



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on July 22, 2019

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## The Ugly Legacy of the French Revolution

Thirty years ago, France marked the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution, celebrated officially as a great event, but remembered in the Vendee region of the country quite differently. Roger Jouteau, the manager of Les Herblers, a little town in the Vendee region that was assaulted by revolutionary French armies in 1794, expressed outrage in 1989 that the French government believed the revolution was something to celebrate.



“For us, it was a horrible genocide, a lasting source of national shame,” said Jouteau. It is estimated that Vendee’s 1789 population was 250,000; 150,000 died in the efforts of the radical government to impose its will on the recalcitrant area of rich farmlands south of the Loire River, extending east from the Atlantic Ocean. Much of its population, which resisted the de-Christianization, the destruction of private property, and the attacks upon the existing order of society, all in the name of the people, was either killed in battle, disemboweled, starved, or shoved alive into bread ovens.

While the French Revolution is often depicted as a patriotic uprising against an old regime of aristocratic oppression of the French people, the truth is that most of the victims were not aristocrats, but rather peasants who defended their lands and their Christian faith, and resisted conscription to fight wars intended to spread the revolution throughout Europe.

According to Simon Schama’s best-seller *Citizens*, most of France remained loyal to the king.

According to the popular understanding (misunderstanding, actually), Bastille Day is some sort of French equivalent of America’s Independence Day, and the French Revolution as a whole was brought about by liberty-loving French in Paris who spontaneously rose up against a tyrannical king and his haughty wife, and who stormed the Bastille and liberated hundreds of political prisoners. Yet this widely accepted image could not be further from the truth.

## The Role of Radical Secret Societies

The French Revolution was actually the fruit of decades of radical agitation stirred up by anti-Christian, power-seeking secret societies that had been inspired by the most radical elements of the Enlightenment. (A radical is a person who desires the destruction of the present order, replacing it with a new order in the world.) The French Revolution has served as the template for every radical movement since. The first dictator of the Soviet Union, Vladimir Lenin, praised the French Revolution as a model for his own bloody Bolshevik Revolution, which installed a communist dictatorship in Russia. As the radicals of the French Revolution murdered the king and queen in the 1790s, Lenin’s Bolsheviks did the same in 1918 to the Russian royal family. Another communist who looked with favor on the French Revolution was Ho Chi Minh, who killed rivals for political power in Vietnam, saying, “Anyone who does not follow the line determined by me will be smashed.”

Since much of the rhetoric of today’s leftists sounds like that espoused by the French revolutionaries,



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with its savage attacks upon Christianity, liberty, property, and life itself — symbolized by the guillotine for the “enemies of the people” (called a basket of deplorables today by the revolution’s ideological heirs) — we need only note how and why the French Revolution happened to understand the impetus and strategy of modern leftists.

The popular image of the heroic storming of the Bastille is a gross distortion of actual historical events. The seeds of the French Revolution were sown in the cafes, coffee houses, and secret societies that emerged in the Enlightenment. This is not to say that the Enlightenment as a whole was evil, but many of the personalities and ideas that emerged from it were certainly radical. It was marked by increasing opposition to the existing order, specifically opposition to orthodox Christianity.

Among the more important events of the radical side of the Enlightenment was the publication of the 35-volume *Encyclopedia*, compiled between 1751 and 1772 by the virulently anti-Christian Denis Diderot and others who shared his radical viewpoints. The first edition even pictured a winged Lucifer on its title page. (One might note that Saul Alinsky, the mentor of both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, dedicated his 1971 book *Rules for Radicals* to Lucifer.) Few Enlightenment figures were openly atheist, but many instead held to deism, a belief that while there exists a Creator, he does not intervene in human affairs, and the authority of the Bible is questioned, with particular opposition to literal miracles. In other words, it is a religious view that leaves man morally unrestrained.

