

Document Packet: 1780s France -- The Road to Revolution

Document 1

(17 July 1725)—On Saturday the fourteenth, a baker of the *faubourg* Saint-Antoine seemingly tried to sell bread for thirty-four *sous* which that morning had cost thirty. The woman to whom this happened caused an uproar and called her neighbors. The people gathered, furious with bakers in general. Soon their numbers reached eighteen hundred, and they looted all the bakers' houses in the *faubourg* from top to bottom, throwing dough and flour into the gutter. Some also profited from the occasion by stealing silver and silverware.

The guards, who are at the city gates during the day, arrived but were driven back by a shower of rocks. They had the presence of mind to close the three gates of the *faubourg* Saint-Antoine. They sent for a mounted patrol, which forced its way with swords into the midst of the crowd and fired three shots, leading to a general dispersal.

All this is due to the controls on bread. Farmers are forbidden to bring wheat to market and bakers are given only a certain quantity of flour. The kind of bread baked is also regulated. Rolls and soft bread are no longer eaten in Paris.

Several signs have appeared in the mornings, one of them posted in the courtyard of the Palais-Royal, containing terrible rumors against the government and against Monsieur the Duke [of Orléans]. Just very recently, we have had to pay [two new taxes] and bread has been extraordinarily expensive. This is too much at once to take sitting down.

(April, 1724)—Money has been devalued by one-third this year. . . . Order is being reestablished only with great difficulty, which highlights the danger of workers becoming accustomed to increased earnings. It was attractive for them to work only three days and to have enough to live on for the rest of the week.

It is obvious how far these lower-class individuals go in creating factions. In Paris there are perhaps four thousand stocking weavers. When the first devaluation took place, they wanted to have five *sous* more per pair of stockings, and this the merchants were obliged to give them. With the second devaluation, the merchants wished to reduce this five *sous* increase. The workers refused, the merchants complained, and the workers rebelled. They threatened to beat up those among them who would work for a lower wage, and they promised one *écu* a day to those who would have no work and could not live without it. To do this, they chose a secretary who had a list of the jobless and a treasurer who distributed the stipend.

SOURCE: E. J. F. Barbier, *Chronique de la regence et du regne de Louis XV ou journal de Barbier*, vol. 1 (Paris: G. Charpentier et Cie., 1857), 350–51, 399–403.

Document 2

24 August 1774.

Sire,

I could have wished to have detailed the reflections that are suggested to me by the present posture of the finances, but time will not permit me. I reserve myself for a more ample explanation, when I shall have obtained more accurate information. In the present moment, I confine myself, Sire, to call to your recollection three ideas:

No national bankruptcy.

No increase of taxes.

No new loans.

No bankruptcy—neither avowed nor disguised under compulsory reductions.

No increase of taxes—the reasons for this measure Your Majesty will find in the situation of your people, and still more in your own heart.

No new loans—for every loan, by diminishing the amount of the free revenue, necessarily produces at last a bankruptcy, or an increase of taxes. In a period of peace, money should not be borrowed, unless to liquidate old debts, or to discharge others bearing a higher interest.

To obtain these three points there is but one method, that of reducing the expenditure below the receipt, and so much below it as to leave twenty millions [livres] every year for the redemption of former debts. Without this precaution, the first cannonball that is fired will force the state to a public bankruptcy.

Where to retrench? Every department will maintain that, as far as relates to itself, there is scarcely a single expenditure that is not indispensable. The reasons alleged may be very good, but...must give way to the irresistible necessity of economy.

It is this necessity then that calls upon Your Majesty to oblige each department to consult the Minister of Finances. It is indispensable that he should be allowed to discuss with each, in Your Majesty's presence, the degree of necessity of proposed expenses. Above all, it is requisite, Sire, when you have thus fixed upon the funds of each department, that you should forbid him who is charged with it to engage any new expense without having first consulted the Minister of Finance on the means of supplying it. Without this [measure], each department will load itself with debts, which will still be the debts of Your Majesty; and the person directing the finances will never be responsible for any correspondence between the expenditure and the receipt. . . .

