

What was revolutionary about the french revolution

[Literature](#), [French Literature](#)



What was revolutionary about the French Revolution? Since the beginning of history itself, several and numerous people, inventions, ideologies or behaviours were immediately attached to a particular and self-explanatory concept such as revolutionary. As the time goes by its outreaching characteristics and meaning remains the same. A revolutionary is an individual who either actively participates in or advocates revolution.

When used as an adjective, the term revolutionary refers to something that has a major, abrupt impact on society or on some aspect of human endeavour. The term – both as a noun and adjective – is usually applied to the field of politics and is occasionally used in the context of science, invention or art. [1] One of the themes in modern European history which can be directly linked with this concept is the French Revolution.

The main interrogation remains in “ What was revolutionary about the French Revolution? ” In order to answer to this question it is necessary to acknowledge the reasons or origins of the revolution, which initiated or motivated this event and finally, which was the impact and importance of it. The French Revolution is considered one of the greatest social and political upheavals in European History and its tremors can still occasionally be felt.

In the popular imagination, the magical figure 1789 conjures up conflicting images of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity alongside the “ tricoteuse” and the “ guillotine”, of a revolution that offered individual choice and freedom, but that was transformed first into terror and subsequently the caesarism of napoleon. [2] These events continue to fascinate historians and the causes and consequences of the French Revolution continue to be a rich source of

debate. The revolution started in 1789 and the exact date of its end it is still uncertain but studies believe it lasted almost ten years. 3]A series of political and social crises led up to it: widespread of popular discontent because of poverty which was highly influenced by the taxation system implemented by the king Louis XVI in order to maintain his own luxurious and extravagant lifestyle, the wave of unemployment, the growth of the bourgeoisie, an agricultural crisis which left the population in a state of hunger and resentment, the royal treasury's state became desperate because of help given to The American revolt against Britain which led to drastic solutions such as reducing the privileges of the aristocracy and clergy producing revolt on their part among several other origins.

The king offered no lead and the result was a government trapped by the Estates General. The political initiative was not so much lost as given away, and it was considered the perfect opportunity to ambitious or radical deputies such as Mirabeau, Lafayette, Sieyès and Le Chapelier to come to the front. [4] Under their influence the third estate, representing a minimum of 98 per cent of the population, declared itself the National Assembly on the 17th of June. 5] Due to this action, the deputies broke the umbilical cord connecting them to the society of orders marking the birth of the sovereign nation and the death of the old regime. The revolution had begun officially. By the end of June, effective power was draining away from the monarchy and the political failing of Louis XVI (who reigned from 1774-92) was observed once more after the violence in the capital culminating in the storming of the Bastille on the July 14th.

The fall of the Bastille was nevertheless highly noteworthy equally as a political Symbol and as a result of the municipal revolutions that followed. In Paris, order was restored by the newly created National Guard, headed by another ambitious aristocrat - Lafayette - , and effective power passed into the hands of the elected municipality (leaving royal officials with little more than their titles). Throughout France, the conventional power of governors, parliaments and intendants dissolved.

Between the 14th of July and the formal promulgation of a new constitution in September 1791 France was witness to an unprecedented wave of reform. As for Louis XVI, he was largely excluded from the process of national restoration and it symbolized one of the revolution's most striking achievements: the transfer of sovereignty from the king to the National Assembly. [6] As calm was being restored in Paris, information regarding rural revolution began to reach the city.

The peasantry proved itself to be much more persistent and determined than the revolutionary politicians and by July 1793 had won a complete victory as seigneurialism and tithes disappeared from the French countryside forever. The night of 4th of August was considered essential for the upcoming path of reform in a way that it removed the particularist obstacles and corporate mentality that had so often impeded the monarchy. Nevertheless, it was the Declaration of the rights of man, adopted by the National Assembly on 26 of August, which most clearly indicated the new philosophy of government. Written by Lafayette, the Declaration was a manifesto for liberal revolution.

Men were assured equal in rights and such fundamental values as freedom of speech and of the press, religious toleration, equality before the law, freedom from arbitrary arrest and open competition for public office, decreed in a series of imposing articles. No less imperative was the claim that sovereignty belongs to the nation, ideology that justified everything accomplished afterwards. 7] Jointly, the night of the 4th July and the Declaration of the rights of man are a symbol of a revolution that literally destroyed the old social and institutional map of France and sought to apply rational and enlightened principles to the construction of its successor. Internal tolls and duties were abolished, free trade in grain restored and guilds and professional monopolies damaged, old provinces were replaced by eighty-three departments of comparable size and identical administrative structure.