With the continuing spread of radical ideas — discussed openly in cafes, coffee houses, reading rooms, salons, and the like across Europe — some people began to move toward revolution, meeting in secret societies. One of these secret societies was the Bavarian Illuminati, formed by Adam Weishaupt on May 1, 1776. (Note that today communists around the world celebrate May 1.) Weishaupt’s godfather, Johann Adam Freiherr von Ickstatt, raised him after the death of the boy’s father. Ickstatt was a devotee of the more radical ideas of the Enlightenment and passed on his rationalistic views to his godson. Weishaupt, a law professor, envisioned a society of “illumination, enlightening the understanding by the sun of reason, which will dispel the clouds of superstition and prejudice.”

Many of the Illuminati’s goals are largely shared by the Left today. They hate religion and nations, hoping that both will be annihilated. The Illuminati considered patriotism to be narrow-minded, believing it should be replaced by a world government, according to John Robison in his *Proofs of a Conspiracy*. The radical group envisioned the abolition of laws protecting property and any veneration of marriage vows, and advocated the taking of education out of the hands of parents, while supporting the practice of abortion, according to Nesta Webster in her book *World Revolution*.

These ideas of the Illuminati permeated the radical clubs of pre-revolution France. The ruler of Bavaria, Elector Karl Theodor, became alarmed at the subversive intentions of the Illuminati, and tried several times to suppress it. As a result, many of its adherents migrated to Paris, which was already awash in Enlightenment radicalism.

## **Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette**

Whereas King Louis XVI and his wife, Marie Antoinette, are usually portrayed in the history books and in popular culture as tyrants of the worst sort, the truth is quite different. Marie Antoinette supposedly once remarked, “Let them eat cake,” when told the poor lacked bread. The real Antoinette said no such thing. In fact, she lodged and fed 12 poor families at her own expense at Trianon. She founded the



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Society of Ladies of Maternal Charity. She even once stopped her carriage for over an hour to aid an injured person, and waited until a surgeon was located.

Historian Antonia Fraser disputed the cruel libel against Antoinette in her book *Marie Antoinette, the Journey*, writing, “As a handy journalistic cliché [“Let them eat cake”], it may never die,” adding that “such ignorant behavior would have been quite out of character. The unfashionably philanthropic Marie Antoinette would have been more likely to bestow her own cake impulsively upon the starving people before her.”

Perhaps the greatest error of Marie Antoinette’s husband, Louis XVI of the House of Bourbon, was involving his nation in the war between Great Britain and her American colonies, compounding France’s serious debt problem. He, however, did not create the debt problem: Most of France’s debt was incurred before Louis the XVI came to the throne, during the four wars of Louis XIV, followed by the Seven Years’ War (known as the French and Indian War in America) under Louis XV. With its monetary problems, France had no business involving itself in yet another war. Perhaps Louis could not have avoided the national bankruptcy that contributed to the coming of the French Revolution even had he remained out of the American Revolution, but his intervention no doubt deepened the debt problem.

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In 1788, the fiscal situation for the French government was desperate, and Louis XVI called the Estates-General — representatives of the clergy (the First Estate), nobility (the Second Estate), and commoners (the Third Estate) — to help him pay it off. The nobility and the clergy claimed exemption from taxes, leaving most of the debt to be the burden of the growing middle class. Louis XVI even asked the people of France for their suggestions to improve the nation, known as *Cahiers de doléances* (or local grievances). While many asked for the abolition of the fiscal privileges of the church and the nobility, none called for the king to step down.

With the Estates-General divided into three “estates” and the severe winter of 1788, which contributed to hunger and even starvation, the radicals sensed their opportunity to overthrow the king. On June 10, 1789, the Third Estate, led by Count de Mirabeau — a nobleman ally of the king’s cousin, the Duke of Orleans, and a probable member of the Illuminati — urged the nobles and clergy to unite with the radicals and separate from the Estates General. Many did, and on June 17, the Third Estate, with some nobles and clergy who joined them, proclaimed themselves the National Assembly of France. On June 20, the new National Assembly found the meeting hall closed, so the deputies went to a nearby indoor tennis court to escape the rain. There, they took the Tennis Court Oath, in which they pledged not to adjourn until they had adopted a new constitution for France.

