

WAIT, WAIT, DON'T GUILLOTINE ME!

Test – and refresh – your knowledge of the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror with this simple multiple-choice quiz!

4. The French Revolution was mainly an uprising of:

- A. Members of the First Estate
- B. Members of the Second Estate
- C. Members of the Third Estate.
- D. The peasant poor of France
- E. The “sans-culottes”

Answer: B, C & E.

King Louis XVI needed money. His financial crisis forced the French monarch to reluctantly convene the Estates General in order to levy a new land tax that would hopefully solve his monetary woes. It had been 175 years since the last meeting of this deliberative body that included representatives of three Estates: The First comprised of the clergy, the Second comprised of the nobility, and the Third comprised of the middle and lower classes.



The Estates began their meeting at Versailles on May 5, 1789 and quickly entered into a power struggle. The Third Estate soon declared itself a "National Assembly" that was representative of the people. This new National Assembly expressed its desire to include the other two Estates in its deliberations but also made it clear that it was determined to move forward without them. Louis attempted to shut down the National Assembly, but on June 20 its members declared that they would not disband until they had written a new constitution for France.

The tension increased, exacerbated by massive crop failures that led to a shortage of food. In Paris, mobs filled the city's streets. The fear spread that the king would retaliate with force. On July 14 the mob stormed the Bastille to obtain arms. The attack launched the nation down a pathway that would eventually lead to the destruction of the monarchy and the execution of Louis XVI.

Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* is only the best known of many novels that portray France's wretched poor taking revenge on their aristocratic oppressors during the revolution. (Not on the list, please note, is Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, source of the popular musical, whose climactic scenes take place during the Parisian insurrection of 1832, not the events of 1789).

But the poorest of the poor played relatively little part in a revolution that began among wealthy nobles and professionals in meeting halls at Versailles, weeks before the fall of the Bastille. Even the dramatic popular violence that repeatedly drove the revolution forward was mostly carried out by men with more than a little to lose. In the countryside, as many historians have shown, it was directed against elite fief-holders, and the taxes and tolls they collected above all from well-off, entrepreneurial peasants. In the cities, the urban militants who called themselves "sans-culottes" ("without breeches" — i.e. those who did not dress like the wealthy) mostly came from the ranks of artisans, shopkeepers and clerks. Their leaders, though they often called themselves simple laborers, in fact included professionals and workshop owners.

Source: Wikipedia; "5 Myths about the French Revolution," by Daniel A. Bell, The Washington Post, July 9, 2015.