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The French Revolution

Analyzing Visual Primary Sources
World History Series

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Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 1-56004-304-0

Product Code: ZP421

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	iv
Lecture Notes	S1
Student Handouts	H1
<u>Culminating Activities</u>	
Image Analysis Worksheet	1
Contextual Analysis Worksheet	3

Introduction

Primary sources are the building blocks of history. Using these sources to introduce students to historical periods offers students the opportunity to become historians themselves—to analyze the evidence, form hypotheses, and learn how to support arguments based on evidence. They learn what it means to interpret the past in ways that provide meaning for the present. Textual primary sources can often be difficult for students to engage with because they are often couched in unfamiliar language from a different historical era. Visual primary sources can prove more appealing and accessible to students, and they also involve different types of “reading” skills.

How to Use This Product

This PowerPoint® presentation is designed to walk students through the process of primary source interpretation. Slides help to focus students’ attention and train them how to “read” visual primary sources. Targeted questions and enlarged insets from images help to train students to see deeper into the historical record, to uncover evidence that, though plainly before their eyes, is not always obvious at first glance.

Let Us Know What You Think

At Social Studies School Service, we always strive to provide the best supplemental curriculum materials at a superior value. If you have feedback that could help us improve this product, requests for other titles in this series, or stories of how it has helped your students, please let us know. You can e-mail us at access@socialstudies.com.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Dr. Aaron Willis
Chief Education Officer
Social Studies School Service



The French Revolution



Table of Contents



- The Three Estates



- The National Assembly



- Executions



- The National Convention



- The Terror



- Robespierre

The Three Estates

- Life under the *ancien regime*
- The Three Estates:
 - Clergy
 - Nobility
 - Everyone else
- Late 18th-century financial crisis
- Unfair taxation

Before the revolution, France operated under a system called the *ancien regime*, or “old regime.” According to this system, society was divided into three groups, or “estates.” The First Estate consisted of members of the clergy. The Second Estate was the nobility or aristocracy. Everyone else, from peasant farmers to wealthy merchants, belonged to the Third Estate. The Third Estate represented 98% of the population yet held virtually no power.

By the late 18th century, the system was in crisis, and members of the Third Estate were desperate for change. Even though the first two estates held much of the land and the wealth, they were exempt from almost all forms of taxation. That meant that the Third Estate had to support the monarchy and the government on its own. The Third Estate also had to pay taxes to landowners and to the Church. For the wealthier members of the Third Estate, this seemed deeply unfair: they had to pay a disproportionate amount in taxes yet reaped none of the benefits, since the nobility enjoyed a much higher status and held the highest positions in government. For the poorer members of the Third Estate, the burden was crippling. Many were desperately poor and starving, yet they still owed a huge percentage of what little they had.

The inequality of the *ancien regime* system became unbearable, and in 1789, the Third Estate revolted. It is easy to view the revolution as a case of the poor rising up against the rich, but the reality was much more complicated than that, as the following discussion will show.

The Three Estates



4

Give students approximately one minute to view the image, then proceed to the next slide.



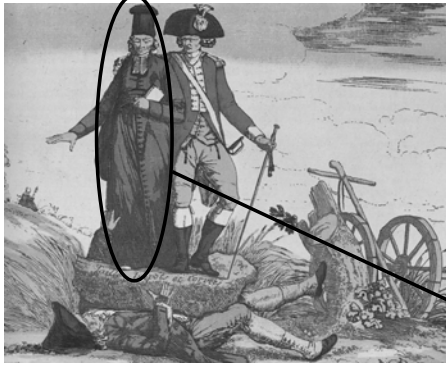
- What type of source is this?
- What appears to be happening?
- What is the setting? How can you tell?

5

At first glance, this picture might look like a painting that would hang in a museum. However, the action doesn't look realistic: two men appear to be crushing a third man by standing on a rock placed on his chest. The fact that this is not a realistic action is a clue that the artist is using a metaphor to express a political opinion, not to depict an actual event.

The image is actually a political cartoon. The artist had a very specific political point to make when he created this picture. The image does not show portraits of specific individuals but instead presents a general representation of pre-revolutionary French society: in this case, the figures represent the three estates that made up the *ancien regime*.

The scene appears to be taking place in a rural area. There is some sort of farming tool on the right-hand side of the cartoon, and on the left a shepherd tends a flock of sheep.



- Who does the man in the purple robe represent?
- How can you tell?



The man in the purple robe represents the First Estate, the clergy. You can tell this because he holds a Bible in his hand, and also because of the manner in which he is dressed.