

What caused the 1792 french revolutionary wars history essay

[War](#), [Revolutionary War](#)



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This history extended essay seeks to address the following question: To what extent were the French governmental policies responsible for igniting the 1792 French Revolutionary Wars (FRW)? The 1792 war would mark the first of three revolutionary wars which pitted France against continental Europe over the 18th century. This essay is primarily concerned with identifying the responsible party who provoked the first FRW.

This essay shall be organized accordingly. An investigation will first be undertaken to explore the poor leadership of the newly installed French government. Not only did it create domestic disarray with its reforms, the employment of a rash foreign policy served to exacerbate issues. Secondly, it focuses on the actions of King Louis XVI. His controversial planned escape to Austria created led to repercussions which facilitated the emergence of war. Just as the popular saying goes “ it takes two hands to clap”, similarly, the role of the almighty Habsbury Monarchy and expanding Prussia in inciting conflict will be examined in detail.

Due to space constraints, it must be noted that the essay attempts to focus solely on the First Coalition of the FRW in 1792. Also, the personal agendas of the individual elements within the government will be ignored. Instead, it will focus solely on the reforms of the political entity.

Primary documents such as translated parliamentary transcripts, official reports and first-hand accounts from participants involved will be consulted. Secondary documents such as literature that examines the nature of 18th century France and internet databases will also be utilized in this process.

As such, this essay concludes that there were mainly three parties involved in the whirlwind of conflict. However, the party at fault was largely the French government, whose incompetence coupled with misjudgment contributed to the decision of starting a revolutionary war.

Introduction

It is often proclaimed that “ The French Revolution created the modern world”. However, in retrospect, it was the French Revolutionary Wars (FRW). On 17th April 1792, the French government was convinced by the weakness afflicting the continental superpowers. Thus, it sought to declare war on one of them- the state of Austria.[1]This was to mark the starting point of the FRW, which would see the entrance of Prussia and the forging of a united alliance against France. From this, the idea of a total war emerged, with the introduction of conscription and mass mobilization of all factions of society.

[2]

The FRW has been a subject seldom touched by historians, who have constantly viewed it as merely as an extension from the French Revolution. Academic research into this topic is sorely lacking. Moreover, the discussion regarding revolutionary wars has waned with the onset of twentieth century world wars, setting greater benchmarks for military carnage, socio economic dislocation and political upheaval.[3]

This essay is significant in exploring the various parties involved in inciting the FRW. From a militaristic perspective, it is interesting to explore the aggressive nature of 18th century Europe, which observed 19 wars during that time span alone.[4] From a socio-political perspective, the evolution of the French Revolution evoked by the consciousness of the day provides a fascinating dimension. From a psychological perspective, it can shed light on the effect of revolutionary fervor on the community at large. Indeed, the duration of this essay saw me exploring first hand, the inter-disciplinary nature of history.

Three various groups will be examined in the process of this essay, with fault accorded accordingly to the guilty party. First and foremost, the French government, fresh from their bourgeoisie victory, implemented reforms which failed to cultivate national unity. This provided counter revolutionaries a framework to launch a movement on their own, portraying themselves as “foreign-backed”. Consequently, Austria and Prussia emboldened by international circumstances and sentiments, demanded that a reaction against France was required. The consequences of the tripartite culminated in the 1792 FRW.

This essay hypothesizes that the French revolutionaries, in their radical state of mind, were therefore most protective of their new regime. Since revolution seemed only sustainable through the creation of war, it was the path they trotted. Therefore, the research question is as such: To what extent was the French domestic policy responsible for igniting the 1792 French Revolutionary Wars (FRW)?

Background

The 1792 French Revolutionary Wars would pit revolutionary France against the epitomes of the old regime- Austria and Prussia. Against the experienced coalition of the imperialistic superpowers, a potent military force was required by the French. From the outset, this did not bode too promisingly for an army largely weakened by the lack of military officers, many who fled due to the disillusionment with the revolution.[5]Like so many revolutionaries, Dubois used the ubiquity of the new regime's enemies to justify radical action, demanding universal conscription. Revolutionary fervor facilitated a strong response to calls as 120, 000 volunteers were enlisted. [6]Despite their enthusiasm, many of these volunteers were untrained and suffered from poor control.[7]Such was the case that Theobald Dillon, a general within the army, was murdered by his own troops after losing a skirmish to the Austrians.[8]The volunteers of 1792, influenced by the cries of liberty during the revolution, were less inclined to accept military discipline. Indeed " all the volunteers believe they are competent to judge military operations and at once cry treason if things are not done the way

they want.”[9]Thus, it was no surprise that after a span of 4 months, the revolutionary forces retreated from Austria Netherlands in utter chaos.

