



## Once Upon a Time at Versailles: Before the French Revolution

The [Palace of Versailles](#), in all its gilded architectural glory, was completed by 1682. [Louis XIV](#) had taken it upon himself to relocate the French monarchy 12 miles (19 km) from the squalor of Paris.

If Louis XIV's reign had been distinguished by extravagance, [Louis XV](#)'s was characterized by carelessness. Louis XV was a perfect example of the Old Regime's dysfunction. He preferred to satisfy his mistresses (notably Madame de Pompadour and [Madame du Barry](#)) rather than his kingdom. But he did pull himself away from the boudoir long enough to get France into some serious financial scrapes. Under his reign, France was involved in the [War of Polish Succession](#) (1733-38), the War of Austrian Succession (1740-48) and the [Seven Years' War](#) (1756-63). France lost valuable land during these battles, and the Seven Years' War nearly drained the treasury.

At Versailles, it was easy to forget about the French people -- and also pretty convenient for a despised king like Louis XV. The people couldn't be ignored, though. For many years, diseases like [the plague](#) had kept the peasant [population](#) in check. Now, the population was booming and clamored for sustenance. When Louis XV died in 1774, the crown went to Louis Auguste, who famously intoned, "Protect us, Lord, for we are too young to reign." No one had much confidence in Louis XVI's ability to lead France, much less pull it out of debt. His young wife, [Marie Antoinette](#), only compounded his troubles. Marie Antoinette had been married off to Louis to cement the relationship between the Austrian Hapsburgs and the French [Bourbons](#). They were teenagers when they wed, but already shy Louis and tentative Marie Antoinette were under pressure to create the next heir to the throne. The couple floundered in the bedroom for nearly seven years before producing a child -- and their first was a girl.

When she wasn't reproducing, Marie Antoinette was spending. Her reputation as Madame Deficit was well-deserved: She amused herself by ordering hundreds of gowns, trying out elaborate hairstyles and hosting lavish parties at her private retreat, Petit Trianon, on Versailles' expansive grounds. Marie Antoinette had a yearly wardrobe allowance of \$3.6 million, but she easily surpassed that by ordering dresses trimmed with silver and gold and dripping with precious jewels - - even [diamonds](#) [source: [Thomas](#)]. Her focus was on pleasing the courtiers and her new family, and she may very well have been ignorant of the conditions in Paris. After a brief excursion to the city in 1773, she wrote to her mother, "What was really affecting was the tenderness and earnestness of the poor people, who, in spite of the taxes with which they are overwhelmed, were transported with joy at seeing us"

The third class was fully aware of its spendthrift queen, though. Pamphlets circulated with lewd cartoons of the queen at court orgies



and with her eccentric stylist sweeping up her hair into impossibly high bouffants. It wasn't just her extravagance on display -- her lack of reproductive success was, too. Where was the male heir, the people wondered. Louis couldn't govern the bedroom; could he govern France?

Emasculated by this negative publicity and still smarting from criticisms at court, Louis exacted military vengeance. He pledged 2,000 million livres to the [American Revolutionary War](#); for that massive sum, he could've fed and sheltered 7 million of his own people for a year [source: [History Channel](#)]. This mistake wouldn't be his last, however. And the French would see to it that he was duly punished.

## Estates General Resurrected

[Louis](#) was aware of his powerlessness. He exacted authority through financial initiatives, but these ill-advised policies only burdened the poor and pardoned the rich. His deregulation of grain may have been the very worst of these new policies. The cost of [bread](#) increased more than tenfold in some instances, and the people could no longer afford the mainstay of their diet. Mobs lynched bakers and looted precious loaves from their shops. While the court of [Versailles](#) ate to excess, the people of [France](#) went hungry in the streets.

Royal advisers prodded Louis to elect a finance minister. Obliging, he appointed Jacques Necker in 1789. Necker was a pragmatic Enlightenment thinker who set out to reform government finances so that they'd serve the people. Necker's boldest move was calling a meeting of the [Estates General](#), a legislative body made up of [deputies](#) (or representatives) from each of the three estates. The Estates General hadn't been assembled since 1614 [source: [Hibbert](#)].

Though 175 years had passed since its last meeting, not much had changed in the Estates General. Power still rested with the first and second estates: the clergy and the nobility. The deputies' votes carried equal weight, but the first and second estate represented a sliver of a fraction of the French [population](#). Because the first and second estate usually voted the same way on issues, the upper classes benefited from governmental policies while the third estate shouldered the burden of the wealthy.

The French wanted the justice of a three-chambered parliament to solve this imbalance (similar to how the American colonists rallied for no taxation without representation). The people began clamoring for identity. Pamphlets and newspapers flooded the streets of Paris as the people tried to define themselves in terms of class. In January 1789, theorist Emmanuel Joseph Sieyes put it like this: "[W]hat is the Third Estate? Everything; but an everything shackled and oppressed. What would it be without the privileged order? Everything, but an everything free and flourishing. Nothing can succeed without it, everything would be infinitely better without the others" A lawyer named Maximilien Robespierre was less poetic than Sieyes, but he was an active, incendiary speaker. In early May of 1789, Robespierre went to Versailles to serve as a deputy at the Estates

General. He was a true representative of the people; from the beginning, he incited unrest among the staid deputies when he proclaimed that all estates should pay [taxes](#). Robespierre's perspective was guided by [Enlightenment](#) logic, and it quickly gathered popularity as well as derisive ire.

Nearly two months of heated debate fueled the long-dormant Estates General, and the members of the third estate even won over some members of the clergy and nobility to their cause. But discussion was silenced on June 20, 1789, when members of the first and second estates bolted the doors of the Estates General shut. Undaunted, deputies found an unoccupied indoor tennis court and reconvened there. They identified themselves as the **National Assembly** and passionately swore to write a constitution for the people of France, in what became known as the Tennis Court Oath.

During the early days of the National Assembly, there was a shred of hope that Louis might endorse this constitution. But when 30,000 of the king's troops were positioned around Paris, the people realized that reform wouldn't be won through politicians' promises and hopeful treatises. They responded by creating a homespun militia. The people broke into armories and swept the stores clean of firearms.

Then, Louis made the fateful decision to dismiss Necker from his position as minister of finance. The people viewed this as a direct retaliation to their cause. There was no mobilization of troops, no grand pronouncement of attack. On July 14, sheer chaos broke out in the streets of Paris, and the people headed for the [Bastille](#).

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