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“Bread and not too much talking!”: The Role of the Peasant in the French Revolution

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Abstract

The French Revolution of 1789 is arguably the most significant set of uprisings in modern European history. While the peasants neither started nor finished the revolution, they did have a profound impact on furthering the revolution at certain times, especially during the Great Fear. The main questions I will be asking are: To what extent did the peasants have a role in elections to the Estates General? To what extent did peasants shape the list of grievances that representatives of the Third Estate took to the Estates General? Why and how did the peasants accelerate the revolution at key moments while never taking control of the government? To what extent did the Estates General, and subsequent assemblies, address the concerns of peasants? The main historians I have looked at are Georges Lefebvre, Albert Mathiez, Francois Furet, Alfred Cobban, John Markoff, and William Doyle. Based on the research conducted, I will argue that the role of the peasant was paramount to furthering revolutionary sentiments and stimulating reforms.

Sun beams reflect onto the columns and triumphal arcs set up outside the cathedral in Reims, the city responsible for the coronation of every French king for the last thousand years. This scene is shaded by a young Louis XVI, surrounded by people “intoxicated with joy,” expectant that this new king will return France to the glory and power felt by their beloved Sun King.¹ Yet Louis, in all of his pompous splendor, was entirely oblivious to the fact that the people of Reims were starving in the streets, as the entire country was “in the throes of the most serious grain riots seen for years” resulting from drastically rising bread prices.² Malnutrition affected rural families as well, thus increasing discontent in the countryside. While both the urban poor and the rural poor were impacted by the shortages, their experiences were different in several ways. The rural peasants considered seigneurial dominance an especially onerous yoke, one that impeded aspects of daily life, even the baking of bread. In a broader sense, they saw it as hindering them from improving their economic and social position. In response, peasants took significant action against their feudal lords. From the summer of 1788 to the spring of 1789, there was a notable increase in anti-seigneurial actions, which continued to grow the following summer. By fall, the insurrectionary peasants had focused their actions on the seigneurial regime, which continued to be the source of their ire.³ The connection between anger and hunger shaped the course of the revolution, fueling the rural crisis of 1789, which was stimulated as well by both hope and fear.⁴ The role of the peasant and the rural conditions during this time of turmoil were vital in opening up the French Revolution from an aristocratic political movement to a social movement. The next section will address the historiographical contexts of the French Revolution. This will be followed by an examination of the revolution’s aristocratic origins, the rural conditions leading up to the revolution, the importance of the Great Fear, and the impact of peasant action on the National Assembly, ultimately culminating in my conclusions.

Historiography

While the peasants neither started nor ended the French Revolution, they had a profound (yet oftentimes underrated) impact on turning the revolution from an aristocratic coup to a country-wide revolution that fundamentally impacted almost every aspect of daily life. Rural riots played an essential role throughout the course of the revolution. Much of the overall research into the origins of the revolution emphasizes the importance of the bourgeoisie, even though the peasants played just as much, if not a more significant role. As a country-wide phenomenon, peasant movements consequently deserve fresh consideration as a determining factor of the French Revolution. With over two hundred years' worth of historiography on the origins of 1789, the problem I have faced as a student and scholar of the French Revolution, as historian Peter Davies describes, is sorting through what others have said about it.⁵ With so much extant scholarship, determining what is significant is difficult. To simplify the task, I will focus on notable historians from each major field of thought: the early historians, the Marxist/classic historians, the anti-Marxist/revisionist historians, and the modern historians like John Markoff.

Jules Michelet, one of the most famous early nineteenth-century French historians, called for "history from below," meaning "the history of those who have suffered, worked, declined and died without being able to describe their sufferings."⁶ Michelet stated in his groundbreaking work, *History of the French Revolution*, that the more research he conducted, the more generally he found "that the more deserving class was underneath, buried among the utterly obscure."⁷ It was in fact the peasants who were the chief actors of the revolution, and they communicated their "impulses" to those "brilliant, powerful speakers" in the Estates General and subsequent legislative assemblies.⁸ This concept was considered revolutionary at the time, in 1847, as most other historians were focused on the political consequences of the revolution rather than the

experience of the majority of French citizens. Michelet was followed by historians who subscribed to a Marxist approach to the Revolution.

For most of the twentieth century, Marxist historians dominated revolutionary historiography. In their minds, the revolution as a whole was a class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy—one in which the bourgeoisie triumphed—thus moving France from a feudal regime to a capitalist one and positioning France closer to the ultimate goal of communism.⁹ Despite the macroscopic focus on conflict between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, Marxist scholars shed tremendous light on urban workers and peasants, thereby building on Michelet's call for "history from below." The major Marxist historians include Albert Mathiez, Georges Lefebvre, and Albert Soboul.

In *The French Revolution*, Albert Mathiez emphasized the class conflict between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy in 1789, and subsequent bourgeois confrontations with the peasants and *sans-culottes*—arguing that the bourgeoisie allied with the popular classes to defeat the aristocracy and then betrayed the popular classes.¹⁰ The *sans-culottes*, literally individuals "without knee-breeches,"¹¹ were the more radical members of the urban working class, particularly in Paris between 1792 and 1795. Born in eastern France to peasant farmers, Mathiez's upbringing shaped his proletarian political perspective. In his book, Mathiez refers to the proletariat as "the passive citizens" yet highlights their abilities to rightfully defend themselves against power through violence.¹² Mathiez's focus on peasants and urban workers inspired Georges Lefebvre and Albert Soboul to give close attention to these groups in their respective works.

Georges Lefebvre observed the causes of the insurrection from the peasant perspective in his seminal work, *The Coming of the French Revolution*. Lefebvre argued that there was not one,

but four revolutionary “acts” which occurred between 1787 and 1789.¹³ Each movement was initiated by a different social class, and by the final movement, all of France had taken part in at least some revolutionary actions. While Lefebvre goes into great detail regarding each social class and its relationship to the revolution, he ultimately concludes that the true beginning of the French Revolution was the peasant uprisings in the spring of 1788 stemming from the detrimental drought in the countryside.¹⁴ He divides the four revolutionary movements as follows: the aristocratic revolution, the bourgeois revolution, the popular revolution, and finally, the peasant revolution.

Louis XIV, argued Lefebvre, had gradually subjected nobles and clergy to his authority and deprived the lords of their political power. Aristocratic retaliation—the climax of a “century-long aristocratic resurgence or reaction, in which the nobility had sought to regain the pre-eminence in the state of which Louis XIV had deprived them”—resulted in the calling of the Estates General in 1789.¹⁵ However, aristocrats quickly lost control of the proceedings. After being recruited by the aristocrats to aid them in action against the monarchy, the bourgeois were inspired to take matters into their own hand. In September of 1788, the *parlement* of Paris (the legislative body which had spearheaded the aristocratic revolution) declared the Estates General of 1789 would be constituted as it had in 1614. The bourgeois were furious because this meant that the aristocrats would dominate the assembly, and this anger fueled their goal of civil equality which had been inspired by the Enlightenment.¹⁶ The class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the aristocrats lasted until the creation of the National Assembly, a “precarious” victory that had been threatened by a “noble-inspired royal attempt to dissolve the National-Assembly.”¹⁷ The coup was defeated by the Parisian populace who had stormed the Bastille and initiated the popular revolution, which was the next revolutionary movement. This portion of the revolution

marked the shift from a revolution of elites to a revolution of the public. Those who had been oppressed and ignored for so long finally stood up to throw off the yoke of oppression, and eventually, the popular revolution transitioned into the peasant revolution. This stage of revolutionary actions by the lowest (yet largest number of) members of French society marked the fourth and final act of Lefebvre's "symphony," and may be the most overlooked and underestimated part of the revolution.

