. This imposing royal prison was a permanent reminder of the power of the *ancien régime*. News of the desertions among the *Gardes-françaises* led the army commanders to advise the King that the reliability of the troops to crush the rising could not be counted on.

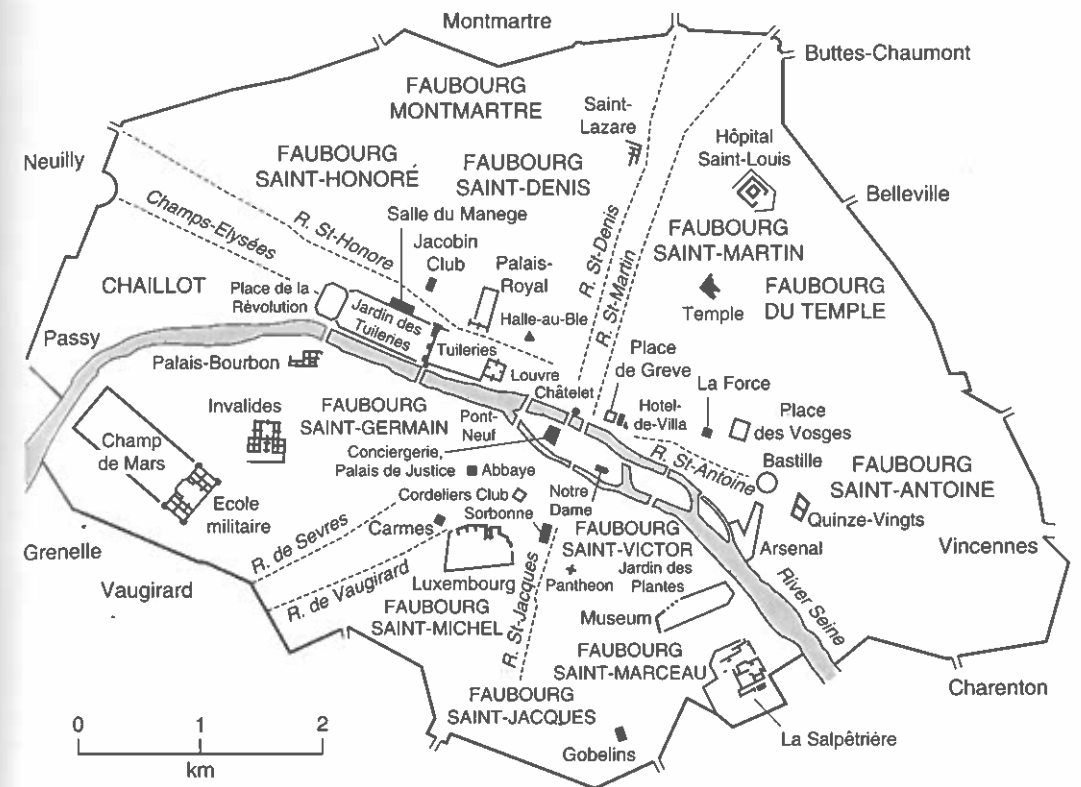


Figure 2.2 The main locations in revolutionary Paris.

Throughout late June, many *Gardes-françaises*, who worked at various trades in Paris in their off-duty hours and mixed with the population, were being influenced by agitators at the Palais-Royal. As early as 24 June two companies had refused to go on duty. By 14 July 1789 five out of six battalions of *Gardes-françaises* had deserted and some joined the Parisians besieging the Bastille. There were 5000 other troops nearby, but the officers told their commander that they could not rely on their men. Troops were removed from the streets of Paris to the Champ de Mars, a wide-open area south of the River Seine, where they did nothing.

The crowd outside the Bastille were denied entry by the governor, de Launay, who also refused to hand over any gunpowder. There was no intention of storming the fortress, although a group managed to enter the inner courtyard. De Launay ordered his troops to open fire on them and 98 were killed. *Gardes-françaises* supporting the crowd, using cannon taken from Les Invalides that morning, overcame the defenders. De Launay was forced to surrender. He was murdered and decapitated by an enraged crowd.

Those who had taken part in the attack on the Bastille were not wealthy middle class but *sans-culottes*. At the height of the rebellion about a quarter of a million Parisians were under arms. This was the first and most famous of

KEY TERMS

Journée Day of popular action and disturbance linked to great political change.

Citizens' militia
A bourgeois defence force set up to protect the interests of property owners in Paris. After the storming of the Bastille it became the National Guard.

