

1. Absolutism and the Structure of the *Ancien Régime*



LEARNING OBJECTIVES – AFTER THIS LESSON YOU SHOULD UNDERSTAND:

- ❖ Louis XVI as king
- ❖ The structure of the government
- ❖ Social divisions in government
- ❖ Privileges and burdens in government
- ❖ Strengths and weaknesses in government

Ancien Régime, Government

The *Ancien Régime* (literally meaning *the former regime*) was the dominant system of government in the Kingdom of France from the 1500s until the late 1700s. The system was based upon the rule of an 'absolute monarch', which meant that the country's centre of administration and government was built around a king or queen as the head of state. As absolute power resided with the monarch in this system, it is known as *Absolutism*. Underneath the monarch came the *parlements*. These were regionalised local governments made up of magistrates and dukes of the realm. These bodies acted as a final court of appeal for legal disputes and criminal trials for their region, with the largest and most important being in Paris. In theory, all new laws would have to pass through the *parlements* for ratification and this meant that the *parlements* could reject the suggested law. However it was with the king that power ultimately resided, as the monarch could effectively overrule the decisions of the *parlements*.



Louis XVI, King of France during the French Revolution

Louis XVI, The Character of the King

Despite being raised from the age of 11 as the *Dauphin* of France (the next in line to the throne) Louis did not possess the characteristics of a competent leader. His critics accused him of a lack of authority and firmness. His desire to please as many people as he could resulted in indecisiveness and a lack of clear direction. Louis' main desire was to gain public favour and he often made ill-advised decisions in order to please his subjects. Upon his ascension to the throne one of his first actions was to reinstate the *parlements* that his grandfather King Louis XV had dissolved. When his advisors questioned this decision he responded that 'it may be politically unwise, but it seems to me to be the general wish and I want to be loved'. This attitude was typical of Louis' reign and he relied heavily upon his appointed ministers for support. One of the most important of these ministerial roles was that of Minister of Finance.

The Courts

The King of France customarily surrounded himself with the wealthiest and most noble gentlemen of the realm and these elite men were known as his court. These noblemen were appointed to powerful positions as ministers of government by the king, who would consult them before making laws and legislation. This meant that a great deal of power and influence in France was concentrated in a small group of men who vied competitively for the king's favour and ear. This led to the emergence of *court factions* and meant that it was necessary for a successful courtier to play a subtle game of political intrigue. Denouncing rival courtiers and promoting oneself and one's allies could make particular factions favourable in the eyes of the king and could earn the reward of further positions of power and influence in government.

Social Division: The Three Estates

French Society under the *Ancien Régime* was divided into three orders known as the *Estates of the Realm*. The first two of these three estates possessed considerable advantages over the third, their frequent use of which was to become one of the long-term causes of the French Revolution.

The First Estate: The Clergy

The First Estate was the clergy. This consisted of monks, nuns and other members of religious orders as well as parish priests and bishops. The particular advantages held by the First Estate over the others were:

- ❖ **Pluralism** – Pluralism meant that high-ranking clergy often held more than one position in the Church. High-ranking positions such as Bishop or Archbishop provided very large incomes for those who held them. More positions meant more income for high-ranking clergy.
- ❖ **Church Tithes** – The Church was the single largest landholder in France, owning roughly 10% of all the land. The tithe was an amount that the people working the land had to pay the Church every year and was usually paid in the form of a percentage of the crops produced on that land. The percentage of crops owed to the Church varied widely in different regions but the overall income nationwide provided the Church with 50 million *livres* each year.
- ❖ **Tax Exemption** – Instead of paying tax on all the income the Church made from tithes it agreed to pay the king one annual sum named the *don gratuit*. However, it was up to the Church to determine exactly how much money it paid to the king, and it regularly paid less than 5% of its overall income.
- ❖ **Power Over the People** – Society in France in the 1700s, as in most European countries, was very religious. Catholicism was the official religion of the state and this meant that on a day-to-day basis, the Church had an extraordinary amount of power over the population. It was in charge of schools and hospitals and was responsible for the recording of all births, deaths and marriages in the parish. Its wide censorship of books and its resistance to change and new ideas made it unpopular amongst many people.

Livre – the French system of currency before the Revolution. The *Livre* was a coin used to represent a certain amount of silver and had been in use in France in various forms since the Dark Ages.

The Second Estate: The Nobility

The Second Estate was the nobility. This consisted of the wealthy landed gentry of France. Of all three estates it was the nobility that held the most power as nearly all the main positions in government were held by nobles. Compared to its neighbour and rival Britain, France had a very large nobility that varied widely in wealth and status. Amongst these the most powerful was the 4,000-strong court nobility. This elite was made up of those who could supposedly claim noble ancestry that could be traced back as far as 1400, although in reality anyone who could afford the lavish and luxurious lifestyle of living at Versailles was welcome. The particular advantages of the nobility were:

- ❖ **Special Courts of Justice** – The nobility were tried for their crimes in a separate court from the peasantry, and were often granted far more lenient sentences due to their high status.
- ❖ **Exemption from Military Service and the *Corvée*** – The nobility were excused the mandatory services that were enforced upon the lower classes such as serving in the army, or working the *corvée*, which involved the maintenance of France's road system.
- ❖ **Exclusive rights** – the nobility enjoyed exclusive rights to hunting and fishing in the countryside and this, combined with their monopoly on the operation of mills, ovens, and wine presses meant that they had particular power over food. This made them unpopular with the poor and starving lower classes.
- ❖ **Exemption from Tax** – This was perhaps the nobility's greatest privilege as they paid no tax at all before 1695. Even after this, the nobility often paid far less than they could have afforded, and this led to the Second Estate being seen to be avoiding paying their share in the country's taxation.

