The French Revolution

The Phrygian, or liberty, cap is a soft, red, conical cap worn with the top pulled forward. It was worn in antiquity by the inhabitants of Phrygia, a region of central Anatolia. The cap had been worn by freed slaves in ancient Greece and Rome as a symbol of their freedom. During the French Revolution, along with other symbols adopted from antiquity, the cap came to represent freedom and the pursuit of liberty. The emblem of Phrygia and the cap was worn by sans-culottes and soldiers of the revolutionary army. On 20 June 1792, when sans-culottes attacked the Tuileries Palace, Louis XVI donned the cap to demonstrate he was one of the people. To this day, the national emblem of France, Marianne, is shown wearing a Phrygian cap.

Louis XVI
King of France from 1774, Louis XVI summoned the Estates-General in 1789 to reform his kingdom. The revolution that followed led to his overthrow in 1792 and execution in 1793.
Ignorance and disregard for the rights of man are the sole causes of public misfortunes and of the corruption of governments.

Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, 1789
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Using The French Revolution

The French Revolution has been developed especially for senior secondary students of History and is part of the Nelson Modern History series. Each book in the series is based on the understanding that History is an interpretive study of the past by which you also come to better appreciate the making of the modern world.

Developing understandings of the past and present in senior History extends on the skills you learnt in earlier years. As senior students you will use historical skills, including research, evaluation, synthesis, analysis and communication, and the historical concepts, such as evidence, continuity and change, cause and effect, significance, empathy, perspectives and contestability, to understand and interpret societies from the past. The activities and tasks in The French Revolution have been written to ensure that you develop the skills and attributes you need in senior History subjects.

ILLUSTRATED TIMELINE

is a bird’s-eye view of the topic and summarises the major developments of the period.

CHAPTER INTRODUCTIONS

provide a context to the issues that are addressed.

KEY FIGURES AND ORGANISATIONS, KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS,
KEY DOCUMENTS

feature brief biographies, profiles, definitions and summaries of key documents as a ready reference for learning and revision.

SOURCE STUDIES

of visual and text primary sources and secondary literature appear frequently through the text and are combined with questions and activities to aid your evaluation and interpretation of evidence from the past.

SIGNIFICANT INDIVIDUALS

are biographical profiles and assessments of key historical figures and frequently include questions and activities.

INQUIRY QUESTIONS

are listed at the start of the chapter. These questions provide a focus for you as you read each chapter.
As king, he established royal academies for the arts. Louis XIV became synonymous with greatness, power, splendour and glory.

The reign of France’s Sun King, Louis XIV (1643–1715), was one of the longest in European history. Louis’s grip on power was absolute: he was more than just a political leader; he was the embodiment of the French nation, a divinity who embodied all the values of his time. He was the one who established the creation of a grandiose art gallery, and Versailles, where he based his life. Louis’s reign has been described as a period of unparalleled luxury and extravagance, with the development of economic policies including the growth of economic relations. As king, he established royal academies for the arts. Louis XIV became synonymous with greatness, power, splendour and glory.

The revolution of 1789

1. The French Revolution began in 1789 with the assertion of political rights by the Third Estate at the Estates-General.

2. The freedoms heralded in 1789 formed the foundation of the enduring concept of rights: the French citizens have the right to do ‘all that is not forbidden by the law’. With this concept the revolution were never reversed.

3. The revolution of 1789 and the years following it was a period of great social and economic transformation in France.

4. The French Revolution was not only a political upheaval but also a cultural and intellectual revolution.

5. The revolution of 1789 and the years following it was a period of great social and economic transformation in France.

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Conclusion

The French Revolution began in 1789 with the assertion of political rights by the Third Estate at the Estates-General. The revolution of 1789 was not only a political upheaval but also a cultural and intellectual revolution. The revolution of 1789 and the years following it was a period of great social and economic transformation in France.
**CHARLES, COUNT OF ARTOIS, (1757–1836)**

Artois was the youngest brother of Louis XVI. In 1788, he was one of the signatories of the Memoir of the Princes of the Blood. He left France shortly after the fall of the Bastille. In 1824, he became king as Charles X, but was deposed in 1830 and died in exile.

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**JEAN-SYLVAIN BAILLY (1736–1793)**

Bailly was the scientist who first tracked the orbit of Halley’s Comet. Elected as President of the National Assembly in June 1789, he presided over the Tennis Court Oath. After the fall of the Bastille he was elected Mayor of Paris. His popularity declined following the Champ de Mars Massacre; he was guillotined in 1793.

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**ANTOINE-PIERRE BARNAVE (1761–1793)**

Barnave was a lawyer and a deputy for the Third Estate to the Estates-General. He was a member of the Feuillants who favoured constitutional monarchy. He was arrested in August 1792 and executed in November 1793.

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**NAPOLEON BONAPARTE (1756–1821)**

Bonaparte was a revolutionary general, consul and, from 1804, emperor of the French. He gained prominence in 1793 after retaking Toulon from the British. In 1795, he was responsible for suppressing the royalist insurrection. He was a gifted strategist who won several spectacular victories. In 1799, he overthrew the Directory and established the Consulate. In 1812, he was defeated after a disastrous campaign in Russia. He was forced into exile, initially to Elba and later St Helena.

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**JACQUES-PIERRE BRISBOT (1754–1793)**

Brisot was a lawyer and a leading member of the Girondin faction, also known as the ‘Brissotins’. He was elected as a deputy to both the Legislative Assembly and the National Convention. In October 1793, he was executed with other leading Girondins.

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**ÉTIENNE-CHARLES LOMÉNIE DE BRIENNE (1727–1794)**

Brienne was the Archbishop of Toulouse. In May 1787, he was appointed the Chief Minister. He attempted to push tax reform through the Assembly of Notables and the Parlement of Paris, but was unsuccessful and resigned in August 1789. During the revolution, he took the Clerical Oath and continued as a constitutional bishop. He was arrested during the Terror and died in prison.

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**CHARLES-ALEXANDRE DE CALONNE (1734–1802)**

Calonne was a career administrator. From 1783, he was Director-General of Finances. He was the author of the unsuccessful reform plan that was rejected by the Assembly of Notables in 1787; he was replaced by Loménie de Brienne.
Danton was a lawyer and a founder of the Cordeliers Club. He was actively involved in overthrowing the monarchy on 10 August 1792. Later he became Minister for Justice and a member of the Committee of Public Safety. He was a supporter of the Terror in 1793; later he called for moderation and was arrested for conspiracy and executed.

Desmoulins was a lawyer and a journalist. He agitated for crowds to arm themselves at the Palais Royal on 12 July 1789. He was a founding member of the Cordeliers Club and was elected to the National Convention. Desmoulins was a moderate Jacobin, a supporter of Danton and later a critic of Robespierre. He was arrested together with Danton and guillotined.

Gouges was a playwright and journalist, and an advocate for women, demanding their equal rights and treatment. In 1791, Gouges published the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen, declaring that ‘Woman is born free and remains equal in rights’. She was guillotined in 1793.

Dumouriez was a soldier and a diplomat. He became a general after his victory at Valmy on 20 September 1792. He was a sympathiser of the Girondins and defected to Austria after his attempted coup against the Convention.

Grégoire was a clergyman and an advocate for the abolition of slavery. He was deputy for the clergy to the Estates-General and later joined the constitutional Church. Grégoire refused to renounce Christianity during the de-Christianisation.

Hébert was a journalist and publisher of the radical newspaper Le Père Duchesne 1790–94. He was a member of the Cordeliers Club and the Commune of Paris. He pursued policies favouring the Paris poor, for example the Law of the Maximum and the Law of Suspects. Later he was the organiser of the de-Christianisation campaign. His pursuit of direct democracy threatened the government and he was arrested together with his followers. He was guillotined in May 1794.
Mirabeau was a liberal noble elected as a deputy for the Third Estate to the Estates-General. He was influential in the early stages of the revolution and supported constitutional monarchy following the British model. In 1790, he became a secret adviser to Louis XVI. His revolutionary legacy was discredited when his secret letters were found in the king’s iron chest. He was, nevertheless, the first to be buried as a national hero in the Panthéon.

Montesquieu was a nobleman and lawyer who held the position of president of the Parlement of Bordeaux. In his writings, he commented on various political subjects. In 1748, he published *The Spirit of Laws* in which he outlined the idea of the separation of the powers, enabling a system of checks and balances of the branches of government.

Marat was a physician, radical journalist and publisher of *L’Ami du peuple*, and a member of the Cordeliers Club. His demagogic and denunciations incited violence, which some have seen as leading to the September Massacres of 1792. He was assassinated in a bath by Charlotte Corday, a Girondin supporter, on 13 July 1793.

Marie Antoinette married the future Louis XVI to seal an alliance between France and Austria. She was deeply unpopular and often accused of betraying France; she was used as a scapegoat for the kingdom’s financial problems. She was a devoted mother who shared the same fate as the king, following him to the guillotine on 16 October 1793.

Louis XVI was a volunteer in the American War of Independence. A liberal noble, Lafayette was influential during the early stages of the revolution; he was a deputy to the Estates-General for the nobility and was appointed the first commander of the National Guard in July 1789. He lost popularity after his troops opened fire on the demonstrators at Champ de Mars in July 1791. He defected to Austria on 19 August 1792 where he was detained until 1797.
Necker was a Swiss banker and Controller-General of Finances from 1776. In January 1781, he published his misleading Compte rendu in an attempt to restore confidence in the Crown’s finances. Necker claimed that the accounts showed the finances to be 10 million livres in surplus; the cost of royal borrowing was hidden in the notes to the accounts.

Robespierre was a lawyer who was elected deputy for the Third Estate to the Estates-General. In 1792, he was elected to the National Convention and from July 1793 he was a leading member of the Committee of Public Safety. Robespierre was a key figure of the Terror. He was arrested and guillotined after a conspiracy against him and his followers.

Roux was a priest and later a member of the constitutional Church. He was a member of the Paris Commune from August 1792 and was leader of the radical group known as enragés. Roux was arrested in September 1793 and committed suicide in January 1794.

Roland was famous for her salon in Paris, which attracted all the important revolutionary leaders, including Robespierre and Brissot. She was imprisoned after the fall of the Girondin faction and executed on 8 November 1793.

Sieyès was a priest and a radical writer, author of the influential pamphlet What Is the Third Estate? He was a deputy for the Third Estate to the Estates-General and later in the National Convention. He was also instrumental in bringing Napoleon to power.
**ARThUR YOUng (1741–1820)**

An English traveller and a keen observer. He became a writer on agriculture and related topics and founded the *Annals of Agriculture* in 1784. He visited France in 1787–89 and wrote an account of his travels.

**ASSEMBLY OF NOTABLES**

A gathering of eminent individuals (notables) summoned to advise the monarch. It was convened in February 1787, and again in November 1788.

**BOURBON, THE DYNASTy**

The ruling house of France, a branch of the Capetian dynasty. The first Bourbon King of France and the direct ancestor of Louis XVI was Henry IV who ruled from 1589 to 1610. Spain and Luxembourg currently have Bourbon monarchs.

