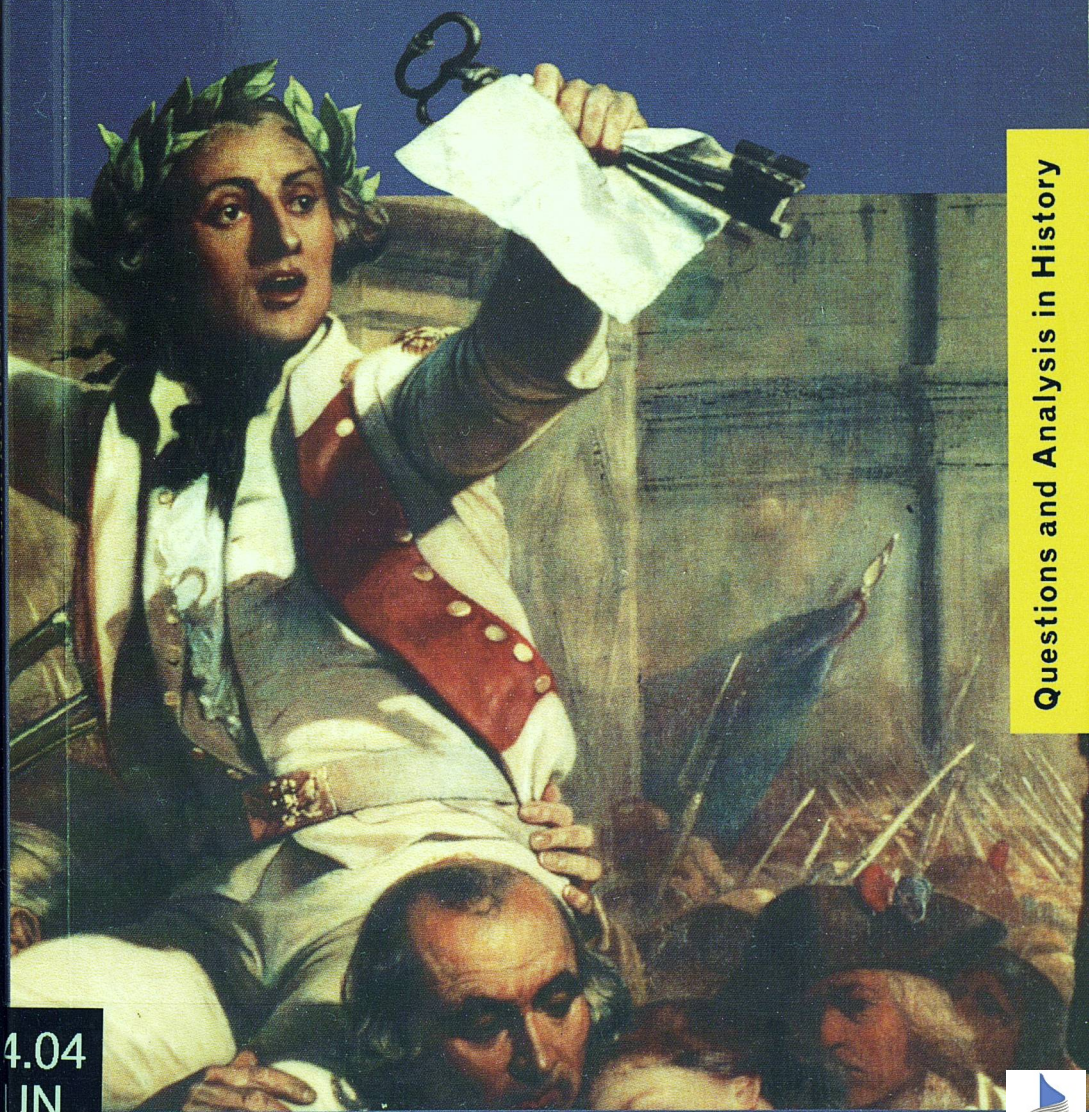


The French Revolution



Questions and Analysis in History

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JOCELYN HUNT

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION



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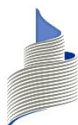
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THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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SERIES PREFACE

Most History textbooks now aim to provide the student with interpretation, and many also cover the historiography of a topic. Some include a selection of sources.

