

The French Revolution

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“Revolutions are the locomotives of history” -Karl Marx

1. France Before the Revolution

In 1788, France was in a state of destitution. The Seven Year War (1756-63) with England absorbed most of the treasury and caused substantial debts; France lost its North American colonies. The harvest of 1788 was decimated by hailstorms and droughts (Sargent and Velde 474-518). The French-British free trade agreement ruined domestic productions of silks and cotton. Day laborers, urban tradesmen and artisans were required to own permits, which were quite costly. The sale of titles and government posts assembled politically unable and corrupt individuals around the crown. The clergy (0.5% of the population, controlled 8-10% percent of private land, also known as the First Estate) and nobility (1.6% percent of the population, controlled 20-30 % of the land, the Second Estate) lived in opulence and wealth and were exempt from taxation.

Advisors who suggested to tax the Second and First Estates in order to help solve financial problems were promptly dismissed by the King, who opted to further tax the peasants and middle class (Third Estate) unequally in different parts of the country, obstructing fair trade. According to Jean Jaures, French socialist, “There was not one action in rural life that did not require the peasants to pay a ransom... Feudal rights thus extended their clutches over every force of nature, everything that grew, moved, breathed... even over the fire burning in the oven to bake the peasant’s poor bread.”

On May 5, 1789 Louis made another political move; the Estates-General, a representation of the population, last called for in 1614 was convened in order to discuss the country’s penury. The outdated rules (each estate carries a single vote) brought to open feuds over the justice of such a system. Having the advantage of majority, the Third Estate’s representatives declared

themselves the National Assembly and successfully appealed to the King for a voting advantage. Many members of the clergy and nobility switched allegiances and joined the majority, thus insuring their future benefits. Shortly after, the National Assembly swore the Tennis Court oath: to work on bringing France to accept a constitution.

3.The Beginning of the Revolution

On July 14, 1789, feudal lords demanded dues from the penniless peasants. Rumors of soldiers being sent to disband the National Assembly spread like wildfire. The mob recruited some members of the French Guard (Schama 331) and the Bastille was stormed, seven prisoners released; weapons and gunpowder triumphantly seized. The event is remarkably presented in *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens,

"Cannon, muskets, fire and smoke; but, still the deep ditch, the single drawbridge, the massive stone walls, and the eight great towers. Slight displacements of the raging sea, made by the falling wounded. Flashing weapons, blazing torches, smoking waggonloads of wet straw, hard work at neighbouring barricades in all directions, shrieks, volleys, execrations, bravery without stint, boom smash and rattle, and the furious sounding of the living sea; but, still the deep ditch, and the single drawbridge, and the massive stone walls, and the eight great towers..." (188)

A flag of truce did not save the governor nor his three men. They were executed and former's head paraded around on a pike. Returning to the city hall, the mob assailed the mayor, accusing him of "treason" (Schama 334). This bloody triumph of the mob was the foreshadowing of the countless victories and tragedies to follow, marking the beginning of the Revolution.

Attacks on nobles and clergy continued until the August Decrees (August 4th, 1789) and the Declarations of the Rights of Man (August 26th, 1789) which freed peasants of serfdom. The National Assembly drafted a constitution, but the relative peace was short-lived. A rift grew between the radical (Montagnard, consisting of the Jacobin and Cordeliers clubs) and moderate (Girondin) factions, which was widened when Louis XVI was caught in a failed escape plot. The royal family disguised themselves as servants and their servants as nobles, but Louis was recognized, captured, and imprisoned. The Girondins were in favor of keeping the constitutional monarchy, prevailed, and the King was forced to sign the constitution.

Neighboring countries demanded Louis XVI be returned to the throne, issuing the Declaration of Pillnitz. Seeing this as an intrusion, the National Assembly declared war on Prussia and Austria on April 20, 1792, but the venture was unsuccessful. As Francis Charles Montague concluded, "In the attempt to govern, the Assembly failed altogether. It left behind an empty treasury, an undisciplined army and navy, and a people debauched by safe and successful riot." (158).

