

# Revolutions in Politics

1775–1815

The revolution that erupted in France in 1789, and would, in time, engulf all of Europe in political upheaval and war, was sparked by a financial crisis that had been brewing for more than a century. Over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the cost of warfare rose dramatically, and France was at war for almost all of that time. Under Louis XIV (1638–1715), France launched one war after another in an effort to cement French dominance in Europe. Louis XV (r. 1715–1774) inherited Louis XIV's ambitions and spent much of the eighteenth century unsuccessfully battling Britain for a world empire. By 1789 France's finances had reached the crisis point. With no options left, Louis XVI (r. 1774–1792) gave in to noble pressure to summon the Estates General, the French representative body that had last met in 1614. Louis hoped to use the Estates General as a vehicle for limited financial reform, but events quickly spun out of his control. What had begun as a financial crisis became a far-ranging debate over rights, liberty, and equality, the implications of which would reverberate around the world. While France would return to conservative government, first under Napoleon's dictatorship and then under a restored monarchy, the French Revolution would remain a potent symbol of the possibility of dramatic social and political change for centuries to come.

Seven years war / American Revolution

Also spread to the rest of the world - especially French colonies.

## 19-1 | The Third Estate Speaks

### COMMISSIONERS OF THE THIRD ESTATE OF THE CARCASSONNE, *Notebooks of Grievances* (1789)

Assuming the throne in 1774, Louis XVI inherited a bankrupt government that spent half its income just to pay the interest on the national debt. The *Cahiers de Doleances* (*Notebooks of Grievances*) were an attempt to discover and catalogue the issues the king would need to resolve at the meeting of the Estates General in order to get approval for new taxes. Long denied any formal avenue of complaint, the third estate—everyone who was not a member of the nobility or clergy—responded with a flood of complaints and suggestions that surprised Louis and his advisers. While phrased in respectful language, the *Cahiers* illuminate a society at odds with the absolutism of Louis XVI's predecessors. As you read this example from the district of Carcassonne, ask yourself what kind of state would result from the reforms the authors propose. What rights would they claim for the people? What limits would they place on monarchical power?

The third estate of the electoral district of Carcassonne,<sup>1</sup> desiring to give to a beloved monarch, and one so worthy of our affection, the most unmistakable proof of its love and respect, of its gratitude and fidelity, desiring to cooperate with the whole nation in repairing the successive misfortunes which have overwhelmed it, and with the hope of reviving once more its ancient glory, declares that the happiness of the nation must, in their opinion, depend upon that of its king, upon the stability of the monarchy, and upon the preservation of the orders which compose it and of the fundamental laws which govern it.

Considering, too, that a holy respect for religion, morality, civil liberty, and the rights of property, a speedy return to true principles, a careful selection and due measure in the matter of the taxes, a strict proportionality in their assessment, a persistent economy in government expenditures, and indispensable reforms in all branches of the administration, are the best and perhaps the only means of perpetuating the existence of the monarchy;

<sup>1</sup>Carcassonne: Town in southern France, near the Mediterranean coast.

<sup>2</sup>apostolic religion: "Apostolic" meant that the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church claimed to have received their authority in succession from one of the original twelve apostles, specifically Peter. Of the Protestant churches, only the Church of England could claim apostolic succession.

The third estate of the electoral district of Carcassonne very humbly petitions his Majesty to take into consideration these several matters, weigh them in his wisdom, and permit his people to enjoy, as soon as may be, fresh proofs of that benevolence which he has never ceased to exhibit toward them and which is dictated by his affection for them.

In view of the obligation imposed by his Majesty's command that the third estate of this district should confide to his paternal ear the causes of the ills which afflict them and the means by which they may be remedied or moderated, they believe that they are fulfilling the duties of faithful subjects and zealous citizens in submitting to the consideration of the nation, and to the sentiments of justice and affection which his Majesty entertains for his subjects, the following:

1. Public worship should be confined to the Roman Catholic apostolic religion,<sup>2</sup> to the exclusion of all other forms of worship; its extension should be promoted and the most efficient measures taken to reestablish the discipline of the Church and increase its prestige.
2. Nevertheless the civil rights of those of the king's subjects who are not Catholics should be confirmed, and they should be admitted to positions and offices in the public administration, without however extending this privilege—which reason and humanity alike demand for them—to judicial or police functions or to those of public instruction.
3. The nation should consider some means of abolishing the annates<sup>3</sup> and all other dues paid to the holy see, to the prejudice and against the protests of the whole French people. . . .

[The holding of multiple church positions should be prohibited. monasteries reduced in numbers, and holidays suppressed or decreased.]

7. The rights which have just been restored to the nation should be consecrated as fundamental principles of the monarchy, and their perpetual and unalterable enjoyment should be assured by a solemn law, which should so define the rights both of the monarch and of the people that their violation shall hereafter be impossible.
8. Among these rights the following should be especially noted: the nation should hereafter be subject only to such laws and taxes as it shall itself freely ratify.
9. The meetings of the Estates General of the kingdom should be fixed for definite periods, and the subsidies judged necessary for the support of the state and the public service should be voted for no longer a period than to the close of the year in which the next meeting of the Estates General is to occur.
10. In order to assure to the third estate the influence to which it is entitled in view of the number of its members, the amount of its contributions to the public treasury, and the manifold interests which it has to defend or promote in the national assemblies, its votes in the assembly should be taken and counted by head.
11. No order, corporation, or individual citizen may lay claim to any pecuniary exemptions. . . . All taxes should be assessed on the same system throughout the nation.
12. The due exacted from commoners holding fiefs<sup>4</sup> should be abolished, and also the general or particular regulations which exclude members of the third estate from certain positions, offices, and ranks which have hitherto been bestowed on nobles either for life or hereditarily. A law should be passed declaring members of the third estate qualified to fill all such offices for which they are judged to be personally fitted.
13. Since individual liberty is intimately associated with national liberty, his Majesty is hereby petitioned not to permit that it be hereafter interfered with by arbitrary orders for imprisonment. . . .
14. Freedom should be granted also to the press, which should however be subjected, by means of strict regulations, to the principles of religion, morality, and public decency. . . .

<sup>2</sup>annates: Refers to the practice of claiming the first year's profits from a church district, or fee, for the bishop who oversaw that district.

<sup>4</sup>fiefs: Medieval gifts of land in return for military service. With the rise of professional armies, many fief holders were expected to make cash payments instead.