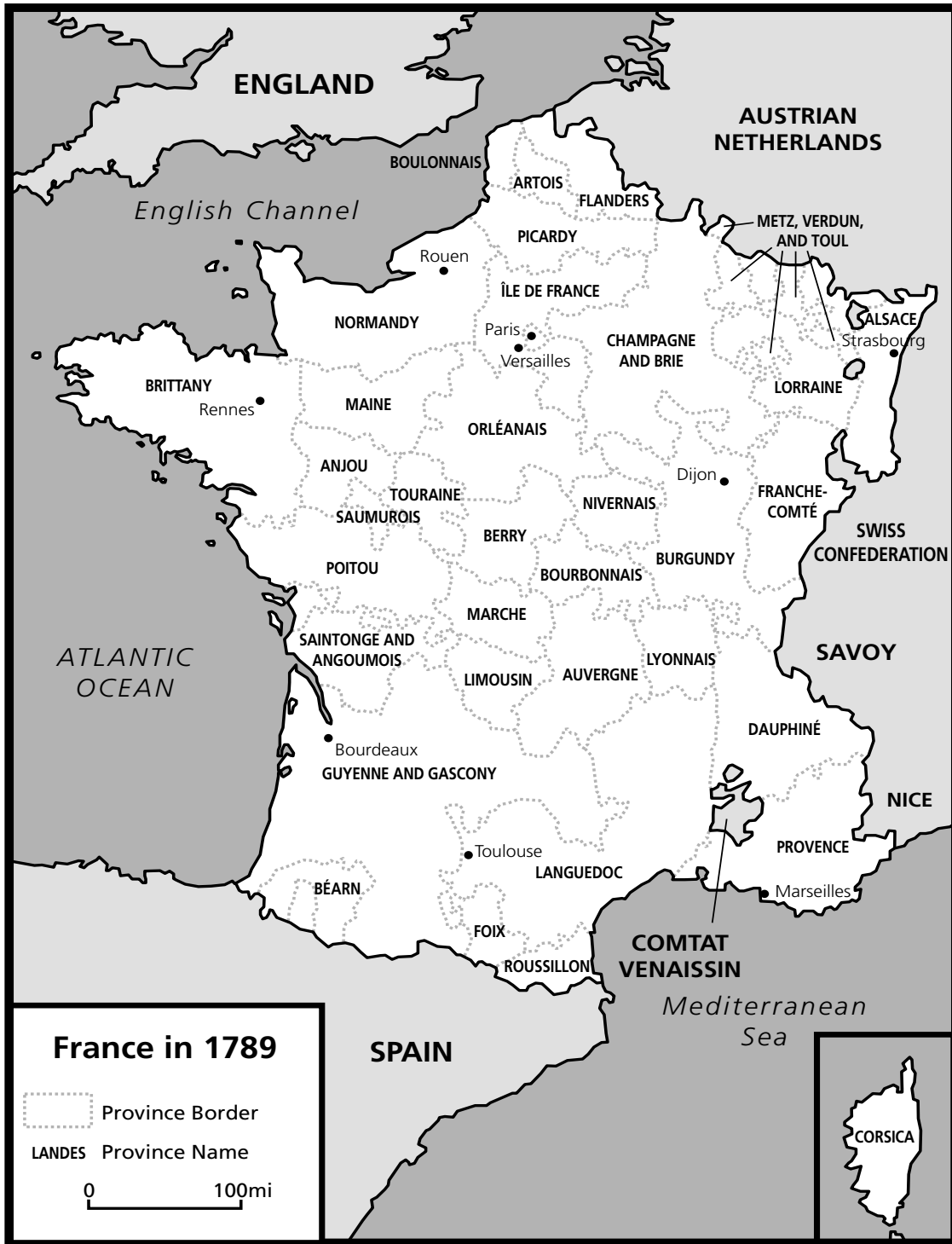


## France in 1789



## Introduction: The Summer of 1789

On July 14 1789, several thousand French workers attacked and captured the Bastille—a military fortress and prison in the city of Paris. Many were hungry and looking for food. They were also looking for gunpowder to defend themselves against soldiers called to Paris by France’s King Louis XVI. The king had said that the soldiers were there to preserve public order. But the workers suspected the soldiers were there to disband the National Assembly, a new representative body that had just formed against the wishes of the king.

