

Causes of the French Revolution

Central Historical Question:

Given the conditions in France, would acting in rebellion against the King be an act of heroism or terrorism?

Document #1 Description of King Louis XIV's rule 1643 - 1715

The King's rule was absolute. He ruled by the *divine right* and was therefore responsible to God alone. He appointed all civil officials and military officers. He made and enforced the laws. He could declare war and make peace. He levied taxes and spent the people's money as he saw fit. He controlled the expression of thought by a strict censorship of speech and press. He could arbitrarily imprison anyone without trial for an indefinite period. He lived in his magnificent palace at Versailles, completely oblivious to the rising tide of popular discontent.

Document #2: Arthur Young "Travels in France" 1787-1789 [Taille = tax]

In the south of France there is a taille. There is an injustice in levying the amount each person must pay. Lands held by the nobility are taxed very little. Lands held by commoners are taxed heavily.

The poor people seem very poor indeed. The children are terribly ragged.

June, 1789: The lack of bread is terrible. Stories arrive every moment from the provinces of riots and disturbances, and calling in the military, to preserve the peace of the markets. The price of bread has risen above people's ability to pay. This causes great misery.

July 1789: ...I was joined by a poor woman who complained of the hard times. "The tailles and feudal rent dues are crushing us," she said.

Document #3 What is the third estate? *Abbé Sieyès 1789*

This pamphlet was written to try to convince the King the Third Estates deserved an increased role in the Estates General – France's elected body.

We must ask ourselves three questions.

1. What is the Third State? Everything.
2. What has it been until now in the political order? Nothing.
3. What does it want to be? Something....

The Third Estate is made of those who collect nature's products, those who make them into something and those who then sell and distribute the finished products. The Third Estate also includes teachers, doctors, lawyers and those who provide other important services. These efforts sustain society. Who puts them forth? The Third Estate.

Who then shall dare to say that the Third Estate cannot form a complete nation on its own? If the privileged order should be abolished, the nation would be nothing less, but something more.

What is the Third Estate? Everything; but it is an everything that is shackled and oppressed.

Document #4 Jean Jacques Rousseau: The Social Contract, 1763

Government is an intermediary body established between the subjects and the sovereign to keep them in touch with each other. The government's power is only the public power vested in it. If the time should ever come when the government makes use of the public power to carry out its own particular will- the social union will disappear and the body politic will be dissolved.