The peasant class consisted of a majority of the French population. As soon as they saw the rest of the French people reacting to issues that, from the peasant perspective, appeared to be minor inconveniences, the peasant were inspired to take action regarding major problems they were facing, including food shortages, bad harvests, and absence of political power. In addition, peasants revolted "against the exaction of seigniorial dues and labor services by aristocratic landlords."¹⁸ The peasant movement pressured the National Assembly to pass the August Decrees (1789), which abolished feudalism and brought significant change for peasants, though the bourgeoisie maintained control of the government and ultimately ensured that their interests were protected above all others'.

What strengthened Lefebvre's argument was his citation of Ernest Labrousse's book, *French Economic and Social History*. Labrousse, a fellow historian, wrote extensively on the economic and social aspects of the Revolution, with his primary focus covering eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France. Labrousse's book was well-respected among scholars of the French Revolution because of its extensive statistical information on the economic conditions of the peasants and lower class during the eighteenth century. Lefebvre "saw the peasant revolt as a defensive reaction of peasant communities confronted by increasingly demanding lords who were themselves increasingly inclined to participate in a developing rural capitalism."¹⁹

Essentially, Lefebvre believed peasants were forced to react as circumstances grew increasingly worse for them.²⁰

As the son of a clerical worker,²¹ Lefebvre struggled financially, and he continued to do so until well into his fifties. Despite teaching in *lycées* in northern France for half his life, he had difficulty making significant connections with other renowned intellectuals until later in life. Due to his understanding of financial struggle (not only was he an underpaid teacher but he also had to provide for his parents and younger brother), Lefebvre was inspired to write on the role of the popular classes.²² Whereas Mathiez focused on overall class conflict and not one specific group, Lefebvre emphasized the extent to which peasants were active participants in the revolution, particularly during the Great Fear, which prompted organization among peasants, undermined seigneurial rights in many locales, and paved the way for national legislative action in August 1789. Lefebvre's focus on the peasantry was somewhat ironic considering Mathiez came from a peasant family and Lefebvre from a lower-middle-class family, but Lefebvre's research led him to conclude that the peasants had played a key role. His focus on peasants, rather than the progenitors of the social class into which he was born, provides good evidence of Lefebvre's objectivity.

Not only did Lefebvre become a leading historian of the French Revolutionary, but he also inspired several of his students, one of whom was Albert Soboul. Born in Algeria and a student of the Sorbonne, Soboul's work explored the lower classes, especially the *sans-culottes*. His two major works are *A Short History of the French Revolution* and *The French Revolution 1787-1799*. Just as Lefebvre became the cutting-edge historian on the peasant in the revolution, Soboul became a pioneer for his vast research on the *sans-culottes*, adding a layer of depth beyond the analysis of Mathiez.²³ Soboul believed that the *sans-culottes* were not a class but a

“loose coalition of artisans, labourers, and *petit bourgeoisie*.”²⁴ Not only did he write his doctoral thesis on the *sans-culottes*, but several of Soboul’s books also focused on the role of this “coalition.” According to Soboul, “it was the joint . . . action that gave the French Revolution its unique character.”²⁵ As he argued in *A Short History of the French Revolution*, “[T]he bourgeoisie intended to stay within the law. Before long, however, it was carried forward into more extreme action by the pressure of the masses, the real motive force behind the Revolution, whose energies were sustained by their own aspirations and the persistence of the economic crisis down to the middle of 1790.”²⁶

Despite the dominance of Marxist scholarship in the early- and mid-twentieth century, it did not stop another opposing interpretation from emerging. This approach, known as revisionism, focused primarily on the monarchy’s despotism but did touch on social, economic, and religious conflicts as well. The main contributors to this analysis were Alfred Cobban and Francois Furet. Cobban’s argument, as demonstrated in his book, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (1965), was that the revolution was primarily “a struggle for the possession of power and over the conditions in which it was to be exercised.”²⁷ Cobban did mention the peasant revolts and their success in achieving economic power, as well as the social hierarchy of eighteenth century France, but he ultimately emphasized that the “supposed social categories—bourgeois, aristocrats, *sans culottes*”—were in fact political ones in which less well-organized peasants were ultimately marginalized.²⁸ Cobban acknowledged Lefebvre’s “valuable” study of the social structure of Orléans, but it was published after Cobban had written his book. Furet also acknowledged Lefebvre’s significant analysis of the “peasant problem,” stating that Lefebvre “...had a richer knowledge and a surer grasp of the period than anyone,” but arguing that Lefebvre did not try to understand the political importance of the revolution.²⁹ Furthermore,

Furet believed that “modern France was special not because it had gone from an absolute monarchy to a representative régime or from a world of noble privilege to a bourgeois society,” since the rest of Europe went through the same process without a revolution, but because “it was the first experiment with democracy.”³⁰ Following the revisionists, there have been several modern historians who have taken yet another approach towards the revolution.

While there are several prominent modern historians of the French Revolution, John Markoff, in *The Abolition of Feudalism: Peasants, Lords and Legislators in the French Revolution*, has provided a particularly masterful analysis of the peasants’ role in undermining seigneurial rights. Markoff is currently a Distinguished University Professor of Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh and has published several books on the topic of the French Revolution and democracy. When Markoff wrote *The Abolition of Feudalism* in 1997, there was “little scholarly consensus on the causes and significance of the rural insurrection,” despite the light shed on peasant movements by scholars like Lefebvre.³¹ Markoff’s aim, as he stated, was to shed a revealing light on both the dialogue of the insurrectionary peasants and revolutionary legislators and their substantial impact in furthering the revolution—at actually making their voices heard and stimulating lasting change, rather than being outmaneuvered by the bourgeoisie, as Marxist scholars ultimately contended.³² Consistent with Markoff’s approach, I hope to contribute more to the causes and significance of the rural aspect of the French Revolution and its importance of furthering the movement at key moments. Since the passing of Lefebvre, the peasantry’s influence on the events of the revolution has all too often been underestimated, but that does not mean it was any less important than the other identified causes. While my goal is to add to the research on the role of the peasants, it is also important to note how the peasants were impacted and influenced by the other levels of society in order to

understand their broader role. I will begin by exploring the aristocratic origins of the revolution in order to provide a more wide-ranging understanding of the context of the Revolution.

