FRENCH LESSON

Sue Valentine
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"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," wrote Charles Dickens. But whichever way one views it, July 14 1789 and subsequent events ushered in a new order that was, sooner or later, to put an end to the *ancien regime* in France and sow revolutionary seeds throughout Europe.

The French Revolution saw some of the most militant "housewives" assert themselves (out of desperation) to lead their menfolk in the march to Versailles on October 5 1789 to demand bread from Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI.

They sat out on their 20 km walk in two great columns, in the rain, chanting as they marched: "Let us fetch the baker, the baker's wife and the little baker's lad."

But why France? Conditions there for the majority of the population were substantially better than in other parts of Europe. In Austria, Bohemia, Prussia, Poland or Russia there were far more oppressive regimes and the peasants more impoverished.

The best roads in Europe were in France, social welfare was being extended, torture was being abolished, the Bastille was being emptied of its prisoners and the *lettres de cachet* the system of detention without trial, were steadily declining in number (Louis XVI issued just 14 000 compared with 150 000 under Louis XV).

Well known French historian George Rudé, a guest lecturer

at Wits University in the early 1980s, endorses the view that the revolution was not so much about the absence of reform as about the nature and tardiness of it. This says Rudé, "in opening the eyes of men to better things, served to precipitate a revolution rather than to avert it."

Rudé goes on to examine the argument "that it was precisely because the middle classes were becoming richer and more conscious of their social importance and because the peasants were becoming free, literate and prosperous that the old feudal survivals and aristocratic privileges appeared all the more vexatious and intolerable".

On the eve of the Revolution, France comprised 24 million commoners. The privileged minority numbered 200 000. Eighty percent of the French population were peasants who bore a heavy burden of taxation.

They paid tithe to the church; salt tax to the State and a varying toll of obligations, services and payments to the *seigneur* of the parish. These ranged from the *corvee* (exacted in cash or kind) and the *cens* (feudal rent in cash) to the *champart* (rent in kind) and a charge on the transfer of property.

If he did not own his land outright, a peasant might also have to pay for the use of his lord's mill, wine-press or bakery. He also had no legal recourse when landlords hunted over his fields, ploughed and planted or otherwise.

By contrast, the aristocracy enjoyed important legal privileges which included immunity from many forms of direct taxation. They were also adept at dodging their true share of other dues.

The *noblesse* was less of a closed caste than in many states of central and eastern Europe and wealthy commoners could buy their way into this estate. However, this avenue was beginning to close, creating dissatisfaction among those potentially eligible for higher rank – later they would throw in their lot with the revolutionaries.

The clergy were in an even more favourable position. As landowners they had an income from rents and feudal dues and also drew tithe (which could amount to one-twelfth the yield of the land). Taxation was minimal. They handed over a relatively small percentage of their income to the Exchequer in the form of a "voluntary gift".

A recession in the years after France entered the American War of Independence in 1778 and economic catastrophe in 1787-89 in the form of bad harvests and food shortages affected the peasants most acutely.

But it also helped to unite urban craftsmen and workers with the peasants against landlords, the government, merchants and speculators.

However, it needed more than economic hardship, social discontent and frustrated political and social ambitions to make a revolution.

From a position where there had been no daily paper before 1777 when the *Journal de Paris* was established, the number of periodicals and papers had increased to 35 in 1779 and to 169 by 1789.

This burgeoning world of papers and pamphlets served the writers of the Enlightenment well. The ideas of Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau and others were being widely disseminated and absorbed by an eager reading public – both aristocratic and middle class. It had also become fashionable, even among the clergy, to be sceptical and irreligious.

Terms such as "citizen", "nation", "general will", "social contract", "rights of man" and "the third estate" (commoners) became part of the general vocabulary.

In particular, the local governing bodies, which were involved from the 1750s in a duel with what they called "ministerial despotism", quoted freely from the philosophers.

Many of the pamphlets they issues protested the high and mighty actions of the court-appointed ministers.

French Society: an old farmer of the third estate carries the weight of the priest and aristocrat of the first and second estates.

Yet even in this atmosphere, Rudé says it is doubtful if in January 1787 – 18 months before the revolution – an intelligent Frenchman or foreign observer could have predicted that a revolution was close at hand.

He adds: "It still needed a spark to bring about an explosion; and it needed a second spark to bring about the particular alignment of forces that ushered in the revolution of 1789."

The first spark, says Rudé, was the government's declaration of bankruptcy following the American War of Independence.

Proposal to widen the tax net to tap the wealth of the landowners and to cut government spending were resisted by the privileged classes. However, after much political manoeuvring to appease the elite, nationwide protests led by the urban middle-classes and some of the nobility forced the government to surrender.

