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# The Days of the Enrages

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## **The Days of the Enragés**

Topic: The Causes of the French Revolution

Abstract: Regarded as one of the most important events in western history, the decline of the long-reigning French monarchy reached a dramatic climax after a decade of protests. The general public does not know what brought on this terrifying time of political upheaval in history, but the causes are clear when inspected.

Over a period of ten years, radical ideas in France turned a country from an absolute theocratic and monarchic government into one with a true constitution and rights for its people. France underwent a process similar to the coming of our own country, only with much more gore. A broke country, with lavish-spending royals and nobles, had nothing left to feed the starving peasants while the aristocrats gorged themselves in the palace of Versailles. Through bread shortages and political intrigue, the streets surged with French flags and banners stating the tripartite motto: “Liberté, égalité, fraternité,” meaning “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.”

The French Revolution has been highly documented, commemorated in art, and even incorporated into video games. The people of one of the most powerful countries in the world turned against their leaders, and changed their government. A spark of rebellion ignited into a raging inferno of hate against the feudal system. America’s own revolution inspired French citizens to change their lives, which included doing away with a total monarchist and his arbitrary rule. This time period is not only fascinating to myself, but historians worldwide. After

intense reading and comprehending just exactly why and how France came to this pivotal point in history, I will attempt to expertly explain why the most powerful country in Europe endured such bloodshed.

The odds against overthrowing centuries-old social order were overcome by rebels with radical ideas. These rebels grew to become the National Guard, people who eventually walked King Louis XVI of France across the scaffold to his public, gruesome death. They stripped away the given rights of the privilege and tossed their heads into the streets. Their actions sent powerful messages to all hereditary monarchs. This was a time where tradition was thrown out the window; kings and queens were beheaded, flags were burned, and wars were waged. Regarded as one of the most important events in history, the decline of the long-reigning monarchs reached a dramatic climax after a decade of protests. The general public may not know what brought on this terrifying time of political upheaval in history, but the causes are clear when inspected.

“The French Revolution was not a single event. Rather, it was a series of developments over a period of years,” This quote from the book entitled *The Aftermath of the French Revolution* by James R. Arnold, is a statement regarding the causes of the French Revolution. (Arnold 8) This first reason for revolution was a major one, that being the French debt, which later caused France to declare bankruptcy. France first came into this difficult time in 1774, when the country aided the colonists in the American Revolution. They did so in retaliation after Great Britain defeated them in the Seven Years’ War. The money would also help form an alliance with America if they did succeed in gaining independence. But to secure this money France had to borrow it, which was the first mistake made. This money had not been paid off by 1786, and nobles only made matters worse; abusing their own government, they had spent more

of France's funds with pleasantries, until the money France owed had turned into a crippling debt. (Arnold 18)

The year that France started borrowing money, 1774, was also the year Louis XVI's reign began. "King of the French" at only 19 years old, Louis XVI was not supposed to become a monarch at such a young age. His father died of tuberculosis while his grandfather, Louis XV, still reigned. Louis XV's reign was cut short, dying at age 64 of smallpox. Louis XVI's siblings didn't survive either. His first two brothers were stillborn, then the proceeding child was a girl. His following sibling, his older brother, lived for only a little over a year before passing away, after that Louis was born. Louis was not prepared for kingship. He was known to the public as a very indecisive ruler, and according to the book *The Coming of the French Revolution* by Georges Lefebvre, Louis, "would make decisions in the morning and change them by evening." (Lefebvre 34)

Louis also never seemed truly interested in courtly affairs and was more inclined to indulge his personal life. This made Louis a very weak leader and a weak voice for the people of France. "Louis XVI, though honest and well-intentioned, he was far from being a great mind. Addicted to hunting and to manual hobbies, a great eater and drinker, having no fondness for society, amusements or balls, he was the laughing stock of his courtiers. Among the immediate causes of the Revolution the character of the king and queen must be included. It is scarcely doubtful that events would have taken a different turn if the throne had been occupied by a Henry IV or even a Louis XIV." (Lefebvre 25)

Though Louis neglected his duties, he still wished to be loved by his subjects. Louis XVI did not receive his wish, however, as he was generally disliked by the people of France, not only for indecisiveness, but also for his marriage. The hated queen Marie Antoinette brought

discourse and suspicion to Louis's reign. According to the book *The Days of the French Revolution* by Christopher Hibbert, "Neither the King nor the Queen was an unpopular figure with the people as a whole in the early years of their marriage; on their first visit to Paris they were warmly welcomed by cheering crowds... in later years their palace in Versailles was attacked by angry peasant women demanding her head" (Hibbert 22). Their union clearly angered the people and made for a sometimes hostile marriage.