A hope may be indulged, that, by the improvement of agriculture, by the suppression of abuses in the collection of the revenue, and by a more equal distribution of the taxes, the people may be sensibly relieved, without greatly diminishing the public income, but, unless economy is adopted first, no reform will be possible, for there is no reform which does not involve the risk of some interruption in the collection of funds and one must expect a multiplicity of embarrassments, which will be created by the man.

SOURCE: Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot's letter to the French king, 1774.

Document 3

PARIS, OCTOBER 17, 1787: One opinion pervaded the whole company, that they are on the eve of some great revolution in the government: that everything points to it: the confusion in the finances great: with a deficit impossible to provide for without the estates-general of the kingdom, yet no ideas formed of what would be the consequence of their meeting: no minister existing, or to be looked to in or out of power, with such decisive talents as to promise any other remedy than palliative ones: a prince on the throne, with

excellent dispositions, but without the resources of a mind that could govern in such a moment without ministers: a court buried in pleasure and dissipation; and adding to distress, instead of endeavoring to be placed in a more independent situation: a great ferment¹ amongst all ranks of men, who are eager for some change, without knowing what to look to, or hope for: and a strong leaven² for liberty, increasing every hour since the American revolution; altogether form a combination of circumstances that promise e'er long to ferment into motion, if some master hand, of very superior talents, and inflexible courage, is not found at the helm to guide events, instead of being driven by them. It is very remarkable, that such conversation never occurs but a bankruptcy is a topic: the curious question on which is, would a bankruptcy occasion a civil war, and a total overthrow of the government? These answers that I have received to this question, appear to be just: such a measure, conducted by a man of abilities, vigor, and firmness, would certainly not occasion either one or the other. But the same measure, attempted by a man of different character, might possibly do both. All agree, that the states³ of the kingdom cannot assemble without more liberty being the consequence; but I meet with so few men that have any just ideas of freedom, that I question much the species of this new liberty that is to rise. They know not how to value the privileges of **the people**,⁴ as to the nobility and the clergy, if a revolution added anything to their scale,⁵ I think it would do more mischief than good.

RENNES, SEPTEMBER 2, 1788: The discontents of the people have been double, first on account of the high price of bread, and secondly, for the banishment of the *parlemente*.⁶ The former cause is natural enough, but why the people should love their *parlemente* was what I could not understand, since the members, as well as of the states, are all noble, and the distinction between the nobility and common people is nowhere stronger than in Bretagne. They assured me, however, that the populace have been stirred up to violence by every art of deception, and even by money distributed for that purpose. The commotion rose to such heights before the camp was established, that the troops here were utterly unable to keep the peace.
...

NANTES, SEPTEMBER 22, 1788: Nantes is as *enflamme*⁷ in the cause of liberty, as any town in France can be: the conversations I witnessed here, prove how great a change is effected in the minds of the French, nor do I believe it will be possible for the present government to last a half century longer, unless the clearest and most decided talents are at the helm. The American revolution has laid the foundation of another in France, if government does not take care of itself.

SOURCE: Arthur Young, an English agricultural writer, traveling through France in 1787-1788.

¹ excitement

² rising

³ the Estates-General.

⁴ Young's emphasis.

⁵ size, i.e., increased their power.

⁶ The common people supported the *parlemente* because it was defying the king's government and standing up for everyone by doing so. (Or so it seemed at that time.)

⁷ inflamed

Document 4



SOURCE: French political cartoon, 1789.

