

The origins of the French Revolution

The storming of the Bastille on 14 July 1789 came to symbolise the start of the French Revolution, one of the most dramatic events in modern European history.

The origins of the Revolution were a combination of political, economic and social factors. This chapter examines these factors as two main themes:

- ★ Long-term causes of the French Revolution
- ★ Short-term causes of the French Revolution

The key debate on *page 21* of this chapter asks the question: What are the different ways in which the origins of the French Revolution have been interpreted?

Key dates

1614	Last summoning of the Estates-General before 1789	1781–7	Economic crisis
1756–63	The Seven Years' War	1786	Eden Treaty
1774	Accession of Louis XVI	1787	Feb. The Assembly of Notables met
1778	France entered the American War of Independence	1788	Declaration of bankruptcy

1 Long-term causes of the French Revolution

▶ How did long-term causes contribute to the outbreak of the Revolution?

During the ***ancien régime*** there were a number of deep-rooted problems that affected successive royal governments. These problems influenced:

- the way France was governed, particularly the taxation system
- the carefully ordered, yet deeply divided, structure of French society
- the gradual spread of ideas that started to challenge this structure.

These deep-rooted problems can be seen as long-term causes of the French Revolution. In order to understand them fully, it is necessary to understand the nature of French society before 1789, namely:

KEY TERM

Ancien régime French society and government before the Revolution of 1789.

- the structure of royal government
- the taxation system
- the structure of French society
- the Enlightenment.

Royal government

France before 1789 was an absolute monarchy ruled by the Bourbons. This meant that the authority of the French Crown was not limited by any representative body, such as an elected parliament. The King was responsible only to God and answerable to no one on Earth. This system of government is also known as absolutism. In such a system, the personality and character of the ruler are very important as they set the tone for the style of government.

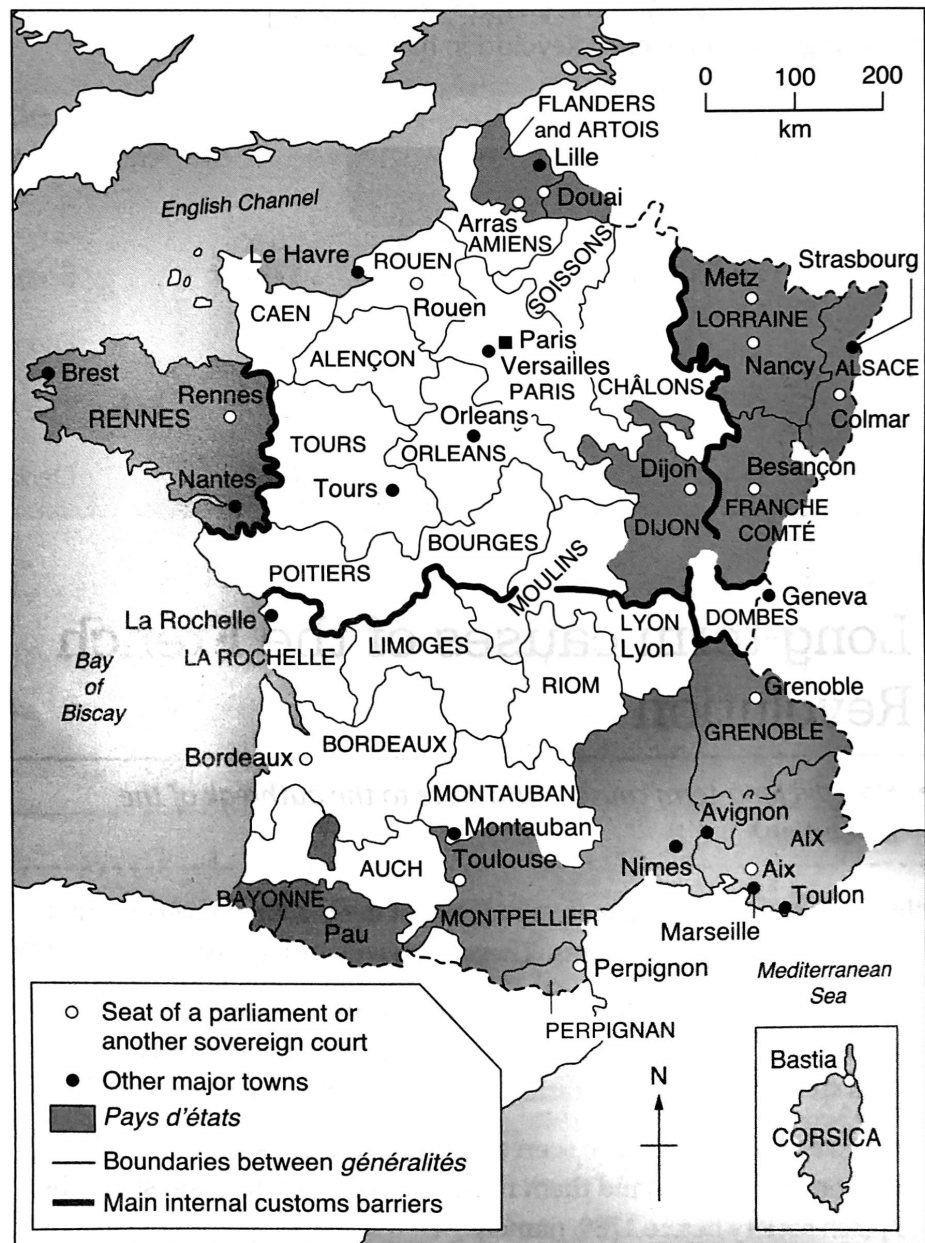


Figure 1.1 Pre-revolutionary France's main administrative, judicial and financial sub-divisions.

In the century before the outbreak of the Revolution there were three French kings: Louis XIV, Louis XV and Louis XVI (see the profile on page 4). Louis XV said in 1766 that 'sovereign power resides in my person alone ... the power of legislation belongs to me alone'.

Limitations to power

Although their power was absolute, kings were bound by the laws and customs of their kingdom. For example, there were many independent bodies such as the Assembly of the Clergy which had rights and privileges guaranteed by law. The King could not interfere with these.

The King also had to consult his council of ministers and advisers to make laws. This meant that considerable power was in the hands of a small number of men. The most important of these was the Controller-General, who was in charge of royal finances. Each minister dealt with the King on an individual basis and did not form part of a cabinet system of government.

In the provinces, the King's government was carried out by the **intendants**, who had far-reaching powers in the **généralités**. In 1774 Louis XVI, the grandson of Louis XV, acceded to the French throne. The new King was well intentioned but never came to terms with the State's financial problems. In an absolutist system the monarch needed to be a strong figure with a dominant personality. Louis was rather weak and indecisive.

