

The French Revolution

An Age of Revolutions
(1750–1914)



The ancien régime

Reform and terror

Emperor Napoleon

Thematic Icons



Economics and business



Geography and environment



Historical concepts and questions



Politics, government and citizenship



Religion and thought



Society and culture



War, diplomacy and foreign policy

Icons: For more detailed instructions, see the *User Guide*



Flash activity (these activities are not editable)



Teacher notes included in the Notes page



By the end of this section, you will have learned about the origins of the French Revolution and be able to answer the following key questions:

- How was French society organized before the Revolution?
- What were the main causes of the French Revolution?
- What were the early events of the French Revolution?



In order to contextualize the French Revolution, use this timeline to recap previous key historical events. Either press on a date or drag the pointer along the timeline to find out information about what happened in each year.

Press **start** to begin.

start





Financial problems



In the late 1700s, France faced several financial problems. After years of excessive spending by the monarchy, costly wars, a decline in trade and industry, and rising living costs, it was on the brink of bankruptcy.

Compounding these issues, the 1770s and 1780s had seen poor harvests, resulting in a nationwide shortage of food. Bread, a staple food, doubled in price in 1789.



Although taxes were high and French ministers borrowed extensively to keep the country afloat, France had no money.

How do you think the government could solve its economic troubles?





The king and queen



Louis XVI became king in 1774. He inherited the throne from his grandfather, **Louis XV**. With the crown came a large debt. Louis XVI was a weak, indecisive **absolute monarch** who was bored by matters of state. He was a poor leader who received bad advice and continued to spend a lot of money.



His queen, **Marie Antoinette**, was pretty and charming, but unpopular due to being from Austria, an old enemy of France. She made things worse with lavish spending and gambling.





The French government under the monarchy was known as the ***ancien régime***. Under this rigid system, society was divided into three classes, or **estates**.

Clergy of the Roman Catholic Church made up the **First Estate**, and nobles the **Second Estate**. Everyone else in France was part of the **Third Estate**.

The Third Estate was made up of the **bourgeoisie** (professionals), merchants and artisans; but it was mostly **peasants** (poor farmers) that made up 80% of the Third Estate.



What does this political cartoon tell us about the relationship between the three estates?



The Three Estates



The Three Estates made up the
ancien régime in France.
Drag each of the statements to the
correct estate.
Press **start** to begin.

start



How would you feel if you were born a peasant?



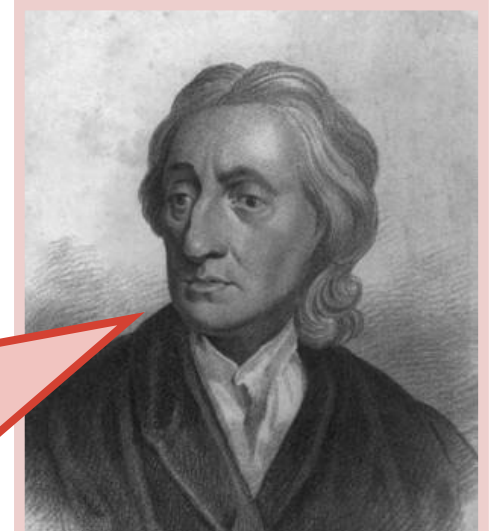
Enlightenment thinking also played a part in the French Revolution. The Third Estate began to question the power and authority of government and words like equality, liberty, and democracy began to spread. The ideas of **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** and **John Locke** brought inspiration.



Jean-Jacques
Rousseau

“Man is born free,
and everywhere he is
in chains.”

“All people are born free
and equal, with three
natural rights – life,
liberty, and property.”



John Locke





Tax reform and grievances



In an attempt to rectify France's financial problems, Louis XVI's ministers pushed in vain for a tax reform that would extend taxation to the First and Second Estates. However, these estates refused to consider the proposed taxes.

In addition, the Third Estate was unhappy.
Can you match the groups to the reasons why they were unhappy?

Press **start** to begin.

start



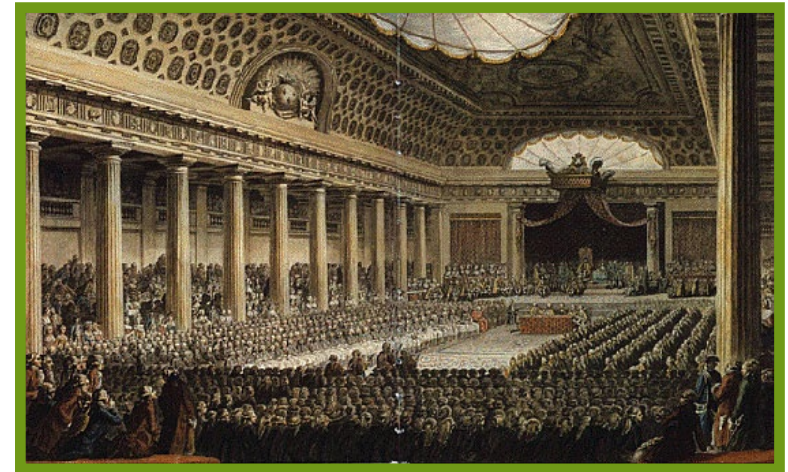


The Estates-General



In order to try to pass a tax reform, Louis XVI called a meeting of representatives from the three estates – the **Estates-General**. Traditionally, each estate had only one vote in government for the whole estate. However, the Third Estate wanted a voice and representation, so it suggested each delegate should have one vote.

Instead of always being outvoted two to one, this would give power to the Third Estate, which had the same number of delegates as the other two combined.



Refusing reform, the king upheld the traditional voting structure and the meeting quickly reached gridlock.





The meeting of the Estates-General provided the spark for the French Revolution.

A series of events in the summer of 1789 set off the Revolution, resulting in the end of the *ancien régime*.

Watch this animation to find out about the key events of the Revolution.

Press **start** to begin.

start



Why did the king feel so threatened by the Assembly?



Major causes of the Revolution



There were several major causes of the French Revolution.

Decide on the importance of the reasons and drag the statements into the order of your choice, with the most important reason at the top. You should justify your answers.

Press **start** to begin.

start

