



THE FRENCH REVOLUTION (1789-1815) Part 1

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Introductory Remarks

- In France the existing social system towards the end of the eighteenth century was called the ancien régime.
- The ancien régime was dominated by the aristocracy, its social and economic foundation was feudal, and autocracy was the general political principle.
- **Three estates system:** Within the ancien régime,
 - The clergy constituted the First Estate
 - The aristocracy comprised the Second Estate
 - The rest of the population formed the Third Estate.



Privileged Clergy and the First Estate

- The privileged clergy of the First Estate could maintain a separate identity, despite being part of the structures of the state.
- The King's Law was not applicable to them, and the king had no power to impose tax on them.
- The clergy, who formed 1 per cent of the French population, were in control of one-tenth of the total land from which they extracted a tithe, enabling them to lead a luxurious life.
- Corruption was rampant in the Church.



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Aristocracy and the Second Estate

- The aristocracy of France belonged to the Second Estate.
- They formed about one-third of the total population of the country and enjoyed various privileges like the clergy.
- Many owned huge tracts of land and, without paying any taxes, they lived at the expense of the peasants' labour.
- But the aristocracy was not free from factionalism.
- However, their power and privileges were curbed in the wake of the revolution.



The Third Estate: 96% French

- All the people of France, except those belonging to the First and Second Estates, i.e. clergy and aristocracy, were part of the Third Estate.
- A total of 96 per cent of the French population.
- The socio- economic divisions and disparity which characterized the clergy and the aristocracy, were more pronounced among the various communities of the Third Estate.
- The Third Estate was made up of rich businessmen, industrialists, and intellectuals on the one hand, and the labouring men and peasants on the other.
- It was this section of the French population who bore the brunt of taxation.