**BOURgeois**

The original meaning of bourgeois was ‘citizen of a town’. By 1789, the term was used to describe the middle classes. During the revolution, it referred to the urban upper middle class of the Third Estate: professionals such as lawyers, doctors, bankers, brokers, manufacturers and office holders in the bureaucracy.

**COCKADE**

A ribbon or knot of ribbon or rosette worn in the hat as a badge. After the fall of the Bastille, the newly formed National Guard used a cockade of white, edged with red and blue, the colours of the king and the city of Paris. The wearing of this tricolour cockade became symbolic of one’s support for the revolution and a patriotic duty.

**COMMITTEE OF GENERAL SECURITY**

The Committee of General Security was one of the two leading government committees established in 1793. It was a body charged by the Convention with policing state security throughout the country, issuing passports and prosecuting foreign agents. It oversaw revolutionary justice.

**COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC SAFETY**

The more prominent of the two leading government committees established in 1793 and responsible for both internal and external affairs. Consisting of 12 members, it functioned as the executive branch of government from April 1793 to October 1795. It was disbanded in 1795.

**CORDELiERs**

The radical revolutionary club of the Cordeliers was founded in April–May 1790 under the leadership of Danton, Marat and Hébert. It attracted many members because of the low fees and its radical rhetoric. It also welcomed women to its meetings, which were each attended by about 400 people. Hébert’s newspaper, *Le Père Duchesne*, became its mouthpiece. It lost power and influence after the Terror and was discredited and closed in March 1794.

**DIRECTORY**

A committee of five directors chosen by the Council of Five Hundred and approved by the Council of Ancients as the executive branch of government. It was in power from 26 October 1795 to 10 November 1799.

**ESTATES**

Also known as orders, the three groups that divided French society until the revolution: the First Estate, the clergy; the Second Estate, the nobility; the Third Estate, the commoners. Membership of an estate determined social status, opportunity and privilege.

**ESTATES-GENERAL**

The consultative assembly comprising representatives of the three estates of the realm: clergy, nobility and commoners. The Estates-General were summoned by Louis XVI for May 1789 to consider the reform of the taxation system. The emancipation of the deputies of the Third Estate led to the Estates-General transforming into the first revolutionary legislature, the National Assembly in June 1789.

**FÉDÉRÉS**

Citizen soldiers who came to Paris from the provinces for the Festival of the Federation in July 1790, and again on 14 July 1792. Many were from Marseilles and participated in the uprising of 10 August 1792. Some returned home; others went on to join the regular army at the front.

**FEUILLANTS**

Constitutional monarchist deputies who split from the Jacobins over a petition to depose Louis XVI after the flight to Varennes in June 1791. They formed their own club, named after the monastery of the Feuillant monks in which they met.
Girondins were a group of deputies in the Legislative Assembly, with some from the Gironde region, in south-west France. They were one of the two major factions in the National Convention (the other being the Montagnards). They opposed the Jacobins in 1793. Many of the Girondins were supporters of the 1793 ‘federalist revolt’ against the Convention. They were expelled from the Convention during the Reign of Terror; their leaders were arrested, tried and guillotined in October 1793. The term was rarely used prior to 1793; their opponents often called them Brissotins, after their most prominent spokesman, Jacques-Pierre Brissot.

HÉBERTISTS
Followers of Hébert, a journalist and prominent member of the Cordeliers Club. They were anti-Christian and, during the de-Christianisation campaign, they turned several thousand churches, including Notre Dame, into temples of reason.

INDULGENTS
Informally led by Danton, who together with his supporters was accused of winding back the Terror and being ‘indulgent’ towards counter-revolutionaries.

JACOBINS
A revolutionary club that met in a former Jacobin monastery, the debating centre of increasingly radical revolutionary ideas. Its branches spread all across France and Europe. The Jacobins rose to political dominance in Paris and in many provincial cities. Because of its association with the policies of the Terror, the Convention ordered the Paris Club to close in November 1794.

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
A single-chamber parliament elected under the constitutional monarchy of 1791–92, and ended with the elections to the National Convention.

MONTAGNARDS
The name of the Montagnard faction derived from the location (high at the back) of the seats in the National Convention its members occupied. They were the main faction opposed to the Girondins. Estimates of the number of Montagnards vary considerably, from 140 to 300, and a significant proportion of its membership belonged to the Jacobin Club. They were supported by the Paris Commune and by the sans-culottes; of the 24 deputies elected from Paris, 21 were Montagnards. The Montagnards came to dominate the Convention in 1793, but lost influence with the demise of Robespierre.

MUSCADINS
Also known as the ‘Gilded Youth’, these were anti-Jacobin youth from wealthy families. They wore flamboyant clothes and, after the fall of Robespierre, violently attacked his sympathisers, supporters of the Terror and the sans-culottes.

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY
The National Assembly, after July 1789, the National Constituent Assembly, and often simply called the Assembly, was a direct successor of the Estates-General. It emerged as the national representative body after 17 June 1789 when the deputies of the Third Estate and some deputies of the other estates proclaimed themselves the National Assembly. After initial opposition, Louis XVI recognised the National Assembly on 27 June 1789 when he requested all three estates to unite as one body. The National Assembly served as the legislature from 1789 to 1791.

NATIONAL CONVENTION
This single-chamber assembly was elected in September 1792 and proclaimed the republic. The 745 deputies were divided between Girondins and the more radical Montagnards, with a large number of crossbench members (the Plain) in between. It remained in session until October 1795.

NATIONAL GUARD
A citizens’ militia formed in July 1789 in the Paris districts and other cities to maintain order, protect property against mob violence, and to guard against counter-revolutionary plots.

NOBILITY OF THE ROBE
Nobles, such as magistrates, court officials and bureaucrats, who acquired their noble status from holding office, often a venal office.
**NOBILITY OF THE SWORD**
Old and established noble families, who could trace their lineage back to the Middle Ages. They often owed their status to their service to the Crown in battle.

**PARIS COMMUNE**
The revolutionary municipal government of Paris formed in July 1789 by an insurrectional committee composed of 144 delegates – three from each of the 48 sections of the city. It was opposed by the Girondins, who tried to curb its growing influence on the Assembly and later on the Convention. In 1793, the Paris Commune and the Jacobins ousted Girondin members from the Convention.

**PARLEMENTS**
The function of the 13 parlements was to administer justice and to register, remonstrate and publish royal edicts.

**PEASANT**
The word ‘peasant’ derived from the Old French word paisent, meaning ‘someone who lives in the country’. Peasants made up approximately 80 per cent of the population.

**PHILOSOPHES**
Intellectuals and writers of the 18th century, such as Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rousseau and Diderot, who advocated the use of reason instead of custom, tradition, faith or superstition as the basis for the organisation of society. They were the key contributors to the Enlightenment.

**PLAIN**
The centre or non-aligned faction in the Convention, which sat in the flat middle area of the chamber and generally remained uncommitted to the opposing Montagnards and Girondins.

**RED CAP OF LIBERTY (PHRYGIAN BONNET)**
The red Phrygian bonnet had been worn by freed slaves in ancient Rome as a symbol of their newly acquired freedom. It symbolised personal liberty in revolutionary France.

**REFRACTORY OR NON-JURING CLERGY**
Clergy who refused to take an oath of allegiance to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy.

**REPRESENTATIVES ON MISSION**
Deputies sent from Paris by the National Convention who were entrusted with considerable powers of repression in the provinces, especially during the Terror. They also recruited men for the army. After June 1793, they were appointed by the Committee of Public Safety. One of their tasks became the suppression of the Federalist revolt.

**SANS-CULOTTES**
Revolutionaries who made a virtue of their plain dress, in contrast to that of the nobility and the bourgeoisie. They were mostly workers, shopkeepers, petty traders, craftsmen and the poor, and wore trousers instead of the breeches and stockings of the higher classes.

**SECTIONS**
The 48 areas into which Paris was divided for administrative purposes were called sections; they replaced the former 60 districts. Each was run by a revolutionary surveillance committee and was able to organise armed men, mostly sans-culottes. Other cities also had their sections. Section assemblies played a major role in shaping uprisings and influencing the government.

**SURVEILLANCE COMMITTEES**
Surveillance or watch committees were formed in each commune in March 1793 to maintain public security and order. They often took the place of local government in the districts and were controlled by extreme Jacobins.
THE FRENCH REVOLUTION
In the second half of the 18th century, the very roots of the long-established social, political and economic foundations of French society, based on privilege, hierarchy and tradition, were being challenged. The French king, Louis XVI, faced with pressure from elite groups in his kingdom, recognised the need for reform, which in his assessment was limited to the issue of taxation. In 1781, the Compte rendu, the first ever statement of the Crown’s finances, reflected and encouraged the growing interest by the French public in economic affairs. These challenges, together with the Crown’s financial difficulties as a result of France’s involvement in costly foreign wars, convinced Louis XVI and his successive finance ministers to implement a range of radical reforms to increase the income of the Crown. Although there is no consensus among historians on the causes of the revolution, there is a broad acknowledgement of the complex nature of the tensions and problems that became apparent when an unfolding political crisis brought them to the surface.

In the early 18th century, France was an absolute monarchy ruled by the Bourbon dynasty, which claimed the throne by divine right. As the century progressed, France’s system of government, and indeed the whole structure of society, came under increasing pressure for change. It made the crisis possible, but not unavoidable; it was not evident that France was on the brink of a revolution. The fluctuating economic activity in the 1770s and 1780s had not made most peasants poorer and had not prevented the bourgeoisie from increasing its wealth. The need for change was caused mainly by the financial difficulties King Louis XVI’s government faced as a result of France’s involvement in foreign wars. When the Crown could no longer afford to finance the operation of the government, the king attempted to force through a reform of the fiscal system. At this critical point the financial crisis turned into a political crisis, with various sections of French society demanding a constitution to regulate the relationship between those governing and those being governed. When the monarchy and the nobility resisted such a change in 1789, the revolution began.

**INQUIRY QUESTIONS**

+ What was the structure of French society before 1789?
+ What ideas contributed to the revolutionary movement in France?
+ What were the long- and short-term factors that contributed to the French Revolution?
The making of a revolution

For centuries, France held a dominant position in European politics. Maintaining that status caused a permanent deficit in the royal finances, in particular because of an increasingly costly rivalry with Britain. While Britain’s fast-growing economy allowed it to concentrate on building its colonial empire, France’s overseas expansion always came second to competition with other European states on the Continent, such as Austria and Britain’s ally, Prussia. France was badly affected by the 18th century’s most extensive conflict, the Seven Years’ War (1756–63), perhaps indicating that the French monarchs were unable to cope with the challenges posed by the growth of Prussia and the British capture of French colonial possessions in India, Quebec and the Caribbean. Another sign of France’s decreasing international influence was its inability, just prior to Louis XVI’s accession in 1774, to prevent annexation of territories belonging to Poland, one of its traditional allies, by Prussia, Austria and Russia.

