

Original Article

FRENCH REVOLUTION IN EUROPE

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Abstract:

The French Revolution was one of the most influential events in European and modern world history. It not only ended absolute monarchy in France but also gave rise to new ideas about popular sovereignty, human rights, and the principle of equality before the law. This article aims to examine the background of the French Revolution, the social, political, and economic conditions that underpinned it, the dynamics of the Consulate and Napoleonic Empire, and the revolution's impact on the European order. This research uses a literature review method with a historical-analytical approach. The results show that the French Revolution was the result of structural inequality, a state financial crisis, and the influence of Enlightenment thought. While bringing advances in the legal system and modern government, the revolution also gave rise to political violence and instability. The conclusion of this study confirms that the French Revolution marked the beginning of modern Europe, albeit at a significant social and humanitarian cost.

Keywords: French Revolution, absolute monarchy, Enlightenment, Napoleon Bonaparte, modern Europe

Introduction

The French Revolution was one of the most defining events in European history and the development of the modern world. This event not only ended the rule of absolute monarchy in France but also fundamentally changed how people viewed the state, power, and the relationship between rulers and the people. The revolution, which erupted in 1789, marked the collapse of the old order, which had been based for centuries on feudalism, noble privilege, and the dominance of the church in social and

political life. Within the context of European history, the French Revolution is often understood as a turning point leading to the birth of the modern state, which upholds the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

Before the revolution, France was under an absolute monarchy, in which the king was the center of all state power. The king served not only as head of government but also as a symbol of legal, political, and even religious legitimacy. This centralized power limited the space for popular participation in state decision-making. Representative institutions such as the General Council were rarely convened, preventing the aspirations of the people, particularly those of the common people, from being formally channeled. In practice, this absolute power was often exercised arbitrarily and insensitively to the socio-economic conditions of the people.

The social structure of pre-revolutionary French society displayed striking inequality. Society was divided into three large classes known as the Three Estates. The first and second estates, namely the nobility and the clergy, enjoyed various privileges, such as extensive land ownership, access to important positions, and tax exemptions. In contrast, the third estate, which included peasants, laborers, small merchants, and the bourgeoisie, bore a heavy economic burden. This injustice created an increasingly stark social gap, especially when economic conditions worsened due to crop failures and rising food prices.

In addition to social and economic factors, the French Revolution was also inseparable from developments in intellectual thought in the 18th century. The Enlightenment Era (Aufklärung) gave birth to new ideas about rationality, individual freedom, and equal rights. Enlightenment thinkers strongly criticized absolutism and rejected the notion that royal power derived solely from the will of God. This idea spread widely among the educated classes, especially the bourgeoisie, and created a collective awareness that the political order could and should be changed for the sake of justice and the common good.

The influence of the American Revolution also strengthened the spirit of change in France. The success of the American colonies in breaking free from British rule and establishing a state based on the principles of democracy and human rights provided a concrete example that the monarchy could be replaced by a more representative government. Many French figures were directly involved in or inspired by the American Revolution, strengthening the ideas of liberty and popular sovereignty within the country.

The national financial crisis was a direct trigger for the outbreak of the French Revolution. Mounting national debt from war expenses and court extravagance brought France's finances to the brink of collapse. An unfair tax system, in which the burden of

taxes fell solely on the third estate, further exacerbated the situation. When King Louis XVI convened the General Assembly in 1789 to seek a solution to the crisis, the assembly became an arena for political resistance. The third estate seized the opportunity to demand political reform and establish a National Assembly, which later became a symbol of resistance to absolutism.

The French Revolution not only impacted France but also shook Europe as a whole. Revolutionary ideas about nationalism, liberalism, and human rights spread beyond national borders through war, propaganda, and legal reform. As it developed, the revolution gave birth to important figures such as Maximilien Robespierre and Napoleon Bonaparte, who represented the radical and consolidation phases of power, respectively. The long-term impact of the French Revolution is evident in the transformation of the European political system, the collapse of feudalism, and the emergence of the modern nation-state.

Against this backdrop, the French Revolution has become a crucial subject of study in history and the social sciences. It not only demonstrated how structural injustice can trigger profound change but also provided valuable lessons about power dynamics, the role of ideology, and the consequences of radical social change. Therefore, understanding the French Revolution means understanding one of the fundamental foundations of modern European and global civilization..

Research Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with a historical approach. This qualitative approach was chosen because the study focuses on an in-depth understanding of the French Revolution as a complex, multidimensional historical phenomenon, fraught with social, political, and ideological significance. The French Revolution cannot be understood solely through quantitative data or statistics; it requires interpretation of the context, ideas, and social dynamics that developed during the period.

