

Extended Essay - History

King Louis XVI and the downfall of the French Monarchy.

Research Question: *To what extent was King Louis XVI personally responsible for the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789?*

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1.0 Introduction

The suggestion to summon the estates-general came on the 22nd of February 1787 after the parliament of Paris had refused to ratify Controller-General of Finance Charles-Alexandre de Calonne's financial reform suggestions. A few weeks later Calonne was dismissed by King Louis XVI. He was not the first finance minister that had been dismissed and in the close future, several other ones would follow. This escalating use of political power brings up a question about the personal responsibility of King Louis XVI for the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789. In this work, the focus will therefore be **"To what extent was King Louis XVI personally responsible for the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789?"** due to its importance in the unraveling of the remainder of the 18th century in France which led to the downfall of the monarchy.

The research conducted throughout this paper was based on a few primary sources, such as quotes from Louis XVI, and some secondary sources, such as documents containing the contemporary financial situation. These sources help build a narrative background of what caused the French Revolution. This paper will argue both for and against his responsibility and will be analyzed by using political, economic, and social factors. Several authors have then been used for the interpretation and analysis of the event. Worth mentioning are two very influential historians who work with different perspectives. Stephen Clarke's book *The French Revolution & What Went Wrong*¹ focuses on the individual perspective, whereas George Lefebvre's

¹ Stephen Clarke, *The French Revolution & What Went Wrong* (London: Arrow Books, 2019).

book *The Coming of The French Revolution*² focuses more on the structural changes.

2.0 Background

The political system of France was based on absolute monarchical power. Due to family succession, King Louis XVI was born into his role as a King of France and had complete political power and legal authority³. At this time general political, economic, and social inequality was very common. Some groups were tax exempt, different law systems (and different courts) existed and corruption was common⁴. The majority of the population suffered and had to pay for the costs of the more privileged groups as well as pay for the expenses of the royal family. When the economic situation began to become desperate the King called in the the estates-general in 1787⁵.

The first estate consisted of the clergy who served the church⁶. The clergy received privileges such as being tax exempt and were able to accumulate vast wealth mostly due to land rent⁷. There was, however, conflict within the first estate due to internal competition for power⁸. These tensions were pre-existing, but they were amplified due to the poor harvest of 1788 and the enlightenment.

² Georges Lefebvre, R. R. Palmer, and Timothy Tackett, *The Coming of the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

³ Terence Alan Morris, Richard Staton, and Sally Waller, "The Origins of the French Revolution Chapter 3," in *Europe: 1760-1871* (London: Collins Educational, 2000), 49.

⁴ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, "Ancien Régime," Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., April 8, 2019), <https://www.britannica.com/event/ancien-regime>.

⁵ "Summoning of the Estates General, 1789," Palace of Versailles (Château De Versailles, August 23, 2018), <https://en.chateauversailles.fr/discover/history/key-dates/summoning-estates-general-1789>.

⁶ "The Three Estates of the French Revolution," Grey History Podcasts (Grey History Podcasts, January 18, 2021), https://greyhistory.com/french-revolution-articles/explained_the_three_estates_of_the_french_revolution/.

⁷ Terence Alan Morris, Richard Staton, and Sally Waller, "The Origins of the French Revolution Chapter 3," in *Europe: 1760-1871* (London: Collins Educational, 2000), 51.

⁸ John Russell, *The Causes of the French Revolution* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green, & Longman, 1832), 47.

The second estate consisted of the nobility in France who, despite being the smallest, had the largest influence over the King⁹. This authority was instilled by the second estate's pre-existing privileges of being born into their position in society and being able to purchase their parliament seat. They were also tax exempt just like the first estate which increased the rift between the second and third estate.

The third estate was the rest of the population, from the wealthy bourgeoisie in urban areas to the poorest peasants. The bourgeoisie worked in towns but could greatly vary in wealth. The peasants were mainly farmers or farm laborers who had minimal chances of obtaining any wealth or status¹⁰. This estate was discriminated against and was forced to pay high taxes when the monarchy required funding of any sort due to financial problems such as the expenses of the Palace of Versailles, the former royal residence¹¹. Their agitation was already high, but more instability was needed for them to erupt¹². Some third estate members became rebellious and started groups that demanded justice. Two of the more influential groups were known as the Sans-culottes¹³ and the Jacobin group¹⁴. They had radical political ideas and soon gained several followers. Together with the new ideas of the 18th

⁹ Terence Alan Morris, Richard Staton, and Sally Waller, "The Origins of the French Revolution Chapter 3," in *Europe: 1760-1871* (London: Collins Educational, 2000), 54.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ John Russell, *The Causes of the French Revolution* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green, & Longman, 1832), 80.

