

France History - Causes of the French Revolution

France in 1789 was one of the richest and most powerful nations in Europe. Only in Great Britain and the Netherlands did the common people have more freedom and less chance of arbitrary punishment.

Nonetheless, a popular rebellion would first to bring the regime of King Louis XVI of France under control of a constitution, then to depose, imprison, try, and execute the king and, later, his wife Marie Antoinette.

Many factors led to the revolution; to some extent the old order succumbed to its own rigidity in the face of a changing world; to some extent, it fell to the ambitions of a rising bourgeoisie, allied with aggrieved peasants and wage-earners and with individuals of all classes who were influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment.

As the revolution proceeded and as power devolved from the monarchy to legislative bodies, the conflicting interests of these initially allied groups would become the source of conflict and bloodshed.

Certainly, all of the following must be counted among the causes of the revolution:

- Resentment of royal absolutism.
- Resentment of the seigneurial system by peasants, wage-earners, and a rising bourgeoisie.
- The rise of enlightenment ideals.
- An unmanageable national debt, both caused by and exacerbating the burden of a grossly inequitable system of taxation.
- Food scarcity in the years immediately before the revolution

Absolutism and privilege

France in 1789 was, at least in theory, an absolute monarchy, an increasingly unpopular form of government at the time. In practice, the king's ability to act on his theoretically absolute power was hemmed in by the (equally resented) power and prerogatives of the nobility and the clergy, the remnants of feudalism. Similarly, the peasants covetously eyed the relatively greater prerogatives of the townspeople.

The large and growing middle class -- and some of the nobility and of the working class -- had absorbed the ideology of equality and freedom of the individual, brought about by such philosophers as Voltaire, Denis Diderot, Turgot, and other theorists of the Enlightenment.

Furthermore, they had the example of the American Revolution showing that that it was plausible that Enlightenment ideals about governmental organization might be put into practice. They attacked the undemocratic nature of the government, pushed for freedom of speech, and challenged the Catholic Church and the prerogatives of the nobles.

Taxation

Unlike the trading nations, France could not rely almost solely on tariffs to generate income. While average tax rates were higher in Britain, the burden on the common people was greater in France. Taxation relied on a system of internal tariffs separating the regions of France, which prevented a unified market from developing in the country.

Taxes such as the extremely unpopular gabelle were contracted out to private collectors ("tax farmers") who were permitted to raise far more than the government requested. These systems led to an arbitrary and unequal collection of many of France's consumption taxes. Further royal and seigneurial taxes were collected in the form of compulsory labor (the corvée).

The system also excluded the nobles and the clergy from having to pay taxes (with the exception of a modest quit rent). The tax burden was thus paid by the peasants, wage earners, and the professional and business classes. These groups were also cut off from most positions of power in the regime, causing unrest.

Debt ▲

Since 1614, the French monarchy had operated without resort to a legislature. Kings had managed their fiscal affairs by increasing the burden of the ancient and unequal system of taxes, by borrowing money, and sometimes by selling noble titles and other privileges; however, because noble titles exempted the holder from future taxes, the purchasers of titles were effectively buying an annuity.

This led to the long-running fiscal crisis of the French government. On the eve of the revolution, France was deeply indebted, so deeply as to be effectively bankrupt. Extravagant expenditures by Louis XIV on luxuries such as Versailles were compounded by heavy expenditures on the Seven Years War and the American War of Independence.

Britain too had a great of debt from these conflicts, but Britain had a far more advanced fiscal structure to deal with it. There was no counterpart to the Bank of England in France in 1789 and there was also far less ready capital in France, as it was not nearly as much a trading nation as was Britain.

Edmund Burke, no friend of the revolution, was to write in 1790, "...the public, whether represented by a monarch or by a senate, can pledge nothing but the public estate; and it can have no public estate except in what it derives from a just and proportioned imposition upon the citizens at large." Because of the successful defence by the nobles of their privileges, the king of France lacked the means to impose a "just and proportioned" tax. The desire to do so led directly to the decision in 1788 to call the Estates-General into session.

Other Causes

American Influence ▲

France had played a deciding role in the American Revolutionary War, (1775-1783) sending its navy and troops to aid the rebelling colonists. During this time there was much contact between the Americans and the French, and revolutionary ideals spread between the groups.

Food Scarcity ▲

These problems were all compounded by a great scarcity of food in the 1780s. Different crop failures in the 1780s caused these shortages, which of course led to high prices for bread. Perhaps no cause more motivated the Paris mob that was the engine of the revolution more than the shortage of bread.

The poor conditions in the countryside had forced rural residents to move into Paris, and the city was overcrowded and filled with the hungry and disaffected. The peasants suffered doubly from the economic and agricultural problems. ▲