SOURCE 1.1 Europe in 1763
The Bourbon dynasty

The Bourbon dynasty, which ruled France at the time of the revolution, is one of the most ancient European royal houses. It is a branch of the dynasty founded in 987 by Hugh Capet (c. 941–996), who was elected ‘King of the Franks’ after the death Louis V, the last king of the Carolingian dynasty. In 1328, when direct descendants of Hugh Capet did not produce a surviving male heir to the French throne, the succession passed to their cousin, the head of the younger branch of the House of Capet, the Valois dynasty. Similarly, in 1589, the Valois died out and the throne passed to Henry IV (1553–1610), the first French monarch of the Bourbon dynasty. When, in 1792, King Louis XVI was deposed, the government of the French Republic decided that the former king and his family would be referred to by the family name of their ancient ancestor Hugh Capet, and thus Louis became Louis Capet.

Louis XIV – the Sun King

The reign of France’s Sun King, Louis XIV (1643–1715), is one of the longest in European history. For more than 50 years, Louis had personally ruled France, providing the rest of Europe with an example of an absolutist style of government. His reign marked the growth of France as one of the great powers of the Continent. Louis reformed the administration of justice and promoted commerce and industry, including the development of overseas colonies. As king, he established royal academies for architecture, art, literature, science and music, and built the royal palaces of the Louvre, now an art gallery, and Versailles, where he based the French court. Louis XIV outlived all of his immediate family with the exception of his grandson, Philip V of Spain, and a great-grandson, who became Louis XV when the Sun King died in 1715. The name of Louis XIV became synonymous with greatness, power, splendour and glory.
Seven Years' War (1756–63)

The conflict that Winston Churchill called ‘the first world war’ began when the European powers sought to extend their influence both in Europe and overseas. It was a continuation of the War of Austrian Succession (1740–48), which was fought over the right of Maria Theresa of Austria, the daughter of Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI (1685–1740), to succeed her father as ruler of all realms of the Habsburg dynasty.

The Seven Years’ War also became known as the ‘French and Indian War’, as fighting between Britain and France took place on the American and Canadian frontiers and India. In the Treaty of Paris, which ended the war in 1763, France acknowledged the loss of all of its territory on the North American mainland and the Indian subcontinent, and Britain emerged as the dominant European colonial power.

At the beginning of Louis XVI’s reign, France attempted to recover its pride from these foreign policy defeats by supporting Britain’s American colonies in their war for independence. A small French contingent significantly aided the Americans, and France hosted the peace conference at which Britain conceded the colonies’ independence in 1783. Britain lost its Thirteen Colonies, but while France won a propaganda victory over Britain, its financial losses were huge. This
dipломatic success brought no tangible rewards for France and its costs added to the
growing pressure for reform of France's fiscal system, which by 1789 had developed into a
political crisis.

The American Declaration of Independence

On 2 July 1776, a convention of delegates from the Thirteen British Colonies in North America met in
Philadelphia and adopted a resolution declaring the colonies' independence from Britain. Two days later,
the delegates approved the Declaration of Independence in which they outlined the reasons for their
renunciation of British sovereignty, providing the moral rationale for their decision and a list of grievances
against King George III. The authors of the Declaration were influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment,
and in particular the theories of English thinker John Locke and French philosophe Jean-Jacques Rousseau.
In a clear break from the past, the colonists declared 'that all men are created equal' and were 'endowed
by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights'. They declared these rights to be 'Life, Liberty and
the pursuit of Happiness'. In defiance of the divine right of kings, the American colonists argued that
governments derive their powers from 'the consent of the governed', who have the right to abolish them
when 'any form of government becomes destructive'. The ideals proclaimed in the Declaration and the
subsequent development of the Constitution of the United States of America (ratified in 1788) had a
profound impact on the ancien régime of Europe.

The American War of Independence, which began in April 1775, ended in June 1783 with the Treaty of
Paris when Britain recognised the establishment of the United States.

Ancien régime

The French system of government before the revolution is best described as an absolute
monarchy and is often referred to as the ancien régime. This term was coined in 1789
by the revolutionaries who wished to distance themselves from the system they sought to
reform. The kingdom of France was ruled by the king, the head of the Bourbon dynasty.
King Louis XVI, whose reign started in 1774, was an absolute monarch who ruled by
divine right, his authority and the right to rule were subject to the will of God alone.

THE ROLE OF THE KING

In theory, there were no legal limits to the monarch's power over his realm. In practice, however,
the king was bound by the laws and customs of the land, and exercising his authority depended
on the agreement of France's elite: the nobility and the clergy. The king could not, for example,
alter the rules of hereditary succession, under which the throne passed to a king's closest living
male relative. The king resided in Versailles and from there he appointed his ministers to
advise him on the government of the kingdom. The ministers did not form a collective group
or a cabinet in the modern sense, but were responsible to Louis XVI individually for the tasks
assigned to them and their departments. The king was thus at the centre of the government,
directing, if not formulating, government policy. The lack of a cabinet meant, however, that
ministers and their supporters competed against each other for Louis favour.
In the decades leading to the revolution, a number of institutions questioned the powers of the Crown and, in particular, the scope of the royal prerogative. During the reign of Louis XV (1715–1774), the king considered it necessary to remind the judges of the parlements, and France in general, of the extent of his authority. On 3 March 1766, the Parlement of Paris, one of the sovereign courts of law, held a special session known as the lit de justice, presided over by Louis XV, during which the king outlined his own interpretation of law. The event became known as the ‘Session of the Scourging’ because the king lashed out at the judges who objected to his will. When the king’s grandson and successor, Louis XVI, began his reign in 1774, these words served as a powerful reminder of the monarch’s own concept of authority.

**CONTEMPORARIES ON THE CHARACTER OF LOUIS XVI**

The abbé Jean-Louis Soulavie (1781–1813), who published his account of the reign of Louis XVI in 1801, attributed the unleashing of the revolution to the rigid social structure of the ancien régime. Soulavie pointed out that Louis XVI was unsuitable to lead his country in the time of crisis because of his indecisive personality. The king seemed unable to follow through his policy decisions and defend them when faced with firm resistance. Soulavie portrayed Louis XVI as a scrupulous and morally irreproachable monarch, who could not choose between asserting the royal authority and consenting to the demands of public opinion.¹
King Louis XVI (1755–1793)

Before he became king, Louis XVI was known as Louis-Auguste. As the eldest male heir to the throne, he was known as the dauphin. He was well educated, with a particular interest in mathematics, physics and history. Although Louis was interested in technological innovations, his education and upbringing reinforced his own perception of the monarch’s traditional position as an absolute ruler.

From the beginning of his reign, Louis pursued a number of reformist policies, wishing to rebuild confidence in the monarchy. He often took the advice of his ministers, but was not persistent when faced with firm opposition to his ideas. This inconsistency made him look indecisive and weak. Louis XVI agreed to support the American colonists financially in their rebellion against Britain and, while their success gave the perception of the restoration of France’s position in Europe, there were no tangible benefits to France; the loans that financed the war added to the Crown’s crippling debt. Louis understood that a radical reform of the tax system was needed to introduce fiscal uniformity across France by eliminating tax exemptions. Yet, he was unable to force the reforms through.

The opposition by the kingdom’s nobility was the first step in the political revolution that swept France in 1789. The king might have been sympathetic to the demands of the Third Estate, but, pressured by his advisers, he delayed his reform plans until after the formation of the National Assembly in June 1789. Again, he consented to work with the Third Estate, but provoked the revolt in Paris by dismissing Necker, his finance minister associated in the public’s mind with reforms.

After the storming of the Bastille on 14 July and the October Days, Louis and his family were virtual prisoners in the Tuileries Palace. He appeared to be willing to reach some sort of accommodation with the revolution by playing the part of a constitutional monarch, but could not accept the religious reforms of the National Assembly. The failed flight of the royal family and their capture at Varennes in June 1791 sealed his fate. Public opinion gradually turned against Louis, perhaps recognising that he pursued a policy of passive resistance. The radicalisation of the popular movement resulted in the storming of the Tuileries Palace on 10 August 1792 and the king’s final deposition. Before the end of September 1792, France was declared a republic. The king who never used violence against his subjects was put on trial and executed on 21 January 1793 for conspiring against ‘public freedom’.

The title of the heir to the throne of France derived from the province of the Dauphiné. The word dauphin is French for ‘dolphin’, a reference to the depiction of the dolphin in the coat of arms of the province.

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dauphin

The title of the heir to the throne of France derived from the province of the Dauphiné. The word dauphin is French for ‘dolphin’, a reference to the depiction of the dolphin in the coat of arms of the province.
Queen Marie Antoinette (1755–1793)

Marie Antoinette, born Maria Antonia, was the youngest daughter of 16 children of Maria Theresa of Austria (1717–1780) and Francis I (ruled 1745–65), Holy Roman Emperor. Her parents were an unconventional couple who married for love, shared the same bed and raised their children in an informal family setting. Marie Antoinette was educated by a French tutor who instructed her in history, the classics and the arts.

Her marriage to Louis-Auguste, dauphin of France, sealed a new Franco–Austrian alliance. When Louis-Auguste became king of France as Louis XVI in 1774, she became his queen. The marriage was haunted by enmity towards Marie Antoinette from all sections of the French public. Until she gave birth to a daughter and later provided a dauphin, rumours of her infidelity and infertility circulated widely, despite the king's open affection towards her in public. In the 1780s, Marie Antoinette became the subject of vilifying, subversive pamphlets. These pamphlets portrayed her as immoral and self-indulgent, falsely insinuating that she had lesbian affairs, which eroded the prestige of the monarchy in the eyes of the public. The disastrous ‘Affair of the Diamond Necklace’ (1785–86) exposed Marie Antoinette to further public condemnation even though she was innocent of any involvement. The perception of her extravagance was so legendary that even when rumours were refuted, the public continued to believe the scandals. She was branded ‘Madame Déficit’ and became the favourite political scapegoat for France’s financial problems. After 1789, the escalating revolutionary situation led to her imprisonment and trial. She followed Louis XVI to the guillotine on 16 October 1793. Her last image, made by painter Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), showed her brave and dignified in the tumbril on the way to her execution.

The marriage of Louis and Marie Antoinette, 1770

In 1770, Louis-Auguste, aged 15, married Marie Antoinette of Austria, aged 14. The marriage was intended to show the strong alliance between France and Austria. The alliance was established after the conclusion of the War of Austrian Succession in 1756 and was orchestrated by the dominant faction at Louis XV’s court, led by the duc de Choiseul. The marriage was contracted on 19 April 1770 at a ceremony held in Vienna and the young Marie Antoinette arrived in Versailles on 16 May. On that day, the official wedding was held in the royal chapel. The celebrations included the reception of the ambassadors, a fireworks display and a lavish party in the royal opera house. The day concluded with the bedding ceremony.
The disastrous ‘Affair of the Diamond Necklace’ (1785–86)

The affair of the diamond necklace contributed to discrediting the queen in the eyes of the French people, although there was no evidence that she had done anything wrong. At the centre of the scandal was the Cardinal de Rohan and the necklace ordered by Louis XV for his mistress, Madame du Barry. This jewellery, with an estimated cost of 2 million livres, never reached its intended recipient because the king died of smallpox before it could be delivered.

