***Marie Antoinette*** (*1755-1793) was the wife of Louis XVI and thus the queen of pre-revolutionary France. Antoinette was an Austrian royal, the 16th child of Empress Maria-Theresa. Like many European princesses, the young Antoinette was hustled into an arranged marriage that would further the political interests of her parents. In 1770 the 14-year-old girl was wheeled off to France to marry Louis, the heir to the French crown. Antoinette found adjusting to her new life difficult. Though their affection grew with time, Antoinette personal and sexual relationship with her new husband was problematic. As an outsider and a foreigner, she was also the victim of court gossip and intrigues. As a consequence Antoinette came to prefer the company of favourites like the Polignacs, who she showered with money and gifts. Though often exaggerated, Antoinette’s profligate spending attracted criticism and earned her the nickname ‘Madame Deficit’. Street gossip and propaganda was much crueller, dubbing her* l’Autrichienne *(‘the Austrian bitch’) and accusing her of adultery, cuckoldry and other sexual depravities. Politically, Antoinette was conservative, strong-willed and stubborn. After 1789 she worked strenuously to reverse the changes of the revolution and restore her husband’s political authority. She communicated and negotiated with men like Mirabeau and Talleyrand, though she could never bring herself to trust them. By late 1792 revolutionary events had overtaken the king and his wife, who were unable to save themselves. After losing her husband to the guillotine in early 1793, Antoinette went the same way in October, following a show trial where she was accused of everything from treason to incest. At the time of her death she was one of the revolution’s most hated figures, though it was a reputation that was only partly deserved*

One of history’s most despised women, Marie Antoinette’s reputation is largely undeserved. She has been portrayed as the woman whose sexual appetite discredited the regime, and whose cuckolding pushed and harried Louis XVI to the Revolution and the guillotine. However like Louis she herself was a scapegoat, a victim of circumstances beyond her perception and her control. Some of the most vulgar political pornography in history suggested that she was guilty of infidelity, masturbation, promiscuity, incest and bestiality. A more common theme was that she was a wild consumer of public funds, spending millions of livres on clothes, jewels and trinkets.

Marie Antoinette was only 14 years old when her mother, the overbearing Austrian empress Maria Theresa, parceled her off to marry the teenage Dauphin; the marriage would align the two great Catholic powers of France and Austria. A complicated ritual required Antoinette to strip at the Austrian-French border and pass across to her new home naked, before being fitted in French clothes by French maids. Her wedding to the somewhat overweight prince – whom to that point she had never met – was an ornate affair, but during her first years as queen Antoinette found life at Versailles a marked contrast to the refined gentility of her mother’s court in Austria: couples flirted openly and men urinated on walls indoors, while the wives of nobles scoffed at Antoinette’s accent. She hated the monotonous ritual of court and made enemies, particularly Louis XV’s mistress Madame du Barry (who was banished from Versailles after the old king’s death). Her marriage to Louis was not successful initially either. Their first attempts to consummate the marriage were closely watched by court officials and ladies-in-waiting, but they were not able to have intercourse successfully for many months. It would be almost seven years before the queen would fall pregnant. This delay created gossip and positioning in the court, as cliques and intriguers attempted to secure the young queen a lover. She eventually took a liking to the handsome Swedish count Fersen and although no evidence of an affair exists, they wrote to each other frequently.

“The political significance of her position was none of her making, any more than the ‘little wife’, as Maria Teresa called her, was herself responsible for [her own] pitiful lack of preparedness… As Dauphine and then young Queen, this untrained girl was designated by her family to advance the interests of Austria in a role described as the “finest and greatest that any woman ever played”.  
Antonia Fraser, historian

Only 18 years old when she became queen, at the time of her coronation Antoinette is famously rumoured to have received news of bread shortages with the response: “Let them eat cake!” This has no basis in fact, and her recorded words when hearing of starving townspeople were: “It is quite certain that in seeing the people who treat us so well despite their own misfortune, we are more obliged than ever to work hard for their happiness.” Marie Antoinette was much criticised for her extravagance, particularly her clothing, jewellery and the construction of a mock rural village, the Petit Trianon, in the grounds of Versailles; there she liked to dress in peasant clothing and carry out the duties of a milkmaid (a not uncommon practice amongst aristocratic women of the time). It is true that she was free-spending while young, though this was partly because Louis had charged her with organising court balls and other entertainment. Antoinette did become more frugal in her 30s. She stopped wearing metre-high bejewelled wigs and buying costly jewellery after the mid-1780s — and she played virtually no part in the Diamond-Necklace Affair of 1786, despite her reputation suffering because of it. She also maintained several charitable funds and took a keen interest in distributing funds to good causes.

