

Western Civilization II

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Professor Bostick

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Near the end of the 18th century, France was a powder keg ripe for turmoil and bloodshed. The last quarter of the century was a dark, bloody time that saw famine, disease, political unrest, numerous wars, and out right terror spread across the country. The monarchy was deposed by murder fueled by radical new ideas of enlightenment. As the conditions worsened, the citizens of France fractured in various groups and factions all jockeying for power. This brutal time became known as the revolution that shaped contemporary France.

The road to revolution was a gradual rising tide that would eventually swallow the nation. By the 1770's famine and disease were ravaging the peasantry of France. To worsen the situation the lower classes were heavily and unfairly taxed. All over France the poor saw high unemployment and higher bread prices. Simultaneously, the Government was experiencing its own problems; it was finding it hard to adapt in a changing world. For a hundred years, the French government was a feudal monarchy that was ever increasing into a centric power. The rule of king was absolute, asserted by the divine rights of kings' doctrine. The King ruled all powerful without any checks or balances, and occasionally without counsel. The whims and will of the King were enforced by the teachings of the Catholic Church and the military. To make money the King warred and looted enemies and taxed the commoners with his tax-farmers (who added their own tax to make money). The King also sold venal offices, positions in his

ministry, to the highest bidder. Outside of France, all across Europe, monarchies were abandoning the old system for a capitalistic one of trade and tariffs to fill their coffers. The Ancien Regime of France was too preoccupied with war, persecuting religious minorities, and palace building to see the world evolving around them.

King Louis XVI inherited his throne amidst a tense political landscape. The two preceding kings spent much of their time abolishing the feudal system and strengthening the power of the monarchy while doing little in the way of financial reform. They waged many wars and built elaborate palaces placing France in debt. To make the debt worse, Louis XVI funded the American Revolution in a power play against Britain. France's biased tax system brought in less money than it spent. The archaic tax system was divided into Estates. The first estate was the clergy of the Catholic Church. The Second Estate was the Noble families of the old feudal system. The third was the rest of the people, a staggering ninety-six percent of the population. This majority included the newly rich merchant class, the artisans, and the poor farmers and laborers. The tax system overbearingly taxed the third estate while exempting the much wealthier first and second estates. To correct the country's financial crisis, The King appointed Jacques Necker as the Director-General of Finance. Necker was a Swiss-born banker who made himself very wealthy through investing. He was very popular with the bourgeoisie and commoners of France. He wrote a book on government expenditure and brought the subject into the public's interest. Once in office, he raised interest rates to avoid raising taxes. Then when that failed, he attempted to reform the tax system in attempt to make it an equal distribution. When Necker proposed restricting government spending his role was terminated. The public outcry was so great he was quickly reinstated. Gradually the

King was seeing his absolute power diminish by the will of the people. In 1789, the newly reappointed Necker organized the Estates-General voting assembly, thus setting the revolution in inexorable motion. While Necker was seen as the savior of the people, King Louis XVI received a deservedly harsh reputation. Except for warring and taxing, the French Kingdom was ineffectual. Louis XVI was an indecisive and inept leader who failed to deal the problems his predecessors left him or even lessen them for his successors. As his reign and financial problems continued, he grew sheepish to the will of the people and when they realized he was essentially powerless they usurped his throne. The Third Estate would now fix France by their selves. After abdicating the throne he was imprisoned, then summarily executed by guillotine.

The King wasn't the only to have sleepless nights over the crisis; the nobility and clergy did not welcome revolution either. Though the Aristocracy had been having their feudal power consolidated over the past century, they still enjoyed a life of privilege and ease. They were tax exempt and spent the majority of their time idling away in court life or patronizing the arts. A large portion of the men purchased venal offices to hand down through the family line. Some of the son's of the Second estate would join the First estate of the church for more power. The First Estate was as nearly above the law as the king, with incredible influence. The nobility flaunted wealth and practiced conspicuous consumption. Many were preoccupied with 'keeping up with the Joneses' and rather indifferent to the financial and political states of their country. At the time of upheaval, many of the noble families and clergyman became targets of mob violence and were killed or chased out. After the initial violence and the storming of the Bastille, some of the surviving nobility joined the political groups Monarchiens and Feuillants. Notable

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nobles who were active players in the revolutionary years were Paul Barras, who became Executive leader of the Directory, and Jean Joseph Mounier, a staunch royalist who survived the turmoil and later worked for Napoleon Bonaparte's empire. Some of the surviving aristocrats were responsible for the Thermidorian Reaction which ended the Reign of Terror. Halting La Terreur was not enough, as the nobles who kept their lives lost their titles and were known as Ci-Devants. The Revolution permanently altered the position and shape of the Upper Class in France.

