



Sample: History - Middle Age and French Revolution

Middle Age and French Revolution

The history of France is a dramatic part of the entire world civilization and the French Revolution is, probably, the most important of the events that make it significant and special. The causes, course and outcomes of the French Revolution can be traced studied today in detail and with the experience that has been accumulated over the centuries that passed after it. The subject is still in the focus of contemporary historians who look into the many controversies of the revolution that changed the history not only of France but also of Europe and had a strong impact on the history of the Western civilization.

At the time before the Revolution, France was not a unified country that had been developing as a single land over a certain historical period of time. Instead, it was made up of areas and lands that were collected over the previous centuries. This fact resulted in discrepancies between different laws that were used across the country. These features were inherited by the country from the previous stages of its history that were characterized by wars and invasions. The Viking invasions and disputes with England that went on for centuries led to frequent changes of power between the latter and France. The Carolingian dynasty established by Charlemagne was one of the most prominent states of the medieval period. It included a large section of central Europe, as well as parts of Italy. The system of government divided the entire territory of the dynasty into regions governed by local rulers (Medieval History of France, 2000). The system that was used by the country during the period of feudalism became outdated by the eighteenth century and was an impediment for the social progress that was associated with a new, capitalist system. The word “feudalism” had a strong negative connotation because it “was often identified with an ancient regime and the privileges of the French aristocracy, which aroused the wrath of the French bourgeoisie” (Cantor, 1994, p. 195).



This was one of the major causes that brought about the French Revolution. France remained mostly a feudal nation, with the majority of its population made up by peasants. New classes that developed rapidly, which were the middle and the working class were opposed to the absolute monarchy that conserved and preserved the existing system (France. History – Causes of the French Revolution, 2014). The administrative system was based on concentrating the political, social and economic power in the hands of the monarchy, clergy, and the aristocracy (The Political Crisis, 2014). The nation was divided into 36 administrative areas that had the name of “generalities”. The three estates reflected the hieratical construction of the society. The first was represented by the Roman Catholic clergy; the second was nobility headed by the King and the third estate comprised the rest of the population and was the largest in number. It demanded more rights for the common people and the abolition of the Ancient Regime system (The Political Crisis, 2014).

The outdated social and political system strongly affected the economy of the country. Agriculture was characterized by low productivity, with many little farms divided between different owners of feudal families. As a result, the periodic poor harvests were causing famine, high prices of food products and riots. The latter were caused by crop failures of the 1780s that resulted in shortages of bread and brought about high prices of it. This was a particularly serious cause for urban citizens and perhaps nothing “motivated the Paris mob that was the engine of the revolution more than the shortage of bread” (France. History – Causes of the French Revolution, 2014).

All these causes of the French Revolution, as it is often the case with revolutions, are described in their totality as the revolutionary situation. It is recognized by historians that the revolutionary situation in France included the mismanagement of the economic and social life by



the absolute monarchy. It included the expenses on the Seven Years' War and the funds directed to the American War of Independence that the country could hardly afford. These expenses resulted in the huge national debt. Meanwhile, the king and his family, notwithstanding the economic crisis, continued to have huge personal spending. In the court of Versailles, "over 15,000 people benefited from the country's wealth and gave little in return" (French Revolution Cause: an Economic Crisis, 2014). In addition to these problems, the country had an unfair tax system that made only the poor pay taxes.

The French Revolution is generally defined as a period between 1789 and 1802 when radical changes were made in the government, administrative, ideological and cultural spheres. The life in the country became different from the previous period and Europe, as a result of the revolution, was involved in a series of wars. All the institutions of the feudal system and its vestiges were demolished; the country that was ruled by an absolute monarch executed its king and a large number of aristocrats and was turned first into a republic and then into an empire ruled by Napoleon Bonaparte. At the beginning of the period, the monarchy confronted with a complete inability to manage the situation in the country, gave in to the demands of the National Assembly that started reforming the political and social system of the country. A new constitution was drawn up with a Legislative Assembly but before adopting a constitution the Assembly deemed it necessary to draw up a "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen", which had to serve as a preamble to the Constitution. A suggestion expressed by Camus the declaration of the rights of the man should be made jointly with a declaration of the citizen's duties found no support. The Catholic Church was removed from power and the liberty of worship was established (French Revolution, 2014).



Yet the Revolution united the parts of the country that were a loose combination of lands into a single and strong French nation, with French citizens feeling proud of their country and having a strong national identity. The nation and its future were in the hands of common people who became active participants of the processes of the social and political transformations that were taking place in their country. The Revolution created and promoted the notions of universal rights of people and the ideals of equality as the basic foundation for the progress of nations. The events of 1789 provided the framework and mechanisms for the implementation of these ideas. The legislation that guaranteed equality of citizens before the law, trial by jury, basic freedoms for citizens including the freedom of speech, religious freedom and freedom of conscience, as well as the freedom of speech. It should be noted that the exercise of many of these principles was made controversial or even impossible by the Terror that was an integral part of the French Terror and, later, was continued by Napoleon Bonaparte and the Restoration. The horrors of the French Revolution scared not only the European governments but also “cooled the ardor of many of its ardent supporters on the other side of the Atlantic” with whom France had traditionally strong bonds developed at the time of the War for Independence (Alison, 1842, p. 315). The revolution that was aimed against the power of the limited social elite and was carried out in the name of liberty, equality and fraternity promptly rejected these were principles in its practices of governing the country. As pointed out by Alison (1842), in reality it led to the loss of liberty and, finally, the dictatorship and a surge of nationalism. However, the French Revolution laid the foundation for significant political, social, and economic changes that took place in France and Europe in the following century and served for many people across the world as a symbol of fighting for their rights and social justice. It also facilitated the progress of the ideas of the Enlightenment that assisted major humanistic transformations across the world.



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