

The crisis of the Old Regime in France

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1. What was 'absolutism'?
2. Principles of the Old Regime
3. Challenges
4. 4 August and Declaration of Rights

Slides available at: <http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/historical-studies/staff/dgarrioch.php>

How often are national elections held in Australia?

- 1. every year?**
- 2. every 3 years?**
- 3. every 5 years?**

How often in Old Regime France?

**-- once: in 1789,
first time for 175
years**

How often in Old Regime France?

- once: in 1789,
first time for 175
years**
- not just elected
representative,
but also *cahier* =
list of grievances**

Old Regime:

- **not democratic—government not elected**
- **King appoints government—King is source of authority (‘sovereignty’)**

absolute monarchy

- **everyone answerable to King, but King answerable only to God**
- **King could change or over-ride law: e.g. have people locked up, no appeal**

Versailles





Image of monarchy: magnificence

- **part of *ideology* of absolutism**
- **compensated for inability to control directly**

- **religious justification ('Divine Right monarchy')**
- **hierarchy, based on birth, and privilege (principle of inequality)**

Privilege

- **status**
- **tax exemptions**
- **jobs**
- **special legal rights**

Underpinnings of absolutism:

- 1. magnificence**
- 2. religious justification ('Divine Right monarchy')**
- 3. hierarchy, based on birth, and privilege (principle of inequality)**

3. Challenges to Old Regime:

a. Financial crisis

- **cut spending**
- **increase revenue (raise taxes or change tax system)**

Attempts to reform tax system:

- **through Parlements**
- **by getting Assembly of Notables to agree**
- **Estates General**

Crisis of legitimacy

ii) perception of corruption

- **bread normally just under $\frac{1}{2}$ of daily wage for single working man (8/20 sous)**
- **1788-89 (winter): bread price nearly doubled → govt/‘aristocrats’ blamed**



Crisis of legitimacy

iii) perception of 'despotism'

- **misuse of royal power (opponents imprisoned, Parlements intimidated)**
- **intimidation of Third Estate**

b) Crisis of legitimacy

iv) perception of injustice



c) Revolutionary ideas--influence of Enlightenment, of American Revolution

**i). idea of ‘social contract’
(Rousseau): the people had
set up government**

Revolutionary implications:

- government’s authority
from the people (not from
God)**
- the people could get rid
of incompetent, corrupt, or
despotic government**

Influence of Enlightenment, of American Revolution

ii). growing belief in rights

(that governments should respect)

**→ challenge to whole ideology on
which Old Regime based**

Why ideas spread

- **growth of literacy**
- **improved communication networks (roads, rivers, markets)**
- **Estates General**
- **relevance**

Decree of 4 August

‘The National Assembly entirely destroys the feudal regime’



Declaration of Rights of Man and the Citizen (26 Aug 1789)

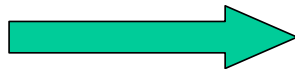
‘Ignorance, forgetfulness, or contempt of the rights of man are the sole causes of public misfortunes and of the corruption of governments’

Declaration of Rights of Man and the Citizen (26 Aug 1789)

‘Art. 2 . . . the natural and inalienable rights of man . . . are liberty, property, security and resistance to oppression’

Declaration of Rights of Man and the Citizen (26 Aug 1789)

Art. 3: The source of all sovereignty resides in the nation; no group, no individual may exercise authority not emanating expressly therefrom



attack on absolutism

Declaration of Rights of Man and the Citizen (26 Aug 1789)

Art. 1: Men are born and remain free and equal in rights; social distinctions may be based only upon general usefulness

 **direct attack on hierarchy and privilege**

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