Historians have disagreed about the extent to which government debt was the main cause of the French revolution in 1789. What is your view about the extent to which government debt was the main cause of the French revolution in 1789?

With reference to **three** chosen works:

* analyse the ways in which interpretations of the question, problem or issue differ
* explain the differences you have identified
* evaluate the arguments, indicating which you found most persuasive and explaining your judgements
* make use of supplementary reading as appropriate.

The French Revolution was a key period in French, European and Western civilisation. During this time republicanism replaced the absolute monarch and the country's Roman Catholic Church was forced to undergo radical changes. The outcome of the Revolution has shaped Western democracy. The Revolution is regarded as the shift from the age of absolutism and aristocracy to the age of the dominant political force.

The French Revolution had both short and long term causes. Political, social and economic inequalities caused great discontent and hatred towards the King among the third estate. Ideas from the Enlightenment played a major role as new ideas planted the seeds for Revolution. The American Revolution had a major impact on the events of 1789 as it showed to the French people that it was possible to overthrow a hated regime such as when the American's overthrew British rule. Political and social inequalities led to a number of peasant grievances and the scarcity of food during the 1780s led the peasants having a considerable amount of influence in the events causing the Revolution of 1789. However it has been argued that it was government debt which was the main cause for the French Revolution in 1789.

By 1789 France was a country that had become bankrupt. It was a country which could no longer pay its debts, debts that were a result of war. For example by 1789 France was still paying off debts incurred by the wars of Louis XIV in the late 17th and 18th century. After two decades of relative peace following the death of Louis XIV (1715), the European monarchies again went to war over the issue of the succession to the Polish throne (1733). Between 1740 and 1783, France was involved in two major international conflicts; the war of Austrian Succession (1740-1748) and the 7 Years War (1756-1763). During the War of Austrian Succession expenditure exceeded the normal income by 40 million livres tournois in 1741, 52 million in 1742, 88 million in 1744, 115 million in 1745, 100 million in 1746, 115 million in 1747 and 112 million in 1748. In total this amounted to 719 million. These were debts that were impossible for the French government to pay. The historian Francois Crouzet claimed that 'the ancient regime did not perish because of a weak economy but above all because of poor finances'

Given the extent of these expenditures, which would continue to increase during war the French government decided to increase the taxing of the third estate. War not only meant a great loss of life on the battlefields but a large increase in expenditure. Every possible financial resource was exploited by the government. By asking the peasants in the third estate to pay half again on their taxes was materially impossible and ill advised. It created huge discontent and resentment towards the King. The peasantry began to see the ancient regime as unfair and unjust. The collection of these taxes was impossible for the peasants as they simply did not have the money. It was extremely slow and problematic and risked oppressing an economy that in a time of war was already suffering due to the unavoidable disruption to colonial trade.

The historian Ernest Labrousse's enormous statistical labours show that between the 1730s and around 1770 the French economy made rapid and sustained advances with good harvests, a rising population, rising prices and expanding overseas trade. Between 1770 and 1778 this prosperous time came to an end and there was no recovery made over the next decade. He states that 'industrial production may have fallen by as much as half between 1787 and 1789 and employers economised on labour costs by cutting wages or by dismissing their workers. The political crisis of 1789 came at the time of high prices, falling wages and mass unemployment. Therefore the revolution broke out a moment of severe economic crisis.

However, Ernest Labrousse also argues that in such an economy the agricultural sector is of overwhelming importance and difficulties in this area therefore have a major impact on other sectors. Agricultural inefficiencies prevent improvement and development on other fronts. He stated that 'if the economic crisis was of fundamental importance to the events of 1789, then France's political revolution resulted from the absence – in contrast with England of an agricultural revolution. If the upheavals of 1789 were merely the result of the type of economic crisis that had been seen since 1693-1694, 1708-1709 or in 1770-1771, then why did the previous crises not result in events comparable to those of the 1790s?

The historian Joel Felix claims that it was a long historical tradition which attributed to the collapse of the ancient regime. He states that 'the economic and social consequences of the political system of absolutism which set up and maintained the dominance of the privileged classes by means of the unfair taxation of the third estate was the main reason for causing the French Revol11tion in 1789. However, since the beginning of the 19th century, historians such as Marcel Marion have disagreed with this claim and have argued that 'the monarchy had attempted to reform its systems and make the rich pay a fairer proportion of taxes'. He concludes by saying that 'thus the crisis of the ancient regime should not be sought solely in the arbitrary character of the absolute monarchy'.

However, despite government debt playing a major role in causing the French Revolution in 1789, there are many other factors which have been argued to have played a role. Bad decision making from Louis XVI and the French government has been regarded as having a major impact on events leading up to 1789. The decision made to take part in the American War shows Louis XVI at his best. Despite many viewing the decision as unwise it was free from influence and many ministers were consulted on the matter. However, several decisions were made which were extremely unpopular and caused a great loss of support for the ancient regime. The decision made in February 1778 to assist England's American colonies in their war of independence, the decision in 1786 and December 1789 to convoke the Assembly of Notables, the recalling of Parliament in 1774, the signing of an alliance with the Americans in 1778 were all unpopular and ill advised. However, the historian John Hardman claims that the second decision to support Calonne and present a wide program of reforms for approval by an Assembly of Notables is a different matter. He states that 'departing from the traditional conciliar processes, Louis avoided consulting all but three of his ministers on the matter, implicitly leaving them free to oppose what they had not approved'. Given that the ministry was split into warring fractions and that Calonne's reforms were in need of all the support they could get, this was a bad mistake. The factional strife and mistakes in the political management suggest that the dissolution of the regime began at the centre.

