

The Ancien Regime

History

Year 8 - Lesson 7

Mr Arscott



The Three Estates

Although many Enlightenment ideas were discussed in French salons, in many ways, the way France was ruled during the eighteenth century was very old-fashioned. In fact, the French government was facing a **crisis** because society had changed but the way France was ruled had not changed. France had a political system known as the **Three Estates**. Everyone in France was a member of one of the three estates. The first two estates were the clergy and the aristocracy. These two groups owned most of the land in France and had the greatest influence on the French government. Although they were wealthy, they paid very few taxes. The Third Estate included everyone else in French society. Members of the Third Estate had to pay a lot of tax. Most members of the Third Estate were poor peasants.



Social Change

During the Eighteenth century, France was changing. New social groups were growing. One was the bourgeoisie: the new wealthy middle class. Members of the bourgeoisie were part of the Third Estate, but they were wealthy. People in the bourgeoisie were also well educated and because they knew about Enlightenment ideas, they had strong views on how France should be ruled. They particularly did not like that they paid so many taxes but that they did not get to influence the French government. Another new group was the growing number of workers who lived in towns. These have become known as the sans culottes. The sans culottes were mainly very poor and because they had to pay so many taxes sometimes they could not afford to buy bread. Both the bourgeoisie and the sans culottes wanted change but King Louis XVI was unwilling to **reform** the French government.



Tax and debt

The French government was also in crisis because it was in **debt**. France had spent lots of money fighting against Britain in the American War of Independence. In order to pay for its debt, the French government needed to collect more money through taxes. Most people that worked for the government were members of the First and Second Estates. Although the aristocracy and clergy could afford to pay more money they did not want to be taxed and might stop supporting King Louis XVI if he tried to tax them. The bourgeoisie were wealthy enough to pay more but they wanted to be involved in government through a parliament. The sans culottes could not afford to pay any more taxes and were at risk of starving.



Louis XVI's crisis

Louis XVI was in a difficult situation. He knew he needed more money but he did not know how he could raise taxes without losing support. He also wanted to rule as an absolute monarch. In fact, some people who knew about Enlightenment ideas thought Louis XVI was a despot. In the centre of Paris was a feared building called the Bastille. The Bastille was a prison where Louis XVI could send anyone without a trial. For example, the Enlightenment thinker Voltaire had briefly been imprisoned in the Bastille for criticising the French government.



Glossary

Clergy: people who work for the Church. Known in France as the First Estate.

Crisis: a bad situation which will get worse if action is not taken.

Debt: money that is owed to someone else.

Three Estates: the division of French society into three social classes.

Reform: to change something.

Sans culottes: poor workers who live in towns.



Comprehension Questions

1. Who were the clergy?

Sentence starter: *The clergy means....*

2. What were the benefits of being part of the First or Second Estates?
3. Why were members of the bourgeoisie unhappy about paying taxes?
4. Which groups could not afford to pay more taxes?
5. Challenge question: Why was Louis XVI's government facing a crisis?



Extension: Did the Enlightenment contribute to the crisis of 1789?

Sentence starters:	Key words
<p><i>On the one hand, the Enlightenment did contribute to the crisis of 1789. The Enlightenment made people more critical of Louis XVI because....</i></p> <p><i>On the other hand, the Enlightenment did not really contribute to the crisis of 1789. Other causes were more important such as....</i></p> <p><i>Overall, I think...</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-Salons-Estates-Equality-Fair-Debt-Parliament-Taxes-Corrupt-American War of Independence

