

## The Old Regime

The Old Regime was a period of time often considered by many to be representative of a crashed society. Under the Old Regime in France, the king was the absolute monarch. King Louis XIV had centralized power in the royal bureaucracy, the government departments that took care of his policies. King Louis' reign in France played a significant role in its history and economy. He was a king to all during the most important events of the time, but he was also a financial king to the rich because he created a tax system that only benefited those who were wealthy. During the time of the Old Regime, society was broken down into three orders or classes, known traditionally as estates. The most important class of the three consisted of the rebellious Nobility of the Second Estate which contained about 400,000 individuals who held all the public offices in the kingdom.<sup>1</sup> The first two estates numbered the least but held the most influence in the whole kingdom. Most of the King's ministers of state were of Noble birth, and even the highest order of the First Estate, the Clergy, was filled with the younger sons of Noble families.<sup>2</sup> Like the First Estate, the Second Estate paid hardly any taxes and generally consisted of the richest members of society. The First and Second Estates were grouped together because they had similar political beliefs. The Third Estate strongly resented the advantages of the first two estates. The first two estates were the richest of the three estates. The First Estate consisted of the Clergy, or the Church. The First Estate owned nearly ten percent of all the land in France. This estate paid no taxes, but to support church activities such as running schools and caring for the poor, it collected a tithe, or a tax on income.<sup>3</sup> In addition, this estate was made up of the Nobles who lived luxurious lives in major French cities such as Versailles and Paris. The First Estate perfectly illustrates the amount of power and wealth possessed by the Church during a time when Church and State were not separated. The Second Estate in French life was mainly comprised of the Nobility. This class, generally characterized by the richest members of society, enjoyed extensive rights and privileges, great land, and much wealth. The Nobles accumulated their wealth by collecting taxes, rents, and dues for the use of their farms or estates. Noblemen traditionally lived by the values of loyalty, courage, refined manners, and service to the King.<sup>4</sup> However, while these aristocrats still claimed the privileges of their estate, many had forgotten their duties and values.<sup>5</sup> This estate shows how lopsided society was; most members of the Second Estate weren't even rich, but were born into a Noble family and were therefore considered Nobility. The Third Estate consisted of French citizens who weren't classified as either Clergy or Nobility. Since the first two estates were exempt from taxes, the Third Estate had to provide almost all of the country's income. Yet the Third Estate, easily the largest since it encompassed every Frenchman who was neither an aristocrat nor a clergyman, was the least influential of the estates. In general, the Third Estate was composed of three groups: the Peasants, the Middle Class, and the Urban Workers. Peasants mainly led the lives of farmers. In contrast, the Middle Class was composed of the most important people in society. However, the Middle Class often worried about its social status, for it wasn't socially recognized because it was part of the Third Estate. The Urban Workers, on the other hand, held much weight in society before and during the Revolution. Their anger at low wages and shortages of bread and other staple foods often resulted in mob violence during the Revolution.<sup>6</sup> While the first two orders enjoyed many advantages, the commoners of the Third Estate had none. Barred by law and custom from possessing any kind of political power, these people were also burdened with taxes.<sup>7</sup> They were

forced to pay taxes on their income, land, property, crops, salt, tobacco, wine, cider and even their lives. If a peasant sold a piece of land, he or she paid a sales tax, as well as an additional tax, on the money he or she received. These taxes were just too much for a hard working individual to pay; thus, this class system caused human life to be unequal.

Ironically, these people were taught that all were born equal; therefore, they learned that classifying mankind must be wrong. However, restrictions were still put upon the subordinated Third Estate. In addition to financial constraints, peasants and farmers were forbidden to kill any game animals, even those that threatened their crops. On top of all these restrictions the commoners had to bear, they were faced with yet another burden -- forced military service. Once in the army, these people were paid very poorly and fed even worse. These restraints were only levied upon the Third Estate; thus, this estate became quite infuriated. As a result of these restrictions, the whole Third Estate was living in an inferior state

of mind that caused those within this estate to want more. The people of the Third Estate were tired of being treated unfairly throughout their everyday lives. The first two estates were enjoying their tax-free lifestyles while the poor paid for this injustice. Clearly, such a system could not survive for long. During the 1780's, France's financial crisis grew daily as kings drained the country's treasury. The Peasants wanted relief from their ancient and dated duties while the Middle Class desired freedom as a reward for their industry labor.<sup>8</sup> Despite this growing tension in France, the King continued to resist the demands of his people. As a result of his constant refusal to grant his people equal rights, many rebellions and wars broke out and diminished the country's treasury. Furthermore, a series of bad harvests between 1688 and 1694 brought about total catastrophes.<sup>9</sup>

