The French Revolution: Crash Course World History #29

Crash Course: World History
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Hi, my name is John Green, this is Crash Course World History, and today we're going to talk about The French Revolution. Admittedly, this wasn't the French flag until 1794, but we just felt like he looked good in stripes. As does this guy. Huh?

So, while the American Revolution is considered a pretty good thing, the French Revolution is often seen as a bloody, anarchic mess, which...

Mr. Green, Mr. Green! I bet, like always, it's way more complicated than that.

Actually no. It was pretty terrible. Also, like a lot of revolutions, in the end it exchanged an authoritarian regime for an authoritarian regime. But even if the revolution was a mess, its ideas changed human history - far more, I will argue, than the American Revolution.

(Intro)

Right, so France in the 18th century was a rich and populous country, but it had a systemic problem collecting taxes because of the way its society was structured. They had a system with kings and nobles we now call the Ancien Régime. Thank you, three years of high school French.

And for most French people, it sucked, because the people with the money - the nobles and the clergy - never paid taxes. So by 1789, France was deeply in debt thanks to their funding the American Revolution - thank you, France; we will get you back in World Wars I and II. And King Louis XVI was spending half of his national budget to service the federal debt.

Louis tried to reform this system under various finance ministers. He even called for democracy on a local level, but all attempts to fix it failed and soon France basically declared bankruptcy. This nicely coincided with hailstorms that ruined a year's harvest, thereby raising food prices and causing widespread hunger, which really made the people of France angry, because they love to eat.

Meanwhile, the King certainly did not look broke, as evidenced by his well-fed physique and fancy footwear. He and his wife Marie Antoinette also got to live in the very nice Palace at Versailles thanks to God's mandate, but Enlightenment thinkers like Kant were challenging the whole idea of religion, writing things like: "The main point of enlightenment is of man's release from his self-caused immaturity, primarily in matters of religion."

So basically the peasants were hungry, the intellectuals were beginning to wonder whether God could or should save the King, and the nobility were dithering about, eating foie gras and songbirds, failing to make meaningful financial reform.

In response to the crisis, Louis XVI called a meeting of the Estates General, the closest thing that France had to a national parliament, which hadn't met since 1614. The Estates General was like a super parliament made up of representatives from the First Estate, the nobles, the Second Estate, the clergy, and the Third Estate, everyone else. (Added annotation corrects- First estate is the clergy, Second estate is the nobility)

The Third Estate showed up with about 600 representatives, the First and Second Estates both had about 300, and after several votes, everything was deadlocked, and then the Third Estate was like, "You know what? Forget you guys. We're gonna leave and we're gonna become our own National Assembly."

This did not please King Louis XVI. So when the new National Assembly left the room for a break, he locked the doors, and he was like, "Sorry, guys, you can't go in there. And if you can't assemble, how you gonna be a National Assembly?"

Shockingly, the Third Estate representatives were able to find a different room in France, this time an indoor tennis court where they swore the famous Tennis Court Oath. And they agreed not to give up until a French constitution was established.

So then Louis XVI responded by sending troops to Paris primarily to quell uprisings over food shortages, but the revolutionaries saw this as a provocation, so they responded by seizing the Bastille Prison on July 14th, which, coincidentally, is also Bastille Day. The Bastille was stormed ostensibly to free prisoners - although there were only seven in jail at the time - but mostly to get guns.

But the really radical move in the National Assembly came on August 4, when they abolished most of the Ancien Régime - feudal rights, tithes, privileges for nobles, unequal taxation, they were all abolished - in the name of writing a new constitution.

And then, on August 26th, the National Assembly proclaimed the Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen, which laid out a system of rights that applied to every person, and made those rights integral to the new constitution. That's quite different from the American bill of rights, which was, like, begrudgingly tacked on at the end and only applied to non-slaves.