The National Assembly hoped to solve the serious problems facing France. Economic conditions were desperate and France’s government was nearly bankrupt from fighting a succession of wars. Most recently France had spent a fortune helping Britain’s American colonies achieve independence. Many of France’s people faced hunger and starvation. Riots over the price of bread were common.

Worries about the arrival of the king’s troops disrupted the work of the month-old National Assembly. When they found themselves locked out of the assembly’s regular meeting place, the delegates swore an oath on a nearby tennis court to remain in session until they created a new constitution for France. This, they believed, was an important step to solving France’s troubles.

**“We swear never to separate ourselves from the National Assembly, and to reassemble wherever circumstances require, until the constitution of the realm is drawn up and fixed upon solid foundations.”**

—The Tennis Court Oath, June 20, 1789

Today the fall of the Bastille is the event that France and the world use to mark the French Revolution. But the revolution did not occur in a single moment. In fact, the fall of the Bastille was closer to the beginning of the revolution than the end. The French Revolu-

tion would last for another ten years. During this time France would have three constitutions and repeated changes of government. It would fight a series of international wars and a civil war. It would go through a period of brutal dictatorship known as the Terror. It would also produce “The Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen,” a document that has had a profound impact on contemporary thinking about human rights and the role of government.

### ***Why is the French Revolution important to understand today?***

The ten years of the French Revolution were a time of intense debate and upheaval. The upheaval would have profound effects in France and beyond. Borders in Europe would change, many would suffer and die, and new ideas about politics and individual rights would emerge that would reshape the world. It is these far-reaching effects that contribute to our interest in the French Revolution today.

As you read in the coming days, try to consider the following questions: Why was there upheaval and change in France? What were the events that led to the storming of the Bastille and eventually to revolution? How did the French people determine what sort of government they would have? Why did efforts to create a democratic republic fail? Why did those committed to political rights resort to terror and dictatorship? How did the French Revolution contribute to new thinking about the relationship between people and their government?

In these readings and the activities that accompany them, you will explore the social, political, and economic conditions of France in the eighteenth century. You will then be asked to recreate the debate in the National Assembly as it pondered what should be in the constitution of France. Finally, you will consider the outcome of these debates and the course of the French Revolution.

## Part I: France under the Old Regime

**W**hat was life like in eighteenth century France? It is safe to say that it was very different from the life we are familiar with today. Yet without some sense of the life and beliefs of the French people at the time, it is difficult to answer the question: why did the French Revolution take place?

To help you understand what led to the revolution that began in 1789, Part I of your reading traces the contours of French social and political life during the Old Regime (Old Regime was a name given to the system of rule in France before 1789). You will read about the economic conditions facing the French people. You will examine the role of social classes and of the Roman Catholic Church, and see how political decisions were made. You will also consider some of the new ideas about society that were beginning to circulate in France at that time.

### A New King

In May 1774, a young man of nineteen became King Louis XVI of France. He succeeded his grandfather who died at the age of sixty-four from smallpox. His father had died when the king was eleven. Like his grandfather before him, Louis XVI came to the throne through dynastic succession (when members of a family continue to hold political power from generation to generation). The king was a member of the Bourbon family, which had ruled France since 1589.

#### *How much power did the king claim for himself?*

The king was at the top of the social and political order in France. At the time, most French people believed that God had given the king authority to rule. This idea is known as the “divine right of kings.” Not only did the king represent France, but all authority of the government resided in him. (This type of government is referred to as an absolute monarchy.)

**“It is in my person alone that sovereign power resides.... It is from me alone that my courts derive their authority; and the plenitude of their authority, which they exercise only in my name, remains always in me.... It is to me alone that legislative power belongs, without any dependence and without any division.... The whole public order emanates from me, and the rights and interests of the nation...are necessarily joined with mine and rest only in my hands.”**

—King Louis XV, 1766

King Louis XVI certainly also thought of his power as absolute, but France in the late eighteenth century was a complex society with competing ideas and political interests. Some in France were beginning to question the absolute authority of the king.

### French Society

When Louis XVI became king, France had about twenty-six million inhabitants, not counting its colonies overseas. There were distinct social classes, complex political divisions, and rigid hierarchies. Roughly speaking, the wealthiest and most powerful group were the nobility, who numbered approximately 300,000. Beneath this group were the approximately three million *bourgeoisie*, a social class made up of professionals such as merchants, judges, legal officials, and small factory owners. The largest group was the peasants, numbering more than twenty million. (The word peasant is derived from the Old French word *paisent*, meaning “someone who lives in the country.”) The peasants were at the bottom of the hierarchy; the king was at the top. Life was often very difficult for those near the bottom.