Menu peuple Used to describe ordinary people living in towns.

? What does Source C suggest about the storming of the Bastille?

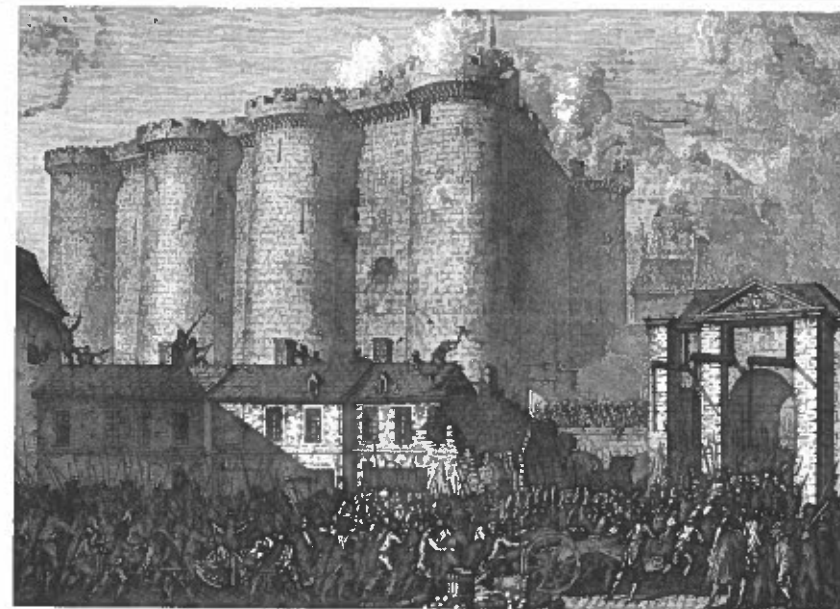
the *journées*, which occurred at decisive moments during the course of the Revolution.

The establishment of the Commune of Paris

The popular disturbances in early July 1789 were unplanned and a reaction to the actions of the King and his ministers. Middle-class Parisians, who were worried about their safety and the security of their property, took action to regain control of the situation. On 15 July the Paris electors (representatives of the 60 electoral districts that had chosen the deputies to the Estates-General) set up a new body to govern the city. This was known as the Commune and it would be at the forefront of the clash between Parisians and the King. Sylvain Bailly was elected the mayor of Paris to carry out the Commune's policies.

On 10 July 1789, shortly before the formation of the Commune, the electors of Paris proposed forming a **citizens' militia** to defend the interests of property owners. It was envisaged that the militia would be predominantly bourgeois, and that the *sans-culottes* would be excluded from its ranks. It had the double purpose of protecting property against the attacks of the *menu peuple* and of defending Paris against any possible threat by royal troops. It was these electors and the supporters of the Duc d'Orléans who were to turn what had begun as spontaneous riots into a general rising. On 15 July the citizens' militia became the National Guard and Lafayette was appointed its commander.

SOURCE C



The storming of the Bastille, 14 July 1789.

The significance of the storming of the Bastille

The events in Paris on 14 July had far-reaching results:

- The King had lost control of Paris, where the electors set up a Commune to run the city.
- Lafayette (see page 79) was appointed commander of the predominantly bourgeois National Guard.
- The Assembly (which on 9 July had taken the name of the National Constituent Assembly) prepared to draw up a constitution, no longer under threat of being dissolved by the King.
- Real power had passed from the King to the elected representatives of the people. Louis now had to share his power with the National Assembly.
- Louis was no longer in a position to dictate to the Assembly, because he could not rely on the army.
- News of the fall of the Bastille spread through France and intensified activity among the peasantry.
- The revolt of Paris led to the emigration of some nobles, led by the King's brother the Comte d'Artois: 20,000 *émigrés* fled abroad in two months.

SOURCE D

From a letter written by Horace Walpole to H.S. Conway, 15 July 1789, quoted in *The Letters of Horace Walpole, Volume VI, Richard Bentley, 1840, p. 328.*

I write a few lines only to confirm the truth of much of what you will read in the papers from Paris. Worse news is expected every hour. Some of my friends informed of events in the city. Necker has been dismissed. Paris was in uproar and the courtiers have left. The firing of cannon was heard for four hours. That must have come from the Bastille. It is shocking to imagine what may have happened in such a populous city. Madame de Calonne told my friends that the newly encamped troops deserted in their hundreds. If the Bastille falls, which is possible considering the general spirit of the country, then other fortified places may be seized by the dissidents and whole provinces torn from the authority of the crown. On the other hand if the King prevails what heavy despotism will the Estates by want of their actions have drawn down on their country! They may have obtained many capital points and removed great oppression. No French monarch however will ever summon the Estates again, if this moment has been thrown away.

