

History Revolutions: French Teach Yourself Series

Topic 3: Trigger factors that contributed to the revolution

Contents

Factors that contributed to the revolution	3
Key terminology.....	3
As it appears in Unit 3 and 4.....	3
Long term causes of the French Revolution	5
As it appears in Unit 3 and 4.....	5
Intermediate causes of the French Revolution	5
As it appears in Unit 3 and 4.....	5
The spark: the immediate cause of the French Revolution	5
As it appears in Unit 3 and 4.....	5
Document analysis 1	5
As it appears in Units 3 and 4	5
Document analysis 2	5
As it appears in Units 3 and 4	5
Solutions to Review Questions	6

SAMPLE

Factors that contributed to the revolution

When investigating why there was a revolution in France in 1789, historians generally identify long-term causes, intermediate causes and an immediate cause or trigger that sparks the revolution. There is often a list of causes generally agreed to have played their part in creating the revolution; however, historians often disagree about the weight that should be given to each factor.

Key terminology

As it appears in Unit 3 and 4

In studying the years leading to the French Revolution, you will use these terms. It is important you have a working knowledge of them.

absolute monarchy: a political system in which the monarch rules with personal authority

absolutism: political system in which the ruler has unchecked power

ancien régime: the system of government in France before the French Revolution. Technically, it is the French translation of 'old regime', but it often means more than that, referring to the whole traditional structure of France, politically, socially, economically and culturally.

artisan: a skilled worker

bourgeoisie: middle class; these were usually wealthy members of the Third Estate.

cahiers: lists of grievances drawn up by the three estates prior to the Estates General.

capitation: poll tax, paid by all except the clergy

clergy: members of the (Roman Catholic) Church

convocation: calling together, announcement of meeting

corvée: the peasants' obligation to do unpaid labour on roads.

cultural: relating to the arts and other human intellectual achievement. The customs and social behaviour of a group.

deference: showing respect to those above you in the social hierarchy

despotism: cruel and random use of power

ecclesiastical: involving the Christian Church

Enlightenment: an 18th century intellectual movement emphasising reason and individualism rather than tradition

feudal dues: payments of money, food or labour to the landlord

feudalism: medieval political and economic system

gabelle: a tax on salt

ideology: a system of ideas and beliefs

intendants: administrators appointed by the king to supervise tax collection, enforce laws and oversee public works.

lettres de cachet: letters or order signed by the king

livre: main unit of money

noblesse d'épée: noble of the sword. A noble whose family had been noble for at least 400 years

noblesse de robe: nobles who had recently bought their noble title

old regime: France before the revolution

parlement: a high court of appeal that had the right to register royal edicts and criticise them. There were 13, of which the parlement of Paris was most significant

philosophes: intellectuals and writers during the Enlightenment

privileges: designated rights held by members of the First and Second Estates. These two estates were identified as 'privileged.'

remonstrance: a criticism of royal policy

sans culottes: urban worker

seigneur: landlord

seigneurial: belonging to the lord/noble

sous: small unit of money. Twenty sous made up one livre

taille: a tax on either land or income, paid by members of the Third Estate

tithe: a tax of one tenth of yearly income paid to the Church

Versailles: Louis XVI's palace near Paris

Review Questions

- 1 From the list of terms, decide whether the word relates to politics, economics, social, culture or ideology and place the words in the appropriate column. Some words may fit into more than one column.

Political	Economic	Social	Cultural	Ideology

Long term causes of the French Revolution

As it appears in Unit 3 and 4

Cause 1

The system of the *ancien régime*.

(a) Political system

The kings of France were, on paper at least, appointed by God and their power was absolute. There was no representative body, such as a parliament, to limit the king's authority. *Lettres de cachet* allowed the king to imprison anyone without trial.

Nevertheless, French kings did not act as despots. They were bound by laws and customs, and they could consult with councils and assemblies, although they were not bound to follow the advice. The king's government was carried out throughout France by intendants, who supervised tax collection, enforced laws, supervised public works, communications, commerce and industry.

The taxation system in the *ancien régime* was chaotic. There was no uniformity. The *taille* was paid by members of the Third Estate, with nobles and clergy exempt. In theory, everyone paid the capitation, but many nobles and clergy evaded it or paid little. Some tried to evade indirect taxes, such as the *gabelle*, paid on salt, and to avoid paying it, smuggling was common. Taxation fell most heavily on the Third Estate, but many in this estate lived on the edge of hunger and destitution. The chaotic system meant the government never received the full amount collected.

As one historian has commented, it is really too much to dignify the *ancien régime* with the word 'system.' There were 360 different feudal codes of law applying to different parts of France, there were too many different taxes to even quantify them at the time, and there was no uniformity in weights and measures.

Perhaps the most important aspect of this lack of uniformity was that France was unable to balance its financial books. As it spent more than it received each year, the government was deeply in debt, and had been throughout the 18th century.