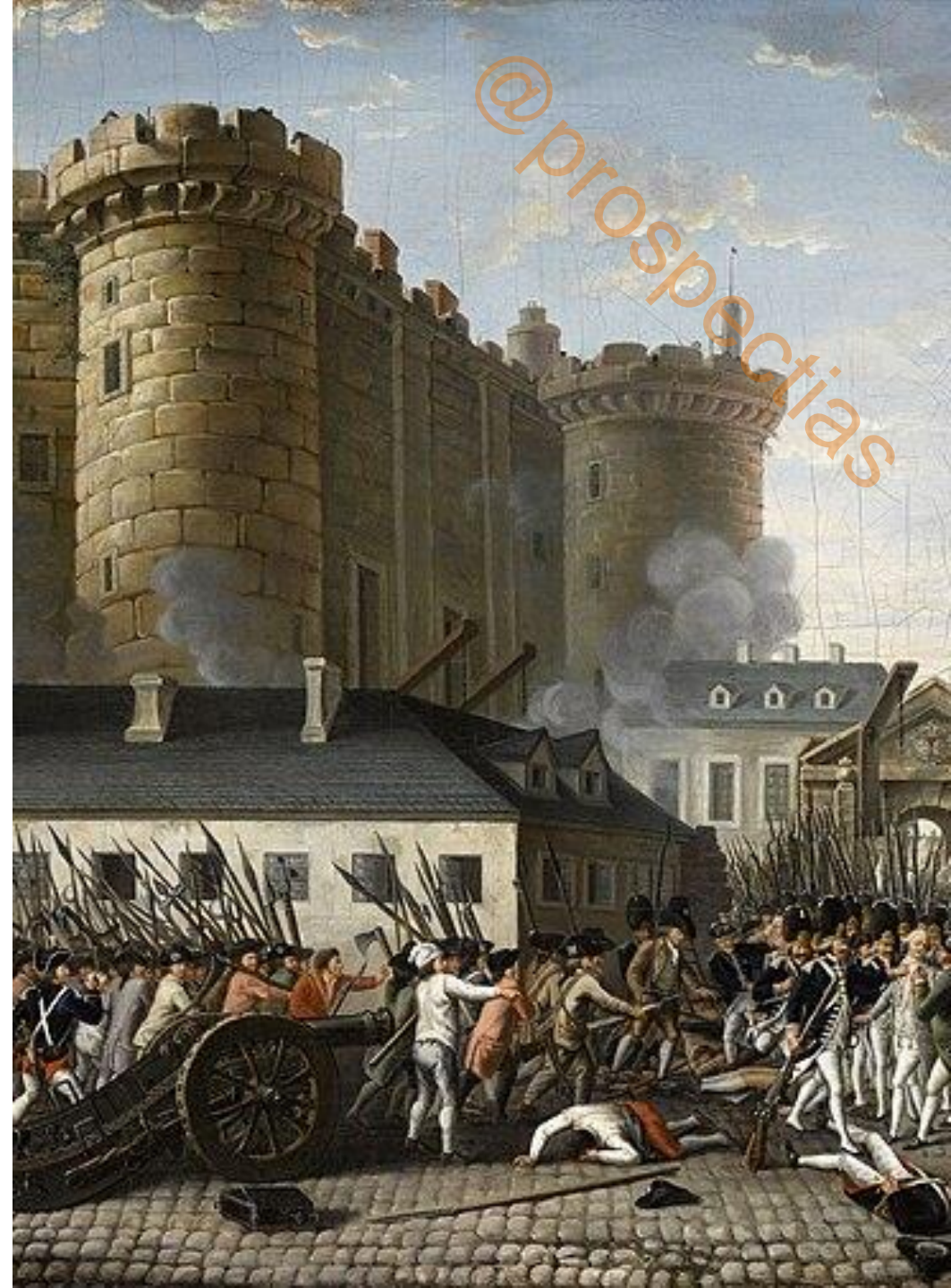
Division of Third Estate

- The people of the Third Estate were broadly divided into three groups—the bourgeoisie, the peasants, and the sans-culottes.
- The word bourgeoisie literally means the middle class and though they were a minority in the Third Estate they wielded the greatest influence and considerable financial power.
- However, they did not all have the same economic or social status.
- The bourgeoisie included some of the most enlightened, and most intelligent members of French society, yet they were excluded from politics and administration by the privileged estates.
- It was this incongruence which fuelled the bourgeois revolution.



The Political Crisis of 1789: Political Causes

- The word 'revolution' generally means a fundamental change in a social system, or structure, and a shift from one type of social system or structure to another.
- The French Revolution of 1789 can therefore be branded a total revolution
- It aimed At
 - The destruction of the Feudal Social System which had developed in Europe over the last thousand years or so and
 - The Establishment in its place of a capitalist or bourgeois social system.
- Louis XIV, a French king of the bourbon dynasty, reinforced autocratic monarchy by centralizing his power.
- French kings: Believers in the divine right of kings; Limited scope for popular participation.
- Like the British Parliament, the French Estates General assembled irregularly.
- As the Estates General was not legitimate if it had not been convened by the King, the assembly was not called into the session from 1614, with the result that all powers were centralized in the hands of the French King.



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- Greatest flaw of an Autocratic Monarchy: The effectiveness of governance and the welfare of the people depended on the efficiency and personality of the king.
 - It meant that if the king was strong, then he could maintain control over his administration and subordinates would execute his instructions.
 - A weak King had little control over his administration.
- During the reign of Louis XIV officials known as intendants ran the administration very efficiently but they became selfish and corrupt during the reigns of Louis XV and Louis XVI.



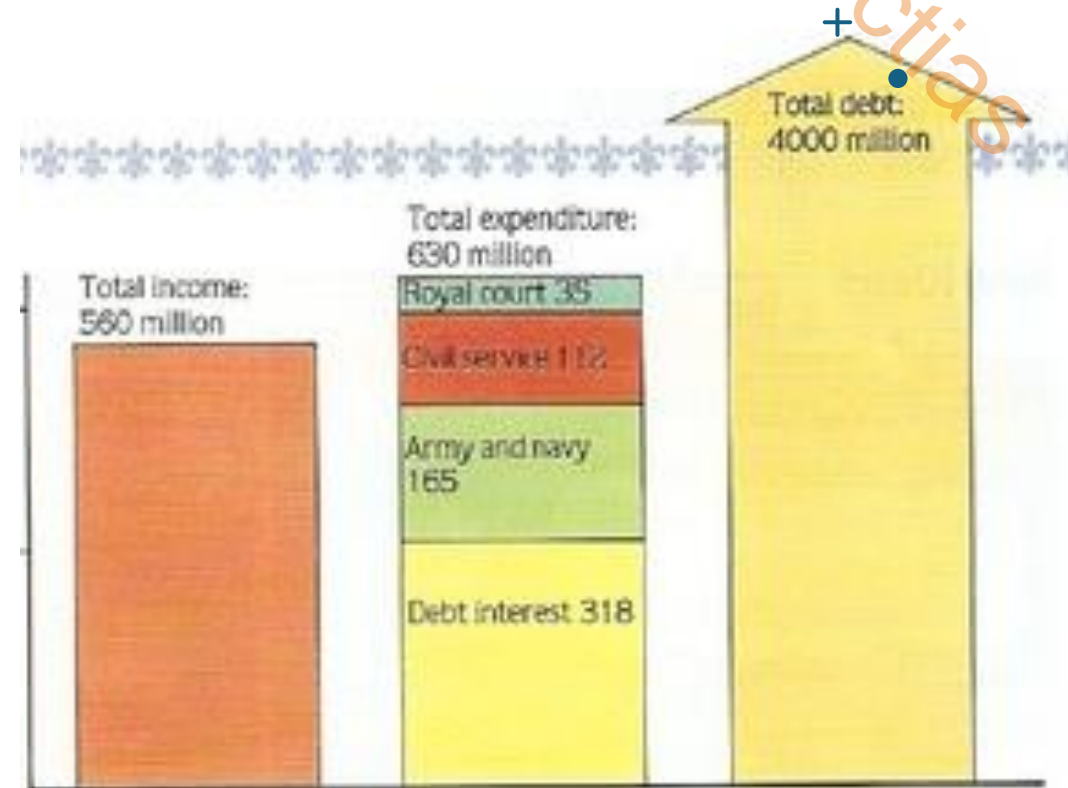
The Economic Crisis of 1789: The Economic Causes