Arguably one of the most influential demographics during the revolution was the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie were a new type of people kings had a hard time dealing with. They were newly and self made wealthy, without any favor from the king. They were skilled entrepreneurs who lived capitalistic and materialistic life styles. These were the artisans, the merchants, the artists, doctors and lawyers. The bourgeoisie possessed powerful skills that allowed accumulating large profits. With their new riches, they educated themselves and their families, improved their station in life, exerted influence and bought venal offices from the king. By the fall of Louis XVI 39,000 of the 50,000 venal offices now belonged to the Bourgeoisie instead of the typical noble families. The problem with this class is they were technically part of the Third Estate. These craftsmen were the upper crust of the lower half and were tired of being treated like peasants. Prior to the revolution, many of these men attended salons and discussed ideologies of the enlightenment. The bourgeoisies were the ones who pushed the country into the revolution. Many of them were politically moderate, only wanted to create a constitutional monarchy with a parliament not to depose of the king. The most politically active of these men were the lawyers, many who helped in forming the Girondists'

principles. Their increasing power greatly threatened the nobility, and the bourgeoisie saw themselves as the new and true elite of French society. Initially, the moderate men of this class were successful in their revolutionary activities as shown by the Tennis Court Oath in June of 1789, but eventually more radical and more liberal forces took control of the revolution.

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The Jacobin Club stained its place in history as the most notorious and radical part of the French Revolution. Initially made up of Estates-General deputies from Breton province, their influence dramatically increased when they arrived in Paris and accepted left-winged bourgeoisie into their membership. At their height of power, the club had an estimated strength of 420,000 citizens. They believed in a centrist republican state with universal education and suffrage, separation of church and state and numerous more radical reforms. Their members adopted the dress of the rural farm gentry. They were staunchly opposed to the war with Austria. Under the control of Maximilien Robespierre, lawyer by trade and a deputy of Artois, the Jacobins began the Reign of Terror. The result was over 1200 public executions by guillotine for any citizen considered by the Jacobins to be Anti-, Counter or False Revolutionaries. Robespierre was the de facto dictator of France for almost a year. Beside the streamline murdering of political enemies, the reign of terror was marked by food riots and consolidation of Jacobin centrist power resulting in repressed freedoms. The Jacobin's menacing regime culminated in the arrest and execution of Robespierre and 21 of his allies, known as the Thermidorian Reaction. The Thermidorian Reaction was carried out by noblemen and bourgeoisie of the Directory, which had its powers greatly diminished under Robespierre's rule. The Reaction subsequently destroyed the Jacobins. They were forced to close their doors and meet

in secret at cafes. Aristocratic youths hunted them down and beat them with sticks. A few attempts throughout the decade tried to recreate the Club, but all were short lived and powerless.

The largest, angriest and most violent group during this time was not the Jacobins, but the Sans-Culottes. Not an organized political entity, the term encompassed the lowest and poorest members of the Third Estate. Their title, coined in 1790, literally is “Without Breeches” indicating the type of pants they wore. The bread shortages and political injustices forced on them created a furious mob, which at times were led by different groups. The Sans-Culottes was the angry mob; the grunts and foot soldiers of the Revolution. They were the main perpetrators in the September Massacres against the Catholic Church and the storming of the Bastille. The Jacobins greatly influenced them during the Reign of Terror controlling the streets of Paris with mob rule. The Hebertists, a small extremely radical group that supported Europe wide atheism and revolution used them to do their violent bidding until they were wiped out during the Terror. All of the radical violent revolutionary groups managed to feed off the mob frenzy until the fall of Robespierre when their mob influence was greatly reduced. Without the effective leadership from bourgeoisie like Robespierre and Jacques Herbert (Leader of Hebertists) they ceased to exert power through violence and rioting. The most interesting subset of the Sans-Culottes is the Tricoteuse. These were poor women who spent all day knitting near the guillotines. They were the ones who sentenced suspects to life or death, since law required a jury’s verdict. Almost overwhelmingly their response was “Off with his head!” These “jurors” were paid by the Committee of Public Safety (A machination of the Jacobins) to give their public opinions on the executions.

The French revolution was a wild, dangerous time in France. The king and thousands of others were dead and headless. The Catholic Church and the nobility were attacked, badly beaten and powerless. Everything was unstable. France went to war with Prussia, Italy, Russia, Spain, Portugal, Great Britain and the Dutch Republic. France changed from a monarchy to anarchy then transitioned into four different republics and two different dictatorships before finally becoming the nation it is today. It was this dark and bloody time that defines French history; a dire quest for enlightenment and freedom that brought harsh realities and bloodshed and echoed all throughout Europe before finally discovering its peace as a true republic.

Whitney,

Your essay was well-written with many interesting details. Just a few points were missing. The nobility pressured the crown into convening the Estates General which they thought they could control (two votes against one). In your discussion of the upper middle class, you should mention their influence to change the voting in the E.G. from estates to individuals heads, and they were primarily responsible for the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen," a key document. Otherwise your essay was outstanding. Score 97

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