

Perspectives on the french revolution.

[History](#), [French Revolution](#)



Perspectives on the French revolution. This essay will examine the ideologies of the French revolution of 1789. Two perspectives on the French revolution were held by the conservatives' elite and the educated philosophers. The educated philosophers believed that a revolution was the only way that the middle and lower class were to have a say in matters of state, and obtain their rights. Their goal in the revolution was to turn the absolute monarchy into a constitutional monarchy. The conservatives believed that the absolute monarchy should stay intact to preserve their heritage, and that the revolutionary changes brought more problems than they solved. The French revolution started in 1789 and officially lasted 10 years, finishing in 1799. Although according to public opinion, many events after the official end of the revolution are considered to be included in revolution for example the rein of Napoleon Bonaparte. The revolutions started as a result of rising food prices and the states bankruptcy. The rising food prices were primarily caused by an immense and volatile hailstorm. The food shortage may have ended there, however the hailstorm was followed by a long drought, likely caused by the El Niño effect. After the drought there was an uncharacteristically cold winter rivers and roads froze over, stopping flour from being ground by watermills, and the little food that was produced couldn't get to the market because the roads were blocked. When spring came around and the snow finally thawed it caused floods destroying an abundance of farmland. There is also speculation that volcanic activity of Laki and Grimsvötn had a hand in the food crisis. In addition to rising food prices, the states bankruptcy, caused in part by Frances involvement in the American revolutionary war, put the monarchy in a difficult financial position.

To pay its debts the state would either have to borrow money or raise the already high taxes on the third estate (Adcock, pg. 40). Both decisions were unfavourable as they would cause upheaval in civilian life. The taxes were already high, having been raised to pay for the many wars King Louis XIV had waged, leaving the state in debt (Neely, pg. 29). In August 1786 King Louis XVI's minister of finance informed him of the seriousness of the financial situation. France had been in debt for about 100 years. They waged 4 separate wars between 1733 and 1783, and borrowed more than £1250 million since 1776. These were the major contributions to France's debt (Adcock pg. 41, Broome pg. 19). The king had two options, either borrow more money or raise the taxes higher than they've ever been. He soon discovered he couldn't borrow more money because he was in too much debt, so he tried to introduce a new tax. This tax was called the land tax, all land owners had to pay this tax to keep the land they owned. This included the first, second and third estates land but excluded the king. All new taxes and laws had to be registered and approved at the law courts, or parliament in Paris. King Louis tried to pass the new tax without the estates general's approval. When the law courts wouldn't allow him to introduce the new tax without their approval he exiled the entire parliament from Paris. People everywhere in France protested against this, sometimes violently, for six months until King Louis gave in and reappointed them. As a result of these main problems the people felt that the monarchy was not doing its job and that the French people needed a constitutional government to rule over them fairly. Although the philosophes did not always agree on political issues they did agree that the scientific discoveries made in the 17th century were

important to all aspects of life (Neely pg. 16). Most philosophes were not traditional Christians, but rather deists. Deists believed that “ knowledge of god came through study of the nature that he created” and did not believe in things such as miracles (Neely pg. 17). Before the revolution the philosophes achieved the publication of the encyclopédie, a collection of knowledge with contributions from many philosophes. The first volume was published in 1751(Neely pg. 18). These encyclopédie have been blamed by some historians for the revolution. They do at least play a small role in the revolution. “ what helped to bring on the revolution were not radical ideas, but rather that more and more people were now discussing public policy and taking a lively interest in political and governmental matters”(Neely pg. 21) these books were the reason people were able to be informed enough to create their own opinions. The governing of the country was no longer in the hands of just a few noble men, but majority of the population. One of the most famous philosophes was François-Marie Arouet, better known as Voltaire. He wrote a variety of philosophical works on many topics and in many forms. In 1725 he was exiled to Britain for three years after offending a nobleman. In Britain he learnt about the constitutional monarchy, which appeared far better than his own country’s monarchy. During this exile he wrote letter philosophiques sur les anglais (philosophical letters on the English). He published these when he returned to France. These letters recommended the constitutional monarchy over the absolute monarchy, and sparked outrage in most people throughout the country. It is likely that these works had a hand in the revolution, once people had time to process the information. The edict of Nantes was signed in Nantes, France by Henri IV on