All this suggests a more benign and likeable Antoinette, however it is worth noting that she was also strongly religious, a stringent believer in absolute monarchy and scornful of the democratic principles of the revolution which emerged in 1789. She was intensely suspicious about those involved in the Estates-General and it was her influence that persuaded the king to discharge Jacques Necker as treasurer, prompting the July unrest in Paris. Despised more and more as the revolution progressed, Antoinette was held under close arrest following the royal family’s unsuccessful escape attempt in June 1791. She was tried for treason and other charges and executed in October 1793, ten months after her husband was guillotined.

- See more at: <http://alphahistory.com/frenchrevolution/marie-antoinette/#sthash.XKRZSQ9o.dpuf>

**Marquis de Lafayette** *(1757-1834) was arguably the most influential leader of the revolution’s moderate phase (1789-91). Born Gilbert du Mortier in south-central France, Lafayette was of noble blood and voraciously ambitious, however as a younger son he was destined for a career in the army. In 1777 he defied the government and travelled to North America, where he planend to assist the American revolutionaries in their struggle for independence. While in America Lafayette proved himself a skilled military officer, earning the respect and friendship of George Washington. Lafayette was hailed as a hero after returning to France. In 1787 he was appointed to the Assembly of Notables, where he argued for the convocation of the Estates General, where he also served. Lafayette’s personal views were liberal, strongly influenced by the relatively peaceful course and moderate political outcomes of the American Revolution. In mid-1789 he contributed to the drafting of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.*

Lafayette’s role as commander of the Paris National Guard placed him at several critical revolutionary events. In October 1789 he attended Versailles to protect the royals from a possible mob attack, later escorting them back to Paris. In July 1791 Lafayette’s men fired on protesters at the Champ de Mars, killing dozens – an event that cost him an enormous amount of public respect and affection. By mid-1792 Lafayette was serving in the regular French military but also urged the government to take strong action against radical political clubs. His last move was an unsuccessful attempt to rally troops to march on Paris after the dramatic journee of August 10th 1792. With the revolution now radicalising far beyond its original goals, Lafayette lost hope that it might be saved. In late August he left French territory and surrendered himself to the Prussians and Austrians. The latter held him in detention until 1797. He later returned to France and served in the post-Napoleonic national government.

The Marquis de Lafayette was, at the time of the French Revolution, one of the most famous Frenchmen in the world. This was particularly true in America, where his youthful exuberance and his friendship with George Washington made him a high-profile contributor to the American Revolution. Lafayette returned to France changed by his participation in that particular revolution, enamoured with its political idealism and its moderate aims. He was keen to see many changes implemented in France: including a constitutional monarchy, the abolition of slavery and state-protected religious freedom. Lafayette’s views were liberal rather than radical, however; he also considered a strong central government and a national militia to be necessities. “The electors declared Paris an autonomous commune and voted Lafayette commanding general and military head of the new government. Elated by the prospects of organising and commanding an American-style citizen’s milita, he drew his sword, the symbol of his knighthood and fealty to the king, and raised it high to thunderous cheers… ‘Vive le Roi!’ he cried. ‘Vive le Roi! Vive la Nation!’ they echoed, before beginning a sing-song chant: ‘La-fa-yette, La-fa-yette…’ One elector crowned the Houdon bust of Lafayette with a laurel wreath, then held it high above his head and marched it around the room.” Harlow G. Unger, historian At the outbreak of the French Revolution he was still a young man (31 in 1789) though greatly respected. He was a member of the Assembly of Notables, within which he was the driving force in convincing Louis XVI to summon together the Estates-General. He was elected to the Estates-General and then as vice-president of the newly-formed National Assembly. Within that body he pursued a liberal agenda, suggesting a declaration of rights (Lafayette would subsequently draft the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen in August). The day after the Bastille fell, Lafayette was popularly appointed as commander of the National Guard, a people’s militia based in Paris with the responsibility of keeping order and protecting the people from royalist troops. In this position he would struggle nobly against violence and disorder – but the source of this was generally the Paris mobs rather than the army or counter-revolutionaries. He was instrumental in rescuing Marie-Antoinette from the crowd that had marched on Versailles in October 1789; as a constitutional monarchist with moderate views such behaviour appalled him. Between 1789 and 1791 Lafayette was probably the only figure who could have saved the revolution; in many ways he was the revolution. But the growing radicalism disenchanted him, leading him to form a political club for constitutional monarchists called the Feulliants; meanwhile the escalating violence in Paris – including the Day of Daggers – disgusted Lafayette to the point where he tried to resign his command (he was talked out of this). In July 1791 he ordered the National Guard to open fire on a rowdy republican mob, more than 50 people dying in what became known as the Champ-de-Mars massacre. It was a telling blow to whatever respect and affection Lafayette enjoyed among the radical Jacobins and the urban sans culottes. As events unfolded in 1792 he planned to use his army to protect the royal family and to push for a limited monarchy, prompting the government to declare him a traitor. He was captured by Austrian forces and spent several years in prison, eventually returning to France in the late 1790s