- The structural and economic crisis of the ancien régime deepened with the coronation of Louis XVI in 1774.
- With the participation of France in the American War of Independence, the crisis became all the more unbearable.
- Economic backwardness further deteriorated the matter. The decline in the French economy started in the first half of the eighteenth century.
- The economic crisis which came in the wake of wars waged by Louis XIV, further deepened following the extravagances of Louis XV.
- The economic reforms undertaken by Louis XVI met with failure because of his weak personality and opposition from the aristocracy.
- Despite all this, the king and the aristocracy continued to maintain their privileged way of life as before.
- Main cause of the economic crisis in France was the disparity in taxation. In the ancien régime, the privileged classes were free from the burden of taxation.
- Only the people belonging to the Third Estate were obliged to pay taxes hence the condition, particularly of farmers, deteriorated most.
- The pre-revolutionary backwardness of the French economy meant that the exploitation of farmers by feudal lords gained in intensity.
- The French historian Taine shows that four-fifths of a farmer's income would be spent in payment of state tax, religious tax imposed by Church and dues to feudal lords.

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- The direct taxes were taille, capitation, vingtiemes, etc. and the indirect taxes were gabelle, aide, etc.
- Also had to pay tithes or religious tax to the Church.
- Internal tariff barrier stood in the way of trade, commerce, and industry run by the bourgeoisie.
- However, it was the social humiliation, more than the economic hardship, of this class which paved the way for their support of revolution.
- The depression of 1778 and the failure of crops in 1787, on the eve of the French Revolution, was an utter disaster for the French economy.
- Prices of commodities decreased following the depression and as a result, the profits went down and the labour fell on bad days.
- Following the failure of crops in 1787-89, food production fell dramatically, leading to an increase in the prices of foodstuff. The hardship of peasants, workers, and the weaker classes therefore intensified.