The DoRoMaC, as I called it in high school, declared that everyone had the right to liberty, property, and security - rights that the French Revolution would do an exceptionally poor job of protecting, but as noted last week, the same can be argued for many other supposedly more successful revolutions. Okay, let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Meanwhile, back at Versailles, Louis XVI was still King of France, and it was looking like France might be a constitutional monarchy. Which might've meant that the royal family could hang on to their awesome house, but then, in October of 1789, a rumor started that Marie Antoinette was hoarding grain somewhere inside the palace.

And in what became known as the Women's March, a bunch of armed peasant women stormed the palace and demanded that Louis and Marie Antoinette move from Versailles to Paris. Which they did, because everyone is afraid of armed peasant women. And this is a nice reminder that to many people at the time, the French Revolution was not primarily about fancy Enlightenment ideas; it was mostly about lack of food and a political system that made economic contractions hardest on the poor.

Now, a good argument can be made that this first phase of the revolution wasn't all that revolutionary. The National Assembly wanted to create a constitutional monarchy; they believed that the king was necessary for a functioning state and they were mainly concerned that the voters and office holders be men of property. Only the most radical wing, the Jacobins, called for the creation of a republic. But things were about to get much more revolutionary - and also worse for France.

First, the Jacobins had a huge petition drive that got a bit unruly, which led troops controlled not by the King but by the National Assembly to fire on the crowd, killing 50 people. And that meant that the National Assembly, which had been the revolutionary voice of the people, had killed people in an attempt to reign in revolutionary fervor. You see this a lot throughout history during revolutions. What looked like radical hope and change suddenly becomes "The Man" as increasingly radical ideas are embraced. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

Meanwhile, France's monarchical neighbors were getting a little

nervous about all this republic business, especially Leopold II, who in addition to being the not holy, not Roman, and not imperial Holy Roman Emperor, was Marie Antoinette's brother. I should note, by the way, that at this point, the Holy Roman Empire was basically just Austria.

Also, like a lot of monarchs, Leopold II liked the idea of monarchies, and he wanted to keep his job as a person who gets to stand around wearing a dress, pointing at nothing, owning winged lion-monkeys made out of gold. And who can blame him? So he and King William Frederick II of Prussia together issued the Declaration of Pillnitz, which promised to restore the French monarchy.

At this point, Louis and the National Assembly developed a plan: Let's invade Austria. The idea was to plunder Austria's wealth and maybe steal some Austrian grain to shore up French food supplies, and also, you know, spread revolutionary zeal. But what actually happened is that Prussia joined Austria in fighting the French. And then Louis encouraged the Prussians, which made him look like an enemy of the revolution, which, of course, he was. And as a result, the Assembly voted to suspend the monarchy, have new elections in which everyone could vote (as long as they were men), and create a new republican constitution.

Soon, this Convention decided to have a trial for Louis XVI, who was found guilty and, by one vote, sentenced to die via guillotine. Which made it difficult for Austria and Prussia to restore him to the throne. Oh, it's time for the open letter?

An Open Letter to the Guillotine. But first, let's see what's in the secret compartment today.

Oh, there's nothing. Oh my gosh, Stan! Jeez. That's not funny!

Dear Guillotine,

I can think of no better example of Enlightenment thinking run amok. Dr. Joseph Guillotine, the inventor of the guillotine, envisioned it as an egalitarian way of dying. They said the guillotine was humane and it also made no distinction between rich or poor, noble or peasant. It killed equally.

You were also celebrated for taking the torture out of execution. But I will remind you, you did not take the dying out of execution. Unfortunately for you, France hasn't executed anyone since 1977. But you'll be happy to know that the last legal execution in France was via guillotine.

Plus, you've always got a future in horror movies.

Best wishes, John Green

The death of Louis XVI marks the beginning of The Terror, the best known or at least the most sensational phase of the revolution. I mean, if you can kill the king, you can kill pretty much anyone, which is what the government did under the leadership of the Committee of Public Safety (Motto: We suck at protecting public safety), led by Maximilien Robespierre.