In 1770 Louis married **Marie Antoinette**, the daughter of the Austrian Empress Maria Theresa. When Louis acceded to the throne in June 1774, the young couple were very popular. Over the following years, however, this popularity dissipated owing to a combination of Marie Antoinette's extravagance (the purchase of a pair of diamond bracelets for 400,000 **livres** in 1776) and a series of scandals. She was portrayed very negatively as the 'Austrian whore'. As the government's debts ballooned, the Queen's fondness for gambling and expensive construction projects suggested that she was widely out of touch with ordinary people. It was believed by many revolutionaries that she influenced the King so that he avoided granting them concessions. Her supporters were labelled the 'Austrian Party' and were suspected of sacrificing the interests of her adopted country for those of her homeland.

The taxation system

Good government benefits greatly from an efficient taxation system that provides it with an adequate income. The taxation system in France was both chaotic and inefficient (see Table 1.1).

Tax collection

Taxes were collected by a system known as **tax farming**. The Farmers-General was a company that collected the indirect taxes for the government. They paid the State an agreed sum and kept for themselves anything collected above this

KEY FIGURE

Marie Antoinette (1755–93)

Daughter of the Austrian Empress Maria Theresa, she married Louis in 1770. Suspected of exerting undue influence on her indecisive husband. Nicknamed 'Madame Deficit' because of her extravagant tastes.

KEY TERMS

Intendants Officials directly appointed by and answerable to the Crown who were mainly responsible for police, justice, finance, public works, and trade and industry.

Généralités The 34 areas into which France was divided for the purpose of collecting taxes and other administrative functions; each area was under the control of an *intendant*.

Livres France's currency during the *ancien régime*. In 1789, 1 *livre* was roughly 8p in today's money.

Tax farming A system where the government agrees a tax assessment figure for an area, which is then collected by a company that bids for the right to collect it.



Louis XVI

- 1754 Born and christened Louis-Auguste
- 1770 Married Marie Antoinette, daughter of Empress Maria Theresa of Austria
- 1774 Crowned Louis XVI following the death of his grandfather
- 1788 Agreed to calls to summon the Estates-General
- 1789 May, Louis opened the Estates-General at Versailles
October, Royal family brought forcibly to Paris
- 1791 20–21 June, 'flight to Varennes'; Louis escaped from Paris
November, Louis vetoed decrees against the *émigrés* and non-juring priests
- 1792 10 August, storming of the Tuileries – overthrow of the monarchy
November, discovery of the '*armoire de fer*' in the Tuileries
December, trial of Louis
- 1793 21 January, executed

In the past, historians have portrayed Louis XVI as weak, stupid and indecisive; a man who was ill-suited to the task of governing an absolute state, particularly one with many pressing problems. The view that he was unable to cope with the momentous events unfolding

around him has recently been revised. It is acknowledged that Louis had an excellent memory, took an interest in a range of intellectual subjects (mathematics and geography) and learnt English. Yet he lacked the strength of character to combat the powerful factions in his court and failed at crucial times to give the necessary support to reforming ministers.

Louis was clearly aware of the need to resolve his most pressing problems: the lack of revenue and an increasing public debt. When reform plans were submitted to the Assembly of Notables and rejected, he failed to back his ministers and they were dismissed.

Summoning the Estates-General (see page 26) was seen as a sign of desperation, and he again failed to provide leadership. The initiative was seized by the Third Estate while Louis was forced to react to events rather than control them. His attempt to leave France, and the revelation of his true thoughts on the Revolution, further undermined his position. Louis' increasing reliance on the advice of Marie Antoinette confirmed what many suspected, that he lacked leadership skills. The view of one of Louis' biographers, John Hardman, is that Louis was intelligent, hard-working and possessed the sort of skills (financial and naval) which were required by an eighteenth-century French king. In the end he was overwhelmed by the financial crisis and his inability to resolve it.

figure. The French government consequently never received enough money from taxes to cover its expenditure, and so frequently had to borrow. Interest rate payments on the debt became an increasingly large part of government expenditure in the eighteenth century.

SOURCE A

An entry from the private diary of l'Abbé de Veri, 1780.

Louis XVI may be seen passing each morning in his room, observing with his telescope those who arrive at Versailles. He often occupies himself in sweeping and nailing and repairing locks. He has common sense, simple tastes, an honest heart and a sound conscience. That is his good side. On the other hand he has a tendency to indecision, he possesses a rather weak will and he is incapable of ruling effectively. He also lacks an ability to fully appreciate the significance of what is occurring around him.

? Read Source A. According to the Abbé de Veri, why might Louis be unsuited to the role of king?

Table 1.1 The main taxes imposed during the *ancien régime*. For a description of the three estates, see pages 6–10

Tax	Description	Indirect (levied on goods)/ direct (levied on incomes)	Who was taxed?
Taille	Land tax – the main direct tax	Direct	In theory, the Third Estate, although in reality, some people had been granted exemption by the Crown, so it was mainly the peasants who were taxed
Vingtième	Five per cent tax on income	Direct	Third Estate
Capitation	Tax on people – frequently called the poll tax	Direct	In theory, Second and Third Estates
Gabelle	Salt tax	Indirect	Everyone
Aidas	Tax on food and drink	Indirect	Everyone
Octrois	Tax on goods entering a town	Indirect	Everyone

Many of the taxes were collected by officials who, under a system known as **venality**, had bought the right to hold their positions. They could not therefore be dismissed. Corruption and wastage were vast, and resulted in the Crown not receiving an adequate income, while the taxpayers knew that much of the tax they paid never reached the treasury.

On his accession in 1774 Louis XVI was aware of many of the problems affecting the finances of the State. He appointed **Turgot** as Controller-General. Turgot was influenced by the ideas of the **philosophes** and embarked on a reform programme. His attempts to abolish the trade **guilds** and the **corvée** and to reform the tax system provoked such a storm of protest from the **parlements** and other interested parties that Louis, for the sake of harmony, withdrew his support and Turgot left office.

The bulk of royal revenue was made up of taxation, yet because of the system of exemptions the Crown was denied an adequate income with which to govern the country. In order to meet the demands of war, the Crown was forced to borrow money. Tax farming meant that not all the revenue paid actually reached the treasury. The issue of taxation weakened the Crown and created resentment among the Third Estate, which bore the burden of tax payment. This was one of the most important long-term causes of the Revolution.

KEY FIGURE

Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot (1727–81)

As Controller General (1774–6), was one of the first of Louis' ministers to attempt to reform French finances. He failed owing to a combination of powerful vested interests and a lack of support from Louis.

KEY TERMS

Venality The sale and purchase of certain jobs which could be inherited by descendants.

