Thesis Context 4 6 POV Add Complexity

There were a number of different causes of the French Revolution. For example, unfair taxation of the French population led to revolts against the First and Second Estates. Another cause of the French Revolution was the presence of Enlightenment Ideas and the influence of the American Revolution on those educated in France. The majority of French citizens were also very frustrated with the lack of reform that benefitted their lives.

French forces supported American Patriots during the American War for Independence during the 1770s and 1780s. At the conclusion of the war, many of the middle class soldiers returned to France, bringing with them a number of the ideas of personal liberty and equality. At the same time, drought and famine spread throughout France causing tension between the different estates. To aid the French economy, King Louis XVI called the Estates General to levy a new tax to provide aid to the struggling economy. Tension continued to build throughout the 1780s, leading up to the explosive attack on the Bastille Prison in 1789.

One major cause of the French Revolution was unfair taxation on the French citizenry. For example, according to historian Arthur Young, French peasants were crushed by taxes, and as a result were unable to feed their families. This unfair taxation led to revolts throughout France, as hungry citizens desired equality under taxation with the First and Second Estates. Young (doc. 1) was a British reformer, and as a result, made observations on French problems with the intention of preventing similar outcomes in Britain. While British colonists in America had not experienced the extreme hunger Young wrote about in France, high taxes had also been a cause of revolution against the British only thirteen years earlier. As a result, Young likely recognized how high taxes played a role in revolting against monarchies. The French cahiers de doleances (doc. 3) also dealt with unfair taxation. The Third Estate requested equal taxation over land shared by all three estates, as well as a time constraint placed upon the period of taxation. Frustrated with their lot in life as carrying the heavy burden of taxation, the Third Estate brought the cahiers to the estates general with the hope that the Parliament would address their concerns. This frustration was evident in a diagram of the three estates (doc. 2). While the First and Second Estates were made up of 3% of the French population, they owned 45% of the land in France and were exempt from paying land taxes. That meant that the remaining 55% of the land was taxed, doubling the amount of taxes the third estate was required to pay.

Another cause of the French Revolution was influence of the Enlightenment ideas. In a book about the French Revolution, Albert Mathiez (doc. 4) explained that the educated middle class started the Revolution due to their exposure to the beliefs of Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau. These ideas, which included life, liberty, property, the social contract, and separation of powers, would have had a heavy influence on the majority of French population that was seen as a part of the lowest social class and who had very little political representation. Mathiez was a French Socialist, and as a result, would have been biased toward the fact that the common man, or middle class, was essential to overthrowing the establishment. Lord Acton, a liberal British historian, also argued that French exposure to Enlightenment ideas influenced the Third Estate in reorganizing French society. He argued that due to the exposure French had to the American Revolution and its ideas of liberty, freedom, and equality, the educated in France also embraced these ideas, leading to revolt against a “unjust tyrant,” King Louis XVI. However, because Acton was a liberal, he sought to improve the lives of the common man, and thus sympathized with those in the working and lower classes of France. French citizens embraced this idea of equality, going so far as inventing a device that executed people equally: the guillotine. Both Acton and Mathiez agree that one major cause of the French Revolution was the presence of Enlightenment ideas. They both recognized the importance and significance of beliefs of overthrowing an unjust and unresponsive tyrant, as well as granting all people an equal say and representation throughout France.

The Third Estate was also very frustrated with the lack of change and reform that occurred in France in the years leading up to 1789. According to historian Young, the lives of the Third Estate continues to be difficult, forced to pay higher taxes at the expense of providing food for their families. The cahiers supports this idea, by explaining that the Third Estate in the Estates General is tired of not getting equal votes, petitioning for voting per head rather than per estate.