



2023 History Essay Contest

School High School Winner

Two Revolutions: Liberty and Liberalism

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The eighteenth century was buffeted by a tidal wave of revolution. The century saw the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, and suffered the continued effects of the Protestant Revolution, or Reformation. In 1775, the American Revolution began. The English colonies of the New World refused to be a pawn in a game of gain and glory controlled by the distant hands of the Great Powers, and the independent United States of America was constituted. Finally, to bring the century to a close, there was the French Revolution, where the citizens of France revolted against the absolute monarchy of the king and the privileges and wealth of the aristocracy, and resulted in a tragic loss of life and liberty, and the triumph and spread of liberalism and Enlightenment philosophy over the West. The French and American Revolutions, while often considered similar, have marked differences but both had a long and lasting impact on the world. The American Revolution marked the beginning and birth of a country that would eventually become one of the world's most dominant and pivotal powers,

and the French Revolution embodied and spawned the Enlightened liberal movement, to which America quickly fell prey.

The American Revolution was sparked by the initiation of several tax acts over the course of ten years (1764-74) put in place by the English Parliament. The colonies were enraged by the injustice of being taxed by a Parliament in which they had no representation, and by which they were governed without consent (Crocker 342). The colonies rightly perceived that they were being treated as inferiors and slaves working to increase British wealth (Bergman). The war broke out in April of 1775, with the battles of Lexington and Concord. Following this, the British suffered over 200 casualties at the Battle of Bunker Hill, and they retreated from the port city of Boston on 17 March 1776. In May, the Second Continental Congress met in Philadelphia and formed a Continental Army under commander-in-chief, George Washington. The Olive Branch Petition was sent directly to George III and ignored completely. On 25 August 1775, the King declared the colonies to be in open rebellion, and the colonies responded with the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. Following this, the battles of Saratoga, Guilford Courthouse, and Yorktown take place, and peace is finally sued for. In the Treaty of Paris in 1783, the 13 colonies were given all of the land east of the Mississippi River (National Archives, *Treaty of Paris*).

Like the American Revolution, money and taxes were also the stimulus of the French Revolution. When Louis XVI and his fair but frivolous wife Marie Antoinette took the French throne they inherited a kingdom and a country beset with issues (Carroll 323). Societally, France was plagued with parasitic and wastefully extravagant upper classes who lived on the high taxes levied on the lower classes, an unjust tax system, and high rates of unemployment and

poverty. Politically, France was impoverished and in massive debt due to their assistance of the Americans in their revolution, and their involvement in the Seven Years War. Louis proposed a tax reform that would lower the taxes on the poor while simultaneously increasing the total amount raised, but the French Liberals and wealthy Noblemen spread through propaganda only the narrative that the reform would raise more money. These enemies stirred up rebellions and began an outcry demanding that the Estates General be called. The Estates General, France's equivalent to the English Parliament, had not met since 1614, and Louis was hesitant to call it, but being a weak man succumbed to pressure against his better judgment.

The Estates General opened on May 4, 1789, and the Revolution began with the rebellion of the Third Estate. The Third Estate took the Tennis Court Oath on June 20, promising not to disband until France embraced a new form of government and a new constitution (Carroll 327). The Revolution grew in strength with the Storming of the Bastille on July 14, and the Abolition of Feudalism on August 4. This was followed by the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen on August 26, and the Women's March on Versailles on October 5. On June 20, the Royal family fled to seek refuge in Austria from the rising chaos, but were arrested at Varennes. The Revolution reached a thunderous and bloody climax with the regicide of Louis in the name of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity on January 21 (Betts). This execution and the following execution of Marie Antionette marked the beginning of the Reign of Terror. The Reign of Terror, September 5, 1793 to July 28, 1794, was headed up by the new political body of France, the National Convention. The National Convention created the Committee of Public Safety which had 12 members, the most prominent of these being Maximilien Robespierre. The committee was in charge of smothering internal rebellion against the Revolution and arrested 500,000

suspects, and executed 17,000 “officially,” and 25,000 without even fair trials. The total death toll of this bloody 11 months was around 40,000. On June 28, Robespierre himself was guillotined by his compatriots bringing an end to the Reign of Terror. The War in the Vendee, a counter-revolution, was put down in 1796, and the Revolution came to an actual end with the coming to power of Napoleon Bonaparte (Crocker 348).

Differentiating between the two Revolutions is interesting as the goals of both could be seen to some degree as the same. Both the Americans and the French were fighting for the ideals which surfaced during the Enlightenment of religious freedom, liberty, the sovereignty of reason, and man’s right to pursue happiness. Blood was spilled in both wars to attain a governing system that foundationally respected these rights, however what makes these two Revolutions different from each other was the fullness of their understanding of these good and just principles.

