



SIMUN X

St. Ignatius Model United Nations

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French Revolution

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The French Revolution (May 5th, 1789)



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Chers délégués,

Benvenue to the French Revolution Joint Crisis committee. My name is Caítriona Pagni and my political officer, Tyler Christian, and I are looking forward to being your presiding over your debate and discussion. I have been involved in Model United Nations since freshman year and have had a great deal of experience with historical simulations so if you have any questions, feel free to contact me via email.

Historical committees are unique because they deal with events that have already transpired. However, this does not mean you are expected to follow the course of history, in fact, the whole point of historical committees is to see whether it is possible to change the course of history, for better or for worse. Delegates must be creative, quick on their feet, and ready for the unexpected. I wish you luck as you explore the past and immerse yourself in the world of Bourbon France, Do not take this task lightly the future of you countrymen is at stake!

Au plaisir de vous voir tous,

Caítriona Pagni

P.S. Authentic dress is appreciated.

Bonjour, Frenchmen of the Three Estates!

You have been one of the lucky few delegates participating in the exciting Joint Crisis Committee in this year's SIMUN X 2011 conference. For clarification purposes, both King Louis' advisory cabinet and the Estates-General Meeting will be held in separate rooms, the latter being chaired by myself, Lisa. However, both committees will share this background guide since we will be discussing the same topics that plague France. As a Joint-Crisis Committee, the crises created by Simulations will affect both the Estates and the advisors.

We, your chairs, are very excited for this committee and having been looking forward to it for nearly seven months! As a brief introduction, my name is Lisa Kohldorfer, a junior at Ignatius. My Political Officer is named Stephan Mezyk, who is also a junior. This will be my third time chairing a committee, but my first historical. I am a flutist and am obsessed with the musical Les Miserables.

Welcome to May 5th, 1789, in the midst of the Estates-General Meeting in Versailles, France. King Louis XVI is an absolute monarch and France is one of the most influential countries in its day. But this country is also on the very edge of financial ruin. As you read your background guides, it is your duty as a representative of your Estate, or your duty as a royal advisor, to come up with a plan of action to save your country. Good luck, delegates!

Sincerely, your charming chair,

Lisa Kohldorfer

P.S. Realistic representation (including demeanor and dress) are encouraged. Do not be afraid of “treasonous” suggestions, if they are in line with your position and are what you to be in the best interests of the people of France.

Introduction

The French Revolution, one of the most influential events ever to transpire in Western civilization, shook the foundations of Europe and inspired social change based on the values of Liberté, égalité, fraternité



throughout the world. However, long before the question “What is the Third Estate?” even entered the mind of Abbe Sieyes, deeply entrenched social, economic and



political woes were working together to lay the foundations of social unrest that eventually lit the spark of revolution. At the dawn of the nineteenth century France was a country weighed down by a medieval system of taxation, government bankruptcy, widespread poverty, and

economic crises waiting for change to come its way.

Topic One: Reformation of Taxation

During the eighteenth century France experienced remarkable growth in commerce, exporting items such as indigo and coffee from its Caribbean colonies. France's population grew from nineteen million in 1700 to about 25 million people and transportation within France had improved exponentially. Despite these advances, by 1771 domestic industry and agriculture had collapsed causing mass unemployment among the peasantry. During the 1780's France's textile industry declined thus increasing the number of unemployed throughout France. Agriculture, although accounting for almost three-fourths of France's economy, was not enough to sustain the rising population, and thus food prices soared. As a result, hunger was prevalent in both the French countryside and cities, causing social unrest to rise to a level that had been unheard of in France for the last century.

France's economic troubles came in part from expensive decisions regarding foreign policy; their role in the Seven Years War and later the American Revolution had effectively drained the French treasury of revenue. War related expenditures accounted for the largest part of the national debt in almost any European country at the time and France was no exception. About fifty percent of the annual budget was spent repaying war debts to other countries. Twenty-five percent went to the upkeep of the French army and navy. In addition to this, the frivolous and extravagant practices of the ruling Bourbon family added to the ever deepening pit of public debt. Most famously, the infamous Marie Antoinette, the Austrian wife of Louis XVI, was renowned throughout France for squandering money on elaborate clothing. Although the entire percentage of the budget spent on royal day-to-day expenses only amounted to five percent of the overall budget, Madame Antoinette kindled hatred in the hearts of patriots throughout France and in the eyes of the common people became a symbol of the monarchy's unjust decadence and disregard for peasant life.

