

2016

Why the French Revolution Was Not So Revolutionary: A Brief Overview

Jacob Hafer

La Salle University, haferj2@student.lasalle.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hafer, Jacob (2016) "Why the French Revolution Was Not So Revolutionary: A Brief Overview," *The Histories*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories/vol3/iss2/6

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by La Salle University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Histories by an authorized editor of La Salle University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact careyc@lasalle.edu.

Why the French Revolution Was Not So Revolutionary: A Brief Overview

By Jacob Hafer

The French Revolution is often regarded as one of the most radical upheavals in world history. It was a period of social and political unrest as the people of France struggled to transform their government from an absolute monarchy to a democracy that would represent the people. From the storming of the Bastille in 1789 to Napoleon Bonaparte's rise to power in 1799, thousands of Frenchmen died in the name of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity."¹ In modern times, we tend to think of the French Revolution as a highlight of the struggle for basic human rights and the spread of intellectual ideas throughout the world. However, the revolution was not as revolutionary as we think of it to be. The origins of the revolution were not inspired by enlightened ideas until much later on. Food shortages, economic depression, and heavy taxes on the lower class instigated the revolution.² Tens of thousands of innocent people were killed during this time of power struggle. Also, the French government actually fluctuated from having the absolutist leader, King Louis XVI, to a militaristic leader, Napoleon Bonaparte.³ The French Revolution was not groundbreaking because it did not live up to its liberal ideals as it is perceived to be.

One way why the revolution was not radical, was the false origin of the conflict where the revolution was believed to be inspired by ideas of the Enlightenment. Prior to the revolution

¹ McPhee, Peter. *The French Revolution, 1789-1799* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1.

² Jones, Colin. *Voices Of The French Revolution* (Topsfield: Salem House Publishers, 1988), 17.

³ Herold, J. Christopher, *The Horizon Book Of The Age Of Napoleon* (New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1963), 7.

in the 1790s, France was a rural society where 98 percent of the population lived off the land as farmers or craftsmen.⁴ Those who resided in urban communities were primarily the nobility and clergy of the Catholic Church. The social order of France was made up of three estates; the clergy, the nobility, and then everyone else in French society (notably peasants).⁵ This system called the Estates General gave the third estate, which were the commoners and those who were not part of the nobility nor the clergy, an unfair advantage when voting because the first and second estates, clergy and nobles respectively, could always outvote the third estate on certain legislation. During the American Revolution, King Louis XVI devoted almost 50 percent of France's national budget to funding the fight in order to diminish the power of its colonial rival: Great Britain.⁶ In 1787, France declared bankruptcy and the king was forced to raise taxes on the lower classes, but excluded the clergy and nobility from taxation. Following food shortages after a famine plagued France, the king decided to call for the Estates General and discuss how to deal with the country's financial crisis. The aristocracy and clergy refused to allow the king to tax them, and they outvoted the third estate on legislation that would favor the nobles and clergy. The third estate, furious at how unfair the Estates General is, decided to form the National Assembly that aimed to represent the people and not just the elites.⁷ The reason for a clamor for revolt against the aristocracy was due to economic depression and a broken tax system that relied heavily on the common people. Ideals of the enlightenment were not introduced until much later

⁴ Jones, Colin. *Voices Of The French Revolution*, 27.

⁵ Grab, Walter. *The French Revolution: The Beginning Of Modern Democracy* (London: Bracken Books, 1989) 33-3.

⁶ Tulard, Jean. *The French Revolution In Paris* (Paris: Paris Musees, 1989), 12.

⁷ Jones, Colin. *Voices Of The French Revolution*, 55-67.

during the climax of the conflict. Also, the French people intended to keep Louis XVI as their king rather than establishing a republic at the start of the revolution. The revolution really started off as a call for reforming the economic system of France, not a call for a full- scale radical change.

Another reason why the revolution was not radical, was the way the revolution was carried out among the French people. After King Louis XVI was guillotined by his subjects, a power struggle ensued with various political factions like the Girondins and the Cordeliers emerged as they attempt to gain control.⁸ One radical political club called the Jacobins, led by Maximillien Robespierre, sought to preserve the leftist radical ideas and spread the zeal of the revolution by hunting anyone who is considered to be a traitor to the cause. Tens of thousands of innocent French people were killed in the event known as the Reign of Terror (1793-1794).⁹ The control of the French government swayed from one radical faction to another as each group established their own policies and laws. Some outlandish policies ranged from reorganizing the calendar by renaming the days and months of the year, establishing a church called the Cult of Reason, and declaring war with powerful European nations even though France was bankrupt and its army disorganized and unfit for fighting.¹⁰ France was always in a constant state of anarchy as the government failed to maintain control and protect public safety. The revolution failed to uphold many of the enlightened ideas that it would later introduce due to its constant persecution of Frenchmen and destruction many communities. It is ironic how one movement

⁸ Grab, Walter. *The French Revolution: The Beginning Of Modern Democracy*, 137.