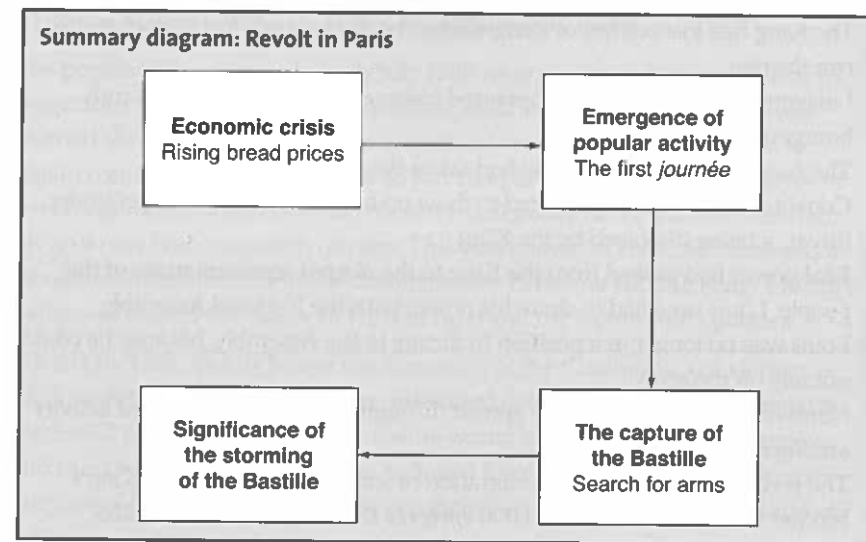
On 17 July the King travelled to Paris from Versailles, where the people gave him a hostile reception. Louis recognised the new revolutionary council – the Commune – and the National Guard, and wore in his hat the red, white and blue cockade of the Revolution (red and blue, the colours of Paris, were added to the white of the Bourbons). The significance of the King's humiliation was not lost on foreign diplomats. Gouverneur Morris, later the US ambassador to France, told US President George Washington: 'You may consider the Revolution to be over, since the authority of the King and the nobles has been utterly

KEY TERM

Émigrés People, mainly aristocrats, who fled France during the Revolution. Many *émigrés* joined foreign opponents of the Revolution.

Read Source D. What does Walpole consider to be the significance of the events taking place in Paris?

destroyed.' Far from the Revolution being over, as news of events in Paris spread throughout France, it influenced what occurred elsewhere in the country.



3 Revolution in the provinces

▶ What were the features of the Revolution when it spread to the provinces?

News of the capture of the Bastille spread to the provinces, and led to similar challenges to the authority of the Crown. The movement, known as the Municipal Revolution, covered the whole of the month of July 1789. As a consequence of the revolt of Paris, the authority of the King collapsed in most French towns. His orders would now be obeyed only if they had been approved by the newly formed National Constituent Assembly.

Most provincial towns waited to hear what had happened in Paris before they acted. 'The Parisian spirit of commotion', wrote the English traveller and writer Arthur Young, from Strasbourg on 21 July, 'spreads quickly'. Nearly everywhere there was a municipal revolution in which the bourgeoisie played a leading part. This took various forms.

In some towns the existing council merely broadened its membership and carried on as before. In Bordeaux, the electors of the Third Estate seized control, closely following the example of Paris. In most towns, including Lille, Rouen and Lyon, the old municipal corporations which operated during the *ancien régime*, and which excluded ordinary people, were overthrown by force; in others, like Dijon and Pamiers, the former councils were allowed to stay in office, but were

integrated into a committee on which they were a minority. Citizens' militias were set up in several towns, such as Marseille, before the National Guard was formed in Paris. In Rouen, revolutionaries seized power at the beginning of July, before the revolt in the capital, following food riots.

In nearly every town a National Guard was formed, as in Paris, it was designed both to control popular violence and to prevent **counter-revolution**. Nearly all *intendants* abandoned their posts. The King had lost control of Paris and of the provincial towns. He was to lose control of the countryside through the peasant revolution.

