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Tyranny Plagued the French Revolution

By

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Political Science

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ABSTRACT

Liberty, equality, and fraternity were the three original pillars of the French Revolution at the start in 1789. The slogan became the rallying cry for the embittered French people in their initial pursuit for political and social transformation. The French Revolution is perhaps the most prominent contemporary illustration of a violent revolution which ultimately was successful, resulting in a model of democratic government. The French Revolution reached a decade in length wherein there were countless demonstrations, massacres, wars, civil unrest, and political enlightenment. The disorganized nature of the revolution cultivated a vast array of political beliefs, which ranged from radical revolutionaries, moderates, and anti-revolutionaries. This incoherence generated monumental brutality and a serious lack of fluidity. The French Revolution is a perplexing topic because regardless of the overt tyranny, excessive violence of a savage nature, and the unjustified infringement upon civil rights perpetrated by the revolutionary government, the French nation did ultimately develop into a successful democratic republic. It is this conclusive and extraordinary eventual success of the French Revolution which is compelling. I intend to investigate and explain how the French Revolution materialized and for what reasons, as well as to analyze the effectiveness of the revolution through the administration of tyranny. Furthermore, I intend to explore how the Reign of Terror culminated and became an emblematic component of the French Revolution. There is a unique paradoxical relationship regarding tyranny which occurred wherein the revolutionary government administered tyrannical laws and perpetrated unnecessary violence against the people of France in a desperate effort to preserve the new regime. I intend to examine the design of this phenomena and explain why this paradox occurred. One of the fundamental reasons as to why the French Revolution is so complex is due to its many different layers and stages. The revolution encompassed myriad

social and political changes blended with the stress of foreign and domestic wars, as well as civil unrest. Therefore, this time period became a chaotic, vicious, and an arduous time for the people of France.

FOUNDATIONS OF REVOLUTION: FINANCIAL CRISIS

In order to properly interpret the concepts and events presented in this essay it is important to briefly explain an indispensable element pertaining to the outbreak of the French Revolution. The combination of an unqualified monarch accompanied with a colossal financial crisis set the foundations for the development of the rebellion. (Heller, 2009) The financial crisis in France during the late 1700s became an increasingly threatening situation as well, which ultimately contributed to the outbreak of civil unrest, further prompting revolutionary sentiments within the country. Prior to the French Revolution of 1789 the government administration ruling over the country was referred to as the Ancien Regime. This regime consisted of the absolutist monarch King Louis XVI as the ruler, along with a strictly enforced social class system. From the start of his reign in 1774 King Louis XVI was considered a weak and inadequate leader (McPhee, 2017). King Louis displayed a pattern of puppetry leadership, persistently unable to make authentic and quality decisions for the country, rather he allowed others to greatly influence his delegation. Therefore, he was regarded as incompetent to properly rule the country especially during a time period overwhelmed with financial disaster. (Palmer & Armitage, 2014) The element of an incompetent central leader within France paved the way for revolutionary development. In addition to Louis XVI being a dreadful leader he was engulfed in personal considerable financial dilemmas which were remarkably mismanaged. The crown of France was in tremendous debts. It was this financial crisis and subsequent mismanagement which led to the disproportionate taxation burden intensifying upon the poor people of France. Meanwhile the

exceptionally wealthy citizens of the country such as members of the nobility and the clergy were not required to pay taxes. Therefore, the most impoverished members of French society were unjustifiably taken advantage of in regard to taxation. Whereas the elitist classes of the nobility and clergy were exempt from paying taxes due to their social prominence. The financial burden upon the country in the years leading to the revolution is a fundamental element in the perpetuation of the movement. The mismanaged financial crises conjoined with an unwarranted sovereign set the main foundational elements, which were groundbreaking in sparking the French Revolution.