The terror saw the guillotining of 16,000 enemies of the revolution including Marie "I never actually said Let them eat cake" Antoinette and Maximilien Robespierre himself, who was guillotined in the month of Thermidor in the year Two.

Alright, so while France was broke and fighting in like nine wars, the Committee of Public Safety changed the measurements of time because, you know, the traditional measurements are so irrational and religion-y. So they renamed all the months and decided that every day would have 10 hours and each hour 100 minutes.

And then, after the Terror, the revolution pulled back a bit and another new constitution was put into place, this one giving a lot more power to wealthy people. At this point, France was still at war with Austria and Britain, wars that France ended up winning, largely thanks to a little corporal named Napoleon Bonaparte.

The war was backdrop to a bunch of coups and counter coups that I won't get into right now because they were very complicated, but the last coup that we'll talk about, in 1799, established Napoleon Bonaparte as the First Consul of France. And it granted him almost unlimited executive power under yet another constitution. And when he was declared First Consul of France, Napoleon proclaimed "Citizens! The revolution is established on the principals with which it began. It is over." By which he presumably meant that France's government had gone all the way from here to here to here.

As with the American revolution, it's easy to conclude that France's revolution wasn't all that revolutionary. I mean, Napoleon was basically an emperor and, in some ways, he was even more of an absolute monarch than Louis XVI had been. Gradually the nobles came back to France, although they had mostly lost their special privileges. The Catholic Church returned, too, although much weaker because it had lost land and the ability to collect tithes.

And when Napoleon himself fell, France restored the monarchy, and except for a four-year period, between 1815 and 1870, France had a king who was either a Bourbon or a Bonaparte. Now, these were no longer absolute monarchs who claimed that their right to rule came from God; they were constitutional monarchs of the kind that the revolutionaries of 1789 had originally envisioned. But the fact remains that France had a king again, and a nobility, and an established religion and it was definitely not a democracy or a republic.

And perhaps this is why the French Revolution is so controversial and open to interpretation. Some argue the revolution succeeded in spreading enlightenment ideals even if it didn't bring democracy to France. Others argue that the real legacy of the Revolution wasn't the enhancement of liberty, but of state power.

Regardless, I'd argue that the French Revolution was ultimately far more revolutionary than its American counterpart. I mean, in some ways, America never had an aristocracy, but in other ways it continued to have one - the French enlightenment thinker, Diderot, felt that Americans should "fear a too unequal division of wealth resulting in a small number of opulent citizens and a multitude of citizens living in misery." And the American Revolution did nothing to change that polarization of wealth.

What made the French Revolution so radical was its insistence on the universality of its ideals. I mean, look at Article 6 of the Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen: "Law is the expression of the general will. Every citizen has a right to participate personally, or through his representative, in its foundation. It must be the same for all, whether it protects or punishes."

Those are radical ideas, that the laws come from citizens, not from kings or gods, and that those laws should apply to everyone equally. That's a long way from Hammurabi - and in truth, it's a long way from the slaveholding Thomas Jefferson.

In the 1970s, Chinese President Zhou Enlai was asked what the affects of the French Revolution had been. And he said, "It's too soon to say." And in a way, it still is. The French Revolution asked new questions about the nature of people's rights and the derivation of those rights. And we're still answering those questions and sorting through how our answers should shape society today - must government be of the people to be for the people? Do our

rights derive from nature or from God or from neither? And what are those rights?

As William Faulkner said, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” Thanks for watching. I’ll see you next week.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script supervisor is Danica Johnson, the show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself, our graphics team is Thought Bubble, and we are ably interned by Meredith Danko.

Last week’s phrase of the week was "Giant Tea Bag"; if you want to suggest future phrases of the week, or guess at this week's you can do so in comments, where you can also ask questions about today’s video that will be answered by our team of historians.

Thanks for watching Crash Course, and as we say in my hometown, Don’t Forget To Be Awesome.