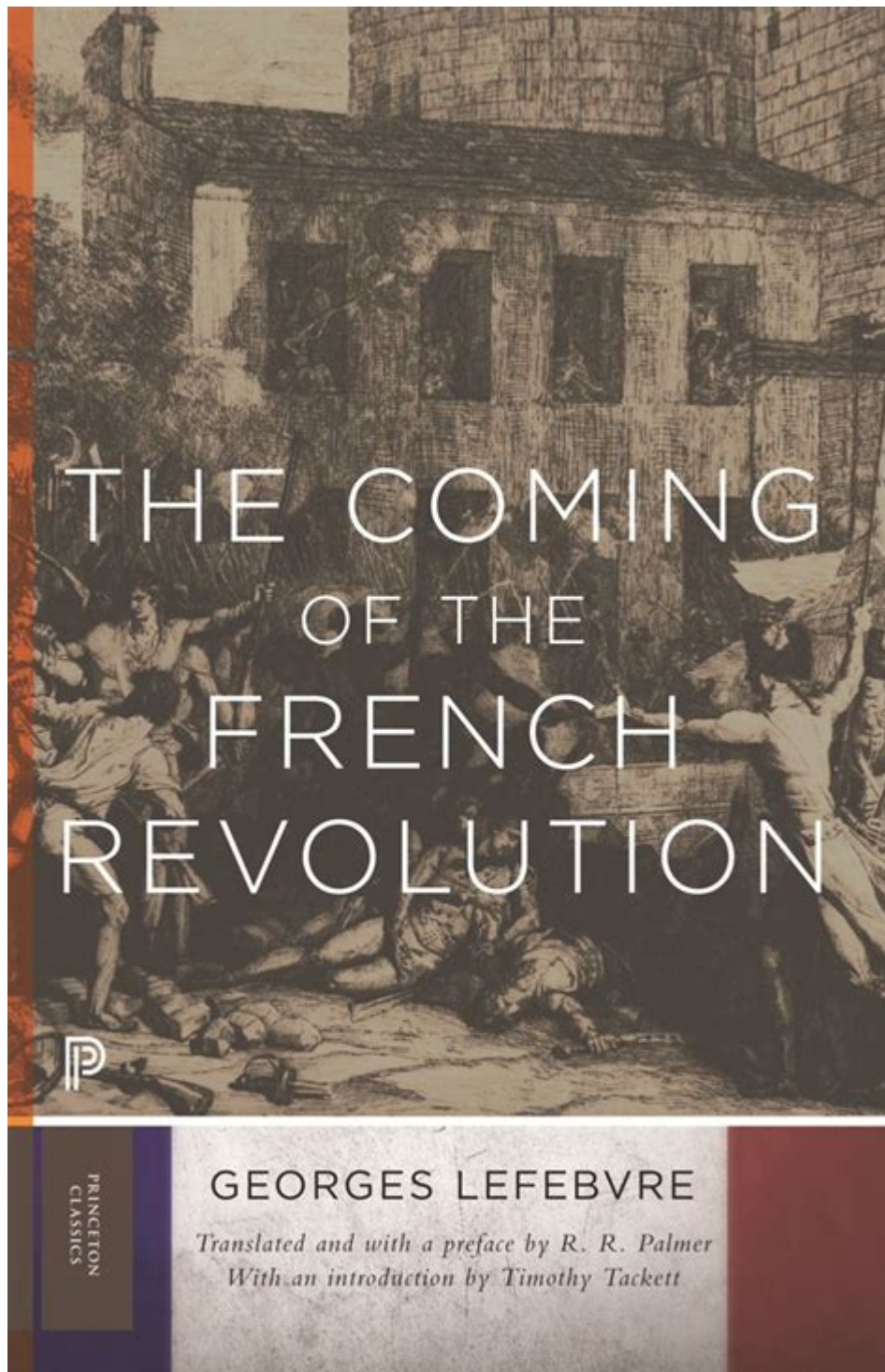


The Coming Of The French Revolution



The coming of the French Revolution was a pivotal moment in world history, marking the transition from monarchical rule to republican governance in France. This complex event was not merely the result of immediate circumstances but was influenced by a myriad of social, political, and economic factors that had been brewing for decades. The French Revolution, which began in 1789, set into motion a series of radical changes that would not only reshape France but also reverberate across Europe and the world, inspiring revolutionary movements and ideologies for generations to come.

Understanding the coming of the French Revolution involves examining the conditions that led to this monumental upheaval, the key players involved, and the pivotal events that marked its inception.

Historical Background

The seeds of discontent that ultimately led to the French Revolution were sown in the late 18th century, a period characterized by significant social stratification and economic hardship. Several factors contributed to the growing unrest among the French populace.

The Social Structure of France

France in the 18th century was divided into three estates:

1. First Estate: The clergy, who enjoyed numerous privileges, including exemption from many taxes.
2. Second Estate: The nobility, also largely exempt from taxes, who held significant power and influence.
3. Third Estate: Comprising the vast majority of the population, including peasants, urban workers, and the burgeoning bourgeoisie, this group bore the brunt of taxation and had little political power.

The inequalities inherent in this feudal system bred resentment. The Third Estate, particularly the bourgeoisie, began to demand more rights and representation, feeling marginalized and oppressed by the privileges enjoyed by the First and Second Estates.

Economic Strains

The economic situation in France was dire by the late 1780s:

- Debt: France was heavily in debt due to costly wars, including its involvement in the American Revolution.
- Taxation: The tax burden fell disproportionately on the Third Estate, leading to widespread poverty and hunger.
- Food Scarcity: Poor harvests in the years leading up to the revolution led to soaring bread prices, exacerbating the plight of the common people.