In 1785, the Cardinal de Rohan hoped to gain the favour of the queen, but was duped by Jeanne de la Motte. She pretended to act as a friend of the queen and convinced the cardinal that the queen wanted him to negotiate the purchase of the necklace at the centre of the affair is now housed in a French museum.

**SOURCE 1.6** A reproduction of the necklace at the centre of the affair is now housed in a French museum.
necklace and pay for it in instalments. In the end, Jeanne de la Motte’s husband sold the necklace’s diamonds separately in London. When the payment was not received, the jeweller approached the queen directly; she rejected the suggestion that she had ordered and received the necklace. The Cardinal de Rohan was taken to the Bastille in August 1785, but he was acquitted after a trial in May 1786. Jeanne de la Motte was branded on each shoulder with a V mark, reserved for thieves, and imprisoned. The public image of the queen was, however, damaged beyond repair – Marie Antoinette could do nothing right!

The ‘Affair of the Diamond Necklace’ has become the subject of many novels and films. One of the most recent is the 2001 American historical drama The Affair of the Necklace directed by Charles Shyer. The lavish film sets and costumes bring to life the last years of the Bourbon court before the revolution.

ORGANISATION OF FRANCE

When Louis XVI ascended the throne, the territory under his control (excluding overseas territories) covered 717,944 square kilometres and had a population of more than 28 million inhabitants, which was growing rapidly. The kingdom extended from the lowlands of Flanders in the north to the Pyrenees and the Mediterranean Sea in the south, from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Rhine River and the Alps in the east. France also controlled overseas colonies in Canada, the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent. Louis realm had been built by conquest and dynastic marriages since the Middle Ages. As recently as 1766, Louis grandfather, Louis XV, inherited the Duchy of Lorraine and 20 years later incorporated the island of Corsica into his realm. The kingdom was an amalgamation of provinces that were progressively added, and the kings of France tended to adapt the existing institutions of these new territories rather than develop and impose new institutions. As a result, each province had different legal and administrative systems, and taxes levied at varied rates. This made Louis XVI’s France a diverse and complex realm to govern.

SOURCE 1.7 This map illustrates the complexities of the political, legal and economic system of France on the eve of the revolution.
For administrative purposes, the kingdom was divided into 36 généralités, each governed by an intendant who reported to the Controller-General of Finances. These administrative units were not uniform in size and their boundaries seldom coincided with the geographical boundaries of the provinces. In the exercise of the royal authority the intendants competed with the parlements, the 13 sovereign courts of law. The premier position among these courts was held by the Parlement of Paris whose jurisdiction covered a third of the kingdom. Among the prerogatives of the parlements was the registration of the king’s edicts before they were promulgated as binding laws. To add to this complex administrative framework, the Roman Catholic Church maintained 18 archiepiscopal provinces and 136 dioceses across the kingdom. These complex connections and interdependencies, according to historian William Doyle, were repeated in many different ways at the town and village level.

**SOURCE 1.8** Laws and taxes in pre-revolutionary France

Lamoignon on the principles of the French monarchy, 19 November 1787

This extract is from a speech delivered by Chrétien-François de Lamoignon (1735–1789) at a sitting of the Parlement of Paris on 19 November 1787. Lamoignon was the king’s Lord Chancellor who customarily managed the system of justice.

These principles, universally acknowledged by the entire kingdom, are that the King alone must possess the sovereign power in his kingdom; that He is answerable only to God in the exercise of his power; that the tie which binds the King to the Nation is by nature indissoluble; that the interests and reciprocal obligations...
between the King and his subjects serve only to reassure that union; that the Nation’s interest is that the
powers of its head not be altered; that the King is the chief sovereign of the Nation and everything he
does is with her interests in mind; and that finally the legislative power resides in the person of the King
independent of and unshared with all other powers. These, sirs, are the invariable powers of the French
Monarchy ... As a consequence of these principles and of our History, it is clear that the King only has the
right to convocate an Estates-General; that he alone must judge if this convocation is necessary; and that
he needs no other power for the administration of his kingdom.

From a speech by Chrétien-François de Lamoignon, 19 November 1787

Questions
1 What, according to Lamoignon, are the powers of the monarch?
2 To whom is the king accountable?
3 What is the basis of the monarch’s powers?

ESTATES OF THE REALM

Louis XVI’s subjects were all members of social groups that, with the exception of the peasants, claimed certain special rights that set them apart from others. As such, the social structure of the ancien régime was rigid and built on notions of privilege and precedence. Originating in the Middle Ages, this structure divided French society into three estates or orders, known as the First, Second and Third Estates. The First Estate was made up of the clergy of the Roman Catholic Church. The Second Estate drew its membership from those who were born to a noble father or who had acquired nobility by the grace of the king. The Third Estate contained everyone else, those of common birth. Almost every group in 18th-century France could claim some sort of special privilege, but the most visibly privileged groups were the two so-called privileged orders, the clergy and the nobility.

The First Estate – the clergy

The clergy of the Roman Catholic Church made up 0.6 per cent of the population. The 169,500 members of the clergy comprised monks and nuns in religious orders, and priests and curates who ministered to the spiritual needs of lay society. The Church was a highly hierarchical organisation, with archbishops and bishops predominantly from the nobility in the high offices, and the priests and curates predominantly commoners. The influence enjoyed by the Church had its roots in the monopoly of public worship (97 per cent of French people were nominally Catholic) and its wealth was largely derived from extensive landholding, perhaps 10 per cent of the land in France, and the income from a tithe of 10 per cent imposed on farm produce at harvest. The most evident sign of the privileged status of the First Estate was its total exemption from paying taxes. The Church’s General Assembly made a voluntary annual grant to the king.
The origins of the revolution

Chapter 1

The origins of the revolution
Chapter 1

The Second Estate – the nobility

The nobles derived their status as members of the Second Estate by birth (the noblesse d’épée, nobility of the sword) or by creation or ennoblement (the noblesse de robe, those raised to nobility by the king either through merit or by the virtue of the office). In terms of social mobility, the creation of more than 4000 venal offices out of 70,000 opened the way for wealthy commoners to acquire noble status. Historian William Doyle likened the French nobility to a club that the wealthy among the commoners felt obliged to join. He also noted that while not all nobles were wealthy, most wealthy people, eventually, ended up becoming nobles. The membership of the nobility offered standing in society that was beyond the reach of wealth alone and assisted its holders in securing prestige, positions and privileges. Precisely how many nobles there were in 1789 is debatable. Historian Peter McPhee estimates that there may have been no more than 25,000 noble families or 125,000 individual nobles, perhaps 0.4 per cent of the population. Historian Peter Jones agrees with McPhee that 25,000 is an accurate number, and William Doyle uses the estimate of between 120,000 and 350,000 individuals.

The nobles owned between a quarter and a third of all the land in France. Their greatest privilege was exemption from paying the taille and the corvée. The nobles as estate holders benefited from a number of sources of wealth and power. Notwithstanding great internal

**Source 1.9** The observance of the strict social hierarchy could be seen in the clothes worn by the members of each of the estates for the deliberations of the Estates-General. This illustration shows the clothing of the clergy (left), nobility (centre) and commoners (right).
diversity of the nobility, they enjoyed the privilege of rank demonstrated by various insignia of distinction, the fiscal and seigneurial privileges, and exclusive employment in a range of official positions, including the army. As members of the Second Estate, the nobles were seen as having a ‘vested interest in a highly complex system of status and hierarchy from which came material privilege and preferment’. In their opposition to the reforms sought by King Louis XVI, many nobles recognised that any significant changes in France’s political institutions would most likely result in a decrease in their privileges. While some enlightened nobles accepted the need for these reforms because they thought of themselves as the natural leaders of society, most nobles believed that reform was a threat to their position.

The Third Estate – the commoners

The Third Estate included every person who was not a member of the clergy or nobility. Accounting for about 99 per cent of the French population, the Third Estate was a broadly defined group that included wealthy merchants, urban workers, peasants and beggars. The wealthiest group within the Third Estate was the bourgeoisie, mostly living in the towns. They accumulated their wealth through trade rather than farming. Among them were merchants, bankers, industrialists, business people, financiers, landowners, medical professionals, lawyers and civil servants. As a social group, they were growing in wealth and aspired to advance their social status in order to become nobility.

Historian George Rudé suggested that there was a growing frustration within the upper bourgeoisie, particularly those engaged in manufacturing. Rudé illustrates this point by arguing that the causes of the dissatisfaction were deeply rooted in the structures of the ancien régime. The expansion of overseas trade and the increase in the consumption of luxury goods were restricted by the rights and privileges of corporations, feudal landowners and government. In short, the privilege of a few affected the job market, freedom of trade and thus commerce in general.

The most populous section of the Third Estate was the peasants, who constituted more than 80 per cent of the population. Across the country they owned about 30 per cent of the land outright, although this varied between the provinces. They were smallholders, tenant farmers or sharecroppers; if they did not own or lease their land, they farmed at subsistence level. Their low income depended on yields for grain crops and was subsidised by working on other people’s land or in the towns. Scarcity of food was a common feature of peasant life. Among their obligations were feudal seigneurial dues to the lord of the manor (seigneur), including work on the lord’s land; labour service on the roads (corvée); various taxes, including the land tax (taille), the salt tax (gabelle), the head tax (capitation) and the vingtième or twentieth tax; and a tithe to the Church.

Among those of the Third Estate who lived in the towns were urban workers who made their living working as servants, labourers or industrial workers. Most of them were low skilled and survived on low wages. The burden of taxes that members of the other estates did not pay fell heavily on the Third Estate. The quality of life in the lower strata of the Third Estate depended very much on the price of food; when food prices went up, their lives got harder.
INEQUITY OF THE SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL SYSTEM

In the 18th century, there was significant diversity among the regions of France. Many local traditions, practices and loyalties, for example, continued to influence the lives of individuals throughout France. The growth in population and expansion of the economy was not matched by reform of the increasingly outdated feudal structures in society. By the late 18th century, the perception of the need for change became a source of political tension. The nobility, although fully aware of its privilege, rank and status, was removed from active participation in the government of France by lack of any representative institution able to influence the king. The laws and privileges of the provinces prevented the creation of a uniform national market, which frustrated the growing bourgeoisie, who sought a more rational system of law, custom duties and taxes as well as a voice in the governing of the kingdom. The Third Estate was heavily taxed and increasingly resentful of the burden of feudal dues and the tithe. The growing disproportion of wealth and means was not lost on contemporary commentators. French writer Louis-Sébastien Mercier (1740–1814), for example, observed the increasing disparity in the standard of living between the rich and the poor and noted that the ostentatious luxury enjoyed by some prompted bitter resentment among the underprivileged.

The social hierarchy based on the hereditary principle and privilege constrained the social mobility of the enterprising middle class. The predominance of nobility among the leading Church appointments and the practice of a few clerics accumulating multiple financially rewarding church benefices became a frequent and bitter grievance for lower clergy denied advancement and prosperity. Expenditure was high among the nobility, who had to compete for the king’s favour to maintain their position at court, and poorer nobles in particular resented ennoblement of rich merchants. The rich bourgeoisie was equally insulted to be ranked at the bottom of the social order as part of the Third Estate along with the peasants and labourers.

