

# French Revolution : Causes and Effects

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## ABSTRACT

*The French Revolution was an outcome of the discontent of the common people with the French Monarchy. France's costly investment in the American revolution and the extravagant spending by King Louis XVI and his predecessors had put the country in a big economic crisis. The failure of the Ancient Régime to respond to increasing social and economic inequality, rapid population growth and restrictions caused by the inability to adequately finance government debt resulted in economic depression, unemployment and high food prices. Eventually, after the French Revolution the spread of French culture, the end of the feudal system, the beginning of liberalism, the introduction of the principle of legal equality-- these changes sped up. The purpose of this research paper is to make a deep study of the great historical event 'The French Revolution', and thereby to research its causes and effects.*

*Keywords: Discontent, inequality, revolution, feudal system, liberalism.*

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## French Revolution: Causes and effects

The French Revolution started on the 17th May, 1789. It replaced the 'ancient regime' of King Louis XVI and the old ways of feudal, aristocratic hierarchy. From 1790 to 1794, the French Revolution became increasingly radical. French King Louis XVI was tried and executed on January 21, 1793. A guard held his severed head up to cries of 'Vive la République' and as an eye witness, Vincent Cronin later wrote, 'this cry, a thousand times repeated became the universal shout of the multitude, and every hat was in the air.'

After this France was declared a Republic and full power placed in the hands of the National Assembly especially in the innocuously named Committee of Public Safety. Now war between France and monarchical nations Great Britain and Spain was inevitable. They joined Austria and other European nations in the war against Revolutionary France.

On the 5th September, 1793 the Convention declared 'terror the order of the day.' From this point the Committee under the control of the infamous Maximilien Robespierre instituted what would later be called the Terror, where over 16,000 'saboteurs', 'royalists' and 'enemies of the Republic' were imprisoned and executed. One of the worst atrocities was the destruction of the Federalist city of Lyon, which had surrendered in October 1793 in which 1880 people were condemned to death and much of the

city was raised to the ground. A German adventurer who travelled to Lyon with the army recalled that 'the blood of those who had been executed a few hours beforehand was still running in the street.'

The Terror ended in late July of 1794.

To illustrate the differences between the new Republic and the old regime, the leaders needed to implement a new set of symbols. To this end, symbols were borrowed from historic cultures and redefined, while those of the old regime were either destroyed or reattributed with acceptable characteristics. These revised symbols were used to instil in the public a new sense of tradition and reverence for the Enlightenment and the Republic.

The song is the first example of the "European march" anthemic style, while the evocative melody and lyrics led to its widespread use as a song of revolution and incorporation into many pieces of classical and popular music.

The guillotine remains "the principal symbol of the Terror in the French Revolution."

The Liberty cap, also known as the Phrygian cap, or pileus, is a brimless, felt cap that is conical in shape with the tip pulled forward. It reflects Roman republicanism and liberty.

Causes :-

The upheaval was caused by widespread discontent with the French monarchy and the poor economic policies of King Louis XVI. Although the upheaval failed to achieve its goals, it played a crucial role in displaying to the world the power inherent in the will of the people.

There were a number of prime reasons of the French revolution. France's costly investment in the American revolution and the extravagant spending by King Louis XVI and his predecessors had put the country in a big economic crisis. The government had borrowed to fight Great Britain in the Seven years war and to help the Americans in the revolutionary war. Now the king had no choice except to try and raise taxes. The commoners of France (The Third Estate) had to pay the taxes while the nobles and the clergy were exempted. This angered the common people. The peasants had seen two decades of poor harvest, drought and cattle disease. Besides these, the skyrocketing bread cost kindled unrest among peasants. Many of them expressed resentment by rioting and looting. The economic instability was a major cause in stimulating the French revolution.

The miserable social condition of France during this period was a major cause. The then society of France was divided into three classes - the clergy, the nobles and the common people (the third estate). The farmers, cobblers, sweepers and other lower classes belonged to the third estate. The clergy belonged to the first estate. The nobles belonged to the second estate. The first and the second estate did not pay taxes. The clergy managed the church, the monastery and education institutions of France. They exploited the common people in many ways, while the lower clergy served the common people in the true sense.

