

## Lesson 5: “The weight of the taxes crush us!” – Economic Hardship and the Harvest Failures of 1788



French peasants attack soldiers on June 7th, 1788, in the town of Grenoble.

**Do Now:** What would happen if the price of food became very high very quickly? What might cause the price of food to go up?

## **Inquiry Question: How did economic and social conditions **cause** the French Revolution?**

At this point we have examined the overall social structure of France represented by the Three Estates and the society of orders. We have studied the absolute monarchy established by King Louis XIV and the Palace of Versailles. Furthermore, we have outlined some of the key political ideas proposed by first the English and then the French philosophers of the Age of Enlightenment. In this lesson we will consider the social and economic conditions of France just prior to the outbreak of the Revolution in 1789.

This is a good time to start considering the concept of causality (cause and consequence). The social structure of France, its absolutist government, and the new ideas of the Enlightenment are all causes of the French Revolution. However, the extent to which each individual factor caused the Revolution is a matter of some debate. While you engage in this lesson keep thinking about causality and the extent to which poor economic conditions were a cause for change.



# The French Economy: A Brief Overview



“Why is the great number of hard-working, innocent men who till the land every day of the year that you may eat all its fruits, scorned, vilified, oppressed, robbed; and why is it that the useless and often very wicked man who lives only by their work, and who is rich only through their poverty, is on the contrary respected, courted, considered?”

Dictionnaire philosophique, written by French philosopher  
Voltaire in 1764.

“Sudden rises in the price of bread or grain were universally recognized as the most dangerous moments for public order, and towns were the places it was most likely to break down.”

William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*





## **Economic Conditions in France**

Film: The French Revolution

1. How does the video describe King Louis XVI? Was he a good king? Why or why not?

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2. “The grand wedding gala continues for days, but outside the gates of Versailles there is hardly cause for celebration. Years of mismanagement by the monarchy, have left the French people deprived and \_\_\_\_\_.”

3. King Louis XV lost the Seven Years War. What effect did this have on France?

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4. “France grew from \_\_\_\_\_ million to \_\_\_\_\_ million in the 18th century, after having grown only \_\_\_\_\_ million in the previous two centuries. That put tremendous strain on what was there and that caused a lot of anxiety.”

5. “The Enlightenment is a movement which says don’t \_\_\_\_\_ authority, don’t trust anything you’ve been told by anyone else. Think it for yourself, test it for yourself.”

Based on what you have learned, how would describe France before 1789?





**Value:** What does Young describe in these quotations? Why might his book be of value to a historian of the French Revolution? What does he tell us about life in France before the Revolution?

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**Limitations:** Is there something that Young does not tell us? Do we have any reason to distrust his account? Could he be lying or does he have any reason to lie?

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**Conclusion: Evaluate** the source. In other words, is this a good source of information about the French Revolution? Why or why not?

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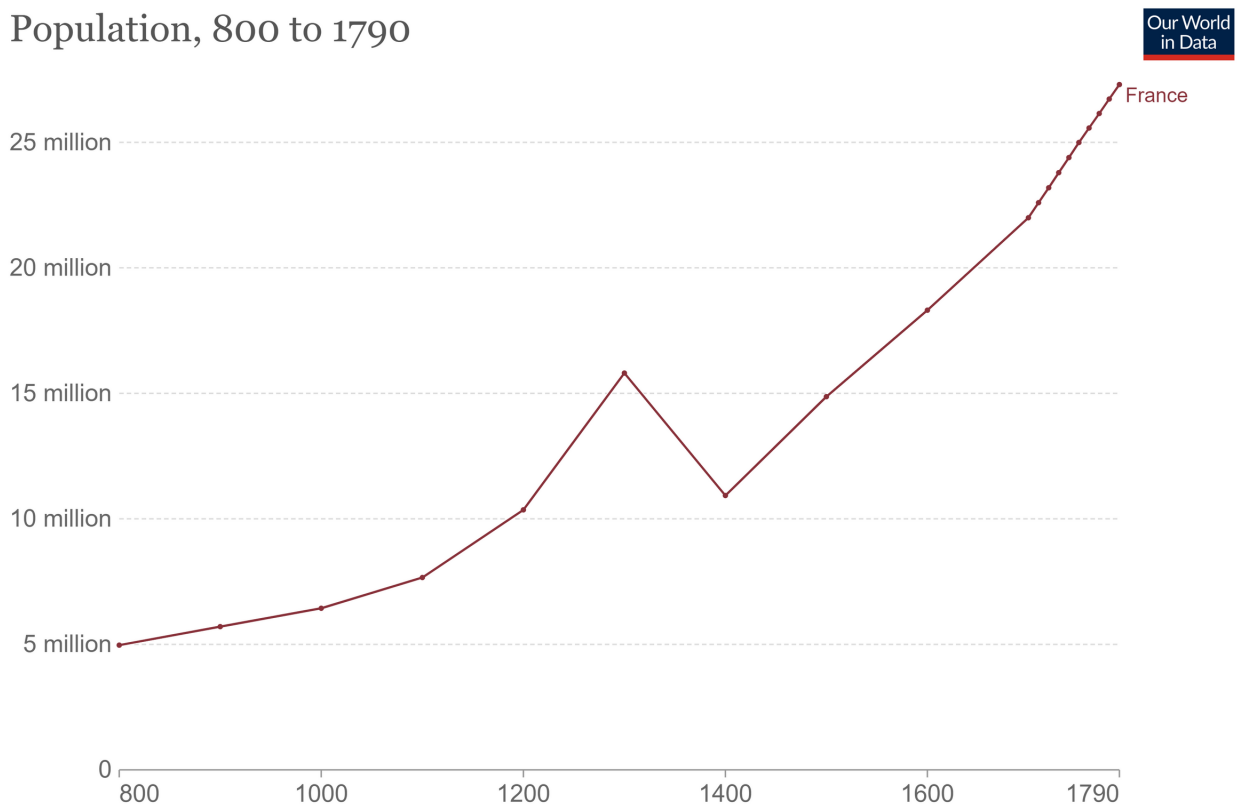
**Evaluate:** Make a judgement by weighing strengths and limitations.