Document 5

What is necessary that a nation should subsist and prosper? Individual effort and public functions. All individual efforts may be included in four classes: (1) Since the earth and the waters furnish crude products for the needs of man, the first class, in logical sequence, will be that of all families which devote themselves to agricultural labor. (2) Between the first sale of products and their consumption or use, a new manipulation, more or less repeated, adds to these products a second value more or less composite. In this manner human industry succeeds in perfecting the gifts of nature, and the crude product increases twofold, tenfold, one hundred-fold in value. Such are the efforts of the second class. (3) Between production and consumption, as well as between the various stages of production, a group of intermediary agents establish themselves, useful both to producers and consumers; these are the merchants and brokers: the brokers who, comparing incessantly the demands of time and place, speculate upon the profit of retention and transportation; merchants who are charged with distribution, in the last analysis, either at wholesale or at retail. This species of utility characterizes the third class. (4) Outside of these three classes of productive and useful citizens, who are occupied with real objects of consumption and use, there is also need in a society of a series of efforts and pains, whose objects are directly useful or agreeable to the individual. This fourth class embraces all those who stand between the most distinguished and liberal professions and the less esteemed services of domestics.

Such are the efforts which sustain society. Who puts them forth? The Third Estate.

Public functions may be classified equally well, in the present state of affairs, under four recognized heads: the sword, the robe, the church, and the administration. It would be superfluous to take them up one by one, for the purpose of showing that everywhere the Third Estate attends to nineteen-twentieths of them, with this distinction; that it is laden with all that which is really painful, with all the burdens which the privileged classes refuse to carry. Do we give the Third Estate credit for this? That this might come about, it would be necessary that the Third Estate should refuse to fill these places, or that it should be less ready to exercise their functions. The facts are well known. Meanwhile they have dared to impose a prohibition upon the order of the Third Estate. They have said to it: "Whatever may be your services, whatever may be your abilities, you shall go thus far; you may not pass beyond!" Certain rare exceptions, properly regarded, are but a mockery, and the terms which are indulged in on such occasions, one insult the more.

....It suffices here to have made it clear that the pretended utility of a privileged order for the public service is nothing more than a chimera; that with it all that which is burdensome in this service is performed by the Third Estate; that without it the superior places would be infinitely better filled; that they naturally ought to be the lot and the recompense of ability and recognized services, and that if privileged persons have come to usurp all the lucrative and honorable posts, it is a hateful injustice to the rank and file of citizens and at the same time a treason to the public weal.

Who then shall dare to say that the Third Estate has not within itself all that is necessary for the formation of a complete nation? It is the strong and robust man who has one arm still shackled. If the privileged order should be abolished, the nation would be nothing less, but something more. Therefore, what is the Third Estate? Everything; but an everything shackled and oppressed. What would it be without the privileged order? Everything, but an everything free and flourishing. Nothing can succeed without it, everything would be infinitely better without the others.

It is not sufficient to show that privileged persons, far from being useful to the nation, cannot but enfeeble and injure it; it is necessary to prove further that the noble order does not enter at all into the social organization; that it may indeed be a burden upon the nation, but that it cannot of itself constitute a nation.

In the first place, it is not possible in the number of all the elementary parts of a nation to find a place for the caste of nobles. I know that there are individuals in great number whom infirmities, incapacity, incurable laziness, or the weight of bad habits render strangers to the labors of society. The exception and the abuse are everywhere found beside the rule. But it will be admitted that the less there are of these abuses, the better it will be for the State. The worst possible arrangement of all would be where not alone isolated individuals, but a whole class of citizens should take pride in remaining motionless in the midst of the general movement, and should consume the best part of the product without bearing any part in its production. Such a class is surely estranged to the nation by its indolence.

The noble order is not less estranged from the generality of us by its civil and political prerogatives.

What is a nation? A body of associates, living under a common law, and represented by the same legislature, etc.

It is not evident that the noble order has privileges and expenditures which it dares to call its rights, but which are apart from the rights of the great body of citizens? It departs there from the common order, from the common law. So its civil rights make of it an isolated people in the midst of the great nation. This is truly *imperium in imperio*.

