

Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette and the Royal family

In the early years of the Revolution the royal family were central figures in events. So, what were Louis and Marie Antoinette like? And how suited were they to dealing with such fast-moving and difficult issues?

Louis

Louis was born in 1754 in Versailles, the son of the **dauphin** Louis-Ferdinand. Following the deaths of his older brother (1761) and father (1765) he became dauphin, heir to the French throne. He was well educated, fluent in English and Italian, and particularly enjoyed hunting and the hobby of lock making.

Some historians have blamed Louis for the failures of his government. They point to him lacking confidence and failing to control the competing noble factions at court. The historian Georges Lefebvre (1939) described Louis as:

... lacking in will; honest and well-intentioned, he was far from being a great mind ...

This negative view was countered by Paul Hanson (2009) who wrote:

Older descriptions of Louis XVI as intellectually lazy, isolated at Versailles, scarcely engaged with matters of state have given way to more flattering biographies that portray the King as devoted to his subjects, committed to reform, more the victim of circumstance than his own failings.

Somewhere between the two is the assessment of Peter Jones (2010), that Louis:

... unlike his grandfather, took an intelligent, if fluctuating interest in matters of government.

That word 'fluctuating' may well be the key point, suggesting that Louis' involvement in government and willpower to keep pursuing particular policies fluctuated too much to be successful amidst such complex, fast-moving events.

Marie Antoinette

In 1770 Louis married Marie Antoinette, daughter of the Austrian Empress. This was an unpopular marriage as Austria was blamed for France's defeat in the Seven Years' War in 1763. Louis was unable to consummate the marriage for three years. It was not until 1778 that the couple successfully produced a child and 1781 before they produced a male heir.

dauphin

The dauphin was the title given to the heir to the French throne



△ Coronation portrait of Louis XVI from 1774. Louis inherited the throne from his grandfather (Louis XV) in 1774. He was one of an uninterrupted line of Bourbon Kings which stretched back to Henry IV's accession in 1589.

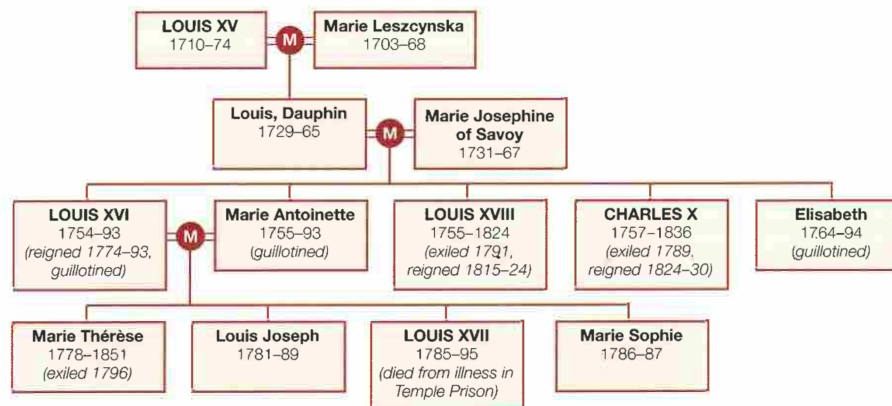
The problem Marie Antoinette never overcame was her nationality. Austria was the traditional enemy of France and she was often called '*l'Autrichienne*', 'that Austrian woman'. This harmless-sounding nickname is a much deeper insult as '*Autrichienne*' incorporates a pun on the word *chienne*, or bitch.

Hatred of Marie Antoinette's nationality made it easy for people to believe scandal. Her reputation came under attack in the 1780s in a pamphlet called *Le Lever d'Aurore* where an outing to watch the sun rise was twisted into an accusation that she took part in illicit sex and orgies. The author was identified and imprisoned in the Bastille. Nevertheless rumours continued to circulate about Marie Antoinette's sexual conduct, including that she was having affairs with the King's brothers, with women, and that the royal children were bastards.

Historians believe none of these rumours were true but then, as now, mud sticks. As we shall see in later chapters, these rumours undermined confidence in, and support for the monarchy.



△ Marie Antoinette, portrait by Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (1787). The Queen is depicted as a mother, dressed in simple yet stately clothes, with her children Marie Thérèse, Louis Charles (on her lap), and the Dauphin Louis Joseph. Baby Sophie had died so the Dauphin points to a sad empty cradle.



△ A family tree of the French royal family.

A royal revolutionary?

