Document Set 1: The Estates System

The estates system was the class structure in France before the French Revolution. Though feudalism was no longer the organizing force in most of Europe in the 1700s, the same groups that held power during the Middle Ages still had control.

Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>clergy</th>
<th>people who work for the church like the Pope, bishops, and priests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>commoners</td>
<td>people in a low social and/or economic class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bourgeoisie</td>
<td>the middle class; during the French Revolution this was a group in the Third Estate made up of educated professionals like lawyers and doctors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>caricature</td>
<td>a picture, description, or imitation of a person or think that exaggerates certain features to be funny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nobility</td>
<td>wealthy landowners and people with high status in society</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Document 1a

The Three Estates In Pre-Revolutionary France

Chart showing the “estates,” classes in France before the French Revolution.
The Three Estates in Pre-Revolutionary France

Population
- First Estate: Clergy: 1.5%
- Second Estate: Nobility: 0.5%
- Third Estate: Commoners: 98%

Land Ownership
- First Estate: Clergy: 10%
- Second Estate: Nobility: 25%
- Third Estate: Commoners: 65%

Government Taxation
- First Estate: Clergy: 100%

Legend:
- First Estate: Clergy
- Second Estate: Nobility
- Third Estate: Commoners
Document 1c
Unknown artist, political cartoon about The Three Estates, You Should Hope this Game Will Be Over Soon, 1788
Document Set 2: Absolute Monarchy and Life at the Palace of Versailles

Document 2a

. . . Powers of the king.—The King, Louis XVI, was absolute. He ruled by the divine right theory which held that he had received his power to govern from God and was therefore responsible to God alone. He appointed all civil officials and military officers. He made and enforced the laws. He could declare war and make peace. He levied taxes and spent the people’s money as he saw fit. He controlled the expression of thought by a strict censorship of speech and press. By means of lettres de cachet (sealed letters which were really blank warrants for arrest) he could arbitrarily [without reason] imprison anyone without trial for an indefinite period. He lived in his magnificent palace at Versailles, completely oblivious to the rising tide of popular discontent [frustration]. . . .

Document 2b

The Palace of Versailles was a royal château [castle] in Versailles and was the center of political power in France from 1682 until 1789. Louis XVI and his wife Marie Antoinette lived in the palace before the French Revolution. They were known for throwing lavish parties.
Arthur Young was an English gentleman farmer who visited France at the start of the French Revolution. His goal was to determine "the cultivation, wealth, resources, and national prosperity" of France by describing what he witnessed.

**July 12, 1789**

... The 12th. Walking up a long hill, to ease my female horse, I was joined by a poor woman, who complained of the times, and that it was a sad country; demanding her reasons, she said her husband had but a morsel of land, one cow, and a poor little horse, yet they had a *franchar* (42 lb.) of wheat, and three chickens, to pay as a *quit-rent* [a payment that allowed the husband and wife to continue to use their land] to one *Seigneur* [noble]; and four *franchar* of oats, one chicken and 1 *sou* [small unit of money] to pay to another, besides very heavy *tailles* [taxes on the land and its produce] and other taxes[...] It was said, at present, that something was to be done by some great folks for such poor ones, but she did not know who nor how, but God send us better, because the taxes and laws are crushing us. — This woman, at no great distance, might have been taken for sixty or seventy, her figure was so bent, and her face so wrinkled and hardened by labour, — but she said she was only twenty-eight. An Englishman who has not travelled, cannot imagine the figure made by infinitely the greater part of the countrywomen in France; it speaks, at the first sight, hard and severe labour[...] To what are we to attribute this difference in the manners of the lower people in the two kingdoms [England and France]? To Government . . . .
Document Set 4: Bad Harvests, National Debt, and the calling of The Estates General

Vocabulary

| grievance | a cause for complaint or protest especially for unfair treatment |

Document 4a

On the eve of the French Revolution, France’s government was in enormous debt. King Louis XIV (1638-1715), Louis XV (1710-1774), and Louis XVI (1754-1793) added to the debt, borrowing money to finance the following:

On the eve of the French Revolution, France's government was in huge (money owed). King Louis XIV (1638-1715), Louis XV (1710-1774), and Louis XVI (1754-1793) added to the (money owed), borrowing money to finance the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event that Increased the French Debt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1678-1789</td>
<td>Building of, additions to, and upkeep of the Palace of Versailles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1756-1763</td>
<td>Seven Years’ War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fought against their rivals at the time, Great Britain, and several other European powers in Europe and North America.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1775-1783</td>
<td>American Revolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>France lended 1.3 billion livres, soldiers, and ships to the American colonists in their fight against the British.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1678-1789</td>
<td>Extravagant lifestyles of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Narrator: Versailles in the late seventeen hundreds is an oasis of extravagance [wealth]. Surrounded by a land in despair and with an uncertain king at the helm, France is charting a course for disaster.

After nineteen years of marriage Louis has sired four children, yet as a king he remains impotent [unable to act]. As the financial crisis escalates all the king can do is hire and fire a succession of administrators, none of whom have the answers. By ancient privilege, the nobility and clergy are exempt from taxation and so as taxes rise to cover the government's mounting debt repayments the burden falls heavily upon the poorest.

To add to their misery, freakish weather arrives to decimate the harvest. William Boyle: “If ever God had intervened to make a situation worse the summers or 1788 and spring of 1789 is a moment when that happens. By the summer of 1788, you already have a burgeoning political crisis and it's developing against the background of very serious food shortage.”

Narrator: For the people of France in 1788, bread is the essence of life itself. Lynn Hunt: “Most ordinary people in France ate at least two pounds a day of bread. Bread was all-important. Its price was immediately felt by everyone, if the price doubled you're in big trouble.” Under the financial mismanagement of Louis’ government, the cost of bread skyrocketed. Food supplies are hoarded by profiteers and the cost of a loaf of bread can soon equal a month's wages.

Hunger turns to rage. Bread riots break out across France. Bakeries are raided and shopkeepers suspected of hoarding bread are lynched on the spot.
Estate-General of 1789

In the late 1700s in France, the king needed approval from a group of noble judges called the Parlement of Paris to pass new taxes. In an attempt to solve the country's debt problems and larger financial crisis, Louis XVI proposed to tax the First and Second Estates for the first time. The Parlement was not in favor of the tax because its members were from those estates.

Since the King and Parlement could not come to an agreement, they decided to convene the Estates General, an old institution that had not been assembled since 1614, 175 years beforehand, to settle the issue.

The Estates General was an assembly of representatives from each of the three estates from areas all over France. When the Estates General met on May 5, 1789, one quarter of the representatives were from the First Estate, one quarter were from the Second Estate, and half were from the Third Estates, but each estate received only one vote. So, even though the Third Estate had half of the delegates, they were always outvoted by the First and Second Estates, 2 to 1.
The Cahiers de Doléances, better known simply as Cahiers, were lists of grievances written by the three Estates in France in 1789 for the convening of the Estates General. King Louis XVI asked each of the Estates to compile cahiers. Below is an excerpt of one of the cahiers from the district of Carcassonne.

The third estate of the electoral district of Carcassonne very humbly petitions his Majesty to take into consideration these several matters, weigh them in his wisdom, and permit his people to enjoy, as soon as may be, fresh proofs of that benevolence [goodwill; kindness] which he has never ceased to exhibit toward them and which is dictated by his affection for them...:

8. ...the nation should hereafter be subject only to such laws and taxes as it shall itself freely ratify [approve].

9. The meetings of the Estates General of the kingdom should be fixed for definite periods...

10. In order to assure to the third estate the influence to which it is entitled in view of the number of its members,…, its votes in the assembly should be taken and counted by head.

11. No order, corporation, or individual citizen may lay claim to any pecuniary [financial] exemptions. … All taxes should be assessed on the same system throughout the nation.

12. The due [tax] exacted from commoners holding fiefs [land] should be abolished, and also the general or particular regulations which exclude members of the third estate from certain positions, offices, and ranks which have hitherto [until now] been bestowed on [given to] nobles either for life or hereditarily [based on family relations]. A law should be passed declaring members of the third estate qualified to fill all such offices for which they are judged to be personally fitted.

14. Freedom should be granted also to the press, which should however be subjected, by means of strict regulations to the principles of religion, morality, and public decency. …