

Peasants made up 5 to 80 percent of the Third Estate and owned about 35 to 40 percent of the land. When the revolution began, revolutionary leaders often quoted Enlightenment writers, especially Rousseau. At least half the peasants had little or no land to live on. Peasants owed certain duties to the nobles, which were a holdover from medieval times when serfdom was widespread. The bourgeoisie included merchants, bankers, and industrialists, as well as professional people—lawyers, holders of public offices, doctors, and writers. Bad harvests in 1787 and 1788 and a slowdown in manufacturing led to food shortages, rising prices for food, and unemployment. For example, a peasant had to pay a fee to grind his flour or press his grapes because the local lord controlled the flour mill and wine press. In the 1700s, the price of consumer goods increased much faster than wages, which left these urban groups with decreased buying power. Both groups were increasingly upset with a monarchical system resting on privileges and on an old and rigid social order. Another part of the Third Estate consisted of urban craftspeople, shopkeepers, and workers. Some bourgeoisie had managed to become nobles by being appointed to public offices that conferred noble status. Despite these problems, the French king and his ministers continued to spend enormous sums of money on wars and court luxuries. When the harvest time came, the peasant had to work a certain number of days harvesting the noble's crop. Peasants fiercely resented these duties. The bourgeoisie (bourgeoisie) (burzh wah