So far, however, there have been few attempts to combine *all* the skills needed by the history student. Interpretation is usually found within an overall narrative framework and it is often difficult to separate out the two for essay purposes. Where sources are included, there is rarely much guidance as to how to answer the questions on them.

The Questions and Analysis series is therefore based on the belief that another approach should be added to those which already exist. It has two main aims.

The first is to separate narrative from interpretation so that the latter is no longer diluted by the former. Most chapters start with a background narrative section containing essential information. This material is then used in a section focusing on analysis through a specific question. The main purpose of this is to help to tighten up essay technique.

The second aim is to provide a comprehensive range of sources for each of the issues covered. The questions are of the type which appear on examination papers, and some have worked answers to demonstrate the techniques required.

The chapters may be approached in different ways. The background narratives can be read first to provide an overall perspective, followed by the analyses and then the sources. The alternative method is to work through all the components of each chapter before going on to the next.

WHY DID THE FRENCH REVOLUTION BEGIN?

BACKGROUND NARRATIVE

The French Revolution began in May 1789, with the meeting of the Estates General. Each group in French public life expected its own interests to be served by the meeting, and the fulfilling and frustration of those expectations mark the start of the Revolution. This Assembly, meeting 175 years after the last, was a measure of the desperation of the French government. From his accession in 1774, Louis XVI had faced a worsening financial situation, compounded by the money and troops sent to assist the Americans in war against Britain. France failed to gain the expected benefits: the liberated colonists continued to trade mainly with Britain, and were slow to repay the French loans. Turgot had warned that the first shot would drive France into bankruptcy, and he was proved right.

The appointment of Necker as Director of Finances in 1776 was a popular one, since he financed the war by borrowing, issuing five- and seven-year bonds at rates of 8 per cent or more. In 1781, however, the need to find new lenders led to his publication of the highly optimistic 'Compte Rendu au Roi'. By the time Calonne became Finance Minister in 1783, willing lenders were hard to find, so radical action was needed. His first schemes were designed to 'create wealth' and might today be called Keynesian: in the eighteenth century, they were merely extravagant. His other strategy was to reform the entire taxation system. The Parlement was most unlikely to register these reforms, but his idea that an Assembly of

Notables would be more tractable was mistaken. It raised objections to these reforms and tried to establish a constitutional role for itself. Calonne was replaced by Archbishop Brienne, himself a member of the Notables. He, too, failed to persuade the Notables, who demanded that the representatives of the whole nation should be consulted. The next months were spent in trying to persuade the Parlement to accept the reforms, while the financial situation worsened and public order was threatened. By August 1788 the King was forced to agree to the summoning of an Estates General for the next May, and to reappoint the ever-popular Necker. Decisions about the precise structure of the Estates General were assigned to a second Assembly of Notables, and rules for election were agreed. The Assembly which had seemed impossible in 1786 met at Versailles in May 1789.

The question of why the Revolution began has long been a matter of historiographical debate. One of the clearest discussions of the debate can be found in *Rethinking the French Revolution* by G. C. Comninel.¹ Marxist historians assert that this was a social revolution: a fundamental process of historical development. Barnave, in his *Introduction à la Révolution Française* (1792), had written that commercial property was totally different from and much more valuable than traditional landed property; thus the Revolution aimed to align political power with economic wealth. Barnave could be said to have predicted Marx. Later Marxist historians concurred. Lefebvre, for instance, wrote 'The Revolution is only the crown of a long economic and social evolution which has made the bourgeoisie the mistress of the world'.² And, for Marxists, the bourgeois revolution is the inevitable precursor of the proletariat revolution, since 'the bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations' (*Communist Manifesto*).³

Historians who reject the determinist view prefer to argue that this was a revolution led by ideas: concepts like egalitarianism, justice, organisational rationalism and anticlericalism led to a search for a better society. R. R. Palmer, Jacques Godechot and Claude Manceron have put forward a conservative/liberal view that Revolution was needed to restore justice. They agree that a wider movement can be traced, linking the American and Dutch experiences to that of the French. J. M. Thompson provides a

theoretical link between the Marxists and these historians, suggesting that the bourgeois and liberal nobles used their wealth in a creditable way to improve society. Among those who argue for a less clear cut view are Cobban and Doyle. Historians such as Souboul and Rudé add the dimension of the popular revolution, and the involvement of the *menu peuple*: the peasants in 1789, for example, and the *sansculottes*.

