

DBQ 1: Causes of the French Revolution

(Adapted from *Document-Based Assessment for Global History*, Walch Education)

Historical Context: The French Revolution of 1789 had many long-range causes. Political, social, and economic conditions in France contributed to the discontent felt by many French people—especially those of the third estate. The ideas of the intellectuals of the Enlightenment brought new views of government and society. The American Revolution also influenced the coming of the French Revolution.

Part A: Examine each document carefully, and answer the questions that follow.

Document 1. This excerpt is adapted from *Travels in France* by Arthur Young, who traveled through France from 1787 to 1789.

In the south of France there is a *taille* [tax on the land and its produce]. There is an injustice in levying the amount each person must pay. Lands held by the nobility are taxed very little. Lands held by commoners are taxed heavily.

September 5, 1788: The poor people seem very poor indeed. The children are terribly ragged.

June 10, 1789: The lack of bread is terrible. Stories arrive every moment from the provinces of riots . . . The price of bread has risen above people’s ability to pay. This causes great misery.

July 1789: I was joined by a poor woman who complained of the hard times, “The *tailles* and feudal dues [rents owed the lords] are crushing us,” she said.

Question: List three observations this traveler made about the life of the peasant in France between 1787 and 1789.

Document 2. This diagram illustrates the three estates in 1789 and the land each held during the Old Regime.

FIRST ESTATE	SECOND ESTATE	THIRD ESTATE
Clergy	Nobles	Middle class, peasants, city workers
1% of the people	2% of the people owned	97% of the people owned
Owned 10% of the land	35% of the land	55% of the land

Question: What conclusion can you draw about the relationship between the percentage of the population in each estate and the percentage of land owned by that estate? What unfair conditions existed in pre-revolutionary France?

Document 3. These are excerpts from the *cahiers* (list of grievances about the king, taxing, and voting in the Estates General) brought to the Estates General.

That the king be forced to reform the abuses and tyranny of *lettre de cachet*.

That every tax . . . be granted [by the Estates General] only for a limited time.

That the *taille* [a tax on land] be borne equally by all classes.

The meetings of the Estates General . . . shall be scheduled for definite times . . . in order to assure the third estate the influence it deserves because of its numbers . . . its votes in the assembly should be taken by head.

Question: What three changes did the third estate demand be made in the French government?

Document 4. In the French Revolution, historian Albert Mathiez claims that leadership fell to the middle class with their knowledge of the ideas of the Enlightenment.

The Revolution had been accomplished in the minds of men long before it was translated into fact . . . The middle class . . . was sensitive to their inferior legal position. The Revolution came from them — the

middle class. The working classes were incapable of starting or controlling the Revolution. They were just beginning to learn to read.

Question: What was the result of the middle class' knowledge of the ideas of the Enlightenment?

Document 5. Lord Acton suggested another point of view.

The condition of France alone did not bring about the overthrow of the monarchy . . . for the suffering of the people was not greater than they had been before. The ideas of the philosophers were not directly responsible for the outbreak . . . [but] the spark that changed thought into action was supplied by the Declaration of American IndependenceThe American example caused the Revolution to break out.

Question: What did Lord Acton believe caused the French Revolution?

Part B –Essay

What were the most important causes of the French Revolution? (Discuss three.)