**Louis XVI (1754-1793)** *was the last king of the ancien regime and the most prominent victim of the revolution. A member of the Bourbon dynasty which had ruled France for more than six centuries, the young Dauphin took the throne in 1774 after the death of his grandfather, Louis XV. Privately, the young Louis XVI was moderately intelligent, cognisant of his royal responsibilities and conversant with the need for reform – but he was also leisure-loving, deeply religious and susceptible to poor advice and intrigues. The new king ruled one of the most powerful empires in the world – but he also inherited a nation strangulated by debt, fiscal mismanagement and an inequitable and inadequate taxation system. Advised by competent financial ministers, Louis might have been able to facilitate working solutions to the crisis, if not for obstinate nobles who blocked the paths to reform. The king summoned the Estates General to push through reform, however he failed to foresee the political events that lay ahead. A number of equivocations and poor decisions contributed to the spiralling crisis of 1789, culminating in the formation of a National Assembly and the erosion of his absolute power. Had he accepted the revolution and its changes, Louis and his family might well have survived – but instead he clung to the misguided hope that he could retain arbitrary executive power. The National Assembly’s attacks on emigre nobles, church lands and the clergy sapped whatever interest Louis had in becoming a constitutional monarch. In June 1791 the king and his family all but abandoned the revolution by fleeing Paris, only to be recaptured at Varennes. Moderate political leaders tried to recover the king’s position, however the tide of the revolution was now against him. In January 1793 Louis XVI was put on trial before the National Convention, which found him guilty and sentenced him to die under the guillotine. His wife, Marie Antoinette, would follow some 10 months later.*

Ask those with only a basic understanding of the French Revolution what caused it and most will say “the king” (not surprising, since revolutions are often blamed on old regime leaders). And while it’s true that Louis XVI and his wife, Marie-Antoinette, lacked a full understanding of the crisis that was engulfing the nation, it is simplistic to lay all or even most of the responsibility at their feet. Louis was hardly a great thinker but neither was he stupid: it’s true he failed to fully grasp the importance of economic reforms but he did encourage innovation and expansion in trade and commerce. His wife was stubborn, interventionist and big-spending in her 20s – but hardly the vicious harlot she was portrayed as in political pornography. In another age they would have been successful monarchs; in the age of the French Revolution they failed to understand the conditions and changes threatening both the nation and their own situation.

“It is easy to see how historians have been able to turn this really very average man into a hero, an incompetent, a martyr or a culprit: this honorable king, with his simple nature, ill adapted for the role he had to assume and the history which awaited him… Where personal qualities were concerned, Louis XVI was not the ideal monarch to personify the twilight of royalty in the history of France: he was too serious, too faithful to his duties, too thrifty, too chaste and, in his final hour, too courageous.”  
Francois Furet, historian

Louis was born in 1754, the son of the then-dauphin and the grandson of the reigning king, Louis XV. He had not always been destined to be king – at the time of his birth Louis was fourth in line to the throne – however a string of deaths saw him propelled to the monarchy. Louis’ older brother died in 1761, aged 10, while his father passed away four years later. Louis, who was a healthy but reserved boy, had achieved very well in his studies but was largely shunned by his parents. He enjoyed hunting with his grandfather and locksmithing, in which he trained as a teenager. In 1770, with Louis now dauphin and his grandfather Louis XV in his 60s, an arranged marriage to the Austrian princess Marie-Antoinette was convened – to secure an heir and protect the Bourbon line, as well as for political purposes (Antoinette was the daughter of the powerful Austrian empress and the Holy Roman Emperor). Both were only in their mid-teens at the time of their marriage, and although they developed a relatively close relationship it cannot be said that they were ever passionately in love.