The two analyses in this section consider two aspects of these many arguments: Were the privileged classes responsible for the outbreak of the French Revolution? Is it possible to say that the Revolution was a middle-class phenomenon?

ANALYSIS (1): WERE THE PRIVILEGED CLASSES RESPONSIBLE FOR THE OUTBREAK OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION?

The privileged classes could be held responsible in three ways: they helped cause the problems since their wealth was not subject to serious taxation; they provoked the hatred of the groups below them in society; and they used the strength of their position to resist attempts at change, while finally demanding, for their own ends, the meeting of the Estates General which gave voice to the Third Estate and ensured their own downfall.

Privilege was a complex concept in *ancien régime* France. The word lacked the modern connotation of injustice, since privilege was a form of property. The first two estates were identified as privileged. Manceron has this to say about the First Estate, the Church:

The clergy is the first order of France, even richer in land and money than the nobility. The bishops, all of whom in the past century have come from the nobility, as well as the powerful abbots of the great monasteries, hold almost half the real estate of France. Property is presumed to be the product of accumulated centuries of endowments and is regarded as sacred, untouchable by any form of taxation. Every year, thanks to the tithe system . . . it grows'.⁴

Of course the Church did make its 'free gift' to the government every year, but it decided the amount itself, and was often in arrears.

The Second Estate, the nobility, for long had exemption from many taxes. *Capitation*, or tax per head, was paid by the nobility, but was

divided into only four grades, and so did not hurt the rich. Nobles in the *pays d'état* paid the *taille*, but calculated their own contribution. The *vingtième* was the only proportional tax which the nobility paid. They resisted Calonne's planned single land tax precisely because it would have been collected according to size and value of holdings, regardless of the social status of the land holder.

Members of the nobility, and of the clergy, were also involved in capitalist enterprises. France was potentially a very rich country. As well as the range of climate and crops which should have ensured its wealth, it had a growing population, rich mineral resources, colonial possessions abroad and harbours on both the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts. But the French government could not tap this wealth in taxation, since the tax systems dated from the Middle Ages, using land as the measure of wealth: even the *vingtième*, collected in peacetime since 1749, was assessed on 'real property'. Thus, either directly or indirectly, it was the common people who bore the weight of taxation; and not all of them: many towns had purchased exemption from *taille*. These *villes franches* did not pay the most oppressive taxes. Those who did were the *paysans* of France, the country folk. The King's government faced the thankless task of taking as much as it could from the very poor, while taking little from the wealthy. The failure of these sums to add up brought about the crisis which began the Revolution. Members of the prosperous classes collected certain taxes '*en ferme*': that is, they paid in advance for the right to collect the tax from a certain area. While this benefited the government, who got their money 'up front', it naturally meant that the taxpayer paid more, in order to cover their investment. And the system became less than adequate when the *fermiers généraux* took to 'paying' in IOUs rather than in actual money.

The *rentiers*, who invested in government stocks, were also, of course, the rich. They received their dividends and their repayments from those liable to tax, imposing a further burden on the poor.

The privileged classes also alienated the rest of society. The seigneurs, the land holders, whether clergy, noble, bourgeois or corporation, most directly oppressed the *paysans*. The peasants paid to the King the *tailles*, *vingtièmes*, *capitation* and the *gabelle* (salt tax); they also paid the *dîme* or tithe to the Church, but, above all, they paid their landlords. The luckiest, those who paid a fixed money rent, had actually benefited from the inflation of the 1770s. Others were *métayers*, share croppers, who gave between 40 per cent and 60 per cent of their produce to the landlord in return for the land and tools. In many areas, peasants still held their land according to the medieval



rules of feudalism. They paid both in money and in kind for use of the land, and were liable to other obligations as well: the *banalités* of mill, oven, wine press and cider press were almost as hated as the hunting laws, which prevented them killing game animals, including pigeons and rabbits, building stone walls or harvesting crops till birds had finished nesting in them. There was little that peasants could do to resist their seigneurs: but, when events in Paris set the example, they liberated themselves in their own way, seizing the land and burning the infamous *terriers*, where their many obligations were set down. Many nobles had alienated their tenants still further, by employing *féodistes*, lawyers who specialised in discovering and enforcing forgotten feudal dues.