#### *Who were the peasants?*

Peasants lived all over France, had different customs, and even spoke different

languages. The vast majority of peasants (more than 85 percent) worked in agriculture. Although there was no such thing as a typical peasant—life varied widely in the different regions of France—all shared certain experiences. Peasants were expected to obey their “betters” and pay dues and taxes to local nobility, the church, and to the crown. Life was filled with hardship, hunger, and suffering. Death was commonplace due to overwork, poor nutrition, and illness. One in five died before reaching the age of one. Less than half lived to the age of fifteen.

### ***What was life like for peasants in the countryside?***

Poverty was the greatest challenge for peasants in the countryside. Most peasant families could afford a one or two-room dirt floored house, which they might share with any farm animals that they owned. These houses generally had little to no ventilation and were breeding grounds for disease.

Even though most peasants worked in agriculture, their nutrition tended to be poor. Diets often did not include meat—it was too valuable to butcher—or even green vegetables. Child mortality rates increased in the months before and during harvests, when breastfeeding mothers had to work long hours in the fields and supplies of food from the last harvest were running low. Farming techniques were not innovative and relied heavily on manual labor. Agriculture was the most important economic activity in France, but harvests were often poor.

In addition, peasants were heavily taxed by a variety of sources. For example, a peasant renting land might be expected to pay the land owner half of all crops that he produced. In addition, the Roman Catholic Church collected a tithe (a tithe is from the Old English word meaning one-tenth, but the church collected anywhere from 8 to 15 percent of the value of the harvest). There were also likely to be fees paid to local nobility as well as other taxes. Peasants could hope for some profit from about 15 to 20 percent of their crops and livestock.



Drawing by Charles Eschard. 1748-1810. Wikimedia Commons.

This eighteenth century drawing is called “Peasants Resting.”

The difficulty of making enough to survive in farming forced many peasants to look for additional work. Many added to their income by spinning and weaving in their homes. Other peasants occasionally took jobs in rural towns as stone masons, chimney sweeps, ropemakers, and papermakers. In fact, most of France’s industry was in rural areas.

The financial pressures of having a family meant that men often waited until their late twenties to get married. Women usually married a few years earlier. Although these distinctions varied, men usually worked away from the immediate area of the home, for example in the fields, fulfilling obligations to local nobility, or fixing roads (a requirement regularly imposed by the state). Women tended to work closer to home, for example tending small livestock, or growing and selling produce at local markets.

### ***What was life like in the city?***

During the reign of King Louis XVI, hardship in the countryside led many peasants to come to urban areas to find work. Paris,

France's largest city with a population of about 700,000 in 1789, grew by 100,000 during the eighteenth century. Most people who lived in urban areas were poor, unskilled workers. Poverty and hunger were the greatest challenges to those who lived in cities.

A central component of the diet of the working class was bread. The average male worker would spend about half of his wages just to buy this bread. In times of bread or grain shortages, the cost of bread would rise even higher—up to about 75 percent of income. Women workers earned considerably less than men. The challenge of providing for a family was high.

**“Workmen today need twice as much money for their subsistence, yet they earn no more than fifty years ago when living was half as cheap.”**

—Jean Marie Roland, manufacturing inspector, 1777

A large group of workers worked as servants to the well-off. Servants made up about 5 to 7 percent of the population of cities. Paris is thought to have had about fifty-thousand servants during the reign of Louis XVI. Many servants were new arrivals from the countryside. Although they enjoyed advantages, including regular food, clothing, and a place to sleep, the high turnover rate suggests that many servants found the disadvantages to be significant. Servants were forbidden to marry or have relationships, and often were poorly treated by their masters. Many servants despised their masters and many masters thought poorly of their servants.

**“Today, servants who go from house to house, indifferent to masters whom they serve, can meet a master they just left without feeling any sort of emotion. They assemble only to exchange the secrets they have unearthed; they are spies, and being well paid, well dressed, and well**

***fed, but despised, they resent us, and have become our greatest enemies.”***

—Louis Sébastien Mercier, 1783

The well-off were also worried about rioting and violence by peasants, particularly when shortages led to rises in the price of bread. There were numerous instances of riots and violence over high prices and shortages of bread during the reign of Louis XVI. Because of their role in preparing and providing food, women often participated and even led these demonstrations.