## Approaches to Learning: Analysing and Evaluating Sources of Information

**Source A:** "Population of France, 800 to 1790" *Our World in Data*

The chart below shows the population of France from 800 to 1790, roughly the lifespan of the ***ancien régime***. What do you notice? Why do you think this happened?

Population, 800 to 1790



Source: Gapminder (v6); HYDE (v3.2); UN (2022)

OurWorldInData.org/world-population-growth • CC BY

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**Source B:** Adapted from "Poverty in Auvergne," LIBERTY, EQUALITY, FRATERNITY: EXPLORING THE FRENCH REVOLUTION, accessed October 11, 2022, <https://revolution.chnm.org/d/354>.

The difficulty of life in rural regions led some to leave home and seek a better life elsewhere, particularly in the growing cities. Such migration worried some observers, who feared villages would be emptied and no one would be left to work the land. In the excerpt below, a local government official in the Auvergne region comments on the causes and effects of emigration.

“This land produces grain, but everything else is lacking. And even the sale of this produce is uncertain due to the variability of the harvest, which is reduced considerably by too much drought or too much rain. The sale of young cattle, which the inhabitants pursue with all possible industriousness, is the only sure source of income. And as it is insufficient to pay the taxes, they supplement it by annual emigration. They go to work on a part of the forests throughout France, to do road work, or to work in the carrying trade. After that, they go to do the harvest work in Languedoc and Burgundy and then return home for their own harvest, and to replant the land that their wives have cultivated during the good season.

Thus it is that with the greatest sobriety and the most arduous work these men bring back each year the money necessary to pay the taxes of their district and even of the valley, which they do to exchange part of the money earned outside the province for wine, hemp, iron, and other goods that they don't have at home and which the valley furnishes them either from its soil or through its trade.

Those who have the most intelligence or are accustomed to the work, hire others and make a profit from their labor. These entrepreneurs have some money left over each year after they have paid their taxes.”

**Source C:** Arthur Young, *Travels in France*. Published in 1792

“[September 1788] To Montauban . The poor people seem poor indeed; the children terribly ragged, – if possible, worse [dressed] than if with no clothes at all; as to shoes and stockings, they are luxuries. A beautiful girl of six or seven years playing with a stick, and smiling under such a bundle of rags as made my heart ache to see her. They did not beg, and when I gave them anything seemed more surprised than obliged. One third of what I have seen of this province seems [unused], and nearly all of it in misery.



What have kings, and ministers, and parliaments, and states to answer for their prejudices, seeing millions of hands that would be industrious [instead useless] and starving through the [terrible commands] of despotism, or the equally [hated] prejudices of a feudal nobility...

[July 12 1789] Walking up a long hill to [rest my 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 [small piece] of land, one cow, and a poor little horse, yet they had [18 kg] of wheat and three chickens to pay as a [tax] to one [landlord]; and four [72 kg] of oats, one chicken, and one franc, to pay to another, besides very heavy tailles [the tailles was a specific property tax in France] and other taxes. She had seven children, and the cow's milk helped to make the soup."But why, instead of a horse, do not you no keep another cow?" Oh, her husband could not carry his produce so well without a horse; and [donkeys] are little used in the country. 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, *car les tailles et les droits nous ecrasent*."