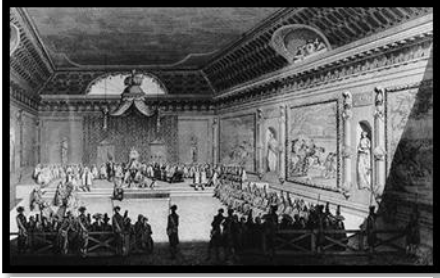


Marie Antoinette, the wife of Louis XVI.

France's national debt not only stemmed from government expenditure, but from the lack of revenue flowing into the country's treasury. Government administration in France operated through a decentralized, feudalistic system in which nobles possessed complete control over the peasants living on their land and were responsible for collecting taxes. This unorganized system facilitated government corruption from both noblemen and accountants who dipped into the public fund for personal expenditures, leaving little money for government administration. At that time, the government relied completely on tax revenues to function and the entirety of the tax burden fell on the shoulders of the common people because, due to ancient privileges and laws, noblemen and clergy were exempt from paying taxes. Some successful merchant men were also able to evade taxes by becoming landowners themselves, but this was a rare occurrence and was impossible to achieve by peasants and the majority of the Third Estate. This system took a heavy toll on the common

people, especially when bread prices rose following several years of bad harvest during the 1780's, creating resentment and dissatisfaction that would eventually turn into revolution.

During the 1780's the government set about solving their financial crisis. Louis XVI appointed



The Assembly of Notables, 1787.

Charles du Calonne as controller general of finance in 1793.

Calonne first sought the aid of other European countries but after decades of financial ruin the government had lost all credibility and none of France's allies were willing to take the risk of lending money to such a financial train wreck.

Calonne arrived at the conclusion that the only way to salvage the economy was to either raise existing taxes or to tax the nobility. Calonne realized that both of these actions would

cause a great deal of protest from both the nobility, who did not want to give up their traditional privileges, and from the common people, who were already taxed to their limits. On February 22nd, 1787 Calonne convinced Louis XVI to call an Assembly of Notables, giving Calonne the opportunity to explain France's situation to a group of influential nobles and convince them that the only way to save France was to adopt one or both of his proposed solutions. Predictably the biased group rejected any attempt to strip them of their tax exemption and the meeting ended without accomplishing anything. Calonne was disgraced and eventually dismissed from office and France was left worse off than before.

Following Calonne's dismissal, Louis hired a banker, Jacques Necker, to replace him. After examining the situation, Necker proposed that Louis convene the ancient Estate General, a medieval governing body that represented the Three Estates, the clergy, nobility, and common people. Louis agreed to call the assembly and to accept whatever solution they agreed upon. On May 5th 1789 The Estate General met for the first time in centuries with the future of France riding on its success.

Questions to Consider:

- 1) How will changing the system of taxation change the overall structure of government?
- 2) What effect will changing the system have on French society and on the feudalistic system of government?
- 3) What repercussions will this have on the monarchy, nobility, clergy and the common people?
- 4) What other possible solutions exist?

Topic Two: The Shifting Roles of the Three Estates

In the years before the Revolution, French society operated according to a hierarchical system divided into three main social groups called estates. The First Estate consisted of the clergy, the Second of the nobility, and the Third of the common people. The First and Second Estates were, for the most part, extremely wealthy (the exception being low ranking clergy members) and enjoyed many privileges such as separate courts, land ownership preference, and most importantly exemption from taxation. Overarching all of French society was the monarchy; France operated under an absolute monarchy and believed in the divine right of the monarch to rule. However this system of political legitimacy created a great deal of leeway for the monarchy to abuse power and little for government reform. In particular, the poorly advised decisions and extravagant behavior of Louis XV created long-term financial

problems so dire that they made France the laughing stock of Europe and became a major reason why revolutionary ideas began to gain support throughout France.



Cartoon depicting the relationship between the Three Estates



Members of the clergy.