However, the historian Sorel claims that Louis XVI was in a situation which was hard to win support. He states that 'consultation may not be the most effective way of managing change. In such a situation the King could not win. In convoking the Assembly of Notables he ignored vested interests, which quickly conspired to defeat his reforms. So should he have done nothing? The trick in terms of political management is to recognise that whereas action is often dangerous, inactivity can be even more so'.

It was not just the King's actions which caused resentment towards the ancient regime. The French Queen, Marie Antoinette was generally hated by the French people. She was hated for her supposed infidelity towards the King, her overspending and her foreign origins. The Diamond Necklace scandal was used to incite the Parisian mobs against her and united many people leading them to rise up and play a role in causing the French Revolution. The Diamond Necklace Affair caused great hatred towards Marie Antoinette. An unaware cardinal received a message from the supposed Queen informing him to buy her a necklace costing the equivalent of $100,000,000. The cardinal bought the necklace and took it to what he thought was the Queen but was instead an accomplice named Jean de Ia Motte. She took the necklace and the cardinal happily received a rose in return. Jean de Ia Motte took the necklace to her husband in England where it was sold in pieces. The bill for the necklace was sent to the Marie Antoinette by the jewellers when it was never paid. Within France this was soon common knowledge and rumour informed everyone that Marie Antoinette had stolen the diamonds and went on to have an affair with Jeon de Ia Motte. This was used to incite the Parisian mobs against her and helped to push the Revolution forward in 1789. However, despite popular opinion, Marie Antoinette did not single handedly cause the French Revolution. Instead her reputation was used as a political handle to incite the mobs against the ancient regime.

The origins of the French Revolution have also been traced long back into history. There have been two critical moments which have been argued to have played a key role in causing events of 1789. The growth of commerce since the discovery of America and the growth of ideas from the Enlightenment allowed the French people to realise that it was possible to go against their King. The spread of goods and ideas helped to increase the importance of a growing class of 'middling men' who would later take a major role in the Revolution. They later used the new ideas to their advantage and moulded the events during the final stages of the Revolution.

Political and social inequalities had a major impact on causing the French Revolution of 1789. France was a country which in the 18th century still practiced feudalism. The nobles and clergy were exempt from paying taxes. The Estates General was an unfair system, in which the peasants were forced to pay taxes but were allowed no freedom or say in political issues. The First Estate consisted of 1 % of the population who owned just 10 % of the land. The Second Estate consisted of 2 % of the population who owned 35 % of the land. The Third Estate which consisted of 97% of the population who owned 55 % of the land were made to pay the taxes. This was virtually impossible as the peasantry were poor and caused great discontent. It created a large hatred of the ancient regime and led many peasants to want to take action against the monarchy. 80 % of France's population were peasants, an extremely large majority, which therefore shows that peasant actions had a major impact on events. The historian Cobban argues that it was the peasants which drove the bourgeoisie's revolution forward. However, the historian Norman Hampson argued that new ideas from the Enlightenment were the main cause of the French Revolution in 1789.

Political and social inequalities led to a great deal of poverty amongst the peasants. The failure of the 1788 harvest did not help the situation. The drawing up of the cashiers in the spring of 1789 raised expectations amongst the peasants. However, when these expectations were not met it caused riots amongst the peasants. They became angry towards the King and had resentment towards the ancient regime. A peasant woman told Arthur Young that 'something was to be done by some great folks for such poor ones'. The political and social inequalities within France had a major impact on the King's reputation. He became hated by many and a culture of discontent towards the ancient regime began.

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Inequalities caused a number of peasant grievances which did not seem to be addressed by the ancient regime. The economic crisis was made worse for the peasantry due to the failure of cash crops in the 1780s. Rural industrial employment was weakened due to English competition. This was not helped by the Anglo-French trade treaty of 1768 which meant there were protectionist barriers on textile imports. The great scarcity of food in the 1780s did not help the situation in 1789. People were starving and it seemed to the peasantry that the ancient regime was taking no action to resolve this problem. The peasants wanted actions and when nothing was done it caused great anger.

