

Was the French Revolution Enlightened?

History

Year 8 - Lesson 10

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Two of the Enlightenment thinkers wrote about the links between citizens having good, or virtuous, characters and a country being virtuous. Both Montesquieu and Rousseau talked about the need for individuals to be virtuous for a country's government to succeed. What they meant is that the people should care about the **public good**. Revolutionaries, like Robespierre, accepted these Enlightenment ideas and wanted to make sure France became a virtuous country. They had a special name for this imaginary future France: The Republic of Virtue.

However, as the revolution became radical and tried to change more things, the revolutionaries like Robespierre faced a problem. People had different views on what it meant to be a good person. People disagreed about what it meant to be virtuous. When aristocrats opposed changes it was easy to ignore their criticisms and call the aristocrats enemies of the revolution. The revolutionaries could say the aristocrats were thinking about what is good for them rather than the public good.



However, when revolutionaries themselves disagreed it was harder to work out who was right. One Revolutionary, Charlotte Corday, disagreed so much with another revolutionary about the direction of the revolution that she murdered him in his bath! Robespierre decided the way to decide on the future of the revolution would be to find out which laws were most popular by giving more people the vote. He believed the poor sans culottes were most likely to be virtuous. So, inspired by Rousseau's ideas, a new constitution was designed which made France more democratic. (Olympe de Gouge's ideas were still ignored and women could not vote.) But a problem remained. Radical revolutionaries did not believe all the people were virtuous yet. If you gave votes to all the people but a majority were critical of the Revolution, then they might vote against revolutionary laws. So, Robespierre thought the best thing to do would be to use the government's power to force people to be virtuous. This is how he explained himself:



*If the source of popular government in peacetime is virtue, the source of popular government in revolution is both virtue and terror: virtue, without which terror is disastrous; terror, without which virtue is powerless. Terror is nothing but prompt, severe, inflexible justice; it therefore comes from virtue; it is not so much a specific principle as a consequence of the general principle of democracy applied to our **homeland's** most pressing needs.*

This short quote gives us a fascinating view into the mind of someone who allowed thousands to die. Before the Revolution, Robespierre had agreed with the Enlightenment thinkers when they criticised absolute monarchs because they used fear to keep control. Enlightenment ideas had then been made law through the Declaration of Rights and the new constitution. However, when these Enlightened changes were at risk, Robespierre was willing to use terror to try to protect them.



Glossary

Homeland: France (For Robespierre)

Public good: something that benefits society and not just yourself

Virtue: a positive characteristic



Preparing your answer:

Some historians argue the French Revolution was shaped by the Enlightenment. For example....

Other historians disagree and argue the Revolution was directed by mob violence. For example....

Alternatively, it could be argued that some of Revolution's violence was influenced by Enlightenment thought.

In conclusion, I think....

