A Comparison of the French Revolution and American Revolution

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Both the American Revolution and French Revolution were the products of [Enlightenment ideals](http://www.articlemyriad.com/influence-enlightenment-formation-united-states/) that emphasized the idea of natural rights and equality. With such an ideological basis, it becomes clear when one sets out to compare the French Revolution and American Revolution that people felt the need to be free from oppressive or tyrannical rule of[absolute monarchs](http://www.articlemyriad.com/war-revolution-downfall-monarchy-france-russia/) and have the ability to live independent from such forces. The leadership in both countries at the time of their revolutions was certainly repressive, especially in terms of taxation. Both areas suffered social and[economic hardships](http://www.articlemyriad.com/frances-pre-revolutionary-financial-crisis/)that led to the realization that something must be done to topple the hierarchy and put power back into the hands of the people.

While there are several similarities in these revolutions, there are also a few key differences. This comparison essay on the French and American Revolutions seeks to explore the parallels as well as the divisions that are present in both the American Revolution and the French Revolution. The political climate in France during its revolution was quite different than that in America simply because there was not a large war that had just ended in America (while in France the Seven Years War had nearly devastated the [French monarchy](http://www.articlemyriad.com/war-revolution-downfall-monarchy-france-russia/)’s coffers). Furthermore, although the lower and middle classes were generally the majority of the rebelling populace, there was far more upper class support for the revolution in France versus the participation of loyalists in America.

One of the most important similarities between both the American Revolution and French Revolutions was that there was a growing dissent among the people aimed at the [monarchy](http://www.articlemyriad.com/war-revolution-downfall-monarchy-france-russia/)and its associated elite and aristocrats. Even though they were powerful in both France and America at the start of each revolution, their strangleholds on both the people and economies of each nation were weakening. For instance, “In 1763 Britain was on the very pinnacle of worldwide power and her old enemies were seemingly prostrate. At the same time, however, the nation was beset with political instability and was stumbling on the edge of bankruptcy” (Jensen 4). The reaction against the British monarchy in America only served to further weaken it and although it may have been strong in other parts of the world, the continued resistance exemplified by events such as the Boston Tea party and other revolutionary acts against the crown were taking their toll.

By the time the American Revolution was strong and the war was beginning, Britain’s defenses were already down since they had so quickly lost the vast amount of power they had gained in the pre-revolutionary years. In France and in [the case of the French Revolution](http://www.articlemyriad.com/historical-societal-functions-world-revolutions/), it was much the same and although some of the reasons differed for the revolution, on the whole, it was a very similar attack against the monarchy. “In the eighteenth century, the French bourgeoisie had become aware of the increasing disparity between its wealth and social usefulness, on the one hand, and its social prestige and opportunities on the other. It way was blocked and recognition of its worth was denied by a decaying class of parasitic, hereditary privileged, noble landowners. Its vitality was further jeopardized by a monarchy not only committed to antiquated aristocratic values, but also incapable of giving the country that firm yet benignly restrained direction under which the initiative of men of business might flourish” (Lucas 84). Just as in America, it was the middle and lower classes involved in the revolution and although the loyalists in America had a sound following, the demographics of the revolution were essentially the same.

Another important similarity between the two revolutions in France and America was their emphasis on Enlightenment thought. [The Enlightenment](http://www.articlemyriad.com/influence-enlightenment-formation-united-states/), which started in France and is associated with writers such as Rousseau and Voltaire, caused those under the thumb of monarchies to begin to recognize the inequality inherent in such systems. People of all classes, especially the middle and lower classes, began to use these ideas to formulate an ideology of resistance and insist on the implementation of new measures that would guarantee the natural rights of all citizens. These ideas shaped the American Revolution and the success of it went on to also inspire the French as well. In France, “the war was an ideological war, but anyone who tried to see it as a straight clash between Revolution and counter-revolution would soon become confused. Partisans of the Revolution differed violently with each other, as did their opponents.