Philosophes A group of writers and thinkers who formed the core of the French Enlightenment.

Guild An organisation that tightly controls entry into a trade.

Corvée Unpaid labour service to maintain roads. In many places money replaced the service.

Parlements The 13 high courts of appeal. All edicts handed down by the Crown had to be registered by the *parlements* before they could be enforced as law.

French society during the *ancien régime*

On the eve of the Revolution it was estimated that the population of France was about 27.5 million. French society in the eighteenth century was divided into three orders known as the Estates of the Realm. The first two estates had many privileges that they frequently used to the disadvantage of the Third Estate. Over the course of the eighteenth century, divisions appeared between and within the estates, and this became a long-term cause of the Revolution.

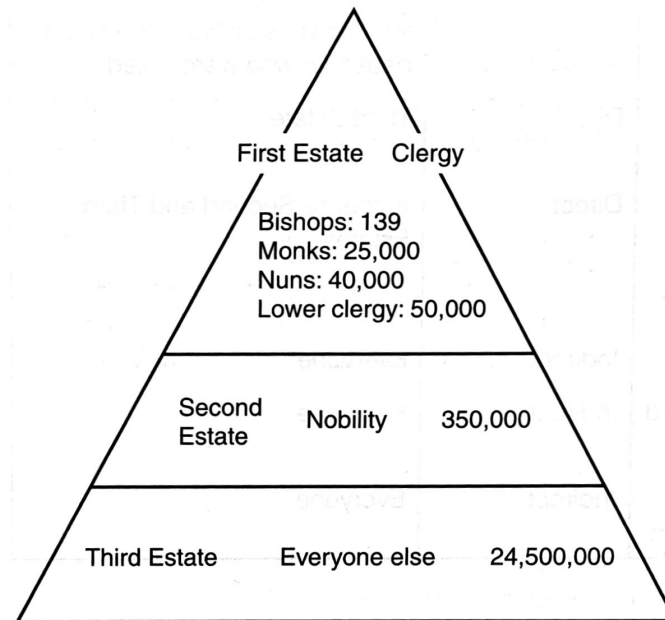


Figure 1.2 The structure of the *ancien régime* c. 1780.

The First Estate

The First Estate was the clergy, which consisted of members of religious orders (monks and nuns) and clergy (parish priests). A number of issues contributed to the Church being unpopular with many people. These were:

- plurality and absenteeism
- tithes
- exemption from taxes
- power over the people.

Plurality and absenteeism

Many younger sons of noble families entered the Church and occupied its higher posts, such as bishops and archbishops, which provided large incomes. The Archbishop of Strasbourg received an annual 400,000 *livres*, which contrasted sharply with most parish priests (*curés*) who received only between 700 and 1000 *livres*. Some bishops held more than one bishopric, which meant that they were bishops of more than one **diocese**. This is called **plurality**. Many never visited their diocese: a practice known as absenteeism. This made the Church

KEY TERMS

Diocese An area served by a bishop. It is made up of a large number of parishes.

Plurality The holding of more than one bishopric or parish by an individual.

very unpopular with many ordinary people who considered that bishops were more interested in wealth than in the religious and spiritual needs of the people.

Tithes

The wealth of the Church came from the land it owned and the tithes paid to it. It was the largest single landowner in France, owning about ten per cent of the land.

The tithe was a charge paid to the Church each year by landowners and was based on a proportion of the crops they produced. This charge varied widely. In Dauphine it amounted to about one-fiftieth of the crops produced, while in Brittany it was a quarter. In most parts of France it was about seven per cent of the crop. The income produced by the tithe provided the Church with 50 million *livres* each year.

Tithes were supposed to provide for parish priests, poor relief and the upkeep of Church buildings, but much of it went instead into the pockets of bishops and abbots. This was greatly resented by both the peasantry and the ordinary clergy and was one of the most common grievances made in their *cahiers* in 1788.

Exemption from taxes

The Church had many privileges apart from collecting the tithe. By far the most important of these was its exemption from taxation. This added to its unpopularity. Its income from property was immense: around 100 million *livres* per year in the closing years of the *ancien régime*. Instead of paying tax the Church agreed to make an annual payment, which it determined, known as the *don gratuit*. It was under five per cent of the Church's income and was much less than it could afford to pay.

Power over the people

France was a very religious country and Catholicism was the official state religion. The influence of the Church was considerable and touched many areas of people's lives. The Church had wide-ranging powers of censorship over books that were critical of it, provided poor relief, hospitals and schools, and kept a list in the parish of all births, marriages and deaths. At a time when communication in general was very poor, the Church acted as a sort of Ministry of Information for the government when parish priests informed their congregations about various policies and initiatives. The vast wealth of the Church and its resistance to new ideas made it unpopular with many people, which contributed to the long-term causes of the Revolution.

The Second Estate

Of the three estates, the nobility was the most powerful. Unlike the British nobility, which were numbered in the hundreds, the French nobility numbered hundreds of thousands, although the exact numbers are disputed. Figures for



KEY TERM

Cahiers Lists of grievances and suggestions for reform drawn up by representatives of each estate and each community and presented to the Estates-General for consideration.

 **KEY TERMS**

Versailles The royal palace of the Bourbons and the seat of royal government built outside Paris by Louis XIV.

Feudal dues Financial or work obligations imposed on the peasantry by landowners.

the numbers of nobles by 1789 vary between 110,000 and 350,000. Within the nobility there were great variations in wealth and status:

- The most powerful were the 4000 court nobility, restricted in theory to those whose noble ancestry could be traced back to before 1400; in practice to those who could afford the high cost of living at **Versailles**.
- Second in importance were the *noblesse de robe*: legal and administrative nobles which included the 1200 magistrates of the *parlements*.
- The remainder of the nobility – the overwhelming majority – lived in the country in various states of prosperity. Under the law of primogeniture a landed estate was inherited by the eldest son. Younger sons were forced to fend for themselves and many joined the Church, the army or the administration.

The main source of income for the Second Estate was land, and it owned between a third and a quarter of France. Nearly all the main positions in the State were held by nobles, among them government ministers, *intendants* and upper ranks in the army.

Privileges

In addition to holding most of the top jobs in the State, nobles had many privileges. These included the following:

- They were tried in their own courts.
- They were exempt from military service.
- They were exempt from paying the *gabelle*.
- They were exempt from the *corvée* (forced labour on the roads).
- They received a variety of **feudal** (also known as *seigneurial*) **dues**.
- They had exclusive rights to hunting and fishing.
- In many areas they had the monopoly right (known as banalities) to operate mills, ovens and wine presses.

