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### The French Revolution: Is it Justified?

The French Revolution (1789-1799) was when French citizens toppled the government that had ruled France for hundreds of years and replaced it with a democratic government called the National Assembly. Eventually, after all the people had accomplished, Napoleon Bonaparte, a French General, seized the government in a coup and crowned himself emperor and undid some of the good things the previous government did. The French Revolution embodied the ideas of the Enlightenment, but it was offset by the bloodshed the National Assembly allowed to go on unchecked and eventual takeover of Napoleon.

The French Revolution began in 1789 when King Louis XVI of France called the Estates General to decide how to solve the problem of France's debt. France was very low on money after the country's involvement in the American Revolution. As a result of this, the prices of most things, including bread, rose, angering the middle and lower classes. The Estates General was made up of three groups: the First and Second encompassed the nobles and clergy which made up 2% of the population, while the Third made up the remaining 98% (History.com) organized themselves into what was called the National Assembly and began to make laws for France that bettered the lives of the lower classes (Strayer). The National Assembly gave freedom of religion and speech, women

more rights, and abolished slavery. At this point in the revolution it was a peaceful transition but it would soon turn sour.

The revolution turned the most violent during the Reign of Terror from 1793 to 1794. Also known as simply The Terror, it led to the deaths of tens of thousands across France. It began with the execution of the King of France, Louis XVI who was tried for conspiracy after an attempt to flee the country in 1791. His wife, Marie-Antoinette was executed nine months later (History.com). They along with 17,000 others were executed by guillotine (History.com), which became a symbol of the revolution. Thousands more died without a trial. Those who were executed contained anyone who opposed the revolution such as nobles who did not want to lose rights they had long had. During this time the National Assembly also drafted several constitutions for the country. The reign of terror came to an end when Robespierre, one of the revolutionists who caused the Reign of Terror, was himself executed for causing so many to die. Although at this point the revolutionaries had accomplished much, much of what they had accomplished would soon be undone.

In 1795, the National Assembly members that survived the Reign of Terror made a new constitution that had an executive group that was made up of five men called the Directory who were selected by parliament. The military was now under control by General Napoleon Bonaparte who used it to put down any further protests. Although created to better the lives of the people, the Directory was corrupt, ineffective, and caused financial problems. The Directory gave much of the power they had to generals to allow the military to keep them in power. In 1799, Napoleon grew tired of the Directory and staged a coup in which he took power. He crowned himself Emperor of France and

started numerous wars with other countries in Europe. His campaigns cost France heavily in both money and in human lives. To have funding Napoleon sold the large amount of land France had in North America to the United States for \$15 million in the Louisiana Purchase and his campaign in Russia alone killed 500,000 French soldiers (History.com). Ultimately, what had begun as plan to give a king less power ended with an emperor having total power.

The French Revolution was fueled by the ideas of the Enlightenment but ultimately was not justified by the violence and death as well as the takeover of Napoleon. Though it started peacefully enough with the National Assembly's creation and them giving people more personal freedom, the same revolutionaries did not care that thousands died in the name of their cause until it had already happened. Even after that, the country was almost back to where it started with one man as the leader of the country.

### Sources

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