The clergy functioned according to strict hierarchical tradition and despite the fact they accounted for less than 5 percent of the population carried significant influence over government decision making. In terms of political change, members of the First Estate were overwhelmingly conservative and resistant to change (some liberal clergy did exist; however they were usually low ranking and

had no influence over policy making). Church officials immediately balked at the ideas of reforming institutions such as the tithe and removing their tax exemption, and accordingly could be counted on work to block all attempts at reform.

The members of the Second Estate traditionally acted as feudal lords to the people living on their land and possessed what essentially amounted to ownership of their tenants. They were responsible for collecting taxes (rarely paid by coin, but often in the form of grain) from them and often over-taxed their peasants, leaving them in poverty. At Versailles noblemen traditionally acted as advisors to the king and considering France operated under an absolute monarchy, exercised a great deal of power. However, when Louis XIV came to the throne, fearful of threats to his power, he eventually confined the nobility to Versailles and virtually removed their political significance. They became mere showpieces of



Members of the aristocracy in traditional dress.

the government's wealth frequently participating in extravagant court rituals. Following Louis' death in 1715 the nobility slowly remerged on the scene and reasserting political power and questioning the monarchy, frightened by the fragility of their positions. They questioned the very idea of divine providence and became a reactionary force in Parliament, blocking any steps toward significant change. They refused to even humor Louis XVI's attempts at reform, leaving France in gridlock and economic ruin. This

movement became so strong it became known as the Aristocratic Opposition and is considered the first stage of the French Revolution.

During the eighteenth century, the Third Estate underwent monumental transformation in both structure and ideology. Despite the poverty the economic crisis had caused, France's growth in commerce gave birth to a middle class of wealthy, educated bourgeoisie who were completely distinct from the landless farmers and artisans of the Middle Ages. This new class of informed businessmen examined the extravagant behavior of the aristocracy and began to harbor resentment over their disadvantaged situation regarding taxation and other privileges, such as royal titles. Seeking a role in politics to match their role in sustaining the economy, many merchants and businessmen



Gentleman of the Third Estate with his family.

attempted to purchase power, but found themselves shut out by members of the Aristocratic Opposition who were bent on keeping "common dogs" in their place. They almost eliminated opportunities for the middle class to buy influential positions such as hereditary army offices, keeping them in political obscurity. Frustrated by the lack of change, disillusioned with ideas such as divine providence, and inspired by the writings of Enlightenment writers such as Seyes and Voltaire, the bourgeoisie eventually grew bold enough to demand reform. However, even though the Third Estate possessed greater numbers (approximately 97% of the population), they carried no political clout because virtually all government positions were occupied by the First and Second Estates. As a result, instead of channeling their grievances into political action, the complaints of the middle class remained unanswered, creating a recipe for Revolution.

The peasantry of the Third Estate, that is, the landless farmers, also underwent an ideological change that set the tone for Revolution. During the years leading up to 1789, education improved remarkably in France, thus giving common people access to new ideas and information. Society grew more secular and people have begun to resent the dominating influence the clergy, the feudal lords, and the monarchy held over their lives. In addition to this, economic downturn created a sharp upturn in food prices. Hungry and indignant, the common people of



Peasants working in the fields.

France slowly released themselves from the ideological chains of the Dark Ages and accepted Enlightenment ideas that undermined the very foundations of the Old Regime, spelling doom for the status quo and opening society to

change.

These numerous shifts in society combined with political deadlock and economic ruin pushed France to the breaking point. In desperation, Louis XVI called the Estate General in order to give each sector of society an opportunity to present their grievances and work together to come to a solution that would make or break France. The date of the assembly was set for the 5th of May, 1789 and the representatives entered the meeting chambers with the weight of a nation on their shoulders.

Questions to Consider:

- 1) What are the implications of allowing the Third Estate a greater role in political affairs?
- 2) Should representation of the Estates be proportional to population or wealth? Any other possible measures?
- 3) What role should each sector of society play in a possible solution to the financial crisis at hand?
- 4) What role should each Estate play in modern society?
- 5) Is social change the best thing for France at the present time?
- 6) Should the people of France be given more freedoms in accordance with Enlightenment ideas?

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Other helpful sites/articles:

Wikipedia.com: Causes of the French Revolution

Sparknotes.com: The French Revolution

Textbooks can also be helpful:

A History of the Modern World to 1815, 10th edition, by Palmer, Colton and Kramer.