Perhaps the nobles' greatest privilege was exemption from taxation. Until 1695 they did not pay direct taxes at all. In that year the capitation was introduced and, in 1749, the *vingtième*. Even with these they managed to pay less than they could have done. They were generally exempt from the most onerous tax of all: the *taille*.

Provincial nobles, who were unlikely to be very wealthy, were strongly attached to these privileges, which represented a significant part of their income. They felt that if they were to lose their tax privileges and their seigneurial rights, they would face ruination. Consequently, they were determined to oppose any changes that threatened their position and undermined their privileges. The privileges relating to land ownership and tax exemption were resented by many ordinary people who saw the Second Estate as avoiding their share of the tax burdens borne by others. These issues contributed to the causes of the Revolution.

Joining the nobility

There were various ways of becoming a noble besides the obvious one of inheritance. One of the main ways of acquiring noble status was either by direct appointment from the King or by buying certain offices that carried hereditary titles. These were called venal offices and there were 12,000 of these in the service of the Crown. They carried titles that could be bought, sold or inherited like any other property. Although there were significant benefits to gaining noble status there were also some limitations, the most important of which was that noblemen were not, in theory, allowed to take part in industrial or commercial activities since this would mean they would suffer derogation (loss of their nobility). In reality many did, as the rule was not rigidly enforced.

The Third Estate

In essence, the Third Estate consisted of everyone who did not belong to one or other of the two privileged estates. There were enormous extremes of wealth within this estate.

The bourgeoisie

At the top end were the rich merchants, industrialists and business people. This group of rich commoners, who were not peasants or urban workers, is frequently referred to as the **bourgeoisie**. Among the wealthiest of the bourgeoisie were the merchants and traders who made vast fortunes out of France's overseas trade. Others included financiers, landowners, members of the liberal professions (doctors and writers), lawyers and civil servants. Many were venal office-holders.

As a group, the bourgeoisie was rising not only in wealth but also in numbers. There was a threefold increase in the number of bourgeoisie over the course of the eighteenth century to 2.3 million. Although the bourgeoisie was increasing in importance, there was no real conflict between with the nobility until at least the closing years of the *ancien régime*. The bourgeoisie did, however, feel that its power and wealth should in some way be reflected in the political system as it bore such a substantial part of the tax revenue paid to the Crown. This slowly simmering resentment was one of long-term causes of the Revolution.

The peasantry

At the other extreme of the Third Estate from the bourgeoisie were the peasantry. They were by far the most numerous section of French society, comprising about 85 per cent of the population. This group, however, covered enormous variations in wealth and status.

At the top end was a small group of large farmers who owned their land and employed labourers to produce food to sell to others. More numerous were the labourers who existed at, or near, subsistence levels. For much of the eighteenth century they, and the larger farmers, did well as agricultural conditions were



KEY TERM

Bourgeoisie Middle-class urban dwellers who made a living through their intellectual skills or business practices.

KEY TERM

Serfdom A system in which people were the property of the landowner.

? Look at Source B. Which estate do you think the cartoonist sympathises with?

favourable, particularly in the 1770s. Half of the peasants were sharecroppers who did not own their land but farmed it and gave half of their crops to the landlords instead of rent. About a quarter of the peasants were landless labourers, who owned nothing but their house and garden.

In some parts of France **serfdom** continued to exist. There were a million serfs in the east, mainly in Franche Comté. They were at the bottom of the social structure and their children were unable to inherit even personal property

SOURCE B



A contemporary cartoon showing a peasant crushed by the weight of taxes and dues such as the *taille* and *corvée*, imposed by the privileged First and Second Estates.

without paying considerable dues to their lord. Poor peasants lived in a state of chronic uncertainty. Bad weather or illness could push them into the ranks of the vagrants, who lived by begging, stealing and occasional employment.

Grievances

As the largest group in society, the peasants bore the burden of taxation and this made them extremely resentful. All peasants had to pay a tithe to the Church, feudal dues to their lord and taxes to the State. Nearly all land was subject to feudal dues. These included the *corvée*, *champart* (a due paid in grain or other crops to the landlord which could vary from five to 33 per cent of the harvest) and *lods et ventes* (a payment to the *seigneur* when property changed hands).

A further grievance was that the peasant could be tried in the seigneurial court, where the lord acted as both judge and jury.

Taxes paid to the State included the *taille*, capitation and *gabelle*. All these increased enormously between 1749 and 1783 to pay for the various wars France was involved in. Taxes took between five and ten per cent of the peasants' income. The heaviest burden on the peasants was the rent they paid to their landlords. This increased markedly during the second half of the eighteenth century as a result of the increase in population, which is estimated to have risen from 22.4 million in 1705 to 27.9 million in 1790. This increased the demand for farms, with the result that landlords could raise rents. The increasing financial burden placed on the peasantry, along with growing resentment of the feudal system, was an important long-term cause of the Revolution.

Urban workers

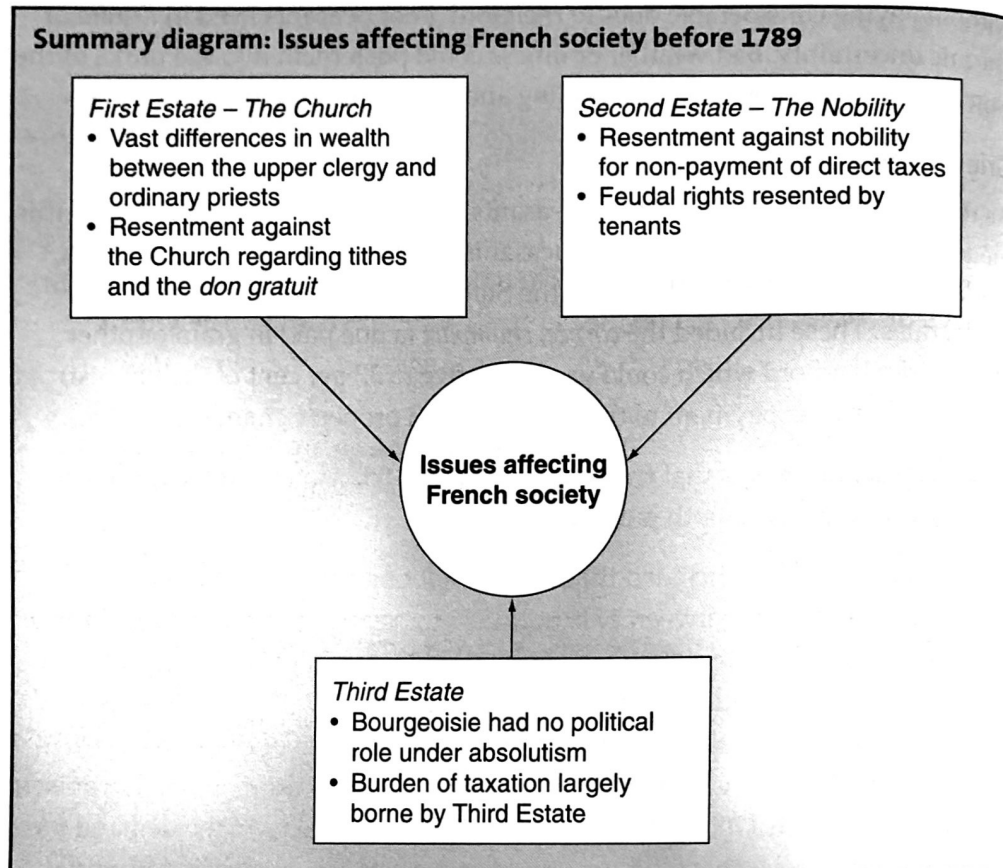
The remaining part of the Third Estate was made up of urban workers. Small property owners and **artisans** in Paris were known as **sans-culottes**. The majority of workers in the towns lived in crowded insanitary housing blocks known as tenements. They were unskilled and poor.

