The Tragedy of the French Revolution
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1,745 Words
“Let them eat cake.” These were the words running through the minds of France’s peasants on July 14, 1789. This was the storming of the Bastille, the first true show of force from the commoners, marking the beginning of the French Revolution. The commoners would have killed anyone on sight if they proclaimed Marie Antoinette’s famous quote false, even if it was explained to them that this was a product of yellow newspaper—a term coined in the 1960s for false news reporting. If the French Revolution leaders Maximilien Robespierre and Jean-Paul Marat were exposed for the lies they were facilitating, that person would have been the first to the guillotine. The commoners had no way of knowing the outside forces that would lead to the first raised pitchfork and torch. The tragedy of the French Revolution can only be seen in the years leading up to what would be the ultimate deaths of the current French monarchy. These unnecessary deaths and lack of change to the government were a tragedy due to the commoners needing scapegoats and the nobility being oblivious.

Describing a point in time is easy—understanding it is harder. To do this, there must be context. France society has long revolved around four political classes: the clerics, the aristocracy, and the commoners with the bourgeoisie as a budding new class of the time. Similar to today’s societies, it all boils down to the rich and the poor. The rich—the aristocracy and the upper echelon of the church—had a social etiquette to uphold. The nobles were expected not to work in any business or profession, lest they become commoners. This was no longer profitable and many noble families were losing
money. The poor felt powerless and out of control. They felt the brunt of the social classism with harsh taxes and little legal power. At the time of the French Revolution, the people of France had representation in the form of the three estates, the First Estate (clerics), the Second Estate (nobles), and the Third Estate (commoners and the bourgeoisie). Even though the commoners were the largest group by population within the three estates, they had the smallest vote. The developing bourgeoisie class was formed from rich urban commoners who had made money by selling overseas and were becoming a large player in French politics. During the beginning of King Louis XVI rule, he signed the formal Treaty of Alliance on February 6, 1778 with the fledgling nation of America. France supplied America with guns, troops, food, ships, and other necessary supplies. This lead to America winning the war, but it had slowly sucked much of the crown’s treasury away, leaving France near penniless. France, desperate for the money they still needed to operate the country, decided to enforce encumbering taxes on the commoners. To make matters worse, a massive blight in the summer of 1778 and a long winter that same year and the next caused crop failure. Poverty and starvation struck much of France’s peasants, making them desperate and ready for a fight. Meanwhile, the French nobility was doing what society dictated they do—throw a party and spend large quantities of money.

1 Lefebvre. p. 8-12
2 Bulliet
3 Editors, History.com
4 Waldinger
Before the true slaughter began, there were many players who would fill key roles as scapegoats and instigators. King Louis XVI was not a bad king. However, he was young and inexperienced. When his grandfather died, King Louis XVI was only twenty years old. At first, he made a point to expand tolerant religious laws and foreign power. His downfall was being too indecisive and relying heavily on his advisors, who had their own ambitions. Marie Antoinette was an Austrian princess who married the young Louis for a political alliance after the two nations fought together in the Seven Year War. She had a lavish lifestyle, which, when combined with France and Austria being old enemies, made her the perfect scapegoat to blame all of the unfortunate series of events in France at the time. The last straw for many commoner people was hearing that Marie Antoinette had bought a diamond necklace as they all starved. In reality, this was also false and Marie had been framed by another-countess De La Matte. Others such as Maximilien Robespierre lead the commoners to their uprising. Robespierre was an accomplished writer and lawyer who was known for his altruism. He would become one of the loudest advocates against the known aristocracy and a figurehead of the revolution. Another was Jean-Paul Marat who was a co-conspirator in the fight against the aristocracy. He was not a direct proponent of the nobility at first, rather, he was a critic of the king’s management. As the King Louis XVI became more

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5 Editors, Biography.com
6 Editors, History.com
7 Klar. p. 40-41
8 Bouloiseau
despondent to the people, Marat joined the revolution as a writer and wrote many newspaper articles that would call the people to the revolution⁹.

By July 1789 the people were feeling anxious because of the removal of financial advisor Jacques Necker. He was a popular vote by the people because they felt he worked for them. Unfortunately for Necker, he could not come up with a financial plan to fix France’s depleting treasury, so he was removed. This led Louis XVI to convene the Estates-General (a legislative platform for all people of France to air their grievances represented by the three estates) in May 1789. This is the first time the Estates-General was called in the last hundred years. The problem laid in the fear and hatred that the subjects had towards the aristocracy already. This suspicion led the commoners to refuse any compromise at all from the clerics and nobles who had the power to outvote the Third Estate. In retaliation, the Third Estate declared themselves the National Assembly in hopes of getting more voting power and asked the other Estates to join. Most of the clergy joined, while the nobles resisted¹⁰. This was when the papers came in and started riling up the peasants again. Jean Marat would write a scathing review of the king called the L’Ami du Peuple (“The Friend of the People”)¹¹. In this, he would critic the outcome of the Estates General, “... a king who had summoned the nation only to engage it to fill the abyss dug by the wastefulness of his ministers, of the household princes, of his favorites, and of the other scoundrels of his court; of a king who tried to

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⁹ Vidalenc  
¹⁰ Klar. p. 48-51  
¹¹ Witness
dissolve the National Assembly as soon as he found some opposition to his wishes.\textsuperscript{12}

This inspired the already enraged commoners to take up arms and prepare to fight. The king than essentially forged an alliance with the nobles thinking they still held power. Meanwhile, the National Assembly deputies, elected with help from allies in the clergy and nobility, stated they alone had sovereign powers and its representatives claimed and exercised that sovereignty\textsuperscript{13}.