¹² John Russell, *The Causes of the French Revolution* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green, & Longman, 1832), 81.

¹³ Steve Thompson and Jennifer Llewellyn, "The sans-Culottes," French Revolution (Alpha History, September 1, 2020), <https://alphahistory.com/frenchrevolution/sans-culottes/>.

¹⁴ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Jacobin Club," Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., May 7, 2020), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jacobin-Club>.

century, the Enlightenment started to undermine the monarchy which together with growing economic problems would lead to demands for change¹⁵.

As a consequence of the Seven Years War (1756-1763) and the American Revolutionary war (1775-1783) France was facing huge debt which was further worsened by an extremely poor harvest between 1787 and 1788. The harvest led to a famine which mainly affected the third estate members leaving them desperate for resources and in need of change and support¹⁶. To exacerbate the situation, the first and second estates refused to pay taxes due to their higher societal rank. As a result, the third estate suffered terribly not only from the famine but also from having to pay taxes to cover the whole feudal system. Overall, this frustration and unrest led to an unstable society which acted as a catalyst for the political, economic and social factors which led to the revolution.

3.0 Analysis for Louis XVI's responsibility

3.1 Louis XVI's Political Leadership

King Louis XVI was an absolute ruler and can therefore be held responsible for the political decisions pursued at the time. Between 1774 and the end of summer in 1789, Louis XVI hired 16 Ministers of Finance - three of which were hired hastily in July 1789 alone. Firstly, this suggests that the King often acted indecisively, and lacked the leadership skills required to align minister incentives with achieving his

¹⁵ Terence Alan Morris, Richard Staton, and Sally Waller, "The Origins of the French Revolution Chapter 3," in *Europe: 1760-1871* (London: Collins Educational, 2000), 62.

¹⁶ "1780s: Pre-Revolutionary France," 1780s: Pre-Revolutionary France | Archives & Special Collections (Archives & Special Collections), accessed November 26, 2021, <https://asc.library.carleton.ca/exhibits/french-revolution-arc/1780s-pre-revolutionary-france>

vision¹⁷. Furthermore, according to Clarke, many of Louis XVI's financial ministers presented good ideas which will be discussed in detail; however, he was too weak to stand by them.

It was a common occurrence that many of Louis XVI's financial ministers were fired after suggesting reforms in favor of the third estate. In Stephen Clarke's book *The French Revolution & What Went Wrong*, Clarke focuses on the financial ministers and specifically admires Necker by saying, "if he had been able to push through all his reforms, the Revolution might never have happened"¹⁸, suggesting that the solution to preventing the French Revolution was in the monarchies hands, yet these ideas were not pursued. Necker, however, continued pushing for reform and even suggested taking away political power from the parliaments which were the supreme courts of law¹⁹. However, the King failed to support Necker to pursue these plans in this key moment.²⁰ Louis XVI evidently felt the pressure from the nobility, however, with the full political power in his hands it was essential that he would have implemented these reforms. This would have given an advantage to the poor to work against the social inequality; thereby suggesting that the king underestimated the role of the poorer class in a stable society. Collectively, the treatment of his financial ministers highlight the King's responsibility in allowing a political environment to arise, in which a revolution would then take place.

¹⁷ Stephen Clarke, *The French Revolution & What Went Wrong* (London: Arrow Books, 2019), 179.

¹⁸ Stephen Clarke, *The French Revolution & What Went Wrong* (London: Arrow Books, 2019), 192.

¹⁹ Steve Thompson and Jennifer Llewellyn, "The Parlements," French Revolution (Alpha History, October 17, 2019), <https://alphahistory.com/frenchrevolution/parlements/>.

²⁰ Stephen Clarke, *The French Revolution & What Went Wrong* (London: Arrow Books, 2019), 191.