The rural revolt

The peasants played no part in the events of the Revolution until the spring of 1789. It was the bad harvest of 1788 that gave them a role, because of the great misery and hardship in the countryside. Most peasants had to buy their bread and were, therefore, badly affected by the rise in its price in the spring and summer of 1789. They also suffered from the depression in the textile industry, as many owned handlooms and were small-scale producers of cloth. From January 1789 grain convoys and the premises of suspected **hoarders** were attacked. Since this violence tended to occur when food was scarce it would probably have died out when the new crop was harvested in the summer.

What made these food riots more important than usual were the political events that were taking place. The calling of the Estates-General aroused excitement among the peasants. They believed that the King would not have asked them to state their grievances in the *cahiers* if he did not intend to do something about them.

Events in Paris, particularly the fall of the Bastille, also had a tremendous effect on the countryside. Risings immediately followed in Normandy and Franche-Comté. Demonstrations and riots against taxes, the tithe and feudal dues spread throughout the country; it appeared that law and order had collapsed everywhere.

There were storehouses of grain that had been collected as rents, feudal dues and tithes on the great estates of the Church and other landowners. In the spring and summer of 1789 they were the only places where grain was held in bulk. Landlords were regarded as hoarders. The President of the Grenoble *parlement* wrote on 28 June: 'There is daily talk of attacking the nobility, of setting fire to their châteaux in order to burn all their title-deeds.'

The main features of rural protest were:

- Grain stores were looted.
- Châteaux were attacked and frequently burnt.
- Documents known as 'terriers', which listed peasant obligations, were seized and destroyed.

KEY TERMS

Counter-revolutionaries

Groups and individuals hostile to the Revolution, who wished to reverse any changes it made at the earliest opportunity.

Hoarders Those who bought up supplies of food, keeping them until prices rose and then selling them at a large profit.

The Great Fear

Although hundreds of châteaux were ransacked and many were set on fire, there was remarkably little bloodshed – landowners or their agents were killed only when they resisted. On 20 July 1789 the attacks on the châteaux started and became part of the Great Fear (*Grande Peur*). These disturbances lasted until 6 August 1789. They began with local rumours that bands of brigands, in the pay of the aristocracy, were going to destroy the harvest. The peasants took up arms to await the brigands and when they did not appear, turned their anger against the landlords. The Great Fear spread the peasant rising throughout most of France. However, some areas that were further away from Paris, such as Brittany, Alsace and the Basque region, were unaffected.

4 Dismantling of the *ancien régime*

▶ What impact did the reforms have on the lives of ordinary French people?

The Assembly was in a dilemma. It could not ask the King's troops to crush the peasants, because afterwards they might be turned against the Assembly itself. Yet the Assembly could not allow the anarchy in the countryside to continue. This could be ended, and the support of the peasants gained for the Assembly and for the Revolution, by giving them at least part of what they wanted.

KEY TERM

Patriot party A loose group of progressive reformers, mainly nobles and bourgeoisie, who wanted changes to the political structure – a reduction in royal power in order to enhance their own positions.

The August Decrees

On 3 August leaders of the **patriot party** drew up a plan for the liberal nobles to propose the dismantling of the feudal system. On the night of 4 August 1789 the Vicomte de Noailles, followed by the Duc d'Anguillon, one of the richest landowners in France, proposed the following:

- Obligations relating to personal service such as serfdom and the *corvée* should be abolished without compensation.
- The abolition of other rights such as *champart* and *lods et ventes* (see page 000). As these were regarded as a form of property they could only be redeemed when a peasant paid compensation to the landowner. As these were the dues that affected the peasant most severely, there was little satisfaction in the countryside with the limited nature of the reforms.

The proposed changes were given legal form in the decrees of 5–11 August, which stated that: 'The National Assembly abolishes the feudal system entirely. It decrees that, as regards feudal rights and dues those relating to personal serfdom are abolished without compensation; all the others are declared to be redeemable.' All seigneurial courts were abolished without any compensation.

Amid great excitement, the example of Noailles and Anguillon was followed by other noble deputies, who lined up to renounce their privileges in a spirit of patriotic fervour. The changes proposed went far beyond those demanded by the *cahiers*. The main ones were:

- Tithes payable to the Church were abolished.
- Venality was abolished.
- All financial and tax privileges relating to land or persons were abolished.
- All citizens were to be taxed equally.
- Special privileges (including tax exemption) for provinces, principalities, pays, **cantons**, towns and villages were abolished.
- All citizens without distinction of birth were eligible for all offices, whether ecclesiastical, civil or military.

When the Assembly adjourned at 2a.m. on 5 August the deputies were weeping for joy. Duquesnoy, one of the deputies, exclaimed 'What a nation! What glory! What honour to be French!'