Soon a party of enraged citizens, spurred on by the extremely radical and vulgar publication *Le Pere Duchesne* by Jaques Hebert and other passionate articles by Jean-Paul Marat, (which blamed the King for the Assembly's failures) took matters into its own hands. At dawn on August 10, 1792, an angry crowd marched on the Tuilleries Palace and after a battle the King was arrested once more. In January of 1793 Louis was accused of "political treason," by D. V. Ramel-Nogaret and publicly executed to chants of "Vive la Republique!" France was declared a Republic. However, the triumph over the execution was short lived as famine was sweeping the country.

4.The Jacobin Club Gains Control of the Parliament

Manipulating the powers of the angry and hungry mob, the Jacobins overthrew the Girondins and gained control over the Parliament. The newly formed Committee of Public Safety tried to stabilize the economy but failed with unsuccessful and unpopular food rationing. (Schuettinger 45). The Incorruptible (a nick-name for Robespierre), lawyer and public activist who spoke against brutality, the death penalty and slavery, was becoming alarmingly dictator-like in his efforts to eradicate counterrevolutionaries, on September 9, 1793 embarking on the Reign of Terror.

“Each day was marked by bloody expeditions which cannot but horrify every decent soul, and seem justifiable only in the light of philosophy... It was said openly that it was essential for peace that not a single republican was to be left alive in France... It was sufficient to have attended at a mass said by one of the constitutional clergy, to be imprisoned and then murdered or shot, under the pretext that the prisons were too full,” wrote Francois Chevalier, French historian (1914-2012). At least 300,000 suspects were arrested; 17,000 were officially executed and perhaps 10,000 died in prisons or without a trial in a period of less than nine months.) The Girondins were also promptly executed. Robespierre meanwhile did not seem to want to back off from his violent tendencies, “The terror is nothing but justice, prompt, severe, inflexible; it is thus an emanation of virtue; it is less a distinct principle than a natural consequence of the general principle of democracy, applied to the most pressing wants of the country.” This standpoint was well received by the bloodthirsty mob which gleefully applied the lyrics of the La Carmagnole (the composer and date of creation is not known but it is suspected to be sometimes around late August of 1789) as a punishment for condemned prisoners; the latter had to sing and dance the tune before their execution. (Gilchrist and Murray 312-323)

“Madam Veto [the queen] had promised

To cut everyone’s throat in Paris.

But she failed to do this

Thanks to our gunners

Let us dance the Carmagnole

Long live the sound of the cannons....

Go Louis, big crybaby,

from the Temple into the tower!”

The up-beat song contained simple lyrics that illiterate people could easily learn and understand, and therefore participate in singing.

5. End of the Terror

The excessive bloodshed created money-making opportunities for all layers of society, merchant to congress member. In spite of a prohibition on pillaging, bribery, etc., individuals covertly and successfully gained wealth. Nevertheless, Robespierre looked through his fingers at doings of some of his friends such as Joseph Fouché, a radical Jacobian, who fought luxury and wealth, wanted to abolish the use of currency, and turn churches into the Cathedrals of Reason. Due to his revolutionary enthusiasm, Fouché gained the nick-name of “French Musketeer” for a mass-murder at Leon, proclaiming, “The blood of criminals fertilizes the soil of liberty and establishes power on sure foundations.” Fouché’s personal foundation became shaky when his carriage returning from Leon to Paris overturned. Out rolled open trunks, displaying stolen wealth and gold plates. The party member was arrested, but released with a very strict warning. Fearing for his safety, Fouché began to organize a group of revolutionists, most caught in acts of

bribery, against Robespierre. They spread rumors of the existence of a list of names of to-be-executed. In his memoirs Fouché wrote:

“Being recalled to Paris, I dared to call upon [Robespierre] from the tribune, to make good his accusation. He caused me to be expelled from the Jacobins, of whom he was the high-priest; this was for me equivalent to a decree of proscription. I did not trifle in contending for my head, nor in long and secret deliberations with such of my colleagues as were threatened with my own fate. I merely said to them... 'You are on the list, you are on the list as well as myself; I am certain of it!'

On July 6, 1794, Robespierre delivered his last speech where he named three who abused revolutionary ideals in order to destroy the nation and hinted at countless others. This obviously displeased the already revolting members of the Convention and in two days the orator was arrested (McPhee 219). His attempted protests were quieted by a gunshot into his jawbone from former Tuilleries guard Charles-Andre-Medra (Scurr 354). Another conflicting version states he attempted to shoot himself in desperation and Medra tried to stop him (McPhee 219). (The former being the version Medra had presented to the Convention and earned awards for). On July 28, 1794, Robspierre was executed without a trial marking the end of the Terror and the Revolution.