RELIGION IN PRE-REVOLUTION FRANCE

Religion is a vital component within human society. Religion has been the conflict of many wars which have built nations and conquered others. Religion creates unity amongst people within a society and allows for a sense of shared customs, deepening the bonds of the people. Religion is the foundational element for most cultures around the world and assembles the identity of the people. The eradication of religion during the French Revolution was one of the most catastrophic acts leading to the eventual decline of the revolutionary movement. The French people were predominantly Catholic Christians at the start of the revolution in 1789. But the new regime intended to comprehensively abolish the power and influence of the Catholic Church in France. The de-Christianization of France included exiling a vast majority of priests, seizing church properties, and executing members of the clergy. The revolutionaries in power wanted complete secularization of the country, removing the church from all political and social aspects of society. They even went so far as to revoke the Christian calendar and implement a new system. The first year of the revolution in 1789 was named Year 1. This example shows the endless lengths which the regime strived for in order to effectively erase all elements of the

Catholic religion in France. Eliminating the presence of religion within society is comparable to removing a great portion of the foundations of that society. Stripping away a vast portion of the religious cultural identity of any people is tyrannical and unjust. The church was a critical institution within France that provided many services to the public in addition to its traditional, cultural, and spiritual role. Therefore, as a result of the elimination of the institution there was extensive detrimental effects upon the country. This is a major component within the French Revolution which generated oppression and greatly contributed to the breakdown of the French people.

Alexis de Tocqueville was a French diplomat who was born after the French Revolution. He wrote a book titled *The Ancien Regime and the Revolution* where he analyzed both the government prior to the French Revolution and after. The system of government in place prior to the French Revolution, consisted of the French monarchy, feudal system, and nobility is referred to as the Ancien Regime. The Ancien Regime and the French monarchy were in place for hundreds of years. It was no secret that Tocqueville enjoyed democracy along with the many values and customs that come with it. He wrote all about his appreciation for democracy in another book titled, *Democracy in America*. Alexis de Tocqueville had an expert understanding of the French political climate before, during, and after the revolution. Therefore, he evaluated many critical aspects regarding the revolutionaries. One aspect he studied in particular was the component of religion. Tocqueville argued that the French Revolution was not initiated “to destroy the dominance of religious beliefs.” (Tocqueville. Book I. Chapter IV.) Rather he insisted that the revolution was supposed to have been one of social and political changes, not religious. Tocqueville also argues that the purpose of the French Revolution was “to abolish those political institutions which have prevailed unopposed for several centuries in most

European nations and which we normally describe as feudal, in order to replace them with a more uniform and simpler social and political regime based upon social equality.” (Tocqueville. Book I. Chapter V.) Tocqueville argued that there were indeed institutions under the Ancien Regime which were corrupt and unethical and needed to be replaced. He described institutions such as feudalism where the distribution of wealth was exceedingly unethical.

Feudalism was a major problem in France prior to the revolution and was an institution deeply associated with the aristocracy and social class system. Tocqueville argued that these inequitable institutions were a direct result of the failings of the Ancien Regime. Institutions such as immunity of public officials, and rigorous administrative control were also substantial political issues leading up to the outbreak of the French Revolution. Tocqueville argued that these types of institutions led to exploitation of the French people as well as apprehension. Religion was remarkably important in pre-revolutionary France because it was a part of the cultural foundations of the country, and also provided an array of services to the people. Therefore, when the revolutionary government abolished the church from France, they were abolishing a part of French identity as well.

CAUSES OF THE REVOLUTION: DISCRIMINATORY TAXATION

The French Revolution was caused by a combination of issues, some larger and more destructive than others, but each controversy added fuel to the revolutionary fire, which culminated into a recipe for outright disaster. The national financial crisis was the most considerable obstacle because it triggered significant communal unrest as the French people feared destitution, starvation, and insurrection. National debts caused by lengthy foreign wars and mismanagement prompted King Louis XVI to administer increasingly infamous unfair taxation policies upon a certain class of French people. Discriminatory taxation arrangements

produced as a result of the financial crisis was a major point of frustration amongst the French people.