To different parties, the French Revolution might refer to specific events, like the capture of the Bastille, or to a vast personified force, or to an abstract cause for which the French or others might be fighting. It could mean taking titles away from dukes, giving bread to the poor, or mean the teachings of Jesus or Voltaire” (Palmer 10). This statement would also apply to America during its revolutionary period and acts of rebellion could be anything such as boycotting goods from Britain to violently attacking loyalist and British enterprises. The final result was that there “originated in the emergence of a new discourse on politics which grew up in opposition to the traditional ideology and practices of the old monarchy” (Sutherland 259) in both countries as [Enlightenment ideals](http://www.articlemyriad.com/influence-enlightenment-formation-united-states/)were put into practice . In the end, “the prime fruit of independence was the national republic, resting its claim to resolve the old problem of American legitimacy on several bases. One was the charisma of General Washington, embodying as he did the states had fought the war together. Another was the half-realized myth of an ultimate popular sovereignty, superior to both the republic and the separate states” (Countryman 283).

Like in the case of the American Revolution, the French Revolution and the years leading up to it saw increasing dissatisfaction with the [absolute monarchy](http://www.articlemyriad.com/war-revolution-downfall-monarchy-france-russia/), especially in terms of his unwillingness to bring in a meaningful parliament or engage with demands of the citizens. On top of this, the Seven Years War had increased taxes by a huge margin and no one—not even those in the upper echelons saw the potential for personal yield. The nobility was becoming a useless old structure and the boredom of many of these idle aristocrats led to planning action. “In its French setting, then, the idea of “revolution” was inseparable from the condemnation of the past, which sharpened the will to exclude or eliminate those corrupt beneficiaries of the old order, the aristocrats” (Furet 65). What was perhaps most striking about the French Revolution was that it wasn’t merely a work’s revolt or a peasant’s rebellion—it was a wide-scale assault on the monarchy and the old values that were now stagnating in a world that was opening to industrialization. The difference between France and America was that in America there was not a period of protracted wars outside of the country going on that would weaken the economy and necessitate the need for additional funds. Even though there were battles in America with the Indians, mostly in the pursuit of land, these did not match the scope and cost of the Seven Years War that had driven the French nearly to bankruptcy. On the other hand, the British, the opponent to the Americans, were weakened because of outside (mostly colonial and land-grabbing) wars. The people in America were less impoverished than their French counterparts although the British government was coming close to breaking the bank through massive taxation.

There was also a difference in [class participation in the Revolutions](http://www.articlemyriad.com/historical-societal-functions-world-revolutions/) in America in France. In America, there were still a strong number of loyalists because they benefited from the great amount of favor they received from the British government. In France, however, even the nobles and aristocrats were angry at the monarchy because they were given less and less power. Although they still had money and a fair amount of control over local politics, they were almost figureheads instead of people with actual power. They saw that the king was limiting their role in government and they were part of the resistance effort as well. This is not to say that all of the nobility took part in reaction against the monarchy but the numbers of French aristocrats that were rebelling was significant. Still, the similarity of the rest of the population sponsoring the revolts was strong in both France an America.

From the top levels all the way to the lowest of laborers, everyone in France had a reason to want to prompt great change. The nobility wanted a greater stake in the future of the country, the middle classes wanted better representation and lower taxes, and the poor wanted to be able to earn a living and not be forced to give up well over half their earnings to a king they’d never seen for a war they’d never benefit from. While it seems that a majority of the focus of the French Revolution is on the plight and revolt of the working poor, the fact remains that this was a rebellion that was so effective because of this widespread support. Although there were certainly royalists among the rebellious French, their interests in crushing the revolt were equally self-centered. If they were lucky enough to enjoy a spot of favor with Louis XIV, certainly the lavish spoils that the monarch himself enjoyed were to be shared. With such nepotism, the introduction of an elected or mixed-class parliament would obliterate their security. Still, the ideas of the[Enlightenment](http://www.articlemyriad.com/influence-enlightenment-formation-united-states/)had gradually tricked down and soon enough, they may have had an influence on the agricultural poor. “Whether sentimentalist ideashad been widely enoughdisseminated to influence thelaboring poor in citiesand in fields isan open question. Thereare indications that thetopic of sentimentalism werefamiliar far down thesocial ladder” (Reddy 109).

In sum, these revolutions had more in common than it might appear despite the slight difference in time period and national histories. They were both reactions against an oppressive monarchy that taxed heavily and attempted to control its subject and they both reacted in part because of Enlightenment ideals. While there were different circumstances that effected the governments being rebelled against and there were different demographics of supporters, these revolutions had similar aims and achieved the similar result of a new republic and constitution as the final outcome.

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