

# CAUSES OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

## French Financial Crisis

- France's loss in the **Seven Years' War** and its subsequent support (military and financial) for the **American Revolution** added **debt** that strained the French government's finances.
- The royal family lived in inordinate luxury at **Versailles** and there was a perception of extravagance while others in France suffered (Marie Antionette was known as "Madame Deficit.")
- The Church and the nobility were exempt from most forms of taxation (e.g., the **taille**), making it difficult for the French government to raise revenue.
- The French government's financial crisis provided the emergency situation that made it necessary for Louis XVI to call the **Estates General**.

## Poverty Among the Lower Classes (Urban Working Class and the Peasantry)

- Bad harvests in 1788 and 1789 caused **grain shortages**, leading to higher grain prices and an overall **higher cost of living**.
- At the same time, the working class faced **lower wages**, making it even more difficult to cope with the higher cost of living.

## Rise of the Bourgeoisie

- The French **professional class** (educated people who don't work with their hands) gained wealth and influence in the 18th century, but this increased wealth and influence was not accompanied by any institutional political power.
- This increasingly influential class wanted to be represented in an official representative body with legislative authority, resembling the British Parliament.
- When the Estates General was called, it was divided into the Three Estates, with 95% of the population getting one of three votes. Louis DID NOT allow the delegates to the Estates General to vote by head (as a nation), insisting on keeping the traditional form of the Estates General, which gave the privileged estates the opportunity to run the table.

## The Influence of Enlightenment Philosophy (Enlightenment Lectures [Available on YouTube](#))

- Government is created by a social contract in order to better protect each individual's **natural rights** of life, liberty, and property. Divine Right monarchy is illegitimate. (Locke)
- Religious toleration and a contempt for the power of the Catholic Church. (Voltaire)
- Government power should not be consolidated in one place. Its powers should be separated in order to prevent tyranny. (Montesquieu)
- Government policy should reflect the **General Will** of the people. (Rousseau)

NOTE: *Rousseau's ideas were most influential during the **Radical Phase** of the Revolution.*

## Ineptitude of Louis XVI    Louis could be counted on for two things: indecision and bad decisions.

- After the failure of the Estates General, Louis allowed the **National Assembly** to meet in 1789 but threatened delegates by bringing troops to Versailles. The Women's March on Versailles led to the royal family being relocated to Paris.
- In the early stages of the French Revolution, Louis had a veto over legislation, which he used to veto measures that were popular with the people.
- In 1792, he attempted to escape from Paris and join with Royalist military forces near the border. He was caught and brought back to Paris under guard.

Visit [tomrichey.net](http://tomrichey.net) for more instructional materials.