Prelude to Revolution

**Political Causes**

• The French government had been an absolute monarchy mode for several hundred years. By definition, the king shared his power with no one.
• The French parliament had not met in over 175 years. And, French people had very few legal or political rights. There was no freedom of speech or press, and very little freedom of religion. People who openly criticized the government were jailed, and sometimes never even had a trial.
• Additionally, there was little judicial ‘due process’ in France at this time. People who were accused were considered guilty until they could prove their innocence.

**Social Causes**

• There had always been vast gaps between the upper and lower classes in French society. What had changed by the 1700s in France was the rise of a wealthy and educated middle class – the bourgeoisie.
• The bourgeoisie were townspeople. France had become increasingly urban in the 17th and 18th centuries, and as a result, a healthy and wealthy middle class of lawyers, bankers, educators, merchants and doctors had begun to crop up.
• In many cases, the middle classes were wealthier than the nobility, and though the nobility needed the middle classes, they did not respect them. They refused to intermarry, and they considered them ‘dirty tradesmen’ who had to work for a living.
• The bourgeoisie were growing restless, and were unhappy at their lack of social mobility. Despite their wealth, they were unable to make their way into the upper classes.

**Economic Causes**

• The economic situation in France was the driving force behind revolution. The gaps between rich and poor had widened, and as the common people struggled to feed their families, desperation increased, and the mood grew revolutionary.
• In France, only 3% of the population (the nobles and the Church) owned nearly 50% of the land.
• By 1789, the French treasury was bankrupt due to foreign wars, aid that had been sent to the Americans in their revolution, and extravagant living at Versailles. Nearly a quarter of the taxes collected annually went to the maintenance of the King’s lifestyle at Versailles, and the upper classes (nobles & Church) in France paid no taxes.
• The final straw was the famine of 1788-89. Bread was scarce and terribly expensive, and the people of France were starving.

**Intellectual Causes**

• The writings of the Enlightenment philosophers served to stir things up in 18th century France.
• Many of the philosophers were French (Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau), and their writings contained direct criticisms of the French government.
• The educated bourgeoisie latched on to the philosophies, and began to question what type of a social contract existed in France. They wondered why they did not have individual rights, personal freedoms and a say in government.
1. What type of government did the French have at the outset of revolution?

2. How did the government deny people rights?

3. How was the French judicial system different from ours?

4. What changed socially by the 1700s?

5. Who were the bourgeoisie? (Specifically...)

6. How did the upper classes view the bourgeoisie?

7. Why were the bourgeoisie unhappy?

8. Why had the economic mood in France become revolutionary?

9. Why might a French peasant justifiably argue that the land distribution was unfair?

10. Why was the French treasury bankrupt?

11. What was the last economic straw?

12. How did the Enlightenment contribute to the revolutionary mood in France?

13. In particular, how did the writings impact the bourgeoisie?
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