With that, it seemed like the momentum of battle would belong to the Austro-Prussia forces. It was just a matter of time before Paris would succumb. By August 1792, the allied coalition led by the Duke of Brunswick, were confident in securing victory in one quick swoop. They released the Brunswick manifesto in seeking to re-emphasize their intentions to re-establish the king’s ‘legitimate’ authority.[10]Their aim to strike further terror in the hearts of Parisians proved to be counter-productive as revolutionaries stormed the King’s residence in furious protest. From the on, popular anger would soon be translated to patriotic fervor and this culminated in the Battle of Valmy on 20th September 1792. In the end, superior French artillery turned the tide of battle as French Generals Dumoriez and Kellermann proved victorious over Brunswick’s coalition. This battle not only served to sustain revolutionary France, it too, propelled a period of renewed military strength.[11]Ultimate victory was consolidated with the slaughtering of 12, 000 Austrians in Jemappes, and 10 days later, domestic peace was ensured with the last of the foreign entities retreating. [12]From then on, an offensive elan was adopted, and the next 10 years witnessed the expansion of France into an empire under the reign of Napoleon Bonaparte.

The Role of the French Government

Failed Domestic Reforms

In the 2 years leading up to the monumental FRW, the proclamation of “Liberty, Fraternity and Equality” which had formed the basis of the 1789 French Revolution was gradually withering in reality. Social parity, the main principle of the revolutionaries, was ignored, prompting cries of disaffection from a group which constituted 90% of the population – peasants.[13]The Revolution, after all, had been staged by the middle class and the wealthier members of the Third Estate; most of the reforms, especially the economic reforms, benefitted only these two groups.[14]In fact, life had become harder for the peasants, many whom were country dwellers along the provincial borders, away from the attention of the National Assembly, France’s new governing body.[15]One such example of hardship was the implementation of the bourgeoisie-backed laissez-faire policy. Against the backdrop of capitalistic middle class claims of economic liberty, the peasants remained deeply attached to the old system of regulation and price-fixing which had in some measure guaranteed them a standard of living.[16]Naturally, they now postured as vehement upholders of the decrees of the Assembly.[17]“ We thought after the decree surpressing the feudal regime, that we were as free in our property as in our persons, two years experience has shown us that we are slaves...unless you come to our help, we are ruined.” This left the mass of the rural population a potential breeding ground for counter revolutionaries.[18]

Besides suffering from social polarity, France was in a fiscal calamity too. Despite a temporal relief on the food crisis in 1790, the price of foodstuffs was rising again between 1791 and 1792. This was compounded with a

growing inflation rate as the national currency, the assignat fell by 20% at the foreign exchanges.[19]With that, workers who were paid in paper found that their purchasing power was falling. There were equally unhappy consequences for certain sections of the nobles too, whose accumulated wealth was diminished.[20]

Politically, the instituting of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy on 3rd January 1791 created much tension in the once-Catholic nation. By asserting that all beneficed clergy were to swear “ to be faithful to the nation, king and law and to uphold the constitution declared by the Assembly”, it effectively fused Catholicism with the State.[21]The revolutionaries were forced to choose, to declare themselves publicly for or against the order, thus, marking the end of national unity and the possibility of civil war.[22]The resistance of a large part of the clergy was inclining a reluctant but imperious Assembly towards punitive measures that would drive the vacillating king to implore his fellow monarchs to come to his rescue.[23]One such example took place at Nimes in June 1790, when pro-revolutionary Protestants clashed with the Artois-backed Catholic National Guardsmen. Though both sides were driven by traditional sectarian antagonism, however, it was “ destabilized and sharpened by the Revolution’s reforms”.[24]

Intentions for War

Indeed, the reforms “ created disenchantment with the Revolution’s achievements” socially, politically and economy.[25]Their lack of consideration of the climate of the nation before implementing their

potentially discriminatory policies, invariably, created a nation suffering from domestic turmoil and thus, susceptible to counter revolution. This fear was made all the more real, through substantiation from the past. To a certain extent, it could even be observed on a superficial level that the causes of the French Revolution mirrored the present predicament. Disputes between social classes, debts and bankruptcy were all causes of possible revolution, and its symptoms were starting to form as resurrections occurred at the Gard, the Vendee and rural Brittany.[26]

In order to preserve the revolution, “ a state of war” had to be induced “ to settle internal disorder”. [27] Financially, Historian Albert Soboul concluded that the commercial bourgeoisie sought war to re-establish the credit of the assignat, enforcing its paper money on others to forge much needed international credibility. [28] Socially, war was seen as a way of uniting the people once more and healing the fractions within society. Under the pretense of a war promoting liberty, Jacques Brissot, a prominent member of the warmonger Girondins, expressed that “ a nation which has conquered its liberty after 10 years of slavery, has need for war.” [29] Politically, war was seen as a possible distraction from the domestic front. This argument is reflected in a classical precedent. “ Rome, when threatened by some domestic storm, often launched a war faraway from Italy, as a result of this salutary diversion, achieved peace at home and victories abroad.” [30] Indeed, war would seek to heal internal divisions by turning the pre-occupations of French citizens outwards, and their antagonisms against

the enemy rather than each other.[31]It was also so known as the “ the classical remedy for internal problems.”[32]

Led by a more radical second generation of revolutionaries, who viewed war as an “ efficient and relatively painless method of settling internal disputes”. [33]This accelerated the coming of the war.

