Causes Of French Revolution Essay, Research Paper

The French Revolution happened in France around the period 1789-92 (although these dates are disputed by historians), and resulted in the overthrow of the French monarchy and the Ancien R?gime (the system of government). The monarchy in France had been established for many centuries, and the causes of the Revolution were deeply-rooted, including the problems with the Ancien R?gime, the growth of nationalism, the influence of philosophers, and the example of the American Revolution. In the short term, there were other factors that precipitated the French Revolution, and these included the character of Louis XVI (the reigning French monarch at the time), the Bankruptcy of the French Crown, and, in the very short term, the economic and agricultural problems of 1788 and 1789.

Of all the long term causes of the French Revolution, the Ancien R?gime was perhaps the most deeply-rooted. The Ancien R?gime was the old system of government, the old order of things, before the Revolution, and it divided French society up into three “estates”: the nobles, the clergy, and the common people (ie. everyone else, which included both peasants and the middle classes). The first and second estates were privileged in that they paid no tax at all, and for this reason, the monarch did not have a problem with their support: they were, in effect, propping up the Ancien R?gime. The first and second estates also owned the larger proportion of land: although there were only 300 000 of them out of a total population of 25 million, they owned three fifths of the land in France.

The excesses of the French Crown meant that the third estate was being crushed by the financial burden. They were taxed in almost every conceivable way, from a vingti?me tax, to a capitation tax, to customs taxes. The punishments for tax offences were high. The high taxation and bad conditions of peasants gave them the incentive to do away with the Ancien R?gime.

The middle classes of the time found perhaps more grievances with the Ancien R?gime than the peasants. The middle classes resented being lumped in the third estate with the peasants, and resented being excluded from positions of office, such as in the army, navy and diplomatic services. They were unable to openly criticise the government without risking harsh punishment; they lacked religious freedom; they wanted lower taxes for Free Trade.

In addition to this, the monarch exercised complete power in France; France was an autocracy. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the will of the sovereign was law (“The thing is legal because I wish it” – Louis XVI). Critics of the government could be arrested via a royal writ (a lettre de cachet) without trial. Earlier on, the French provinces (?tats) were each represented by their own parlement, but these had declined by the 18th century. The States-General (which bore a closer resemblance to England’s parliament) had not been called since 1614. Lastly, the parlement of Paris, which registered the King’s edicts, was the only body left that could have opposed the King, but by the 19th century had no real power to reject the edicts.

The upshot of this was that there no formal opposition to the government, and the masses had no say in government. The monarchy had the power to grossly misgovern the country; one of the causes of the Revolution.

England’s monarchy was different to the French monarchy in this respect; it was a constitutional monarchy, and so England’s monarch was limited in his powers by a constitution, and by parliament, and was effectively only a figurehead. This was the sort of government the French middle classes were looking towards: they did not want to abolish the monarchy, they merely wanted to limit his powers and have a say in government.

More inspirational to the French, though, was the American Revolution. At the time of the French Revolution, the American War of Independence had happened only recently, with the Declaration of Independence happening in 1776. America had become a democratic republic after a war sparked off by unfair taxation (in a similar way to how the French third estate was overtaxed). During the Seven Years War (1756-63), in which France helped Britain fight against America, many ideas key to the US Constitution were brought home by French soldiers fighting in the war. The French were inspired when they saw the American ideals working so well.

The US Constitution had also, in turn, been influenced greatly by various philosophers in France who were critical of the Ancien R?gime, and included their ideas. These philosophers included Voltaire (1694-1778), who was critical of existing institutions in France, especially the Church (“If God did not exist, you would have to invent him”), and attacked religious persecution, unfair taxes, and torture (all things forbidden by the US Constitution, and the later French “declaration of the rights of man and the citizen”). Montesquieu (1689-1755) suggested that the English constitution was suitable for France, and advocated checks and balances in government (with separate legislature, judiciary and executive; an idea again implemented in the US Constitution). Rousseau’s (1712-1778) “Social Contract” put forward the case for direct democracy (as opposed to representational democracy), and, although this idea was never realised in France or America as it was more radical than Montesquieu’s ideas, the spirit of democracy inspired the French revolutionary leaders. Lastly, a group called the Encyclop?dists (a key figure of which was Diderot) attacked the Church and State, and aimed to compile an encyclop?pedia critical of the government. The French philosophers not only inspired the middle class revolutionaries at the time of the French Revolution, but they established the ideas behind the US Constitution, which the French middle classes saw worked so well.