Although there was distinct antipapist sentiment amongst the early Americans, the Founding Fathers and the Constitution which they composed had a basis in a philosophy of life and an approach to politics which was consistent with Catholic reason and social thought. Michael Novak writes in his article “Built Wiser Than They Knew” that the American Constitution “among other things, has defended in an historically unprecedented way the dignity of the human person; the limited powers of the state; the transcendence of God; and the material preconditions of liberty of conscience.” America, in its pursuit of the ideals of the Enlightenment, understood man to be in the image and likeness of God, the Creator, and hence granted him certain “unalienable” rights which give him the ability to live that image fully, for the glory of God is man fully alive, as St. Irenaeus writes. John Adams wrote of the United

States in a letter to the Massachusetts Militia, "We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Avarice, Ambition, Revenge or gallantry, would break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net. Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." Permeating America's beginning were understandings of natural law and man's inherent dignity and rights which served as a solid foundation to pursue the Enlightened ideals for which they strove, but throughout all of this is a beautiful and holy understanding of man's relation to God. Thus placing God, and man's freedom to religion as the first and foremost foundation.

The French Revolution in contrast, was a complete perversion of the Enlightenment ideals. The French were not fighting to attain freedom *of* religion, but freedom *from* religion. They rejected everything the Church offered, attacking even their own foundations of civilization--which were built by the Church. The Church in their eyes was a corrupt superstitious cult of ignorant, greedy, irrational, proud people, and the most vile encapsulation of tyrannical monarchical power. They sought to be free from its perceived flaws and from having to follow its moral, spiritual, and intellectual jurisdiction. So also, the French were not fighting for liberty, but license. They did not want to be free to choose the good, but free to choose the pleasurable and follow every whim and will without repercussion. Their understanding of happiness was the understanding of John Locke, who writes, "Happiness then in its full extent is the utmost Pleasure we are capable of" (258). This base understanding of happiness fed the enlightened idea that the primary source of all knowledge is the passions, and emotion is the means by which we reason.

The French Revolution lauded itself as being the ultimate triumph of Reason, and yet in the same breath condemned Reason as a whore--which indeed she was, for the primary principles and premises upon which she was founded were false. Robespierre and his men of "light" desecrated the holy Cathedral Notre Dame by stripping her of the holy Virgin Mary, Mother of God, and parading a prostitute in her place, calling her the "Goddess Reason" (Esolen). While the French Revolutionaries thought they were standing as icons of the Sovereignty of Reason they were really standing as icons of the Sovereignty of Self. The Revolution was an embodiment of the Enlightenment's enthronement of reason to the exclusion of God, faith, and even human love. This glorification of subjectivism and relativism in the charade of "Reason," has contributed greatly to the movement of modern liberalism, a godless, graceless, political philosophy which seeks to corrupt the heart of human society. The political, philosophical and theological ideas which spawned from the French Revolution were spread far over the West by the imperialism of Napoleon Bonaparte in the subsequent years, and today especially the fruits of this spirituality of secularism are seen to have disastrous effects in culture and society.

Liberalism is the political philosophy that holds that there is no legitimate authority among men, and that responsibility and moral absolutes are myths created by a repressive and controlling Church. Man owes nothing to God, his mind alone is supreme. These ideas, born in the Renaissance, spread suffering and death over Europe and continue to plague the modern world today. Both Nazism and Communism are the direct fruits of the French Revolution as both these systems are based on the principles that the government owes nothing to God and that moral, religious principles are fetters to be crushed in the dust. The mass murders,

nationalist uniformity, militarism, and pillaging in the name of the State and the cult of Reason are the outward manifestations of Communism and Nazism which serve to illustrate their connection to the ideas fostered and spread by the French Revolution. All over the world, even in America where liberty is lauded, culture, society, and politics suffer from the pervasive and poisonous effects of Liberalism and the Enlightenment philosophies spread by the French Revolution, manifested in the form of relativism, secularism, “wokeness,” and political leftism.

To ask which of these two Revolutions had a greater impact on our modern world is to ask whether America, where all men are created equal, and are recognized as endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, among which are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness, was a greater gift to the world than the philosophical rationalism and Modern liberalism spawned by the French Revolution. Though the American Revolution had a great impact on the modern world in introducing to history what would be one of the most powerful and pivotal world powers, the results of the French Revolution were greater and far more gruesome. Napoleon succeeded in restoring peace in France, but through his imperialism he spread the ideologies of the French Revolution all over Europe. Revolutionary liberalism took root all over the West, and continues to plague modern society and culture even today.

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