On the other hand, skilled craftsmen were organised into guilds. In Paris in 1776, 100,000 workers – a third of the male population – belonged to guilds. The standard of living of wage-earners had slowly fallen in the eighteenth century, as prices had risen on average by 65 per cent between 1726 and 1789, but wages by only 22 per cent. In the years immediately preceding the Revolution the worsening economic situation caused considerable resentment among urban dwellers and contributed to the long-term causes of the Revolution. This helps to explain their readiness to become involved in the popular demonstrations that helped to bring about the overthrow of the *ancien régime*.

KEY TERMS

Artisan A skilled worker or craftsman.

Sans-culottes Literally 'those without knee-breeches': those who wore trousers and were classed as workers. It was later used as a label to identify the more extreme urban revolutionaries of 1792–5.



The Enlightenment

During the course of the eighteenth century there emerged in Europe an intellectual movement of writers and thinkers known as the Enlightenment. The movement questioned and challenged a whole range of views and ideas that, at the time, were widely accepted – particularly relating to religion, nature and absolute monarchy. Their analysis of society was based on reason and rational thought, rather than superstition and tradition.

In France these intellectuals were known as the *philosophes* and were writers rather than philosophers. The most famous were Voltaire, Montesquieu and Rousseau. They wrote on the problems of the day and attacked the prejudice and superstition they saw around them. Many of them contributed to the most important work of the French Enlightenment, *The Encyclopaedia* (edited by Diderot, the first volume appeared in 1752, the last of 35 in 1780).

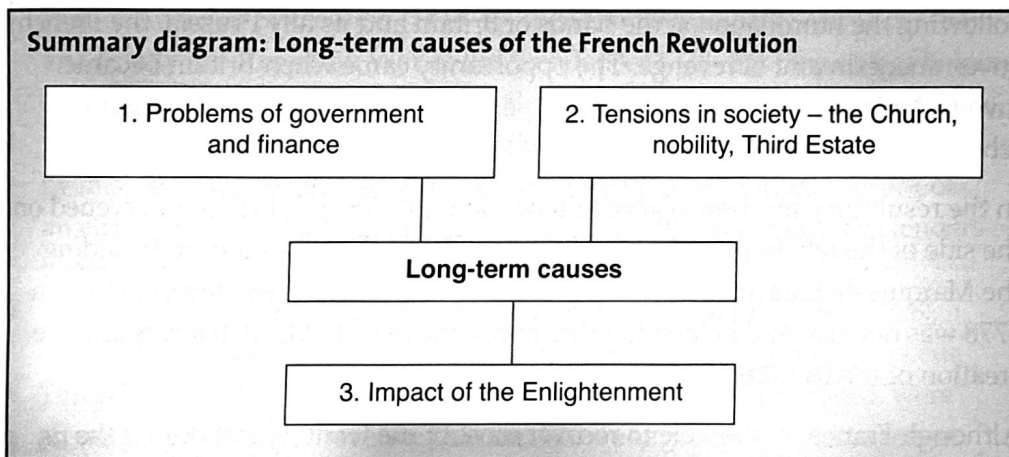
Aims of the *philosophes*

The aim of the *philosophes* was to apply rational analysis to all activities. They were not prepared to accept tradition or revelation, as in the Bible, as a sufficient reason for doing anything. They were much more in favour of liberty – of the press, of speech, of trade, of freedom from arbitrary arrest – than of equality, although they did want equality before the law. The main objects of their attack

were the Church and despotic government. The *philosophes* did not accept the literal interpretation of the Bible and rejected anything that could not be explained by reason – miracles, for example – as superstitious. They condemned the Catholic Church because it was wealthy, corrupt and intolerant, and took up Voltaire's cry of '*Écrasez l'infâme*' ('crush the infamous' – meaning the Church).

The *philosophes*, while clearly critical of many aspects of the *ancien régime*, were not essentially opposed to the regime and they were not therefore revolutionary. Yet they did have an impact on the outbreak of the Revolution. Their ideas attacked all the assumptions on which the *ancien régime* was based. They challenged and helped to undermine one of the key pillars of the old order, namely the position of the Church and the role of the King as God's servant. Although not revolutionary themselves, their ideas and approaches did influence many who would become revolutionaries.

Summary diagram: Long-term causes of the French Revolution



2 Short-term causes of the French Revolution

► What short-term factors brought about the crisis that sparked the Revolution?

In the ten years before the outbreak of the Revolution in 1789, a number of issues, crises and events contributed to the downfall of the *ancien régime* and should be viewed alongside the long-term causes. The main short-term causes were:

- foreign policy
- financial crisis
- political crisis
- economic crisis.

Foreign policy

The Seven Years' War

Since the fifteenth century, France had more often than not had a hostile relationship with both Britain and Austria. Britain was viewed as France's only serious colonial rival and Austria was a rival for the dominance of mainland Europe. By the middle of the eighteenth century, France and Austria had resolved their differences and were allies when the Seven Years' War (1756–63) broke out in 1756. During the course of this war, French forces in India and North America suffered a series of crushing defeats at the hands of the British. Much of France's overseas empire was lost in 1763, although the profitable sugar-producing islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe, and some other lesser territories, were retained.

The American War of Independence

Following the humiliation at the hands of Britain and its ally Prussia, the French government dreamt of revenge. The opportunity came when Britain became involved in a bitter quarrel with its thirteen North American colonies, who rebelled against British rule.

In the resulting American War of Independence (1776–83), France intervened on the side of the rebels, providing both financial and military support, including the Marquis de Lafayette (see profile on page 79). The intervention of France in 1778 was decisive and helped to bring about the defeat of British forces and the creation of the United States of America.