Louis XV died in 1774 and was succeeded by his grandson. The new king was only 19 years old, still immature and politically naive. Rumour has it that hearing of his grandfather’s death, Louis prayed “Dear God, please guide and protect us… we are too young to reign.” Following ministerial and aristocratic advice his initial changes included restoring much of the power of the parlements (a decision that would have important consequences during the 1780s). Louis was possessed of a good memory and showed an interest in foreign policy, however he was disinterested in many affairs of state and continued his regular leisure pursuits while king (these passions, particularly hunting and locksmithing, would become the subject of propaganda during the 1780s). He remained up to his death a strongly religious man, seeking the counsel of higher clergy both on personal affairs and matters of state.

***Jacques Necker*** (*1732-1804) was a French finance minister and a critical participant in the unfolding revolution of 1789. Born in Geneva, Necker was the son of a Swiss law professor but shunned law and instead trained as a banker. He established his own bank in the 1750s and became independently wealthy, in part through loans to the French government. By the mid-1770s Necker was semi-retired and living in Paris. He devoted much of his time to reading and writing, particularly about economics, while his wife (Suzanne) and daughter (Madame de Stael) hosted well-known* salons*. In 1776 Necker was recruited by Louis XVI’s government, which was impressed by his financial reputation as well as his connections. In June 1777 he was appointed as director-general of finance, giving him virtual control of the French economy. Discovering the nation to be almost bankrupt, Necker attempted some minor reforms, but for the most part sought to keep the economy afloat through foreign loans, which had to be constantly juggled and refinanced. In February 1781 Necker published* Compte Rendu au Roi sur les Finances*, a financial report that suggested France was carrying significantly less debt than it actually was. Necker was dumped from office three months later, the product of manipulations and intrigues of those who disliked him. But the king would return to Necker after the failures of Calonne and Brienne, reinstating him as finance minister in 1788. Necker appeared at the Estates General but failed to offer a clear program of either fiscal or political reform, nor did he provide an accurate summary of France’s perilous debt. Yet despite his political failures, Necker was hailed as a reformist by the people, who were moved to revolt when he was sacked again on July 11th 1789. Necker was recalled a week later and stayed in office until mid-1790, however he failed to have any significant impact on the new society.*

More on the Compte Rendu

In 1776, the king appointed Jacques Necker and the Compte Rendu as finance minister of France. Though of Swiss background and Protestant by religion, Necker had shown great talent in managing the affairs of the French East India Company – and his influential wife had also lobbied actively on his behalf. He continued to demonstrate potential after his appointment, though his main skill was acquiring loans and juggling debt rather than long-term economic management and reform. Necker’s ability to manage the deficit was tested by France’s involvement in the American Revolution from 1778 onwards, which would cost the nation more than 2 billion livres. He managed to fund the war effort but, again, it was through borrowing at rates of high interest, rather than by raising state taxes or revenue. “The public nature of the Compte Rendu, rather than its inaccuracy, incensed ministers. Necker was accused of being something less than a Frenchman. Vergennes gave to Louis XVI an opinion of the Compute Rendu which encapsulated this point of view: ‘…the example of England, where accounts are made public, is that of a calculating, selfish, troublesome nation. To apply such principles to France is a national insult: we are people of feeling, trusting and devoted to the person of the King’, and he went on to spell out that the Compte Rendu was a slight to monarchy… The King yielded and Necker lost office.” Olwen Hufton, historian By 1781 disaster was looming as the nation was approaching bankruptcy. Necker produced a document that was stunning in its deceit: the Compte Rendu du Roi (loosely translated, the ‘king’s balance sheet’) was a statement of the nation’s financial situation (see picture, right, which reads “Necker takes the measurements of France”). However the Compte Rendu suggested there was actually a fiscal surplus, not a substantial debt. The publication of these glowing numbers in the Compte Rendu earned Necker hero-status amongst the people; he was hailed as an economic miracle-worker, despite being no such thing. The document concealed the disastrous level of debt and would make subsequent attempts at taxation reform more difficult than they would ordinarily have been. Thus the Compte Rendu du Roi was a catalyst for revolution: it was not a problematic event itself but it nevertheless contributed to the crises of the late 1780s. Despite his financial deceit of the ancien regime, Necker was extremely popular with the people. He courted their affection but he also seemed to have genuinely liberal views (his wife ran one of the largest literary salons in France). He advocated a more equitable sharing of the taxation burden, agitated for the summoning of the Estates-General and, once the Estates-General was convoked, he also supported the notion that the Third Estate should have double representation. Because of Necker’s liberal views – or perhaps simply because he was foreign and not part of the inner royal court – he was despised by Marie-Antoinette, whose intriguing was probably responsible for his dismissal in 1781. Necker was recalled in August 1788, though he made it clear that this was only to assist with the convocation of the Estates-General. Royal anger at the events there led to Louis sacking Necker again, this time on July 11, 1789. The Paris crowd, incensed that ‘their man in the government’ had been removed, stepped up their violence and attacked several targets, the best-known being the siege on the Bastille prison. - See more at: http://alphahistory.com/frenchrevolution/jacques-necker-compte-rendu/#sthash.pwhFWMDl.dpuf