3.2 Louis XVI's Economical Management

King Louis XVI spent 227,983,716 livres, the French currency, from 1774 to 1789 on foreign affairs and various other expenses including the royal family which caused tension and criticism in society from the third estate²¹. During an already difficult economic period caused by vast generational debts, Louis XVI decided to give his military and economic support to the Americans during the American Revolutionary War in 1776. Even though the French succeeded somewhat with the Battle of Yorktown and acquired some trading posts, it still turned out to be a huge economic and political burden.²² Additionally, this involvement caused ideas of revolution to spread from America to France.

To maximize Louis XVI's own personal wealth he used France's fortune as the royal spending was 6% of the national budget, whereas the spending on education and aid for the poor was only 2%. This was documented in *Calonnes Reply from Monsieur de Calonne to Monsieur Necker, Containing the Accounts of the Financial Situation for 1774, 1776, 1783 & 1787*²³ in an attempt to defend himself for his failed reforms. This showed where all of the debt in France came from, and additionally included the King's households spendings such as, "Silverware & Menus: 2,000,000 per year", "Hunting: 1,031,000"²⁴. These hunting expenses were equivalent to about ten million loaves of bread. Similarly, he had no control over Marie-Antoinette's, his wife, frivolous spending as she spent huge sums of money on personal possessions such as refurbishing the Palace of Versailles as well as her own château called *le*

²¹ "A Summary of French Royal Spending (1789)," French Revolution (Alpha History, February 27, 2018), <https://alphahistory.com/frenchrevolution/summary-french-royal-spending-1789/>.

²² Florin Aftalion, "The Fiscal Crisis," in *The French Revolution, an Economic Interpretation* (Cambridge England: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 11-30.

²³ Stephen Clarke, *The French Revolution & What Went Wrong* (London: Arrow Books, 2019), 209.

²⁴ Stephen Clarke, *The French Revolution & What Went Wrong* (London: Arrow Books, 2019), 210.

petit trianon. This amounted to approximately 300,000 livres which was about 3,000 years' rent on a real farm of familiar size.²⁵ Not only did it significantly contribute to the financial crisis, but also heightened the perceived gap between the monarchy and the country's citizens, as they appeared to not be concerned with the suffering throughout the country. Potential ways in which he could have solved this would be to increase taxes for the wealthy, which he failed to do due to the conflicting interest and significant power of aristocrats in political decisions. This shows how Louis XVI's financial management, both on capital budgeting and personal expenses, contributed to the financial crisis and social unrest which helped lay the foundation for a revolution in 1789. Additionally, it further reiterates how interrelated these different aspects are in laying this groundwork; therefore, the social factors causing the French Revolution will be outlined next.

3.3 Louis XVI's Ideas of Social Differences

King Louis XVI believed in divine rights and social differences. Under Louis XVI's rule, the feudal system meant that the population was split into 3 groups and the vast majority (98%) was in the third estate. These individuals commonly had very low pay, and on top of this, the third estate was burdened with significant taxes.²⁶ Since bread was cheap, it became their main consumption. From 1788 to 1789 bad weather and severe winters led to very poor harvest which decreased the bread supply. Thus, the price for bread increased to about 60-80% of a worker's wage²⁷. Due to industrialization taking place, urbanisation was increasing rapidly leading to a larger population in a more focused area. Consequently, famine and starvation started to

²⁵ Stephen Clarke, *The French Revolution & What Went Wrong* (London: Arrow Books, 2019), 151.

²⁶ Stephen Clarke, *The French Revolution & What Went Wrong* (London: Arrow Books, 2019), 163.

²⁷ Una McIlvenna, "How Bread Shortages Helped Ignite the French Revolution," History.com (A&E Television Networks, September 30, 2019), <https://www.history.com/news/bread-french-revolution-marie-antoinette>.

grow among the poor as there was not enough food to feed everyone, causing social unrest²⁸. These environmental causes were not in the hands of the King, however, the heightened social antagonism between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie highlights a significant point in which notable actions were needed²⁹. Louis XVI showed his stance on this inequality at the estates-general in 1789 as the third estate were given equal votes as the first and second even though they took up the largest percentage of the population. Louis XVI granted the third estate that they would be doubled, but this would still lead to a majority win for the first and second estate. This showed that the King did not believe that everyone should be treated equally, further intensifying the social antagonism present between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie since he openly denied basic needs for survival to large portions of the population.