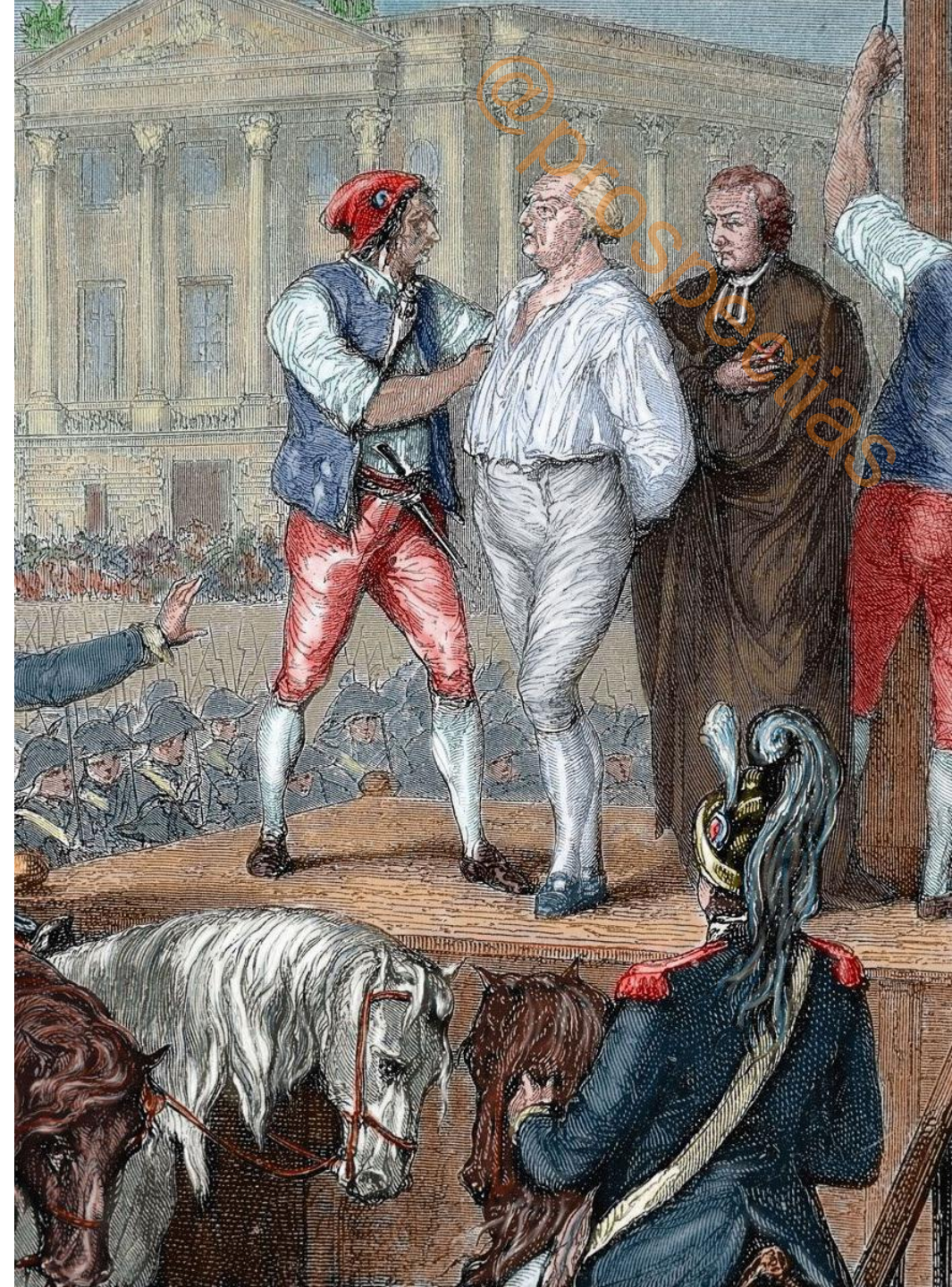
Economic factors : growing government debt



CE 5 Government income and expenditure, 1788

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- Only way out of this condition was to cut expenditure and increase income, but French involvement in wars made a considerable dent in the French exchequer.
- The extravagance of the French king and the aristocracy worsened the situation.
- The ministers in the council of Louis XVI-Turgot, Necker, and Calonne-proposed a restructuring of the tax system to tide them over the economic crisis.
- Under the prevailing conditions, imposition of a tax on the aristocracy was the only way to solve the problem.
- Stiff opposition from the aristocracy made it impossible for Louis XVI to implement the proposal. T
- he empty exchequer inexorably led to the convening of Estates General.
- This resulted in the 'aristocratic revolt'-the beginning of the French Revolution.



The Role of the Philosophers

- **Montesquieu (1689-1755)**

- He was an admirer of the state and social system of England.
- His greatest work *The Spirit of the Laws* (*De l'esprit des lois*) came out in 1734. In this book he expounded his famous theory of the 'separation of powers'. He held that distinct separation of power among the legislature, judiciary, and administrative wings of government was desirable for without which, it would be impossible to curb an autocracy.
- Montesquieu was no believer in republicanism or democracy and the constitutional monarchy of England was his ideal. Though his thoughts and ideology were characterized by revolutionary spirit, he was not in favour of revolution.
- He never spoke about the abolition of privileges of the Church and aristocracy and he also remained silent about the rights of common people.

- **Voltaire (1694-1778)**

- Like Montesquieu he too was an admirer of the English model. The target of his attack was the Roman Catholic Church. For him Church was synonymous with religious bigotry yet far from being an atheist, he was a believer in God.
- In terms of political belief, he was a liberal but like Montesquieu he had faith in the institution of monarchy and his ideal form of government was 'enlightened despotism'.



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- **Rousseau (1712-78)**
 - The greatest thinker among contemporary French philosophers was Jean-Jacques Rousseau.
 - His ideology and thought was more extremist and revolutionary in character than those of all other contemporary philosophers.
 - According to Rousseau, man was honest and happy in his natural condition but it was society, which by way of creating division among men, became the source of unhappiness and disquiet.
 - Rousseau set forth this theory in *The Social Contract*.
 - He held that the state and society should evolve out of a social contract between all members of that society and that sovereign power should lie not in the rights of kings, but in the 'general will of the people.'
 - Rousseau's ideal political form was direct democracy.
 - He believed that in order to ensure social equality and freedom, there was little alternative but to hand over power to the people.
 - Rousseau's thoughts deeply influenced contemporary France and according to Napoleon, Rousseau was responsible for the French Revolution more so than anyone else.