Alexis de Tocqueville was an acclaimed French diplomat in the mid-1800s and among his many held positions and talents, Tocqueville wrote a distinguishable publication regarding the French Revolution simply titled, *The Ancien Regime and the Revolution*. This book analyzes many indispensable arguments regarding the transition in France from the Ancien Regime into the revolutionary years starting in May of 1789. Within this book Tocqueville argues that although the revolutionary government of France radically attempted to disassociate with the ideals of the Ancien Regime, the revolutionary French government eventually relapsed back to a strong centralized government style. Tocqueville, a proficient and bright philosopher, identified unjust taxation under the Ancien Regime as a primary cause of the revolution. (Tocqueville, 2008) Tocqueville explored the reasons he believed had caused the disastrous decline of the French monarchy system. Tocqueville also identified how the vulnerability and weakness of the monarchy became an element vital for the establishment of the revolution. Tocqueville believed that immoral taxation was the ultimate cause for the decline of the Ancien Regime. He stated, “I venture to declare that, from the day the French nation, let kings impose a general tax without its consent and when the nobles were mean enough to allow the Third Estates to be taxed so long as they were exempted, from that day was sown the seed of practically all the vices and abuses which plagued the Ancien Regime for the rest of its days and finally brought about its violent death.” (Tocqueville. Book II. Chapter X.) Tocqueville proclaims that the implementation of unfair taxation placed upon the impoverished people of the Third Estate by King Louis XVI was the foundation for revolution. Furthermore, Tocqueville specifically identifies how the systematic separation of classes inflicted insult to injury when the Third Estate was unjustly and

solely taxed. Tocqueville established that the discriminatory taxation was the induction point for the French Revolution and that the many problems which followed were a direct result.

The issue was not only about the act of paying taxes to the nation, but instead addressed the ethical subject of discrimination. In simple terms it was unethical for the Ancien administration to inflict such unabashed discriminatory treatment upon citizens of the Third Estate. This class of people were underprivileged and the most destitute in France, yet they were burdened with being the only class to pay taxes. Contrary to the Third Estate, members of the First and Second Estates were exempt from paying taxes. This discrepancy on behalf of the monarchy was overtly unethical and immoral. The unethical practice of only taxing the poor class of society, while the excessively wealthy members of the clergy and nobility were not required to pay taxes given their social status, is wrong. Tocqueville also highlights the lack of parity within the classes in regard to taxation, which is an important component to the development of civil unrest, which soon rapidly superseded the streets of Paris. Tocqueville understood that inequality regarding taxation would be detrimental to the existing monarchy. He states, "The monstrous consequence of sparing the rich and burdening the poor was inevitable." (Tocqueville. Book II. Chapter X.) Here Tocqueville concludes that the dissolution and failure of the French monarchy was inescapable. Tocqueville directly references what he determines are the inevitable consequences on behalf of the Ancien Regime due to their unfair taxation methods of oppressing the impoverished and sparing the wealthy. This evidence demonstrates a clear violation of ethics on behalf of the Ancien Regime, which directly resulted in breeding revolutionary sentiments in France. Therefore, the unjustifiable mistreatment of the French people of the Third Estate in regard to taxation, indeed manifested into a profound breakdown within society, leading to immense civil unrest and violent public demonstrations.

SEPERATION OF CLASSES

The Ancien Regime of France was based upon a hierarchical system where the monarchy, nobility, clergy and peasants were all a part of the structure of French society. This was the systematic separation of classes wherein people were born into classes. The system was formally divided into three distinct sections which were called estates. Each estate was permitted one vote during the pre-revolutionary government under the monarchy. Although the monarch had the final say on all matters and could effectively veto any type of legislation. The First Estate was comprised of the clergy, the Second Estate was the nobility, and the Third Estate was everyone else who were not members of the First or Second Estates. There was an enormous logistical problem with the way in which the estates were divided for example, the First Estate consisted of less than 1 percent of the French population, the Second Estate made up less than 2 percent of the population, while the Third Estate made up nearly 98 percent. These discrepancies were inequitable and immoral in nature because the Third Estate was the only one required to pay taxes. Therefore, the most impoverished class in society was forced to pay taxes while the wealthy members of the clergy and nobility were exempt. This was a major component which contributed to the rise of revolutionary sentiments in France. Tocqueville identified that the separation of classes under the Ancien Regime caused monumental destruction to the political liberty of the people. (Tocqueville. Book II. Chapter X.) This is because many French citizens did not have the right to vote and were completely isolated from political life do to their allocated class. Tocqueville argued that the strict separation of classes was a major element in bringing about the French Revolution. (Tocqueville. Book II. Chapter X.) The separation of classes was a form of control upon the people of France and forced them into specific groups. It

was this separation as well as the unfair treatment which sparked a tremendous effort to overthrow the monarchy and establish a democratic government.