Although France was unable to recover most of the territory lost during the Seven Years' War, the Treaty of Versailles (1763) did satisfy French honour. Few at the time, however, could foresee what the real cost of the war would be: revolution in France. The war cost a great deal of money and in the short term worsened the already weak financial situation of the Crown. French soldiers who had fought in the war had been exposed to ideas such as liberty and democracy and many, on their return home, demanded similar rights for the people of France.

Financial crisis

The main short-term cause of the French Revolution was the financial crisis. By far the most important aspect of this was the huge **deficit** that the government was building up. On 20 August 1786 **Calonne**, the Controller-General, told Louis XVI that the government was on the verge of bankruptcy. Revenue for 1786 would be 475 million *livres*, while expenditure would be 587 million *livres*, making a deficit of 112 million – almost a quarter of the total income. A much more detailed and alarming picture of the situation is provided in the Treasury account of 1788, which has been called the first and last budget of the monarchy (see Table 1.2).

KEY TERM

Deficit When expenditure is greater than income it results in a deficit.

KEY FIGURE

Charles Alexandre de Calonne (1734–1802)

As Controller-General from 1783 he drew up an ambitious reform plan to deal with the financial problems of the monarchy. The plan was rejected by the Assembly of Notables.

Table 1.2 Royal income and expenditure 1788 (millions of livres)

Royal income	Royal expenditure	
	Education and poor relief	12
	Court expenses	36
	Other civil expenditure	98
	Military – army and navy	165
	Debt interest	318
Total 503	Total	629

The deficit had increased in two years to 126 million *livres* – twenty per cent of total expenditure. It was anticipated that for 1789, receipts would amount to only 325 million *livres* and that the interest payments on the deficit would amount to 62 per cent of the receipts. There are two reasons to explain why there was a deficit and a financial crisis in France:

- **War.** Between 1740 and 1783 France was at war for twenty years, first in the War of Austrian Succession (1740–8), then the Seven Years’ War (1756–63) and finally the American War of Independence (1778–83). The cost of helping the American colonists to defeat the British government was approximately 1066 million *livres*. **Jacques Necker**, the finance minister, financed the war by raising loans. While this did not directly lead to revolution, the lack of an elected parliament to guarantee loans, as in Britain, did not give lenders confidence.
- **Tax.** The Crown was not receiving much of the tax revenue (see page 8), and until it recovered control of its finances, no basic reforms could occur. The privileged classes, whose income from property had increased, were an untapped source of revenue that the Crown urgently needed to access. There would, however, be powerful resistance to any change in the taxation structure from those with vested interests in retaining the *status quo*.

SOURCE C


From Marquis de Bouillé, quoted in Richard Cobb and Colin James, *The French Revolutions*, Simon & Schuster, 1988, p. 20. Bouillé was a royalist supporter and military commander in 1789.

The most striking of the country’s troubles was the chaos in its finances, the result of years of extravagance intensified by the expense of the American War of Independence, which had cost the state over twelve hundred million livres. No one could think of any remedy but a search for fresh funds, as the old ones were exhausted. M. de Calonne the Minister of Finance conceived a bold and wide-reaching plan. Without either threatening the basis of the French monarchy, this plan changed the previous system of financial administration and attacked the vices at their root. The worst of these problems was the arbitrary system of allocation, the oppressive costs of collection, and the abuses of privilege by the richest section of taxpayers. The whole weight of public expenditure was borne by the most numerous but least wealthy part of the nation which was crushed by the burden.

 **KEY FIGURE**

Jacques Necker (1732–1804)

A Genevan banker who was in charge of France’s finance on a number of occasions. Popular because of his ability to raise loans and thereby avoid creating new taxes.

In Source C, what does Bouillé consider to be the main cause of the financial problems affecting France? 

Reform

Following Necker's dismissal in 1781, his successor Joly de Fleury discovered the true nature of France's finances. The Treasury was 160 million *livres* short for 1781 and 295 million *livres* short for 1782. To make good the shortfall, Fleury and his successor, Calonne, undid much of Necker's work by resuming the practice of selling offices (many of which Necker had abolished). They both also borrowed much more heavily than Necker.

SOURCE D

From Alexis de Tocqueville, *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*, Michel Lévy Frères, 1856. De Tocqueville (1805–59) was one of the first historians to offer an incisive analysis of the origins of the Revolution.

It is not always by going from bad to worse that a society falls into revolution. It happens most often that a people, which has supported without complaint the most oppressive laws, violently throws them off as soon as their weight is lightened. Experience shows that the most dangerous moment for a bad government is generally when it sets about reform.

In 1786, with loans drying up, Calonne was forced to grasp the nettle and embark on a reform of the tax system. His plan consisted of an ambitious three-part programme:

- The main proposal was to replace the capitation and the *vingtième* on landed property by a single land tax. It was to be a tax on the land and not on the person, and would therefore affect all landed proprietors – Church, noble and common alike – regardless of whether the lands were used for luxury purposes or crops. There were to be no exemptions; everyone including the nobles, the clergy and the *pays d'états* would pay.
- The second part of the programme was aimed at stimulating the economy to ensure that future tax revenues would increase. To try and achieve this, Calonne proposed abandoning controls on the grain trade and abolishing internal customs barriers, which prevented the free movement of grain from one part of France to another.
- The final part of the programme was to try to restore national confidence so that new loans for the short term could be raised. By doing this Calonne hoped that the *parlements* would be less likely to oppose the registration of his measures. His plan was to achieve some display of national unity and consensus.

The failure of the reform process

The **Estates-General** was the obvious body to summon to approve the reforms, as it was representative of the nation. However, this was rejected as being too

? In Source D, what does de Toqueville suggest was responsible for the outbreak of the Revolution?

KEY TERMS

Pays d'états Areas that had local representative assemblies of the three estates that contributed to the assessment and collection of royal taxes.

Estates-General Elected representatives of all three estates of the realm. This body was only summoned in times of extreme national crisis, and had last met in 1614.

unpredictable. Calonne and Louis XVI opted instead for a handpicked Assembly of **Notables**. It was anticipated that this would be a pliant body who would willingly agree to rubberstamp the reform package.

The 144 members of the Assembly met in February 1787. They included leading members of the *parlements*, princes, leading nobles and important bishops. On examining the proposals it became clear that they would not collaborate with Calonne and Louis in agreeing the reforms. As representatives of the privileged order they had the most to lose from them.

The Notables were not opposed to all change and agreed that taxation should be extended to all. They claimed that the approval of the nation was needed for Calonne's reforms and urged the summoning of the Estates-General, which had last met in 1614. Realising the strength of opposition to Calonne, Louis dismissed him in April 1787.

