

French revolution – montesquieu and voltaire assignment

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French Revolution: The Influences When the Enlightenment occurred, it established some modern-day ideals such as religious toleration, separation of powers, and natural rights. These Enlightened principles eventually spread throughout France, causing the people to question the current state of their society, and ultimately causing the French Revolution. Montesquieu and Voltaire were two very major Enlightenment figures whose beliefs had a huge impact on the French Revolution.

The ever-growing middle class of France had begun to have access to and absorb some writings and ideas of philosophes like Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot. In addition, the recent American Revolution proved to the people of France that Enlightenment ideals could be implemented into their government. Montesquieu, a philosophe who believed strongly in the separation of power, was one person who had a dramatic impact on the French Revolution. He was born into the French nobility, received a classic education, and became well known for his Persian Letters.

In these he pretended to be two Persian travelers commenting on French society. These allowed him to criticize the Catholic Church and the French monarchy. Montesquieu was just one of many factors in the Revolution that, in Edmund Burke's words, caused "the French to rebel against a mild and lawful monarch with more fury, outrage, and insult than any people has been known to rise against the most illegal usurper or the most sanguinary tyrant" (Doc. 9). Later, Montesquieu published his most famous work, *The Spirit of Laws*, which compared three basic different government types: republics, monarchy, and despotism.

He believed that monarchy was best for middle-sized states and made sure the ruling class holds fast to the law. These ideas of Montesquieu eventually led to his most notable contribution ??? the development of separation of powers ??? something that not only greatly influenced the French Revolution, but is something that is still seen, even today. Francois-Marie Arouet, or Voltaire, was perhaps the greatest Enlightenment figure who had a large impact on the Revolution. Voltaire is best known for his passion for religious toleration and criticism of traditional religion.

He constantly argued for religious freedom, proclaiming it had caused no problems for England or Holland, also always impressed by England's constitution. In Voltaire's Philosophical Dictionary: The English Model, he said that England had " in fact, arrived at that point of excellence, in consequence of which all men are restored to those natural rights, which, in nearly all monarchies, they are deprived of" (Doc. 1). However, his main focus remained on religion and religious toleration.

He was a deist himself, believing in the Newtonian world-machine, rejecting many of the essential Christian beliefs as a result of their being " contrary to the laws of nature. " Voltaire's criticisms of the Catholic Church and encouragement of toleration was yet another ideal from the Enlightenment which had a significant impact on the Revolution. When the Revolution finally occurred, it became apparent that implementing things from the Enlightenment was much harder than simply being influenced by it.

Nevertheless, Montesquieu's separation of powers was implemented quite well and proved to be an essential factor in a future development. This future

development turned out to be the New Constitution of 1791. By establishing a constitutional monarchy, the constitution created a new branch of government known as the Legislative Assembly. It served to monitor the king's actions and to make sure all the power of a country didn't end up in one man's hands.

While Montesquieu's separation of powers into three branches of government was not fully implemented, it was definitely a large factor in the creation of the Legislative Assembly. Voltaire had a strong stand on Christianity, believing that while it did have a few upsides, France was simply better off without it. Like Montesquieu, his ideals were certainly taken into consideration, but were not fully implemented into the new, revolutionized society. Voltaire's principles were seen after the National Convention pursued their "de-Christianization" of France.

The word saint was removed from all street names, Sundays and church holidays were removed from the calendar, and the calendar even began and ended at a different time than before. Without Voltaire's work, many of these beneficial changes would never have been implemented and France wouldn't have changed for the better so soon. In *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Process of the French Revolution* by Mary Wollstonecraft, she recapitulates this well. The revolution was neither produced by the abilities or intrigues of a few individuals; nor was the effect of sudden and short-lived enthusiasm; but the natural consequence of intellectual improvement" (Doc. 10). If not for Montesquieu and Voltaire, the French Revolution may very well have not taken place. These revolutionaries fought for the power and rights of the people, many of which are still in effect today. The Revolution changed <https://assignbuster.com/french-revolution-montesquieu-voltaire-assignment/>

the face of France forever and without the Enlightenment ideals to begin with, France might not have made any progress to the modern, prosperous country it is today. .