The Duke of Orleans, who desired to replace his cousin as king of France, began bribing hungry Parisians to rebel and overthrow the government.

Thousands stood outside bakeries all day, waiting for bread. (The Duke had a virtual monopoly on the importation of food into Paris, and may have intentionally exacerbated the food shortage in Paris so the king could be blamed). As well, rumors of all sorts were floated among the populace to raise them against the king: One had it that the king had even placed explosive mines in the meeting hall of the National Assembly. On July 11, Louis XVI ordered the army to disband the National Assembly, no doubt providing fodder for more scaremongering. On July 13, mobs were encouraged to break in to



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gunsmiths' shops, searching for weapons, ostensibly to protect themselves from the king's soldiers. A new rumor circulated on July 14, causing the greatest alarm yet. According to this rumor, soldiers were supposedly poised to attack the city.

## **The Storming of the Bastille**

At this point, to obtain more arms, someone suggested that the mob attack the Hôtel des Invalides — a hospital for elderly and ill and injured soldiers — where they found nearly 30,000 muskets. But since there were few cartridges and only small stores of powder, someone then shouted that they should storm the Bastille, which was said to contain vast stores of both cartridges and gunpowder.

While the French Revolution has been presented as a spontaneous uprising, it seems that there was a guiding hand every step along the way.

The Bastille was a 14th-century castle that Louis XVI would have already torn down, had he the funds. At one time, during the rule of his great-great-great grandfather, the "Sun King," Louis XIV, the Bastille had housed hundreds of political prisoners. Now, it housed only seven inmates — four of whom were forgers, one who was jailed for incest, and two others, who were probably insane. None were political dissidents.

But all this information was unknown to the mob. They were told that the Bastille not only contained weapons, but also still held hundreds of political prisoners, suffering horrific tortures within its thick walls. Suddenly, someone in the crowd shouted that the cannons atop the Bastille could kill many in the enraged Paris mob. Upon hearing this, the governor of the Bastille, Bernard-René de Launay, directed that the cannons be withdrawn from visibility. At this, someone shouted that they must be loading the cannons, with intentions of murdering the mob!

Rather than fight, de Launay chose to open the doors. With shouts from within the mob to kill them all, de Launay was butchered — shot and stabbed. A sword was used, along with a pocket knife, to decapitate him. His severed head was then placed at the end of a pike and paraded through the streets of Paris.

Rumors then spread that hundreds of political prisoners had been liberated from the Bastille.

This whole episode is hardly something to celebrate; however, it is held up by many — not only in France, but around the world, including in our own country — as somehow the equivalent of the embattled farmers standing at Lexington and Concord and firing the shot heard 'round the world.

What nonsense!

## **The Libeling of Marie Antoinette**

Unfortunately, the madness was only beginning. Radicals were doing their best to drive events to attain their vision of a new, godless society, with them in charge. As such, they focused much of their propaganda on the foreign-born queen, Marie Antoinette, who was falsely portrayed as a woman of low morals. For years, she had been the target of scurrilous pamphlets that made the rounds of revolutionists because it was understood that Marie, an Austrian, was an easy target for these brutal libels.

Others also conspired to overthrow the Bourbon Dynasty, including the Duke of Orleans (the king's cousin who wanted the throne) and the Prussian government, which desired to destroy the Austrian-



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French alliance that had been cemented by the marriage of Louis and Marie. The Hohenzollerns in Prussia saw the Austrian Hapsburgs blocking their path to power in the Holy Roman Empire. Were the Hapsburgs removed as the dominant family of the Holy Roman Empire, then perhaps the upstart Hohenzollerns would provide the emperors.

Marie Antoinette detested the Prussians. In her book *The French Revolution: A Study in Democracy*, Nesta Webster wrote, "There can be no doubt whatever that certain of the libels and seditious pamphlets published against her before and during the Revolution were circulated by [Prussian envoy to France Bernhard] von der Goltz at the instigation of the king of Prussia."

All manner of evil was attributed to Marie Antoinette in these pamphlets. She was compared to the evil queen Jezebel. Even her desire to go with some friends to see the sun rise one morning led to a pamphlet, implying something evil must have been involved. She was accused of having had incestuous relationships with her own brother and the king's brother and her own son, as well as sexual encounters with women and even animals. Although she drank little to no alcohol, she was accused of frequent drunken orgies.

Contrary to the pictures painted by the pamphlets, she was actually quite disgusted at the sexual immorality she witnessed at the French court.

The radicals freely used this hatred of the queen to advance their own goals.

In July and August, rumors — which had no basis in fact — swept the country that brigands, Austrians or English, were arriving to slaughter citizens in towns and villages. This was a fabrication perpetrated by Adrien Duport of the Club Breton (forerunner of the Jacobin club, which drank freely of the poisonous radicalism of the Illuminati), according to Webster. Messengers were even dispatched to various towns with the bizarre claim that the king wished to burn down manor houses. The ensuing frenzy led to mob violence throughout the country.

Then, in October 1789, a rabble of Parisian women (which included men dressed like women) made their way to Versailles, screaming they would "cut the queen's pretty throat." They broke into the palace, killing resisting guards, and charged toward Antoinette's bedroom, shouting, "Where is the whore? Death to the Austrian! We'll wring her neck!"

Both the king and queen had to flee for their lives. After some negotiating, the king and queen were marched back to the ancient Tuileries Palace in Paris by the angry mob, holding the heads of decapitated guards on pikes. The king and his family were under house arrest. Soon the National Assembly chose to move their own meetings to Paris, where the entire French government now fell under control of the radical-controlled Paris Mob.

One month later, the Assembly began its attacks upon the Roman Catholic Church, in particular, and Christianity, in general. The property of the church and noble estates was seized. Using this property as backing for paper money, known as assignats, the government began the inflation that would worsen the economic conditions.

Clergy were now to be elected by popular vote, and all priests and bishops were required to swear an oath of loyalty to the state. This turned many early supporters against the revolution. The National Assembly, now joined by the nobles and the clergy from the Estates General, believed a new constitution was needed to better represent "the people," and to fulfill the promise of the June 20



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Tennis Court Oath. While Louis XVI remained the nominal head of state, the new Legislative Assembly would hold all legislative power.

The better-organized radical members became more prominent, and the king and queen decided to flee the country. Unfortunately, they lost their way, and were discovered after asking a boy for directions. Sadly, Louis tipped the boy, who recognized the king from his likeness on the coin. The boy then informed revolutionary “authorities” in the area, and the king and queen were forced to return to Paris.

As the radicals seized greater power, they were able to engineer a declaration of war against Austria and Prussia. They wanted a world revolution. After early setbacks in the war, Louis XVI became a convenient scapegoat for the failures in the war, the food shortages in Paris, and the rising prices (due to the inflationary practices of the Legislative Assembly), and the king was stripped of any real power and placed under house arrest.

Radicals within the Legislative Assembly coordinated with a radical element in the streets of the city — known as the Paris Mob — to intimidate the Legislative Assembly as a whole to call for yet another, even more-radical constitution.

## **The National Convention**

The new National Convention established by the Legislative Assembly to write the new constitution was made up of only radical delegates. The so-called right-wing of the convention was the Girondists, who were simply the less-radical members of the socialist Jacobins. Left-wing Jacobins ran the convention, with their leaders Georges Danton and Maximilian Robes-pierre dominating the proceedings.

As conditions in the country deteriorated with rising prices, shortages, and continuing threatened invasion by Austria and Prussia, the radicals opted to divert attention away from their own gross misgovernment by placing the king on trial. The king’s Swiss Guards were prepared to defend the king, but he chose to order their surrender. Once the guards surrendered, 600 Swiss Guards were murdered by an enraged mob.

The madness spread, with a mob attacking a caravan of 24 clergymen on their way to prison. They were slashed to pieces. Other Catholic priests and bishops around the country shared their fate over the next several weeks.

Princess Lamballe, a close friend of the queen and an enemy of her late husband’s brother-in-law, the Duke of Orleans, was dragged from her cell, and ordered to express her hatred of the royal couple. Her response was, “It is not in my heart. The king and queen I have ever loved.” Her trial was a farce, and her murder, called an execution, came immediately. She was gang-raped, then sliced to pieces. The mob chopped up her body, with one man roasting a breast and eating it. Her head was paraded past the window of the queen’s prison cell, with some asking the distraught Marie Antoinette to “kiss her lover.”

Finally, in September 1792, the National Convention abolished the office of king and put him on trial for treason. The leader of the Jacobins, Robespierre, hypocritically favored capital punishment for Louis, though prior to the revolution, as a judge, he opposed it. He contended that even bothering with a trial was “counterrevolutionary.”

Despite their continuing vitriolic attacks upon the king, blaming him unfairly for all of France’s woes, the revolutionaries were having trouble getting the majority vote needed in the Convention to sentence the king to death, until his cousin, the Duke of Orleans, now calling himself Philippe Égalité (Equality),



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stood and cast the decisive vote for death. The following day, January 21, 1793, Louis XVI went to the guillotine. His last words were, "I die innocent of all the crimes imputed to me. I pardon the authors of my death and pray God that the blood you are about to shed will never fall upon France." At that the crowd began yelling, and the drummers began pounding their drums, so he could no longer be heard. His body was dumped in an unmarked grave, where the revolutionaries poured lime on his corpse to dissolve his body.

The only justice was that, less than a year later, Philippe Égalité, who had engineered much of the revolution and had voted for his own cousin's death, also went to the guillotine.

Revolts by more-conservative French citizens in Lyons and Marseilles angry at how the radicals were destroying their country were then put down with brutal severity, and several thousands of average French citizens were killed by revolutionary armies. This revolt and the foreign threat were then used by the radicals to launch the infamous Reign of Terror from September 1793 to July 1794, during which time a radical oligarchy of a dozen men set up the ridiculously named "Committee of Public Safety," with Robespierre the dominant member, and used the guillotine for mass executions of tens of thousands of French people.

Among the first to die was the unfortunate queen, Marie Antoinette. The food shortages were blamed, devoid of logic, on her. Her son had already been taken from her, and given to a radicalized cobbler to raise. At her trial, she was accused of being an enemy of the revolution, among many ridiculous and vile charges.

In a final letter to her sister, she wrote, "I die in the Catholic Apostolic and Roman religion, that of my fathers, that in which I was brought up, and which I have always professed.... I sincerely implore pardon of God for all the faults which I may have committed during my life."

By this time, as the once-beautiful Marie Antoinette was transported to the place of execution in a cart, she was already dying of tuberculosis. Less than 40 years old, she had turned prematurely gray.

## **The Reign of Terror**

Estimates of the death toll are still disputed, from a low of 14,000 to in excess of 50,000, of those who followed their queen to their deaths by guillotine. Contrary to the mythology that the masses killed were all aristocrats and priests, they actually comprised only 15 percent of the total. About 70 percent of those legally murdered were of the working class, peasants, and lower middle class — anyone who could be branded as an "enemy of the people."

Finally, the revolutionaries turned on each other. When Danton raised the possibility that perhaps it was time for the executions to subside, he was arrested as an enemy of the revolution by Robespierre, and guillotined. Ascending the scaffold, Danton's last words were, "Show my head to the people. They don't see the like of it every day!"

Joseph Fouche convinced the other members of the committee that they would be next if they did not execute Robes-pierre. Accordingly, Robespierre's head soon rolled, bringing an end to the Reign of Terror. (Fouche would go on to head up Napoleon Bonaparte's secret police.)

During the Reign of Terror, the National Convention did its best to implement the radical regime envisioned by so many radicals of the Enlightenment. To curb the inflation that they had caused, they resorted to price controls, which predictably led to shortages. They attempted to uproot every vestige of



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what they called the Old Regime and replace it with their New Order.

They created a new law code, a new system of weights and measures (the Metric System), and a new Constitution, and even ordered that the images of the king and queen in decks of playing cards be replaced by soldiers and workers.

Of course, the central target was Christianity, which was summarily abolished. Many church buildings were ransacked, such as the Cathedral of Notre Dame, and turned into Temples of Reason, complete with statues of revolutionary “saints” such as Voltaire, a leading critic of Christianity and the Old Regime and a leading figure of the radical side of the 18th-century Enlightenment. This hatred of Christianity led to a new calendar, largely to eliminate any remaining influence of the Christian faith. Instead of the old calendar, the new calendar eliminated B.C. and A.D., as well as all holy days. The year of the adoption of the Constitution would be the starting point for the new calendar — after all, in the view of the anti-Christian radicals, that was a more important event of history than the birth of Jesus Christ. Their 360-day, 12-month calendar would be divided into 10-day periods of time, rather than a seven-day week. The purpose, of course, was to end Sunday as a day of worship. The five remaining days were dubbed Virtue Day, Genius Day, Labor Day, Reason Day, and Rewards Day.

Fouche even ordered the religious imagery found in most cemeteries to be replaced with a phrase that summed up their atheistic ideology: “Death is an eternal sleep.”

### **The Thermidorean Reaction and Burke’s Reflections**

In the end, there was a reaction to the madness, named “the Thermidorean Reaction,” in 1795 (the radicals also renamed the months — Thermidor being the month of heat, which was the month in which the radicals were ousted from power). Churches reopened and price controls were mercifully lifted, ending the continuing shortages.

Unfortunately, the social order of France had been so disrupted that a young Corsican artillery officer, Napoleon Bonaparte, eventually seized power and established a military dictatorship. In the words of Napoleon, “I found the crown of France on the ground, and I picked it up with a sword.” Not too surprisingly, two radicals — Charles Talleyrand and Joseph Fouche — had no problem joining up with Napoleon. Although Napoleon was later defeated by Allied powers led by Great Britain in 1815 at Waterloo, the seeds of radicalism planted in France, and throughout Europe, have never been extinguished. We can see its progeny today not only in the political world, but also in the popular culture and in academia.

One observer who very early saw the dark hole into which France was descending was the English political philosopher Edmund Burke, who wrote his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in 1790. He considered the principles of the French Revolution to be abstract and dangerous, and contended that a nation could not totally destroy its own traditions and character, as had the French, without the most dire consequences.

Only a year into the revolution, Burke was already predicting it would end not in reform, but rather in violence and dictatorship. He wrote to a friend in France shortly after the storming of the Bastille, and said, “Whenever a separation is made between liberty and justice, neither is in my opinion safe.” He declared that the French Revolution was precipitated by a host of rotten atheists who were starved for power, and once they obtained power, were further corrupted by it. “A disposition to preserve, and an ability to improve, taken together, would be my standard of a statesman. Everything else is vulgar in





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conception, perilous in the execution.”

Burke regarded that the American Revolution had succeeded in connecting liberty and justice, but the French Revolution had not.

For those who blamed previous generations of French leaders for what had occurred — both monarchs and even some previous leaders of the Roman Catholic Church — he had no patience: “It is not very just to chastise men for the offenses of their natural ancestors, but to take the fiction of ancestry in a corporate succession as a ground for punishing men who have no relation to guilty acts.”

The lessons of the French Revolution for our day are numerous. As we watch the mob of our own time agitating for redistribution of the wealth, destroying the careful work of the Founders in the Constitution, and libeling the Founding Fathers as they have, all we need to do is read the history of the French Revolution to learn that we must avoid such madness, not only for our sake, but also for our descendants’.



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