Another member of the royal family who you will meet in later pages was the King's cousin, Philippe, Duc D'Orleans. As a member of the Bourbon royal family he was known as 'a Prince of the Blood'. Married to the richest woman in France he lived a debauched and

frivolous life until he became involved in politics in the 1770s and changed his name to Philippe Égalité (which means 'equality') during the Revolution. One view of his role in the Revolution is in the title of Tom Ambrose's 2008 biography *Godfather of the Revolution: The Life of Philippe Égalité, Duc D'Orleans*.

The Ancien Régime (1)

The King and his ministers

The Ancien Régime is the name used nowadays for the French system of government before the Revolution. It was first used in 1790 after the Revolution began – as an insult. It means ‘old rule’, ‘old kingdom’ or ‘old regime’. The phrase was invented by the Comte de Mirabeau, an early revolutionary, to say that the old system of government and classes was out of date, falling apart, decrepit, over the hill and had to be got rid of, fast!

At the head of the Ancien Régime was the King. In theory Louis XVI was ‘an absolute monarch’ which means that there were no legal limits to his power over his subjects. At his coronation Louis XVI had sworn an oath to God, not to his subjects. However, in reality his power was based upon the consent of the noble elite and bound by the laws and customs of the kingdom. He therefore did have to take into account other people’s views even if the nobles were very few in number.

The King’s government consisted of Louis, his advisers and his ministers. This was based in the magnificent Palace of Versailles (shown opposite), roughly twelve miles south-west of Paris. The King did not meet his ministers as a group to make decisions collectively. Instead, Louis met each minister individually to discuss the work of the minister’s department. This meant that it was Louis who decided the overall direction of government policy. It also created a situation where ministers worked against each other rather than together and one of Louis’ problems was controlling competing **factions** at court. This made it much more difficult to bring in much needed reforms.

Another problem facing Louis and his ministers was the huge variation in laws and customs across France. France had no single representative body, such as the English Parliament, which could pass laws covering the whole country. Since the Middle Ages France’s kings had won control of new territories but had allowed these areas to keep local laws and customs unchanged. This meant that Louis XVI’s France was a patchwork of different forms of administration, different legal systems, different taxes and different rules on who paid them.

As you can imagine, this bewildering complexity made France difficult to govern. No single solution to a problem could work in every place. Kings had attempted to create one system of royal officials by splitting the country into 36 *généralités* or administrative areas, each under the control of a royal official called an *intendant*. The intendant was responsible for carrying out the policies of the King’s government in his region. As representatives of central government, they were often unpopular which led to them being constantly hindered by local law courts and local **parlements**.

By far the most important of the parlements was the Paris Parlement which had one very significant power – it had to register each royal edict issued by the king before it could become law. Louis could over-ride their objections by using a special royal session known as a *lit de justice* but if he did that too often then confidence in the power of the King’s government would weaken and raising money would become increasingly expensive and difficult.

factions

Groups of court nobles competing to secure lands, pensions and well-paid posts such as bishoprics from the King

parlements

These were the major high courts of appeal in France. There were thirteen of them, of which the Parlement of Paris was the most important



△ The Palace of Versailles at the time of Louis XVI.



◁ The Hall of Mirrors at Versailles gives a hint of the opulent lifestyle of Louis XVI, his family and court nobility. Versailles sums up both the grandeur and problems of absolute monarchy. It could create a sense of wonder and pride in France’s wealth and power but at times of hardship also emphasised how the King and nobles lived gilded lives, cut off from the people of France.

The Ancien Régime (2)

The Three Estates

French society was divided into three groups, known as the First, Second and Third Estates.

The First Estate – the Clergy

The **clergy** formed less than 0.5 per cent of the population but was powerful and privileged. The Church owned roughly one-tenth of the land making it the largest landowner in France. The political power of the Church was considerable and only Catholics had legal rights. It was only in 1787 that Protestants were given full legal rights such as the right to get married without converting to Catholicism. (Protestants were not given freedom of worship until 1789.) The Church controlled almost all education, most hospitals and **poor relief**. It had extensive powers of censorship and its pulpits were used to publish the King's government's messages.

The clergy also dominated towns, running convents, seminaries, schools, and hospitals as well as churches and cathedrals. In a small town the church could be the largest employer. In the countryside the parish priest or *curé* (often the only educated person in the village) was entitled to receive the tithe, one-tenth of every person's livelihood, to support him. In practice this was not always collected in full but was still a significant tax. However, what the people in the Third Estate disliked far more was that the clergy did not pay taxes. The Church's General Assembly had managed to resist any attempts to take away their tax exemptions. Instead the Church made a voluntary annual grant of about 16 million **livres** to the state – only about five per cent of total church income.