Shortages and high bread prices contributed significantly to public dissatisfaction and would play an important role in the early days of the revolution. Women, as important participants in these demonstrations, began to have a larger role in public life.

#### ***Who were the bourgeoisie?***

The largest group of well-off people in France were the bourgeoisie, or what today would be called the middle class. In 1789, they numbered two to three million, about 10 percent of the overall population. Most made their money as merchants and businessmen in industry, commerce, and trade. As the economy grew between the reigns of Louis XIV (1661-1715) and Louis XVI, the number of bourgeoisie tripled. During the same period the population of France only grew by 25 percent. As a result, the role of bourgeoisie in French society became more important.

As the wealth of the bourgeoisie grew, they invested heavily in land and new businesses. They bought luxury goods like sugar and coffee from the Caribbean. They built new houses and decorated them with silks and wallpaper produced in France. They wore fancy clothing and had servants. Their lives were very different from the peasants who struggled to survive in the countryside, cities, and towns.

**“The distance which separates the rich from other citizens is growing daily and poverty becomes more insupportable at the sight of the**



***astonishing progress of luxury which tires the view of the indigent [poor]. Hatred grows more bitter and the state is divided into two classes: the greedy and insensitive, and murmuring malcontents.”***

—Louis Sébastien Mercier, 1783

In addition to investing in land, the bourgeoisie bought public “offices” from the crown. For example, a Roman Catholic member of the bourgeoisie could buy an “office” (position) as a judge. (French law barred Protestants and Jews from buying offices.) By paying an annual tax, holders of these offices could keep them and then pass them on to their children. Under Louis XVI, there were approximately fifty thousand of these offices. They were a valuable source of revenue for the king. A few of the offices even gave the purchaser the status of nobility. The bourgeoisie saw these offices as an important means of achieving social status as well as providing a well-paying job.

Members of the bourgeoisie also invested in education, which they saw as a way to help future generations prosper. During the eighteenth century, the number of schools and universities increased. There was growth in the number of newspapers, public libraries, theaters and clubs. All of these factors contributed to the introduction and circulation of new ideas in France. More of the French bourgeoisie began thinking about the relationship of art, culture, philosophy and economics and to their own lives and society.

### ***What was life like for the nobility?***

Life in the nobility brought status that many members of the bourgeoisie found highly desirable. They had special privileges and were exempt from many of the numerous and complex taxes that the bourgeoisie and peasants had to pay. If they were accused of a crime they were entitled to be tried in a special court and they could not be drafted into the military.

While there were only about 300,000 members of the nobility, customs and tradi-

Louis XVI.

tion helped them amass wealth. The nobility owned about one-third of the land. They also held special rights over the rest of the land, which entitled them to collect fees and taxes on those who used or lived on the land. They owned most of the valuable public offices. About 25 percent of the revenues of the Roman Catholic Church went to those clergy who were also members of the nobility.

The nobility also had political influence and power. Most of the senior advisors to the king were nobles. It would have been extremely unusual for the king even to meet someone who was not a noble.

Nobility was no guarantee of wealth. (But great wealth for a member of the bourgeoisie did guarantee eventual membership in the nobility.) In fact, about half of the nobility were not as well off as an average member of the bourgeoisie. This had two important consequences. First: most of the wealth and political power in France was concentrated in very few hands. Second: nobility who were not wealthy relied on collecting the numerous fees and

Antoine François Callet (1741–1823). Wikimedia Commons.

taxes on their lands and asserting their social superiority—all of which heightened resentment against them.

### ***What was life like for the king and the royal family?***

The queen and the king lived a life of plenty, and they were the top of the hierarchy in France. King Louis XVI ruled France from his Palace of Versailles, which was about twelve miles from Paris. Approximately ten thousand people worked at the Palace of Versailles to serve the king and the court (the court was made up of the entourage of the king). The expense was tremendous; it was paid for with taxes and revenues that the king collected from the people of France.

A place at the royal court brought status and privilege and was therefore highly desirable. To be a courtier (a member of the court), one had to have a noble family stretching back to the year 1400, or have special permission from the king. Only a thousand families met this criterion. Many chose not to attend or simply could not afford to live the very expensive life at court. Those who could were the elite of France; they were from the wealthiest, most powerful families. By being close to the king, they had status and influence.