⁹ Jones, Colin. *Voices Of The French Revolution*, 161-166.

¹⁰ McPhee, Peter. *The French Revolution, 1789-1799*. 131-154.

appeared to promise radical hope and change, suddenly becomes “authoritative” as its radical ideas are embraced.

What is even more ironic is that the one thing that made the revolution a complete failure, is its transition from one authoritarian regime to another authoritarian regime. After the death of King Louis XVI, several European nations such as Austria, Prussia, Great Britain, and Spain were shocked to discover that the French abolished their monarchy. Fearing that similar revolutionary acts might be carried out in their own nations, the monarchs of Europe formed a coalition to attack France and contain the spread of revolutionary ideas.¹¹ The coalition of European countries suffered many defeats by a commander who would later dominate Europe in the near future: Napoleon Bonaparte. Napoleon was an ambitious leader who believed he was destined for greater things, even if it meant taking control of the French government by force.¹² In 1799 in the event known as the Coup of 18 Brumaire, Napoleon led his battalion of French soldiers in a coup against the Council of Five Hundred, which was the governing head of France at the time. Following the coup, Napoleon declared himself First Consul under a new French constitution.¹³ Napoleon was granted almost unlimited executive power, giving him the ability to govern like an absolute monarch.¹⁴ Under the new French Republic, Napoleon declared himself Emperor of France and waged war against the major powers in Europe in the series of conflicts famously known as the “Napoleonic Wars”.¹⁵ Napoleon was never democratically elected by the French people. By the end of the revolution the ideals of democracy, where a

¹¹ Jones, Colin. *Voices Of The French Revolution*, 197-199.

¹² Herold, J. Christopher. *The Horizon Book Of The Age Of Napoleon*,72.

¹³ *Ibid*, 104-112.

¹⁴ Grab, Walter. *The French Revolution: The Beginning Of Modern Democracy*, 194-197.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 200.

government is led by the people and for the people, were entirely ignored when Napoleon became head of state. Napoleon will rule like a king until his defeat in 1815 at the Battle of Waterloo.¹⁶

Despite the reasons why the revolution was not very radical, there is the argument that revolution did inspire enlightened ideas. For example in 1793, the National Assembly wrote the “Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizens” which abolished the feudal system and made all men equal, despite socioeconomic backgrounds.¹⁷ Even though this document is a sign of influence of the enlightenment, it is not proof that enlightened ideas were the main cause that started the French Revolution. Food shortages, economic depression, and unfair treatment of the common people by the aristocracy and clergy instigated the revolution. There is also the argument that any revolution is subject to violence, such as the American Revolution and even the Russian Revolution one hundred years later. While it is true that a conflict during the French Revolution would be necessary, it was a conflict along with the persecution of thousands of innocent people in France. The French government killed anyone who was even suspected of being an enemy to the revolution, and many were put to death without a trial to prove their innocence.¹⁸ These massacres were called the “Reign of Terror” because the people were terrorized by radical leftists trying to seek control and solidify their power.

The legacy of the French Revolution should be remembered as a conflict where the ideologies of freedom and equality failed to become a reality. In very few ways has the revolution actually introduced enlightened ideas, but in many more ways it had become a chaotic disaster. The causes of the revolution were not based on ideas from the Age of Reason until the

¹⁶ Herold, J. Christopher. *The Horizon Book Of The Age Of Napoleon*, 350.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 59.

¹⁸ Jones, Colin. *Voices Of The French Revolution*, 159.

height of the revolution. Also, in no way is it revolutionary for tens of thousands of innocent Frenchmen be slaughtered like animals in the name of “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity”. The results of this bloody conflict reverted right back to another authoritarian regime under Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, who would dictate France until his abdication in 1815. With these reasons in mind, we should take time to learn from the mistakes of the French Revolution and not aspire to emulate it for future political movements.

Bibliography

Grab, Walter. *The French Revolution: The Beginning Of Modern Democracy*. London: Bracken Books, 1989.

Herold, J. Christopher. *The Horizon Book Of The Age Of Napoleon*. New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1963.

Jones, Colin. *Voices Of The French Revolution*. Topsfield: Salem House Publishers, 1988.

McPhee, Peter. *The French Revolution, 1789-1799*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002

Tulard, Jean. *The French Revolution In Paris*. Paris: Paris Musees, 1989.