

The significance of the great fear of 1789 essay sample



The Great Fear, or Le Grand Peur, of 1789 conducted the French Revolution from Bastille and Paris to the provinces, thereby creating a national insurrection against the powers that be. The French peasants mistrusted Parisians and were by no means willing allies of Parisians in 1789. Moreover, as soon as the wave of the Great Fear died out with the almost overnight demolition of feudal system in the first week of August 1789, the peasantry lost interest in the Revolution. Yet the Great Fear phase that lasted for about twenty days in July and August of 1789 was crucial in determining the depth and scope of the French Revolution.

The Great Fear episode briefly shattered the indifference of hundreds of thousands of rural farmers to the cause of revolution, and gave a massive boost to the forces of change that were convulsing the French society. French peasants were not interested in politics; their chief concern was their bread (Fagan 2004). But when the “ Great Fear of 1789” generated mass hysteria in the general populace, the country’s peasantry found itself suddenly confronting the broader aspects of French political and social system.

It is commonly believed that one of the chief causes behind the French Revolution was the rise of bourgeoisie in economic and social importance. It was the awakened and advancing French middle class that instigated and led an uprising against the Old Regime and the prevailing social order dominated by the nobility and the clergy. Economic recession in the 1770’s thwarted the ambitions of many bourgeois and resulted in the accrual of deep frustrations that seemed to be ready to explode by the time of the beginning of the French Revolution. Yet there was also the factor of the

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rising bread prices just before the Revolution which fomented unrest and discontent among the poor peasants and workers — thus precipitating the onset of the Revolution and giving it a head start.

After the storming of Bastille on July 14, 1789, disturbances broke out all over the land. The whole society was in upheaval. There were all kinds of rumors in the air that added to the confusion and chaos of the situation. Somehow rumors started circulating that bands of robbers and thugs working for nobles were set loose on the villages and were prowling about seeking to destroy the harvests and homes of the peasants. These baseless rumors seriously impacted the farmers who had been in a severely weakened and disadvantaged condition owing to poor harvests the previous years, which increased bread prices and created widespread destitution.

As the rumors caught on, fear spread across the length and the breadth of the country. There was acute sense of panic that flared up in the manner of a chain reaction. The panicked and infuriated peasants turned against the nobles ransacking their premises and property, killing and burning people in the process.

As castles, manor houses, abbeys and tax and salt monopoly offices were invaded and sometimes set on fire, villagers fled in terror from their houses at reports of assassins paid to wreak revenge, and sought refuge in forests and church belfries. Fear led to further violence (Hibbert 1980).

The riots and agitations associated with the Great Fear began on 20th July and ended by 6th August of 1789, all taking place in the immediate

aftermath of Bastille (Rudé 1988). The aims of the peasant uprising coincided with one of the chief purposes of the bourgeoisie, which was to bring down the nobility and clergy. The nobility and clergy were made to surrender their privileges on 4th August 1789, and this positive development was almost a direct result of the peasant uprising and unrest.

The outcome was the passage of a series of decrees early in August. The most controversial of these declared the 'feudal regime' abolished (Roberts 1997).

The National Assembly abolished feudalism, annulling the seigneurial rights of the nobility (the Second Estate) and the tithes gathered by the Roman Catholic clergy (the First Estate). This move was made largely to placate the insane fury of the peasants and to bring the spate of violence under control. If not for the rumors and the Great Fear wave that resulted from them, this development could have come about at such an early stage in the Revolution.

The French Revolution was one of the bloodiest revolutions ever, and the intense violence witnessed during the very brief Great Fear period set the tone of all the blood-letting that was to come in the eventful decade ahead. Blood, gore, brutality, and mass executions became the hallmark of the French Revolution, especially in its latter radical stage, standing in a noticeable contrast to the earlier moderate stage. The Great Fear was one of the first tumultuous insurrectionary events to have happened during the Revolution, it set a precedent for the much later course of events.

In the years before the commencement of the Revolution, there was growing dissatisfaction in the middle class French people concerning many aspects of the existing state of affairs. One of the most important issues was the rising and unequal taxes. The government was being drawn deeper and deeper into financial crisis, to offset the impact of which it continued to raise the burden of taxes on common folks. In general, the government led by the King Louis XIV appeared increasingly inefficient and illegitimate to most French people. The palace of Versailles came to be seen as the very symbol of unwarranted extravagance and corruption of the monarchy.

The people's resentment and frustrations were given voice by a group of professional intellectuals called philosophes. Writings of such people as Voltaire and Diderot channelized the attitudes and sentiments of the people against the monarchy and the government. They urged for significant changes in the whole prevailing political, legal, and socio-economic system, which they perceived as corrupt, decrepit, and moribund. However, they did not incite a violent revolution, nor advocated drastic measures of any kind that involved bloodshed.

