

The Old Order

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While the American colonies struggled to gain independence from Great Britain and to establish a republic, the absolute monarchy in France was at its height. During this time France enjoyed its role as the richest and possibly the most powerful state in Europe. The French aristocracy set European trends in literature, clothing, art, and ideas for change.

Yet the majority of the people in France did not share the wealth or power of the aristocracy. Working men and women who had few rights yearned for a better way of life. The Americans' success only fueled their desires for change.

French Society Divided

The source of the unhappiness lay within France's class system, which fostered great inequalities among the French people. All French people belonged to one of three estates, or orders of society. The estates determined a person's legal rights and status. The Catholic clergy formed the First Estate. The nobility formed the Second Estate. Everyone else, 97 percent of the French people, were members of the Third Estate.

Members of the Third Estate deeply resented the privileges that members of the First and Second estates enjoyed. For example, neither the First Estate nor the Second Estate was required to pay taxes. The nobilities received high positions in the Church, in the government, and in the army, and they could also hunt and carry swords. Third Estate members enjoyed none of these social and political privileges. However successful and well educated Third Estate members became, they were always excluded from the First and Second estates—simply because of the families into which they were born.

The First Estate The First Estate consisted of Roman Catholic clergy and made up about 1 percent of the population. The First Estate comprised two groups: the higher clergy and the lower clergy.

Bishops and abbots, noblemen by birth, made up the higher clergy. These powerful men controlled between 5 and 10 percent of the land in France and enjoyed many privileges. At their disposal were the revenues from their land as well as a **tithe**, or a 10 percent tax on income from each church member. Although this money was used to support schools, aid poor people, and maintain church property, it also paid for the grand lifestyles the higher clergy enjoyed, often at the expense of their religious duties.

The lower clergy, made up of parish priests, came from poorer backgrounds and were socially more a part of the Third Estate. Many lower clergy members who carried out religious duties, ran schools, and cared for the poor resented the luxurious lifestyles of the higher clergy.

The Second Estate The nobility, the Second Estate, formed about 2 percent of the population and owned about 25 percent of the land in France. Like the upper clergy, the members of the Second Estate enjoyed many privileges and lived in great style.

The nobility held high posts in the government and the military. Some resided in the palace at Versailles. Others lived in lavish homes on inherited land, some of which they rented to peasants to farm. The Second Estate's main income came from the feudal dues they collected from the peasants who lived on and worked their land.

The Third Estate The Third Estate made up the largest social group. Peasants and artisans, as well as members of the bourgeoisie

(poor *zhwah ZEE*), or middle class, belonged to the Third Estate. Yet they had almost no political rights.

The doctors, lawyers, merchants, and business managers of the bourgeoisie generally lived in the towns and cities. Educated and well-to-do, they had read Enlightenment works and believed in freedom and social justice.

Other members of the Third Estate, such as thousands of poor artisans and their families, also lived in the cities. Artisans worked for low wages and in poor working conditions in places such as dockyards or in government-owned car factories. Many lived in Paris' slums.

The peasants, the Third Estate's largest group, lived in rural areas. Although they owned 40 percent of the land, they were very poor because of the payments they had to make to the other estates. These payments included a tithe to the clergy; feudal dues, fees, and fines to the nobles; and a *taille*, or land tax, to the king. Although members of the Third Estate worked hard, they had no voice in the government.

Growing Unrest

Unhappy with this unfair social structure, the people of the Third Estate began to call for change. An Englishman traveling in France saw this growing unrest reflected in a conversation he had with a peasant woman:

Walking up a long hill . . . I was joined by a poor woman who complained of the times, and that it was a sad country; . . . she said her husband had but a morsel of land, one cow, and a poor little horse, yet they had [42 lbs.] of wheat and three chickens to pay as rent to one [lord], and [four lbs.] of oats, one chicken and [a shilling] to pay to another, besides very heavy tailles and other taxes.

—Arthur Young, from *Travels*, 1789

As a growing population put increasing demands on resources, and the cost of living in France increased, the peasants' anger rose. Nobles also charged the peasants higher fees for the use of such equipment as mills and wine presses.



Learning from Cartoons A member of France's Third Estate is shown bearing the costs of fees and taxes during the Old Regime. What is the message of the cartoon?

At the same time, artisans in the cities faced higher prices while their wages stayed the same. Members of the bourgeoisie also wanted change. Although they were prosperous, they wanted more political power. Nobles, too, were unhappy. They resented the king's absolute power and wanted to increase their political influence in the government.

A growing financial crisis in government only added to the country's problems. The 1700s had begun with debts from the wars waged by Louis XIV. The extravagant court of Louis XV had further increased this debt.

In 1774 Louis XV's 19-year-old grandson followed his grandfather to the throne as Louis XVI. His wife, Marie Antoinette, was a year younger. In spite of his inexperience, the young king recognized the growing financial crisis. Supporting the American revolution had only increased his debt. After initiating government cost-cutting measures, Louis decided that he had no choice but to begin taxing the nobility and the clergy. But both groups refused to be taxed.