The inequity of the system was particularly striking in the fiscal arrangements: nobles paid little or no tax as the traditional defenders of the kingdom, but despite their rank they had little opportunity to influence the policies of the government. Peasants, urban workers and the

SOURCE 1.10 This is a typical satirical representation of the burden of the privileged orders carried by the Third Estate. Here, a woman of the Third Estate carries representatives of the privileged orders on her back. Note the dress of the three women in this image. Social distinctions between the three estates were often maintained by the Second Estate in the ostentatious display of clothing, which was a guarded privilege.

benefices Church offices that provided ministers with a revenue
ennoblement The act of conferring nobility and the induction of an individual into the nobility
bourgeoisie, who carried the fiscal burden of supporting the kingdom, had no control over how taxes were spent. It was increasingly apparent that in the absence of regular meetings of the Estates-General neither the privileged order nor the commoners had a representative body to give them a political voice.

**Estates-General**

The Estates-General originated in 1302 when the three estates were summoned to meet by King Philip IV the Fair. When in session, the Estates-General formed a consultative assembly of the Kingdom of France and comprised the three estates of the realm: the clergy, the nobility and the commoners. During a meeting of the Estates-General, the three estates deliberated in three separate chambers independently of each other.

The Estates-General never became an institution and never assumed a role similar to the English Parliament. Kings of France summoned the Estates-General only in times of crisis, and some did not call them at all. Deputies representing each of the three estates were elected by the members of the Estate to which they belonged. Their election was accompanied by drawing up lists of grievances (cahiers de doléances) at meetings of adult males who elected the deputies. Traditionally, the monarchy would ask the Estates-General to approve increases in taxes and, in return, pledged to deal with the issues presented in the lists of grievances. The Estates-General of 1614 ended in fiasco and demonstrated how difficult it was to reach consensus between estates when each of them staunchly defended their rights and showed no inclination for compromise. After this experience, the Estates-General were not summoned until the fateful decision of Louis XVI to call their meeting for May 1789 to advise him on the solutions to France’s financial problems and endorse fiscal reform.

In the absence of regular sessions of the Estates-General, their advisory role was carried out by France’s sovereign law courts, the parlements. In the decades before the revolution, the parlements had obstructed many reforms because the right of remonstrance allowed them to hold royal authority in check. In the final years of the fiscal crisis, the parlements refused to agree to the king’s reforms of the taxation system, arguing that only the Estates-General could consent to it on behalf of the whole nation.

When Louis XVI announced that he would summon the Estates-General, no one, including the king, knew how exactly the Estates-General were to be assembled. On 23 September 1788, the Parlement of Paris declared that the Estates-General needed to be organised as they were for the last meeting in 1614. In particular, the deputies of the
three estates were to sit and vote in separate chambers. Nonetheless, Jacques Necker, the reform-minded minister of Louis XVI, persuaded the king to allow the number of deputies of the Third Estate to equal the number of the nobility and clergy combined, to permit the Third Estate to elect deputies from the privileged orders to represent the commoners, and set the number of the deputies at 1000 at least. In an unprecedented break with tradition, the king also promised not to impose any tax without the consent of the Estates-General. These innovations ensured that the outcome of the 1789 elections would be very different from those of 1614.12

**RURAL SOCIETY**

Eighteenth-century France was a rural society. Most of the peasants survived by subsistence farming, their standard of living dependent on harvest yields and weather: crop failure and bad weather meant hunger. It is not an overstatement that the majority of peasants earned just enough to sustain their own existence. Poor harvests were a major reason for rural poverty as they reduced food supply and inflated prices. The testimony of Arthur Young, an English traveller through France in 1789, is often used to highlight abject poverty of the rural population. Young described parts of France as backward and poverty-stricken, with farming practices not much further advanced than that of the Indigenous tribes of North America. At the same time, other visitors to France reported its progress and development.

**SOURCE 1.12** A painting by Louis Le Nain, *Famille de paysans dans un intérieur* (Peasant family in their home), 1643
The inequity of taxation

This contemporary engraving offers a striking illustration of the injustice of the ancien régime based on the inequalities in political, social and economic standing of the estates. The privileged estates (identifiable by their form of dress) are depicted standing on top of the rock bearing the names of taxes paid almost exclusively by the Third Estate.

**SOURCE 1.13** This contemporary image depicts the crushing inequity of the ancien régime in France – the fiscal privilege.

**Questions**

1. Identify the three figures in the cartoon. How are they represented?
2. Describe the background to the scene and explain its significance.
3. The words written on the rock are those of taxes: *Taille, Impôts, Corvées*. Explain what each of these taxes was for.
4. What message does this image convey about the burden of taxation in pre-revolutionary France?
5. Symbols, such as clothing, are frequently used in illustrations to convey meaning. Recognising and understanding these symbols will enable you to analyse and interpret the meaning of other visual sources. Create a table summarising the symbols used in Sources 1.09, 1.10 and 1.13. As you work through your study of the French Revolution you will encounter many new symbols, such as the cockade and the revolutionary bonnet. Add any new symbol and a description of its meaning to your table.
Population of France in 1789, estimated at 28 million

SOURCE 1.14 This diagram shows the estimated size of different social and economic groups of the three estates of French society in 1789.


Questions

1. Why were the clergy and the nobility referred to as the privileged orders?
2. Does the information in Sources 1.13 and 1.14 provide an accurate representation of the social structure of France before 1789?
3. With reference to the sources above, explain in three or four points the position of the Third Estate, or commoners, in the ancien régime.

New ideas – the Enlightenment

As the 18th century progressed, a range of new ideas emerged that challenged traditional ideas about how society should be organised. These ideas were often linked to a series of interrelated economic, social and cultural changes that were undermining the institutional foundations of the European ancien régimes based on corporate privilege and the authority of the Church. These new ideas, which coincided with extended, gradual economic and political change, are referred to by historians as the ‘Enlightenment’. The origins of the Enlightenment can be traced to scientific discoveries such as the publication of Sir Isaac Newton’s *Principia* (1687), which outlined the law of universal gravitation and is regarded as one of the most important works in the history of science. This intellectual movement challenged established forms of society, politics and religion by insisting that the world...
should be understood using reason and logic rather than religion, tradition and superstition. It spread across Europe and had a particularly strong influence in France. Order, religious tolerance, rational thought, criticism and human progress became the key enlightened ideas propagated by these thinkers. These writers became known as *philosophes*. By the 1770s, Paris became the centre of the Enlightenment, but the clever, witty and often satirical and daring writings of the *philosophes* spread far and wide across Europe. The spread of their ideas was partly due to the growth of the reading public and increased affordability of printed text.

The Enlightenment as an intellectual movement was diverse and varied: the *philosophes* argued and disagreed on many questions they debated; they changed their opinions; their intellectual debate was also carried by others, as many novelists, journalists, social thinkers, scientists and even pornographers thrived on the ideas of freedom, pushing the boundaries of what was permissible and acceptable.

**Enlightenment**

The term ‘Enlightenment’ became popular and influential among educated elites, although each European nation had its own particular term to describe the phenomenon. In Germany it was called the *Aufklärung*; in France *des Lumières*; and in Italy it was known as the *Illuminismo*. All these names mean much the same as the English word, *enlightenment*. These terms were used by people at the time to describe the times in which they lived, perhaps in recognition that they were living in a time of great intellectual turmoil.

**FRENCH PHILOSOPHES**

The French word *philosophe* means ‘philosopher’, but in the context of the Enlightenment it is used to denote intellectuals, writers and thinkers who critically scrutinised the institutions, laws and society in general, often challenging established conventions in religion and forms of behaviour. The *philosophes*’ approach was empirical – that is, based on evidence and experience – and sceptical because they questioned established knowledge and examined facts, opinions and beliefs. It promoted access to human knowledge based on reason, not superstition. For this reason, the writings of *philosophes* covered many topics including agricultural techniques, printing, draining swamps, metalworking and the organisation of society.
Among the most influential French *philosophes* were Montesquieu, Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The writings of these key thinkers, although they disagreed on many points, created a new language to discuss and define new understandings about how society should be ruled and organised. They also shaped the values and beliefs of revolutionaries who lead the transformation of France after 1789.

**Montesquieu (1689–1755)**

Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu is usually known simply as Montesquieu. In his masterwork, *The Spirit of Laws* (1748), Montesquieu contrasted the British system of government with the absolutist system of France. By highlighting Britain’s constitutional monarchy, where the power was shared between the king and the parliament, Montesquieu criticised the French system, which was kept from becoming despotic only by the activity of such ‘intermediate bodies’ as the parlements. Montesquieu’s ideas were subsequently reworked and simplified to promote the notion that France needed independent institutions capable of limiting the power of the king and his ministers. Montesquieu also advocated religious tolerance and criticised the use of torture.

**The Spirit of Laws, 1748**

In *The Spirit of Laws*, Montesquieu proposed a system of government based on the ‘separation of powers’, in which a system of checks and balances is established to prevent any form of arbitrary power to dominate others.

In every government there are three sorts of power: the legislative; the executive in respect to things dependent on the law of nations; and the judicial in regard to matters that depend on the civil law.

By virtue of the first power, the prince or magistrate enacts temporary or perpetual laws, and amends or abrogates those that have been already enacted. By the second, he makes peace or war, sends or receives embassies, establishes the public security, and provides against invasions. By the third, he punishes criminals, or determines the disputes that arise between individuals...

The political liberty of the subject is a tranquillity of mind arising from the opinion each person has of his safety. In order to have this liberty, it is requisite the government be so constituted as one man need not be afraid of another.

When the legislative and executive powers are united in the same person, ... there can be no liberty; because apprehensions may arise, lest the same monarch or senate should enact tyrannical laws, to execute them in a tyrannical manner.

Again, there is no liberty, if the judiciary power be not separated from the legislative and executive. Were it joined with the legislative, the life and liberty of the subject would be exposed to arbitrary control; for the judge would be then the legislator. Were it joined to the executive power, the judge might behave with violence and oppression.

Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, Book 11, Chapter 6, 1748.
Voltaire (1694–1778)

Voltaire was a poet, playwright and pamphleteer. In the period when French works were read by educated people throughout Europe, Voltaire was widely regarded as the foremost literary figure in France. Like Montesquieu, he thought that the British parliamentary system had much to recommend it. He aimed his sharpest criticism at religious superstition, intolerance and fanaticism. Voltaire denounced injustice and intolerance; however, he questioned the ability of uneducated ordinary people to make sound political decisions and favoured an enlightened absolutist monarchy.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778)

Rousseau was Swiss by birth but lived much of his life in France. He wrote on a variety of topics, including music, political philosophy and literature. His ideas had great influence in France, especially during the revolution. In The Social Contract (1762), Rousseau advanced the idea of ‘general will’, suggesting that all people have a right to have their opinion heard. Yet it is unlikely that Rousseau’s book was widely read before 1789, and questions have been raised about whether Rousseau was indeed so influential. Certainly, Rousseau did explore his ideas in his bestselling novels, and his books were banned and even publicly burned. Among the future revolutionaries who acknowledged that they were heavily influenced by Rousseau’s ideas was the revolutionary leader Maximilien Robespierre.
The Social Contract

Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s idea of social contract was influenced by a number of writers such as the Englishmen John Locke and Thomas Hobbes. Rousseau’s *The Social Contract* was, however, relatively unknown until the outbreak of revolution in 1789. Only after 1789 was it suddenly treated as a founding text of the revolution.

