Causes of the French Revolution: Mid-Term Factors

The tension between the "Three Estates" does not provide a real explanation for why the French Revolution happened when it did. After all, these problems had existed for a very long time. Also, the situation in countries such as Russia and Britain was even worse, and they didn't experience a revolution at that time.

So although the "Three Estates" provides a long-term explanation for the French Revolution, there must have been short-term factors at work too. Those factors are what we will investigate in this lesson.

Economic Factors

▪ By 1789, France was bankrupt. The country could no longer pay its debts, debts that were all the result of war. By 1789, France was still paying off debts incurred by the wars of Louis XIV a hundred years before! The King was keen for the First and Second Estates to start paying taxes, but they refused point-blank. As a result, he started taxing the peasantry even more. They were very annoyed at this.

In this cartoon from the time, Louis is looking at the chests and asks "where is the tax money?" The financial minister, Necker, looks on and says "the money was there last time I looked." The nobles and clergy are sneaking out the door carrying sacks of money, saying "We have it."

Intellectual Factors

▪ The 18th Century was the age of "The Enlightenment", when intellectuals produced lots of pamphlets and made lots of speeches all about how society could and should be organised:

Rousseau:
1. "Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains"
2. "In the natural order, men are all equal"
3. "You forget that the fruits belong to all and that the land belongs to no one"
4. "To renounce liberty is to renounce being a man, to surrender the rights of humanity and even its duties…such a renunciation is incompatible with man's nature; to remove all liberty from his will is to remove all morality from his acts".

Diderot:
5. "There is no true sovereign, there can be no true lawmaker, but the people"
6. "Man will never be free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest"
7. "A thing is not proved just because no one has ever questioned it. What has never been gone into impartially has never been properly gone into. Hence scepticism is the first step toward truth"

Tom Paine:
8. "A hereditary ruler is as absurd an idea as a hereditary mathematician"
9. "The state of a king shuts him off from the world, yet the business of a king requires him to know it thoroughly"
10. "Aristocracy has a tendency to degenerate the human species by intermarrying constantly with each other"

Which of these quotes strikes you the most? Explain your choice.

Which of these three philosophers do you find the most intriguing overall? Do some research on the man you choose and be prepared to feedback to the class with your findings.

International Factors

▪ In the 1770's, the American War of Independence saw the USA fighting for its independence from Britain. It succeeded – with French help! The King of France spent a fortune paying soldiers to go over to America to fight the British, his enemies. However, these soldiers were inspired by the example of the Americans and went home determined to restrict the power of their own king!
▪ "The freedom for which I am going to fight inspires me and I would like my own country to enjoy such a liberty that would fit in with our monarchy, our position and our customs" – a French soldier in America

Questions
▪ Write the title "Mid Term causes of the French Revolution" in your books, then answer this question:

1. Produce a flow diagram in your books explaining how these three factors are connected to each other.
(a) Long-Term factors: The "Three Estates" system

(b) Short-Term factors: The weaknesses of (a) the King and (b) Queen

(c) Mid-Term factors: (a) Economic, (b) Intellectual and (c) International factors

SUGGESTION: If you think this is too straightforward, break this into 6 factors (underlined) and try to link all of them.