Different crop failures in the 1780s caused these food shortages which considerably raised the price of bread. The two years previous to the Revolution saw bad harvests (in 1788 and 1789) which damaged the lives of the peasantry. The price of bread rose by 88 % in 1789 causing the bread riot. The peasants evolved into the central cause of the revolution. The worsening situation gave the peasants the ambition to counteract social inequality and put an end to the food shortages. The declining situation in the countryside led to a large number of peasants moving to the French cities in search of employment. However, mass urbanisation coinciding with the Industrial Revolution led to extremely poor living conditions. There was little room in the cities for the incoming peasants, meaning living conditions were extremely dirty and cramped. Disease was rife and the standard of living amongst the peasantry became extremely bad. The historian John Markoff argues that the French Revolution occurred as the rural people shifted towards attacking the rural lords which had an enormous impact on the entire course of revolutionary politics. He states that there was a 'pre-revolution, which led to growing tension in rural France in the late ancient regime. The Great food riots of the late 1770s and the growing crisis among France's regional and national elites out of which the fateful and fatal decision to convoke the Estates General emerged'.

Jules Michelet argues that it was the workers and peasantry who became inspired to create a society which was equal. They wanted political democracy and a less unequal distribution of wealth amongst the country. He claims that it was largely the peasantry which caused the French Revolution in 1789. Marshall B. Davidson has argued that 'if it wasn't for the third estate's resistance, the nation would still be under the yoke of despotism'.

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The historian Georges Lefebvre also argues that it was peasant grievances which caused the collapse of the ancient regime in 1789. He claims that 'against the aristocracy the peasants had far more substantial grievances than the people of the cities, and it is natural therefore that they took it upon themselves to deal the blow by which the aristocracy was laid low'. The historian Donald Sutherland agrees and states that 'in the end, therefore the vast weight of ancient peasant France imposed itself upon the government at the expense of many of the ideals of 1789'. However, despite it being argued that it was peasant grievances which drove the French Revolution of 1789 forward, the historian George Taylor urges us to see 'peasant docility’. He argues that the peasants had no role in the final stages which caused the French Revolution. It was peasant grievances which led to many turning to new ideas from philosophers during the Enlightenment.

It was the Enlightenment which bought radical new ideas to the French people. It has been argued to be the main cause of the French Revolution in 1789 and may have planted the seeds for revolution. The Enlightenment gave people ideas and showed them that it was possible to overthrow the ancient regime and change their situation. The old explanation was that the philosophers of the Enlightenment were literally to blame for the Revolution. Ideas from writers such as Montesquieu, Voltaire and Rousseau became widespread. The historian Roger Cartier claimed that 'the revolution became possible in part because it was conceivable'. Marshall B. Davidson argues that it was the philosophers which helped to precipitate the Revolution. The American Revolution also showed to the French people that it was possible to overthrow a hated regime. Conservative and pro-Catholic writer De Maistre claimed that 'there was little question but that the traumas of the revolution should be laid at the door of the meddling intellectuals and freethinkers; though these men died years before the revolution broke out, they could not escape responsibility for the impact of their words'.

The historian Daniel Mornet argued that it was the 'ideas of a very large minority, more or less enlightened'21 which caused the French Revolution in 1789. He highlighted two critical moments in the transformation of ideas; between 1748-1750, the publication of several key works including Montesquieu's Spirit of the Laws. The second moment was around 1770 when philosophers began to win acceptance for their ideas amongst the educated elite. The Enlightenment had a major impact in causing the French Revolution in 1789. It showed the French people that it was possible to change a system and caused many to revolt against the ancient regime. It inspired many to go against their King. The Enlightenment led to riots from peasants which helped to push the bourgeoisie's revolution forward.

Overall, government debt was the main consequence of the French Revolution in 1789 as it had major implications on all other areas However, it cannot be assumed that it was solely government debt which ultimately led to the causing the French Revolution in 1789. However, other factors were present which all played a role in the collapse of the ancient regime. If no other factors but government debt had been present, it has to be asked, would there have been a French Revolution in 1789?

Government debt has been argued by numerous historians to be the central cause of the Revolution in 1789. France had become bankrupt as a result of war and could no longer pay its debts. Although this is the case of many other countries during this period, France was in an extremely worsening situation. Debts from wars that were incurred during Louis XIV's reign were extremely large and impossible to pay off. Every possible financial resource was exploited by the government. The third estate was asked to pay half again on taxes which was materially impossible and ultimately led to discontent towards the ancient regime and has been considered to be the main reason for the start of the Revolution in 1789. Bad decision making from the King did not help the situation and the entry into the American War was financially a bad decision. By convoking the Assembly of Notables in 1786 he ignored vested interests leading to a hatred of the ancient regime. However, other factors are closely linked and did have a major impact and influence on the events in 1789. The unfair taxation of the peasants led to a great deal of poverty which led to famine. The bread riot in 1789 has been argued to have evolved into the central cause of the French Revolution. The great scarcity of food led to peasant grievances and when these were not addressed caused riots amongst the French people. New ideas from the Enlightenment showed to the French people that it was possible to overthrow a hated regime. The Enlightenment planted the seeds for Revolution. It was the Enlightenment which led to the educated elite playing a major role in the final stages of the Revolution. In conclusion, government debt was the main cause of the French Revolution in 1789 as this led to problems in other areas such as the unfair taxation of peasants causing peasant grievances. Ultimately if there had been no government debt, it would have been very unlikely that the French Revolution would have happened in 1789 as problems in other areas would have been unlikely to have occurred.