

THE GREAT FEAR

The Great Fear (in French, *Grande Peur*) was a widespread series of peasant strikes, riots and revolts that took place in rural areas in mid-1789. The **reasons for it were more economic than political**. The months between April and July were always hard for European peasants as they were reliant on dwindling stores of the previous year's grain – and the current year's crop had only just been planted.



In addition, the harvests of 1787-88 had been poor, placing increased pressure on grain stocks. With the shortage of goods, prices began to escalate and those who possessed stores of grain often relocated them to increase profit. Though not the worst conditions of the 1700s, the middle months of 1789 were significantly desperate for French peasants.

There was also the **long-running paranoia** about the thousands of people turned up in rural villages at this time each year. Some were out-of-work townsfolk or migrant labourers in search of work or food; some were beggars or vagrants seeking the same thing. These newcomers were viewed with suspicion, not only because they competed for labour and food but also because they placed heavy demand on charitable organisations, mostly convened by the church. Any charity given to outsiders was charity not available for locals, causing further tensions and animosity.



Spread of the Great Fear

Added to this climate of economic desperation and suspicion was the **political turmoil of 1789**. Small peasant uprisings had been occurring since April, however the political events of July caused an escalation. The convocation of the Estates-General in May drew many local leaders to Versailles, so communities were often placed under the control of hastily-organised committees which acted rashly.

The writing of the cahiers had helped to stimulate discussion and remind the peasants of old feudal grievances. News of the Tennis Court Oath, the sacking of Necker, the attack on the

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Bastille, the unrest in Paris and increases in royal troops all heightened peasant sensitivities. There were also rumours of roaming bands of itinerant workers (which was true) as well as gangs of armed bandits paid by aristocrats, seeking to damage crops or buildings (which was not). By late July, the peasants were in a state of high paranoia and were ready to act.

The **main targets** of the subsequent uprisings were the seigneurs, to whom the peasants were obliged to pay feudal dues and the corvee. The chateaux (grand homes) of the seigneurial nobility were attacked and looted (wine cellars were often the first target). Written records of names, debts and seigneurial obligations were keenly sought and quickly burnt. Sometimes the nobles themselves were held captive and, under threat, forced to renounce their rights over the peasants on the estate. The uprisings began in the south-west of France but quickly spread, reaching their peak in the last week of July. The response of the newly empowered National Assembly was to dissolve most vestiges of feudalism during its famous night-sitting of August 4. The Great Fear fizzled out a few days later, although sporadic peasant uprisings would continue throughout the revolution.