**Jean-Jacques Rousseau** (1712-1778) was a French philosopher whose ideas and writings underpinned many aspects of the revolution. Rousseau was born in the Swiss city of Geneva. He moved to Paris at age 30, taking up employment as a government official while studying political philosophy in his spare time. Rousseau made several contributions to Denis Diderot’s Encyclopédia and in 1750 won a major essay competition, after which he returned to Geneva and began writing in earnest. In 1762 Rousseau published two of his best known books: The Social Contract and Emile. The first of these was a discourse on the relationship between government and individuals, which contained the immortal line “Man is born free yet everywhere he is in chains”. Emile continued on the same theme but also considered how individuals should be educated to become better citizens. These works thrust Rousseau into the public arena – but his strong criticisms of royalty, aristocracy and religion also saw him hounded out of Geneva. He returned to France, where he lived out the remainder of his years. Rousseau was dead long before the tumultuous events of 1789, however his writings and ideas about government, society and individual liberties inspired many of the revolution’s leading figures, from Bailly to Robespierre.

More on the Enlightenment

The Enlightenment is such a broad movement that it is difficult to define, since it had several distinct strands such as the ‘scientific Enlightenment’ and the ‘political Enlightenment’. It is best described as a long period where European thinkers began to question the way things were. The Enlightenment is best known for producing scientific thinkers and their wonderful discoveries. Galileo’s development of an improved telescope led to advances in astronomy; Benjamin Franklin’s experiments using lightning led to an understanding of electricity; Isaac Newton made significant contributions in the fields of physics and mathematics. These men began to look for scientific answers to natural phenomena where religious or Biblical answers had previously existed. Needless to say that in doing so they attracted criticism from the church and the strongly religious. More relevant to the American and French revolutions, were the contributions of political philosophers.

“Historians have long debated the exact relationship between the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. In the minds of contemporaries, the Enlightenment laid the groundwork for the Revolution’s most important ideas and agendas. Within two years of its outbreak in 1789, it sparked radical movements in Britain, Haiti, and finally Ireland and Egypt.. The days of the Enlightenment seemed halcyon – a war of words, a battle of books – in comparison with the reality of trying to live in a republic and keep faith with its principles.”  
**Margaret C. Jacob**

These men, the philosophes as they became known, questioned and examined the traditions, preconceptions and superstitions of the old order. The most frequent targets of their criticism and satire were medieval feudalism, the established church, absolute monarchy and the hereditary aristocracy. According to the philosophes these concepts had no obvious rational or logical value: the king had no special powers or innate abilities, and in fact many kings were profoundly incompetent. These thinkers identified existing ideas and developed new ones which to them were more logical and workable, and less predicated by tradition and superstition. For the French philosophes – Diderot (shown at right), Rousseau, Voltaire, Montesquieu – it was England that best represented a logical political system. Voltaire was especially positive about particular features of English society, such as the rule of law; freedoms of the press, speech and religion; freedom from arbitrary arrest; and the democratic principles espoused in the parliament. As flawed as it was, the English system prospered because it existed in a state of balance between monarchy, aristocracy, commercial interests and the people; it served the needs of all these groups. France, by comparison, was strongly hierarchical, semi-feudal, corrupt and thoroughly undemocratic.