Aristocratic Origins of the Revolution

France, being a feudal state, had deep class divisions. The nobles, clergy, peasants, and bourgeoisie had different mindsets and economic backgrounds. Before the revolution, France, which was dominated by nobles at the time, was the most powerful country in Europe. Not only did the nobles possess a majority of the country's wealth, but they also owned approximately 25-33% of the land, keeping approximately 25% of agricultural revenue for themselves.³³ As the French monarchy coalesced, the nobility lost much of the political power it had had during the Middle Ages.³⁴ Notably, during the reign of Louis XIV, the gap between economic privilege and increasing political impotence became a major source of contention between the monarchy and aristocracy. The aristocrats had long escaped most taxes, placing the burden on commoners with fewer resources, thus resulting in inadequate tax revenues to cover state expenses. This was another source of conflict, as the state was unable to collect sufficient tax revenue from aristocrats. Eventually, these tax exemptions became a part of a royal bargain with the nobles to relinquish their political power. By the 1700s, though, the royal government could no longer afford to go without this tax revenue, and the aristocrats demanded more political influence in exchange. The royal government demurred. Consequently, the burden of foreign wars, the unrestrained lifestyles of the nobles and high-level clergy, and the extravagance of the royal court were placed on the rest of the French people. This system subjected peasants to feudal regulation, including forced labor, the despised *dîme* (a 10 percent tax) that went to the Church.³⁵

A major factor that contributed to France's economic problems was the extravagance of the royal court. In an attempt to recreate the power and prestige of Louis XIV, Louis XVI and

Marie Antoinette spent large sums impressing visitors. Like their predecessors, the royal couple maintained Versailles as their home because of the hunting and because it was close enough to Paris that Louis could travel there when he needed to, but far enough away that he did not have to live with his own people. France's inequitable tax system severely hurt the peasants when Louis decided to financially back the American people in their fight for independence from Britain. He saw it as an investment in political leverage against England. The government could not collect sufficient revenue because of poor harvests that depleted peasant income. In an attempt to recover from the immense debt and resulting bankruptcy, revenue was needed. In 1787, hoping to consult with ministers about reforming state finances, Louis convened the Assembly of Notables, which was comprised of members of the First and Second Estates—the clergy and aristocrats—who paid few taxes. Unwilling to take on more of a financial burden, the Assembly refused to agree to the new taxes the royal government proposed. Their refusal led to the implementation of new taxes on poor French people. Greatly displeased, the notables told Louis that there would be no agreement to tax reforms unless a general assembly representing the entire nation was called.³⁶

France had been an absolute monarchy since Louis XIV, while other powerhouses in Europe, like Britain, had modernized and moved toward constitutional monarchy. Change came to France in May 1789 when Louis called the Estates General, which was the national legislative body. Class divisions were evident in the division of the French population into the three estates, whose life experiences were vastly different. While the nobles and the clergy were clearly split, the rest of the population, which included the bourgeoisie and the peasants, all fell into the Third Estate. The last time the Estates General had been called was 1614. In those 175 years of silence, France's population had almost doubled to 28 million, creating further class delineations. The

population of the Third Estate was more than that of the First and Second Estates combined, with eighty percent of the French population being peasants.³⁷ Since the nobility and the clergy had privileges that the rest of the population did not, the Third Estate felt the heaviest burden of taxation. In sum, France's financial situation was tremendously mismanaged, characterized by "disorder, corruption, and misrule."³⁸

When the Estates General convened in the Palace of Versailles, a debate arose among the body as to whether voting should be conducted by estate or by head. Voting by estate would have given the first two Estates the upper hand, while voting by head would have given power to the Third Estate, since the King had agreed to double its membership in recognition of the fact that the Third Estate represented the vast majority of the population. Louis made the decision to have voting take place by estate, thus eviscerating the Third Estate's potential leverage. The Third Estate retaliated and broke off from the Estates General, and on June 17, 1789, declared itself the National Assembly. The Assembly tried to meet at Versailles the next day and found the doors locked at the command of the King; so, they instead assembled in a neighboring building used as a tennis court and took the famous Tennis Court Oath, stating that they would not separate until a constitution was constructed. Louis attempted to put his foot down and reject the National Assembly, but to no avail. On June 27, he legalized the legislative body, only to later attempt to control it through military force. Meanwhile, a Parisian mob retaliated by destroying a local prison, the Bastille, on July 14. Still, Louis entered nothing about such events in his diary that day, reflecting only on a poor hunt in the forest around Versailles.³⁹ Louis was utterly clueless about the important forces taking shape in France at the time. The storming of the Bastille was the first violent act of the Revolution and resulted in the formation of a Paris popular government, called the Commune, as well as a new military body, the National Guard.

Violent revolts soon erupted all over the country, and chateaux were ransacked, while tax collectors were assaulted.

The peasants played no role in compelling the king to call the Estates General,⁴⁰ as they were more focused on surviving the poor harvest of 1788. While the failure of the harvest would make the peasants important in turning the revolution from a political movement to a social movement, they were initially “passive observers.”⁴¹ What ultimately transformed the otherwise normal consequences of a poor harvest was the electoral campaign.⁴² The calling of the Estates General raised everyone’s hopes of a better future, but those hopes fell short when the monarchy attempted to limit the power of the Third Estate.

After the revolution in the countryside and a subsequent movement known as the Great Fear (discussed below), the nobles and the clergy surrendered their privileges on August 4, 1789, later referred to as the August Decrees. Even Cobban recognized that these decrees would have never happened without the peasant uprisings in the countryside, for he states: “it is accepted by practically all recent historians of the revolution that what forced the National Assembly into the decisions of the night of the fourth of August was the widespread and alarming peasant revolt of the spring and early summer of 1789.”⁴³ Members of the National Assembly (who were not peasants) concluded that “unless concessions were made to the peasantry the whole of rural France would remain in a state of endemic rebellion.”⁴⁴ Not willing to take that chance, the nobility and the clergy conceded their power and agreed that “taxes shall be paid by every individual in the kingdom in proportion to his income,” thus suppressing all fiscal exemption.⁴⁵ The feudal dues that peasants had to pay to their lords (called seigneurs) were abolished, but compensation was provided in return for the absolution of the seigneurial dues. Finally, the *corvée* (the forced labor service on municipal roads), serfdom, and “other forms of personal

servitude” were eliminated without reparation.⁴⁶ Just one month following the August Decrees, the Marquis de Lezay-Marnesia described France as “absolutely disorganized, given over to the most horrible anarchy.”⁴⁷ At the time, he planned to emigrate from France, defending his decision by questioning “how can one remain in the midst of a people who, out of their lack of understanding, their frivolity... have become the cruelest people, the most coldly terrible?”⁴⁸ Despite the systemic reforms, and the loss so clearly felt by aristocrats like Lezay-Marnesia, life for peasants did not get much easier immediately. They were arguably the least responsible for the situation in which France found itself, but at the same time were the hardest hit. France was facing dark times, and even though the August Fourth Decrees brought some relief it was not enough to fundamentally change the experience of peasants overnight.

The broader forces at work included the relationship between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, as well as the relationship between the aristocracy and the king. While the aristocracy and monarchy were the most visible elements of the Revolution, that does not mean they were the only important ones. The aristocracy, monarchy, and clergy represented a minority of the population with a majority of the power. Beneath the surface, we find there is an entire population of people whose experiences mattered, who were disproportionately affected by the financial crisis, and who played a fundamental part in the revolution. While these people have often been overlooked as influential contributors to the Revolution, it is important to understand the role that they played. Now that I have established some of the broader context of the French Revolution, I will look into what rural conditions were like during the revolution, and, specifically, the role that peasants played.