One example of the rituals of the court shows the exalted status of the king and queen—and the desire of the courtiers to be as close to them as possible. Every day courtiers

crowded into a large room simply to watch the king and queen eat their midday meal. Those most in favor got to sit on stools, others simply stood and found places to watch the royal couple who sat at a table facing the crowd and ate their meal.

### **The Political Structure**

King Louis XVI wanted to be a conscientious ruler, but there were signs that he felt burdened by his responsibilities. He preferred working in his own locksmith shop or carving wood to consulting with his ministers on matters of the state or dealing with the large problems facing France. When one of his ministers resigned, the king said, “How lucky you are! Why can’t I resign too?”

### ***What factors complicated the task of governing France?***

The king inherited the throne and with it a political structure and organization to France that had developed over centuries. It was a tangled web of overlapping jurisdictions. This made governing France an extremely complex and often inefficient process.

One example of this was how France was divided internally. France had thirty-nine provinces that each had governors. (A province is a geographic area like a state.) At the same time, France was divided into thirty-six *généralités* (pronounced zhen-air-al-itay). It was the *généralités*, not the provinces, that

### **Marie Antoinette**

King Louis XVI had married his wife Marie Antoinette when he was fifteen and she fourteen. She was the daughter of the empress of Austria who had sent her to help strengthen Austria’s relationship with France. Although the king and queen were both popular at first, Marie Antoinette became the target of pamphlets that attacked her in later years. Her failure to bear the king an heir for seven years, the fact that she was foreign born, and her financial extravagances made her the subject of gossip and criticism. Many in France distrusted her and even considered her to be a spy.

Although she was often harshly criticized, one of the most famous and lasting stories about Marie Antoinette is probably untrue. During one of the periods of famine, she is alleged to have been told that common people couldn’t afford bread to which she replied, “Then let them eat cake.” There is no actual evidence to support this story, but it was probably told to show that the queen was out of touch with the reality of her subjects’ lives.

assumed most responsibility for administering and governing the regions of France, including the essential function of collecting taxes.

The king claimed absolute authority throughout France, but the regions farthest from the site of his rule in Paris often exercised some autonomy. For example, the regions in southern France established their own rates of taxation in consultation with the king's ministers.

Although the peoples of France were unified by the fact that Louis XVI was their ruler, there were in fact great variations throughout the kingdom. For example, in the provinces around Paris French was the language spoken. But there were other dialects and languages spoken in other provinces, including Basque, Breton, and German. Taxes were also administered differently. For example, salt was taxed at different rates throughout France. In some areas people were taxed, in other areas, only land was taxed.

#### ***How was the king able to rule France?***

Although the king claimed absolute power and final say over all decisions and policies of France, he depended on the nobility and officials to carry out his policies. Many of them did this simply because it benefitted them. For example, the tens of thousands of officials who had purchased "offices" and paid taxes so that they could pass the office on to their offspring wanted to preserve the source of their income. It served their personal interests to perpetuate the system of government. After all, if it had not made them wealthy, it at least made them financially secure. They were free from the fear of hunger, something that the vast majority struggled with daily.

France was a complex maze of jurisdictions and inconsistent rules that the privileged and powerful used to benefit themselves. Some historians have called the government of pre-revolutionary France a plutocracy (government for and by the wealthy). The king depended on a minority of the French people, who were in the nobility or clergy, to preserve his rule. This small minority depended on and used the system he headed for wealth, status, and power.

#### ***What was the role of the Roman Catholic Church?***

France was primarily a country of Roman Catholics. The Roman Catholic Church was both wealthy and politically powerful. By law and tradition, clergy were considered the most important group in France, ahead of the nobility. All of the king's subjects were legally designated as Catholics and no one was permitted to practice any other religion publicly. Protestants, who numbered about 550,000, had no civil rights and were not tolerated except in the province of Alsace. About thirty thousand Jews lived in France and their rights were similarly curtailed.

The Catholic Church played an important role in the lives of ordinary people. The



This photograph shows the Roman Catholic Cathedral of Notre Dame in present-day Paris. The cathedral was built between 1163 and 1345 CE.