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly what impact the Enlightenment had on the development of revolution, because in most cases the philosophes themselves were long dead and their writings pre-dated revolution by decades (Diderot’s first “Encyclopedie” was published in 1752, Voltaire’s “Philosophical Letters” in 1734, Montesquieu’s “Spirit of the Laws” in 1748). What can be definitively stated is that these thinkers created a climate for questioning and criticism of the old order, where previously this might have been more subdued. The philosophes’ practice of seeking alternative explanations using logic, reason and investigation opened the way for important revolutionary pamphleteers such as Sieyes, while many of their ideas and principles are reflected in key documents like the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, the August decrees and the Constitution of 1791.

***Emmanuel Joseph Sieyes*** *(1748-1836) was the liberal French clergyman who became an influential political writer, best known for authoring the 1789 pamphlet* What is the Third Estate?*Born to a middle class family in southern France, not far from Cannes, Sieyes trained at a Paris seminary and entered the priesthood in 1773. He soon became aware of the venality in the church; it was almost impossible for commoners like Sieyes to enter the higher clergy. These grievances fuelled his political radicalism and his sympathies for the Third Estate. In January 1789 Sieyes published* What is the Third Estate?*, insisting that the Third Estate’s size and production earned it the right to be the dominant voice in the government. Sieyes’ pamphlet was widely read and enormously popular, earning him a place at the Estates General. Once there, Sieyes raised the motion forming the National Assembly; he also contributed to the drafting of the Tennis Court Oath and, later, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. Sieyes re-entered politics in 1792, sitting in the National Convention as a moderate. The rising Jacobin radicalism of 1793 prompted his resignation; he survived the Reign of Terror by renouncing his own Catholicism. He returned again to politics after the fall of Robespierre, serving in the Convention, the Council of Five Hundred and the Directory.* *–*

Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyes, or the Abbe Sieyes, was born in southern France in 1748 and received an education in theology at the Sorbonne, France’s most noted university. He demonstrated more of a liking for the writings of Enlightenment thinkers, however, particularly those of John Locke. Despite his liberalism he entered the church and was promoted to the chancellorship of Chartres. He was not of noble birth though so further elevation eluded him, a fact that annoyed the talented Sieyes somewhat. In 1788 Louis XVI declared that the Estates-General would be recalled the following year; Jacques Necker issued a nationwide invitation for written expressions about the organisation of the Estates. Sieyes decided to put something together, and wrote the lines: What is a nation? A body of associates, living under a common law, and represented by the same legislature, etc. The Third Estate embraces all that which belongs to the nation; and all that which is not the Third Estate, cannot be regarded as being of the nation. What is the Third Estate? It is the whole What is the Third Estate? Everything. What has it been heretofore in the political order? Nothing. What does it demand? To become something. “Sieyes – who had an ear for what we would now call the sound-bite – gave a notorious answer to this question [of political representation]. In contrast to the other two orders, the nobility and priesthood, which he claimed were guardians of their own corporate privilege, the Third Estate had ‘no corporate interest to defend… it demands nothing less than to make the totality of citizens a single social body.’ It was, he claimed, not one order amongst others, but itself, alone, ‘the nation': it was ‘everything’.” Iain Hampsher-Monk, historian What he developed would become a pamphlet titled Qu’est ce que le tiers etat? (‘What is the Third Estate?’) that would become critical source of political ideas in the revolution. The demands made by Sieyes were not radical but they were insistent. The Third Estate, by far the largest sector of the population, should have due political representation. The appearance of the document in January 1789 earned Sieyes enormous popularity. He was consequently elected as a Third Estate representative at the Estates-General. It was Sieyes motion of June 17 that led to the Third Estate proclaiming itself as the National Assembly – however he was also instrumental in developing the distinction between active and passive voters in the new government, thus protecting the power and status of the bourgeoisie. Strangely, Sieyes was one of the few key leaders to survive the Reign of Terror and played a key role in the government of Napoleon Bonaparte. - See more at: <http://alphahistory.com/frenchrevolution/sieyes-what-is-the-third-estate/#sthash.4nwGma0H.dpuf>