Political crisis

Calonne was replaced by one of the Notables, Loménie de Brienne, Archbishop of Toulouse, while another Notable, Lamoignon, president of the *Parlement* of Paris, became head of the judiciary. The Assembly of Notables proved to be no more co-operative with Brienne than it had been with Calonne.

Brienne retained Calonne's land tax and introduced a number of new reforms following on from Necker's earlier plans. These were:

- an end to venal financial officials
- a new central treasury
- laws codified in a printed form accessible to those who needed to consult them
- educational reform
- religious toleration
- reforming the army to make it more efficient and less expensive.

When Brienne presented his reforms to the *Parlement* of Paris for registration, it refused and said that only the Estates-General who represented the whole nation could consent to any new taxes. Louis' reaction was to exile the *Parlement* to Troyes on 15 August.

Louis' action was considered to be high handed and the result was an aristocratic revolt, which proved to be the most violent opposition the government had yet faced. There were riots in some of the provincial capitals where the *parlements* met, such as Rennes in Brittany and Grenoble in Dauphine. In all parts of the country nobles met in unauthorised assemblies to discuss action in support of the *parlements*.



KEY TERM

Notables Rich, powerful individuals; the elite who controlled the political and economic life of France.

SOURCE E

? What is the cartoonist suggesting in Source E?



Contemporary French cartoon depicting the Assembly of Notables as birds. President Monkey (Calonne) addresses the Notables and asks them with which sauce they would like to be eaten. Animals were frequently used to depict people as they were considered to be much less intelligent than humans.

An assembly of the clergy also joined in on the side of the *parlements*, breaking its long tradition of loyalty to the Crown. It condemned the reforms and voted a *don gratuit* of less than a quarter the size requested by the Crown.

Although the opposition was fragmented and dispersed, it continued because of the collapse of the government's finances. At the beginning of August 1788 the royal treasury was empty. Brienne agreed, with Louis' reluctant approval, to summon the Estates-General for 1 May 1789. On 16 August 1788 Brienne suspended all payments from the royal treasury, in effect acknowledging that the Crown was bankrupt. The previous year, the then navy minister, the Marquis de Castries, had perceptively told the King, 'As a Frenchman I want the Estates-General, as a minister I am bound to tell you that they might destroy your authority.'

In September 1788 Louis was forced to back down and allow the Paris *parlement* to return. Following the resignations of Brienne and Lamoignon, the King recalled Necker, in the belief that he was the only one who could restore the government's credit and raise new loans. Necker abandoned his predecessor's reform plans and, while indicating that he would try to raise new loans, stated that he would do nothing until the Estates-General had met.

The crisis had shown the limitations of royal power. Although Louis was in effect an absolute ruler, in reality he was unable to impose his government's reforms on the State. The forces of opposition detected clear signs of weakness in the Crown. The failure to secure reform contributed to a paralysis of the government. In the short term this was very significant, particularly when linked to the economic crisis.

Economic crisis

In the years immediately preceding the outbreak of the Revolution in 1789 the French economy faced a number of crises. The economy was largely based on agriculture and this sector had grown steadily between the 1730s and 1770s. Good harvests had resulted in food surpluses which in turn contributed to an increase in population as people were fed and healthy and more able to withstand diseases.

Bad harvests

During the 1780s the general agricultural prosperity came suddenly to an end. This was brought about by a series of disastrous harvests in 1778–9, 1781–2, 1785–6 and 1787. In 1788 there was a major disaster. There was a very wet spring and freak hailstones in many areas in July resulted in a very poor harvest. This was particularly disastrous for peasants who produced wine as a cash crop. A poor harvest in a pre-industrial society always led to massive unemployment.

The resulting rise in the price of food led to:

- a lower demand for manufactured goods, as more income had to be spent on food
- a significant increase in the price of bread – a key staple food.

Over the period 1726 to 1789 wheat prices increased by about 60 per cent. In normal times it is estimated that about half a labourer's daily wage might be spent on bread. During the severe winter of 1788–9 this proportion was increased to 88 per cent.

The picture in other sectors of the economy was equally gloomy. Production and employment in the textile industries, which accounted for half of industrial production, fell by 50 per cent in 1789. The industry had been badly hit by the Eden Treaty of 1786 which allowed imports of British goods, including textiles, at reduced rates of import duties. This further affected a group who were already suffering economic hardship. The market for wine was also very poor since rising bread prices meant that there was less money to spend on this and other goods. Unemployment was rising at the same time as the cost of living and, as production was either stagnant or falling, workers were unable to increase their wages.

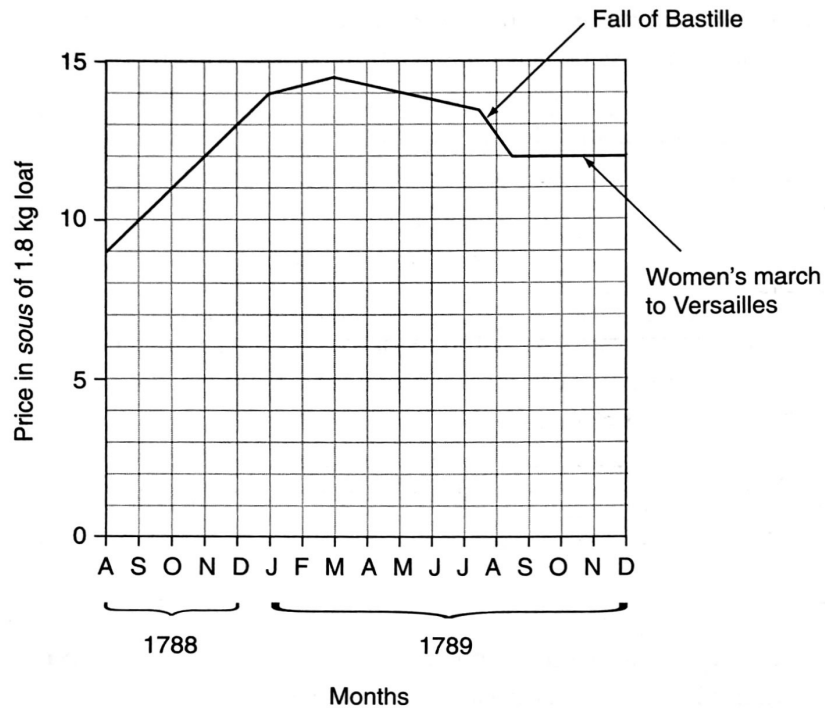


Figure 1.3 Bread prices in Paris, August 1788 to December 1789.