THE REIGN OF TERROR: SACRIFICING LIBERTY FOR SECURITY

After the inception of the French Revolution chaos instantaneously pursued as many citizens did not have trust in the revolutionary government. With distrust and fear widespread throughout the country, the revolution developed into a movement plagued with tyranny. The most distinguished forms of tyranny materialized during the dawn of what became known as the Reign of Terror. Commonly referred to as the Terror, this time period was generated by passing a series of unbelievably tyrannical laws. The excuse given for the sequence of tyrannical laws passed was national security and security of the revolutionary regime. This series of tyrannical laws caused widespread paranoia and fear amongst the nation. The National Convention, which was the ruling body after the eradication of the monarchy, passed these tyrannical regulations due to fear of insurgency against the National Convention. Once they had gained their power, they did not want to lose that power to vigilantes. The Nation Convention was committing a classic political theory crime in sacrificing the liberties of its people for the security of the regime. The Convention wanted to gain control over the chaotic situation, in order to establish a rigorous and secure centralized government. The series of tyrannical laws which I will soon explain demonstrate how the revolution in France went from bad to worse remarkably quickly. The original revolutionary ideals of liberty and equality which had once been integral founding components of the revolution were effectively demolished in an attempt by the government to gain authoritarian control over the people. There is a dramatic shift once these laws are enforced, as it was the terrible start to gruesome violence which later became known as the Reign of Terror.

THE SERIES OF TYRANNICAL LAWS

The administration of tyranny during the French Revolution took many forms, but the development of tyranny was the product of a patterned behavior on behalf of the government.

The necessity to hold the regime together resulted in the administration of tyranny and disregard for constitutional rights, in the form of tyrannical laws. The rationale given for the implementation of these laws was fear of domestic insurgencies and pressure from expensive foreign wars. France was fighting foreign wars against the most powerful nations in the world at that time, among them included Prussia, Austria, Great Britain, and Spain. This type of pressure upon the brand-new governmental body was indeed immense, but it does not permit the infringement upon the rights of the citizens. In addition to foreign wars the French nation had erupted into chaos with a virtual civil war on the Homefront. Civil war conflicts broke out in the countryside and areas of France that were not in agreement with the Paris mobs. This boundless, seemingly anarchic, reality caused the Convention to take extreme measures to control the people of France. Thus, tyrannical laws were drafted, implemented, and enforced, but were all excused out of an understood necessity for security. The first step in passing the series of tyrannical laws was the suspension of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, which was the French constitution. Once the constitution was suspended the National Convention could easily pass unethical and tyrannical laws which would violate the original ideology of the French Revolution. These regulations included the Law of Suspects, Law of 22 Prairial, and the Law of 14 Frimaire.

SUSPENSION OF THE FRENCH CONSTITUTION

The first step in attaining control over the chaotic situation in France came with the suspension of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1793. The French Constitution was a long-awaited triumph of democracy within the country, which had always been consumed with authoritarian monarchy. The constitution included contemporary human and civil rights which the people of France had never possessed before. I will share the first three articles of the constitution to provide insight as to the political nature of the rights originally granted to the people of France. Article I declared, "Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may only be based on common usefulness." (McPhee 2017, p. 79) The first article of the constitution was absolutely groundbreaking because it proclaimed that all men were born equal and free. This signified that the system of separation of classes which was established for hundreds of years was finally part of the past. Article II declared, "The goal of every political association is the preservation of man's natural and imprescriptible rights. These rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression." (McPhee 2017, p. 79) The second article of the constitution sets clear boundaries regarding individual rights. Establishing that the preservation of both natural and civil rights is absolutely imperative. The article also describes the essence of those natural and civil rights, including liberty and security. Lastly Article III declared, "The principle of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation. No body, or individual may exercise authority that does not expressly emanate from it." (McPhee 2017, p. 79) The third article defines who is sovereign within the country, stating that authority can only come from those who are justly granted. These first three articles give major insight as to the democratic progress which the French Revolution had achieved at the time. Citizens were granted rights which they had never received previously. Furthermore, the first article declared

