

Handout: France Before the Revolution of 1789

Society was divided into layers. At the very top was the king. The king was there by God's will. He had absolute power to make laws. He was the law.

At least that was the theory. In reality, the king was very much influenced by the wealthy nobility. They were the top layer of the society and held important official positions. They had special powers and privileges, and could demand taxes and services from those under them.

The next layer was the clergy or, really, the rich and influential clergy, such as bishops. They too had special rights and privileges, and were governed by special church laws, not those of the state.

Next came the bourgeoisie, the middle-class people of wealth. The richest of them could buy their way into the nobility. Most could not, and resented the constant demands on them for taxes to support the king and his government. But those with money could always buy various public offices and use the position to make wealth for themselves.

Near the bottom were the peasants – the rural poor – and the city workers. The laws exploited them. They had no vote. They were presumed guilty if arrested for a crime, and had no right to legal representation if they could not afford it. They could be tortured by the officials of the state. Their property could be seized, and their personal rights had to give way before traditional obligations, such as the obligation to work for their nobles for nothing.

Nobles rode horses through the peasants' wheat crops while hunting, and their pet doves ate the seed the peasants needed for the next season's food crop. They had to pay heavy taxes, and had no say in how they were used.

The Catholic Church was the only legal church. There was no freedom of speech or ideas. The nobles and the king were terrified that the peasants and the urban poor might develop revolutionary ideas.

There were fewer rights for women of all classes than for their male peers.

Some nobles and clergy recognised the injustice of the society they were living in and supported change, but most accepted the system which gave them great wealth and privileges.

This was the nature of French society before the 1789 revolution, a revolution which removed the powers and privileges of the king, nobles and the church and led to the execution of the king and queen. A National Assembly including representatives from all classes was created. They drew up the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen.