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An Enemy of the French Revolution: Examining Louis XVI's Role in the French Revolution

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Abstract

The French Revolution is one of the most important events in world history. This era has been the subject of countless studies and has also been cited as inspiration for revolutions around the world. The downfall of Louis XVI and the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte challenged and reshaped Europe's political foundations. Simply put, the world would be a very different place if the French Revolution had ended differently. With that being said, the outcome of the French Revolution was not inevitable. Having explored this topic before, I believed that Louis XVI's role in the French Revolution needed to be reviewed, as his actions completely changed the trajectory of the revolution. If Louis had given in to the revolutionaries' demands, the revolution might not have escalated; calls for republicanism were not nearly as popular in 1789 as they were in 1793. This paper mainly challenges the concept of the inevitability of Louis' downfall, showing that the monarch was responsible for his own ruin. This paper also seeks to clarify this moment in history by examining numerous books, journal articles, memoirs, and letters that explore why the revolution developed as it did. Furthermore, I believe that this paper's findings clarify the French Revolution's developments and contribute to the subject's historiography through an examination of Louis XVI's actions during the revolution.

Keywords

French Revolution, Louis XVI, Napoleon Bonaparte, Monarchy, French Monarchy, An Enemy of the French Revolution

Introduction

By Professor Justin Carroll

Nathaniel Scott's (IUE 2022) "An Enemy of the French Revolution: Examining Louis XVI's Role in the French Revolution" is an exemplary undergraduate research paper in History. In May 2022, the Indiana University East's History Program faculty granted this paper the Eleanor L. Turk World History Essay Award. It reflects strong historical craftsmanship and combines excellent primary source research with clear and compelling prose to make the past more accessible and legible. To highlight the quality of this paper and the depth of research it represents, the Journal allowed it to be published in the Chicago Manual of Style with the footnotes intact.

An Enemy of the French Revolution

The French Revolution questioned virtually every aspect of French society. Revolutionaries sought to address their concerns in regards to a wide variety of issues, like the nation's tax system, the Catholic Church, and the French monarchy. For centuries, the nobility had ruled in Europe through the feudal system. In 1789, King Louis XVI was ruling as a powerful absolute monarch. Two years later, though, Louis was forced into a constitutional monarchy, sharing power with a legislative body. By 1793, Louis was convicted by the National Convention as a traitor and was executed by the revolutionaries for his crimes against France. Over the course of only four years, one of Europe's most powerful monarchies was removed and replaced by a radical republican government. This outcome, however, was not inevitable; in 1791, a constitution monarchy was established with Louis remaining on the throne. Louis could have potentially embraced this new role, but his own reluctance ultimately hindered this change. He wanted to retain absolute power, despite the people's desire for a constitutional monarchy. This desire amongst the French people can be seen throughout the letters, speeches, and memoirs of the era. In later years, General Napoleon Bonaparte seized power and fulfilled the goals of the early revolutionaries. Louis could have been seen as a hero of the people, like Napoleon later was; Louis' downfall was not inevitable. Instead, he hesitated and then actively worked against the French Revolution. Ultimately, the French people wanted to embrace

Louis as a heroic constitutional monarch, but he was reluctant to cede power to the revolutionaries and made himself an enemy of the revolution in the process.

Estates General 1789

A series of interconnected events played a part in weakening France leading up to the French Revolution. Having fought in the Seven Years' War and the American Revolutionary War, France was struggling economically with its growing debt. This issue created a wide range of problems, as "France did indeed seem weaker in the late 1780s." Military spending, for example, was cut considerably; when compared to the rest of the 18th century, France's military budget hit its lowest point in 1788. Pelz describes France in the 1780s as being "...marked by food shortages, unemployment, and poverty combined with a low standard of living." Louis XVI called the Assembly of Notables into session in 1787, hoping to find an answer to France's problems. This convention ended unsuccessfully, however, and "...for the next two years, [the monarchy] floundered from one scheme to another in the impossible hope of squaring the circle of modernistic reform, popular hostility, respect of privilege, and the preservation of royal absolutism." France's crisis intensified particularly in 1788, with "...the portion of income spent on bread [rising] to an average of 58 per cent; in the months of famine and top level prices of 1789, it soared to the fantastic figure of 88 percent." Figures like Jacques Necker pushed for reform, resulting in the calling of the Estates-General by Louis XVI. This convention would bring together France's three estates: the First Estate being the clergy, the Second Estate being the aristocracy, and the Third Estate being the commoners of France. This was the first time that this assembly had been called into session by a French monarch since 1614, creating a hope for notable reform and for "...political and fiscal solutions that could offer a guarantee for the national debt." Perhaps, France would find an answer to its problems.

As the convention opened, the assembly did not hold ill feelings towards Louis necessarily. In fact, the king's opening statements were "...interrupted by repeated cries of 'Vive le Roi'", meaning "long live the king."

As the events of the Estates-General unfolded, however, the Third Estate rallied together against the First and Second estates. The Third Estate was determined to enact change, having "...arrived with long lists of complaints, demands and a thirst for fundamental reform." This fervor eventually led to the formation of the National Assembly, representing the Third Estate. The assembly was resolute in its agreement to not give up until reforms were made. The Estates-General proved to be an important turning point in the build up to the French Revolution, as the people were defiantly standing up to the nobles, the Catholic Church, and the monarchy. Louis officially recognized the National Assembly on June 27 but mobilized troops towards Paris. This serves as one of the first indicators that Louis' concessions were often against his will.

Storming the Bastille

From early on in this resistance, Louis would have very little choice but to give into the Third Estates' demands. This became even more apparent on July 14, 1789, when the people of Paris stormed the Bastille prison three days after the removal of popular reformer Necker from his position as finance minister (along with several other reformers). The situation became more complicated for Louis when many of the troops who had been sent to "...quell grain and political riots in the city began refusing to attack the crowds and throwing down their arms when ordered by their officers to take aim at the people." It is also worth noting that July 14 was the day on which grain prices peaked; Pelz highlights this as "...likely more than mere coincidence..." The Bastille had become a significant symbol of the old order in Paris, dreaded by the people of France. One former prisoner at the Bastille described the fortress as an "...infamous prison, the terror alike of the wicked and good; the Grave of Liberty, the scandal of France, the disgrace of Europe." The Parisians took the prison, overwhelming the authorities. France was changing; the symbols and systems of the old order were being challenged.

Louis found himself at the center of this crisis. On July 13, a day before the Bastille was stormed, Louis wrote to his brother Charles, the Count d'Artois and future king of France. Louis stated, "To resist at present

would be to risk the loss of the monarchy, and the ruin of us all... My troops will retreat from Paris, and I shall employ milder measures.” Despite some of his understandable concerns at this point, it seems that Louis did not view this uprising as a major long-term threat to the monarchy, if the crisis was handled properly. With the French monarchy having been historically stable, perhaps, Louis thought this was a temporary issue. He continues, “I believe it is most prudent to temporize, to yield to the storm, and expect every thing from time, from the awakened courage of the good, and the love of Frenchmen for their king.” In turn, Louis would not take drastic action after the fall of the Bastille. Instead, he would try his best to yield to the storm publicly, following the demands of the French people.

Louis XVI, King ?

As time went on, the push for the reform of the “ancien régime” intensified. On August 26, 1789, the National Constituent Assembly clarified the revolutionaries’ goals by endorsing the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. Interestingly, this document does not mention the monarchy or Louis personally. Instead, it focuses on the expansion of the rights of the common people, stating, “The principle of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation. No body nor individual may exercise any authority which does not proceed directly from the nation.” In regard to the monarchy, the revolutionaries would have to address an important question: how would revolutionary France balance transforming the political system, while also maintaining the nation’s stability? It is important to clarify that the despotic features of the old order—not Louis himself—were being targeted by the French people. At this point, many of the revolutionaries did not want to abolish the monarchy; they simply wanted to reform the monarchical system. Meanwhile, on the same day, Louis wrote a letter to the archbishop of Arles, privately commenting, “I never will consent to despoil my clergy and nobility...I will never give my sanction to decrees, which tend to their annihilation.” Louis was defiant in his stances, defending both the First and Second estates. Although Louis agreed to some reforms, he secretly held his support of the old order.

With the storming of the Bastille establishing a precedent for violence, a mob marched on Versailles in October 1789, taking the royal family captive and forcing them to move to Paris. Black attributes this march to "...Louis's reluctance to accept reform, and rumours of preparations for a counter-revolution..." At this moment, France was essentially subject to the whims of the people, as "Popular politics and popular violence had become central to the revolution, as had the forces of fear and paranoia." Still, this outburst complicated the revolution, as leaders debated whether these developments were actually beneficial to their cause. Jean Joseph Mounier addressed the National Assembly after the events at the Bastille and Versailles, saying, "I could not resist a feeling of joy, contemplating in the capital the triumph of liberty and the destruction of the Bastille, this dreadful monument of despotism... What regrets must be felt by those who by their intrigues and their obstinacy provoked the fury of the people, gave them a taste of unlimited independence, made them aware of their strength, and taught them to abuse it!" In some instances, the revolutionaries were willing to resort to violence, if needed, to take down the old order.

Revoltion Redirected

From the March on Versailles to his trial, Louis was almost completely subject to the will of the people. Yet, the people were still largely enamored with the king. One of the most fascinating examples of this is the Festival of the Federation. On June 5, 1790, the mayor of Paris, Jean Sylvain Bailly, called for a day to celebrate various aspects of the revolution, its progress, and the overall unity of France. Bailly addressed the National Assembly, saying, "There is only one duty; that of submission to the law and to the king; there is only one sentiment left, that of love and brotherhood. It is on these bases that the peace and prosperity of this empire will rest." He highlighted France's new National Guard that was meant to "...defend public liberty, to enforce the laws of the empire, and the legitimate authority of the monarch." He also envisioned the glorification of Louis, imagining, "The king will see a large number shouting around him, raising a cry of 'long live the king', pronounced by liberty, and this cry will be that of the whole of France." Certainly, this

event was intended to celebrate Louis' new role, as he was still viewed very favorably by the French people. The revolutionaries were imagining Louis' popularity if he embraced a new role.

This festival was held on July 14, 1790, which was the first anniversary of the storming of the Bastille. Despite poor weather, the event took place outdoors at Champ de Mars, with France's most important figures participating in the celebration. Charles-François, marquis de Bonnay provides an eyewitness account of the day's events. De Bonnay highlights the words written out in several images at the event. One image states, "The king of a free people is alone a powerful king." A different image implores, "Follow the king, the queen." These words display a respect for Louis and his actions. Another image reads, "We no longer fear you, subordinate tyrants, You who oppressed us under a hundred different names." This denouncement of despots creates the question: did the French people see Louis as a tyrant at this point? Their praise seems to indicate that they did not. It seems unlikely that they would simultaneously call for reverence in regard to Louis and for the denunciation of tyrants.

Still a King

In reality, this festival celebrates France's seeming progression towards a constitutional monarchy. This can be seen in the wording of another image, reading, "The nation, it is you. The law, it is still you, it is your will. The king, [he] is the guardian of the law." The ceremony that occurred at Champ de Mars also confirms France's move towards a constitutional monarchy. After Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand, the Bishop of Autun, held mass on the newly constructed Altar of the Fatherland, Marquis de Lafayette, the members of the National Assembly, and Louis XVI all swore allegiance to France, its constitution, and its monarchy. De Bonnay describes this as "...the most beautiful moment of the French monarchy." Louis swore the following: "I, king of the French, swear to the nation to employ all the power delegated to me by the constitutional law of the state, to maintain the constitution and to enforce the laws." He took this oath in front of approximately 350,000 people. De Bonnay later notes the seating of the king. Seated on a throne of equal height,

Louis sat "...in the midst of them all, without any intermediary, and under the same pavilion." He describes the cheers of the crowd watching Louis take his oath, writing, "When His Majesty had spoken the last words, universal acclamations broke out; the cries of Long live the king, repeated from one end of the Champ de Mars to the other, by the National Assembly, by the federations and by the people..." Certainly, this festival must have felt like a unifying moment for the French people, in which the king had acknowledged a new role and the people had embraced him for it. This moment provides a picture of what France could have been like if Louis had truly accepted his new role.

For centuries, monarchs had played a central role in European politics. To many revolutionaries, the French Revolution in its early stages was a political revolution that they only hoped would go so far. They were not seeking a complete overhaul of the system. The idea of forming a republic was not mainstream for the first several years of the revolution. In fact, many of the early radical revolutionaries still supported a monarchy, despite their disagreements with the old order. For example, in one of his earlier works, the influential radical Jean Paul Marat denounced "...the increasing despotism of kings, throughout the entire work, nevertheless, he exhibited his faith in monarchy where abuse was not practiced." The revolutionary icon Honoré Gabriel Riqueti, comte de Mirabeau believed in a constitutional monarchy for the country, as his "...ideal government for France was a monarchy limited by one great governing assembly, deliberating together, elected by the people from all classes of the community impartially." In a speech to the National Assembly, Mirabeau stated about the legislature and the monarchy, "These two powers are equally necessary, equally precious to the nation." He later reiterated his loyalty to the constitution, stating, "I have been, I am, I will be to my grave, the man of public liberty, the man of the constitution." It is certainly worth noting, however, that Mirabeau's stance on Louis XVI was eventually compromised through a deal between the revolutionary leader and the king; this thought will be expanded upon later.

Nevertheless, the majority of revolutionaries did not necessarily believe that monarchy itself was tyrannical, but that the old order had exhibited tyrannical characteristics. They hoped that reforms could be achieved in cooperation with the king, reorganizing his despotic government.

Escape or Kidnapping?

As the revolutionaries were celebrating their push towards a constitutional monarchy, Louis, Marie-Antoinette, and those who were intensely loyal to the concept of absolute monarchy worked behind the scenes. With the new constitutional monarchy forming, Louis' role was being redefined as "...the first civil servant of the state. Louis found this definition offensive, as it struck at the conviction, inculcated since his youth, that he had been divinely anointed to assume the throne of his forefathers." Louis maneuvered to win Mirabeau to his side, offering to pay off his debts. In light of this development, Mirabeau wrote to Louis in March 1790, saying, "I will make it my capital business to put the executive power in its place in the Constitution...I promise the king loyalty, zeal, activity, energy..." Klar notes that Louis publicly "...distanced himself from his émigré relatives, but privately he was in league with them and secretly corresponded with the royal houses of Spain and Austria to enlist their support." The possibility of the royal family escaping France was deemed by some as a disastrous sign of treason to the constitution and by others as a hopeful step towards counter-revolution. In turn, on April 18, 1791, Louis and his family were halted by a large mob from traveling to Saint-Cloud. This moment seems to have served as a turning point in the royal family's approach to the revolution. Two days later, on April 20, Marie-Antoinette wrote to her brother Leopold II of Austria about the incident. Unhappy with the situation in France, she tells Leopold, "So expect some sudden trip, everything will be prepared, and I will report to you day by day the events as much as the opportunities allow." The planning process for the escape of Louis, Marie Antoinette, and their children had begun. They were turning their backs on the concept of constitutional monarchy, hoping to lead a counter-revolution.

On June 20, 1791, the royal family left Paris, heading eastward. The escape was unsuccessful though; they were stopped and arrested at Varennes, near France's border with Austria. Louis' flight revealed his secret hope to regain control of France to the people. He wanted to leave revolutionary France, as he "...desired to be free to organize counter-revolutionary activities with an eye to the restoration of a divine right monarchy." This was an extraordinary development in the French Revolution. Before leaving Tuileries in Paris, Louis wrote a note, revealing his reasons for his escape. He complained about his limiting power in the new system of government, describing it as being "...vicious..." He denounced the weakness of the National Assembly and tried to rally the people of France to his return to power. Now, Louis had exposed his views. To maintain order during this crisis, Klar reports that the National Assembly "...turned a blind eye to the king's manifest treason by inventing the fiction that he had been kidnapped." On June 21, the National Assembly published two decrees, promising punishment for those who had been involved in the "kidnapping." At the beginning of their message, they informed the people, "An awful misfortune is announced to us: enemy hands have torn our King and his family from the midst of a People he probably still cherishes." Still, despite this attempt, the monarchy's reputation had been damaged, as many suspected that this event was connected to the efforts of the counter-revolution. Although monarchy itself might not have fallen out of favor with the French people, Louis' favor with the people was weakening, opening the door for radical republicans. For the time being, though, Louis would not be removed, with many of the French still remaining loyal to the monarchy. Although his reputation had certainly been damaged by this event, Louis remained on the throne.

Systematic changes were coming to France, though. The National Assembly sought to concretely establish a constitution that would ultimately limit Louis' power. This was legislatively established in the Constitution of 1791, ratified in September. This document clarifies this limitation of power, stating, "There is no authority in France superior to that of the law; the King reigns only thereby, and only in the name of the law may he exact obedience." This constitution laid out a govern-

ment that allowed Louis to continue as a monarch and gave more power to the people. It was a compromise that provided Louis with most likely his best chance to maintain his throne and some of his monarchical power—even after his attempted escape. Louis had been given another chance; in fact, Caini notes that some favorable changes were made for Louis, saying, “After the flight to Varennes, any reference to the king as a civil servant was avoided in the renegotiated constitutional settlement. The wording of the 1791 document was adjusted so as not to offend royalist sensibilities.” This signals the willing of the National Assembly to still work with Louis, while also remaining committed to limiting his power.

Royal Sentiments

Despite publicly accepting the constitution, Louis’ private disinterest in this role persisted. Munro Price highlights a phrase from one of Louis’ letters to his brothers, in which he states, “I try again the only means I had left: the meeting of my will with the principles of the constitution... by adopting these ideas [myself], by following them in good faith, [the people] will know the cause of their misfortunes.” Price continues on to suggest, “Whether or not the king planned to abide by the constitution in the short term, his only aim in so doing was to expose it to his subjects as unworkable and thus regain the political initiative.” In August, several weeks before the constitution’s ratification, Marie-Antoinette wrote to Florimond Claude, comte de Mercy, “we are at the moment when this constitution will be brought to acceptance; it is by itself so monstrous that it is impossible for it to stand for long; but can we risk refusing it in the position we are in?” With the controversial flight to Varennes having happened approximately three months before, the royal family had to adhere to the constitution, with the hope that it would ultimately fail. The Constitution of 1791 was now in place, but Louis continued to hold onto the idea that the people would eventually turn back to him.

Unfortunate Attitudes

For many revolutionaries, the flight to Varennes had shifted the tone of the revolution. With the monarchs of Europe closely observing the revolution, the flight "...contributed significantly to the rapid expansion of conspiracy fears among the Revolutionary elites." Revolutionary France became paranoid of both internal and external conspiracies. Many citizens' trust with Louis had been damaged. In April 1792, war broke out between France and Austria, as Francis II took the Austrian throne after the death of his father. Several other European nations, like Prussia, came to Austria's aid, forming the First Coalition. The monarchical alliance hoped to reestablish Louis' absolute rule. On June 20, 1792, the Tuileries Palace and the Legislative Assembly—the new name of the National Assembly after the ratification of the constitution—were stormed by roughly 30,000 Parisians, who were outraged by Louis' dismissal of several ministers. The mob surrounded Louis, making their demands to him. Cormack notes, "Although cornered in a window embrasure, forced to don the red cap of the Sans-Culottes and to drink a toast to the nation, Louis XVI made no concessions to the demonstrators." Two weeks later, Marie-Antoinette wrote to Wenzel Anton, the Prince of Kaunitz, stating, "You already know the events of June 20, our position is dreadful and becomes more and more critical...It is more than time that the powers speak strongly." The royal family had lost control of the situation and was appealing to outsiders for help. This increased pressure on the revolutionaries backfired significantly.

Terrors and Trials

In July 1792, the Prussian Duke of Brunswick issued an extremely impactful edict. In this proclamation, he pushed the revolutionaries to "...return without delay to the path of reason, justice, order, and peace." If the revolutionaries did not ensure the royal family's safety, the Duke threatened his troops would "...inflict an ever memorable vengeance by delivering over the city of Paris to military execution and complete destruction, and the rebels guilty of the said outrages to the punishment that they merit." Terror was unleashed upon France; the revolutionaries panicked after receiving this edict. They wondered if French figures were collaborating with the foreign powers. To many revolutionaries, the

Duke's edict could be used "...as proof that the King was the centre of a vast conspiracy linking foreign tyrants, émigrés, counterrevolutionary generals, and corrupt politicians." The people of Paris stormed the Tuileries once again in August, clashing with Louis' guard, and arresting the royal family on suspicion of corresponding with foreign powers. This uprising resulted in the suspension of the king and "...half the deputies themselves fled Paris, for the Legislative Assembly, too, had lost its mandate." The provisional National Convention was formed, with the hopes of solving France's political issues. In turn, Louis was put on trial; the monarchy was in danger.

The trial of Louis XVI is a complex event. Despite Louis' wishes to reclaim power, the French people had remained loyal to the monarchy until very recently. Escalante notes, "A month before the insurrection of 10 August 1792, the republican form of government was still widely rejected." Still, the revelation of Louis' treasonous behavior had turned many of his supporters against him personally. Escalante continues, "Although kingship had very few critics at the beginning of August, Louis XVI, in contrast, had turned into the target of collective hate." As a result, the National Convention abolished the monarchy in September 1792. Louis' trial began in December 1792. Throughout his trial, Louis was referred to as "Louis Capet", positioning Louis as a citizen, not a king. The President of the National Convention summarized the assembly's charges against Louis during his trial, "Louis, the French people accuses you of having committed a multitude of crimes to establish your tyranny, by destroying their freedom." Louis would have to defend himself against these allegations.

Some did, in fact, come to the king's defense. Amongst these defenders was Necker, conveying his thoughts in a pamphlet. Necker questioned:

How could one demand of a Monarch, suddenly put in the bonds of a political system, as obscure as it is bizarre, and finally proscribed by the Deputies of the Nation themselves; how could one demand of him to be alone consistent in the midst of the continual variation of ideas? And would it not

be an extreme pain to judge a Monarch on all his projects, on all his thoughts, in the course of a revolution so great, that he would have needed to be in perfect agreement, not only with the known things, but also with all of them, of which one would have tried in vain to form a clear idea in advance? Above all, would it not be an incomprehensible rigor to demand of a prince, brought up according to the ancient principles of a Monarchy, and of a Monarchy existing for fourteen centuries, to unite without constraint and without regret with the Republican principles, suddenly introduced into the middle of France?

Necker also pointed to the inviolability of Louis—a central issue in the debate over the king’s future. The constitution had, in fact, established that the king was “...inviolable and sacred.” Could the king be punished? Necker asserts that the inviolability seemingly guaranteed by the constitution convinced Louis to agree to the ratification of the constitution in the first place and that without inviolability, “...it is probable that Louis XVI would not have accepted the Crown at this price.” Raymond de Séze, one of the members of the king’s defense counsel, similarly distinguishes Louis from a normal citizen, saying, “He had then a constitutional existence, absolutely distinct and different from every other citizen; and from whence came this particular and privileged existence, if not from the law, which had stamped on him a sacred character of inviolability, which could not be effaced till after his express or legal abdication?” Louis himself was questioned, denying the charges against him. When pressed about a safe in Tuileries that contained incriminating documents, Louis did not acknowledge its existence, stating, “I have no knowledge of it whatsoever.” Louis argued to the convention that he was innocent, but the assembly did not agree.

Conviction and Execution

The body voted overwhelmingly to convict Louis. In light of this conviction, debate ensued over the monarch’s punishment. The assembly debated over whether a king could be executed or if banishment would be more appropriate. Again, this debate speaks to the incredibly strong

allegiance to the concept of monarchy in France, despite the unpopularity of the old regime. Goudemetz provides a look at the voting roll call for the king's punishment. The answers vary, with some voting for execution, others for banishment, and other members giving their own unique responses. For example, Maximilian Robespierre states, "The tyrant has deserved death. I vote for death." Dannon of Arras adds, "The experience of those nations, who have put their King to death, proves the contrary of what you hope for. I am for confinement and transportation." Montgilbert of Macon voted, "If the enemies invade the French territory, then only I am of opinion that Louis should die." When the votes were counted, 366 members of the National Convention voted for Louis' death and 361 sided against his death, with 24 members being absent. On January 21, 1793, Louis XVI was executed by guillotine for his crimes against France. His hope of retaking power ended.

The Republic and Chaos

The age of the Republic was born. Louis' death destabilized France, and the country fell under the rule of chaos. When Louis' regime was unable to give the revolutionaries what they wanted, the people resorted to violent radicalism. The Committee of Public Safety, led by Robespierre, unleashed the Reign of Terror upon France, executing those who were not loyal to the republican revolution and its ideals. Radical leaders, like Marc-Antoine Vadier, were distrustful towards their fellow French citizens after the king's flight to Varennes, as "Vadier must have sworn never again to be lulled asleep by appearances and duped by the mask of patriotism, never again to let down his suspicions." Paranoia took control of France, once again. Tens of thousands of French citizens were executed during this era. Pelz described this era as being "... a tool against counter-revolution, but, at the same time, an attempt to channel popular anger into forms acceptable to the bourgeois, albeit radical, government apparatus." A radical constitution was created in 1793, but the provisional government was unable to implement it effectively. Tackett notes, "In reality, many of the Convention's social decrees, including those on education and land redistribution, were implemented only haltingly, if at all. The war and the terrible faction politics inside France

often made it impossible for the Montagnards to carry through such reforms before they fell from power.” The radicals took actions against the Catholic Church, creating the Republican Calendar and turning Notre-Dame into a temple of reason. After the Thermidorian Reaction, the new Directory did not provide France with the stability that it needed and plotters sought to replace the regime via a coup. The White Terror targeted radicals, causing more violence in France. The death of Louis created a power vacuum, throwing France into anarchy.

Napoleon

An answer to France’s problems arrived in 1799 when Napoleon seized power and formed the Consulate. Napoleon was a very popular figure. He rose through the ranks of the French military during the revolution and was seen as a hero for his conquests in Egypt. The failures of the Directory had “...paved the way for the ‘restoration of order’ by Napoleon Bonaparte.” Although the government established in 1799 was a consulate, Napoleon held all of the power in France. Wanting to establish a hereditary line of succession, he became emperor in 1804. French leadership believed that “...a hereditary office—contemporaries generally spoke of hereditary rather than a new dynasty—supported by an adequate constitution, was the best means of government, the best guarantor of peace.” The radical revolutionaries had tried to usher in a republic to solve France’s issues, but many of the French people held onto their reverence of monarchy. This admiration continued even through the radical stages of the revolution, as “Some of these men, like Talleyrand and Roederer...partisans of a constitutional monarchy during the early years of the Revolution, had always remained favourable to a strong executive.” The monarchy may have been abolished in 1792, but the door for a strong executive power remained open. Republicanism had failed and the French people had now turned to Napoleon’s authoritarian regime for solutions.

In the end, France had seemingly traded one absolute ruler for another. Dwyer explores Napoleon’s attempt to establish himself as an authoritative leader, noting that Napoleon utilized public ceremonies “...to legitimate his rule, to make the political order appear more authoritative,

to acknowledge publicly the place of the people within the new polity, and to create a sense of community first in the Consulate and then in the Empire.” Dwyer examines Napoleon’s coronation as emperor in relation to this concept. Napoleon’s approach to planning this ceremony exhibits his belief in the importance of image. For example, he chose Notre-Dame as the site for his coronation; he had considered Champ de Mars but felt that this location was too closely associated with Paris alone instead of all of France. He also considered the weather at the Festival of the Federation in 1790, believing that “it would not look dignified if the imperial family were exposed to the rain and the mud...” Napoleon invited the Pope to Paris to anoint him, which had not been done in over a thousand years; he believed that this act would “... transform the Empire into a Christian monarchy, and Napoleon into a legitimate monarch.” In turn, Dwyer states, “The Empire was, in some respects, the result of a monarchial reflex that had persisted in French political and popular culture despite more than a decade of republicanism.” Again, this points towards the strong loyalty to the concept of the monarchy in France and the stability that it brought. In a turn away from his radical predecessors, Napoleon seemingly embraced being a monarch.

The Comparison

Louis and Napoleon’s regimes were both authoritarian, but the French people viewed the two figures very differently. This raises the questions: what separated Louis and Napoleon? Why did the French people embrace Napoleon and not Louis? Certainly, the events of the revolution played into this. The people of France were tired after ten years of tumultuous revolution. The practical appeal of Napoleon was that he provided stability—even if it was through authoritarian measures. He also was able to create an image of himself as a people’s champion, as he worked “...to redefine the centre of power by offering a new vision of the relationship between the monarch and society...Contemporaries consequently referred to Napoleon as ‘citizen emperor,’ to show the precarious balance between traditional notions of monarchy and the revolutionary notion of the sovereignty of the people.” Louis, on the other hand, was constantly split between wavering to the people and retaking

power. Jean-Louis Soulavie wrote about Louis, “This wavering and uncertain disposition of Louis XVI was the primary cause of the fall of the ancient monarchy, and of the constitutional monarchy.” Under Napoleon’s rule, the freedom of the press was oppressed, the legislative bodies that were in place held no real power, and Napoleon chose virtually all of France’s officials, even on a local level. On the other hand, Napoleon also pushed for some of the fundamental reforms that the early revolutionaries had wanted.

During Napoleon’s reign, there seemed to be “...a genuine attempt to continue and deepen the reforms brought by the Revolution.” Feudalism in France was abolished, a meritocracy was established, and the property rights that were ensured to members of the Third Estate during the revolution were secured. In the lands he conquered, Napoleon instituted electoral systems, hoping to integrate these lands into his European empire. Through this, Napoleon was able to “...[turn] occupied territories into departments of the Empire...” Napoleon fought back against the foreign invaders who sought to stop the revolution, securing stability within the nation. These ultimately were the main goals of the early revolutionaries, who wanted reform in France, not a complete overhaul. In this regard, Napoleon was able to achieve what Louis was unwilling to do.

Furthermore, Napoleon was also able to reestablish relations with the First and Second estates. He made an agreement with the Pope and welcomed émigrés back to the country. Napoleon was able to balance rebuilding and reforming France. For this, Napoleon’s popularity skyrocketed. This truly can be confirmed through Napoleon’s return to France. In March 1815, Napoleon returned to France from his exile on Elba. In Napoleon’s absence, the Bourbon dynasty had been restored, with Louis XVIII taking the throne. When Napoleon returned, the French people turned to him, with Louis fleeing Paris. The people could have rejected Napoleon’s return to power; Napoleon was in no position to force his rule in this situation. When given the choice, though, the French people rallied to Napoleon and his cause. This highlights the difference between Louis and Napoleon. Louis could have received this type of support if

he had accepted some of the concessions the early revolutionaries had demanded. Again, the early revolutionaries were not against a strong executive power; many were loyal to the idea of the monarchy. However, when Louis would not use his power to help the people, the people acted against him, forcing him into a constitutional monarchy. When he acted against the constitutional monarchy, his relationship with the people deteriorated. Napoleon had defended the revolution and won the people's loyalty; Louis had hindered the revolution and squandered the people's loyalty.

Having reviewed the arguments of the era, it is difficult to find the end of Louis' monarchy to be an inevitable development of the French Revolution. On the contrary, the early revolutionaries extended several opportunities for Louis to remain in power, albeit in a more limited role. Escalante examines this concept, writing, "In the specific case of French republicanism, the revolutionary/republican master narrative has forced the meaning of the events shaping its history so that there is no doubt that they necessarily and inevitably led to the republican rupture of 1792." He later affirms, "There, the terms of traditional historiographical interpretation must undoubtedly be radically reversed: it was not the republicans who created the Republic, but rather the Republic who created the Republicans." If Louis had become a constitutional monarch, the Republic would have never been established.

Caiani similarly denounces the concept of the inevitability of the monarch's fall. He states, "The revisiting of many political and cultural topics did much to demonstrate that it was not the disintegration of traditional French society that overthrew the monarchy. On the contrary, the origins of the Revolution now seemed to be tied to a system of government beset by internal contradictions and unable to react positively to unfavorable international circumstances." This realization casts the revolution in a different light. The downfall of the monarchy was not inevitable but was, in fact, perpetuated by Louis' resistance to reform.

Conclusion

When considering the French Revolution, an important question presents itself: was a constitutional monarchy in revolutionary France ever truly possible? It certainly seems that it could have been if Louis XVI would have allowed it. There was an extremely strong loyalty to the concept of monarchy in France. Despite the inadequacies of the old order, many of the revolutionaries would have embraced Louis as a constitutional monarch. Some of the revolutionaries defended Louis even up to his death. Louis himself, however, privately hoped to regain absolute power and worked against the revolution. The opportunity that presented itself in 1791 was the best path for Louis continuing as a monarch. Louis still had the strong support of the people as a constitutional monarch, which was essential, even after his attempted escape to Varennes. As time went on, Louis' control of the situation diminished. France fell into fear of both internal and external conspiracies and the revolution became increasingly radical. The republican regimes that came into power after Louis could not solve France's problems, ushering in Napoleon's rule. Napoleon seized absolute control of France while securing the main goals of the early revolutionaries. For this, he became an extremely popular figure, effectively ruling as a monarch. This suggests that Louis could have remained a strong executive power in a similar role to Napoleon, if Louis had made the concessions that the people wanted. The people could have viewed him as a hero of the revolution, as they later viewed Napoleon. Louis could have adhered to the revolutionaries' desires and been given a compromise that secured his rule. However, Louis rejected the idea of being a constitutional monarch and did not fulfill the goals of the revolutionaries as Napoleon did, making Louis an enemy of the French Revolution.

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