Marie Antoinette was the daughter of Holy Roman Emperor Francis I and Empress Maria Theresa. She was also second cousins once removed from her husband, Louis XVI. She became a dauphine, wife to an heir to the throne of France, when they married in 1770. Marie was only 14 years old, and Louis was 15. Many French citizens were bitter towards her early on, due to her Austrian nationality. She was not only ridiculed, but was often mocked along with her husband for their royal lifestyles. According to the book, *A Concise History of the French Revolution* by Sylvia Neely, "Marie Antoinette alone was criticized for her supposed power over the king and for her extravagance and haughtiness. French people especially resented Marie Antoinette because they assumed she used her influence over the king to promote the cause of Austria. Marie Antoinette became the subject of scurrilous political pamphlets that corroded her popularity. They pictured her as insatiably dissolute, with both male and female lovers, as an agent of Austria within France, and as a spendthrift who caused the financial problems of the government." (Neely 38)

The people mocked both Marie and Louis for not consummating their marriage for seven years, asking "Can the King do it? Can the King do it?" (Neely 40). Since Marie was known to spend lavishly, the people actually did accuse her as the cause behind the French debt, but Marie was not the entire cause of the deficit. Critics went so far as to nickname her "Madame D ficit"

(Neely 38). Some also accused Marie of being infertile since she had not become pregnant after seven years of marriage, saying instead that Marie and Louis's marriage had been consummated and that was the real reason for her not being pregnant. (Neely 82)

Even when Marie Antoinette finally did become pregnant and give birth, since the baby, Marie Thérèse Charlotte, was a girl Marie had let down her husband and nation for not furthering the line of succession. Some people were now ever more hostile. Marie supposedly said to her daughter shortly after the birth, "Though people will not love you, and I will not, I do love you in a way because you are not the nation's daughter, you are mine." (Hibbert 43) This speaks volumes about Marie's character. The people often screamed and yelled obscenities at Marie also. They called her "L'Autrichienne" and "chienne," French vulgarities, to hurt her reputation, as well as her feelings. (Neely 84) The blame and causes of the French debt were also thrust at Marie, leaving her an accused queen.

The story of the Diamond Necklace Incident further ensnared Antoinette in hostility. The incident's tale is told thus: two German jewelers had been employed under King Louis XV, the current king's grandfather. He had requested a necklace, and not a normal one, a necklace equal to the King in greatness. So the jewelers left, and scoured Europe for ten years for the precious jewels. They used only the most magnificent of precious stones, and took the diamonds to create a glorious masterpiece of a necklace. They returned only to find the king dead and replaced. So they offered the necklace to King Louis XVI, who asked his wife and queen Marie Antoinette if she desired it for a gift. This was all very public. The court was watching at their palace party, so Marie very obviously and publicly denied the necklace in an attempt to show the public she was not a spendthrift. Months later the German jewelers has still not found anyone to buy their creation, so they offered it to King Louis XVI for his queen again, with Marie promptly refusing.

But over the next two months, Antoinette began sending notes to the jewelers to buy the necklace. The correspondence went on for quite some time, until one of the notes leaked to the public. Everyone now knew Marie Antoinette was trying to spend more of France's money. Since the country was already broke people grew intensely angry, especially when it also slipped that the necklace was intended to be bought for two million livres. This massive sum of money meant nothing to her, and everything to the masses. The Diamond Necklace Incident finished off her reputation, and she was hated in the eyes of most French people. (Arnold 56)

Feudalism had "prevailed in western Europe since the eighth century." This quote from the article, "The Monarchy Falls" by the *National Endowment for Humanities* shows how long the feudal system dates back in Europe and how powerful it was. Feudalism was a system of divvying up pieces of land into what was called "fiefs" in France. A lord or honorable man, someone within the proper class, was given control of a fief. The lord would tax all who lived in his fief, collect the taxes, and then pay direct taxes to the king. The goal of feudalism was to give the monarch and government a constant source of income. (*National Endowment for Humanities*)

The feudal system had a major flaw: greediness. The fief lords were not the only ones who would not pay their taxes, none of the nobles, aristocrats, and clergies would either. The crown was deeply in debt, and their way to solve it was not working. Instead of not paying, the fief lords and nobles declared themselves exempt of all taxes, not just the direct ones mandated by the monarch. The system that had served numerous countries for so long was causing France to collapse in upon itself.

By 1786 none of the gargantuan deficit had been paid off and France's main method of payment and income, feudalism, was failing. France had no way to pay off its debts, and the royals, mainly Marie Antoinette, spent millions of livres frequently. The Diamond Necklace Incident makes it evident Marie had no problem spending two million livres just on a piece of jewelry. That money could have fed thousands. Marie also went on to buy the Château de Saint-Cloud for six million livres, outdoing herself for her last incident. This time it was an entire palace, so Marie could have some time to herself or have a private conversation with one of her ladies. (Hibbert 73) Marie was not the only one who abused France, as the nobles, aristocrats, and clergies also spent government money to have feasts in Versailles, enthusiastically ignoring the hostile environment of Paris. The upper-class would also pamper themselves with large amounts of lavish clothing and cooked songbirds. According the Internet article "The Beginning of the French Revolution," by *Eyewitness to History*, King Louis XVI's shoes were worth five thousand livres each. The high society of France kept spending money as if it did not have a care in the world.