Another long term cause was the growth in nationalism that had occurred as a result of the Enlightenment (nationalism being, in this case, a belief that the nation should be the focus of the state, rather than any mutated 20th century meanings of the word). Central to the Enlightenment was reason: it encouraged criticism, and freedom of thought, speech and religion, and was seen as the end of man’s self-imposed irrationality at the hands of the Church in particular. However, once religion was discredited, and the notion of the “divinely-appointed” monarch discredited with it, people became increasingly dissatisfied with the government, which before was held in place by its association with God. Nationalism had existed previously to the Enlightenment, but before it had been tied in with religion and the monarch; now people wanted to cut it free from those discredited notions, and this resulted in a much more powerful fanaticism, one that was revolutionary rather than conservative. Nationalism’s revolutionary and anti-monarchic nature in this state are what contributed to the French Revolution. Conor Cruise O’Brien sums it up: “The philosophes hoped to rid the world of fanaticism, but what they actually seem to have done is to have provided fanaticism with a new deity…There was a yawning emotional void, left by the discredited notions of God and king. And the idea of the nation, la patrie, was beginning to fill this void.” 1

In the medium term, the bankruptcy of the French Crown contributed a lot to the causes of the French Revolution. By the late 18th century, half of the royal income was being spent on the interest alone for the huge debts it had built up; the French court spent one twelfth of government revenue; tax collection was very expensive due to the bonuses paid to tax collectors; most of the French Empire was lost in the Seven Years War (the war cost money, and France lost out on taxes); and Louis XVI joined in the American War of Independence, which also cost money. So, by the 1780s, the Crown desperately needed money just to pay off its debts. To do this, taxes would have to be raised, which would naturally be unpopular with the third estate who would bear the burden as usual, so the King and his finance minister decided to call the States-General for the first time in 175 years in an effort to solve the problem.

Another problem lay with the character of the King, Louis XVI, himself. He was not a strong man, and was more interested in hunting than politics. He was largely under the influence of his wife, Marie Antoinette, who, although strong-minded, failed to grasp the political situation of the time. She was also Austrian, and so, given the nationalistic mood of the day, this probably did not make her very popular.

Louis XVI’s handling of the States-General when it met in May 1789 contributed towards the start of the Revolution. The King wanted to make reform difficult by making the three estates meet separately, in the hope that the first and second estates would vote the third down. However, he had not judged the mood of the representatives, and this backfired: opposition to the King grew, the third estate refused to act separately, and the clergy changed sides, changing the balance of power. In an act that would have angered the second and third estates’ representatives, Louis then closed the meeting halls. He later had to agree to a constitution when the third estate representatives occupied the royal tennis courts. The King had lost considerably more political ground than if he had just listened to the grievances of the middle classes and the third estate right from the start, and opinion had turned against him.

Also in the medium term was the rise in prices that had occurred before the Revolution, with no corresponding rise in wages, which meant an obvious increase in the cost of living. This caused widespread poverty at the bottom of society, ie. the third estate, and to some extend in the second estate, who were not necessarily rich.

This was compounded by bad weather in 1788 which ruined harvests and resulted in famine. In 1789 this was repeated, with a severe winter making things worse. The frozen rivers affected trade, causing unemployment, which led to mobs of the unemployed forming in the cities during winter. A crucial event came on 14th July 1789, when there was an uprising of the Paris mobs, who stormed the Bastille, a royal prison and symbol of royal despotism. This event was a result of the economic conditions (caused by both weather and taxes) and the anti-monarchic mood at the time, and was one of the first revolts in the French Revolution as a whole.

The French Revolution was by no means inevitable. If Louis XVI had listened to the States-General and the mood of the middle classes and peasants, and made some concessions, he would probably have remained as a constitutional monarch without the loss of too much power. However, this is not what he did. The main underlying cause of the French Revolution was the combination of the autocratic Ancien R?gime with the influence of the philosophers and the Enlightenment. The two could not co-exist, and the new nationalism would not go away; therefore the only option was for the people to be granted some sovereignty. The economic conditions of the day and the American example merely accelerated the start of the Revolution; no government can govern perfectly forever, so at some point there would probably have been objections to the autocracy, and an uprising. So instead, the French Revolution was made inevitable through the continued denial of sovereignty from the people by the French monarchy, and in the short term, by King Louis XVI.

Bibliography

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