Interestingly, even the government was not insensitive to the woes of the common people, and was trying its best to ameliorate the situation through initiating reforms. One of the most crucial political measures the government has undertaken in this regard was the convocation of the Estates General. For centuries France had had a tradition of running the democratic institution of Estates General which was a platform to represent the interests of all social classes and elect deputies in the government on a representative

basis. However it had not been in use since the early decades of the 17th century, and Louis XIV sought to revive it in order to abate the swelling tide of common man's fury and in the hope of working out a meaningful resolution to the worsening economic crisis.

In fact, a violent political revolution could not have come about in France of 1789 if not for the economic crisis (Kaiser 2006). It was the intensity of rising prices and dwindling resources that drove people to desperation and violence. It was the scale of poverty and deprivation that instigated the madness of the Great Fear period. If not for the peasant uprising, the revolution could still have taken place but would not have started on such a violent note — inadvertently creating a pattern for all the untold ghastly violence to come in the years ahead.

Poverty and its associated problems had been getting worse all through the 1780's and there was a conspicuous expansion of marginal groups in the society such as beggars, vagrants, criminals, prostitutes and waifs. Bandits consolidated themselves in large gangs and began to terrorize the countryside. The migrant labors in and around Paris were especially likely to turn into either beggars or criminals. Still, the situation was at a manageable stage until 1788, when the harvests miserably failed in twenty-seven of thirty-two generalities due to abnormal weather conditions. As the price of bread began to soar, so were the levels of general social unrest. Even before the Great Fear episode, inflammatory rumors had had their fair share of spreading confusion and breeding deep-rooted distrust. For example, after the agricultural disaster of 1788, it was widely believed that there was a

huge conspiracy between the government and grain-dealers promoting their selfish interests by depriving the common man of bread.

Nothing seemed to work for the government, even the vaunted revival of Estates General (called National Assembly later on) backfired. The conflict and agitation over the issue of the election of deputies and the list of grievances to be included in the cahiers de doléances only helped to heighten the explosive potential of the situation, instead of leading the way to the best possible solutions.

It was in this climate that the twin events of Bastille and Great Fear erupted, triggering off the Revolution as well as setting a trend for things to come. The Bastille event was decisive in turning the tide of events, and to this day we commemorate it as the beginning of a great revolution. But almost equally decisive for the Revolution was the turn of events associated with the Great Fear period, although it has nearly slipped into oblivion from collective memory. These two events were the culmination of a spate of urban and rural violence in the preceding months and were the precursors to a most violent decade in the French history.

Yet, in spite of these two incidents, if Louis XIV, his ministers and his army had been able to restore order to Paris in July and August of 1789, along with abolishing the feudal system that had long exploited the farmers, many scholars believe that the situation could have been easily brought into control and prevented the deadly coalescence of political crisis with a socioeconomic crisis. However, this was not to be. The violence, impulsiveness, mass hysteria and insanity that characterized Bastille and

Great Fear episodes, in sharp contrast to the gradual transition and transformation that the philosophes were urging and which was in the best long-term interests of the society, became some of the most notable features of the French Revolution as a whole.

The French Revolution has had very broad and profound implications for the world history, and a considerable deal of the legacy of the French Revolution can be traced back to the Great Fear episode. Although it may be difficult for us to believe, the French Revolution - especially with its drastic and violent approach - was by no means inevitable. The grievances listed in cahiers de doléances themselves suggest that what people were seeking were moderate reforms (Blanning 1998). Till the last moment, it was eminently possible for the government authorities and the people to work together and come up with compromises and viable solutions. The revolutionary mentality that we so naturally associate with twentieth century uprisings, rebellions and revolutions was still not in evidence during the Age of Enlightenment. If anything, the revolutionary mind was not the cause of the French Revolution, it was the by-product of it. Being the first of its kind and still one of a kind in many ways, the French Revolution, it is sometimes said, was a revolution that was not caused by revolutionaries but itself was a revolution that caused revolutionaries.

If the revolution caused the revolutionaries and not vice versa, what caused the Revolution? It was a fortuitous, and ultimately disastrous, conglomeration of a complex sequence of events that built up extraordinary pressures in the social circumstances and the psychological attitudes of the people. These pressures were first given vent through Bastille and the <https://assignbuster.com/the-significance-of-the-great-fear-of-1789-essay-sample/>

events of the Great Fear period. If the course of events during that fateful year of 1789 took a slightly different turn which did not lead up to Bastille or the Great Fear incidents, not only the Revolution could have been less violent, indeed there may not have been a revolution in the first place, despite many indications that may apparently be pointing to a revolution to us.

Conclusion

Emboldened by the storming of Bastille in Paris, peasants formed themselves into groups, and armed themselves in whatever possible, and stormed the aristocratic chateaux. It resulted in the dramatic abolishing of the medieval institution of feudalism and opened new avenues for modern rural society. The Roman Catholic Church too was rendered powerless at the same time. The much-celebrated Bastille event was largely a symbolic event. However, the happenings of Great Fear, closely following Bastille, had very directly galvanized the Revolution and gave it that particular character of violence and ruthless destruction that we have come to associate with it. The French Revolution significantly impacted the history of the world, and those incidents of insurrection collectively known as Great Fear were crucial in shaping the course of the Revolution.

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