Some historians suggest that a further aspect of this 'feudal reaction' had been the attempt to close the ranks of the nobility to new entrants. In the past there had been various routes to attaining all the privileges of nobility: inheritance; purchase; direct grant from the King; or securing appointment to a position which carried with it nobility. 'Robe' nobles were resented by the nobles of the sword, although 'robe' nobles were accepted as 'sword' nobles after three generations, or 'four quarterings'. During the eighteenth century, formal decrees were made, limiting the officer ranks of the army and the senior jobs in Church and State to those with four quarterings. It may be that the wealthy bourgeoisie in their turn resented this closing of the doors to privilege and tax exemption.

Above all, it was the privileged classes who turned a financial crisis into a constitutional and political revolution. The Assembly of Notables refused to accept Calonne's reforms, or even Brienne's much less radical reworking of them. They, like the members of the Parlement, were reluctant to lose influence over future tax raising, and so refused to accept Calonne's permanent tax; the privileged classes attempted to retain some control over amounts, by demanding that his planned regional councils met '*par ordre*' and not simply according to size of land holding. When the Parlement rejected the decrees, and the King registered them by *lit de justice*, the *parlementaires* depicted themselves as protectors of the traditional rights of the French against the encroachment of the King, and, for a few months at least, convinced the people that they were defending liberty. When it became clear, in the autumn of 1788, that they were simply defending their own privileges, the reaction was all the stronger.

The arrogance of the privileged groups can be seen in their intention to use the Estates General for their own ends. If the meeting had been in the form of 1614, the three estates would have had equal numbers.



The domination of the privileged would have been further assured by meeting and voting '*par ordre*' so that there would always be a two to one majority against radical change. When Louis concluded that there should be double representation for the Tiers, the privileged hoped that this was to be the only change. The members of the Third Estate knew that the change in representation would be pointless without voting '*par tête*'. The refusal to meet separately was their first act of defiance.

Thus the privileged classes both prevented the Crown from solving its financial problems and escalated these problems into a full-scale revolution. On the other hand, the vocal and belligerent response of the prosperous and educated members of the Third Estate, and the pro-reform attitudes of some of the nobles are also significant factors. Nobles had resisted the king in every century of French history, without the far-reaching repercussions experienced in the 1780s and 1790s.

Questions

1. Would it have been possible for the Crown to reform the entrenched systems of French class and privilege without a revolution?
2. Does the fact that the privileged classes 'lost' in the French Revolution help to explain why they are blamed for bringing it about?

ANALYSIS (2): WAS THE REVOLUTION A 'MIDDLE CLASS' AFFAIR?

For the purposes of this section, a pragmatic approach has been taken to the term 'middle class'. It designates the people who were not the very poor, and who were not members of the two privileged orders. The term *bourgeoisie* is often used, but the implication of an urban class is not always appropriate. In the context of the late eighteenth century it is possible to identify a group of people who were educated, had income available for the purchase of books and papers, and had leisure to follow current affairs. While many of these would be from the commercial and professional classes, some would also be members of the wealthier peasantry. The educated classes played a major part in the actual summoning of the Assembly: in the period between November 1788 and the meeting of the Estates General, over 2,500 leaflets were published, including Dr Guillotin's 'Pétition des citoyens domiciliés à Paris', Marat's 'Offrande à la Patrie', and several by Desmoulins,



Brissot and Robespierre. The privileged classes also participated: Condorcet wrote seven pamphlets between November and February; Sieyès produced three during the same period. Their readership was predominantly in the salons and discussion clubs which the middle classes shared with the liberal nobles.