Analysis: The war provided a springboard to revive the dying revolutionary movement that was caused by the failure of its reforms.

Provocative Foreign Policies

The alluring revolutionary spirit soon turned contagious. Just as the revolution attracted sympathizers to France, word of it was propagated abroad too. Self determination for states was in line with the revolution’s aim of liberty for all- the freedom to decide its ruler and government. With that, Alsace was to be the first victim of this revolutionary doctrine .[34]The Treaty of Westphalia was re-examined- though there was cession of Alsace to France but its erstwhile rulers maintained lucrative judicial and ecclesiastical rights.[35]Therefore, on claims of historical heritage and social compactness, it was pronounced that “ the Alsatian state was united to the French people”.[36]This set a trend of self-determination which inevitably led to the termination of existing treaties, threatening the European states system and infuriating many. Soon, the French had turned their attention to Avignon. The papal state was repudiating the sovereignty of the Pope and seeking annexation to France. On 11 June 1790, insurrections convinced the French that “ Avignon no longer belongs to the Pope because tis people no

longer wished him as ruler". This did not go down too well with the Austrians, who observed that this move of annexation would invariably mean declaring war on all governments.

Analysis: Look at bottom of pg 75. Leopold now exerted that " by treaty the lands of the German princes in Alsace were exempted from the sovereignty of the French Crown, therefore France was not allowed to confiscate them regardless of the compensation she might offer". However, Vienna would have never sought war solely to maintain international morality. Rather, this was seen as a pretext to war, giving the Austrians a perfect excuse to head for war.

The Role of the King and Emigrés

The Flight to Varennes

Traditionally, the king was " one individual who had always represented the unity of the nation." [37] Thus, it was no surprise that the continual reluctance of Louis XVI to play the role of constitutional monarch allocated to him by the new order, accentuated the chaotic political climate of 1791. [38] Within the system which the National Assembly adopted, he retained power as King. Nonetheless, he was disgruntled with the limited form of power he withheld, feeling like a " prisoner of the revolution" and unwilling to accept the new sacrilegious religious order. [39] Realizing that the revolution was no mere passing phase and increasingly frustrated by the constraints placed on him, he embarked on the Flight to Varennes. [40] On 20th June 1791, the French royal family slipped out of the Tuileries, the heavily guarded French palace.

Aided by a foreign party, they had sought to dash to Montmedy, close to the Luxemburg frontier. However, the increase in movement along the route aroused suspicions at surrounding towns. It was not too long before the National Guard intercepted the convoy and uncovered his plot.[41]

The Flight to Varennes had major repercussions and is often regarded to be a “ turning point” by many historians.[42]Its immediate significance was the convincing of the French population that the King was in cahoots with outsiders to bring down the revolution, highlighting the reality of a foreign invasion.[43]For the town of Mezieres, only a few miles from the frontier, the flight could only have been assured through the authority of the house of Austria, which now reveals its clear intention of waging war in France.”[44]Indeed, it was the general consensus that “ at present, we (they) should consider ourselves (themselves) to be in a time of war and of imminent peril.”[45]Moreover, the lack of a king gave rise to French nationalism. Members of the local Jacobin club and National Guard took a similar oath. “ I swear to defend to my last drop of blood the nation, the law, and the National Assembly. I swear to live free or die!”[46]This affirmed their resolution of war and induced the demise of the King in the eyes of the French. In all oaths undertaken, they replaced “ king” with “ National Assembly”, portraying a shift in the balance of the power and signaling the institution which the people placed their faith under.

Intentions for war

Louis XVI, however, was not done and dusted. Of all people, he was all the most familiar with the vicious cycle that France was trapped within, internal decay would lead to external failure which in turn fed domestic opposition. [47]Observing the internal turmoil, he imagined that an enfeebled France would be torn apart by the war and incapable of resisting the professional armies of Austria and Prussia.[48]This would in turn, allow him to usurp the throne once more. Therefore, the counter revolutionary movement which was taking place in Europe at the very moment, was where Louis XVI felt most confident in pinning his hopes of success on.[49]Louis XVI was far from the simple, irresponsible and weak man often portrayed by the historians. Rather he was endowed with intelligence and far-sightedness, which he utilized in that of re-establishing his absolute authority, even if he did so at the heavy cost of betraying his country.[50]

The Threat of the Emigrés

Although a small group of liberal nobles had early thrown in their lot with the revolution, the great majority were anything but pleased with the course of events. Unhappy with the National Assembly's take on their feudal rights and privileges, and angered by their suppression of the very status of " noble", reconciliation of the aristocracy and middle-class society was utterly impossible.[51]" Plots were being hatched" among " men with the evil intention of starting a counter revolution". This led to the emergence of émigrés. Royalist in nature, the affronted exiles consistently advocated for the re-instatement of the Bourbon monarchy. Domestically, they aimed to

extricate the King from France by establishing radical insurrections.