For example, the cold and wet summers reduced harvests by more than one-third. The overall result was widespread starvation, and, in many provinces, a death rate that rose to several times the normal figure.<sup>10</sup> These unfortunate circumstances hurt the Peasants even more than the disadvantages they faced before the famine. In addition to these events, food riots, lack of work, and the issuance of political pamphlets all played key roles in fuelling the fire of the French Revolution.<sup>11</sup> This revolution symbolized equality for all classes around the world. The Metropolitan Museum offered many different kinds of displays of French art and architecture that illustrated the contrasting classes of French society. Upon inspection of these displays, one can easily notice that kings and nobles dominated French art and paintings. These displays show an observer the unequal society that the people of that day were forced to live in. For example, the paintings exemplified the prestige, privileged, and rich nature of the Nobles; these were conditions that the Third Estate could not experience. The first two estates endured very fruitful lives, and this is reflected in

the art exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum. Peasants weren't considered anything but lowly peasants, and were thus never really recognized until during the Revolution. The Peasants in the Third Estate became accustomed to their lifestyles and knew they would never become part of the rich society. There were two rooms in the Metropolitan Museum that illustrated the wealth and honor possessed by the first two estates. The first room had to be the bedroom of King Louis XIV, for this room was nothing less than perfect. The walls, surrounded by angels, looked like they belonged to the room of a god. The walls also contained pictures, one being of King Louis himself. The King's portrait was godlike as well, for he bore a confident stance. This room contained a masterful fireplace, which would have definitely been a sight to any peasant who would have had the honor to see it. The other room that would catch the eye of any commoner would have to be the room of the Hotel De Cabris. At first glance,

any observer could see that this room signified wealth with its rich furniture and atmosphere. These two rooms show how the rich lived and how happy they were while the Third Estate struggled to exist. While the first two estates lived in harmony and only worried about what they wanted,

Third Estate members were concerned with how they would continue to live under the restrictions put upon them. These two rooms would give peasants a sense of disappointment -- they would feel that they wouldn't amount to anything because they weren't born into a wealthy or noble

family. These rooms, or any rooms of Nobility, would be nothing more than a reminder of how unequal the society of their time was. The

architecture of that day was nothing less than spectacular; however, it was constructed only to the satisfaction of the rich, and a lot of the things that they built didn't need to be built. Since having money was natural to the rich, they decided to live in luxury rather than help the poor societies.

One example of an unnecessary building that was built would have to be the Palace at Versailles. The King erected this building because he wanted all the French Nobles to live together, yet this place became nothing more than a prison for the Nobility. This building did not have to be made, but it was created to show the greatness of the King and his entire kingdom.

These examples of architecture show that a peasant, who was considered to be low in societal status, would feel regret in any of these places because they contained things that were built lavishly for the wealthy. In a society that has nothing left but hope, the rich are often resented. The French Society in the 17th century was made up of unequal classes. Even though the lowest class made up more than half of the French society during that time, it was treated the worst and given nothing but trouble. King

Louis XIV might have had a tight financial hold on France, but he did so at the expense of the poor. A peasant would feel totally out of place in a rich setting like the one within the Metropolitan Museum. End Notes 1) Dowd, David. French Revolution (New York: American Heritage Pub, 1965) pg. 13 2) Dowd, David. French Revolution, pg. 14. 3) Corzine, Phyllis. The French Revolution (San Diego: Lucent Books, Inc. 1995)pg. 15. 4) Corzine, Phyllis. The French Revolution, pg 16. 5) Corzine, Phyllis. The French Revolution, pg. 16. 6) Otfinoski, Steven. Triumph and Terror (New York: Facts on File, Inc. 1993)pg. 9 7) Corzine, Phyllis. The French Revolution, pg. 20. 8) Otfinoski, Steven. Triumph and Terror, pg. 10. 9) Dowd, David. The French Revolution, pg. 15. 10) McKay, John P., Hill, Bennett D., Buckler, John, A History of Western Society. 6th Ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999) pg. 544. 11) McKay, John P., Hill, Bennett D., Buckler, John, A History of Western Society. 6th Ed. Pg. 545. 12) Otfinoski, Steven. Triumph and Terror, pg. 13.

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