

Hannah Harrington

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Was the French Revolution a revolution?

When discussing the French Revolution, it is important to ask this question: Was the French Revolution a revolution at all? Some scholars argue that rather than a revolution, what occurred in France at the end of the 18th century should be categorized as an evolution. An evolution is described as a slow change in culture over time. A slow burn leading up to the fire. A revolution, on the other hand, can be seen as a rapid change within a culture. A spark leading to an explosion. The French Revolution was characterized by its intense period of violence and change between 1789 and 1800. Because of the short period of time in which it occurred, the French Revolution should be labeled as a revolution.

France was a country dictated by a long-standing class structure that controlled the aspects of every citizen's life for hundreds of years. The system in place is now referred to as the Ancien Régime or the Old Regime. This system held a grip on France's people from the Late Middle Ages until the French Revolution exploded in 1789. Feudalism and monarchy were two key aspects of the Ancient Régime. The feudal system bound citizens to the land and their ruling nobility. The nobles fought for the approval of the absolute monarchy, which at the time of the revolution was Louis XVI, the last monarch of the Bourbon family to control France.¹ In 1789, this entire system was destroyed by the French Revolution.

Europe in the late 18th century was changing. The philosophies of the Enlightenment introduced new ideas for social, political, and economic structures. The former belief that the

¹ Tacket, Timothy, *When the King Took Flight* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 26

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Church was above all began to fall and the trust in the king deteriorated. Previously, the Clergy were some of the highest-ranking officials in France. In Timothy Tackett's *When the King Took Flight*, the citizens of Varennes were shocked to realize that under the new regime, the clergy held no power. "It was difficult to believe that the great aristocrats and clerics of the former regime were not manipulating the events", stated Tackett.² Everything France once called normal would soon be deemed wrong. The revolution sought to change the entire system that once controlled the country.

Tackett believes that the beginning of the instability began in the 1780s with the inability for Louis XVI to properly make decisions of how to lead his country.³ Often Louis would consult his wife, Marie Antoinette, on decisions for the state. He also was described as lethargic and indecisive by the end of his reign. The citizen of Paris grew increasingly impatient and began to distrust the monarch. This was shown most in the major events like the storming of the Bastille on July 14, 1789, or the women's march on Versailles on October 5, 1789. Within a year great violence and extreme legislation change swept through Paris.

Over the next two years, Louis XVI would fight to keep his reputation as a strong and trustworthy leader. He kept a facade that made others believe he agreed with the National Assembly and the signing of the Constitution. The Assembly began to take away many freedoms from the king in order to control him. In *When the King Took Flight*, Louis was reported as

² Ibid., 13

³ Ibid., 33

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saying, “It is amazing that after having given freedom to the nation, I myself am deprived of all freedom.”⁴ As his frustrations grew, Louis XVI and his family decided to flee to Austria. The success of this flight was life or death for the royal family.

Along the route to Austria, Louis and his family were recognized several times by passersby. By the time they reached Varennes, their escape would no longer continue. The royal family was delivered back to Paris by six thousand national guardsmen.⁵ People from every town they passed through gawked at the king and shouted about his lack of thoughtfulness for abandoning his nation. For his supporters, this was the beginning of the end. Their king had betrayed them and left the nation for the National Assembly. The king, now labeled a traitor would face the guillotine by January of 1793. The Reign of Terror was a defining factor at the end of the Revolution as all those who fell on the wrong side of the spectrum would be killed for their beliefs. For those who believe revolution is based solely on violence in bloodshed, this is a major argument that the French Revolution is indeed a revolution.

From 1789 to 1793, France was under the grip of violence. The high stakes associated with picking the wrong side could have meant death during the Reign of Terror. The Revolution in the government was pushed by the violence seen within Paris. These short bursts of violence were some of the main reasons the French Revolution moved so quickly. These explosions across France are the sole reason the French Revolution can be deemed a revolution.

⁴ Ibid., 44

⁵ Ibid., 78-79

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A key player within the French Revolution was the development of mass media through newspapers. The revolution created the culture of spreading views in this way within France.

The radicalization of Paris was also tied to more recent developments. By Early 1791 Paris had been saturated with dozens of daily newspapers and numerous other sporadic publications. Such papers articulated almost every position on the political spectrum.⁶

Though most of Europe would still be illiterate at the time, Paris was a highly literate area compared to the rest of France. People were able to read, write, and discuss their beliefs in a wider range than those in the countryside. Cafes also allowed for people to hear what had been written as people in the restaurants would read the newspapers out loud to anyone that wanted to hear. The spread of news throughout Paris helped push the revolution further in the city.

One of the biggest changes within the revolution was the removal of power from the church. At this time in Europe, the Catholic church was a leading factor in every government. Everyone's lives were dictated by the clergy. In 1791, The National Assembly forced all clergymen to take a formal oath of alliance to the new constitution.⁷ any members of the church that refused to pledge their allegiance would be removed from their positions in the church. This was seen in Varennes in April of 1791. The church had held power in Europe for hundreds of

⁶ Ibid., 91

⁷ Ibid., 13

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years. Within a period of two years, they had been taken from their seat of power in the Monarchy of France.

As stated in its name, the period in France beginning in 1789 has been deemed a revolution. Rather than thinking of bloodshed and fighting to determine whether a culmination of events is a revolution, it must be looked at for the speed at which change occurred. Some try to argue that the French Revolution should instead be considered an evolution because a build-up led to an explosion of violence and change. This slow burn is used to determine an evolution. On the other hand, and revolution is classified by quick change. Because of the rapid speed at which the French Revolution occurred, it is more of a revolution, beginning in 1789 and ending by 1800 with the rise of Napoleon.

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Bibliography

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