The Three Estates

The ancien régime

The ancien régime, or “old order,” refers to the social and political order that existed in France from the late Middle Ages until the French Revolution. Under this system, all men were subjects of the king of France. National citizenship did not exist in France. The king’s subjects were organized into three social classes known as the Three Estates. Each estate was considered an institution, with its own entitlements and privileges.

Before 1789, France was a conglomerate of villages, parishes, and guilds. These smaller groups were very different, but unified under a so-called kingdom of France. They each had their own place in the whole of France; some were endowed with related representative powers, while others were not. Compared to its neighbor England, France was not a true government. The people of France considered themselves French because they had certain rights different from those of foreigners, but that was the extent of their nationality.

The First Estate

The First Estate—the highest level of the feudal class system—was the clergy. Clergy, by definition, is a body of ordained ministers (bishops, priests, and deacons) in a Christian church. Before the French Revolution, there were around 130,000 members of the First Estate. Because of the dominant belief in God, religion, and the afterlife at this time, the clergy possessed the most power among the Three Estates. The Church played an integral role in politics, advising the king in all matters. The Church also played an integral role in the wealth of the country. The clergy’s wealth was a product of taxes and tithes paid by the commoners. Many clergy lived extravagantly, similar to the nobles of the Second Estate. Yet, despite their social and political dominance, they only made up 0.5 percent of the population of France during the ancien régime. They had rights that the commoners did not have, namely, they did not have to pay taxes.

The Second Estate

The Second Estate—the next highest level of the feudal class system—was the nobility, or aristocracy. In ancient Greece, aristocracy meant the rule of the few “best” people, governing the interests of the entire population. These few were considered morally and intellectually superior to everyone else. They also typically included family members, as aristocracy was a hereditary institution of sorts, although some aristocracies were led by nonhereditary members of the upper class. By the Middle Ages, the aristocracy was not a government, but a privileged social class, one that controlled wealth and property and held noble privileges.

The nobility was the wealthiest of the three social classes. Like the clergy, they amassed wealth through taxation of the lower class. They were landowners, and land renters, collecting rent from their tenants. They also did not have to pay taxes.

Not all nobles in the Second Estate were considered equal. There was a hierarchy of order within this class: the highest were the court nobles, then there were nobles who earned their title through military service, and then there were nobles who earned their title through their work as bankers,
administrators, magistrates, or court officials. This class also allowed people to buy a title of nobility, if they had enough money. This allowed those in the Third Estate who successfully acquired wealth to move up in rank. Even with an assorted membership, the Second Estate still only made up less than 1.5 percent of the population of France during the ancien régime.

The Third Estate

The Third Estate—the lowest level of the feudal class system—including every French commoner who did not have a noble title and was not ordained through the Church. This amounted to 27 million people, or 98 percent of the nation. This class was an interesting enigma. It was enormous, but it had no power in the feudal system. It contained penniless beggars and poor peasants, as well as wealthy merchants, laborers and artisans, farmers and city dwellers. The First and Second Estates took advantage of their position over the masses, both politically and socially.

At the bottom of the Third Estate were the peasants. Almost all French peasants were poor. If they had work, they were laborers or tenant sharecroppers. Despite their financial status, they were required to pay taxes. They also paid money to their landowner and money to the Church. These financial obligations had to be met, even during the toughest of times.

Many of the Third Estate’s poor were working class city dwellers. Some were skilled artisans and fortunate to have a job and make a living, albeit a small one. Others were unskilled and jobless. They resorted to begging, or worse, to a criminal life. Life in the city was tough. These workers were not paid well, and any rise in prices, or the cost of living, affected them tremendously. The cities of France, such as Paris, were not large cities. Accommodations, if available, were often small, unhygienic, and uncomfortable. It was not uncommon for multiple families to squeeze into a small apartment that was suitable for just one couple.

On the other end of the spectrum of the Third Estate was the middle class. Known as the bourgeois, they were principally landlords, as well as some business owners and professionals who were able to make enough money to live with relative comfort. As they became successful in their professions, many were eager to acquire the status of those in the Second Estate. A few could purchase noble status, but by the 1780s, even that was out of reach of their financial means. The bourgeois became frustrated. They were the economic developers of the nation, they were the ones making profit for the nation, yet they had no control in the running of it. The Enlightenment ideals that were floating around the salons of Paris soon came to the attention of the bourgeois and they liked what they heard.