The problem is to find a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate, and in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before ...

This, however, is not the case with the relation of the subjects to the Sovereign. They, despite the common interest, would have no security that [the Sovereign] would fulfil his undertakings, unless their subjects found means to assure themselves of their fidelity.

In fact, each individual, as a man, may have a particular will contrary or dissimilar to the general will which he has as a citizen. His particular interest may speak to him quite differently from the common interest. His absolute and naturally independent existence may make him look upon what he owes to the common cause as a gratuitous contribution, the loss of which will do less harm to others than the payment of it is burdensome to himself ... He may wish to enjoy the rights of citizenship without being ready to fulfil the duties of a subject ...

In order then that the social contract may not be an empty formula, it tacitly includes the undertaking, which alone can give force to the rest, that whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be compelled to do so by the whole body. This means nothing less than that he will be forced to be free; for this is the condition which, by giving each citizen to his country, secures him against all personal dependence. In this lies the key to the working of the political machine; this alone legitimises civil undertakings, which, without it, would be absurd, tyrannical, and liable to the most frightful abuses.

*Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The Social Contract, Book 1, Chapter 6 and Book 1, Chapter 7.*

Questions

1. Explain your understanding of Rousseau’s concept of the social contract.
2. In your opinion, what implications did it have for political systems and the structure of society?

**ENCYCLOPÉDIE**

The ideas of Montesquieu, Voltaire and Rousseau were to a large degree reflected in the *Encyclopédie*, a work of 17 volumes edited by Jean d’Alembert and Denis Diderot and published between 1751 and 1765. The contributors to the *Encyclopédie* presented a full range of human knowledge by applying the critical and rational approach of the Enlightenment to many aspects of society.

Over the course of the second half of the 18th century, the *philosophes* enjoyed growing influence and acceptance. This trend was, as historian David Garriochn writes, a result of the secularisation of
both politics and French society. Their ideas were spreading among the literate public who prided themselves on being ‘enlightened’. As some of these ideas were no longer seen as radical, it meant they were entering the mainstream. The success of the philosophes in presenting themselves as staunch opponents of despotism persuaded many of the French revolutionaries to claim them as precursors.

HISTORIANS, THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Among historians there is much debate both about how far the philosophes and their ideas undermined the ancien régime and influenced the development of the revolution. The issue is not so straightforward even though the revolutionaries often referred to the philosophes as their precursors in the opposition to absolutism and despotism. The idea that the Enlightenment was the direct cause of the French Revolution was rejected by historian William Doyle. On the other hand, historian Sarah Maza argued that it is undeniable that Voltaire’s extremely witty comments on the Church, Montesquieu’s cautions about the dangers of despotism and the publication of a voluminous Encyclopédie containing many sacrilegious ideas, contributed to lowering respect for the institutions of the ancien régime among readers. Historian Robert Darnton added to this debate by revealing in his writings that the French mostly bought satirical and pornographic pamphlets targeting the royal family, which in the years preceding the revolution further destroyed the aura of divine right. All these arguments are perhaps best summarised by Peter McPhee, who asserted that the acceptance of the ideals of the Enlightenment was a symptom of a crisis of authority.

For David Garrioch, the key influence of the Enlightenment was its impact on the 18th-century reading public. The writers and thinkers disseminated their ideas in plays, novels and pamphlets, through the Encyclopédie, reviews and articles reaching a wide audience even if their more theoretical works were little read. Above all, states Garrioch, the key factor in the impact of the philosophes was the networks they established through correspondence, which facilitated the exchange of ideas between intellectuals and educated elites.

The philosophes influenced not only the elites of France, but also the rest of the world, which was dominated at the time by Europe and North America. Economic, political, legal and social reforms were seen as necessary and often enacted by ministers and bureaucrats. The enlightened bishops acted against ‘superstition’ by promoting education and empowerment of individuals. Over time, these changes created a climate within which the new ideas became acceptable and they encouraged others to consider issues that had not previously been publicly debated.

HISTORIANS DEBATE: DID THE PHILOSOPHES HAVE AN AUDIENCE?

One-third of the French were literate. (William Doyle)

There was a great demand for newspapers, magazines, dictionaries and encyclopaedias. (Robert Palmer)

Cultural crisis allowed the break with tradition, enabling the growth of recognition of civic behaviour perceived as virtuous. (Daniel Roche)

The ‘citizen-nobles’ who fought in the American War of Independence were influenced by its ideals, making them the ‘first revolutionaries’. (Simon Schama)

The ideas of the philosophes were not only widely disseminated but captivated an eager reading public. (George Rudé)

The achievement of the philosophes was to challenge received wisdom and to provide a new language with which to discuss matters that were previously either not considered or were debated only in religious terms or in court circles. (David Garrioch)

The common political vocabulary expands to include such terms as ‘citizen’, ‘general will’, ‘nation’, ‘social contract’, and ‘the rights of man’. (George Rudé)

The Enlightenment undermined the ideological foundations of the established order and strengthened the bourgeoisie’s consciousness of itself as a class. (Albert Soboul)

Soboul’s claim is incorrect – the Parisian bourgeoisie in the eighteenth century did not have a sense of belonging to a class defined by similar interest and viewpoint. (David Garrioch)

Some readers bought Rousseau’s novels but the majority preferred works of exposing scandal and political pornography. (Robert Darnton)
‘Spirit of America’ – European volunteers and the American War of Independence (1775–1783)

Parisians were greatly interested in the revolt of the American colonies against Britain. In particular, after the American agent Silas Deane arrived in France in 1776 to lobby the French for aid. Deane was involved in recruiting officers and engineers and sourcing supplies to support the rebellion. The first foreign volunteers, writes historian Adam Zamoyski, were French. Officially, France maintained its neutrality, but some of the French officers who desired glory on the battlefield, or had little chance of advancement in the French Army, enlisted to help the Americans. Perhaps the best example is Lafayette, who had no hope of gaining meaningful military experience as a soldier in peacetime. For historian Simon Schama, Lafayette’s American experiences not only exposed him to the ideals of ‘Liberty, Equality and the pursuit of Happiness’, but also positively instilled the ‘spirit of America’ in his psyche. Lafayette and other returning European volunteers who had served in the American War of Independence spread the ideas of liberty and popular sovereignty.

Adam Zamoyski maintains that the American revolt was seen by Europeans as a ‘dramatic condemnation of the evils of Europe’ and echoes earlier assessment of French historian Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote in 1835 that ‘the Americans appeared to be doing no more than carrying out what our writers had conceived’. Indeed, Tocqueville suggests a direct link between the ideas of the philosophes and the revolutionary action. The American rebellion demonstrated to the world that there was an alternative to the ancien régime and, even more significantly, it was within reach.

Marquis de Lafayette (1757–1834)

Lafayette was a volunteer who served on the side of the rebels during the American War of Independence (1775–1783). He was influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment and was one of the liberal nobles who recognised the need for reform. During the Assembly of Notables in 1787, Lafayette supported summoning the Estates-General. He was elected as a Second Estate deputy and in July 1789, due to his popularity with the Parisian crowds, was acclaimed the commander of the newly formed National Guard. His actions perhaps saved Marie Antoinette during the dramatic October Days of 1789. He supported the constitutional monarchy and lost all public support after the royal family’s flight to Varennes in 1791 when he ordered the shooting of unarmed demonstrators at the Champ de Mars. He commanded an army in the war against Austria, but in 1792 he defected to Austria and was imprisoned until 1797. On Lafayette’s release, Napoleon allowed him to return to live on his estates in France.
Reform, bankruptcy and the aristocratic revolt

Throughout the second half of the 18th century, the king’s government recognised that in order to maintain its international standing and meet its domestic obligations the king needed more revenue. The issue of changing the level of taxes, broadening their base and the manner of their collection illustrated the institutional problems facing the monarchy. In theory, the king as an absolute monarch had no need to negotiate with any representative body before he collected traditional taxes and maintained the right to do so without going through any consultative process; he was the sole legislator because the law emanated from him as the sovereign. The process was facilitated by the limited role of the Estates-General, which successive French rulers did not convene after 1614. This prerogative of an absolute ruler had a significant weakness: there was no regular mechanism for negotiating an increase in taxes as the kingdom’s needs grew. Added to this problem was the issue of an awkward and inefficient system of tax collection. Tax farmers, usually wealthy entrepreneurs, paid the treasury a set fee for the right to collect taxes in a given region, which resulted in several different tax-collection regimes that could not be coordinated or managed to deal with the royal income fluctuations.

FROM FINANCIAL CRISIS TO POLITICAL CRISIS

1740–48
War of the Austrian Succession: France gave back its European conquests and recovered some lost overseas possessions

1756–63
Seven Years’ War: France was deprived of many of its colonies and burdened with a heavy war debt

1776
Jacques Necker joined the government as Director-General of Finances to try to solve the financial problems of the Crown

1778
France offered support to rebels in the American War of Independence (1775–1783), increasing its financial obligations

1781
Necker resigned from the government after presenting his financial report to the king

1783
American War of Independence ended with the Treaty of Versailles

1786
Calonne succeeded Necker and was charged with solving the growing financial problems

1787
FEBRUARY
Louis XVI convened the Assembly of Notables to discuss and agree to the new taxation proposal. The Assembly was dismissed after refusing to agree to the king’s demands

APRIL
Calonne was dismissed and replaced by Brienne, who failed to negotiate the passage of the reforms though the parlements

1788
3 MAY
The Parlement of Paris proclaimed that new taxes can only be imposed by agreement with the Estates-General

AUGUST
Resistance of the nobles in the Assembly of Notables and the parlements to the reforms proposed by Louis XVI was supported by urban crowds who revolted against the king’s authority

1788
1789
Louis XVI summoned the Estates-General to meet in May 1789 and ordered elections of its deputies together with compilation of the cahiers de doléances of each of the estates

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION
ATTEMPTS AT REFORM

During the second half of the 18th century there were repeated efforts to increase taxes and make the French economy more productive, but royal ministers had come to realise that partial reform was inadequate and they had begun to propose sweeping reforms of the fiscal system. For example, in 1776, Jacques Turgot tried to open up France’s economy by pursuing a number of free-market policies, but popular protests and opposition from the parlements defeated him. He realised the true state of the royal finances and warned that ‘the first gunshot will drive the state to bankruptcy’, arguing against France’s participation in another war.