that the class system was abolished by stating that all men are free and equal. This was an astonishing concept at the time. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen affirmed the ideals of liberalism within France. It stated that, “liberty consists of the power to do whatever is not injurious to others.” (McPhee 2017, p. 79) The ratification of the constitution in 1793 marked the end of absolutism in France and the beginning of democracy. But the life of the constitution would be incredibly short lived, as it was suspended by the government in the same year that it was passed. Therefore, all the natural and civil rights which had been granted to the people of France was expeditiously revoked by the government. The act of suspending a democratic constitution is tyrannical in nature because it also suspends the civil and human rights of the citizens. The suspension of the constitution was the first step which initiated a trend of tyrannical laws which violated the very principles the original revolutionaries had fought for, as well as to contradict the rights outlined within the constitution. The chaos of the French Revolution resulted in a suppression of constitutional rights at the expense of the French people.

LAW OF SUSPECTS

After the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen was revoked, the National Convention, which was the ruling body of government, began a further crusade against the liberties of the French people. Subsequently, a series of tyrannical laws were implemented in an attempt to control the French people. The Law of Suspects was passed in September of 1793 and was the first law to be passed leading up to the culmination of the Reign of Terror. The Law of Suspects was passed for the purpose of creating revolutionary tribunals where citizens suspected of treason were placed on trial. This law granted an unethical amount of power within the federal government. (McPhee, 2017) The purpose of this law was to seek out individuals which were arbitrarily determined to be suspicious. Once they were determined to be suspicious, they could

be arrested by the state. This law administered overt tyranny upon the citizens of France and was established in an attempt to capture possible insurgents plotting against the National Convention. The law created widespread fear among citizens because the law gave anyone the authority to report another, leaving ample capacity for unjust reporting. This type of law is tyrannical in nature due to its outright disregard for civil rights under law. The Law of Suspects was the first law passed which directly contributed to the Reign of Terror campaign where thousands of people were publicly executed as traitors of the state.

LAW OF 22 PRAIRIAL

The second law introduced following the Law of Suspect was known as the Law of 22 Prairial. This law was intended to require every citizen to have an active duty to report people of suspicion. The Law of 22 Prairial mandated that if any member of the community hears, witnesses, or becomes aware of rumors which would warrant suspicion, then they have a lawful obligation to turn that person into the authorities for further investigation. This law complements the Law of Suspects by creating an even more tyrannical environment for the people of France. Citizens lived in immeasurable fear of being accused as suspicious. Laws of this nature create an environment full of hostility and paranoia.

Under the Law of 22 Prairial, the Committee of Public Safety in Paris became even more powerful, and functioned as a secret police force, seeking out members of the public which presented an apparent threat. The law also allowed the excessively powerful Committee of Public Safety to change the judicial process of the country as to increase the manufacturing of accused traitors. The Law of 22 Prairial declared an array of stipulations including, no trial can last more than three days, and the accused cannot call on a witness or receive any form of defense council. The law also stated that there are no appeals process once a verdict has been

delivered, of which there are only two, death or acquittal. A law of this nature exemplifies tyranny as it is cruel, oppressive, and unfair. The Reign of Terror was a direct result of the Law of Suspects and the Law of 22 Prairial. (McPhee, 2017) Through those channels thousands of French people would be executed, among them included King Louis XVI, Queen Marie Antoinette, and Maximilian Robespierre.

LAW OF 14 FRIMAIRE

The Law of 14 Frimaire was the final law passed in the series which had been the most tyrannical the nation had ever seen. The Law of 14 Frimaire was passed as an attempt to control the chaos that had become known as the Reign of Terror. The law gave even more power and authority to the Committee of Public Safety. At this point in the revolution the Committee of Public Safety had been acting as not only law enforcement, but they were the law. Acting as secret police, the Committee of Public Safety perpetrated horrible crimes against the people of France, distributing terror. The Law of 14 Frimaire established an even stronger and more centralized government. The main reason the law granted increased powers to the police force was to give them more authority over the civilian population, which since the terror began had become engulfed in chaos and violence.

Laws such as the Law of Suspects, Law of 22 Prairial, and Law of 14 Frimaire resemble anything but a democratic society which respects liberty, equality, and fraternity. The original objectives of the French Revolution have been completely destroyed and replaced with overt tyrannical actions on behalf of the government. This tyranny resulted in unprecedented violence within the country. This argument epitomizes the authentic complexity of the French Revolution.

