

French revolution

[History](#)



French Revolution (1789-1799) The French Revolution was a period of social and political changes that had a strong impact not only on France but also on Europe as a whole. The Revolution started in the year 1789 and continued till 1799. Absolute monarchy that ruled over France for several hundred years was overthrown by the common people to bring new principles of equal rights and privileges. This paper focuses on the origin and social causes of the revolution. Origin The immediate cause that led to the revolution was bankruptcy of the French government. The participation of the French army in the American Revolutionary War had put a strain on the government's finance. The expenditure continued to grow at alarming rate due to " costly wars and royal extravagance" 1. When the financial crisis became acute, the government called a meeting of the Estates-General, the French Parliamentary body to search for solutions to deal with the problem. The monarchy had no intentions to bring any major changes in the government. Yet, in the following years, the common people along with the " peasants in the countryside" succeeded in destroying the old regime to bring radical changes in the social and political fronts. The meeting was held in May, 1789. The Estates-General had members of all the three Estates of French Society which included the clergy, nobility and the common people. The First and Second Estates had three hundred representatives each while the Third Estate alone was represented by six hundred delegates. When the meeting ended in an unsatisfactory manner, the Third Estate which is comprised of the common people decided to respond in their own way. On June 17, 1789, the Third Estate decided to draw up a constitution. When the representatives of the Third Estate arrived at their meeting place on June 20, they found the door locked. This made them gather in a tennis court to make a vow that "

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they will continue to meet until they had produced a French constitution” 2. All these actions were the first steps towards the French Revolution. Since the Third Estate had no legal right to form a constitution, they were soon in trouble because the King supported the First Estate which was consisted of the clergy. However, the revolution could not be stopped because of urban and rural uprisings. Social Causes Prior to the revolution, the French society was seeped in inequality of rights and privileges. The society was divided into Three Estates. The First Estate was made of the clergy and they were exempted from payment of taxes. They had ownership of almost 10 percent of the land. The Second Estate was made of the nobility and owned almost 30 percent of the land. They held an important position in the society by occupying all the important offices of the government. The French nobility tried to “ maintain their monopolistic control over positions in the military, church and the government” (Spielvogel, 357). They enjoyed most of the privileges including exemption from taxation. The Third Estate which was comprised of common people formed the majority of the French population. They were divided by “ occupation, level of education and wealth”. The peasants formed the majority of the Third Estate and owned 35 to 40 percent of land. They were obliged to make regular payments to local landlords. They were also made to pay fees for using “ village facilities”. There also existed many peasants who had almost no land to support themselves. There was also a rule of paying one-third of their earnings to the clergy which was known as tithe. The French government was facing financial crisis for more than a century. Huge expenditure was made on wars in the 18th century and this led to monumental debts. The government could not meet the deficit because of the prevailing tax system. Common people

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were aggrieved because they were made to pay high taxes. Peasants who had little or no land were the worst hit because of heavy taxation. The second problem was scarcity of food among the urban population of the Third Estate which was made of “ skilled artisans, shopkeepers and other wage earners of the city” 3. The prices of consumer goods increased at a higher rate than wages. This resulted in the fall of purchasing power of the urban people. The incomes of these people were not even enough to buy food items. The skilled and unskilled workers faced a 140 percent rise in rent. There was growing frustration among the people of the Third Estate. They often had to struggle for mere survival. This economic dissatisfaction of the Third Estate resulted in aggression among the common people. In Paris, these common people played an important role in the French Revolution⁴ (Perry, 81-85) Conclusion French revolution is considered as one of the most important chapter in the history of France. The revolution was manifestation of the common people becoming aware of their fundamental rights in the society. The revolution permanently drained the power of the monarchy and spread the ideals of democracy all over the world. References 1. Perry, Marvin. Sources of the Western Tradition: Volume II: From the Renaissance to the Present, USA: Cengage Learning, 2011 2. Spielvogel, Jackson J. Western Civilisation: A Brief History: Volume II: Since 1500, USA: Cengage Learning, 2007