This historical research method is used to reconstruct the events of the French Revolution based on relevant and academically sound written sources. This approach allows researchers to trace the background, process, and impact of the French Revolution within a coherent timeline, while simultaneously understanding the causal relationships between social, political, and economic conditions and these major changes.

The data sources for this study were obtained through library research. The primary data in this study consist of historical documents, such as the official declaration of revolution, the post-revolutionary French constitution, and the writings of figures who lived during that period. Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained from

history books, scientific journal articles, and contemporary academic works discussing the French Revolution, Enlightenment thought, and the dynamics of European politics in the late 18th to early 19th centuries. The use of secondary sources was selective, considering the credibility of the authors and publishers, and the relevance of the content to the research focus.

Data collection techniques were carried out through a systematic literature search. Researchers identified key themes related to the French Revolution, such as the social structure of French society, the absolute monarchy system, the economic crisis, the influence of Enlightenment thought, and the role of revolutionary figures. The collected literature was then critically read to gain a comprehensive understanding and avoid biased interpretations. In this process, researchers also compared various historians' views to obtain a more balanced and objective picture.

Data analysis was conducted using a descriptive-analytical analysis method. The collected data was classified into thematic categories and then analyzed to identify patterns of relationships between events. The descriptive approach was used to describe in detail the social, political, and economic conditions in France leading up to the revolution, as well as the development of the revolution up to the Consulate and Napoleon's Empire. Meanwhile, analysis is used to interpret the meaning of these events and explain their impact on political change in Europe.

To maintain data validity, this study applies historical source criticism techniques, both external and internal. External criticism is conducted to assess the authenticity and credibility of the source, while internal criticism is used to assess the source's content, including the author's background, purpose, and possible vested interests. In this way, the researcher strives to minimize misinterpretations and ensure that the conclusions drawn are academically sound.

A historical-contextual approach is also employed in this study. Each event of the French Revolution is analyzed by considering the context of its time, including the social, cultural, and intellectual conditions developing in Europe. This approach is crucial to ensure that the French Revolution is not assessed ahistorically but rather as the result of the interaction of various influencing factors.

Through this research method, it is hoped that the study of the French Revolution will not only provide a chronological overview of events but also explain the dynamics of the social and political changes that underlie them and their impact on the development of modern Europe. This method also allows for analytical and reflective conclusions to be drawn, making them relevant to the development of historical and social science studies more broadly.

Research Findings and Discussion

Social Conditions of French Society on the Eve of the Revolution

Research shows that the social conditions of French society before the 1789 Revolution were characterized by long-standing, structural inequality. The division of society into three main classes created a rigid social hierarchy and thwarted equitable social mobility. The nobility and clergy not only controlled economic resources in the form of land and positions but also gained strong social and political legitimacy from the absolute monarchy. Their privileges, particularly tax exemptions, further widened the gap between them and the majority of the population.

The third class, which included peasants, laborers, small traders, and the bourgeoisie, bore almost the entire burden of the country's economy. This research found that this injustice led to accumulated social frustration, especially when economic conditions worsened due to crop failures and rising food prices. Hunger and poverty became not only economic problems but also issues of human dignity, as people felt neglected by the state. In this context, the French Revolution can be understood as a collective response to a social system that was no longer able to fulfill a sense of justice.

Political Dynamics and the Collapse of the Absolute Monarchy

From a political perspective, the study shows that the absolute monarchy in France experienced a serious crisis of legitimacy. King Louis XVI was deemed incapable of responding to the challenges of the times, both in managing the financial crisis and in fostering dialogue with the people. Dependence on the court elite and the nobility led to state policies tending to favor the interests of a small group, while ignoring the aspirations of the wider population.

The convocation of the États General in 1789 marked a crucial moment in the political dynamics of the revolution. This study shows that this forum actually opened up space for the Third Estate to articulate its political demands. The formation of the National Assembly marked a fundamental shift in the concept of power, from the sovereignty of the king to the sovereignty of the people. The collapse of the absolute monarchy was not a sudden event, but rather the result of a long-term process of delegitimization, accelerated by an acute political crisis.

Economic Crisis as a Trigger for the Revolution

The study confirms that the economic crisis was the direct trigger for the outbreak of the French Revolution. The large national debt resulting from war financing and the lavish lifestyle of the court brought the state's finances to the brink of bankruptcy. The unfair tax system exacerbated these conditions, as the burden of

taxation fell solely on the lower classes. The nobility's refusal to pay taxes reflected the inability of the old system to adapt to the needs of a modern state.