This economic turmoil created a fertile ground for revolutionary sentiments. The cries for change became increasingly loud as the Third Estate struggled to survive in a system that favored the elite.

Intellectual Influences

The Enlightenment played a crucial role in shaping revolutionary ideas and ideals. Philosophers such as Voltaire, Rousseau, and Montesquieu challenged traditional authority and promoted concepts such as liberty, equality, and fraternity. Their works inspired the people to question the legitimacy of the monarchy and the existing social order.

Key Philosophers and Their Ideas

1. Voltaire: Advocated for civil liberties and freedom of expression, criticizing the Church and the state.
2. Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Proposed the idea of the social contract and the belief that sovereignty should reside with the people, not the monarch.
3. Montesquieu: Suggested the separation of powers within government to prevent tyranny.

These Enlightenment ideas encouraged the Third Estate to seek a political voice and challenge the status quo.

The Political Climate

The political landscape of France was fraught with tension as King Louis XVI struggled to manage the growing discontent. His attempts to reform the financial system were met with resistance from the nobility, who feared losing their privileges.

The Estates-General of 1789

In May 1789, Louis XVI called for the Estates-General, an assembly representing all three estates, to address the financial crisis. This assembly had not convened since 1614, and its calling was a significant moment.

- Demands of the Third Estate: The Third Estate demanded equal representation and voting by head rather than by estate, which would give them a greater voice in decision-making.
- Formation of the National Assembly: Frustrated by the lack of progress, the Third Estate broke away and formed the National Assembly on June 17, 1789, declaring themselves the legitimate representatives of the French people.

This act marked a turning point in the political struggle, laying the groundwork for revolutionary action.

Key Events Leading to the Revolution

Several critical events in the summer of 1789 served as catalysts for the revolution.

The Tennis Court Oath

On June 20, 1789, members of the National Assembly found themselves locked out of their meeting hall. They reconvened in a nearby tennis court and took an oath not to disband until a new constitution was established. This moment symbolized the unity and determination of the Third Estate and their commitment to reform.

The Storming of the Bastille

Perhaps the most iconic event of the revolution occurred on July 14, 1789, when revolutionaries stormed the Bastille, a fortress and prison in Paris. This event had several implications:

- Symbol of Tyranny: The Bastille represented the oppressive monarchy, and its fall was a powerful symbol of the people's uprising against tyranny.
- Mobilization of the Masses: The storming rallied citizens across France, igniting revolutionary fervor and prompting uprisings in other cities.

The Great Fear

Following the storming of the Bastille, rural peasants began to revolt against feudal lords, fearing retaliation from the nobility. This period, known as the Great Fear, saw widespread violence and the destruction of feudal documents. It highlighted the extent of rural discontent and the collapse of traditional authority.

The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen

On August 26, 1789, the National Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, a fundamental document outlining individual rights and the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. This declaration served as a cornerstone for the revolution, asserting that:

- All men are born free and equal in rights.

- The aim of all political association is the preservation of the natural rights of man.

This document would influence future human rights declarations globally and is considered a foundational text for modern democracy.

Conclusion

The coming of the French Revolution was a complex interplay of social, economic, and political factors that culminated in a dramatic shift in power and ideology. The discontent brewed by centuries of feudal oppression, coupled with the influence of Enlightenment thought and the political missteps of the monarchy, set the stage for revolution. Events such as the Tennis Court Oath, the storming of the Bastille, and the adoption of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen were pivotal moments that defined this transformative period.

As the revolution unfolded, it would lead to the eventual rise of radical factions, the Reign of Terror, and ultimately the establishment of a republic. The legacy of the French Revolution is far-reaching, influencing not only France but also inspiring movements for democracy and social justice worldwide. The coming of the French Revolution was not just the birth of a nation but a profound transformation of human society, heralding a new era in the quest for liberty and equality.

Frequently Asked Questions

What were the main social classes in France before the French Revolution?

Before the French Revolution, French society was divided into three estates: the First Estate (clergy), the Second Estate (nobility), and the Third Estate (commoners), which included peasants, workers, and the bourgeoisie.

What economic factors contributed to the onset of the French Revolution?

Economic factors included widespread poverty among the Third Estate, rising food prices, heavy taxation on the lower classes, and the financial crisis due to costly wars and extravagant spending by the monarchy.

How did Enlightenment ideas influence the French Revolution?

Enlightenment ideas emphasized reason, individual rights, and skepticism of

authority, inspiring revolutionaries to challenge the existing social and political order and seek liberty, equality, and fraternity.

What role did the Estates-General play in the lead-up to the French Revolution?

The convening of the Estates-General in 1789 marked a turning point as it allowed the Third Estate to voice their grievances, leading to the formation of the National Assembly and the beginning of revolutionary actions.

What was the significance of the Storming of the Bastille?

The Storming of the Bastille on July 14, 1789, is considered a symbolic act of revolution, representing the uprising against tyranny and the King's authority, and it sparked widespread insurrection across France.

How did the American Revolution influence the French Revolution?

The American Revolution served as a model for the French Revolution by demonstrating that it was possible to overthrow a monarchy and establish a government based on democratic principles and individual rights.

What was the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen?

Adopted in August 1789, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen proclaimed the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, asserting that all men are born free and have equal rights.

How did the French Revolution impact other countries in Europe?

The French Revolution inspired revolutionary movements across Europe, challenging existing monarchies and social structures, while also leading to conflicts, such as the Napoleonic Wars, that spread revolutionary ideas beyond France.

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