Photograph by Pline. Wikimedia Commons. GNU free documentation license.



church was responsible for most of the education system and provided aid and charity to the poor. It ran almost all of the hospitals and orphanages as well. For the many poor people of France, the church provided vital services that they would not otherwise be able to afford.

When life was filled with hardship, death, and uncertainty, the church also provided hope to peasants in the countryside. Priests blessed crops and animals. Church bells were rung in the belief that they could prevent thunderstorms, which would spoil a harvest.

The church also had an important administrative role. It kept records of births, deaths, and marriages. It had the power to censor or suppress publications of which it did not approve. Government decrees or warnings were often issued through the church.

The church owned about 10 percent of the land in France and earned revenue from the tithes it collected. While many French people loved their parish priests, they resented the wealth collected from the tithes by higher-ranking clergymen, for example, bishops and cardinals. These higher-ranking clergy were appointed by the king and were often members of the nobility as well.

The church and clergy paid no taxes of their own, but regularly gave the crown a gift of cash. Positions of power in the church were usually controlled by nobles, many of whom saw the church as way to increase their own family wealth.

### ***What was the Estates General?***

France did not have a representative body like a parliament or Congress when Louis XVI came to power. The king could convene what was known as the Estates General, which was meant to be a representative body. The Estates General was made of three groups: the First Estate, which was the clergy; the Second Estate, the nobility; and the Third Estate, which included everyone else. King Philip III had established the Estates General in 1302 to provide counsel in times of crisis. Normally French kings convened the Estates General in

order to get support for new taxes. By the time King Louis XVI came to the throne, the Estates General had not met since 1614.

### ***What were parlements?***

France had thirteen *parlements* that served as the highest courts of law in the land. The king registered all new laws and edicts with the *parlements*; the *parlements* had the right to criticize these edicts, but ultimately could not overrule the king.

The jurisdiction of these courts was geographic and often covered multiple provinces and *généralités*. These overlapping administrative boundaries often led to disputes over which laws should apply. The fact that the laws and legal code varied throughout the provinces complicated the situation further. The northern provinces of France relied on customary law (unwritten law established by being used over a long period of time). The southern provinces used laws with their origins in the Roman empire.

## **France and the Age of Enlightenment**

There were many problems in France, including widespread poverty. In spite of this, the king was still a popular and exalted figure. For example, many wept with joy at his coronation or even fainted in his presence. The idea of the “divine right of kings” was still widely accepted in the eighteenth century.

During the reign of Louis XVI, about one-third of the French people were literate, and one in fifty-two boys would attend a high school. Only the well-off could afford to purchase journals or books or have time to read. Yet France was changing. Education and literacy rates had increased even among the poor. Newspapers and journals grew in importance. The number of libraries increased as did the places where political discussions could take place. For example, people gathered in public coffee houses to discuss issues. Private gatherings known as *salons*, often sponsored by wealthy women, were another place for the airing of new ideas.

It was in this environment that writers and philosophers introduced new ideas and ways of thinking about society and government. This period came to be known as the Age of Enlightenment and it occurred not only in France, but in all of Europe.

The beginning of this period in France can be traced to King Louis XIV's decision to eliminate the rights of French Protestants in 1685. Hundreds of thousands fled France to neighboring countries where some were able to publish works that criticized France's Old Regime.

Changes in scientific understanding also contributed to the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment. The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, with its emphasis on observation, measurement, and rationality as a means to understand the physical world, influenced the philosophers of the Enlightenment. Philosophers tried to address questions of government and society using the same approach. Although their goal was to improve society and increase human happiness through criticism and reform, they were not advocates for revolution.

***“We will speak against senseless laws until they are reformed; and while we wait, we will abide by them.”***

—Denis Diderot, Enlightenment philosopher

#### ***What was the object of the Enlightenment?***

Not all of the writers of the Enlightenment agreed with each other or made the same arguments. What the philosophers and writers did share was the idea that society could be improved by using the principles of rationality and reason.

The ideas of the Enlightenment challenged the fundamental principles of French society, including the authority of the king and the Catholic Church. Enlightenment writers believed that rationality, not merely tradition or religious ideas, should be the driving force behind all decisions. Philosophers sought to shape the opinions of educated members of



Denis Diderot.

By Jean-Honoré Fragonard, (1732-1806). Wikimedia Commons.

the public. Many of the philosophers were exiled from France and their writings banned.

