

The French Revolution

Part 1

Explain the causes of the French revolution.

The French revolution, in many ways, was a turning point in history. Although it is such a complex episode, this paper seeks to explain the causes of the French revolution, and show how those causes led directly to the ascent of the Moderate Revolution, the Terror and finally to the epoch of the Napoleonic empire.

The main causes of the Revolution have always been a controversial debate among historians, however this paper proposes that the French Revolution was caused by, in order of precedence, a combination of a rise in population leading to famine and failure of infrastructure, oppression of the Third Estate (Lower class and bourgeoisie), a rise in Enlightenment ideals (supported somewhat by evidence), an absolute monarchy with a weak monarch, financial difficulties on all social planes and an introduction to revolutionary ideals from the American revolution.

“A leading cause of social stress in France...was its large population.”¹ From the 1500s to the 1800, population increase was very minor. In the early 1800s, France (Video watched in class) had a population of 20 million people, but with the decline of disease, this increased by 8 to 10 million people. Infrastructure that had held for hundreds of years simply began to collapse under the population increases. Prisons were overflowing, and the state could not cope.

Furthermore, in the years leading up to the revolution, a famine struck France. As bread was the staple in Revolutionary France, increases in the price of flour were felt very quickly among citizens and “were loudly protested at grain markets and baker’s shops”². However, it was the government who tried to fix the food crisis, so the price and availability of bread became linked to the effectiveness of government, and the

¹ George Mason University. (nd). *Social Causes of the Revolution (page 1)*. Retrieved July 27, 2009, from <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/chap1a.html>

² George Mason University. (nd). *Social Causes of the Revolution (page 2)*. Retrieved July 27, 2009, from <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/chap1b.html>

focus of blame among the people shifted to the government, setting up the tensions that would make the revolution.

The oppression of the third estate in the Estates General had also been a major cause for the revolution. The Estates-General was where the Aristocracy (first estate), Clergy (second estate) and lower class and bourgeoisie (third estate) met. Here, workers and bourgeoisie could present their grievances. Although the third estate made up approximately 97% of the population, they only owned 55% of the land and precisely a third of the political power. In practice, this meant that if the clergy and the nobility (the first and second estates, together approximately 3% of the population), could outvote the third estate, especially as the clergy and the nobility tended to have similar interests. A practical consequence of this is that the third estate paid virtually all the taxes, and that the Third Estate was greatly undermined. This is well expressed in a pamphlet by Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyes:

“WHAT IS THE THIRD ESTATE? EVERYTHING, BUT AN EVERYTHING SHACKLED AND OPPRESSED.

WHAT HAS IT BEEN UNTIL NOW IN THE POLITICAL ORDER? NOTHING

WHAT WOULD IT BE WITHOUT THE PRIVILEGED ORDER? EVERYTHING, BUT AN EVERYTHING FREE AND FLOURISHING. NOTHING CAN SUCCEED WITHOUT IT, EVERYTHING WOULD BE INFINITELY BETTER WITHOUT THE OTHERS

WHAT DOES IT WANT TO BE? SOMETHING...”³

Another social problem that led to the French revolution was the unpopular Louis XIV and his wife Marie Antoinette. The France of 1789 and before was an absolute monarchy, with a weak monarch. Indecisive, young and inexperienced, when faced with the social crises such as the famine and the overflowing prisons he misjudged greatly. “Under Louis Xiv flaws in theory of absolutism had been apparent: now they became obvious: the misuse of power, kings who couldn’t rule”. Also, Louis XIV had a condition that made having a male heir impossible that was left untreated until well into his marriage with Marie Antoinette, making both people seem useless to the French people, who were already of the opinion that court life was devouring the economy. As Maximilien Robespierre, spokesperson for the Third Estate said, “Every day of

³ Age of the Sage. (n.d.). *Abbe Sieyes: What is the Third Estate*. Retrieved July 27, 2009, from http://www.age-of-the-sage.org/historical/biography/Abbe_Sieyes.html

your existence devours the substance of a thousand men”⁴. A weak monarch was among the major causes of the French Revolution.

The rise of Enlightenment ideals was also a major cause of the revolution; indeed, the revolution was founded on those ideals. Holders of the Enlightenment ideals believed in science, not religion. “This encouraged people to participate in government and to rethink old ideas like feudalism and primogeniture.”⁵ The American Revolution was seen as a massive victory for the “prophets of the Enlightenment”⁶, as it showed that a constitution could work without the support of a monarchy. The people were frustrated by the disproportionately large power and wealth of the First and Second estates, and the fact that it was nigh on impossible to gain access to them.

And finally, the financial difficulties were a major cause of the revolution. In effect, France had paid for the American revolution, had spent a huge amount of money on several wars in the past century and by 1789, the government was bankrupt. Due to the unfair tax system, the third estate effectively paid for the first and second estate’s mismanagement. Prices of bread went sky high. The people starved. The people rioted. The revolution had begun.

⁴ Shultz, D. (Director). (2005). *The French Revolution* [Motion picture].

