The ruler of France did not require an official coronation. His reign commenced the moment his predecessor passed away, and a coronation was considered only a formality. The royal court, even at the highest levels, debated whether the lavish coronation ceremony of King Louis XVI, scheduled for 11 June 1775 at the Rheims Cathedral, was merely an extravagant waste of public funds. Prior to the event, the surrounding regions of Paris and parts of the city had been struck by widespread riots protesting soaring flour and bread prices. These disturbances fueled conversations about delaying the ceremony, with the roads leading to Rheims being heavily guarded by precautionary military forces. Surprisingly, a significantly smaller crowd than anticipated traveled to the Champagne region to witness the royal spectacle. Innkeepers complained about rooms that remained empty, and caterers faced wasted provisions. But when the grand cathedral doors swung open on the fateful morning to reveal the youthful monarch, crowned in magnificence, with the scepter of Charlemagne in his hand and anointed with the holy oil of Clovis, the sight overwhelmed even the most stoic observers, causing many to weep uncontrollably.

Louis XVI, the heir to St. Louis and the Most Christian King of France and Navarre, had taken an oath to protect the peace of the Church, preserve order, ensure justice, eliminate heretics, defend the rights of the Order of the Holy Spirit, and to show no mercy to anyone who dueled. Just three days after the ceremony, in the searing summer heat, he performed the traditional “royal touch,” healing 2,400 sufferers of scrofula, a disfiguring disease believed to be cured through the miraculous touch of the anointed king. In addition to his royal duties, Louis found time to correspond with his 74-year-old chief minister, who remained at Versailles, and also to resist the efforts of the queen to promote her own favorites to positions of power. Courtly scheming did not pause simply because the king had been crowned. The various royal rituals that Louis XVI underwent that week were a curious combination of weighty and trivial, meaningful and largely ceremonial, significant yet largely meaningless. The powers he wielded, the pledges he made, the regalia he wore, all stemmed from a long and complicated evolution that few understood or could recall. This typified the kingdom that he had ruled since May 1774.

In the 1770s, the domains of the French king, excluding overseas territories in the Americas and elsewhere, covered approximately 277,200 square miles, with a population of over 27 million people. By 1789, the population would grow by an additional one million. The kingdom’s borders had expanded since the early Middle Ages through military conquest and dynastic fortunes, and by the last century of the monarchy, it continued to grow. In 1678, Louis XIV acquired Franche Comté, Louis XV inherited Lorraine in 1766, and in 1768, he annexed Corsica. However, parts of French territory, such as Avignon and its surrounding districts, still remained under papal control, and regions like Alsace contained pockets of land that were nominally controlled by German princes or an independent city-state like Mulhouse. These anomalies were not considered irregular, as they were deeply ingrained in law, custom, and international agreements. Such exceptions merely illustrated the diversity that permeated the kingdom.

The kingdom’s political divisions were structured around provinces, which had once been independent feudal territories absorbed by the kings of France. These provinces varied greatly in size: vast regions like Languedoc and Brittany coexisted with smaller, more fragmented areas like the Pyrenean county of Foix or the borderlands of Flanders. Even the precise number of provinces was ambiguous, but by 1776, 39 provinces were officially recognized. The role of provincial governors was largely honorary, as the kingdom’s administrative structure relied on 36 generalities, each overseen by an intendant. These generalities, which had been established just a century earlier, were more consistent in size than the old provinces. As a result, the boundaries of these administrative units often did not align with those of the provinces. Similar to provinces in scale were the ressorts of the parlements, the 13 sovereign appellate courts. These ressorts were the territorial jurisdictions of the parlements, but their borders often included parts of multiple provinces and generalities, giving rise to jurisdictional disputes. The Catholic Church, for its part, divided the kingdom into 18 archiepiscopal provinces and 136 dioceses, with many bishops holding authority over lands far from their own dioceses.

The French legal system was marked by a lack of uniformity across regions. Southern provinces followed Roman law, while in northern France, customary law was more prevalent, with numerous local customs in place. This created significant legal disparities in matters like marriage, inheritance, and property ownership. Different regions even employed different systems of measurement, which led to confusion and potential fraud. Similarly, taxation varied significantly across the kingdom. The northern and central regions faced heavier tax burdens than those in the south. The infamous salt tax, or gabelle, was levied at different rates depending on the region, and there were several districts exempt from certain taxes. Moreover, the kingdom was crisscrossed with internal customs barriers, where tolls and excises were collected at varying rates. For instance, goods traveling along the Saône and Rhône rivers from Franche Comté to the Mediterranean had to pass through 36 separate customs points, some public and some private.

The kingdom of France, which had originated in the fertile Paris basin, was the most prosperous and commercially advanced region in the country. The river systems of the Seine and Loire provided easy access to both domestic and international markets, and the roads leading out of Paris were some of the finest in Europe by the late 18th century. The Paris basin, with its temperate climate and fertile soil, was home to the most productive agriculture in the kingdom, feeding not only the residents of Paris but also the densely populated regions along the Channel coast. Rouen, the capital of Normandy, was a major center of the burgeoning cotton industry, earning it the nickname “the Manchester of France.” With abundant resources and a tightly controlled economy, the Paris basin was easily governed by central

authority. Literacy rates were higher there than anywhere else in France, and the inhabitants spoke a standardized version of French. However, this was not true for the more remote regions of the kingdom, where communication and cultural practices were far more diverse.