Rural Conditions of 1787-9 and How Those Impacted the cahiers de doléances and Events in Paris

The term “feudal,” as it was most commonly used at the onset of the Revolution, indicated a “collection of claims of one party upon another (in other words, feudal rights).”⁴⁹ *The* feudal regime (never *a* feudal regime), on the other hand, represented “a particular form of social order that was historically specific.”⁵⁰ Essentially, in the feudal regime, the social order was made up of peasants who were financially beholden to the nobles and the clergy (monasteries and other ecclesiastical corporations controlled vast estates). Some wealthy commoners—those with the most resources—purchased noble titles so they could join the aristocracy, secure “a symbol of social prestige,” and profit at the expense of peasant farmers.⁵¹ Other wealthy commoners—those with fewer resources—exploited large concentrations of land or took the leases of whole estates from wealthy absentees and sublet them to poorer men.⁵² Altogether, the “rural elite” numbered around 600,000 people. Though a small fraction of France’s total population of approximately 28 million, these individuals dominated rural life. They were also well-represented, among all three orders, as Estates General deputies, who, in many cases, held seigneurial rights, had a vested interest in keeping the feudal system in place, and acted accordingly until pressured to do otherwise.⁵³

Though wealthy commoners were technically the apex of the “peasantry,” aristocratic seigneurs dominated most rural communities, standing above wealthy commoners and ordinary peasants alike. Small freeholders, renters, and landless peasants were the heart of the peasantry. Those who could not maintain themselves through farming alone earned additional money in a variety of ways, including wage labor, rural crafts, and weaving cloth. When those activities were still not enough, they would turn to seasonal migration, borrowing money, and even begging.⁵⁴ The rural economy was an “economy of makeshifts,” which in good times was enough for a bare living but in bad times was insufficient. Survival depended upon labor of the

entire family, and if one member was disabled or there were not enough productive children, their living would crumble.⁵⁵ Wintertime proved even more difficult for day laborers who could not find work. The struggle to find work extended to the warmer months when crops were poor as farmers would hire only as many laborers as necessary.⁵⁶ As unemployment and scarcity increased, so did the number of beggars (which was already high).⁵⁷

While there were several delineations within the peasantry, every region and every category of peasant was affected by certain basic trends during the eighteenth century. The most important was a population increase that mainly occurred in the countryside. A larger population meant more mouths to feed, which, in turn, increased the economic pressure on peasant families. Furthermore, abundant labor was cheap labor; therefore, wages lagged way behind the rise in prices. Thus, peasants who were not self-reliant were hit especially hard by the massive, 62% price increase over the course of the eighteenth century. Additionally, they were hard-hit by tax increases between 1749 and the 1780s, which contributed to the peasants bearing a proportionately larger burden than other societal groups.⁵⁸

Peasants were the backbone of industrial labor force and were negatively impacted by a decrease in demand for textiles, contributing to an inability to afford the rising price of bread.⁵⁹ These two factors led to “disturbances up and down the country,” Even though peasants farmed, many were not self-sufficient, so like town dwellers they had to buy bread and flour, causing them to be hit hard by scarcity and high prices.⁶⁰ In the 1770s and 1780s, ministers and intendants sought to transfer the *corvée* (labor due) into a money payment; but as most peasants could not afford any more fees, they opted for physical labor. The 1780s brought increasing fiscal burdens, including the monopoly that corrupt auctioneers had on all public sale of goods.

Before the Revolution, the *taille** was the basic tax taken by the French monarchy.⁶¹ While it varied in form and oppressiveness depending on the province, it was the most common tax that every social class was exempt from paying except the peasant class. In order to avoid paying the *taille*, one had to obtain significant class status, regional privilege, or personal influence, none of which the peasants had.⁶² Since most direct taxes were paid by people who lacked status and means, the monarchy could never raise taxes to an amount that was proportionate to the true wealth of the country.⁶³ The monarchy was heavily reliant on indirect taxes, such as customs duties, *aides* on liquor, soap, etc., as well as the government monopoly on tobacco. Such consumption taxes were especially burdensome for peasants.⁶⁴ Likewise, peasants had no exemptions from the *gabelle* (the state salt monopoly) or the draft for the militia.⁶⁵ Rebellion over taxes was common in the seventeenth century.⁶⁶ But those in the 1780s came at a time when the state faced an unprecedented series of interlocking crises. What also set the people of 1789 apart from their ancestors was that besides their refusal to pay taxes, they refused to pay tithes and feudal dues.⁶⁷ While the peasants declared their refusal to make payments towards their seigneurial dues, their feudal lords were unbothered because the lords did not believe that the peasants would take physical action against them. As we will see, they were wrong.⁶⁸

Most peasants, even small freeholders, were obligated to obey a seigneur. Feudal rights fell into three broad categories. The first was honorific rights, which involved the right to precedence on public occasions, the right to erect weathervanes on the manor-house, etc. The second was jurisdictional rights. Most local courts were lords' courts, and lords were judges even in their own cases. The third was "useful rights" which included hunting rights, shooting, and (most importantly) the right to levy dues in cash or kind.⁶⁹ Poorer peasants also suffered the most

* Originally meant the "cut" taken by the lord from the subject

from harsh leases, leading to competition among peasants for farms. Leases were short and the landlord would frequently break them before they expired. Many times, farmers had to make extra payments to get the lease in the first place (money which they never got back if the lease was broken). Also, peasant tenants did not get paid for any improvements they made to the farm while they were leasing the last.⁷⁰

Two major delineations among the peasants were *fermier* (farmer) and *métayer* (sharecropper). The *métayer*'s terms with their landlord were shorter than those of the *fermier*, and the landlord could get more money out of a *métayer*.⁷¹ The process of the three-field crop rotation system, in which one third of the soil was left fallow each year, was very common in the countryside. Peasants were trapped by both custom and interest into continuing to use traditional farming techniques and were not rewarded for creativity or inventiveness.⁷² This perpetuated the feudal system and stymied economic and social change.

The variety of terms used to describe different types of poverty represent the diversity in attitudes during the eighteenth century. The blanket term was *pauvre*, which implied that, at best, the individual lived at subsistence level. Furthermore, "*dans un état d'ingence absolue*" represented the most destitute of the destitute, the lowest one could be on a scale of deprivation. People at this level had no food, clothing, or adequate shelter. They had already sold the few possessions that they had in order to survive.⁷³ *Mendiant* could be positive or negative as *mendiant de profession* was a man who relied on handouts, which was a respectable position when the individual was aged, sick, or mentally defective. However, if the individual was none of those things, they were considered lazy.⁷⁴

On the other hand, *pauvre honteux*, was the most common representation of a poor person. It consisted of either a man who failed to earn enough to support himself, had fallen ill,

or faced some other calamity; or of a woman without a husband who still had to support her children.⁷⁵ Even the smallest towns had migrants “crammed into cellars and attics... many of whom had little hope of finding employment adequate for their support on any permanent basis, and who were consequently forced... to make a bid for outside assistance.”⁷⁶ French society at this time still held respect for those who “kept up appearances,” rather than leaving their children to fend for themselves on the street or ceasing bathing because soap was too expensive.⁷⁷ Therefore, the poor did not create a “quandary” for the rest of society because those who lived comfortably had no qualms about judging the unknown pauper. They did not understand the struggles of the poor, nor why they were struggling. They were so far removed from the day-to-day fight to survive, that it did not impact their lives.⁷⁸

The power seigneurial judges had over peasants is another reason why the seigneurs held sway. Not only did the judges rule over all cases involving feudal rights (including their own disputes with peasant farmers), but the French Monarchy “only suppressed seigneurial justice at its highest level, where it hampered royal power. It had left it in place at the lowest level, at ground level, where it oppressed and stifled royal life.”⁷⁹ In short, the crown was more concerned with defending itself and expanding its power than protecting the peasantry from oppressive seigneurial justice. As we will see, what ultimately put an end to the oppressive seigneurial regime was the pressure that revolutionary peasants put on legislators during the French Revolution.⁸⁰

Although the revolution began with the aristocrats forcing the king to call the Estates General, it was fueled by the peasants. The importance of the rural conditions is often overlooked by historians who do not focus on the role the peasants played, but it is vital to understand that rural populations did not wait for Versailles or Paris to tell them what to do.