4.0 Analysis against Louis XVI's responsibility

4.1 Political Power

The political power of France by the later part of the 18th century was in the hands of the aristocracy, the church, and the army. King Louis XVI depended heavily on these groups, creating a dynamic in which incentives were misaligned between different classes, and also created an environment in which Louis XVI would act blindly in favor of these groups to maintain power as (officially) an absolute ruler. Thirteen years after the decision to intervene in the American Revolutionary war, the King falsified statements saying that he made the complete decision to partake in the war.

²⁸ Una McIlvenna, "How Bread Shortages Helped Ignite the French Revolution," History.com (A&E Television Networks, September 30, 2019), <https://www.history.com/news/bread-french-revolution-marie-antoinette>.

²⁹ Schwartz, "The French Revolution: Causes, Outcomes, Conflicting Interpretations," Causes of the French Revolution, accessed November 22, 2021, https://www.mtholyoke.edu/courses/rschwartz/hist151s03/french_rev_causes_consequences.htm.

This was revealed when he said “This occasion greatly resembles the American affair, of which I never think without regret. On that occasion they took advantage of my youth, and today we are paying the price for it,”³⁰ written in *Charles Gravier, Comte de Vergennes* by Orville T. Murphy. Even though Louis XVI was supposed to be an absolute monarch, the parliament, people from the nobility meant to assist the King in new laws, contested him instead. For example, as Louis XVI brought in new laws to be passed such as taxing the two higher estates, these reforms were blocked. This raised the view that he was a weak King even though he was conscious of what needed to be changed. As Clarke highlights in his book “And even though he was about to suggest reforms that would benefit the other 27 million of his citizens, his campaign for political change was going to feel like 560,000 against one”³¹. This unravels the idea that the King created an image for himself as the spearhead of the revolution, but was not actually at fault. He had to bear the blame for the decisions made by the nobility. As a result, the King was slightly responsible, but the clergy and the nobility should receive a larger share of the blame for the political causations of the French Revolution.

4.2 Economic Problems

By the end of the 18th century, the French economy was deteriorating to the point where it could not be saved as it had a debt of 112 million livres in 1786³². This was due to several reasons, both from before and during 1789, intertwined together with the lack of power that Louis XVI actually had. France’s involvement in the American

³⁰ Orville Theodore Murphy, “The Decision to Intervene Chapter 20,” in Charles Gravier, Comte De Vergennes: French Diplomacy in the Age of Revolution, 1719-1787 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), 252.

³¹ Stephen Clarke, *The French Revolution & What Went Wrong* (London: Arrow Books, 2019), 163.

³² Terence Alan Morris, Richard Staton, and Sally Waller, “The Origins of the French Revolution Chapter 3,” in *Europe: 1760-1871* (London: Collins Educational, 2000), 60.

Revolutionary war would not have been so burdensome if there was not already a very extensive debt from the previous wars that had been caused by Louis XVI's predecessors. Additionally, it was caused by the country spending more money than they were making from taxes. This is why they needed to increase the tax on the poor, enraging them further. Thus, if the country had a fair taxation system in place, France could have recovered a lot faster than it did.

Additionally, France had an enormous population rising to about 28 million people in 1789 in comparison to about 20 million in 1700. This was due to fewer food shortages, causing the rates of mortality to decrease³³. When the agricultural flourishing period declined from 1787 to 1789, the already existing tax burdens created an even more challenging period for the poor. Hence, one could argue that underlying structural misalignments had been caused by this rise in population leaving a shortage in food, something which (without access to advancements in technology), could be harder to solve in reality than the King often is given credit for. These numerous reasons led the country into a fiscal crisis which forced King Louis XVI to call the estates-general for the first time since 1614 to pass proposals on new taxes³⁴. Based on this, it was not the King that caused the revolution, but instead, it was the unjust and corrupted society that did not allow the abolishment of the heavy tax burden.

³³ Terence Alan Morris, Richard Staton, and Sally Waller, "The Origins of the French Revolution Chapter 3," in *Europe: 1760-1871* (London: Collins Educational, 2000), 59.

³⁴ Terence Alan Morris, Richard Staton, and Sally Waller, "The Origins of the French Revolution Chapter 3," in *Europe: 1760-1871* (London: Collins Educational, 2000), 68.