The Third Estate: Everyone Else

The Third Estate consisted of everyone else. Everyone who did not belong to one or other of the two privileged estates was considered to be in this category and as such there was a great degree of difference in the wealth and status of the people in it. Three main social categories can be identified within the Third Estate.

1. The Bourgeoisie

These were the wealthy merchants, industrialists and businessmen at the upper end of the Third Estate. While the very wealthiest were merchants and sea traders who made fortunes trading overseas, this category also included many other professions such as financiers, landowners, doctors, writers, printers, lawyers and civil servants. The bourgeoisie were rapidly increasing in number and in respective wealth in the 1700s. While they didn't necessarily have any conflicting issues with the Second and First Estates, this increase led to the desire of the bourgeoisie that their power and wealth should be represented politically, especially as they bore the burden of the majority of the country's taxation.

2. The Peasantry

The peasantry were at the bottom end of the Third Estate. The peasantry made up 85% of the population of France and accordingly they had a wide variety of wealth and status. At the top end were farmers who owned their own land and employed others to work it. However these were relatively few in number and the majority of the peasantry consisted of farmers working on land owned by the Church or the nobility. At the very bottom financially were the serfs, those men and women that were technically still under the fealty of a noble lord.

3. Urban Workers

The urban workers made up the rest of the Third Estate. These men and women were mainly unskilled and poor, living in insanitary and crowded city housing. The urban workers occupied low-paid jobs in big cities, and while not as poor as the peasantry, found it hard to afford sufficient food and shelter.



A satirical political cartoon depicting the First and Second Estates riding on the back of the impoverished Third.

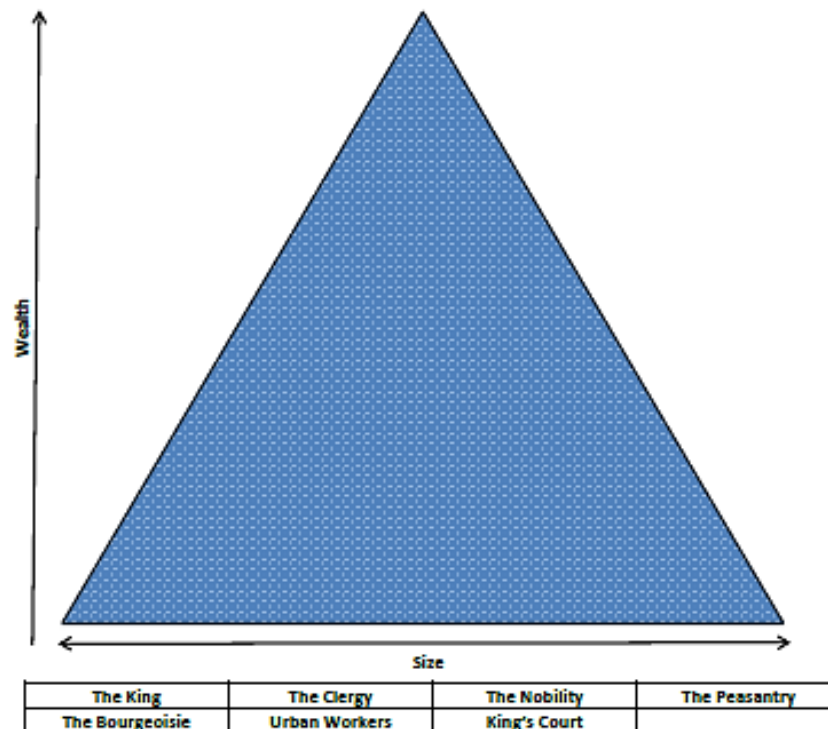
Privileges and Burdens

In particular it was the peasants of the Third Estate that bore the most resentment for the nobility and clergy. Burdened by overbearing taxation, Church tithes and feudal dues to their lords, the quality of life for the average peasant was poor. Peasants were also under the legal jurisdiction of their lords, who acted as both judge and jury in court hearings. As tax steadily increased in the 1700s to pay for France's foreign wars, resentment amongst the Third Estate grew and the demand for political and social change bubbled amidst the financial crisis brought about by failed harvests and food shortages. This resentment was to reach boiling point with the outbreak of the French Revolution.

Feudalism
The feudal system came to prominence in the medieval era. It was a series of customs and practices by which a lord or noble would grant land to his vassals, in return for their allegiance, labour, and service in war.

Hierarchy of the Old Régime

Label the following graph so that it correctly indicates the relative wealth and size of the different social groups of the Ancien Régime. Then briefly answer the question below.



Q. Why might the peasantry in particular have resented the First Estate?

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LESSON 1 QUESTIONS

Five Quick Questions

1. Who was the king of France during the French Revolution?
2. What was the name of the social structure in France before the revolution?
3. List two key features of this social structure.
4. Give two advantages that the First Estate had over the Third Estate.
5. What were the two exclusive rights specific to the nobility?

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