The Nobility (the second estate) was subdivided into two groups- the court nobles and the provincial nobles. The first one lived in pomp and luxury. They neglected the problems of the common people. The third estate formed a heterogeneous class. They paid the taxes- Tithe, Taille, Gable. They were employed by the clergies in their fields. The Bourgeoisie formed the topmost category of the Third Estate. The doctors, lawyers, teachers, businessmen, writers, and philosophers were included in the group. Although they were wealthy, they were ranked by the Monarch as the Third Estate. This class of the Third Estate stimulated the people for upheaval. They awakened the common people for their rights. So the French revolution is also known as the Bourgeoisie Revolution.

Although Louis was not indifferent to the crisis, when faced with opposition he tended to back down. Combined with a regressive tax system and resistance to reform by the ruling elite, the result was a crisis Louis XVI proved unable to manage.

The court became the target of popular anger, especially Queen Marie-Antoinette, who was viewed as a spendthrift Austrian spy, and blamed for the dismissal of 'progressive' ministers like Jacques Necker. For their opponents, Enlightenment ideas on equality and democracy provided an intellectual framework for dealing with these issues, while the American Revolution was seen as confirmation of their practical application.

However, Historians generally view the underlying causes of the French Revolution as driven by the failure of the Ancien Régime to respond to increasing social and economic inequality. Rapid population growth and restrictions caused by the inability to adequately finance government debt resulted in economic depression, unemployment and high food prices.

The French population grew from 18 million in 1700 to 26 million in 1789, making it the most populous state in Europe; Paris had over 600,000 inhabitants, of whom roughly one third were either unemployed or had no regular work. Inefficient agricultural methods meant domestic farmers could not support these numbers, while primitive transportation networks made it hard to maintain supplies even when there was sufficient. As a result, food prices rose by 65% between 1770 and 1790, yet real wages increased by only 22%. Food shortages were particularly damaging for the regime, since many blamed price increases on government failure to prevent profiteering.

Newspapers and pamphlets played a central role in stimulating and defining the Revolution. Prior to 1789, there have been a small number of heavily censored newspapers that needed a royal licence to operate, but the Estates-General created an enormous demand for news, and over 130 newspapers appeared by the end of the year. Among the most significant were Marat's *L'Ami du peuple* and Elysée Loustallot's *Revolutions de Paris*. Over the next decade, more than 2,000 newspapers were founded, 500 in Paris alone. Most lasted only a matter of weeks but they became the main communication medium, combined with the very large pamphlet literature.

Effects :-

The effects of the French were the spread of French culture, the end of the feudal system, the beginning of liberalism, the introduction of the principle of legal equality, and the downgrading of the once powerful and rich Catholic Church to just a bureau controlled by the government. On account of the revolution the frenchmen were displaced. It led to spreading of the French culture.

The displacement of these Frenchmen led to a spread of French culture, policies regulating immigration, and a safe haven for Royalists and other counterrevolutionaries to outlast the violence of the French Revolution. The long-term impact on France was profound, shaping politics, society, religion and ideas, and polarizing politics for more than a century. The closer other countries were, the greater and deeper was the French impact, bringing liberalism and the end of many feudal or traditional laws and practices. However, there was also a conservative counter-reaction that defeated Napoleon, reinstated the Bourbon kings, and in some ways reversed the new reforms.

Most of the new nations created by the France were abolished and returned to prewar owners in 1814. However, Frederick Artz emphasizes the benefits the Italians gained from the French Revolution:

'For nearly two decades the Italians had the excellent codes of law, a fair system of taxation, a better economic situation, and more religious and intellectual toleration than they had known for centuries....

Everywhere old physical, economic, and intellectual barriers had been thrown down and the Italians had begun to be aware of a common nationality.'

Likewise in Switzerland the long-term impact of the French Revolution has been assessed by Martin:

'It proclaimed the equality of citizens before the law, equality of languages, freedom of thought and faith; it created a Swiss citizenship, basis of our modern nationality, and the separation of powers, of which the old regime had no conception; it suppressed internal tariffs and other economic restraints; it unified weights and measures, reformed civil and penal law, authorized mixed marriages (between Catholics and Protestants), suppressed torture and improved justice; it developed education and public works.

The greatest impact came in France itself. In addition to effects similar to those in Italy and Switzerland, France saw Power became centralized in Paris, with its strong bureaucracy and an army supplied by conscripting all young men. French politics were permanently polarized—'left' and 'right' were the new terms for the supporters and opponents of the principles of the Revolution.

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