The successive regime (the Thermidoreans and the Directory) were not interested in democracy but were focused on keeping the middle classes in power. The new Constitution of 1795 reinstated a franchise restricted to men with property. Order was restored with the seizure of power by Napoleon.

6.Causes of the Revolution

“In politics, nothing happens by accident. If it happens, you can bet it was planned that way.” -Theodore Roosevelt. Examining the pattern of the French revolution, one can see how it differs from the previous spontaneous revolts of the lower classes; they were short lived and rarely led to extensive genocide of the native population, destruction of religious and cultural institutes and mass murder scientists, philosophers, and writers. The latter pursues a narrow target and once it is achieved or suppressed it calms down.

We can thus conclude that the French revolution was not a spontaneous or random event but carefully prepared by the educated, fairly wealthy middle class (mostly notable people of the law) and the representatives of the Third Estate of the National Convention. The bourgeoisie emerged in the beginning of the 18th century, building financial strength through trade or manufacture of goods. Select aristocrats such as Duke of Orleans (the time the wealthiest prince in France) who was said to have instigated and funded political unrest; or the scandalous and perverted Mirabeau, later a co-author of the Declaration of Rights of Man also played a major role. The king's power limited the capabilities of untitled people of wealth as well as peasants, however the latter lacked the resources and education, and the former had plenty of both.

The angered and starving people were thus lured into revolt by naturally talented orators and nit-picked or manufactured rumors (such as the fact that Bastille was cruelly incarcerating innocent people while it only housed seven; some petty criminals, debtors and a wealthy lord imprisoned by his own family for lewd behavior). The media highlighted and ridiculed the King's misdeeds and political mistakes in the desperate measures to restore peace.

In fact, according to John Robison, (professor of Natural Philosophy at Edinburgh University) the revolutionary situation was enhanced by individuals such as the Duke of Orleans,

“The Duke of Orleans acknowledged, before his death, that he had expended above L. 50,000 Sterling in corrupting the *Gardes Françaises*. The armed mob which came from Paris to Versailles on the 5th of October, importuning the King for bread, had their pockets filled with crown-pieces; and Orleans was seen on that day by two gentlemen, with a bag of money so heavy that it was fastened to his clothes with a strap, to hinder it from being oppressive, and to keep it in such a position that it should be accessible in an instant....(218)

The artificial inflation was created by printing an extraordinary amount of paper money, completely destabilizing the economy, and provoked a revolt.

It is worth noting that in provinces where the National Convention had less authority the uprisings were much less in number and weaker in force. In fact, the most bloodshed and “patriotic” acts were committed in Paris, where 80% of civilians were literate and were thus easily influenced by the press.

9. Triumph or Tragedy?

Francois Furet, French historian (1927-1997) argued that after the revolution, “Nothing resembled French society under Louis XVI more than under Louis Philippe.” The essentials of life remained the same: inferior status of women, patterns of work, and position of the poor. “Paris soon wakes up, rubs its eyes, says, “How stupid I am!” and laughs in the face of the human race,” (Hugo 82). The people hailed the seizure of power by Napoleon and the monarchy. Rural economy did not suffer great changes except in places where agriculture was more market oriented (such as winegrowing). Most people worked in 1799 as they did in 1789. Only 5% of the executed during the Terror were aristocrats according Pauget de Saint Andre. The unexecuted revolutionaries gained office with the new government; Fouché became the Minister of the

Police and D. V Ramel the Minister of Finance. The daily life before and after 1789 was basic survival. The bloodshed was both unnecessary and tragic. However, “The most revolutionary transformation ... was the transition from subject to citizen,” (McPhee 202). The event was a radical change in the way people viewed positions of power; the social classes were mixed together and out came a new sense of national identity. With the La Marseille, citizens - not subjects - were urged to take up arms.

“ Arise children of the Fatherland

The day of Glory has arrived

Against us tyranny’s bloody standard is raised...

March! March!”

