

When the king took flight essay sample



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In June 1791, King Louis XVI and his family snuck out of Paris during the night, hoping to escape from the French Revolution and its violence. He planned to escape the country and return with foreign assistance to reclaim control of France, but the people of Varennes stopped and detained him until authorities arrived and sent him back to Paris. Louis' attempted escape, in addition to the letter he left behind denouncing the Revolution, "profoundly influenced the political and social climate of France" (223). His escape outraged many people and left the administration in shambles, and this caused tensions to break out. To control the situation, the people of France quickly organized their own authoritative forces. Timothy Tackett argues in *When the King Took Flight* that Louis XVI's escape is significant because it destroyed faith in the monarch and amplified the violence of the Revolution but at the same time instilled a new sense of unity among the French.

King Louis XVI's failed escape upset many people because they had invested so much trust and affection for him. Despite his indecisiveness, chubbiness, and lack of royal grace, they respected him and therefore tolerated his flaws. On June 23 for instance, Louis stood by the nobility and denounced the existence of the National Assembly, but many patriots forgave him and instead blamed his advisors. The French still respected their king and thus forgave him despite his denial of the National Assembly. Instead, they shifted the blame from Louis to his advisors and this provided him with a chance to redeem himself, which he did. At the Festival of Federation, Louis swore to abide by the National Assembly's constitution. In response, people rejoiced knowing that with the support of the monarch, the Revolution is ensured to succeed (37). He easily won back the love of his people with this

act. However, Louis' failed escape shattered any remaining confidence in the monarchy because he betrayed the same people who defended him.

And this time, the people could not excuse him because he left behind a letter “justifying his decision to flee the capital and to cease cooperating with the Revolutionary leaders” (41). In this letter, he disapproved of the reduction of his royal powers and personal wealth, which affected his lifestyle and authority. He denounced the Revolution, National Assembly, and its constitution. Copies of the letter circulated in public and revealed to people that “Louis had lied to the French” when he swore an oath “before God and the nation to uphold the constitution” (102).

Not only did he leave behind his people but his flight would have led to a civil war between revolutionaries and loyalists aided by foreigners. On top of that, deputies of the National Assembly dealt with the aftermath of a missing king: paranoid Parisians suspecting a conspiracy, people storming the palace, and palace servants being accused of treason. This added to the “profound sense of desertion and betrayal” by a king that people saw as a “good father” (222). Out of disgust, they denounced Louis: calling him all sorts of names, took down portraits of him, and covered “in black the word royal” on signs, buildings, and other public places (110). The “myth of the kingship had been shattered” because nobody knew what to do with Louis at this time (104, 108). Some wanted exile or imprisonment whereas others suggested reinstating him as only a figurehead, and some thought about a “republic without a king” (108). Either way, they no longer trusted the king.

The King's flight also amplified the violence of the Revolution, more so after they found out that he did not get kidnapped. When news of his disappearance first got out, a crowd entered the Tuileries, "intimidating and shouting insults against guards and servants" while some of them "destroyed portraits of the royal family" (98). In another instance, hostile groups cornered Duke d'Aumont of the Tuileries guards and assaulted him before the militia came to rescue him (98). The king's absence set loose emotions of paranoia and alarm across Paris because they feared counterrevolutionary conspiracies, foreign invasion, or anything that threatened their Revolution. The nature of the violence however, changed after they realized that Louis had planned the escape instead. For example, when the National Assembly took their time deliberating on what to do with Louis, many Parisians suspected the possibility of his reinstatement. As a result, demonstrators and marchers periodically entered meeting halls expressing concerns, drafted petitions to get deputies to change their minds, and even demanded a "rejection of the National Assembly" (144).

In response, the Assembly pressured Mayor Bailly to suppress the crowds with force if necessary, and he eventually declared martial law. During a standoff between the guardsmen and the demonstrators, rocks were thrown followed by a gunshot. In response to the violence and aggression, the "guardsmen opened fire on the crowds [for about] three minutes" (148-150). Elsewhere beyond Paris, truth of the king's disappearance incited "popular violence against local nobles and clergymen" and authorities did little to repress them (168). These episodes of tension and aggression which culminated into violence came about only because Louis XVI attempted to

escape. His flight sent waves of panic across a country passionate for the Revolution developing for years.

Despite the violence and rage against the monarchy, the King's flight inadvertently instilled a sense of unity among the French. First of all, they had to put a handle on the aforementioned violence breaking out within and beyond Paris. Authorities formed emergency committees, militias, and parades burning "straw effigies" of the conspirators to placate angry mobs (168). Secondly, deputies reorganized the administrative system to confront the "unprecedented emergency" of a missing king (155). Most of the newly appointed officials had no experience but their ardor for the Revolution negated this problem. Instead of competing against each other, these new authorities cooperated and this provided a "much needed sense of unity and solidarity" (156). The people filled the authoritative gap left behind Louis' flight and this forced people to unite, which in turn developed into camaraderie of patriotism.

News of Louis' capture augmented this sense of unity because it dispelled the fears and anxieties of the king having already escaped France. With these fears put aside, the Assembly converted the Corpus Christi ceremony into a "citywide celebration of the capture of the king" (106). People sang songs, marched in processions, played music, and swore oaths to the constitution. The celebration reinforced their "new sense of unity and self-confidence" (107). The king's flight left behind an administration to govern and violent people to suppress, and naturally the people of France stood up and did just that. They took matters into their own hands, cooperated with

each other and developed a new sense of unity: one that made people realize the possibility of a republic without a monarch.

King Louis XVI's flight " profoundly influenced the social and political climate of France" (223). Feelings of betrayal angered the Assembly, the Parisians, and even members of the clergy and nobility, thus destroying any remaining faith in the monarchy. This betrayal led to violence not only towards the clergy and nobility, but also among people who suspected one another of treason, conspiracy, or being counterrevolutionaries. Louis' flight caused many problems, and people stepped up for the sake of damage control and crisis management. In doing so, they developed a sense of unity, confidence, and camaraderie that held them together in tumultuous times.