Louis recognized his mistake and readied the role guard to subdue the Patriots. It was July 14, 1789 and the revolution had become violent for the guards stood no chance against the mob and the Bastille fell. This was the fuel the revolution needed to make the king concede and capitulate, for he did not want a civil war in the streets. The clergy at this point had given up all rights to taxation in favor of the rebellion\textsuperscript{14}. Also, the National Assembly was creating their new constitution called The Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen. This outlined the new power structure switching the nobles to landowning citizens. The problem with this was that the peasants only owned forty percent of the land in France. They had now started the sale of the churches which was valued at ten percent of France and would in theory pay off the national debt. They had used surrogate money to give the people an ability to buy land. This false currency mixed with the real money inflated and deflated too frequently to be used by the rebellious nation. At this point, they had also created more districts for more

\textsuperscript{12} See figure 1 in Appendix A
\textsuperscript{13} Klar. p. 51-53
\textsuperscript{14} lefebvre 154
representation of the people. The citizens also pushed for election so their grievances could be heard. At this point, Louis XVI had been conspiring with Spain and Austria to help him stop this uprising. He then attempted to flee June 21, 1791, and failed. In response Spain, Austria and the emigres (people fleeing from France due to the revolution) fought the other side to a standstill. Meanwhile, the legislative assembly would be holding court to decide Louis XVI fate. His fate was truly decided by the Parisians led by Marat, the head of the popular tribunes. These tribunes were where people voted to see if they would hang the captives. This was the true end of the old nobility with the hanging of King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette with the vote of 387 to 334.

These events all coalesce to form a picture of the true tragedy. The French were the superpower of Europe for decades before, but in ten short years, it came crashing down around on itself. It would be easy to blame the nobility for their arrogance and greed. It would be easy to see their frivolous parties and poor leadership as signs of who is in the right and who is in the wrong. In reality, King Louis XVI was a boy inheriting a responsibility that he lacked skill and training to properly fulfill. The fact that France had no way of usurping ineffective king could only be questioned to the generations before. Marie Antoinette had the bad luck of marrying into a country that simply hated her for what she was taught to be and what her nationality was. The people also did not want to question the king at the beginning and found the next best

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15 See figure 2 and 3 in Appendix A
16 Klar. p. 76-81
target in the queen. This, paired with terrible weather that destroyed an entire years worth of harvest and a heavy tax to refill the treasury, gave the peasants a right to be mad. This anger was simply misguided on most accounts. The weather could not be controlled and the true cost of the American Revolution could not have been accounted for before hand. The exception to this anger is seen in the nobles complete disregard for the citizens of France. The nobles had become lazy and fat and refused to properly rule the citizens. The tragedy of the French Revolution didn’t start at the guillotine, it started when the people in authority stopped seeing the nation as a people but a money source. People like Robespierre and Marat just took an opportunity and simply could not know the bloodlust their words would inspire. In all the French Revolution boiled down to neglect, bad luck, and miss management of large bodies of people. This can only be seen as a lesson for the rest of the world in leadership and human needs.
Appendix A

Figure 1:
Figure 2:

Figure 3
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources


This website provided me with a translation of the Joan Marat newspaper article, “L’Ami du Peuple.” This was useful because I can read french and it was a good primary source.


This Article provided me with a picture of of the Joan Marat newspaper article, “L’Ami du Peuple.” This was useful for a visual reference and it was a good primary source.
Secondary Sources

   Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. 18 Feb. 2019
   In this Article it describes the life and times of Maximilien Robespierre. Robespierre being a revolution leader lead him to being very important to my project.

   This book helped me find information on the Bourgeois class while also clarifying some event that happened in the French Revolution itself.

   www.history.com/topics/france/marie-antoinette.
   In this Article it describes the life and times of Marie Antoinette. Antoinette was a key reason for the havoc of the French Revolution even though she did little to nothing out of the ordinary for nobility at the time.

   In this Article it describes the in depth of Jean-Paul Marat part in the French Revolution while also including early life. Marat was a very influential writer and would inspire many people to take up arms against the French nobility.

In this Article it takes a look at King Louis XVI early childhood and reign over France. This was useful because it became easier to see the build up of the revolution when people could see what the King himself was doing.


This was a article confirming the treaty between the French and AMericans during the Revolutionary War. This may have been a turning point for the Americans but it was a condemnation of the french nobility.


This book gave me most the the time ordered events of the French Revolution and allowed a an easy place to find all the information. It aslo at least gave me the start of what I need to know for the French Revolution.
This book had in depth analysis of the of everyone involved in the French Revolution. This was most helpful in understanding the Nobility and Bourgeois class.

This was a confirmation on the weather of the time while also confirming the the effect it had on the peasants of the time. This was a research study looking for if the peasant would have really revolted due to lack of harvest including outside factors such as population and heavily taxes.

This website allowed a visual on the breaking of the French provinces during the French Revolution. This is integral to understanding how the people of France understanding representation.