Causes Of The French Revolution

A number of revolutions took place in history; many came up in the 18th and 19th centuries across the West. The French Revolution can be considered the most significant of all due to the “extreme causes” and violence related to it; along with the general causes that most revolutions at the time shared, such as cultural change, which was led by philosophers like Jean Jacques Rousseau and Voltaire, commercialization, and the massive population rise. The specific causes was the widespread discontent from the peasants, including the low standards of living and need for natural and political rights, and the influence from the Enlightenment; which were all prompted by the American Revolution.

Before the French Revolution in 1789, France was under an absolute monarchy that was divided into 3 estates; the 3rd estate being the largest amount of people and mostly consisted of bourgeoisie, artisans, and peasants. The unfair attitude of the 3rd estate is show in Document 7 (The Political and Social System in France), which illustrates that the 1st and 2nd estates were stable because they made the most money, paid no taxes, collected the high amount of taxes enforced on the 3rd estate, and held the power that enforced these corrupt laws. The peasants were tired of being crushed; they no longer wanted to support Feudalism/Manorialism, instead they pushed for freedom from landowners and equality in taxing. Their desires were mentioned in Doctument 8 (excerpt from the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen), which states, “Men are born and remain free and equal in rights … these rights are liberty, property, security…”

Besides the inequality between the estates related to taxes and land ownership, which was listed in the observations by Arthur Young in Travels in France (Document 1), it must also be mentioned the horrible conditions the commoners were living with. Young mentions, “The poor people seem very poor indeed. The children are terribly ragged … The price of bread has risen above people’s ability to pay.” This represents how affected the peasants were by the high taxes, they had no money for food or to support their families. This aroused the peasantry into rebellion, that created the most significant impact in the rebellion since they comprised most of the French population.

As the philoshophies from the Enlightenment spread, the middle class became more knowledgable. They used these new ideas as inspiration for political thought, resulting in challenging the government to create new institutions. Jean Jacques Rousseau’s idea of government based on general will and democratic-like voting was one of many that influenced France’s national assembly. In Document 4, Albert Mathiez supports the idea that the middle class used their knowlege of the ideas of the Enlightenment in order to take part in the leadership. This led to changes that the people demanded be made in the French government; manorialism was abolished, equality (between men) was established, and the power of the aristocracy and the Church decreased.

Some argue that the American Revolution was a major cause of the French Revolution, like Lord Acton, who suggested that, “The condition of France alone did not bring about the overthrow of the monarchy … ideas of the philosophs wre not directly repsonsible for the outbreak … the spark that changed thought into action was supplied by the Declaration of American Independence …” The arguments above do not support Acton’s point of view, but

disprove it by the larger impact those issues made. But, its revolution (1775-1783) sparked interest in the French commoners, motivating them to step up and make change.

The economy and unfair taxes, along with inequality, provoked the riots of peasants and forced the king to listen. Because of the high-priced bread, the commoners were suffering, but the philosophs' ideas brought knowledge to these poor people who could barely read. They acted on their new ideas after the American Revolution, and started one of their own in France.