**Harvest Failures**

As in many other revolutions, food shortages, high prices and hunger and harvest failures formed a volatile social backdrop to the French Revolution. The French people were no stranger to hunger, however. The labour intensive, semi-medieval methods used by most peasant-farmers meant inefficient production; and it also rendered them susceptible to variations such as pestilence and the weather. The majority of people were generally able to cope with this; in times of poor production and low grain storage they simply ate less, or foraged for alternative food sources. At the outbreak of the revolution, however, they had endured a horror year in terms of food availability and prices – and another similar year seemed imminent.

*“The agricultural year 1781-82 marked a turning point. After a run of fine summers that generated bountiful cereal and grape harvests, weather conditions over western Europe entered a cycle of extreme instability. A wet and tardy spring in 1782 produced a poor harvest, followed by another in 1783 that climatologists have linked to volcanic dust in the upper atmosphere… Harvest shortfall [became] an all too frequent hazard of ancien regime France.”****PM Jones, historian***

France endured extremely poor harvests in 1769, 1776 and 1783. The harvest of 1788 was decimated by a freak hailstorm so the crop yield was poor; this meant that the granaries were less full during the bitterly cold of 1788-89, and there was less seed for planting in the spring of 1789. Limited harvests meant that grain, corn and vegetables were sold to whoever could afford to pay the highest prices; in most cases this was in the more prosperous cities and regions, leaving the poorer ones short of food. In Paris, a four-pound loaf of bread rose from 8-9 sous to 14-15 sous in February 1789; it would remain at this level until after July. In addition to the bread crisis there were also problems in secondary markets: property rents, which had been rising since the 1750s, again spiked; there was a series of livestock epidemics that led to a shortage of meats; the silk harvest of 1787 failed. The skyrocketing rise in bread prices had a knock-on effect to other industries too. As members of the Third Estate had to spend more and more of their income on bread — up to 80 percent in some cases — they had less to spend on products made by artisans: clothing, tools, furniture and so forth. These workers also began to lose money.

Since speculation about the availability and the price of food was usually informed by future harvests as well as past ones, the people of France had good reason for concern about the winter of 1789-90. Events like the Paris revolt and the Great Fear were consequently motivated as much by panic about the future as conditions in the present.