SOURCE E

From J.S. Bailly, who was elected president of the National Assembly, and later first mayor of Paris, quoted in J.S. Bailly, *Memoirs*, Volume II, published between 1821 and 1824.

During the evening a proposed proclamation was read out. The proclamation was the cause of an impressive debate and of a scene which was truly magnificent and unforgettable. Vicomte de Noailles proposed a motion that the assembly should decree that seigneurial labour service and personal servitude would be abolished without indemnity, and that feudal rights be redeemed if desired by those who were liable. M. Cotin proposed the abolition of seigneurial courts. The Bishop of Chartres added the abolition of hunting rights. La Rochefoucauld spoke in favour of the abolition of serfdom. Never before have so many bodies and individuals voted such sacrifices at one time, in such generous terms and with such unanimity. This had been a night for destruction and for public happiness. We may view the moment as the dawn of a new revolution, when all the burdens weighing on the people were abolished and France was truly reborn. The feudal regime which had oppressed the people for centuries was demolished at a stroke and in an instant.

Significance of the Decrees

The August Decrees were very important in starting the process of dismantling the *ancien régime*. Although there was still a great deal to be done, they marked the end of noble power and the privilege of birth by establishing a society based on civil equality. All Frenchmen had the same rights and duties, could enter any profession according to their ability and would pay the same taxes. Of course, equality in theory was different from equality in practice. The career open to talent benefited the bourgeoisie rather than the peasant or worker, who lacked

KEY TERM

Canton An administrative subdivision of a department.

Read Source E. What does Bailly consider the significance of the events of the night of 4 August?

the education to take advantage of it. Nevertheless, French society would never be the same again – the *ancien régime* of orders and privilege had gone.

The peasants – the vast mass of the population – were committed to the Revolution as it brought about the end of the hated feudal system. They thought that if they did not support it then those who had lost their power would try to recover it. However, they did not like having to compensate landlords for the loss of their feudal dues. Many stopped paying them until they were finally abolished without compensation in 1793. Some peasants, in areas such as Brittany and the Vendée, were to become active opponents of the Revolution, once it became more extreme (see Chapter 4).

The August Decrees had swept away institutions like the provincial estates and cleared the way for a national, uniform system of administration. As most institutions had been based on privilege, the Assembly now began the laborious task, which would take two years to complete, of replacing institutions and often personnel relating to local government, law, finance, the Church and the armed forces. Yet many thought that those who had lost power would try to recover it. There was a widespread fear of an aristocratic plot and a feeling that, without constant vigilance, the victories of July and August could be quickly reversed.

The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen

The August Decrees prepared the ground for the creation of a constitution. Before this, the deputies drew up the principles on which this should be based – the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. It condemned the practices of the *ancien régime* and outlined the rights of citizens, as demanded in the *cahiers* of all three orders. The following are some of the key points from the Declaration, issued on 26 August:

- All men are born free and equal, in their rights.
- The main rights of man are liberty, property, security and resistance to oppression.
- Power (sovereignty) rests with the people.
- Freedom of worship.
- Freedom of expression – speech and publication.
- Taxation to be borne by all in proportion to their means.
- Freedom to own property.

The Declaration would outlast the constitution to which it was later attached and was to be an important inspiration to liberals throughout Europe in the nineteenth century. For all its well-meaning sentiments, the Declaration mainly represented the interests of the property-owning bourgeoisie. Its significance, according to the historian George Rudé, is that ‘... it sounded the death-knell of the *ancien régime*, while preparing the public for the constructive legislation that was to follow’.

The nationalisation of Church land

By September the government was facing a serious financial crisis. Tax revenue was not flowing in and the government was unable to raise a loan to meet its costs. Many in the Assembly were contemplating radical action against the Church – one of the largest landowners in the country – in order to raise funds. After prolonged debates during late October and early November 1789, the Assembly agreed on 2 November 1789 that all the property owned by the Church should be placed at the disposal of the nation. The estimated value of all this property was about 2000 million *livres*.