Food shortages

Many ordinary people blamed tithe-owners and landowners for making the situation worse. They were accused of hoarding grain and speculating on prices rising during times of shortage, thereby contributing to the lack of food. In many areas there were food riots and disturbances as people attacked grain stores. These were most frequent in the spring and summer of 1789 when grain prices were at their peak, before the new harvest had been collected.

Many ordinary people in both rural and urban areas believed that the economic crisis was in part the fault of the nobility. Increasing disturbances against the nobility encouraged many ordinary people to take the first tentative steps towards direct political action. The **politicisation** of the majority of the Third Estate began as a result of the economic crisis. Louis' handling of the political crisis further exacerbated the situation in the eyes of ordinary people.

The deep-rooted long-term problems of the *ancien régime*, considered in the first part of this chapter, came to a head in the years immediately preceding 1789. Short-term causes such as poor harvests and rising bread prices helped to bring this about. The attempts at reform were an acknowledgement that changes were needed; the failure of the process showed the depth of the divisions within French society. When the French monarchy declared itself bankrupt and the Assembly of Notables refused to approve the reforms proposed by the King's ministers, the way was paved for the summoning of the Estates-General. Much was expected from this body by all parties.

KEY TERM

Politicisation A process in which people who were previously unconcerned with politics take an active interest in political issues which affect their daily lives.

The next chapter will reveal how few could have anticipated the momentous consequences of the decision to summon it.

Summary diagram: Short-term causes of the French Revolution

Foreign policy and the American War of Independence

- Government sought revenge against Britain following 1763
- Supporting American rebels against British 1778–83 resulted in:
 - massive additional debt (1000 million *livres*)
 - awareness of political liberty for USA while no political liberty in France

Financial crisis

- Government on verge of bankruptcy
- Sought new measures to raise taxes

The failure of the reform process

- Assembly of Notables refused to back reform
- Dismissal of Calonne

The political crisis 1787–8

- Louis' political weakness
- Revolt of the Aristocracy

The economic crisis

- Bad harvests – rising bread prices
- Less consumption – unemployment
- Grain and food riots

3 Key debate

▶ *What are the different ways in which the origins of the French Revolution have been interpreted?*

Many historians hold sharply contrasting viewpoints on the origins of the French Revolution. One of the main schools is the Marxist interpretation.

Marxist historians see the Revolution as part of the class struggle as outlined in the mid-nineteenth century by the German-born philosopher and social economist Karl Marx (1818–83). More recently, **revisionist historians** have rejected this view in favour of different interpretations.

The Marxist interpretation

The dominant interpretation of the French Revolution for much of the past 100 years has been the Marxist interpretation. This was most clearly expressed by Georges Lefebvre and later by his disciple Albert Soboul. Lefebvre regarded the French Revolution as a bourgeois revolution closely tied to social and economic factors. The commercial and industrial bourgeoisie had been growing

KEY TERMS

Marxist historians Those who interpret the Revolution as part of Marx's analysis of history as a series of class-based struggles, resulting ultimately in the triumph of the proletariat.

Revisionist historians Those who reject Marxist analysis and provide a revised interpretation.

in importance in the eighteenth century and had become stronger economically than the nobility. Yet members of the bourgeoisie were kept out of positions of power by the privileged nobility. According to the Marxists, a class struggle developed between the rising bourgeoisie and the declining aristocracy. The bourgeoisie won this struggle because the monarchy became bankrupt owing to the cost of the war in America. The French Revolution was, according to Lefebvre, a struggle for equal rights for the bourgeoisie.

EXTRACT 1

From Albert Soboul, *The French Revolution 1787–1799*, Unwin, 1989, p. 27.

In 1789 French society remained fundamentally aristocratic; it was based on privilege of birth and wealth from land. But this traditional social structure was now being undermined by the evolution of the economy which was giving added importance to personal wealth and was enhancing the power of the middle class. At the same time ... the philosophy of the Age of Reason was sapping the ideological foundations of the established order. If France still remained at the end of the eighteenth century a country of peasants and artisans, her traditional economy was being transformed by the growth of overseas trade and the appearance of big industrial concerns. No doubt the progress of capitalism and the demand for economic freedom aroused fierce resistance from those social groups dependent on the traditional economic order; but such resistance did not make them seem any less necessary in the eyes of the bourgeoisie whose spokesmen elaborated a doctrine which conformed to their social and political interests.

The revisionist interpretation

In the aftermath of the Second World War, a group of historians challenged the Marxist interpretation. The first important revisionist critic was Alfred Cobban, who questioned the validity of the **social interpretation** and also whether the Revolution was led by a rising bourgeoisie. For Cobban the Marxist interpretation was too simplistic.

EXTRACT 2

From Alfred Cobban, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution*, Cambridge University Press, 1964, p. 162.

In writing the social history of the revolution, I have not intended to suggest that it was other than primarily a political revolution, a struggle for the possession of power and over the conditions in which power was to be exercised. Essentially the revolution was the overthrow of the old political system of the monarchy and the creation of a new one in the shape of the Napoleonic state. However, behind the political regime there is always the social structure, which is in a sense more fundamental and is certainly much

KEY TERM

Social interpretation

An emphasis on changes in society – population trends, social class – as having a significant impact on the Revolution.

more difficult to change. Once we begin to investigate this social background to the revolution we realize how little we really know of the pattern of eighteenth-century French society and the impact on it of the revolution. The supposed social categories of our histories – bourgeois, aristocrats, sans-culottes – are in fact all political ones.

The best known of the revisionist historians is François Furet. He went beyond merely questioning the economic and social interpretations of the Revolution as a class-based struggle, favoured by the Marxists, to considering the intellectual and cultural background to 1789. According to Furet, the driving force for change was the advanced democratic ideas of the Enlightenment *philosophes* such as Rousseau.

Towards a post-revisionist consensus

A number of historians have attempted to synthesise the vast amount of historical writing surrounding this issue and reach some sort of balanced judgement. The following extract by Professor J.H. Shennan, which draws on more recent research, is a good example of this.

EXTRACT 3

From J.H. Shennan, *France Before the Revolution*, Methuen, 1983, p. 32.

It seems most likely that the Revolution broke out because long-term problems and resentments were brought to a head by events immediately preceding it. Two of the areas in which deep-seated problems reached a critical point in the 1770s and 1780s were those of finance and government. In the former case the financial stresses induced by the War of American Independence were made worse by the series of bad harvests which caused the price of bread to rise sharply. Behind both of these factors, however, lay the permanent problem posed by conservative social and political attitudes which prevented the rich land of France from yielding its true harvest and the government from acquiring necessary funds.

How far do the historians quoted in Extracts 1, 2 and 3 agree or differ in their interpretations of the origins of the French Revolution?