Initially, while the aristocracy stirred up trouble in Versailles, the peasants in the countryside only heard rumors of what was going on.⁸¹ It is hard to justify paying for paper to write down grievances when one cannot afford bread, and they were focused on surviving. The origin of their distress began with a prolonged drought that led to a horrid harvest in the spring of 1788, which increased the already high bread price and made grain scarce.⁸² Heavy rains and a hailstorm in July and the continuation of heavy rains in August destroyed the remaining crops in the northwest and Northern part of France near Paris. An early and long winter, starting in November, brought heavy rains and lots of snow and frost—a damaging combination for the already fraught farmers. Through no fault of their own, farmers lacked the ability to pay autumn payments to seigneurial landlords.

Casual workers were hit first, followed by craftsmen, then winegrowers. In some regions, weather destroyed three-quarters of the vine stock.⁸³ By March 1789, laborers and managers struggled to make ends meet,⁸⁴ which led to discontent, unrest, and eventually rioting in local markets. Whereas aristocrats and wealthy commoners had a cushion of profits from successful harvests, the “small peasant cultivators... had no safety margins.”⁸⁵ Those who were most affected by the destructive weather patterns were the ones who could least afford it, forcing them to suffer while other profited off of their misery.

The grain rioting would have made 1789 a social catastrophe by itself, but the duality of the “old-style food crisis and the new style political crisis” inspired rural insurgencies all over France.⁸⁶ Soup kitchens opened and monastery storerooms were raided in rural areas in an attempt to stave off hunger.⁸⁷ These “symptoms of agrarian distress” endured until early 1790.⁸⁸ Relief for the poor was highly restricted and most did not qualify for relief, making them “totally dependent on private subsidies.”⁸⁹ Furthermore, by the end of the Old Regime there were

2,185 *hopitaux generaux* which were based on a model created by St. Vincent de Paul in the 1660s.[†] These institutions were financially supported by donations and legacies “given by the faithful” as well as revenue they received from special privileges presented to them by the monarchy.⁹⁰ Individual bishops, municipal councils, and ecclesiastics took the initiative to found these institutions. Very few of these establishments catered to the rural poor and were created to help only a very specialized section of the destitute—the sick, aged, crippled, or orphaned (the so-called “deserving poor”). This left the bulk of the poor, unemployed men and women and, even more commonly, the children of laboring men, to the mercy of their fellows.⁹¹

While the imagined relief for the poor would have been a collection of voluntary donations from the parish that were given to needy families, this was not the case. The St. Vincent de Paul Society, the Jesuits, and the Tridentine councils all fancied *bureau de chante* or *bureau d'aumônes*[‡] that would have operated in this manner. Unfortunately, any sort of collection for the poor relied upon individuals and their continued effort which hindered long-term success. While some religious houses made seasonal donations, they were minor and made little impact on the lives of the destitute. While a few distributed bread every week, this was the exception rather than the norm.⁹² Those who did give to the poor gave minimally, and donations were meager at best. Catholic charity was based on moral claims and practitioners’ consciences which was not always enough. Theoretically, the poor were given a privileged position, but this led to questions of whether or not material assistance was also holy. Further, the question of whether some forms of poverty were more holy than others impacted people’s willingness to give all while people continued to starve.⁹³

[†] The patron saint of charitable societies, St. Vincent de Paul is most popularly known for his charity as well as his compassion for the poor.

[‡] alms office

What truly helped bring to light the sufferings of the peasants were the *cahiers de doléances*. Considered a form of strategic speech, *cahiers* were documents that expressed grievances against the state and were drafted to be taken to the Estates General by representatives from each community.⁹⁴ *Cahiers* created within the Third Estate were “drawn up by villages, towns, urban guilds, and corporations.”⁹⁵ Even in peasant villages, they were often influenced by privileged commoners such as lawyers and doctors. In some cases, models from Paris were used to write the *cahiers*, which likely led to the peasants and villagers feeling constrained and unable to fully express their grievances.⁹⁶ The *cahiers* from peasant communities nonetheless reveal much about peasant grievances, as well as a general awareness that the meeting of the Estates-General offered a “unique opportunity to be rid of a wide range of burdens which they saw as interlinked.”⁹⁷

The demands expressed what the peasants wanted for the general good.⁹⁸ Even though they were negotiated among villagers—and even influenced by nobles and urban elites who exercised influence over the peasants—they were addressed to a much wider audience. Furthermore, *cahiers* were “speech in context,” representing the grievances of the peasants at a particular moment in time.⁹⁹ Markoff explored two types of documents of the Third Estate: *cahiers* of the parishes and *cahiers* of the deputies. First, *cahiers* of the parishes represent the peasants of rural France, although local priests, urban lawyers, and seigneurial judges aided or hindered their drafting. These *cahiers* were not taken to Versailles and were only presented within the parishes themselves. An example of this type of *cahier* from the St. Germain d’Airan parish in Brittany included grievances mainly about taxes, but also the fixed price for salt, and the fact that all males had to pay three livres annually regardless of fiscal status, in order to maintain a proper military.¹⁰⁰ Instead of a multitude of taxes, they suggested that there should be

a single tax levied on all general property, regardless of the status of the property owner, and that there should be a fixed price for salt.¹⁰¹ Second, the *cahiers* of the deputies of the Third Estate were heavily influenced by the middle class, and represent the “non-noble portion of the upper reaches of urban France.”¹⁰² Simply speaking, these were the urban notables who were aware of the peasant grievances carried by the delegates from the parishes. Included among the most widely discussed subjects are regular meetings of the Estates General, taxation in general, and the collection and allocation of taxes.¹⁰³ These *cahiers* were taken to Versailles as part of the Estates General.¹⁰⁴ The grievances that the peasants filed help us to understand the larger social context of the time.¹⁰⁵ Despite the fact that lawyers often wrote *cahiers*, we can still learn about peasant grievances from them.