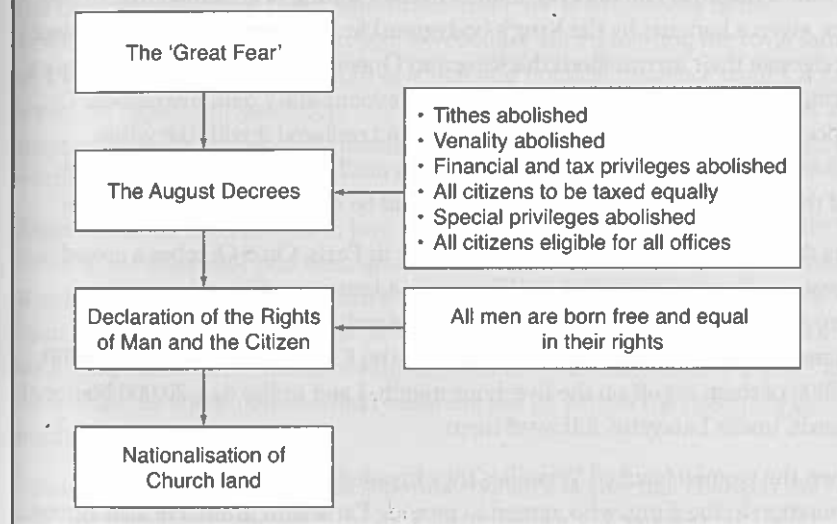
At a stroke, Church land was **nationalised** and the State, for its part, took over responsibility for paying the clergy and carrying out their work of helping the poor. Bonds called **assignat** were issued and sold, backed up by the sale of Church land. These were used to settle debts and for purchasing goods and were accepted as currency. Royal land was also sold. It was anticipated that the sale of the first tranche of Church and royal land would raise around 400 million *livres*. This would go a long way towards meeting the financial needs of the government.

KEY TERMS

Nationalised Taken in to state control.

Assignat Bonds backed up by the sale of Church land that circulated as a form of paper currency.

Summary diagram: Dismantling of the *ancien régime*



5 Reaction of the monarchy

► What effect did the changes have on the power of the monarchy?

The King did not share the general enthusiasm for the changes that were taking place. On 5 August he wrote to the Archbishop of Arles: ‘I will never consent to the spoliation of my clergy and of my nobility. I will not sanction decrees by

KEY TERMS

Suspensive veto The right to delay a measure proposed by the Assembly.

Republic A political system which does not have a hereditary head of state and where the supremacy of the people is recognised through mass democracy.

Legislative power The power to make laws. In an absolute system this power belongs to the Crown, while in a democracy it rests with elected representatives.

Executive power The power to make decisions relating to the government of a country.

which they are despoiled.' He could not use force against the Assembly as the loyalty of the army was in doubt, with many officers and men sympathetic to the Revolution. Louis adopted instead a policy of non-cooperation and refused to officially support the August Decrees and the Declaration of Rights. This forced the Assembly to consider the important question of what rights the King should have. Should he be able to veto or delay legislation passed by the Assembly? The deputies decided that the King should have a '**suspensive veto**' – the power to suspend or delay all laws other than financial ones passed by the Assembly for a period up to four years.

No one, at this stage, considered abolishing the monarchy and setting up a **republic**. It was agreed by the deputies that **legislative power** should reside with the National Assembly and that no taxes or loans could be raised without its consent. **Executive power**, it was decided, would be exclusively the preserve of the King.

The October Days

The King's refusal to approve the Assembly's decrees caused considerable tension. That he was forced to do so was the consequence of another revolutionary *journée*. Louis decided to reinforce his guard by summoning to Versailles the loyal Flanders regiment. On the evening of 1 October the troops were given a banquet by the King's bodyguard in the opera house of the palace to celebrate their arrival. Both the King and Queen were present at the banquet, during the course of which there were anti-revolutionary demonstrations. Officers trampled on the tricolour cockade and replaced it with the white cockade of the Bourbons. When news of this reached Paris, feelings ran high and there were demands that the King should be brought back to the capital.

This demand coincided with a food shortage in Paris. On 5 October a crowd of women stormed the Hôtel de Ville, the headquarters of the Commune, demanding bread. They were persuaded to march to Versailles – twenty kilometres away – to put their complaints to the King and the Assembly; 6000 or 7000 of them set off on the five-hour march. Later in the day, 20,000 National Guards, under Lafayette, followed them.

When the women reached Versailles they invaded the Assembly and sent a deputation to the King, who agreed to provide Paris with grain. He also agreed to approve the August Decrees and the Declaration of Rights. On 6 October, at the request of the crowd, the King and Queen appeared on a balcony and were greeted with cries of 'To Paris'. That afternoon the royal family left Versailles. The National Assembly also moved to Paris. These dramatic events are known as the October Days.

SOURCE F



A print showing the women of Paris going to Versailles to bring Louis back to the city.