Since the French government had no money, the country could also not provide for its people. No food, money, or concessions were given out to help during the bread shortages. By summer of 1789 the food situation had grown much worse. According to the book *A People's History of the World* by Howard Zinn, bread was the staple food of the nation. It was largely consumed every day. France had a terrible harvest the year prior, 1788, so the supply of bread had decreased greatly, therefore causing the price to increase dramatically. Workers also, "typically ate three pounds of bread each day," so the bread started to run out rapidly while it was affordable to buy. (Zinn 288) When the price increased, it meant barely anyone could afford the "staple food," and especially not the three pounds of it. To make matters worse, the fief lords

chose this already-tumultuous time to raise their taxes for living on land in the countryside. This was where 84 percent of the French population lived. (Zinn 291)

With the now imposing tax increase, peasants had even less money for food, making it nearly impossible to buy anything. Since the government was not helping with the food crisis, the majority of France was isolated in a struggle that left them weak and wanting. There was nothing to eat, and the largest country, population-wise, in Europe with 26 million people was feeling a desperate hunger. (Arnold 20) Waking up and going to bed with an empty stomach day in and day out changed people rapidly. An empty stomach can change anybody from a relatively-civilized human being into a madman, which is exactly what the French became, starving madmen begging for change.

Since Louis XVI was an absolute monarch, he had a relatively free reign. He answered only to himself, and he only spoke to his advisors and helpers when he desired to be advised. Since Louis was striving to raise taxes, he consulted his advisors for help in implementing the tax. The point of the tax increase was an attempt to pay off France's debts, and Louis saw it as the only logical way to do so. But the nobles resisted the tax proposition to the extent of Louis being advised to summon the Estates General, which he eventually did. This was a monumental moment in history because it was the king for the first time formally relinquishing a sliver of his power as an absolute monarch by agreeing to the summoning of the Estates General. (Arnold 27)

The Estates General was a three-part representative body of France. It was composed of the First, Second, and Third Estates. The First Estate represented the 130 thousand members of the Catholic clergy. The Second Estate was the 400 thousand members of nobility, and the Third Estate was a mishmash of classes that was essentially the rest of France. (Zinn 290) The purpose of the assembly was to advise the king on very important matters, but the Estates General had

really only been summoned so the nobles could stop the king from implementing a new, more expensive tax that they were unwilling to pay. The Estates General had not met since 1614, extensively due to the fact that kings hated to be told what to do. Since Louis XVI wanted to successfully implement his new tax, he was willed enough to summon the Estates General. Louis also could still decide whether or not the tax would be set in motion, since the Estates General only had the power of advisement. (Zinn 295)

Over the course of the assembly the First Estate decided “to not yield its top position,” which was in its essence a big flat-out “no” to the proposed tax. (Arnold 17) The Second Estate was open to the tax, but the nobles did not want any of their privileges stripped away. Representatives of the Third Estate was wholly and entirely ignored, but demanded representation. Representatives of the Third Estate stated that since they represented the true heart of France, which in essentiality they were the common people, they deserved complete equality before the law. King Louis XVI gave small concessions to the First and Second Estates, but nothing to the Third Estate. Though the other estates only received very small concessions, the Third Estate was fed up. They decided to take action.

On June 17, 1789, the Third Estate declared itself the National Assembly. The First and Second Estates were invited to be part of the new body, but promptly refused. Three days later, on June 20, 1789, King Louis XVI blocked the National Assembly’s meeting chamber. Louis figured since he locked the door and they were not able to barge in, the National Assembly could not assemble, and this farce would dissipate. The National Assembly now needed a new place to meet, so they did what they could. They converged on a nearby indoor tennis court. (Arnold 30)

When the National Assembly met on the tennis court, it was a historic moment in French history. The National Assembly made the famous Tennis Court Oath, pledging to not disband

and leave the court until France had a new Constitution, a Constitution that gave more to the people. A document that would emancipate the suffering French and represent them with real, tangible equality before God and the law. “In other words, the Third Estate proclaimed itself France’s new constitution maker. It had seized power formerly held by the King. This was revolution.” (Arnold 14)

