End of the ancien régime (1789)

The Estates-General

The Crown was forced into summoning the Estates-General for the first time since 1614. The Paris parlement declared that voting should be done by order, which would favour the two privileged orders who wished to protect their own privileges. In 1789 bourgeois leaders of the third estate began to suspect that the privileged orders who wanted voting by estate had opposed the government just because they wanted more power for themselves. The third estate as a result demanded to have twice the number of deputies as the other two orders and to have voting by head rather than by order. This form of voting would give them a majority as most first estate representatives were poor parish priests who were likely to support the third estate. The King’s council allowed the number of third estate deputies to be doubled although nothing was said about voting by head. There were large numbers of liberal nobles who were elected for the second estate as well as a majority of poor parish priests in the first estate, this made the Estates-General more reform minded. Not a single peasant or urban worker was elected instead the Estates-General was overwhelmingly made up of lawyers (35%).

Before the meeting of the Estates-General the electors of each of the three orders drew up cahiers – which were lists of grievances and suggestions for reforms. The cahiers of the first estate reflected the interests of the parish clergy, they called for an end to bishops holding more than one diocese and demanded that those who were not noble to be allowed to become bishops. The nobles cahiers were surprisingly liberal, 89% of which were prepared to give up financial privileges, and instead of trying to promote their own privileges, they showed a desire for change. All the cahiers were against an absolute monarchy and they all wanted a King whose powers would be limited by an elected assembly, which would have the right to vote taxes and pass laws.

The Estates-General met on 5 May 1789 and despite the great amount of anticipation of their meeting, it turned out to be very ineffective. Necker talked about making taxation fairer but there was no talk of a new constitution being drawn up despite all the cahiers. The different estates soon split apart due to a refusal to agree on whether it should be voting by head or by order. There was no leadership from either the King or the government. On the 17 June the third estate voted to call themselves the National Assembly and they were joined by members of the first estate. As they felt they represented the nation’s population they decided that they had the rights to decide taxation, on the 19 June the first estate voted to join the National Assembly.

The Tennis Court Oath

The King was forced to act and he decided to hold a session with all three of the orders in which he would propose a series of reforms. On 20 June 1789 the deputies of the National Assembly found that the hall they met in had been closed to prepare
Constitutional Monarchy (1789-91)

Reform programmes of the National Assembly

Nationalisation of church land: the Assembly agreed on 2 November 1789 that all the property owned by the church should be placed at the disposal of the nation. This meant that church land was nationalised. The state assumed the responsibility of looking after the poor and paying the clergy. Bonds called assignats were issued and sold, backed up by the sale of church land. These were used to settle debts and for purchasing goods and were accepted as currency. The sale of royal and church land raised 400 million livres which went a long way in meeting the financial needs of the government.

Local government: in restructuring local government, the deputies wanted to make sure that power was decentralised, passing from the central government in Paris to the local authorities. This would make it more difficult for the King to recover the power he held before the revolution. By decrees of December 1789 and February 1790 France was divided into 83 departments, which were divided into districts which were made up of communes. Communes were grouped into cantons, where primary assemblies for elections were held and justices of the peace had their courts. Also in Paris the Constituent Assembly passed a decree splitting Paris into 48 sections.

Right to vote: deputies did not intend those who took part in the popular protests to have a role in government. A law in December 1789 introduced the concept of active citizens. Passive citizens had no vote and it was only those who could pay a silver mark that could be eligible to become a deputy in the National Assembly. The electoral system was very biased in favour of the wealthy, however, 61% of French men had the right to take part in an election in some way (compared with 4% in Britain at the time).

Taxation and economic reform: the government needed money urgently especially after it was decided that all venal office-holders should be compensated. As a result all the taxes were re-introduced which was hugely unpopular and even lead to rioting in Picardy. As of January 1791 a new taxation system was introduced:

- Contribution foncière: a land tax, no exemptions
- Contribution mobilière: a tax on moveable goods, payable by active citizens
- Patente: a tax on commercial profits.

In October 1790, internal tariffs were abolished, so a national market was created for the first time. The decimal system was also introduced for weights and measures. Guilds were also abolished in 1791 and striking was made illegal in June.