Those departments were divided into districts, which in turns were subdivided in communes. In August 1790, the parliaments were abolished and legal hierarchy reconstructed. Under the old regime, offices in the parliaments and several of its inferior courts had been bought on the open market. That abuse was reformed and the democratic principle was put into place as future judges were to be elected. One final example of their power was the abolition of nobility in June 1790, which came to reassure that only equal citizens remained.

Despite all these significant and revolutionary reforms, it was the financial crisis that had been the immediate cause of the monarchy's collapse and the revolutionaries were expected to provide a solution. It became even more complicated to achieve it due to the integral collapse of the existing

administrative and fiscal system and the disturbances in the countryside where taxes were not being paid. In order to meet its obligations, the state began to print money which benefited from the public confidence in the National Assembly.

Numerous tangible grounds for confidence were provided in November 1789, when the Assembly, voted to confiscate the lands of the church. The effective nationalization of between 5 and 10 per cent of the land in the kingdom provided collateral for state credit and a source of income when the decision was taken to sell these " biens nationaux". By continuing to print paper money against the value of the land seized from the church, their financial worries were solved - at least in the short term. The revolution gained another primordial asset by selling the " biens nationaux".

Those who had invested had a vested interest in the consolidation and defence of the new regime. [8] Another revolutionary reform included a complete transformation of the church. Aided by Jansenist priests, the Civil Constitution of the Clergy was drafted and unveiled in July 1790. Rational enlightened thinking was brought to bear upon the workings of the Catholic Church and like judges and officials in the administrative and political hierarchy, parish priests were subject to elections by district electoral assemblies.

As this brief survey which clearly explained the significant changes occurring in France and the impact they possessed in society, has indicated, the National Assembly was responsible for a programme of reform which

transformed the social and institutional life of France. “ The patchwork quilt of particularist rights and privileges was replaced by a greater emphasis upon the rights of the individual and the concept of equality before the authority of the state. ”[9] Although, revolutionaries were not satisfied as they wanted to merge the world into their sea of values, ideologies and revolution.

The revolutionaries of 1792 began a war which extended through the Imperial period and forced nations to marshal their resources to a greater extent than ever before. Some areas, like Belgium and Switzerland, became client states of France with reforms similar to those of the revolution.

National identities also began coalescing like never before. The many and fast developing ideologies of the revolution were also spread across Europe, helped by French being the continental elite’s dominant language. If the National Assembly had actually reinvigorated France, the constitution created to improve the country was a disaster.

Within twelve months the monarchy had been defeated by the second revolutionary wave of August 1792 resulting in the execution of Louis XVI in January 1793. Another example of the extremely radical path the revolution was taking is the treatment of the church. The reality was that not satisfied, the revolutionaries proceeded to execute the nonconformists. As the revolution slid into Terror after 1792, the clergy was increasingly seen as the agent of counter-revolution. In the short-term, the religious policies of successive governments after 1790 created unnecessary enemies for the revolution.

Revolutionaries started to then use war as a way of forcing the king, and any other “enemies”, to declare themselves whole-heartedly for the revolution. It was therefore; with mixed motives the French began their battle to export revolution to Europe. It can be considered that the use of Terror was simply a form of political strategy but in the minds of the revolutionaries it had a deeper reason. They believed they were creating a new society, a new man and to do so they needed to destroy the idea, beliefs and patterns of behaviour of the old.

Terror was paving the way to a republic virtue and those who would stand in the way of the march of progress would be discarded. It was the integral part of the vision and ideology of a revolution. [10] Between 1789 and 1799, the French Revolution offered a spectacle which inspired and horrified the people of France and Europe ever since. The overthrow of the monarchy, the attack on the church, the declaration of the principles of civic equality and national sovereignty along the destruction of seigneurialism were an admonition to the other monarchies in Europe and an example to their rivals.

For liberals the values and ideas of 1789 and the Declaration of the rights of the man continue to possess repercussions nowadays. Throughout the nineteenth century the radical revolution was the source of inspiration for republican and left-wing movements all over the world. On the other hand, conservatives remained fearful of a further outbreak of revolutionary passion. It influenced and led to other revolutions in most of the European nations, America and several other countries around the world.

The French Revolution was a defining moment in the development of all shades of political opinion, changed views and values, implemented new laws and behaviours. It left no one indifferent and for that reason it can be considered one of the most revolutionary procedures of modern history.

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