4.3 Inequality

The modern society of France in the late 18th century had several different classes that demanded radical changes. These classes were examined by George Lefebvre in his book *The Coming of the French Revolution* where he divides the revolution into four different phases. These include the aristocratic, bourgeoisie, urban, and peasant revolutions³⁵ which all according to Lefebvre had different accomplishments and methods which were usually contradictory.

4.31 Aristocratic Revolution

To begin, it was evident that the aristocrats wanted greater political influence in society, whereas they did not want to improve the situation for the third estate. One specific event occurred in 1788 in which the aristocrats revolted as a reaction towards the economic reforms to add a general land tax paid by all landowners, suggested by the finance minister Calonne³⁶. They refused to give up their privileges and forced the king to call the estates-general³⁷. The aristocrats tried to gain political power but overlooked the strength of the third estate leading to the French Revolution. Their refusal, as we have already seen, grows to become one of the main causes that can be linked to many of the other factors.

4.32 Bourgeoisie Revolution

Next, we have the bourgeoisie revolution which occurred between 1789 and 1791 which consisted of a group of commercial traders and landowners who had gained

³⁵ Georges Lefebvre, R. R. Palmer, and Timothy Tackett, *The Coming of the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

³⁶ Terence Alan Morris, Richard Staton, and Sally Waller, "The Origins of the French Revolution Chapter 3," in *Europe: 1760-1871* (London: Collins Educational, 2000), 62.

³⁷ T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, "French Revolution," Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., September 10, 2020), <https://www.britannica.com/event/French-Revolution#ref177619>.

limited power. This group was able to modernize society with enlightenment ideas using political and legislative maneuvers to abolish the privilege that the nobles possessed. During this time period, literacy and education started to increase, especially in northern France³⁸. Due to the increase in industrialization, it became more attainable for consumers to gather information from pamphlets and books for a lower price. For the benefit of the absolute monarchy, the state tried to censor information given out at the time to hinder critical political opinions. This was done by contracting royal censors to approve manuscripts for printing, and if these laws were not followed people could be imprisoned³⁹. An example of this was Voltaire's works called Voltaire's Lettres philosophique and Dictionnaire philosophique which got him banished because of his criticisms of established religions and political institutions⁴⁰. To some extent, this censorship was difficult to enforce because of the growth of cafes, salons, and masonic lodges which led to a permeate of Enlightenment ideas. A very influential piece during this time period was written by Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès who was a French author that published a pamphlet, *What is the third estate?* in 1789. Sieyès himself was part of the first estate, however, he still went against the monarchy and the privilege that the first and second estates had. The most famous quotes are "*What is the Third Estate? Everything. What has it been heretofore in the political order? Nothing. What does it demand? To become something*"⁴¹ to remind the commoners how much they have been mistreated and to motivate them to fight for equality⁴².

³⁸ Stephen Clarke, *The French Revolution & What Went Wrong* (London: Arrow Books, 2019), 224.

³⁹ Terence Alan Morris, Richard Staton, and Sally Waller, "The Origins of the French Revolution Chapter 3," in *Europe: 1760-1871* (London: Collins Educational, 2000), 62.

⁴⁰ Stephen Clarke, *The French Revolution & What Went Wrong* (London: Arrow Books, 2019), 91.

⁴¹ Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, "*Qu'est-ce que Le Tiers-État?*" (Paris, 1789).

⁴² Stephen Clarke, *The French Revolution & What Went Wrong* (London: Arrow Books, 2019), 280.

Even though feminism was not new during the French Revolution, it had a great impact on the Sans-culottes and the rise of the Jacobins. Modern historian Simon Schama creates an interesting viewpoint on modernization as he says *"It seems to me that much of the anger firing revolutionary violence arose from hostility towards modernisation, rather than impatience with the speed of its progress."*⁴³. This explains that the uprisings were caused by the unwillingness to modernize, supporting our previous point that aristocrats mainly created this conflict. The Enlightenment together with the bourgeoisie gaining power allowed the concept of liberty and equality to grow with the help of intellectual figures such as Rousseau who argued for equality and brought about awareness. This inspired new political ambitions among the third estate⁴⁴ which was a very strong causation of the revolution since many plotted for the downfall of the King.

4.33 Urban Revolution

Following is the urban revolution which was mainly the Storming of the Bastille by workers in Paris on the 14th of July 1789. Furthermore, riots became more common which was caused by anger arising due to the nobility not being willing to allow change. The urban revolution has slightly previously been covered with the bread prices as this was one of the most important socio-economic causes. Together with high levels of unemployment and falling standards of living, these effects were all caused by the overwhelming taxes on the poor.