April 15th 1598. Henri was a protestant who converted to Catholicism 4 years after succeeding the throne. The edict gave Protestants the freedom to worship as they please, made their marriages valid, allowed their priests to be paid by the state and gave full immunity for all crimes committed by both sides during the religious wars. The edict proved only to be a temporary solution to the religious wars and rivalry between the Protestants and Catholics. In 1685 Louis XIV revoked the edict of Nantes, declaring all protestant marriages invalid, and causing mass migration to England (Cavandish, history today). Voltaire, who had a protestant wife, wrote about the Protestants and what they were going through during this time of turmoil (Neely pg. 18). Voltaire especially had an interest in the callas case. He believed that the case showed what was wrong with the French society including religious intolerance. Jean Callas was convicted of killing his son for trying to convert to Catholicism. He was tortured and killed in public. In 3 years Voltaire cleared his name. Although the edict was revoked almost 100 years before the revolution, some historians believe it may have had a part in causing it. " Enlightenment led people astray by weakening their faith in tradition and religion by placing entirely too much confidence in the abilities of human beings to reason and improve the world" (Neely pg. 16). The conservatives believed that the revolution would cause more problems than it would solve. Although they admit that the monarchy had its flaws, they believed it was immoral to attack the government and the church (Neely, pg. 16). It was common belief that the king was appointed by god, which meant he had the divine right to rule. Therefore, " to criticise the king was to criticise god". Public belief in the kings' competence to rule was largely

reinforced by large oil paintings of the king at work (Adcock pg. 7). The second estate or nobility did not have to pay certain taxes (and dodged paying many others), got special treatment in law courts, had the right to carry a sword, and did not have to do military service (Brooman pg. 7). Because most of the conservatives were nobility of the second estate (upperclassmen) it is believed that there may have been a more selfish reason for their beliefs. The conservatives did not want to give up their estates, slaves, titles, and privileges (Neely pg. 16). On the 26th of august 1789 the declaration of rights of man and citizen was introduced provisionally by the parliament (Neely pg. 86). It outlined that all men were equal and free and that power did not solely belong to the king but to the people as well (Brooman pg. 33). Its main purpose was to acknowledge that these rights already exist, no to create new ones. It was merely an affirmation of the philosophes writings about the people's rights. The document did not mention that the state had a responsibility to help the poor and unemployed. Although it was a victory for the philosophes and the third estate, they only got half of what they wanted (Adcock pg. 89). King Louis XVI or " Louis Capet" as the people insisted on calling him, was found guilty of conspiracy against the state on 7th of January 1793 (Adcock pg. 136). On the 15th of January they voted as to what punishment the king would receive. The votes were very close with 361 people who voted for death without conditions and 360 people who voted against it. Out of those 286 people voted for imprisonment or banishment and 46 people voted for death when peace time came (Neely pg. 170). On the 21st of January he was taken to place de révolution to be executed with a guillotine. Later the place de

révolution was renamed to place de la Concorde to try and abate the memory and blame surrounding the place. King Louis XVI was thought of as a rallying point for the conservatives as he was part of the royalty they wished to protect. Once he was executed the conservatives had lost majority of their reason to fight. The revolution officially ended in 1799, when Napoleon Bonaparte came into power. When this happened, both the conservatives and the philosophes lost. Their separate ideals were torn apart as Napoleon declared himself emperor, abolishing both the monarchy and the people voice (Adcock pg. 193). During the revolution the French people had 4 separate national assemblies and 3 different constitutions. Many historians believe that without the help of the philosophes the French revolution may never have happened while others argue that dissatisfaction in the system causes criticism and animosity and the revolution still would have happened eventually. Bibliography Adcock, M 2004, *Analysing the French revolution*, Cambridge University Press. Brooman, J 1992, *Revolution in France*, Longman Group. Cavendish, R 1998, *The edict of Nantes*, viewed 12th September 2012. Hampson, N 1963, *A social history of the French revolution*, T. J press. Neely, S 2008, *A concise history of the French revolution*, Rowman and Littlefield publishers.