Turgot’s successor, Jacques Necker, a Swiss banker, tried to save money by abolishing some 506 venal offices, with a saving of about 2.5 million livres a year, and improving tax collection. In the spirit of the Enlightenment, Necker also introduced representative assemblies to give provincial public opinion some voice in administration and at the same time to offset the power of the parlements. In February 1781, Necker caused a sensation by publishing his Compte rendu, a summary of the government’s income and expenses. This gave the public more information than it had ever had before and publicised the seemingly prosperous state of France’s finances. Necker claimed that existing taxes were more than sufficient to cover normal expenditures, but he did not disclose the size of the loans that had financed the French support for the American War of Independence; by May 1781, he raised 520 million livres in loans. Simon Schama describes Necker’s claims as:

"... exactly the kind of spurious good cheer that led the French monarchy down the primrose path to perdition."


Schama acknowledged, however, that Necker was not only a prudent, but a determined reformer who, like Turgot before him, recognised that France’s prosperity depended on its economy developing without restraints. Necker concentrated on achieving direct savings by rationalising the administration and streamlining the revenue. Yet, the Compte rendu became Necker’s downfall. He trusted that the public support would enable him to be promoted to the king’s council from which his Protestant faith excluded him. When Louis XVI refused, Necker resigned. The effects of the Compte rendu were to be felt in the years to come. Whenever the king’s ministers highlighted the Crown’s financial difficulties, concluded William Doyle, the public would distrust any proposed countermeasures, remembering that finances had been under control in Necker’s time. In fact, the state of the Crown’s finances became so identified with him that his resignation caused a substantial loss of public confidence.

Necker on finances of the state

Necker, Compte rendu au Roi, February 1781

Having devoted all my time and my strength in the service of Your Majesty since you appointed me to this position, it is important for me to give you some public explanations concerning the actual state of the Finances. I would have renounced to the satisfaction of explaining my behaviour, if I had not thought that by doing so, all this [information] could have been very useful to Your Majesty’s affairs. Such an institution [the publication of the annual budget], if it became permanent, would be the source of the most important
advantages because the obligation to publicly show his administration would influence a Finance Minister from the first steps in his career. Darkness and obscurity favour nonchalance ... This report would also allow each of the people – who are part of Your Majesty's Councils – to study and follow the situation of the Finances ... Such an institution [the publication of the annual budget] could have the greatest influence on public confidence. In fact, if one fixes his attention on the huge credit England enjoys ... where each year this state [of the finances] is presented to the Parliament, and then it is printed. And all the lenders who regularly know the proportion that is maintained between incomes and expenses are not troubled by suspicions and fanciful fears, which are always part of darkness. In France, the state of Finances has always been a mystery. If sometimes somebody talked about it, it was only in the preambles of edicts and always only when money had to be borrowed. But these words, too often the same to be true, have necessarily lost their authority, and men of experience only believe in it because of the moral nature of the Finance Minister. It is important to found confidence on more solid bases ...

The sovereign of a kingdom such as France can always, when he wants, maintain the balance between ordinary expenses and incomes. The reduction of expenses – which is always the wish of the public – belongs to the King. When circumstances require, only he has the power to increase taxes. But the most dangerous, as well as the fairest of resources, is to blindly look for some temporary aid, and to borrow either through increases of income or through savings. Such an Administration, which seduces because there seems to have no more immediate problems, only increases difficulties and leads to the precipice. On the other hand, a more simple and frank behaviour would multiply the means of the Sovereign and would save him forever from any kind of injustice. It is then a great view of Administration from Your Majesty to have been allowed to give a public report on the state of your Finances. And I wish, for the happiness and the strength of the Kingdom, that this happy institution is not temporary. What is there to fear from such a report if [you] ... make expenses proportional to incomes, and guarantee lenders, every time the needs of the State require their confidence!

Jacques Necker, Compte rendu au Roi, 1781.

**SOURCE 1.20** Jacques Necker portrayed in a contemporary engraving as acting on the king’s authority. Necker holds the cornucopia, a symbol of prosperity.
The origins of the revolution

Chapter 1

The fact that so many reforms were undertaken exposed the fundamental problems undermining the French monarchy and pointed to the erosion of many long-established customs and institutions. With each of these attempts at reform threatening the privileges of various interest groups, those who stood to lose defended themselves by challenging the king’s right to change laws and customs protected by tradition. Historians with different perspectives, such as Peter McPhee, François Furet and William Doyle, conclude that the conflicts that preceded the revolution were not simply a by-product of an outdated and inefficient structure of government. They were deeply rooted in France’s complex, hierarchical social structure. When the steadily worsening financial position forced Louis XVI to allow his subjects to express their views, the king learnt that neither the nobles nor the commoners were prepared to accept changes from above without questioning them.

Questions

1. What are the reasons, according to Necker, why a publication of the state of the royal finances would improve the standing of the monarchy?
2. What specific measure is Necker suggesting to assist the financial management of the kingdom?
3. Is there a danger of relying on borrowing alone?
4. What message does Source 1.20 convey about Jacques Necker and the state of the French economic system?
5. There are a number of symbols, such as the cornucopia, used in Source 1.20 to convey different ideas. What other symbols can you identify? What do they mean?

It did not contain plans for fiscal reform.

It constituted the beginning of a national financial crisis.

It misleadingly suggested that the Crown’s budget was in credit.

It prevented attempts at fundamental reform of France’s taxation system because it created the impression that the Crown’s finances were in good order.

Through its inaccuracy, it helped to entrench a subsequent attitude of suspicion towards the monarch’s conduct of financial affairs.
ASSEMBLY OF NOTABLES – BEGINNING OF THE ARISTOCRATIC REVOLT

The man who persuaded Louis XVI of the necessity for extraordinary measures to head off bankruptcy was Charles-Alexandre de Calonne, controller-general since 1783. By 1786, the king’s government faced the immediate problem of repaying the money borrowed to pay the cost of France’s support of the American rebels against Britain. The financial crisis was thus directly linked to the effort to maintain France’s role as a world power.

Charles-Alexandre de Calonne (1734–1802)

Calonne was an administrator with a long career in the Crown’s service, serving as the intendant of Metz (1768) and of Lille (1774). His skill in the management of finances and the support of an influential court faction brought him to the attention of Louis XVI, who appointed Calonne as the controller-general of finance in November 1783. Calonne’s management of the Crown’s financial position focused on maintaining public confidence through building projects and spending, which was mainly designed to maintain the Crown’s capacity to borrow funds. His major reform proposal crystallised in 1786 and involved increasing taxation of the first and second estates through a proportional tax on land. The implementation of such a reform needed not only the king’s approval but, in the absence of the regularly summoned Estates-General, a form of consultation with the various sections of the king’s subjects. Calonne recognised that the parlements were likely to reject his proposals if he submitted them as the king’s edict for registration and opted instead for an endorsement by a specially convened Assembly of Notables, which began deliberating on 22 February 1787. The Assembly proved to be his downfall and Calonne was dismissed; within months he had left France for Britain, where he actively criticised the course of revolutionary change. Calonne returned to France in 1802.

Any further increases in tax burden are not viable.

The Crown can no longer rely on borrowing because of the high cost of servicing debt.

Cost-cutting in the Crown’s administration and the court cannot provide enough savings.

The only effective way to put the finances truly in order is review of the fiscal system and reform of all that is defective in its makeup.
In the decision that would prove to be the first step towards the revolution, Calonne asked the king to convoke an Assembly of Notables, an advisory body to the king, which in 1787 comprised 144 notables, only ten of whom were non-noble. The purpose of this assembly was to endorse radical yet fundamental changes in the fiscal privileges of the nobles – the king’s decision to summon the notables was nonetheless a sign of weakness in the monarch. It exposed Calonne’s fear that the Crown lacked the authority to enforce the reforms without some appearance of consultation with the taxpayers. In February 1787, at the Assembly of Notables, Calonne proposed the introduction of a universal land tax, the reduction of the *taille* and *gabelle*, and the abolition of internal customs barriers, while giving the nobles an increased role in administration through the establishment of assemblies in all provinces.

### The Assembly of Notables, 1787

Calonne presented Louis XVI with a broad program of administrative and financial reform, aiming to increase royal revenue by ending the tax privileges of the clergy and nobility. Calonne argued that the annual deficit of nearly 100 million livres was largely caused by servicing the debt and that a new, fairer and more efficient tax levied on wealth was needed. He presented the plan to the Assembly of Notables, seeking its endorsement.

**Calonne, Address to the Assembly of Notables, 1787**

His Majesty brought all his personal attention to bear on establishing the principle of uniformity ... in the distribution of the land tax ... by the application of the rules of a strictly distributive justice, of restoring the original intentions behind the tax, of raising it to its true value without increasing anyone’s contribution (indeed granting some relief to the people), and of making every kind of privilege incompatible with its mode of collection. [Therefore it is proposed] to replace the vingtièmes with a general land tax which, covering the whole area of the kingdom, would consist of a proportion of all produce, payable in kind where feasible, otherwise in money, and admitting of no exception, even as regards his crown lands, nor of any other distinctions other than those resulting from the varying fertility of the soil and the varying harvests. The church lands would necessarily be included in this general assessment which, to be fair, must include all land as does the protection for which it is the price. But in order that these lands should not be overburdened by continuing to pay the tithes which are collected to fund the debt of the clergy, the king, sovereign protector of the churches of his kingdom, has decided to provide for the repayment of this debt by granting the clergy the necessary authorisation to make the repayment [by selling off feudal rights, etc.] ...

Complete freedom of the grain trade ... with the one exception of deferring to the wishes of the provinces when any of them think it necessary temporarily to suspend export abroad ... The abolition of the corvée as performed in person and the conversion of this excessively harsh exaction to a monetary

*continued*
contribution distributed more justly and spent in such a way that it can never be diverted to other purposes. Internal free trade, with customs houses removed to the frontiers, the establishment of a uniform tariff taking the needs of commerce into consideration, the suppression of several taxes which are harmful to industry or lead too easily to harassment and the alleviation of the burden of the gabelle (which I have never mentioned to His Majesty without his being deeply grieved that he cannot rid his subjects of it altogether). These, gentlemen, are so many salutary measures which enter into the plan upon which His Majesty will enlarge and which all conform to the principles of order and uniformity which are its basis.

Calonne, speech of the French king to the Assembly of Notables, Versailles, 22 February 1787.

**Questions**

1. Referring to the caricature of Calonne and the notables, explain the artist’s perception of the meeting. Is it likely that such a perception was shared by the public?
2. List the proposed reforms, as outlined by Calonne. Provide an explanation for each of them.
Calonne’s proposals were rejected by the notables representing the interests of the Second Estate, who insisted that only a gathering of representatives of the three orders in the Estates-General could agree to such extensive changes in the fiscal arrangements of the kingdom. One of the notables, Marquis de Lafayette, wrote to his friend George Washington, questioning the rights of the Assembly of Notables to represent the whole of France and remarked that he felt he could not endorse the taxation proposals unless he knew of the planned savings in the Crown’s expenditure. In the months following the meeting, observers such as Arthur Young also commented that the state of the Crown’s finances were such that any attempt to solve the situation was impossible without the king summoning the Estates-General; and its meeting would necessarily cause great changes in the way France was governed.