#### ***Who was Voltaire?***

Voltaire was the pen name of Frenchman François-Marie Arouet who lived from 1694 to 1778. Early in his life Voltaire was exiled to England. There he published *Letters Concerning the English Nation*, in which he compared Britain's constitutional monarchy and parliamentary government to France's absolute monarchy. Voltaire admired the British Bill of Rights, which was written in 1689, because it made freedom of speech a right and gave Protestants freedom of religion. (He did not mention the fact that Roman Catholics did not have rights in Britain.) Although this book was banned in France, it nevertheless became a best seller. Voltaire spoke out frequently against the Catholic Church and religious persecution.

***“If this world were as good as it seems it could be, if everywhere man could find a livelihood that was easy and***

***assure a climate suitable to his nature, it is clear that it would be impossible for one man to enslave another.... If all men were without needs, they would thus be necessarily equal. It is the poverty that is a part of our species that subordinates one man to another. It is not inequality, it is dependence that is the real misfortune. It matters very little that this man calls himself 'His Highness,' or 'His Holiness.' What is hard is to serve him.***

—Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, 1765

#### **Who was Montesquieu?**

The Baron de Montesquieu was the noble title of the Frenchman Charles-Louis de Secondat who lived from 1689 to 1755. Montesquieu's most famous contribution to political thinking was his work *The Spirit of Laws*. In this work he outlined the principal of the separation of governmental power into three branches of government: the executive, the judicial, and the legislative. This form of government, he argued, was the best way to encourage political liberty. Montesquieu's ideas were important in France, and also influenced the authors of the U.S. Constitution.

***“In order that power be not abused, things should be so disposed that power checks power.”***

—Baron de Montesquieu,  
*The Spirit of Laws*, 1748

#### **Who was Diderot?**

Denis Diderot lived between 1713 and 1784. He helped author and publish a multi-volume collection of knowledge. It was called *Encyclopedia*, but its purpose was more than simply summarizing what was already known. Diderot intended to promote an understanding of the world based on rationality, and also a critical attitude towards all things, particularly the church and the authority of the state. Although both church and crown tried to suppress publication, by 1789 about twenty-five

thousand copies had been sold in France and in other countries.

***“I am a man, and I have no other pure, inalienable natural rights than those of humanity...the laws should be made for everyone, and not for one person [the king].”***

—Denis Diderot, *Encyclopedia*, 1755

#### **Who was Rousseau?**

Jean-Jacques Rousseau lived from 1712 to 1778. He was also a philosopher of the Enlightenment, but he disagreed with many of the arguments made by others of the era. For example, he believed that progress in arts and science had hurt rather than helped humanity. One of his most important works was *The Social Contract*. Rousseau set out the ways that he thought government could legitimately establish authority while protecting the liberty of citizens. *The Social Contract* was condemned for its attacks on the church and priests and Rousseau fled France for eight years.

Rousseau's political ideas were radical for the time. He argued that all adult male citizens had the same innate rights, and that governments could only gain legitimacy by protecting the rights of each citizen. Rousseau also placed great importance on the “general will” of the populace as a guide for establishing political authority. He claimed that the king received his authority from the “general will” not from God.

***“The Sovereign [king], having no force other than the legislative power, acts only by means of the laws; and the laws being solely the authentic acts of the general will, the Sovereign cannot act save when the people is assembled.”***

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 1762

In Part I of the reading, you have explored the structure of French society during the era of King Louis XVI. You have read about the social distinctions in France. In particular, you have read how the vast majority often struggled to get by, while a much smaller group including the bourgeoisie and nobility, worked to ensure their own social and economic status.

You have seen how the king had absolute authority and there was no representative government, but also that France was a land with complex political jurisdictions and interests. You have seen how the political system was used to further the wealth, status, and power of the nobility, clergy, and the king. You have also read about the increased role of education and the growth in newspapers, coffee houses, and salons. Finally, you read about some of the important ideas of French writers of the Enlightenment.

In Part II of your reading, you will explore the events leading up to the beginning of the French Revolution. As you read Part II, try to keep in mind what you have read about here. Ask yourself what roles social classes, political structure, and ideas play in the events you are reading about. How important are each of these factors? These are the types of questions historians ask when considering events. For example, scholars have debated how much of an effect the Enlightenment had on the French Revolution. These questions will help you consider the reasons behind the next dramatic events in France.