The Second Estate – the nobility

There were roughly **120,000** people who were members of noble families, less than one per cent of the population but together they owned between a quarter and a third of all the land in France. The nobles' greatest privilege was exemption from paying the heaviest tax, the *taille* (a tax on land) and the *corvées royales* (forced labour service to improve roads). They were also exempt from military conscription, although many did volunteer to fight for France by buying commissions as officers in the army and navy. Indeed, all military commissions were purchased which meant, that all the officers were nobles.

There were different levels of nobility:

- The *noblesse de court*, who lived at Versailles, were the most powerful and the wealthiest as only those who could afford it lived at Versailles. They included all the King's ministers, ambassadors, councillors and intendants. Access to the King gave nobles influence over government policy and access to royal patronage of lands, offices and money.
- The *noblesse de robe* lived throughout France, mostly in towns and cities. These were nobles who had purchased legal and administrative offices that carried a hereditary title from the monarch. In 1789 there were over 70,000 of these offices. Buying a **venal office** was a way for the

The **clergy** consisted of 59,500 priests, 60,000 monks and nuns and 5000 non-beneficed people (around 125,000 in total).

poor relief

Payments of food given to the poor

The **livre** was the basic currency of France until 7 April 1795

1 louis = 24 livres

1 livre = 20 sous

1 sou = 12 deniers

Precisely how many nobles there were in 1789 is debatable. The historian Peter Jones suggests **120,000** as an accurate number although some estimates go as high as 400,000.

venal office

An official job or post that could be bought which gave its holder noble status

middle classes to join the nobility but they could also do it through marriage. Men from impoverished noble families married the daughters of rich commoners for their **dowry**. Through both of these methods, gaining noble status was accessible and an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 people became nobles during the eighteenth century.

- The third group of nobles, the great majority, were those who lived on their country estates. Many were no better off than the average **bourgeois**, some were much poorer and were insultingly nicknamed *hobereau* (sparrow hawks) by courtiers. Unsurprisingly these poor nobles were jealous of the court nobles' great wealth and access to royal patronage. Moreover they were very protective of their own status and privileges and determined to enforce the **feudal rights** that their standard of living depended upon. This led them into conflict with their peasants and poorer neighbours.

The Third Estate (the rest!)

The Third Estate consisted of the commoners (anyone who was not a member of the clergy or nobility). This was nearly 28 million people. At the top were the bourgeoisie, mostly living in the towns. These included merchants, industrialists, business people, financiers, landowners, doctors, lawyers and civil servants. As a group they were growing in wealth and numbers, perhaps increasing three-fold between 1660 and 1789. They owned most industrial and all commercial capital, about one-fifth of all private French wealth and roughly one-quarter of all the land. The ambition of most bourgeoisie families was to become noble.

Out in the countryside were the peasants, over 80 per cent of the population. A small minority of richer peasants owned or leased enough land to produce a surplus to sell at market but most farmed at subsistence level and had such a low income that they usually had to work as labourers on other land or as migrant workers in towns. At the very bottom of peasant society were vagrants, perhaps as many as 250,000, who lived in no fixed place. They were feared by the rest of society as outsiders.

The peasantry, the poorest people in society, paid taxes that members of the other Estates did not pay. To the lord of the manor (the *seigneur*) they paid taxes on their grain harvest. Some also paid tax to the lord when their property changed hands. Some worked on the lord's land, while others paid taxes instead of working on the lord's land (work known as labour service). To the state they had to do labour service on the roads (*corvées royales*) and pay the *taille*, the main land tax, and the *gabelle*, a salt tax. They might also be conscripted or have soldiers billeted upon them. Finally they paid the tithe to the Church. As a group their main concern was to stay alive and how hard this was depended very much on the price of bread, the main part of their diet. When prices went up their lives got harder.

dowry

Money or property brought by a bride to her husband on their marriage

bourgeois

Originally meaning 'the citizens of a town', by 1789 the term described the middle classes

Feudal rights

dated back to the medieval feudal system and were a variety of taxes paid in money, in kind or through labour by peasants to the landowners. They also included the landowners' control of manorial courts, exclusive rights to hunting and fishing, the right to have a dovecote and the monopoly of operating mills, ovens and wine presses.