The French Revolution was a grand and bloody event full of triumphs and tragedies for everyone, inspired by ideas of Enlightenment thinkers, implemented by Middle Class politicians and executed with the efforts of the mob, becoming a turning point of history and society at large.



Fig 1. The Hydra of Aristocracy, Color engraving: author unknown, 1780.

www.mtholyoke.edu/courses/rschwartz/hist151/French%20Revolution%20II/album/slides/aristoc

[ratic%20hydra.html.Acesed](#) March 7, 2019.



Fouche's Carrige Overturns: author unknown. "Как предательство погубило французскую революцию [How the Treachery Killed French Revolution]" *Вокруг Света [Around the World]* June, 14, 2014.

90. 1-25

MARCHE DES MARSEILLOIS.

Allez, enfans de la Patrie le jour de Gloire est arrivé. Contre nous de la tyrannie, l'Enten-

dart Sanglant est levé l'entendart sanglant est levé entendez vous dans les campagnes mu gir ces féroces Sol-

dat, il vient jusques dans vos bras; égorger vos fils, vos compagnes, aux armes Citoyens

La General

fermez vos bataillons

Choeur

Marchez Marchez qu'un Sang im - pur a breuve nos Sillons. Mar -

chons Mar - chons Qu'un Sang impur a breuve nos Sil - lons.

2

Que veut cette horde défilaves,
De traitres de rois conjures,
Pour qui ces igno les entraves,
Ces fers des long tems prepares:
Français pour nous ah, quel outrage
Quels transports il doit exciter
C'est nous qu'on ose méditer
De rendre à l'autique esclavage.
Aux Armes, &c.

3

Quoi! des cohortes ébrançerés
Feroient la loi dans nos foyers,
Quoi! ces phalanges mercenaires
Terrasseroient nos fiers guerriers:
Grand Dieu par des mains enchainées
Nos fronts sous le joug se pleroient
De vils despotes devien droient
Les maîtres de nos destinées.
Aux Armes &c.

4

Tremblez, tyrans, et vous perfides:
L'opprobre de tous les partis
Tremblez, vos projets parricides
Vont en fin recevoir leur prix:
Tous est soldats pour vous combattre
S'ils tombent vos jeunes héros,
La terre en produit de nouveaux
Contre vous tous prêts à se battre.
Aux Armes, &c.

5

Français en guerriers magnanimes
Portez ou retenez vos coups,
Épargnez ces trilles victimes
A regret s'armant contre nous
Mais ces despotes fanguinaire
Mais les complices de bouillé
Tous ces tigres qui sans pitié
Déclarent le sein de leur mere.
Aux Armes &c.

6

Amour sacré de la Patrie
Conduis soutiens nos bras vengeurs,
Liberte, Liberte chérie
Combats avec tes défenseurs:
Sous nos drapeaux que la victoire
Accoure à tes mâles accents
Que tes ennemis expirans
Voient ton triomphe et notre gloire.
Aux Armes, &c.

Fig 3. The Lyrics and Notes of Le Marseillaise: Carr, Benjamin "French Revolutionary Song form Federal Philadelphia. www.common-place-archives.org/vol-13/no-02/gray/. Accessed March 6, 2019



Fig. 4. The First and Second Estates Ride on the Back of the Third Estate, color engraving, 1789, author unknown. salemcc.instructure.com/courses/451/pages/the-first-and-second-estate-nobles-and-clergy-ride-on-the-back-of-the-third-the-peasants. Accessed March 10, 2019.

Primary Sources

“An Account of the Arrest of Robespierre (1794)”. Accessed March 7, 2019.

alphahistory.com/frenchrevolution/account-arrest-of-robespierre-1794/.

Originally printed in a pamphlet, this document described Robespierre’s arrest and injuries, providing me with information on the aforementioned topic.

Auguste, Louis, “The King’s Degree Convoking the Estate’s General” Alpha History. Accessed March 5, 2019, alphahistory.com/frenchrevolution/convocation-estates-general-1788/.

A decree issued Louis XVI presented at the Versailles on August 8, 1788 on the Convention of the Estate’s General

La Fayette, Marie-Joseph, et al. “The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen” . Accessed March 5, 2019. www.hrcr.org/docs/frenchdec.html.