The significance of the October Days

The October Days were a very significant event in the early phase of the Revolution. The crowd that marched to Versailles aimed to bring the royal family back to Paris, where their freedom of action and political influence would, it was hoped, be significantly reduced. Once in Paris, the King regarded himself as a prisoner of the Paris mob and therefore not bound by anything he was forced to accept.

When Parisians had revolted in July, they had seen the Assembly as their ally. In October, the Assembly had been ignored and humiliated by the decisive action of ordinary Parisians. When the deputies followed the King to Paris, some of them felt as much imprisoned as the King did. Most deputies wanted to work out a compromise with Louis, but this was much more difficult for them in Paris, surrounded by a population which could impose its will on the Assembly by another *journée*.

Following the October Days, the Assembly issued a decree that changed the title and status of the monarch, from 'King of France and Navarre' to 'Louis, by the grace of God and the constitutional law of the State, King of the French'. Louis was now subordinate to the law, and his subjects now became citizens. There had been a shift in the balance of power towards Paris and its increasingly politicised population. Many moderate deputies distrusted the population of Paris almost as much as they did the King, although it was the popular movement and their *journées* that had enabled them to defeat Louis in the first place.

What does Source F suggest about the mood of ordinary Parisians in the autumn of 1789?

6 Key debate

► What was the impact of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen on France?

The momentous events which took place in the summer of 1789 paved the way for the reconstruction of France. A keystone in this process was the drawing up of a Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen which paved the way for political reform and ultimately all the other reforms which ended the *ancien régime*. Historians have interpreted the impact of the Declaration on France from a number of different perspectives.

The orthodox Marxist view

George Lefebvre, one of the most eminent historians of the French Revolution in the first half of the twentieth century, summed up the left-wing view of the Declaration in a work first published in 1939 to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Revolution.

EXTRACT 1

From Georges Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution*, Vintage Books, 1947, pp. 145, 147, 151.

With despotism destroyed and privilege abolished, nothing prevented the drafting of the Declaration, and the Assembly set to work on August 12. ... Men are born free and equal in rights. This memorable affirmation, standing at the head of Article 1, summarizes the accomplishments of the Revolution from July 14 to August 4, 1789. The rest of the Declaration is so to speak only an exposition and commentary on it. ... It is noteworthy that in listing rights, equality does not appear. Equality of Rights was treated at length because special privilege was the foundation of the social hierarchy. The thought in the Declaration looked to the past more than the future.

One of the central failings of the Declaration, according to Lefebvre, related to the articles dealing with constitutional measures, which contained the seeds of future unrest. While all citizens were to take part in the process of elections, the system that emerged excluded the majority of citizens from all but a very minor role in the process (see Chapter 3, page 52). The common people had fought to destroy the *ancien régime* and had forced the abolition of feudalism. 'It was chimerical to suppose that they would let themselves be excluded forever from the vote, in the name of a declaration which proclaimed men equal in rights.'

An updated interpretation

Among the numerous works published to mark the bicentenary of the Revolution, William Doyle offers a more considered view.

EXTRACT 2

From William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. 118–19.

Between 9 and 28 July a score of drafts were submitted by various deputies, and on 4 August, the afternoon before the famous all-night session, the assembly agreed to promulgate a declaration as a matter of urgency. On 26 August, after a week of discussion spun out by clerical reluctance to concede total freedom of thought and worship, The Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen was finally voted. The Assembly reserved the right to add to or alter it when the constitution itself was finally promulgated, but when the moment came two years later nobody dared. The declaration had become the founding document of the Revolution and, as such sacrosanct ... As it was it long outlived the constitution to which it was the preamble; and has been looked to ever since by all who derive inspiration from the French Revolution as the movement's first great manifesto, enshrining the fundamental principles of 1789.

Doyle highlights the longer term impact of the Declaration as an inspirational document, despite its many blemishes.

The declaration reappraised

A more focused examination of the entire text of the Declaration has emphasised the passionate debates surrounding its birth. These debates inevitably resulted in compromise, which meant that the finalised document was ambiguous. Keith Baker suggested that this helped to create a climate of expectation that unresolved issues would be dealt with at some future point. He also argued that as the Revolution became more extreme after 1793, the ambiguities in the Declaration were used to justify a new and more ruthless approach by the republican government (see Chapter 5).

EXTRACT 3

From Keith Michael Baker, 'The idea of a declaration of rights', quoted in Gary Kates, editor, *The French Revolution: Recent Debates and New Controversies*, Routledge, 1998, p. 129.

