

Causes of the French Revolution (2)

As if the system of estates in France wasn't enough to cause resentment among the lower classes, towards the end of the 1700s, France was experiencing other problems too.

Problem 1 – MONEY

By 1787, the French government was **bankrupt**. It was 4000 million livres in debt. France had spent a lot of money fighting costly wars, but had nothing to show for it. Many people accused the royals, especially Queen Marie- Antoinette of spending too much money on luxuries. Others said that the tax system was corrupt and some tax-collectors did not hand all their taxes over to the government.

In 1787 the King asked the nobility to help him **reform** the tax system. As we already know, members of the first and second estate did not have to pay some taxes. King Louis XVI wanted them to start paying some of them. It is not surprising that they refused to do so.



Problem 2 – Bad harvest.

Most people in France depended heavily on agriculture and farming in the 1700s. In the years 1787 – 1789, terrible weather, heavy rain, hard winters and too hot summers led to three very bad harvests in France.

This led to peasants and farmers having smaller incomes, while food prices rose sharply. The poor harvests also meant that many French farmers became unemployed. Many poorer people were starving, but could not afford food and could not find a job. Meanwhile, the nobility, the clergy and King Louis and his family continued to live in the lap of luxury, in their palaces and chateaux.



Problem 3 – Louis calls the Estates General. May – June 1789

In August 1788, King Louis XVI called the **Estates General** (a gathering of representatives from all three estates) for the first time since 1614.

The Estates General met at the palace of Versailles, just Outside Paris, in May 1789. There were 1100 members, or **deputies**, divided into three orders. The nobles, the clergy, and the third estate, which represented millions of ordinary French people, but only contained half the deputies (including some clever lawyers) The king hoped the Estates General would approve new taxes. The nobles and the clergy hoped they would control the affairs to continue their privileged lifestyles. The middle classes hoped for an English style democracy. The peasants hoped for solutions to their problems and were asked by their representatives to draw up lists of complaints. (**cahiers de doléances**).

The King summoned the Estates General to Versailles, where he had a body of troops. Some saw this as an attempt to frighten the representatives. He did not present them with any proposals for discussion, so they were left to think up their own ideas. This meant that Louis did not have control of the meeting.

Source A. Louis meets the States General at Versailles



Problem 4 – The National Assembly, June 1789.



Source B. Members of the Third Estate swearing not to separate until they have given France a constitution.

The deputies of the third estate, having grown tired of the arguments over how each order should vote, declared themselves a 'national assembly'. They represented 96% of the population and felt that they were the 'true' parliament. They wanted to draw up a constitution showing how France was to be governed.

On June 20th, the members of this assembly met at the royal tennis court. They pledged an oath (The Tennis Court Oath) not to leave until the King agreed to meet their demands. He gave way and deputies of the first and second estates became part of the National Assembly.

Source C. – From the collection of Cahiers taken to the Estates-General.

O rich citizens be so good as to leave for a time your chateaux and palaces and be so good as to glance at those unfortunates whose muscles are only occupied in working for you. What do you see in our villages? A few weakened men, faces withered by poverty and shame, their wives having too many children, their children wearing rags...

...All the peasants in our neighbourhood – Brittany – are making ready to refuse the church tax-gatherers and state that nothing will be taken without bloodshed.

Source D. – A modern view of the calling of the Estates General.

The King wanted to hear the voice of his people in order to right all wrongs. What a surprising development. The King was all-powerful: therefore, the people thought, the wrongs must be about to end. The peasants chewed over their suffering with growing bitterness now that they had been invited to speak. They dredged up from the depths of their minds memories from past sufferings.

(The modern French Historian, Lefebvre, *La Revolution Francaise*, 1951)



TASKS

- 1) Write down each of the following words or terms, and what it means: Bankrupt; Reform; Estates General; deputies; cahiers de doléances; 'national assembly'; constitution; tennis court oath.
- 2) Why was the French Government bankrupt in 1787? (think of more than one or two reasons)
- 3) What effect did the poor harvest have on the ordinary people of France?
- 4) Why might members of the third estate have felt under-represented at the meeting of the Estates General in May 1789?
- 5) What were the hopes of each of the parties involved?
- 6) What mistakes did Louis make at the meeting, and what did his mistakes lead to? (clue: look at problem 4)
- 7) Read source C. According to this source, what were French villages like? Were all French villages like the one described? Explain your answer.
- 8) What are the peasants of Brittany threatening at the end of source C? Use words from the source to add detail to your answer.
- 9) What does the author of source D think about the calling of the Estates General?
- 10) Using the information on this sheet, and your previous work on the causes of the French revolution, write an extended answer to the question, 'Why was France on the brink of revolution by 1789?' Refer to and quote from sources in your answer. (You should aim to write at least 2 pages in your exercise book.)