**THE ARISTOCRATIC REVOLT**

The Aristocratic Revolt started with the Assembly of Notables in 1787 and lasted well into 1788. During this period, the authority of the king’s government rapidly eroded. The term ‘Aristocratic Revolt’ was originally used by French historian Georges Lefebvre to describe the period before 1789 when the most vocal opposition to the king’s reform initiatives came from members of France’s noble elite rather than from the bourgeoisie and other members of the Third Estate. Lefebvre interpreted the opposition of the reactionary landed nobles as a response to the growth of an increasingly prosperous bourgeoisie. More recently, historians, including William Doyle and Simon Schama, have questioned such an interpretation and argued that liberal nobles accepted the need for change and their rejection of royal arbitrary power made them the ‘first revolutionaries’. Yet, the very fact that the Assembly was dismissed without resolving the issue, argues historian Michael Fitzsimmons, created a perception that the notables were unwilling to give up their fiscal privileges to restore the financial crisis affecting the whole country.

Peter McPhee sees the refusal of the nobility to endorse the king’s ambitious reform of the fiscal system as the result of the lack of their participation in the government of the kingdom and the social and economic challenges posed by the Third Estate, and in particular from the wealthier bourgeoisie and an openly disaffected peasantry. The claims of the nobility of ‘ministerial despotism’ resonated strongly with the public, who by now lacked confidence in the government. William Doyle argues that Calonne’s whole strategy misfired because he naively assumed that the notables would accept there was a crisis, and Calonne’s plan was the best approach to solving it. Following Calonne’s dismissal in April 1787, his successor, Loménie de Brienne,
archbishop of Toulouse, failed to convince the notables to accept the king’s reform plan and the Assembly was dismissed at the end of May. Brienne’s proposed reforms brought ever wider circles of the population into vocal opposition. The Assembly of Notables was a turning point, marking the beginning of a political crisis, which William Doyle convincingly stated, was only to be resolved by revolution.

Brienne attempts to abolish the parlements

Étienne-Charles de Loménie de Brienne, who replaced Calonne as minister of finance, sought to get the parlements to approve amended versions of Calonne’s proposals. He resorted to exiling the judges of the Parlement of Paris to weaken their resistance and worked out a compromise by promising to call the Estates-General in 1792. In exchange, he asked the parlements to approve an extension of tax surcharges introduced to finance the American War of Independence. This plan did not succeed because when the Parlement of Paris met on 19 November 1787 to ratify this plan, Louis XVI ordered the judges to register his edict instead of allowing a semblance of judicial independence and permitting the judges to discuss it freely. The judges refused to obey the command. With the compromise not possible, the king’s government abolished the parlements altogether and replaced them with a single high court for the whole country. The response of the public was to demand a limit to royal authority.

The crisis deepens

Brienne’s attempt to abolish the parlements opened a public debate that went beyond the issues of fiscal reform. This debate raised questions about the power of the king, the king’s relationship with the nation, and who ultimately had the power to make laws for the kingdom. The examples of Britain and the United States served as powerful inspiration to those who demanded a political voice in the government of France. The dismissed Assembly of Notables had already suggested a solution – calling together the Estates-General, the representatives chosen from the three estates who had the power to present grievances to the king and to consent to new fiscal arrangement.

Such thinking was expressed in the statement of the Parlement of Paris, made on 3 May 1788, which declared that France was a monarchy governed according to a number of fundamental laws. These laws defined the rights of the monarch, those of his subjects including the right of the Estates-General to give its consent to changes in taxes levied by the king as well as the independence of judges, and the traditional laws of provinces.

By early August 1788, the treasury was virtually empty and Brienne resigned in favour of Jacques Necker. Necker’s return, together with the recall of the parlements, produced a temporary calming effect. It was during this period that the election of deputies to the Estates-General occurred.
HOW DID THE FINANCIAL CRISIS BECOME A POLITICAL CRISIS?

Historians take two general approaches to the issues of the developing revolutionary situation in France before 1789. On one side, there are those who see the revolution as the outcome of the push by the bourgeoisie, urban workers and peasants for political power; on the other, those for whom the revolution was an avoidable crisis that occurred when a reform-minded monarch attempted to execute his plans. In particular, the Assembly of Notables as the key event, which led directly to the development of the revolutionary situation, was variously interpreted. For Albert Goodwin (1946), the notables were selfish defenders of fiscal privilege, countering the king’s proposal of reform. A different interpretation was offered by Vivian Gruder (2007), who argued that the notables were seeking compromise and were willing to give up their fiscal privileges, but demanded a measure of control over royal finances. John Hardman (2010) disagreed with Gruder, arguing that the notables were defending their fiscal interests and attributed the failure of the Assembly to the refusal of Louis XVI to share his absolute power and Calonne’s miscalculation in taxing declining agriculture.

Albert Soboul and George Rudé have seen the causes of the revolution in the slow rise of the bourgeois class and the decline of the nobility, which arguably represented the culture less well adapted to capitalism. Albert Soboul explained that:

… the Assembly of Notables, by definition a group of aristocrats … after criticizing the planned tax, demanded a statement of the Treasury’s accounts. The paralysis of the monarchy that resulted from the quarrel between the King and the nobility led to revolution: The bourgeoisie, the leading element in the Third Estate, now took over. Its aim was revolutionary: to destroy aristocratic privilege and to establish legal and civic equality in a society that would no longer be composed of orders and constituted bodies. But the bourgeoisie intended to stay within the law. Before
long, however, it was carried forward by the pressure of the masses, the real motive force behind the revolution.


Similar conclusions were reached by George Rudé and Peter McPhee. Rudé wrote that ‘The Notables refused to endorse ministerial reforms because their own cherished fiscal immunities were threatened’.14 McPhee pointed to ‘the entrenched hostility of most nobles towards fiscal and social reform’.15 He also suggested that, ‘Further attempts at reform foundered on the nobility’s insistence that only a gathering of representatives of the three orders as an Estates-General could agree to such innovation. Tension between Crown and the nobility came to a head in August 1788, with the parlements insisting that the measures that the King’s ministry sought to impose amounted to “royal despotism”.’16

Simon Schama’s profoundly different interpretation of the sources resulted in his claim that the privileged orders were far ahead of Calonne and were willing to sacrifice their own rights because ‘their shared sense of the historical moment that prompted their display of patriotic altruism. Allotted the role of a dumb chorus, they suddenly found that, individually and collectively, they had a powerful voice – and that France was paying attention. This abrupt self-discovery of politics was intoxicating and there are signs that though they are usually dismissed as the tail end of the old regime, with respect to political self-consciousness the Notables were the first revolutionaries’.17 In a masterly use of allegory, Schama provided an illustrative parallel: ‘It was rather as if he [Calonne] had set out to drive an obstinate mule with a very heavy wagon, only to find that the mule was a racehorse and had galloped into the distance, leaving the rider in the ditch’.18

Like Schama, David Andress pointed to the progressive ideas: ‘much in the deliberations of the Notables suggested they, too, were finding new ways of thinking’.19 William Doyle commented on the growth of public opinion, as for the first time the Crown’s financial issues were openly discussed: ‘All these proceedings had formally taken place in secret. The public was agog to have news of the Assembly, rumours abounded, and a good deal of more or less accurate information leaked out. It fuelled a flurry of pamphleteering, most of it hostile to the ministers. In addition to despotism, profligacy, and incompetence, it was now alleged … that Calonne was also guilty of shady stock-exchange dealings’.20

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**Conclusion**

The tensions within the rigid social order based on privilege and tradition and the outdated institutions of the state prevented the French monarchy from responding to financial pressures caused by the French imperial ambitions. The absolute monarchy faced demands for constitutional reform in exchange for consent to reform the fiscal system. When the attempted reforms stalled, radical solutions were sought to resolve the stalemate with the convocation of the only body representing the estates of France, the Estates-General.
Chapter summary

+ In the 18th century, France was one of the great European powers with worldwide aspirations.
+ France was a kingdom whose monarch ruled by divine right.
+ In its effort to maintain its international position, France accumulated a substantial debt, which could not be serviced through its existing taxation system.
+ In the absolute monarchy there was no mechanism for the king’s subjects to express their consent or otherwise to the new taxes. The king’s ministers recognised the need for reform, but were unable to force the changes due to the lack of an institution representing the nation.
+ The intellectual movement, which had begun in the 1720s, articulated new thinking and a new vision of society.
+ The financial crisis caused by French support of the American War of Independence and the inability of the king’s government to reform France’s fiscal system turned into a political crisis, with demands for representation from all sections of French society.
+ The emergence of public debate caused the shift in thinking about the organisation of society and the political roles of the king and the nation.

Endnotes

6 Peter McPhee, 2002, p. 16.
8 Peter McPhee, 2002, p. 16.
15 Peter McPhee, 2002, p. 35.
16 Peter McPhee, 2006, p. 12.
Weblinks
Weblinks relevant to this chapter can be found at http://nmh.nelsonnet.com.au/french

Further resources

Chapter review activities
To bring together everything you have learnt in this chapter, make study notes while the information is fresh in your mind. Using dot points and colour coding on either concept cards or in a computer file or tablet device, note the following main points and add your own examples, including symbols that appear in images.

1. What was the Enlightenment?
2. Who were the critical thinkers of the Enlightenment?
3. What was the position of France in the 18th-century European context?
4. How did ordinary French people view the monarchy and the Church in the last decades of the 18th century?
5. Identify and discuss tensions between the three estates of France and their likely contribution to the revolutionary situation in 18th-century France.
6. To what extent was the social structure of the ancien régime a cause of the French Revolution?
7. Explain why the taxation system in 18th-century France failed to meet the fiscal requirements of the nation.
8. What were the restrictions placed on trade and commerce by the traditional administrative divisions of France?
9. What was the relationship between the Bourbon monarchy and the French people in the century before 1789?
10. In what ways did the Roman Catholic Church support the monarchy?
11. What was the relationship between the French king and the Second Estate?
12 How were the ideological foundations of the French monarchy challenged and possibly undermined by the Enlightenment philosophers and writers?

13 Identify and discuss two individuals who attempted to achieve fiscal and political reform in France during the 1780s. To what extent were they successful?

14 Explain what impact France’s involvement in the American War of Independence had on the development of the revolutionary situation.

15 What were the actions of the parlements that challenged royal authority?

16 What were the events of 1788 that led Louis XVI to announce the convocation of the Estates-General?

17 What factors and forces led to the failure of reformist policies in the 1780s?

Focus activity

18 What were the causes of the French Revolution? Create a chart presenting the structure of society in pre-1789 France. Can the origins of the revolution be found in the composition of society at the time?

Enquiry activity

19 Create a mind map charting the following:
   + issues of most concern to the Third Estate
   + issues that, if unresolved, were most likely to lead to disorder and violence
   + issues that were most likely to lead to change in the way France was governed.

20 Using the ideas gathered in the mind map, create an agenda for reform, ranking the issues in order of their priority for the king’s government.

21 Identify issues that Louis XVI could not have influenced at the time of the French Revolution.