Internationally, they sought the attention of the global audience.[52]

Initially, their efforts were futile. Although familial links associated them with Austria – Marie Antoinette was the sister of the Emperor- yet the monarchy never displayed much enthusiasm for the cause. In fact, they were forced to leave the domains of Netherlands.[53]However, by mid 1791, the mood

changed. The French were startled to learn off foreign aid for the émigrés.

They constructed a headquarters in Koblenz, Germany and from there, they carried out their mission. Lead by the King's brother, the Count d'Artois, they received subsidies from foreign sources. In all the 6. 5million livres were

used to buy arms and equipment, together with hiring mercenaries for the

cause.[54]The “ support allegedly give by Austria to the counter-

revolutionary émigrés”,[55]led to a formation of an army, reaching heights of 20, 000 at its peak.[56]

Its formation along the frontiers of France served to create greater suspicion, and its admission into discussions of the Declaration of Pillnitz caused

greater controversy over its foreign links.[57]Moreover, the Austrian

emperor, Leopold II would now be obliged to come to the aid of the German princes if they were attacked.[58]Indeed, the émigrés were resourceful and

mobile in creating a foreign-backed system, one that stoked emotions of paranoia among the revolutionaries.

The more the revolution progressed, the more real became the sympathetic concerns with which the crowned heads of Europe related towards

supporting counter revolution. The flight transformed the prospects of counter revolution, even though it failed.[59]

The Role of External Elements

18th century Europe depicted an agrarian and feudal society, with monarchs ruling absolutely within their domains.[60]Throughout the century, Europe was in a state of perpetual conflict, albeit due to differing intentions.

External provocation- France and Prussia

Monarchial in nature, the Prussian aristocracy and king enjoyed a close relationship. In the European context, the Prussian Empire was one which emerged from the brink of ruin, it was moulded into a militarized state supported by a militarized army.[61]. Historian T. C. W Blanning succinctly describes the state of affairs it underwent, “ working from a material base markedly inferior to that of adjacent Poland, the Hohenzollerns turned their ‘ sand-box’ into a power capable of resisting the combined weight of mainland Europe.”[62]Due to their history of conquest, Prussia was always far more eager than Austria for counter revolutionary intervention.[63]With the opening of Prussia’s national archives, Frederick William II’s inclination to expand territorially was confirmed. Prussia for all their domination in the 18th century, had no territorial gains to show for it. As Geoff Blainey once said, “ the durability of peace depends on the decisiveness of the preceding war”.[64]Despite the large expenses incurred due to foreign expeditions, the gains from the 1787 invasion of Netherlands and the 1790 Silesian Mobilization all went to British hands.[65]Therefore, the aims of territorial

expansion were very real, emphasizing the need for acquisition and annexation of French territories. This had been part of Prussian schemes since 1790.[66]

In contrast, the French people had always held the Prussians in high regard. Their militaristic success were enviable and people in Paris were “ crazy about the King in Prussia.” Even the most bellicose of the revolutionaries, the Brissotins, were inclined to forging an alliance with Prussia, if not a neutrality pact, due to admiration of their goals.

External provocation France and Austria

The 1796 alliance between France and Austria has been described as “ a marriage of convenience”[67]. The century old alliance had always portrayed the guiding principles of French foreign policy contradicting that of the Habsburg Monarchy. The alliance was only maintained out of fear, that any attempt to drive the other away would result in the forging of a new alliance with Britain.[68]In keeping the balance of power in check, animosity soon resulted. Termed as Austrophobia, contemporaries had often fastened on the Austrian alliance as a scapegoat for the multitude of problems that they faced. This is represented in the following pamphlet published in 1789:

“ Publicly despised by their allies and insulted with the impunity by her enemies, France is today absolutely nothing in the political system of Europe. Chain to the Austrian chariot, what role has France played other than ceaselessly providing the Emperor with money?”[69]“ Detested the court of Austria because they regarded it as the leech of the state.”[70]

From Austria's point of view, the danger of unrest spreading from France to the rest of Europe, especially in Italy and Belgium, influenced their decision to form an anti-revolutionary bloc.[71] However, interestingly, the hostile attitude displayed by France was not reciprocated. In 1789, they were in no state