⁴³ Jennifer Llewellyn and Steve Thompson, "French Revolution Historian: Simon Schama," French Revolution (Alpha History, June 24, 2019), <https://alphahistory.com/frenchrevolution/historian-simon-schama/>.

⁴⁴ John Russell, *The Causes of the French Revolution* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green, & Longman, 1832), 211.

4.34 Peasant Revolution

Lastly, the fourth revolution that was triggered was the peasant revolution. This revolution took place in the countryside with farmers storming the nobility to get rid of the old feudal system. In Lefebvre's view, he believes that this was the most important cause of the French Revolution as he says "...today you can say without any exaggeration that the revolution would hardly have succeeded without their participation (...) the National Assembly where the farmers were not represented devoted little interest to their problems. But suddenly the forgotten social group took their cause into their own hands and it was this action that was the death blow to the last remnants of the feudal regime. The peasant's revolt must be considered as one of the most remarkable features of the French Revolution."⁴⁵ This was due to the peasant revolts decentralizing the King's power and gaining a lot of support. Once again, the peasant's revolution was an aftermath of the aristocratic revolution as it caused them to have it worse off similar to the urban citizens.

Even though George Lefebvre agrees that the revolution took place due to the bourgeoisie, he unlike many other historians draws light to other reasons which creates a very wide understanding of the intertwined causes of the Revolution⁴⁶. Since the aristocrats were the first to make changes and demand better for themselves, it caused a chain reaction of events. Hence, the aristocrats and the results of the other revolutions should be held responsible for the outbreak of the Revolution.

⁴⁵ Georges Lefebvre, R. R. Palmer, and Timothy Tackett, *The Coming of the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). 150

⁴⁶ Jennifer Llewellyn and Steve Thompson, "Historian: Georges Lefebvre," French Revolution (Alpha History, October 12, 2018), <https://alphahistory.com/frenchrevolution/historian-georges-lefebvre/>.

5.0 Discussion

The French Revolution is not as simple as some historians make it out to be. It was greatly affected by political, economic, and social reasons that were both the King's fault, but also structural. Firstly, we can see the indecisiveness of Louis XVI by many pieces of evidence such as him firing Necker. This example is very important to consider as Necker would have helped solve the financial issues, and the direct act of firing him was probably the worst decision that the King could have made.

However, the obvious pressure that the King received also made it close to impossible to have acted differently. This highlights how important the first and second estate's influence was as it took away the absolute power in a country that needed a strong leader. The time period of these political changes also had an impact due to the economic burdening of the feudal system.

The amounts spent by Louis XVI were very similar to his predecessors, however, they were able to survive off of tax money and borrowing which he was not able to due to external factors such as the poor harvest. This shows the significance of the other causes as they built on top of each other, resulting in a Revolution.

Furthermore, Louis XVI was theoretically the only person who could control the taxes in the country, but due to the parliament and the two upper estates, this was not the case.

Lastly, the social causes are strongly affected by both the economic and the political since the social antagonism that evolved at the end of the 18th century was due to the unequal treatment of the third estate. This can be compared to Sweden under

the rule of Gustav III as they were able to have enlightened absolutism due to the monarch being in favor of it, whereas in France the monarchy refused to reform which is what caused the Revolution to be violent. This exemplifies that if the monarchy had been more inclined, there could have been a different outcome that may not have had as drastic consequences. On the other hand, the structural aspects demonstrate that these causes were not solely those of the monarchy, since they also included enlightenment ideas. This again points back to the aristocrats being self-centered and unable to empathize with the common people.

6.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, Louis XVI was a very indecisive leader who was not able to commit to his politics, however, in a time period where external factors such as the famine and enlightenment were not present, he would have been able to lead the country as his predecessors did. This highlights a structural mismatch in society in which incentives fundamentally were not aligned to benefit all stakeholders. This paper on **“To what extent was King Louis XVI personally responsible for the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789?”** should not lead us to assume that Louis XVI had full or zero responsibility in the outbreak of the French Revolution. Instead, it should draw attention to the uncommon perspectives that highlight the responsibility of the first and second estate. It is not as simple as saying one critical person or group should take full responsibility, rather that multiple factors were interdependent and all caused the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789.

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