(b) Social structure

The feudal system established three orders or estates:

First Estate About 130,000	Clergy: archbishops, canons and priests, nuns and monks, parish priests	They had their own law courts and were exempt from some taxes
Second Estate Between 120,000 and 350,000	Nobles: the king and queen, nobles of the sword, princes, dukes, marquises, counts, viscounts, barons, knights, nobles of the robe	Received special treatment in law court, were exempt from some taxes and did not have to do military service
Third Estate About 27 million	Everybody else: lawyers, doctors, businessmen, merchants, soldiers, craftsmen, shopkeepers, unskilled workers, peasants	No privileges

Solutions to Review Questions

1.

Political	Economic	Social	Cultural	Ideology
<i>absolute monarchy</i> <i>absolutism</i> <i>ancien regime</i> <i>cahiers</i> <i>convocation</i> <i>despotism</i> <i>feudalism</i> <i>intendants</i> <i>lettres de cachet</i> <i>old regime</i> <i>parlement</i> <i>remonstrance</i>	<i>capitation</i> <i>corvée</i> <i>feudal dues</i> <i>gabelle</i> <i>old regime</i> <i>livre</i> <i>seigneur</i> <i>seigneurial</i> <i>sous</i> <i>taille</i> <i>tithe</i>	<i>artisan</i> <i>bourgeoisie</i> <i>clergy</i> <i>ecclesiastical</i> <i>noblesse d'épée</i> <i>noblesse de robe</i> <i>old regime</i> <i>privileges</i> <i>sans culotte</i> <i>seigneur</i> <i>seigneurial</i>	<i>deference</i> <i>Versailles</i>	<i>Enlightenment</i> <i>philosophes</i>

2.

Long term causes

Intermediate causes



1. Ancien regime system
 a. Political system
 b. Social structure

3. Bankruptcy

6. Calling Estates General

2. Enlightenment ideas

4. Weak king

7. Famine

5. American Revolution

3. *The calling of the Estates General, announced in August 1788, brought together a series of long term factors and provided the trigger that set off the French Revolution. By the latter half of the 18th century, the French political, economic and social system was chaotic and no longer relevant for a kingdom moving from an agrarian, feudal economy to a more commercial one. Its administration was chaotic, nowhere more so than in the collection of taxes. Throughout the 18th century, the government spent more money than it collected, and went further into debt as it borrowed to pay off the debt. Throughout the 1780s, the king's finance ministers attempted to reform the taxation system, requiring that the privileged First and Second Estates pay taxes. At every attempt, however, the two estates refused. A strong king might have forced acceptance of the fiscal reforms, but Louis XV was not a strong king, so reforms did not pass. At the same time, the Enlightenment promoted ideas that brought into question the authority of the king and suggested there were alternative political systems to autocracy. France's involvement in the American Revolution also encouraged revolutionary ideas: in challenging royal authority, the American colonists were putting into practice the theories expounded by the Enlightenment. America demonstrated it was possible to transform to a republic.*

By the late 1780s, France was bankrupt and the king was forced to call the Estates General, to meet in May 1789. This galvanised the bourgeoisie and liberal nobles, who used the debate about how the Estates General would meet and vote - by order or by head - to mount a propaganda war. Pamphlets, such as that produced by the Abbé Sieyès in January 1789, argued the Third Estate was 'everything' and that the two privileged estates contributed nothing to the nation. Elections of deputies and the drawing up of grievances created a mood of high expectation. And, as these events came together in late 1788 and early 1789, France suffered a terrible harvest, the despair of hungry peasants and workers adding to the mood for radical change.

- 4.
- a. *The opening lines of What is the Third Estate? are effective because they pose three simple questions, and provide brief, straightforward answers. The contrast of those answers, in 'everything' and then 'nothing' gives a simple black and white statement. The questions and answers could almost be a slogan, easily remembered and repeated.*
 - b. *Sieyès believes the First and Second Estates pretend to do useful public service, but this is 'only a chimera.' In fact, all the useful work is done by the Third Estate. If the privileged orders were abolished, writes Sieyès, 'the nation would be not something less but something more.'*
 - c. *Sieyès sees the Third Estate as 'enchained.' They have everything, but are restricted because one arm is tied down.*
 - d. *The document could be considered a quantum leap because it turns the social system on its head. The First and Second Estates were privileged and the hierarchy implied they were more valuable than the Third Estate. Sieyès' document suggests this is the opposite of reality, that it is the Third Estate that does everything significant to France. It also suggests the solution to France's problems lies in forming a constitution, which is not in keeping with an absolute monarchy. The idea of 'the nation' is a revolution in thinking.*
 - e. *This document supported the popular debate in late 1788-early 1789 because it was about the central importance of the Third Estate at a time when debate was about how the three estates would meet and vote at the Estates General. If, as Sieyès argued, the Third Estate was 'everything' and could form the nation without resort to the other two estates, then the Third Estate should carry more weight at the up-coming Estates General meetings. This meant increasing Third Estate*