

How far was louis xvi
to blame for the
french revolution in
1789



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Louis XVI became King of France in 1774. In France, as in many other countries during the same period in history, the King was considered to be 'God's representative' and to have total power over the rest of the country. According to certain surviving documents from that time, the King was considered to be a kind man who had good intentions. However, he does not seem to have possessed the qualities necessary for great leadership. He was not considered to be very bright and was not particularly well educated.

An American ambassador in France during the 1790's described him as having neither '... genius or education to show the way towards that good which he desires...' At the age of fifteen the King married the beautiful fourteen-year-old Austrian princess Marie Antoinette. Although she was popular at first, the people of France increasingly disliked her. In 1781 a publication entitled 'A Historical Essay on the Life of Marie Antoinette' was circulated. It contained rumours about Marie Antoinette, which may not necessarily have been true, but were, nonetheless, widely believed by the people of France to be true.

She was called the 'Austrian woman' which, in French, could be interpreted as 'bitch'. She was also disliked for her extravagant spending on clothes and jewellery and her gambling, and was also believed to be unfaithful to Louis. The American ambassador in France wrote that her '... gambling and extravagance have been a major cause of exhausting the government's finances...' So it seems likely that Marie Antoinette did little to improve her ineffectual husband's reputation and, if anything, helped to make matters much worse for him.

Another major factor leading to the revolution in France was the growing unrest and discontentment among the people. Before the revolution the system in place was known as the ancient regime. This was similar to the feudal system in England during the 11th century. Everyone was placed in an 'estate'. The idea behind the estates was that everyone served the King in some way. For example, the first estate consisted of the clergy. Their purpose was to pray to God. The second estate, the 'nobles', fought for the King.

The third estate consisted of peasants who farmed the land, and increasing numbers of urban workers. In practice the situation was more complex and within each of these groups there was growing discontent. The first estate was, in theory, extremely wealthy. In reality, however, this was only true for the bishops and archbishops, while the numerous parish priests were often very poor. As journalist Louis-Sebastian Mercier wrote in the 1780's '...

Whom do they make bishops? All the richest posts go to the nobility... ' Many other people resented the second estate, because of the privileges they had.

Such as not having to pay most taxes. However in reality many of the family lived in 'relatively' poor conditions. For example the Marquis de Mainvillotte survived on 20,000 livres each year. The middle class resented being known as the third estate, because they thought it degraded them. Many of this group were quite wealthy, and had jobs ranging from bankers and manufacturers to tradesmen and shop-keepers. As they had such high, intellectual jobs, they felt they deserved more of a say in the way the country was being run.

They also wanted lower taxes. The Urban workers lived in filthy and unhygienic houses in the cities and worked in the factories. This is how a newspaper report described them. ' Hungry, crowded into tiny rooms with their wives, sick relatives and their weaving looms. ' Vauban described the landless labourers as doing much of the necessary work for the country. These were the sailors, servants and the people who farmed the land. They worked hard but benefited very little from the fruits of their labour.