The French Revolution sustained for ten dreadful years but there is a specific interval of the revolution which would become the defining element, that being the Reign of Terror. It became the most distinguished stage of the revolution because of the extraordinary level of violence and murder. Although the Reign of Terror lasted approximately two years it came to symbolize the revolution in its entirety because of the condition of systematic violence. The laws which were passed to commit and sustain the Reign of Terror optimize the tyranny which plagued the French Revolution and the revolutionary government. The tyrannical laws did not only infringe upon the rights of the citizens, but they brutally and publically murdered them in their thousands.

TYRANNY PARADOX

The French Revolution was an extremely complex, violent, and remarkable instance of human civilization, encompassing aspects such as sovereignty, inalienable natural rights, civil rights and insurgency. Anarchic violence became normalized as there was no clear sovereign authority which could gain conclusive control. The National Convention declared themselves as sovereign while the people of Paris and other regions of France declared themselves as sovereign. (McPhee, 2017) This was a major component of the revolution which complicated the intended transition from monarchy to democratic republic, the French people were simply not on the same page. Furthermore, they were not organized in a fashion which promotes any form of unity amongst them. The administration of tyranny which was inflicted upon the French people from two different forms of government. The first being the absolute monarchy wherein Louis XVI was king and the second being National Convention, which was the revolutionary government during the revolution.

The fall of absolutism was originally thought to be a great success for liberty, progress, and democracy but ultimately the revolutionaries would become even more tyrannical than the monarchy ever was and inflict horrible atrocities against the people of France. Under immense pressure from foreign wars, domestic uprisings, and food shortages the ruling government became engulfed by paranoia, fear of treason and deception from the citizens. This fear led to the implementation of the tyrannical series of laws, the Law of Suspects, the Law of 22 Prairial, and the Law of 14 Frimaire. (McPhee, 2017) But the most outstanding tyrannical and undemocratic act which the National Convention did was suspending the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. This act stripped the French people of their newly gained constitutional rights and allowed for the government to become unjustifiably powerful and tyrannical. Of course, these actions were taken in an effort to control the French people and protect the new government. (McPhee, 2017)

CONCLUSION

The French Revolution is a story filled with marvelous triumphs, such as the ratification of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, which granted the French people with equalities and protections. But the revolution also demonstrated the consequences of rebellion, resulting in acts such as the Reign of Terror. The French Revolution is an extremely important political and theoretical event in history, due to its complexity regarding tyranny. Although, the reality of the revolution was much more sinister in nature than originally thought. The eventual success of the French Republic would come to overshadow many of the injustices carried out during the revolution. The French Revolution materialized due to aspects such as unfair taxation, financial hardship, and the separation of classes under the Ancien Regime. These inequalities

culminated into deep rooted revolutionary sentiments, causing the initial outbreak of violence and rebellion in Paris.

As Tocqueville said the regime was doomed once it administered unfair taxes upon the people of the Third Estate. The Reign of Terror, though it was short in length became the defining feature of the French Revolution due to its monumental level of violence, murder, and tyranny. However, the Reign of Terror was only possible due to the series of tyrannical laws passed by the National Convention in the name of national security. The revolutionary government camouflaged itself under a democratic mission yet inflicted more tyranny and injustice upon the French people than the absolutist monarchy had done during the Ancien Regime. The extraordinary aspect of this event is that the revolution was able to prevail and eventually establish a solid democratic regime after several difficult years.

The initial defeat of absolutism was originally considered a great achievement in the quest for liberty and democracy but ultimately the French revolutionary government would inflict even more tyrannical authoritarianism than the monarchy ever had. The revolutionary government also administered violent atrocities against the people of France. Tremendous pressure from foreign wars, domestic uprisings, and food shortages, caused the revolutionary government to become consumed with fear, paranoia, treason and deception. Which led to the implementation of the tyrannical series of laws, the Law of Suspects, the Law of 22 Prairial, and the Law of 14 Frimaire, effectively producing the Reign of Terror. But suspending the French constitution was the most tyrannical act committed by the revolutionary government. This act stripped the French people of their newly gained constitutional democratic rights and freedoms, which allowed for the revolutionary regime to become tyrants.

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