In regard to its political rights, these also it exercises apart. It has its special representatives, which are not charged with securing the interests of the people. The body of its deputies sit apart; and when it is assembled in the same hall with the deputies of simple citizens, it is none the less true that its representation is essentially distinct and separate: it is a stranger to the nation, in the first place, by its origin, since its commission is not derived from the people; then by its object, which consists of defending not the general, but the particular interest.

The Third Estate embraces then all that which belongs to the nation; and all that which is not the Third Estate, cannot be regarded as being of the nation. What is the Third Estate? It is the whole.

SOURCE: Abbey Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyè's essay, "What is the Third Estate?," 1789.

Document 6

Gifts, pensions, and large profits reserved to nobles only take the spirit of emulation away from both nobles and commoners. Emulation is taken away from the nobles because, by being born noble and aspiring to everything, they need credit. Emulation is also taken away from the commoners because these people cannot aspire to anything, and emulation becomes useless to them. To deprive a State of the genius that could enlighten, instruct, and defend it, is a crime toward the nation. . . .

To close off employment possibilities and respectable occupations to the most numerous and useful class is like killing genius and talents, and forcing them to run away from an ungrateful home. However, in our current constitution, only nobles enjoy all prerogatives like landed wealth, honors, dignities, graces, pensions, retirements, responsibility for government, and free schools. . . . These [privileges] constitute the favors the State lavishes exclusively on the nobility, at the expense of the Third Estate.

The nobility enjoys and owns everything, and would like to free itself from everything. However, if the nobility commands the army, the Third Estate makes it up. If nobility pours a drop of blood, the Third Estate spreads rivers of it. The nobility empties the royal treasury, the Third Estate fills it up. Finally, the Third Estate pays everything and does not enjoy anything.

Lauris (sénéchaussée Aix)

Sire, it is with the heaviest pain that we see huge pensions granted to vile and scheming courtiers. They take credit in front of Your Majesty. Significant remunerations are tied to jobs without duties.

If only you knew, Sire, how much sweat, how many tears soak the money going into your treasury. Without doubt, your kindness will be more on its guard against people's indiscreet requests who consume in one day the fruits of taxes from thousands of your poor subjects.

We cannot hide, Sire, that the nobility consumes the major part of State income. Indeed, it is this order of citizens, to whom we probably give the most merit, that furnishes the crown officers, the governors, the commanders, the quartermasters, and all the people who have honorable positions. A noble man, who knows how to dance well, ride a horse well, and handle a sword, thinks he deserves everything, and, nonetheless, he pretends that he does not owe anything to the State. If he is only greedy for glory, then he should serve Your Majesty and the nation and receive no income.

SOURCE: A cahiers de doléances ["list of grievances"], 1789.

Document 7

Upper Alsace, Bailliage de Belfort
To His Grace, Monsieur Necker, Minister of Finances

Statement concerning the unjust, onerous, and humiliating dues and other unheard of burdens which the undersigned inhabitants of the seigneurie of Montjoye-Vaufrey are made to endure by the Count of

Montjoye-Vaufrey. The seigneurie of Montjoye-Vaufrey is small with almost inaccessible mountains, covered in large part by forests of beech and fir trees. The soil is naturally barren and produces nothing but brambles and thorn bushes. It is part of Upper Alsace and enclosed by the diocese of Basle, lying on the kingdom's border....

The Right of Mortmain

The same lands on which the seigneur collects this unusual tithe are also subject to mortmain [death duty], and he exercises this right with such cruelty that the poor unfortunate owner cannot sell his land, even when reduced to a state of destitution deserving of the greatest compassion. We have seen infirm persons, possessing land, but forbidden to sell it by the seigneur, who are led by their charitable fellow-citizens from village to village begging for alms. Gardens, houses, and orchards were once exempt from this duty, but today he takes everything in case the owner dies without an heir.