Though it has often been seen as at once the most striking proof and almost inevitable product of a notorious French nationalism, the text of the Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen, was far from being a foregone conclusion in 1789. To the contrary, the story of its composition is one of profound uncertainty and conflict over the meaning and essential purpose of any declaration of rights ... It is scarcely surprising, then, that the resulting document bore the marks of its difficult birth. Though it rapidly assumed a virtually sacred status it was left by its authors as a text still provisional and incomplete. Though it appealed to eternal principles it was shaped by acute conflicts over the exigencies of the political moment. Though it held out the

How far do the views of the historians differ on the impact of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen in Extracts 1, 2 and 3?

ideal of political transparency, it emerged as a work of textual compromise. Many of the provisions of the Declaration remained profoundly ambiguous. These ambiguities served to inaugurate a radical dynamic that subverted representation in the name of the general will, constitutionalism in the name of political transparency, the rights of individuals in the name of the right of the nation.

Chapter summary

The French Revolution broke out in 1789. The summoning of the Estates-General and the refusal of the Third Estate to accept a junior role in proceedings led to the declaration of the National Assembly. The crisis deepened when suspicions that Louis was going to use force contributed to the storming of the Bastille. Forced to concede a number of reforms, Louis' power was being visibly reduced. All these events were being played out

against a rapidly worsening economic crisis. News of events in Paris spread to the provinces, where the authority of the Crown was also being challenged. The August Decrees and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen indicated the demands of the revolutionaries and their aim to dismantle the *ancien régime*. The impact of the Declaration is a matter of historical debate. Louis' continued ambivalence towards the Revolution and continuing suspicions that he wished to reverse the process were factors behind the October Days and his forced removal from Versailles to Paris.

Refresher questions

Use these questions to remind yourself of the key material covered in this chapter.

- 1 Why was the method of voting in the Estates-General important?
- 2 Who were the deputies elected to the Estates-General?
- 3 What concerns were reflected in the *cahiers*?
- 4 How did the demands of the Third Estate lead to the creation of a National Assembly?
- 5 How did Louis react to the actions of the Estates-General?
- 6 What impact did the economic crisis have on the population of Paris?
- 7 How important was the popular movement in the outbreak of the Revolution?
- 8 What was the significance of the setting up of the Paris Commune?
- 9 Why was the storming of the Bastille important?
- 10 What was the significance of the municipal revolution in those areas beyond Paris?
- 11 Why did events in Paris contribute to revolt in the countryside?
- 12 How did the actions of the peasantry contribute to the collapse of the *ancien régime*?
- 13 How important were the August Decrees?
- 14 What was the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen and why was it important?
- 15 Why did the State take over the property of the Church?

Question practice

ESSAY QUESTIONS

- 1 'The summoning of the Estates-General in 1789 was a momentous event.' Explain why you disagree with this view.
- 2 How significant a factor in the development of the Revolution was the storming of the Bastille on 14 July 1789?
- 3 How important were the October Days, 1789, to the course of the French Revolution?
- 4 To what extent did the National Assembly significantly change France by the end of 1789?
- 5 Which of the following had the greater impact on the authority of the monarchy in 1789? i) The storming of the Bastille. ii) The October Days. Explain your answer with reference to both i) and ii).

INTERPRETATION QUESTION

- 1 Read the interpretation of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and then answer the question that follows. 'The thought in the Declaration looked to the past more than the future.' (From Georges Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution*, 1947.) Evaluate the strengths and limitations of this interpretation, making reference to other interpretations that you have studied.

SOURCE QUESTIONS

- 1 Why is Source A (page 27) valuable to a historian studying the origin of the French Revolution? Explain your answer using the source, the information given about it and your own knowledge of the historical context.
- 2 How much weight do you give the evidence of Source D (page 37) about the storming of the Bastille? Explain your answer using the source, the information given about it and your own knowledge of the historical context.
- 3 With reference to Sources A (page 27) and D (page 37), and your understanding of the historical context, which of these two sources is more valuable in explaining why the events of 1789 developed in the way they did?
- 4 With reference to Sources A (page 27), D (page 37) and E (page 41), and your understanding of the historical context, assess the value of these sources to a historian studying the significance of 1789.
- 5 How far could the historian make use of Sources A (page 27) and D (page 37) together to investigate the demands of ordinary people in 1789? Explain your answer using both sources, the information given about them and your own knowledge of the historical context.