***Montesquieu’s* contribution to the revolution:**

The first phase of the French Revolution was the one in which the dominant ideas were those of Montesquieu, notably those expounded in his masterpiece, L'Esprit des lois first published in 1753. Montesquieu claimed that a liberal constitutional monarchy was the best system of government for a people who prized freedom, on the grounds that by dividing the sovereignty of the nation between several centres of power, it provided a permanent check on any one of them becoming despotic. Montesquieu suggested that the English had achieved this by sharing sovereignty between the Crown, Parliament and the law courts. The French, he suggested, would need, if they were to adopt the same idea, to make use of the estates with which they were themselves already familiar: the Crown, the aristocratic courts, the Church, the landed nobility and the chartered cities. Montesquieu's project gives a conspicuous share of the sovereignty to the aristocracy – the class to which he himself belonged - both the noblesse de robe in the courts and the noblesse de race on the land. Some of the people most active in the earliest stages of the Revolution were aristocrats, who undoubtedly identified the cause of national freedom with the interests of their own estate.

More on the enlightenment

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It is difficult to pinpoint exactly what impact the Enlightenment had on the development of revolution, because in most cases the philosophes themselves were long dead and their writings pre-dated revolution by decades (Diderot’s first “Encyclopedie” was published in 1752, Voltaire’s “Philosophical Letters” in 1734, Montesquieu’s “Spirit of the Laws” in 1748). What can be definitively stated is that these thinkers created a climate for questioning and criticism of the old order, where previously this might have been more subdued. The philosophes’ practice of seeking alternative explanations using logic, reason and investigation opened the way for important revolutionary pamphleteers such as Sieyes, while many of their ideas and principles are reflected in key documents like the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, the August decrees and the Constitution of 1791.

Count Honore **Mirabeau** was born Gabriel Riqueti in 1749, to a wealthy commercial family based in central France. Riqueti’s father was Victor de Riqueti, a noted economic thinker who emphasised the importance of agriculture and the landed nobility to France’s national prosperity. The elder Riqueti loathed his son Gabriel, who as a teenager was coerced into military service. He showed some flair as a young officer, however his brief military career was also riddled with several scandals, usually involving gambling and young women. By the age of 23, Gabriel Riqueti had married, fled to Switzerland with another woman, been bankrupted through gambling and cut off by his prominent father. He was arrested and sentenced to death, though this was later commuted to a prison term. It was during his four years behind bars that Riqueti began to write prolifically. One of his texts, completed in 1782, was Erotika Biblion (‘Erotic Bible’) which historian Richard Zacks described as “one-quarter love manual, three-quarters history of sex”. Riqueti’s association with what was essentially a pornographic text brought further shame on his family. “One only has to read Mirabeau’s secret letters to realise the extent to which revolutionary politics… were conducted in a two-fold language. In offering his services to the king, Mirabeau did not become a traitor to his ideas; as his friend la Marck put it: ‘He takes payment but he believes the advice he gives’. In his secret notes to Louis XVI Mirabeau defends the same political aims as in his public speeches in the Assembly: a popular and national monarchy rallied to the Revolution, acting on behalf of the nation against the privileged corps of the Ancien Regime.” Francois Furet, historian Released from prison in 1782, Riqueti began to attract attention, both as a writer, barrister and orator. He also became more interested in political and financial matters, writing critically about France’s delicate economic state and the government’s inept handling of it. Despite his scandalous background and his strong criticisms of the government, Riqueti was recruited as a diplomat. In 1789 he nominated himself as a Third Estate deputy to the Estates-General, and was elected by the people of Aix-la-Chapelle in southern France. It was at Versailles that Riqueti rose to prominence as a potential leader. His oratory and remonstrances revealed his understanding of politics, set him apart from the other Third Estate delegates, and made him popular with the general public. Yet he was not as radical as some: an admirer of the British political system, Riqueti favoured a constitutional monarchy. When his fellow members of the Third Estate moved to convene as the National Assembly, Riqueti declared it a hasty move and absented himself from the final vote. Yet within a week, he had reappeared as their leader, telling a royal official “that we are only to be driven out by the bayonet.” Riqueti’s father died the day before the storming of the Bastille, which saw the younger Riqueti enter the nobility (a privilege he did not refuse). Now the Comte de Mirabeau, his praise for the events of July 14th was restrained. Mirabeau visited the ruins of the Bastille days later, and was showered with flowers by an adoring crowd, yet several times he urged that political reform was superior to public violence. He was critical of the destruction of the Great Fear; and also of the August 4th night sitting that abolished feudalism in one fell swoop, contending that it went too far and undermined the stability of France. Through 1789 and 1790 Mirabeau worked furiously behind the scenes to construct the basis for a constitutional monarchy. Mirabeau tried to gain support for the idea, both within the National Assembly and the royal court, but with minimal success. He tried to forge alliances with popular figures like Lafayette and Necker, but failed. He tried to convince the king that France needed a new form of monarchy, more flexible and receptive to the people – but the king was sceptical, while Marie-Antoinette and others in the royal court loathed him. Mirabeau served briefly as president of the National Assembly, but by late 1790 he had lost the confidence of the royal court. By the start of 1791 Mirabeau had come to realise that a constitutional monarchy was unworkable: the stubborn royal court and the competing interests in the National Assembly made it an impossible dream. Mirabeau’s own health began to fail because of a heart condition, and he died in April 1791. Mirabeau was mourned across France and given a hero’s burial in the Pantheon, alongside the tombs of Voltaire and Rousseau. But public affection for the dead orator lasted only 18 months, until the opening of the king’s secret Armoire de fer (‘iron chest’) in the Tuileries Palace in late 1792. Private correspondence, revealing that Mirabeau was receiving 6,000 livres a month for acting as an advisor to the king, was made public. In reality it was a small sum, hardly enough to make Mirabeau wealthy or corrupt his principles – but it discredited his public image nonetheless. Mirabeau’s corpse was removed from the Pantheon, placed in a lead coffin and interred in a communal burial ground

