

# THE THREE ESTATES EXPLAINED

## FIRST ESTATE

*Clergy*



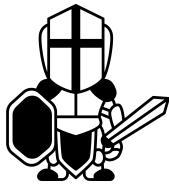
The First Estate included all members of the clergy, such as bishops, priests, monks, and nuns.

Nobody was born into the First Estate. Catholic bishops were exclusively of noble birth, while parish priests tended to come from the Third Estate. As a result, members of the First Estate would harbor some loyalties toward the estate of their birth (e.g., Abbe Sieyes' advocacy for the Third Estate in his famous pamphlet, *What Is the Third Estate?*).

Under the Old Regime, the First Estate was supported by mandatory **tithes** that were collected from French subjects.

## SECOND ESTATE

*Nobility*



The Second Estate consisted of people from noble families. While many French nobles were descended from the old warrior aristocracy of the Middle Ages, others were newly-created "robe nobles" who had purchased their titles.

Under the Old Regime, noble families had **privileges**, which included an exemption from paying the **taille** (head tax), the right to chase wild game onto someone's private property, and the right to carry a sword in public. Nobles were expected to make their living exclusively from agriculture and renting their lands (they were barred from investing in business enterprises).

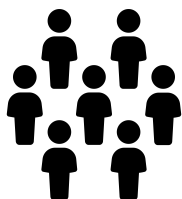
**NOTE:** *While we might tend to imagine nobles as wealthy, there were plenty of nobles of middling means. Many bourgeoisie were wealthier than most nobles.*

**The First and Second Estates together made up less than 5% of the population of France.**

*These estates had several privileges, including being exempt from most taxes.*

## THIRD ESTATE

*Everyone Else*



**BOURGEOISIE:** The French **professional class**, including merchants, lawyers, physicians, and other people who did "white collar" work that typically required an education. They made up about 8% of the population. *There was no serious economic gap between the bourgeoisie and the nobility, but there was a massive political and social gap.*



**GOAL:** Abolish aristocratic privilege and set up a constitutional monarchy on the British model. *The bourgeoisie had the greatest influence during the liberal phase of the French Revolution (1789-1791) due to their prominence among delegates to the Estates General.*

**SANS-CULOTTES:** This describes the urban working class (shopkeepers, laborers, etc.) - literally, "without breeches" (about 1/4 of the French population).



The long pants worn by the **sans-culottes** set them apart from the bourgeoisie, who tended to wear breeches and stockings in imitation of the nobility. *The sans-culottes were the driving force behind the radicalization of the French Revolution, supporting the abolition of the monarchy and the privileges of the Catholic Church.*

"What is the Third Estate?"  
*Everything.*"

– Abbe Sieyes –

The Third Estate included literally everyone not part of the Church or the nobility.

This estate can be divided roughly into three groups:

**Bourgeoisie**  
**Sans-culottes**  
**Peasantry**

**THE PEASANTRY:** By far, the largest group in France (about 2/3 of the French population), which included both landowning peasants and tenant farmers. *This was the most conservative group in France, generally supporting the Church and the monarchy (as long as financial obligations toward neither were excessive). Their chief complaints in 1789 concerned high taxes, bad weather, and poor harvests.*



The **Decrees of August 4th**, which abolished the feudal privileges of the nobility, was designed to appease the peasantry, who rose up in revolt in the "Great Fear" of 1789. Napoleon also catered to the peasantry when he restored the Catholic Church to prominence in 1801 and confirmed purchases of Church lands.