Rising prices of basic goods and unemployment in major cities further exacerbated the people's suffering. This study found that the economic crisis not only worsened the people's material conditions but also strengthened social solidarity across classes, particularly between the bourgeoisie and the poor. This solidarity was a key force in driving radical political change.

The Influence of Enlightenment Thought and Revolutionary Ideology

The study shows that Enlightenment thought played a crucial role in shaping the ideology of the French Revolution. The ideas of individual liberty, equal rights, and popular sovereignty provided a conceptual framework for the critique of absolutism. This thinking developed not only among intellectuals but also spread through pamphlets, public discussions, and print media, thus shaping the political consciousness of the people.

This study found that Enlightenment ideas provided moral legitimacy for revolutionary demands. The French Revolution was not simply a famine-induced uprising, but also an ideological movement that sought to establish a new order based on rational and universal principles. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen serves as a concrete symbol of the influence of Enlightenment thought on the political practice of the revolution.

The Consulate Period and the Consolidation of Napoleon's Power

The study shows that the Consulate period under Napoleon Bonaparte was a phase of consolidation following a period of revolutionary chaos. Napoleon successfully restored political stability through a centralized and efficient government. Legal reforms through the Code Napoléon were a significant achievement, providing legal certainty and eliminating vestiges of feudalism.

However, this study also reveals contradictions within Napoleon's leadership. On the one hand, it upheld revolutionary principles such as equality under the law and meritocracy. On the other hand, it centralized power and restricted political freedom. This contradiction reflects the revolutionary dilemma between freedom and stability, which often leads to the concentration of power.

The Impact of the French Revolution on Europe

Further discussion shows that the impact of the French Revolution transcended national boundaries. The spread of nationalist and liberal ideas through the Napoleonic Wars transformed the political landscape of Europe. Many countries began to question the legitimacy of absolute monarchies and demanded political reform. However, the conservative reaction that emerged after Napoleon's defeat demonstrated that

revolutionary change also sparked resistance from the old forces.

In the long run, the French Revolution contributed significantly to the formation of the modern nation-state and a legal system based on equality. However, this study also emphasizes that the revolution had tragic consequences in the form of political violence and human suffering. Thus, the French Revolution must be understood as a complex event, containing both progress and paradox.

Conclusion

Based on the research and discussion outlined above, it can be concluded that the French Revolution was a historical event born of accumulated social inequality, economic crisis, and the failure of the absolute monarchy political system to respond to the demands of changing times. The unequal social structure, in which privileges were enjoyed only by the nobility and clergy, while the majority of the people bore heavy economic burdens, created increasing social tensions. This injustice was further exacerbated by the state's financial crisis, crop failures, and soaring food prices, which worsened the people's living conditions.

The French Revolution was also inseparable from the strong influence of Enlightenment thought, which emphasized rationality, individual freedom, equal rights, and popular sovereignty. These ideas provided a solid ideological foundation for the critique of absolutism and became the foundation for efforts to build a new political order. The changes that occurred were not simply a change of ruler, but a fundamental transformation in society's perspective on the state, law, and the relationship between ruler and citizen.

Over the course of its development, the French Revolution experienced complex dynamics, ranging from a moderate phase, to a radical phase marked by political violence, to a phase of consolidation of power during the Consulate and Napoleon's Empire. Napoleon Bonaparte's leadership successfully established stability and ushered in important reforms, particularly in the legal and administrative spheres. However, the centralization of power and military expansion demonstrated that the revolution also brought with it a paradox between the ideals of freedom and the practices of authoritarianism.

More broadly, the French Revolution had a significant impact on the development of Europe and the world. The principles born of the revolution, such as human rights, equality before the law, and nationalism, became the foundation for the birth of modern nations. However, the revolution also left important lessons about the risks of political extremism and the high social costs of radical change.

Recommendations

Based on these conclusions, it is recommended that studies on the French

Revolution continue to be developed with a more comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach. Future research can integrate social, economic, cultural, and intellectual perspectives to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of the revolution and its impact on society. A comparative approach with other revolutions in Europe and beyond is also crucial for understanding the French Revolution's place within the global historical context.

Furthermore, learning about the French Revolution should be directed not only at memorizing events and figures, but also at critically understanding its values. The French Revolution can serve as a basis for reflection on the importance of social justice, political participation, and the balance between freedom and stability in national life. Thus, studies on the French Revolution are not only academically relevant but also make a real contribution to building historical and democratic awareness in contemporary society.

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