Corvées

It would seem that the owners of these same lands should be left to enjoy their produce in peace, obliged as they are to submit to such an outrageous tithe and to the odious exercise of the right of mortmain. But far from it. In addition, this seigneur requires five days of work from them, and if he obliges them to perform this service in actual labor, he assigns the work when it is convenient for him. It is often the case that those subject to the *corvée* are not able to fulfill their tasks in a day, whereupon they are obliged to continue their work the next day, even though only one day of work is counted. If he does not require actual labor from them, someone who has two oxen is forced to pay him six *livres*. . . . Some people have preferred to endure this additional charge rather than to provide the actual labor, but the worker with no beasts of burden performs the *corvée* with his own hands. Or, if he wants to commute his work into money, he is forced to pay three *livres* fifteen sols, whereas before he would only have paid thirty-three sols. Poor beggars are not exempt. They are seen going from door to door asking for bread in order to go and work for the seigneur, because recently he refuses all food to those required to work at the *corvée*.

Taxes, Hens, the Sale of Wine, Residence Rights

For each journal of land [a measure of land equal to the amount a plowman could plow in a day] he takes eight deniers in taxes, three hens for each hearth, and the poor are no more exempt than the richest inhabitant. He collects a tenth of the wine sold in inns, whereas the king only takes a twentieth. He makes each person who moves to a new community pay a florin a year for this right. Outsiders are also subject to this payment.

Withholding Right

For approximately ten years, he has assumed a withholding right with respect to most of the land sold in the seigneurie. He sells this right to whomever he wants; therefore the heir can be banished from the land. The rights of family are held in just as much contempt as those of humanity.

Communal Forests

His greed leads him to appropriate all of the communal forests, selling them for his own profit. This usurpation has already been seen in the communities of Montjoye, Monnoiront, and Les Choseaux. He gives them to whomever he pleases. The distribution is never in proportion to the needs of the individual, demonstrating his absolute mastery. However, individuals pay royal taxes and even the subsidy, a tax which in Alsace is particularly heavy on forests.

Communal Pasturelands

The same observations can be made with regard to communal pasturelands. The seigneur does not allow land to be cleared at all unless one agrees to plant and give him a sixth of what is produced. Otherwise it is forbidden to touch the smallest bramble or thorn. Sometimes he seizes certain portions of these

pasturelands that meet his needs, and at other times he cedes them to different individuals.

....For more than a century, they have taken their seigneur to court in order to oblige him to produce the legal titles which give him the right to oppress them. To thwart these just measures, the predecessors of the current seigneur had the deputies of the leading communities clapped in irons and imprisoned, charging them with insubordination and holding them in custody at the seigneur's will. The current seigneur has again outdone his predecessors. For two months, he has kept . . . an entire family composed of six heads of household in prison, and he has charged each fifteen gold *louis*. He has had several others imprisoned. This kind of violence holds all of these unfortunate people in the cruelest fear and slavery. Until now, each imprisonment has been the signal for the creation of a new tax, and it is in this very unusual manner that he perpetuates these different humiliations and creates new ones.

SOURCE: Another *cahiers de doléances* ["list of grievances"] from the countryside regarding seignorial rights and obligations, 1789.

Document 8

First sirs, it is easy to anticipate that the justice of the first *Parlement* of the Kingdom would be to propagate the new and ill-considered doctrine that . . . would establish a dangerous concert between your principles and the declamations of the other royal courts.

This general commotion could bring you the most bitter regrets, by generating ideas in others contrary to your own view. By rejecting the example that you have given to the court, the King has no doubt about the true principles at issue; they are engraved in the heart of all his subjects and if they could ever be altered, it would be in the *Parlement* of Paris that the King would be sure to see them restored in their original purity.

These principles, universally acknowledged by the entire kingdom, are that the King alone must possess the sovereign power in his kingdom; that He is answerable only to God in the exercise of his power; that the tie which binds the King to the Nation is by nature indissoluble; that the interests and reciprocal obligations between the King and his subjects serve only to reassure that union; that the Nation's interest is that the powers of its head not be altered; that the King is the chief sovereign of the Nation and everything he does is with her interests in mind; and that finally the legislative power resides in the person of the King independent of and unshared with all other powers.