***Voltaire*** *(1694-1778) was the pen-name of François-Marie Arouet, the Enlightenment philosopher, writer and critic of the* ancien regime*. Like Montesquieu, Diderot and Rousseau, Voltaire was dead well before the French Revolution was in full swing – however his writings shaped revolutionary ideology and, to some extent, the course of the revolution. As a young man the Paris-born Voltaire chose not to follow his father into law, opting for a writing career instead. Within a few years he had attracted controversy and condemnation, both for his criticism of the church and the* ancien regime*, and his barbed commentary about powerful individuals. In 1726 he was beaten up, arrested and exiled to England by* lettre du cachet*after insulting a nobleman. Rather than thinking of this as a punishment, Voltaire used the experience to study British government, society and attitudes to religion; he found the British system much more enlightened than that of the* ancien regime*. Voltaire returned to France in 1729 and began writing on a broad range of topics, including history, philosophy, poetry and the arts. He used fictional works to criticise and condemn the existing order, using his characters to express what he was thinking. Voltaire’s favourite target was religion: he accepted the existence of God but railed against the divine right of kings, religious dogma, superstition, the profligacy and corruption of the higher clergy, and the Church’s failures to minister to the poor. His most famous work is the 1759 novel* Candide*, which sarcastically takes aim at the upper classes and their wilful ignorance about the sufferings of those below them. –*

Voltaire was the pen-name of the French writer Francois-Marie Arouet, who lived between 1694 and 1778. Born into a moderately wealthy family, the son of a government official, Voltaire received an education in Greek, Latin and law from the Jesuits. He was a free-spirited character even when young: at age 20, while working in Holland, he attempted to elope with a young French emigre (their plot was discovered by Voltaire’s father, who ordered him back to France). After arriving back in Paris he spent a year imprisoned in the Bastille for writing satirical poems about members of the aristocracy. After his release Voltaire continued to write undaunted; in 1726 he was forced into exile after a lettre de cachet was issued against him. During Voltaire’s three years in England he engaged in study of the English political and judicial systems, considering it to be more advanced and respectful of human rights than those of France. In 1729 he published Philosophical Letters on the English which caused considerable controversy in France. One of Voltaire’s strongest beliefs was also the need for religious tolerance. Throughout his life he was a fierce critic of the endemic corruption present in the Catholic church, particularly among high-ranking clergymen such as canons, bishops and archbishops. He wrote plenty about the disproportionate land-ownership of the church and the large tithes it imposed on the peasantry. He commented on how wealthy aristocrats bought positions in the upper clergy and complained about Papal intervention in local and regional church affairs. He was not anti-religious however; though often accused of being an atheist (an insulting slur at the time) Voltaire often proclaimed belief in a higher being; he was, more correctly, a deist. - See more at: http://alphahistory.com/frenchrevolution/voltaire/#sthash.koghxaKC.dpuf