Undoubtedly, the situation in France at the end of the eighteenth century was dire. Scarcity and unemployment were beyond critical levels. People were starving and finding nowhere to turn. Arthur Young, an Englishman who traveled through France during July of 1789, provided a first-hand account of what it was like in France at this time. He wrote his findings as he traveled through the French countryside, stating on July 10 that:

Everything conspires to render the present period in France critical. The want of bread is terrible: accounts arrive every moment from the provinces of riots and disturbances and calling in the military to preserve the peace of the markets. The prices reported are the same as I found at Abbeville and Amiens – five sous a pound for white bread, and three-and-a-half to four sous for the common sort eaten by the poor. These rates are beyond their faculties [ability to pay] and occasion great misery. It appears plain to me that the violent friends of the commons [radical revolutionaries] are not displeased at the high price of corn, which seconds their views greatly and makes any appeal to the common feeling of the people more easy and much more to their purpose than if the price was low.¹⁰⁶

Young described what the people in France were going through, and it did not take him long to observe the desperation and destitution of the French people. He recognized the revolutionary appeal for those who were living on nothing. For them, the system had failed, and they saw no

way out of the situation they were in, nor was it their fault that they were in that situation to begin with. Radical revolutionaries could easily argue that the system had dealt the peasants a bad hand and that it was time for them to stand up and take charge in order to change the system that had kept them down for so long.

Some groups were affected by the circumstances more than others, and after speaking to a woman affected by the aforementioned trends, Young wrote:

An Englishman who has not travelled cannot imagine the figure made by infinitely the greater part of the countrywomen in France. It speaks, at the first sight, hard and severe labour: I am inclined to think, that they work harder than the men, and this, united with the more miserable labour of bringing a new race of slaves into the world, destroys absolutely all symmetry of person and every feminine appearance. To what are we to attribute this difference in the manners of the lower people in the two kingdoms? To government.¹⁰⁷

Young saw that women had to work even harder than men in order not only to provide what they could for their families, but also to provide their families with a new generation whose fate was almost assuredly (at least at that time) the destitute life of a peasant in a feudal system. He placed the blame for France's situation on the government, which consisted of officials who had no interest in addressing the problems facing their countrymen. They benefited from the system and were motivated to keep it the same, committing any new generations to a life of servitude. However, the people were able to change the system and break the cycle, but only as a result of the success of the Great Fear.

The Great Fear and its Impact

Rural panics were far from rare occurrences in eighteenth century France, plaguing the entirety of the country for most of 1789. The Great Fear occurred from mid-July through the first week in August 1789, while agrarian disturbances in Provence and Dauphine in the southeast, Franche-Comte in the East, and the North East had broken out in the previous winter and spring.¹⁰⁸ Louis XVI had called troops to Paris in July 1789, touching off the storming of the

Bastille. After the violence in the capital, the people in the countryside were convinced that hostility from government troops would travel from the capital to their cities and regions. The peasant revolts that occurred in the Normandy Bocage, the Franche-Comté, and the Mâconnais, coupled with the storming of the Bastille, put much of the population on edge, believing they would have to take up arms and protect their homes from certain attack by a mix of the rebellious peasants and the “brigands” (mercenaries sent by the aristocracy to tamp down on revolutionary action). Lefebvre, nevertheless, argues that the “Great Fear” was no great fear at all, but a combination of several smaller, concentrated panics that overall gave the peasants the confidence they needed to get out from under the seigneurial thumb. In many instances, peasants ransacked the homes of lords and burned the documents detailing their seigneurial dues. Such action was a catalyst to a monumental movement.

Word of mouth can sometimes be the most dangerous weapon of all. Telling a story to someone is like playing the game “Telephone.” One person thinks of a word or phrase, whispers it to the next person in the circle, who then whispers it to the next person, and so on and so forth. By the end of the chain, the original word or phrase has been completely distorted and is unrecognizable. Following the storming of the Bastille, people let their imaginations run wild, seeing a possibility for widespread, organized violence. A universal fear ran through the country, as the people were convinced that the aristocrats were going to overthrow the National Assembly through violence. Crippled by fear, rural communities precariously took measures to protect themselves from the invisible and non-existent threat. Just as rumors are spread by those who do not know the whole story, the panic was spread by people “with no official status of any kind.”¹⁰⁹ Couriers and postilions working for the postal service also played a vital role in the spread of panics. While word-of-mouth can travel almost as quickly as stagecoach, these couriers

would carry documents from one post to the next. No one really cared how truthful they were as long as they warned others about the supposedly certain threat of oncoming violence.¹¹⁰

It is important to remember that the peasants in the countryside were still starving at this point. While the towns did their best to restore order (since no higher authority came to help), everyone was still focused on the one problem that had yet to be solved: how to replenish food supplies.¹¹¹ In Paris, for example, in an attempt to stimulate the economy, the deputies sent representatives to buy food in local markets since many Parisians could not afford food due to the significant rise in food prices. What also contributed to the growing tensions were the suppositions that chateaux had been hoarding corn.¹¹² Not only did these officials have to worry about the local people becoming violent when they saw corn being moved towards the city and away from their starving families, but they also had to worry about protecting the stores and mills in areas where the townspeople could not afford to buy corn. When a secret report about large quantities of grain being hidden in Pontoise turned out to be true, representatives were sent to retrieve the supplies with an escort. The locals were so excited about the possibility of food that the troops were unable to enter the city.¹¹³ While the threat of violence loomed large over many towns, the threat of starvation was even more powerful and even more real.

There was an overarching fear of vagrants that flowed through all of the revolts, for “every beggar, vagrant and rioter seemed to be a ‘brigand.’”¹¹⁴ The rumored brigands were made up of the “floating population” of Paris, specifically the local unemployed, and what furthered the Great Fear was the rumor that spread among the provinces after July 14 that the brigands scattered all over the country as municipalities increased their security measures.¹¹⁵ In the age-old line of believing half of what you see and none of what you hear, the most significant reason the fear was felt by so many was due to the urgency and certainty of impending violence. Several

people attempted to cool tensions, only to be considered traitors, and even the seigneurs of a region, whether afraid of bandits or peasants, furthered the progression of the panic. Rationality was arguably absent as desperation and fear drove people's decisions. Sometimes, when there was a town in the midst of a local panic, a traveler or courier would inadvertently exacerbate the fear by warning a neighboring town, normally in an attempt to be a good Samaritan, which would only fuel the internal fears of the anxious public. At Lourdes, for instance, there were four separate signals of alarm on August 6.¹¹⁶

The fear of brigands created the Great Fear, but it is important to understand that they are two separate events. In short, the fear of brigands, which was fueled by rumors and possibilities, paved the way for the Great Fear. The Great Fear, on the other hand, was seen and heard and spread at a faster rate because real events followed in its wake. Once the French people realized that the events of the Great Fear occurred at the same time, it led to rumors of a conspiracy.¹¹⁷ The conspiracy theory was based on the idea that the aristocrats fueled the brigands into moving across France so as to frighten the rest of the population. The goal was to either “bring them back to the *ancien régime* or else thrust them into total disorder,” a belief that allowed the panics to have a greater importance than they otherwise would have.¹¹⁸ Ironically, the event turned against the aristocracy as it spread out of control. This culminated in new agrarian revolts that directly resulted from the Great Fear.