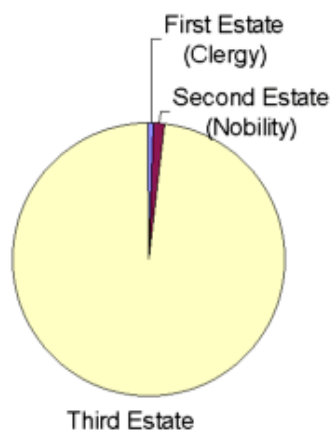
These sirs are the invariable powers of the French Monarchy. . . . His Majesty finds them consecrated in the text of your decree of 20 March 1766. . . .

As a consequence of these principles and of our History, it is clear that the King only has the right to convoke an Estates-General; that he alone must judge if this convocation is necessary; and that he needs no other power for the administration of his kingdom.

SOURCE: Louis XVI, 1789.

Document 9

Population of France 1789 (Total approx. 28 million)



Land Ownership in France 1789



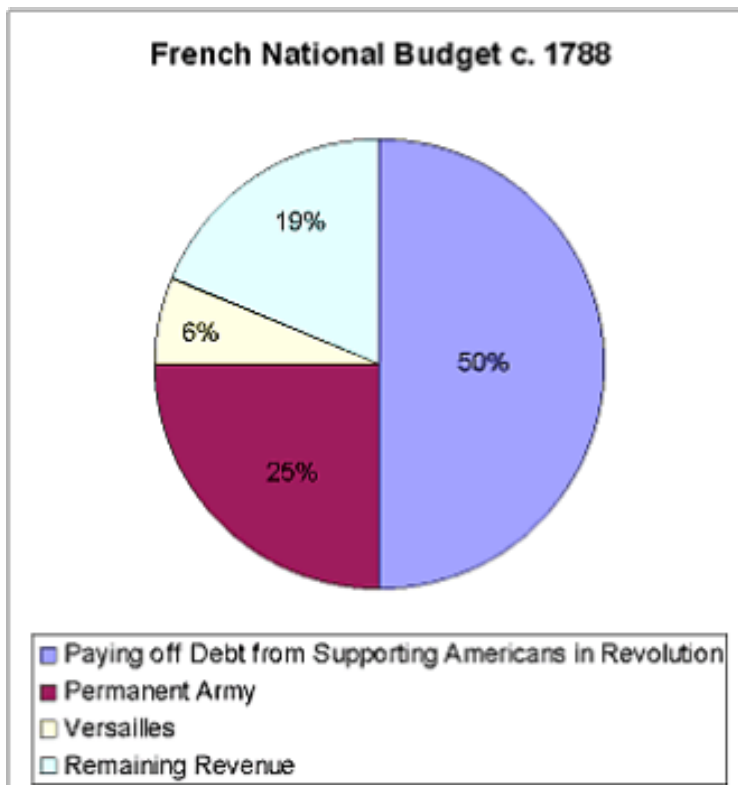
SOURCE: French demographic statistics, 1789.

Document 10

Beloved and loyal supporters, we require the assistance of our faithful subjects to overcome the difficulties in which we find ourselves concerning the current state of our finances, and to establish, as we so wish, a constant and invariable order in all branches of government that concern the happiness of our subjects and the prosperity of the realm. These great motives have induced us to summon the Assembly of the Estates of all Provinces obedient to us, as much to counsel and assist us in all things placed before it, as to inform us of the wishes and grievances of our people; so that, by means of the mutual confidence and reciprocal love between the sovereign and his subjects, an effective remedy may be brought as quickly as possible to the ills of the State, and abuses of all sorts may be averted and corrected by good and solid means which insure public happiness and restore to us in particular the calm and tranquility of which we have so long been deprived.

SOURCE: Louis XVI's letter regarding the convocation of the Estates General at Versailles (January 24, 1789).

Document 11



SOURCE: French national budget statistics, 1788.