These groups were interested in the Enlightenment and its publications. Raymond Birn's essay⁵ demonstrates that, by 1780, 40 per cent of servants and 30 per cent of salaried workers in Paris had one or more books according to their wills or death inventories. Amongst royal officials in the provinces, this rose to 74 per cent. Books which were banned in France were smuggled in from Switzerland and the Netherlands. The Philosophes of the Enlightenment were by no means in favour of equality for all. But they were vehemently anti-clerical (Voltaire and Holbach); they demanded the equalisation of justice (Condorcet and Diderot), fairer taxation (Quesnay) and the opportunity for all citizens to participate in government (Rousseau). These and other ideas had become part of the conversational currency of the educated classes by the 1780s, as never before. Discussion now focused on what was possible and desirable rather than what was traditional. The government had been influenced by Enlightenment ideas to some extent, not always usefully. The Eden Treaty of 1786, providing partial physiocratic free trade with Britain, did not help France's developing industries. It could be argued that the King's desire for reform were a measure of his interest in the new ways: certainly few kings before him had consulted as many groups as he and his ministers did in 1787–9. The publication of accounts by Necker, and subsequent demands for public scrutiny, also demonstrate the questioning mood of the Enlightenment.

Historians including Jacques Godechot and Claude Manceron have associated the French Revolution with similar developments in north Italy, in the Netherlands and in America, where the commercial classes tried to enhance their power at the expense of the traditional ruling classes. Events in America had a particular influence. The most obvious connection is that between Necker's borrowing (on five- to seven-year terms starting in 1778–81) and the urgent need to sort out the French public debt in 1786–8. Historians such as Macdonald have argued that the influence on the educated classes of the war was even more important. He cites the Revolutionary mood in areas such as the Ile de France, which sent more troops to America than others. There may, of course, be other explanations for the uneven spread across France of Revolutionary fervour, and it is easy to point out prominent Revolutionaries who had never been farther from their homes in Arras



(Robespierre) and Champagne (Danton) than Paris. It can be said with some certainty, however, that the middle classes were interested in the American Revolution; they lionised the Marquis of Lafayette as someone with practical experience of liberty, and drew parallels between the tyranny of King George III and the ministerial despotism they perceived in their own country. Louis may well have regretted the freedom allowed to authors writing about the injustice of taxation without representation.

The impact of the educated classes was bound to be substantial once the system of government was questioned in any way at all. Decades of discussion and criticism by the Philosophes and their readers, together with close contact with the various British reform groups of the 1770s and 1780s, had introduced and made current the vocabulary and concepts necessary for constitutional and political change. The recalcitrance of the privileged classes provided the platform from which the middle classes could address their own agenda.

Questions

1. What 'Enlightenment' issues are discernible in the discussions which led up to the summoning of the Estates General?
2. Was the impact of the American war an essential catalyst to developments in France?

SOURCES

The first group of sources offers insights into the privileged classes and the part they played in events leading to the outbreak of the French Revolution. The second group looks at various perceptions and theories held at the time about the issues and events. In the Questions following the Sources, the number of marks that might be allocated by examiners is shown in square brackets.

1. THE PRIVILEGED CLASSES AND THE REVOLUTION

Source A: Controller-General Calonne speaks at the opening of the Assembly of Notables, 22 February 1787.

A general survey has led His Majesty to consider, first, the different forms of administration which exist in the different provinces of the kingdom where there is no meeting of the estates. To ensure that the levying of public taxes is no

The French Revolution

The French Revolution examines the major themes of the period including the pre-revolution economic and political situation in France through the fall of Robespierre and the increasing power of Bonaparte. Combining narrative, interpretation and discussion of what makes a revolution, this book provides a concise introduction and study aid for students.

Jocelyn Hunt is a former History teacher at Watford Girls' Grammar School.

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- includes key background information
- focuses on analysis of material through questions
- supplies worked answers to 'A' Level examination questions
- helps tighten up on essay technique
- contains a comprehensive range of sources, including illustrations
- provides guidance to using sources and a guide to further reading

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