Lefebvre's main argument about the Great Fear being a misnomer is that every historian has gone along with the statement that the Great Fear was universal because they have confused it with the fear of brigands. He explains that:

to admit that the brigands existed and might appear at any moment was one thing; to imagine that they were actually there was another. It was easy to pass from the first situation to the second: otherwise there is no explanation for the Great Fear; but the

transfer was not absolutely obligatory and though the whole of France believed in brigands, the Great Fear did not appear in the whole of France.¹¹⁹

The fear of brigands and the Great Fear were two different types and instances of terror. One was a potential threat, the other an imagined situation. What happened was a transition from whisperings of a hypothetical danger to a societal imagination of what would happen (rather than if it happened) if those warnings became real.

In areas of France where the transition occurred, we see the Great Fear make its appearance. For instance, Flanders, Hainault, the Cambrésis, and the Ardennes were not affected by the panic. Most of Normandy, Roussillon, Brittany, the Landes and the Basque country had no recorded instances of local disturbances. In the regions where the agrarian revolts had been at their worst – the France-Comté, Alsace, the Normandy Bocage and the Mâconnais – there was no Great Fear at all.¹²⁰ The fear of brigands and the Great Fear were not mutually exclusive. Not all areas impacted by the fear of the brigands experienced the Great Fear, but all areas that were affected by the Great Fear felt the fear of the brigands. Today, we now understand that the fear did not break out everywhere at the same time, which was what preceding historians claimed. Lefebvre's research enabled him to provide the names of the provinces and the subsequent days actual fears occurred, thus challenging the initial belief that it was a single event on a single day.¹²¹ The fear of something happening to them, their property (no matter how limited), or their livelihood was enough to inspire panic.

The people of the French countryside supported the revolution as long as it did not occur in their backyard, threatening their sustenance. Once an uprising (or rumors of an uprising) was suggested as a possibility in another town, the townspeople (not including the peasants) panicked, convinced that they would be beheaded, and their houses burned by the peasants.

Whenever the peasants came into town on market days, for example, the rest of the townspeople were always on edge because they did not trust that the peasants were going to be peaceful.¹²² They saw the peasants as agents of war, a threat to their peaceful (though oftentimes troubled) existence. The anxiety felt by the townspeople was not exclusively internal, as there were external warnings that fueled the response to what amounted to glorified rumors.

Fear can be healthy while panic is almost always deadly. The “warning panics” that preceded the rumblings of terror would begin with an alarm sounding, and for hours bells would echo. The women would go into a frenzy, convinced they and their children would be murdered in the street, while their husbands would bury anything of value and set the animals loose. Before fleeing with their wives and children, men would establish patrols to help defend the village.¹²³ Importantly, the fear of brigands did not subside once people realized they were not actually coming. People were still on edge as the critical period of the harvest crept up on them, and as long as the revolution seemed to be imminent, the dread continued.¹²⁴ What enhanced the distress of the townspeople were the fresh alarms that ensued along the routes of the warning panics. The routes were more often than not valleys as they were the quickest route to neighboring cities and towns, flowing towards the capital. The fear spread back towards the capital.¹²⁵

Disorganized chaos plagued the entire country; when news broke of an incident, panic spread through new cities and towns, exacerbated by rumors of brigands spreading chaos. Fear continued to build and build as fresh waves of alarm spread through the French countryside, inching closer and closer to the city at the center of it all. Ultimately, the Great Fear was born from anxiety and the culmination of hundreds of small, local movements. But it is important to remember that while the fear of brigands was a universal one, the Great Fear was not: it

culminated only in specific areas of France. The Third Estate feared these uprisings the most because they believed the rioters were supported by aristocrats and foreign militaries brought in by Louis XVI. The fear had more consequences in the countryside than towns; most significantly it caused the downfall of the seigneurial regime.¹²⁶ Most importantly, the panic brought municipalities together instead of tearing them apart. The fear forced town militias to organize and inspired the countryside to take up arms, thus bringing the Third Estate closer together.

The terror caused by the Great Fear was the catalyst that was needed for the lowest level of society to band together and demand change. Without the organizing effect of the Great Fear, it remains unknown how long it would have taken for the peasants to organize themselves. However, it is reasonable to believe if the Great Fear had not happened, the peasants would still have organized eventually as their situation became increasingly dire. Unity of the Third Estate backfired onto the nobles and upper clergy, who wanted to keep this Estate weak. Ironically, the unity only happened because the Fear deepened the general hatred for aristocracy and strengthened the revolutionary movement overall.¹²⁷ Instantly following the fear was a national unity which banded the peasants together and showed them the full extent of their strength. The Great Fear—and the unity that flowed from it—paved the way for the August Decrees and subsequent reforms.¹²⁸

The August Decrees and Subsequent Events of 1791

The peasants had to put their trust in deputies to enact legislation to relinquish seigneurial rights. From August 4-11, 1789, the National Assembly debated several proposals concerning the fate of the feudal system in France. By August 11, the Assembly had destroyed the feudal regime “...in its entirety.”¹²⁹ What began as a simple progress report on the Declaration of Rights, as the first step toward a constitution, ended with too much dinner wine and the personal

renunciations of the deputies of the First and Second Estates to aid in the common good.¹³⁰

Antoine Clare Thibaudeau, a lawyer who at the time of the Decrees had accompanied his father, recalls the early morning of August 5 as such: “Was it real? Was it a dream? ... [either way], The feudal regime did not fall for ignoble reasons: it was worn out, it was violently attacked and it was unsupportable.”¹³¹ A radical idea was approved on the night of the fourth that feudalism be abolished and the nobility and clergy relinquish their rights, and then the deputies spent the next week making this idea more palatable.

Three legislative actions created during this week covered the division of seigneurial rights into two classes: “those to be abolished outright and those to be indemnified.”¹³² Furthermore, seigneurial dues pending indemnification were to be paid, and tithes were to be abolished.¹³³ As soon as the legislation was complete on the August 11, the countryside calmed down. Legislators kept a keen eye on the nuances of peasant opinion; as the peasants’ rage subsided following August 11, legislators shrewdly followed their lead. Deputies of the countryside, having seen firsthand the power of a peasant revolt, held peasant opinion in highest regard out of fear of retaliation from their peasant constituents. They found themselves in a precarious position, and many realized that faced with the insurrectionary movements in the countryside, they would be far better off getting on the proverbial bus than getting run over by it. Ultimately, the peasants were able to realize their power and forced those who had the ability to do something to act.

In a letter to a fellow noble, dated August 7, 1789, the Marquis de Ferrières described the legislative session as the ‘most memorable session in the history of any nation.’¹³⁴ Although he wrote that he supported the Decrees because “it will deal with rural chaos; it creates national unity,”¹³⁵ his main reason was his fear that “open opposition by noble deputies would be

dangerous, not merely for those deputies, but for the nobility in France as a whole.”¹³⁶ The count de Virieu, on the other hand, decided to appease the wishes of the peasants because “when people are delirious, there are only two ways of calming them: generosity and force. We had no force.”¹³⁷ Either way, the peasants had power for the first time in the revolution, and they were the first to prompt systemic change.

