

France before the French Revolution

(use this to complete "You are a Member of .. Estate" worksheet)

First Estate

The First Estate comprised the entire clergy. In the time of Louis XVI, every bishop in France was a nobleman, a situation that had not existed before the 18th century. The First Estate owned 10 percent of the land in France and made up 1% of the population. Most of the members scorned the Enlightenment because its ideas threatened its power.

Second Estate

The Second Estate was the French nobility; they constituted approximately 2% of France's population and owned 20% of the land. Under the Old Regime, the Second Estate was exempt from the *corvée royale* (forced labor on the roads) and from most other forms of taxation. This exemption from paying taxes led to their reluctance to reform. The Second Estate also detested the ideas of the Enlightenment because it challenged their life of privilege and power.

Third Estate

About 97% of the people belonged to the Third Estate. The three groups that made up this estate differed greatly in their economic conditions. The first group—the bourgeoisie, or middle class—were bankers, factory owners, merchants, professionals, and skilled artisans. Often, they were well educated and believed strongly in the Enlightenment ideals of liberty and equality. Although some of the bourgeoisie were as rich as nobles, they paid high taxes and, like the rest of the Third Estate, lacked privileges. Many felt that their wealth entitled them to a greater degree of social status and political power.

The workers of France's cities formed the second, and poorest, group within the Third Estate. These urban workers included tradespeople, apprentices, laborers, and domestic servants. Paid low wages and frequently out of work, they often went hungry. If the cost of bread rose, mobs of these workers might attack grain carts and bread shops to steal what they needed.

Peasants formed the largest group within the Third Estate, more than 80% of France's 26 million people. Peasants paid about half their income in dues to nobles, tithes to the Church, and taxes to the king's agents. They even paid taxes on such basic staples as salt. Peasants and the urban poor resented the clergy and the nobles for their privileges and special treatment. The heavily taxed and discontented Third Estate was eager for change.

Old Regime

The Old Regime was the aristocratic, social and political system established in France. It gave local privilege to nobles.

The reigns of Louis XIV, Louis XV, and Louis XVI were focused on administrative centralization. The kings of France desired absolute monarchy, yet the French nobility struggled to maintain their own rights in the matters of local government and justice. The need for centralization in this period was directly linked to the question of royal finances and the ability to wage war. The territorial expansion of France in the 17th century demanded great sums, which needed to be raised through taxes.

In France, there were 400,000 nobles. The nobles had special privileges such as: exemption from most taxes, most didn't pay the land tax, they were technically liable to pay income tax—but rarely had to pay it in full, not liable for royal *corvees* (forced labor on public works—peasants), and could collect feudal dues from tenants (peasants).

During the Old Regime, the rural peasantry was subject to high taxes and feudal dues. The economy of France was traditional, unsophisticated agriculture. As a result, scarcity of food occurred often. The quantity of the grain harvest remained the most important fact of life for the peasants.

Estates-General

The Estates-General existed as a symbolic national assembly in France prior to the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789. In reality, the Estates-General had not met since 1614. However, reacting to royal calls for new taxes, in 1788, the French nobility asked King Louis XVI to convene the Estates-General.

The Estates-General consisted of three groups that in theory represented the entire French population. The first group, or First Estate, comprised Roman Catholic clergy; the Second Estate represented the nobility; and the Third Estate represented everyone else in the French kingdom. Louis XVI, unable to levy more taxes on an overburdened Third Estate, raised the possibility of placing taxes on the Second Estate. Resenting the possibility of taxation from which they had been previously exempt, the Second Estate asked Louis XVI to convene the Estates-General, and the assembly began debates in May 1789.