

Why were the peasants dissatisfied?

Revolution often breaks out in a country when conditions are so bad that the people desperately want a change. Some of the troubles that led to revolution in eighteenth-century France had existed for a long time. These troubles are known as the evils, or abuses, of the OLD REGIME (the old order).

Instead of reforming these abuses, Louis XV and Louis XVI allowed them to grow worse. The next selection describes the bad economic conditions in France. It was written by Arthur Young, an Englishman who traveled through France from 1787 to 1789. Why were the difficulties he describes among the basic causes of the French Revolution?

August 4, 1787

In this journey, I have passed a great number of splendid bridges and many superb roads. This only proves the foolishness of the government. These splendid bridges and large roads cannot be made merely for the use of the people who live here. One-fourth of the expense would be enough for useful travel. These things are therefore objects of public display. They are meant for the eye of travelers.

Public works are usually done by the corvée system. In this system, the peasants of the area are required to do several days' work each year without pay. In the south of France, money is collected by the taille. This is a tax on the land and its produce. There has been injustice in levying the amount each person must pay. Lands held by the nobility are taxed very little. Lands held by commoners are taxed heavily.

August 23, 1787

We passed a rich and highly cultivated valley on the way to Aiguillon. I saw the castle of the duke of Aiguillon. It was begun about twenty years ago. At that time, the duke was exiled here for eight years [from the royal court]. Thanks to that banishment, the building went on very well. However, as soon as the sentence was reversed, the duke went back to Paris. He has not been here since. As a result, all stands still. It is thus that banishment alone will force the French nobility to do what the English do for pleasure—live on and take care of their estates.

October 14, 1787

We came to the abbey [monastery] of St. Germain. It is the richest abbey in France. The abbot [head of the abbey] receives 300,000 livres [about 1.5 million] a year. I lose my patience at such revenues being granted in this manner. What a noble farm one-fourth of this income could establish! What turnips, what potatoes, what sheep, what wool! Are not these things better than a fat clergyman?

September 5, 1788

We came to Montauban. The poor people seem poor, indeed. The children are terribly ragged. They are worse clad, if possible, than if they had no clothes at all. I saw a beautiful girl six or seven years old playing with a stick. She smiled under such a bundle of rags as made my heart ache to see her. One-third of what I have seen of this province seems uncultivated. Nearly all of it seems in misery.

July 1789

Walking up a long hill to rest my horse, I was joined by a poor woman who complained of the hard times. She said her husband had only a tiny piece of land, one cow, and a poor little horse. Yet they had to pay 42 pounds of wheat and three chickens as rent to a noble. They also paid 168 pounds of oats and one chicken to another noble, besides very heavy *tailles* and other taxes. "The *tailles* and *fuedal* dues [rents owed the lords since the *fuedal* time] are crushing us," she said. This woman, at no great distance, might have been taken for sixty or seventy years old. Her figure was bent, and her face was wrinkled and hardened by labor. However, she said she was only twenty-eight.

The *capitaineries* [hunting reserves] are another curse on all the people who occupy the land. These reserves are districts granted by the king to princes of the royal blood. The princes own all the game in these districts, even on lands not belonging to them. Game means whole droves of wild boars and herds of deer that are not confined by any wall or fence. The animals wander at pleasure over the whole country, destroying the crops. The game in a single reserve did damage to the amount of 184,263 *livres* [almost one million] a year. No wonder that we find people saying, "We loudly demand the destruction of the *capitaineries* and all sorts of game."

They also ask, as a favor, to be allowed to "harvest their grain, mow their meadows, and remove the leftover stalks without regard to partridges [a bird] and other game." There are many laws for preserving game. These laws forbid weeding and hoeing, which might disturb the young partridges. Mowing hay before a certain time, so late as to spoil the crop, and taking away the stalks are also forbidden. These harvest activities would take away the birds' shelter.

Adapted from Arthur Young, *Travels in France*, 1794

THINKING IT THROUGH

1. This passage describes the evils of Old Regime.
 - A. What are these evils?
 - B. Which do you consider the worst ones? Why?
2. What difference does Arthur Young note between the English and the French nobility? Was the difference an important one? Explain.
3. If you had been a peasant in eighteenth-century France, would you have supported a revolt against the king? Why or why not?

WORKSHEET

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Analyzing a Primary Source: The Storming of the Bastille

Read the following passage, an eyewitness account of the fall of the Bastille, and then answer the questions below. Read textbook page 486 for background information.

Veteran armies . . . have never performed greater prodigies [feats] of valor than this leaderless multitude of persons belonging to every class, workmen of all trades who, mostly ill-equipped and unused to arms, boldly affronted the fire from the ramparts and seemed to mock the thunderbolts the enemy hurled at them. . . .

The attackers, having demolished the first drawbridge and brought their guns into position against the second, could not fail to capture the fort. . . .

. . . One of the [soldiers] opened the gate behind the drawbridge and asked what we wanted. "The surrender of the Bastille," was the answer, on which he let us in. At the same time the besiegers lowered the great bridge. . . .

Those who came in first treated the conquered enemy humanely and embraced the staff officers to show there was no ill-feeling. But a few soldiers posted on the platforms and unaware that the fortress had surrendered discharged their muskets, whereupon the people, transformed with rage, threw themselves on the [soldiers]. . . .

. . . Several . . . [individuals] contended for the honor of having arrested the Marquis de Launay [the governor of the Bastille] . . . and a few

others undertook to guard him and succeeded in getting him out of the Bastille, though he was roughly handled by the people, who were calling for his death. . . .

But the fury of the crowd continued to increase and their blind wrath did not spare de Launay's escort. . . . Exhausted by his efforts to defend his prisoner . . . he had to separate from M. de Launay. . . . Hardly had he sat down when, looking after the procession, he saw the head of M. de Launay stuck on the point of a pike. . . . The people, fearing that their victim might be snatched away from them, hastened to cut his throat on the steps of the Hotel de Ville [City Hall]. . . .

In the intoxication [excitement] of victory the unfortunate inmates of the dungeons of the Bastille had been forgotten. All the keys had been carried off in triumph and it was necessary to force the doors of the cells. Seven prisoners were found. . . .

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1. What kinds of people stormed the Bastille? _____

2. What turned the mob from fairly reasonable to fierce? _____

3. Why do you think people competed with one another to arrest the Marquis de Launay? _____

4. According to your textbook, why was the Bastille attacked? _____

5. What significance did the attack on the Bastille have as a symbol? _____

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