The source gave me valuable information on the republic the revolutionaries wanted to create.

Robespierre, Maximilien. “Justification of the Use of Terror”. Accessed March 5, 2019.

www.historywiz.com/primarysources/justificationterror.htm.

A document looking at the use of terror as a means of fair rule. The source helped me understand the motivations behind the Terror and if it was justified in the end.

Turgot, Anne-Robert, “Turgot on the National Finances (1774)” Alpha History. Accessed March 7, 2019, alphahistory.com/frenchrevolution/turgot-national-finances-1774/.

A letter from Louis XVI’s Comptroller-General of Finances regarding the actions needed to be taken to alleviate the national debt. It provided me with information of the financial state of the country before the Revolution.

Secondary Sources

Andress, David, *The Terror: The Merciless War for Freedom in Revolutionary France*. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005.

An overview of the events after the flight of the king and before the execution of Robespierre.

This source provided me with important and interesting accounts on the aforementioned events, helping me further understand the nature of the Terror.

Gilchrist J., and Murray, F.W. *The Press in the French Revolution* New York, St. Martin's Press, 1971

This source examines the role of the print media during the course of the Revolution, providing analysis and citations from newspapers of the time. It helped me understand the importance of the spread of information through written sources.

Hugo, Victor *Le Miserables*. London, Hurst and Blackett, 1862.

A work of historical fiction examining the aftermath of the French Revolution. Though it mostly focuses on the June Rebellions which followed after Napoleon Bonaparte's rule, it was a gripping tale that provided me with insight on the changes wrought in society after the events of 1789 to 1794.

Jaurès, Jean, *A Socialist History of the French Revolution*. Translated and abridged by Abidor, Mitchell, Pluto Press, April, 2015.

A condensed version of the original four volumes, this book explores the events of the French Revolution and how set roots to global change. It helped me understand details on the roles of the working and middle classes.

McPhee, Peter, *Living the French Revolution*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

A volume examining the life of France's people during the Revolution. This source helped me understand the impact of the event on the citizens living outside of Paris or other major cities.

McPhee, Peter, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life*. Yale University Press, 2012.

A biography of one of the leaders of the Revolution. The source helped me understand the various viewpoints on Robespierre's actions, also providing insight into his ulterior motives.

Montague, Francis Charles, "French Revolution, The", In *Chisholm, Hugh. Encyclopædia Britannica. 11th ed, Cambridge University Press.*

Provided me with general information on the Revolution, including the rule of the Assembly.

Pernoud Georges and Flaissier, Sabine, *The French Revolution*, translated by Richard Graves, New York, Capricorn Books, 1960.

This work contains a number of primary sources including eyewitness accounts and letters. It allowed me a closer look at the Revolution and provided me with a number of reference material.

Pouget de Saint-Andre, Henri. *Les Auteurs Cachés de la Révolution Française : D'après des Documents Inédits. [The Hidden Authors of the French Revolution: From the Untold Documents]*, Paris, Perrin 1923T

The book examines the influences of external forces on the French Revolution, providing me with additional information.

Robinson, John, *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against all the Religions and Governments in Europe Carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies, Collected From Good Authorities*. Fourth ed, New York, George Foreman.

This work examines the possible influences of secret societies and corrupt individuals on the Revolution, helping me gain a broader understanding of the subject matter.

Sargent, Thomas, and Francois R. Velde. "Macroeconomic Features of the French Revolution" *Journal of Political Economy*. Vol. 102, No. 3, June, 1995, pp. 474-518

This article provides a description of the French Revolution from a macroeconomic perspective.

It contains interesting theories on government budget and finance constraints, providing me with helpful information on the financial state of the country before, during, and after the Revolution.

Schuettinger, Robert. *Forty Centuries of Wage and Price Controls: How Not to Fight Inflation*. Heritage Foundation, 2009.

This work offers insight into France's financial problems, helping me understand them to greater detail.

Sidorkin, Pavel. "Как предательство погубило французскую революцию [How the Treachery Killed French Revolution]" *Вокруг Света [Around the World]* June, 14, 2014.

www.vokrugsveta.ru/article/207415/. Accessed March 14, 2019.

This source covers the relationship between Robespierre and Fouche, providing me with information about the corrupt activity occurring during the Terror.