“Paris, with a population of between 600,000 and 650,000, was by far the largest and most influential city.” (Hibbert 45) The city was not the capital of France at this time, as Versailles held the title until October 6, 1789, but the populous metropolis was home to the Bastille, a fortress on the east side of Paris. It was built in the medieval times, and its role changed many times over the years. By July 1789 it was only used as a state prison by the French monarchs. Anyone who merely annoyed or angered the king would be sent to the Bastille, where they would live out the rest of their days. The medieval fortress was hated by all, and was a symbol of the king’s oppression of the French people. (Arnold 34)

Since the Bastille was so intimidating, Parisians would not wildly protest in fear of being locked away. All feared the Bastille, and it cast a dark light on the usually-buzzing streets of Paris. The Bastille reminded all of the king’s power and his influence, so it was not rare to see civilians glare at the sight or name of it. The people knew the only way to truly revolt was if it was gone. Matters changed quickly when news of the conflict between King Louis XVI and Third Estate was leaked to an already-paranoid population. A Parisian militia, also known as a civilian army, was formed. (Arnold 35)

The citizen militia that was formed that day would later become and was known as the National Guard. In later years, as the revolution progressed, the National Guardsmen were

essentially the police. The National Guard soldiers were the ones who walked King Louis XVI across the scaffold to his death. They also stripped Marie Antoinette of her royally posh clothing, cut her hair to the scalp until it bled, and escorted her to her end via guillotine. But the street dwellers of Paris were in for another surprise: King Louis XVI had assembled troops around Paris to deal with “what he viewed as an arrogant Third Estate” (*National Endowment for Humanities*). According to the website article “French Revolution” by *History*, “Though enthusiastic about the recent breakdown of royal power, Parisians grew panicked.” (*History*)

This time the “King of the French” had gone too far. Parisians were fed up, angry, starving, resentful, and now barricaded in the city. The Third Estate represented the lower class, and the large majority of people in France. The Third Estate and the National Assembly were both snubbed by a king who preferred not to associate with any power sharing. The body that was supposed truly represent the people had no voice at all, no way to complain or tell what the common people of France were going through. The “King of the French” was no help at all, and only made lives more difficult. The people’s lives would never change for the better with anyone, especially Louis XVI, on the throne.

If the people did nothing, the privileged would continue to live normally: in splendor with more food than they could possibly eat. The nobles would have daily feasts and shopping sprees without a care in the world, and the clergies would abuse their place in the church and use France’s money to bribe for power. Meanwhile, the poor and unfortunate would have to house up in shanties and fight to live one day at a time. They needed to revolt. The Parisian militia marched on the hated Bastille.

On July 14, 1789 the Bastille was stormed by the people of Paris. A symbol of oppression was overcome, and a revolution had begun. During the siege 98 citizens died, including fortress

soldiers and armed civilians. The angry mob overran the soldiers and decapitated the fortress commander, Bernard de Launay. The mass of people killed soldiers, and plundered the armory. After everything useful had been taken the people tore the Bastille apart “stone by stone” until there was virtually nothing left but a few bricks and dust at the foundation. (Arnold 12) The remaining parts were also eventually taken, and mini Bastille replicas were carved out of the actual stone from the fortress. Bastille Day has continued to be celebrated since its happening in 1789, and is the day France remembers the true power a people can inflict.

The fall and capture of the Bastille showed France that the king’s power was not absolutely permanent and untouchable as previously thought. The Tennis Court Oath illustrated the swift ability to take away Louis XVI’s rights and power with only a mere piece of parchment. No matter what Louis did he was completely outnumbered by a country that despised his every breath and decision. The king’s rule was starting to crumble around him. The Bastille was gone, and Paris was under rebel control by a mass of desperate, starving maniacs.

The French Revolution had officially begun now. One of the most pivotal events in human history had started with fire and bloodshed, and it would end with only more blood spilt. A people were united in an earnest hope for change, yearning to make a difference to the lives of themselves and their posterity. The French Revolution gave way to countries across the world to seek reform and change ideals for the greater good. A people went from nothing, to the power previously bestowed upon their king. The concept of an absolute monarchy was crumbling into dust at Louis XVI’s feet, ending when he became the only French king to ever be executed. Louis was not safe, as his wife and children were not. Everything he knew had changed in the span of a few short years. Louis wished to be loved by his people, instead his head was hacked off by them.

The French Revolution changed lives and history all across Europe. This monumental event in history ended over a thousand years of monarchist rule in France. The protests and bloodshed angered all the elite in Europe. But rebels made their point, and the true voice of the French people was heard. Through beheadings, executions, and wars, change was made, and would later serve to influence the Russian Revolution of 1917. Aristocrats across the world clinched their armrests. Radicals everywhere had learned that change was achievable. The tennis court oath and the storming of the Bastille led to the later abolishment of the French monarchy. To quote the French National Anthem, “To arms, oh citizens! Form up in serried ranks! March on, march on! And drench our fields with their tainted blood!”

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