By January 1789 a Swiss observer, Mallet du Pan, wrote that the position in France had changed radically. He noted that the question at issue was no longer a constitutional contest between the King and privileged classes, but "a war between the Third Estate and the two other orders".

The change would seem to have come from the deepening economic crisis whereby the peasant was likely to see the landlord as a greater menace than the King or court at Versailles; it also came from the newly-found confidence of the middle classes who, in the pamphlets, were advertising themselves as fit and ready to lead and represent the nation.

The King promised to call the State's General – the first time this body had been summoned since 1614. It was agreed that the Third Estate, because it comprised the majority of the population, should be allowed double representation.

Cahiers, or grievances, began to flood in from the different estates, clamouring to have their interests represented at the proposed meeting.

Those of the nobility and clergy stressed their attachment to traditional privileges and immunities, but joined with the lower orders in demanding the removal of many of the more oppressive and wasteful practices of the absolute monarchy. They also demand freedom of the press and the individual.

The cahiers of the Third Estate went much further. They demanded liberty of speech, writing and assembly, freedom of trade and from arbitrary arrest. They also insisted on the civil equality of all three estates, and demanded the nobility and clergy give up hunting rights and other privileges such as local monopolies and feudal rent paid in kind.

The States General met on May 5 1789 against a background of mounting crisis and popular unrest. In Paris the bread price was almost twice its normal level and in the provinces peasant were already stopping food convoys, raiding markets and destroying game-reserves.

The commoners represented in the meeting were made to wear black, had to enter the assembly through a side door and in every way were made aware of their inferior status. Although granted double representation, they were refused the right to deliberate in common in the meeting.

On June 10 the Third Estate took the bit between its teeth. It invited the other estates to join them for a common meeting. If they refused to attend, they would go on without them. On June 17, they adopted the title of National Assembly and three days later, on finding themselves locked out of the usual meeting hall (accidentally it seems), they moved on to an adjoining tennis court and took an oath not to disperse until a constitution had been established.

Government orders that the National Assembly should disperse and take their place in their separate chambers provoked a strong reaction forcing the Court to back down.

From here the commercial and professional classes began to give direction to the revolutionary movement that was growing.

The pamphleteers and journalists established permanent headquarters in the Palais Royal where thousands gathered nightly and from where the slogans and directives to the people emanated.

Responding to these developments, the Court, which had been summoning loyal Swiss and German regiments to Versailles, attempted a further showdown.

Finance minister Necker, the popular choice of the Third Estate, was fired on July 11, and replaced by a nominee of the queen. This was the spark that touched off the Paris uprising.

Parisians, supported by soldiers, forced the cavalry to withdraw leaving Paris in the hands of the people. Forty of the 54 customs posts (hated by shopkeepers and merchants for the money they demanded) around Paris were systematically demolished in four days of rioting.

The main feature of the nights July 12 – 13 was the search for arms. Some 30 000 muskets were taken by about 8 000 citizens from the Hotel des Invalides and from there the cry was "To the Bastille!"

Rudé says the aim was never to try and free the prisoners (there were only seven imprisoned), but to seize the power there. The fortress also symbolised past tyrannies.

In the fray the besiegers lost 98 dead and 73 wounded. The governor and six of the hundred defenders were massacred and the Bastille fell.

On July 17, the King journeyed to Paris and was received by the victors at the City Hall.

As a token of acknowledgement, he wore the red, white and blue cockade of the Revolution.

Rudé writes: "It seemed as if now the National Assembly might proceed quietly with its work" (of creating a constitution).

Bread riots swept the countryside and as news of events in Paris reached the provinces so the call to arms continued.

For the first time the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen" was adopted in Europe. While it supported the protection of property, freedom of conscience, of press and from arbitrary arrest, equality before the law, equal taxation, equal egibility to office it also ommitted significant things.

Nothing was said of economic freedom. The rights of assembly, of petitioning and association were not mentioned, and although the law was said to be the expression of the general will, there was no guarantee that all citizens would have equal right to enact it – least of all in the colonies. Neither was any mentioned made of slavery or the slave trade.

The constitution was eventually introduced in 1791. It was generally agreed the monarchy should remain, but it was to be a constitutional monarchy, stripped of its former absolute control of government.

In the years that followed a struggle for power developed, principally the Girondists and Jacobins. Louis XVI was guillotined on January 21, 1793, and from there the "reign" of the new revolutionary part of Robespierre and a reign of terror began.

- *The author, a reporter on the Saturday Star, has an honours degree in history.*

- By courtesy of *The Star*.