In the months after the decrees, however, the deputies struggled to define the full import of the measures they had taken. Confusion bred new unrest, and the National Assembly once again began to fear retaliation from the peasants, prompting them to issue an ‘eternally celebrated’¹³⁸ statement on the feudal regime in which clear cut abolition was established, as well as proposals for freedom of worship for non-Catholics, the abolition of *parlements*, and the extension of the emancipation to serfs to include colonial slaves.¹³⁹ The revolutionary peasants controlled their deputies through the constant lingering threat of revolt. Deputies suffocated in the thick shroud of danger surrounding the proceedings of the National Assembly, never knowing if the peasants might revolt if an unfavorable decree were passed. Markoff cites several letters and journal entries from deputies who participated in the National Assembly during the August Decrees, and the common element in all of their tales was the sense of menace that hung over them in personal ways.¹⁴⁰ For example, the Marquis de Lezay-Marnesia saw a France “absolutely disorganized, given over to the most horrible anarchy.”¹⁴¹ He seriously considered emigrating with eleven other deputies, asking “How can one remain in the midst of a people who, out of their lack of understanding, their frivolity... have become the cruelest people, the most coldly terrible.” The marquis would later emigrate to the United States.¹⁴²

Two more legislative decrees on rural affairs were enacted following the August Decrees: one in March 1790 and one in May 1790. The legislation that was created in March 1790

elaborated on the August Decrees, while the May legislation did not favor the peasants. The law in May set impossibly high standards for maintenance. Not only could peasants who owed a “bundle of obligations” not pay them separately, but they also could not be assigned individual allotments if they were collectively responsible to a lord.¹⁴³ The peasants had managed to take two steps forward, but then were forced to take one gigantic step back. This exacerbated tensions between the peasants and legislators, deepening distrust. Once Pandora’s box is opened, it cannot be closed, and the peasants were not done making sure their voices were heard. The deepened distrust between peasants and legislators ultimately provided the kindling that would later spark the fire of future revolts.

The National Assembly, which encompassed the Third Estate, existed from June 17 to July 9, 1789. It served as the interim body between the Estates-General and the Legislative Assembly. The Legislative Assembly governed France from October 1791 to September 1792. This governing body came after the construction of a constitution as well as Louis’s attempted abandonment of his country, leaving the Legislative Assembly “...sandwiched between rising radicalism and an uncooperative monarch on whom it was forced to rely.”¹⁴⁴ While Louis XVI reluctantly handed over his power as an absolute monarch for the benefit of a constitution, he did not have high hopes for the success of a constitutional monarchy. If Louis were to admit that France could survive without a monarch, then he would also have to admit that he had been a failure. In a last ditch effort to fight the growing radicalism of the revolution, Louis and his family broke their house arrest in Paris and attempted to flee France in the middle of the night on June 20, 1791, only to be stopped in Varennes the next day when the king was recognized.

Once the news broke that France’s king had attempted to abandon his country, Louis XVI would never fully regain the trust of his people. Just as rumors spread quickly during the Great

Fear about possible revolts, the news of the king's flight spread rapidly as it was considered "...news of the greatest significance."¹⁴⁵ This was the final affirmation that Louis XVI's first priority would always be himself, abandoning honor, duty, and any remaining respect from his people in his flight from Paris. On July 17, 1791, a crowd of anywhere from 25,000 to 50,000 people gathered on the Champs de Mars to sign a petition demanding a removal of the monarchy.¹⁴⁶ The Marquis de Lafayette and the National Guard attempted to disband the group, but when the mob returned later in the day and began throwing stones, the National Guard began firing into the crowd. Anywhere from thirty to fifty people were killed.¹⁴⁷

Public perception of this event was divided; the ruling class vainly attempted to propagate an idealized version of the story, while the peasants quickly asserted their own narrative of oppression. The National Assembly and several government officials claimed that Paris was "...overrun by brigands that compromised the safety..." of the Capital, while other people believed that the event was a massacre of peaceful citizens resulting in the execution of martial law, indicative of a formidable desire to hinder the progress of the revolution.¹⁴⁸ In the weeks and months following this incident, a decisive shift occurred in the French Revolution. Not only did the Jacobin Club, the radical group in France at the time, split, but it also broke the precarious trust between the French people, the Commune, and the National Guard. In short, the end of 1791 marked the end of the first stage of the revolution, but by no means did it signal the end of revolutionary tensions. Following the collapse of the monarchy (August 1792) and a new wave of peasant unrest (some of it anti-revolutionary, in terms of opposition to religious reforms and mass conscription), a new legislative assembly (the National Convention) finally "settled disputes about the interpretation of the National Assembly's decrees of August 4, 1789, in favor of peasants, rather than landlord."¹⁴⁹ Abolished were compensatory payments for feudal dues.

Land of the church and of émigrés that had been seized by the state were divided into plots small enough for peasants to afford and auctioned off, while estates seized from counterrevolutionaries were distributed free of charge to “indigent patriots.” Major vestiges of seigneurial oppression were abolished, and a larger class of peasant freeholders emerged from the revolution. Peasants had indeed made their voices heard.

Conclusion

The perfect storm of an incompetent king, class divisions, and economic disparity paved the way for the breakdown of France’s political, economic, and social systems. Those who have often been ignored by history may have played one of the most impactful roles in the Revolution, not by choice, but by necessity. The peasants of France were literally starving to death, through no fault of their own, and were forced to take action in order to survive. The French population at the time of the Revolution totaled 28 million,¹⁵⁰ and of that 28 million the poor French involved anywhere from 1/5 to 1/10 of the total population.¹⁵¹ The peasant population was divided into forty thousand communities, each with a mind of their own. But they were not making “...forty thousand disconnected revolutions. There was a French Revolution.”¹⁵²

While political conflict between the aristocracy and the king resulted in the calling of the Estates General, economic and social problems produced the full eruption of revolution throughout France. The calling of the Estates General allowed the people of France to fully realize how ancient and unequal their government was, and the Storming of the Bastille opened up the Revolution to action by the *sans-culottes* in Paris and peasants in the countryside.

Understanding rural conditions at the time of the revolution is vital because the calling of the Estates General could not solve the economic problems that arose from a struggling peasant

class. When the peasants had enough of being under the feudal thumb, they revolted. These revolts spread as a result of the Great Fear, which ironically was not so great, and was mainly the product of rumors. The uprisings of the peasants led to the formation of the August Decrees in which the other two Estates forfeited their power to prevent further widespread revolution. As a constitution was created and Louis lost his power, peasant action again prompted change, compelling the National Convention to sweep away vestiges of seigneurial oppression, enlarging the class of peasant freeholders and placing them on surer footing than previously.

¹ "The Coronation of Louis XVI from the Gazette of France (1775)," in World History Commons, <https://worldhistorycommons.org/coronation-louis-xvi-gazette-france-1775>.

² Simon Schama, *Citizens: A History of the French People*, 1988, 52.

³ John Markoff, *The Abolition of Feudalism Peasants, Lords, and Legislators in the French Revolution*, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 13.

⁴ William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, 3rd ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 184.

⁵ Peter Davies, *The Debate on the French Revolution*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 127.

⁶ Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: the Annales School, 1929-89*, (California: Stanford University Press, 1990), 13.

⁷ Jules Michelet, *History of the French Revolution*, C. Cocks, trans., (London 1847), 10.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Jennifer Llewellyn, and Steve Thompson, "French Revolution Historiography," French Revolution, Alpha History, June 24, 2019, <https://alphahistory.com/frenchrevolution/french-revolution-historiography/>.

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