Church reforms: there was no serious conflict with the church until the Civil Constitution of the Clergy was passed on 12 July 1790.
- Each department would form a single diocese
- No recognition of any bishop appointed by the Pope, only by the French state
- All titles not mentioned in the Civil Constitution were abolished
- All priests and bishops were to be elected to their posts
War and the Overthrow of the Monarchy (1791-92)

Outbreak of war

The Great Powers (Prussia, Austria, Britain and Russia) had shown no inclination to intervene during the first two years of the revolution. Leopold II of the Habsburg Empire approved many of the liberal reforms and did not want a return to absolutism in France. The nations of Russia, Austria and Prussia were too busy with wars in other regions of Europe with the Austrians trying to regain control of Belgium, Russia invading Poland and other wars with the Ottoman Empire.

After the flight to Varennes, the Austrians felt they had to make some gesture in support of Louis. On August 27 1791, they issued the Declaration of Pillnitz in association with Prussia that stated that:

- Both countries regarded the present situation of the French King of common interest to all European rulers
- They hoped to restore the powers of the French monarch
- Force would be used if necessary to bring about this restoration.

This declaration was largely ignored and while some people used it as further evidence to mistrust Louis, it was not debated in the Assembly. But it was largely considered to be an empty threat and Leopold welcomed the constitution when Louis signed it. However, Marie Antoinette wrote to her brother, Leopold II, claiming that the French would lose in a military campaign. She was hoping, along with Louis, that they would go to war and France would be defeated, leading to the reinstatement of the French absolute monarchy. This lead to many rumours about the country’s foreign policy being run by an ‘Austrian Committee.’ These rumours were well founded as a group of Austrians, lead by Marie Antoinette were sending information back to Vienna.

Military leaders such as Lafayette and Dumouriez wanted war as well. Lafayette was responsible for bringing the King back to Paris and for the massacre of the Champ de Mars and he had become disillusioned by the failure of the revolution to produce political stability. He wanted to increase the power of the King with a short and successful against Austria, which he believed would increase his prestige as a general. It would also enable him to dictate his own terms to the Assembly and the King. Another group that wanted war were the followers of Jacques Brissot, the Brissotins who merged in the Legislative Assembly with the Girondins. He wanted war as he saw that the King had not accepted the constitution and he wanted the abolition of the monarchy as he felt that the court was plotting against the revolution and that a war would show the King’s true sympathies and expose other traitors to the revolution. Brissot and Lafayette managed to gain a majority in the Legislative Assembly and war was decided on in October 1791, the war now bad the backing of the Assembly. Robespierre was against the war and he became a very isolated and unpopular figure and had large personal disagreements with Brissot.
The Enragés

The economic situation continued to deteriorate in the summer of 1793. In mid-August the assignat was below a third of its face value and drought reduced the grain supplies into Paris by three-quarters.

One group, the Enragés, and their spokesman Jacques Roux demanded action from the government. He was angered how the revolution had not increased living standards for the poor and he gained the support of the labourers, the unemployed and the poor. He wanted the Convention to deal with starvation and hunger and when it did nothing, he denounced it. He demanded death to hoarders and that ex-nobles should be purged from the army. Robespierre hated him as he was threatening the Commune and the Convention with direct action in the streets. Roux was an influential figure in the journée of 5 September, which adopted a more extreme approach to ensure the movement of food into Paris. Roux was arrested during the course of the journée and after several months in prison he took his own life in February 1794.

The journée of September 1793 happened when a crowd gathered on 4 September before the Hôtel de Ville to demand bread and higher wages. The following day, urged by Roux, it marched on the Convention, forcing it to accept a series of radical measures. The Convention immediately set up an armée révolutionnaire consisting of mainly sans-culottes who had a number of purposes:

- Ensure the food supplies of Paris and the provinces
- Round up: deserters, hoarders, revolting priests, political suspects and royalist rebels
- Mobilise the nation's resources for the war effort by confiscating church-bells
- Establish revolutionary justice in areas which had not shown enthusiasm for the revolution

These armies were successful in supplying Paris with bread and the provincial armies did a good job supplying good to smaller towns. However, the CPS did not like the revolutionary armies because they were anarchic and outside the control of the authorities. They also helped create opposition to the revolution due to their heavy-handed approach to dealing with peasants.

Economic terror

The Convention had bowed to popular pressure from Roux and the sans-culottes in July by passing a law that imposed the death penalty for hoarding food and other supplies. On 29 September 1793, the law of the general maximum was passed to control prices. The maximum divided the common people against each other. Peasants hated it because the rate was often below the cost of production, while the sans-culottes wanted it so they could afford to buy bread. When the sans-culottes went into the countryside with the armée révolutionnaire to enforce the maximum they clashed with the peasants and the conflict between the town and the countryside deepened. To meet the concerns of farmers and other producers, the government revised prices upwards in February 1794, much to the disgust of the