

# The french revolution's failure to uphold enlightenment ideas

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The Enlightenment was a time of educational prosper in which new ideas and standards were developed through processes of logic and reason, allowing the expansion of influential knowledge across Europe. The foundation of such information emanated from the minds of ingenious scholars by the name philosophes.

Due to the immense power of these peoples' writings, discoveries and theories, commoners began to question their basic understandings of life, and evaluate their circumstances in terms of their role in government. Many believed that they were being treated unfairly by those who ruled them, and these feelings were validated by the words of the philosophes. In France specifically, they were so haunted by their conditions, and inspired by the new ideas that they led a Revolution, believing they could positively change their nation. Despite intentions, throughout the duration of the French Revolution, the people failed to uphold the newly established ideals of the Enlightenment. Voltaire was one of the many brilliant men from this time period whose inspiring pieces of literature were an example of what France wished their nation to embody.

He stood in favor of of religious freedom and freedom of speech, and he criticised intolerance, prejudice and oppression. Voltaire has been quoted to say, " We cannot always oblige; but we can always speak obligingly" (en. proverbial. net), in his human right campaigns and various books. This proves his belief in freedom of speech because this quote is essentially saying that even if one cannot take action, they should have the ability to speak freely of their wants and needs. The French people would see such ideas from

Voltaire, and draw inspiration from them, inspiration that they used to fuel their Revolution.

Once they had succeeded in overthrowing the brutal monarchy that had treated them so poorly, the nation became crazed with the urge to prevent a recurrence of their former government at all costs. This led to a time period called "The Reign of Terror," in which no one was safe from the guillotine. To assure that no citizen dared to cross them, the leaders of the Committee of Public Safety published the "Law of Suspects". This was a document that declared various categories of people suspects of committing treason, for example, the first grouping of people are, "those who, by their conduct, associations, talk, or writings have shown themselves to be enemies of liberty" (qtd. in "Document B: Law of Suspects").

This statement is a direct violation of both freedom of speech and press, which disobeys loyalties to Voltaire's beliefs. Should people who speak of or publish their thoughts on the war, in a tone that does not reflect positively on the side of the rebels, they are to be beheaded. The fact that the committee is forcing the people to keep their beliefs silent, threatening their lives, is one of the ways that the French Revolution has failed to implement the ideas of the Enlightenment. Another great thinker of The Age of Reason was a diligent man with an unswayable sense of justice, Cesare Beccaria. He criticised abuse in the justice system, was enraged at the use of torture and obscene punishments, and believed that all crimes should get fair, hasty trials. In his most famous writing, "An Essay on Crimes and Punishments," Beccaria states, "If the judge were constrained, or if he desired to frame

even a single additional syllogism, the door would thereby be opened to uncertainty" (iep.

utm. edu). This means that should any judge be influenced by an outside party, or if the man himself is not pure, then the fate of the individual will lie undecided to ensure all fairness. In addition to his court case beliefs, he also was against punishments that served too extreme for their charges. He was a great influence on those who rebelled against the French monarchy, because the nobles would jail the lower classes with little reason, and deal out torturous punishment.

However, when the Reign of Terror had begun, the people turned their back on Beccaria's ideals. Prisoners were being sent to the guillotine with absurd charges, this is explained in an excerpt from the " Modern World History" textbook stating, " Thousands of unknown people were also sent to their death, often on the flimsiest of charges, For example, an 18-year-old youth was sentenced to die for cutting down a tree that had been planted as a symbol of liberty. Perhaps as many as 40, 000 were executed during the Terror" (McDougal 227). The fact that simple errors made by common people were punished by death is in direct conflict with Beccaria's belief in fair trials because any reasonable judge would be able to clearly see that these deaths are unjustified. Having an extreme penalty for trivial occurrences leads to a nation of suffering, a fact that the French people of the Revolution learned.

Had they not failed to uphold Beccaria's beliefs, and enforced them, then there would be less lives lost for no purpose. Baron De Montesquieu, a French political speaker and writer, was another philosophe from the

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Enlightenment era. This man believed that government should protect individual liberty and that too much power would lead to tyranny. His solution for combating this issue was to divide the government into three branches, in a system of checks and balances, to ensure that no one person would gain too much power. Montesquieu once said, " When the legislative and executive powers are united in the same person, or in the same body of magistrates, there can be no liberty; because apprehensions may arise, lest the same monarch or senate should enact tyrannical laws, to execute them in a tyrannical manner" (qotd. org).

This quote perfectly summarizes his beliefs and reasoning for them; if government is one single body, there is nothing to stop it growing out of control and overbearing. The French Revolution was set in motion to stop this very phenomenon, the people wanted to obliterate the monarchy because they were mistreated. However, after they succeeded, their nation reverted back to having a government that was structurally flawed in the same manner. A man by the name Maximilian Robespierre rose to power, becoming the leader of the Committee of Public Safety, which was originally an oligarchy. An excerpt from the History Department's selection for outstanding paper, " Maximilien Robespierre, Master of the Terror" states, " From under his leadership, the committee came to exercise virtual dictatorial control over the French government.

.. In less than a year, 300, 000 suspected enemies of the Revolution were arrested; at least 10, 000 died in prison, and 17, 000 were officially executed" (McLetchie 3). His tyrannical rule over France, after they had just

worked to eliminate such a threat, is a disgrace to Montesquieu's beloved ideas, as all of the power was left in the hands of one man. Not only was he betraying the wishes of the French people, but he was ruling harshly, putting a death sentence on every criminal, no matter how big or small the felony was.

The fact that Robespierre took control over the nation, and took on no form of checks and balances is evidence that the ideas of the Enlightenment were lost in the trials of war. The Age of Reason brought a new sense of understanding to the people of Europe, but when the lower class citizens of France began to revolt against the upper class, many lost sight of these new ideas. They failed to represent the brilliant works of philosophers like Voltaire, Cesare Beccaria, Baron de Montesquieu and many more. Wonderful ideals that they once held so dear such as liberty and equality were torn apart by the fear from the Reign of Terror. Due to the French people's failure to implement this knowledge after their success, they suffered for far longer than was necessary for survival.

If those who fought in the French Revolution had upheld Enlightenment ideas, they would have been able to prosper, rather than suffer through years of conflict.