**Source D:** Doyle, William. *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*. Oxford University Press. 2002. Page 86-87.

**TIP:** Try highlighting words and writing notes in the margins (around the sides of the paper).

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## The Estates-General

### September 1788-July 1789

THE freak storm which swept across northern France on 13 July 1788, with hailstones so big that they killed men and animals and devastated hundreds of square miles of crops on the eve of harvest, came half-way through a year of catastrophic weather. Even out of the storm's path the harvest proved poor, thanks to a long spring drought which had failed to swell the grain. Unusually, these conditions affected almost every region of the kingdom. Summer disasters were followed in the first months of 1789 by the longest, coldest winter within living memory. Northern France was in the grip of snow and ice from December to April, while in Provence and Languedoc delicate vines and olive-trees were killed in their thousands by frost. The whole of Louis XVI's reign had been a time of economic difficulties, with wildly fluctuating grain, fodder, and grape harvests causing repeated disruption. Even good crops did not necessarily restore stability. A bumper harvest in 1785 had made grain cheap and abundant the year after, but any remaining surpluses were dissipated in 1787 by the removal of all controls from the grain trade in one of the few components of Calonne's reform plan to meet no educated opposition. Necker, on resuming office in August 1788, immediately reimposed controls, but by then the damage was done. Grain prices had already begun to climb, and they went on doing so throughout the winter. They peaked in Paris, at their highest level since Louis XIV's time, on 14 July 1789.

Steep rises in the price of grain, flour, and bread posed serious problems for that vast majority of Frenchmen who were wage-earners. In normal times bread absorbed anything between a third and a half of an urban worker's wage, and from landless agricultural labourers it might take even more. As prices climbed over the spring of 1789 the proportion rose to two-thirds for the best-off and perhaps even nine-tenths for the worst. In these circumstances people had less to spend on other foodstuffs, heating, and

lighting. So that bitter winter was particularly miserable even for those not thrown out of work entirely by frozen rivers, blocked roads, and immobilized mills and workshops. 'The wretchedness of the poor people during this inclement season', wrote the Duke of Dorset from Paris on 8 January 1789,<sup>1</sup> 'surpasses all description.' There was certainly nothing to spare for consumer goods; and this produced a dramatic slump in demand for industrial products. In some areas production fell by up to 50 per cent, and there were widespread redundancies in textile towns like Rouen, Lyons, and Nîmes. Between 20,000 and 30,000 silk workers were said to be without employment in Lyons; while spinning and weaving as an extra source of income for hard-pressed country people disappeared as goods became unsaleable. People blamed new technology for undercutting the products of more expensive traditional methods. In Rouen spinning-jennies were smashed and workshops producing with them sacked. Above all they blamed another of Calonne's legacies, the 1786 commercial treaty with Great Britain, which opened up the French market to British manufacturers. The agreement only came into operation in mid-1787, so that British imports, though undeniably cheaper and of higher quality, scarcely had time to do all the damage attributed to them by 1788 and 1789. But they clearly aggravated an already serious industrial depression, and provided one more reason, along with free trade in grain, for the working populace to blame the government. Over the winter of 1788 and spring of 1789 hardly anybody in France regretted the passing of the old political order. It had failed or let down too many people. Everybody assumed that change could only be for the better. But the process of working out what change there was to be took place in an atmosphere made tense by this acute and worsening economic crisis.

Necker's return to power was greeted by several weeks of popular jubilation on the streets of Paris. Bonfires were lit, and his fallen predecessors were burned in effigy. On the Pont Neuf, excited crowds stopped passing coaches and forced those inside to emerge and bow to the statue of the legendary 'good king' Henry IV. But symbols of authority, such as guard posts and the houses of prominent officials, were also attacked, and troops were called out several times to clear the streets. They fired into the crowds, killing several demonstrators and wounding many more. The climax of these commotions came during the fourth week of September, when the parlement returned in triumph from its exile. Necker knew that nothing less than the abandonment of the previous ministry's entire programme would satisfy public demand, and the recall of the parlements with all their old powers was the keystone of this policy. Accordingly, the Paris



	Origin	Purpose	Value	Limitations
<b>Source A</b>				
<b>Source B</b>				
<b>Source C</b>				
<b>Source D</b>				

#### **Criteria D: Thinking Critically**

*iii. Evaluate sources of information in terms of origin and purpose, recognizing value and limitations.*

## Reflection

**Return to the inquiry question. Based on what you have learned so far, how did economic and social conditions cause the French Revolution?**



Sign on the wall reads: "Proclamation for a general fast, in order to avert the impending famine." Cartoon from 1795