⁵ Dowling, Mike., "The Electronic Passport to the Enlightenment and the French Revolution," available from <http://www.mrdowling.com/705french.html>; Internet; updated Wednesday, May 1, 2002

⁶ Kramnick , I. (2009). *Thematic Essay: Political and Social Thought of the Enlightenment*. Retrieved July 27, 2009, from http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_461511152/Thematic_Essay_Political_and_Social_Thought_of_the_Enlightenment.htm

The French Revolution

Part 2

It is a general consensus among historians that the French Revolution began on 14 July 1789, with the storming of the Bastille, political prison and a hated symbol of royal authority over the people.

Later in the year, sporadic riots called the Great Fear culminate into the August decrees, which surrendered feudal rights, and later the declaration of the Rights of Man, which proposes equality of all human beings.

Towards the end of 1789, prices were rising. The Parisian fishwives marched to the Versailles, and stormed the Palace looking to kill the royals. Their attempt is unsuccessful, but Louis and the National Assembly agree to move to Paris, from their secluded paradise of Versailles.

The continuities from before the revolution to the end of 1789 are that the monarchy still has some power; religion is still accepted but still no constitution. However, there was movement to a constitutional monarchy. The changes are that the Third Estate gains huge power, the focus of the Revolution shifts towards violence, equality is affirmed for all Citizens, and the Monarchy is now in Paris.

In early 1790, the first major suppression of religion in the revolution begins. On July 12, the National Assembly passed a law making the church subject to the State (the Civil Constitution of the Clergy). In kind, Pope Pius condemns this and the Declaration of the Rights of Man in a papal bull. Furthermore, on May 19, the Nobility was abolished by the National Assembly, leaving only the Third estate and clergy who have sworn loyalty to the Third Estate. It is also important to note that the radical Jacobin club is gaining power.

Little change happened in the start of 1791, until Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI are arrested when attempting to flee to Australia. In September, Louis had lost so much power that he was forced to accept the Constitution formally. The national assembly was dissolved, under the Tennis Court Oath.

So, the continuities from the start of 1790 to the end of 1791 are that religion is still acceptable, and the changes are that the Monarchy is deposed, the National Assembly is dissolved, the Third Estate gains more power, religion is now controlled by the state, the Jacobins are gaining power, and there is now a constitution and a constitutional monarchy.

In 1792-3, France declared war on many European powers such as Austria and Britain, and the guillotine was first used. King Louis was tried before the National Convention, and was guillotined in early 1793. The governing body was changed to the Legislative Assembly, and this was essentially controlled by the Jacobins. The Constitution was suspended “until the peace”. Girondins (moderate revolutionaries) were arrested and killed by Jacobins, and now that the common enemy, namely Louis was dead, the revolution turned on itself. The National Guard grew with the establishment of sans-culottes (lower working class) military forces. A new calendar was introduced to sever ties with the Pope. With the much larger concentration of Jacobins in the Legislative Assembly and the displacement of the King came a new form of government – a Republic, which theoretically would be implemented with an extreme form of The Terror. There was much public opposition to the idea, specifically the Vendee counter-revolution.

So, the continuity from start of 1792 to the end of 1793 is that there is still equality among all citizens. The changes are that there is a new governing body (the legislative assembly), the Theory of Republic is beginning to be implemented, and the constitution is suspended.

In the years 1794-5, the Vendee counter-revolution was pacified by the Republic, by mercilessly burning the entire town. A new governing body, the National Convention, was created. Danton, President of the Committee of Public Safety (most important Jacobins) and ex-treasurer of the National Assembly, is executed by paranoid members of the Jacobin club. The remaining members, led by Robespierre, establish the “the Cult of the Supreme Being”, a religion where reason was god. He then, on a holiday called “the Festival of the Supreme being”, paper-mache mountain in the centre of the city, and placed himself at the top next to his god, showing his transcendal arrogance. He had time to pass one more law, to make his court for trial of traitors lawful without witnesses. This, together with the episode on the Festival of the

Supreme being, was the last straw for the French people. Fearing that Robespierre and his coterie were power-mad, and indeed they may have been, he was guillotined without trial by the citizens of Paris, along with the rest of the so called “Committee of Public Safety.”

The continuities from the Ancien Regime to the end of The Terror are that religion (of a sort) is re-established, the poor remained poor, a constitution is not in effect and that France went full circle from a monarchy of sorts to a republic and later to an empire under Bonaparte. The changes are that equality was affirmed, France was still at war with much of Europe, and the tax system became fairer.

With the death of most key revolutionaries, the Executive Directory (1796-99), led by Napoleon Bonaparte as first consul, had many major victories against other empires. Not much political reform was made except for the normalisation of the revolution at the beginning of the Directory’s term and numerous alliances made with other European empires. Then, in 1799, Napoleon pulled a coup on the Directory, and created the Consulate (1799-04). In his role as the First Consul, he further moderated France, and remade ties with the Pope. Finally, in 1804, “he did away with the niceties and renamed himself what he really had been for some time: the French Emperor”⁷. Truly, the only changes to the previous paragraph could be that Bonaparte created many alliances with Europe, and he relegalised Christianity.

In conclusion, the revolutionaries started off with grand ideas, but it quickly degenerated into anarchy. Stability was only really restored with Napoleon: France started off with a king, and ended up with an emperor. The more things changed, the more things stayed the same.

⁷ *Napoleonic Europe, 1799-1815* (n.d.). Retrieved July 27, 2009, from <http://www.sparknotes.com/history/european/napoleonic/section1.html>

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