



Groundings Undergraduate Academic Journal

University of Glasgow | Glasgow University Union

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Source: Groundings Undergraduate, April 2022, Vol. 13, pp. 76-83

Published by: University of Glasgow, Glasgow University Union Publications

ISSNs: 1754-7474 (Print) | 1755-2702 (Online)

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Social Upheaval in pre-1789 France: Connecting the French Wars of Religion, the Flour War, and the French Revolution

Xinyao Zhang

This essay explores the French Wars of Religion and the Flour War, comparing them with the French Revolution, in its study of social upheaval in France before 1789. Research surrounding this has been conducted for many years, and different scholars have offered different interpretations. In this essay, the case study method is used, with these three popular protests. Through studying these cases, the essay hopes to draw broader lessons about how these popular protests are interconnected and how they challenged the social order. This essay argues that both the French Wars of Religion and the Flour War caused social upheaval and have similarities with the French Revolution in terms of the political and social impact.

Introduction

There are only a few revolutions in history that constituted so great an upheaval they can now be identified simply by association with the country of their occurrence: the French Revolution, however, is one. Even before 1789, France had experienced much political instability and social unrest, due to various conflicts between the King and his people; the most influential of these were the French Wars of Religion and the Flour War. The old system before the revolution was, as Le Goff has said, an extension of the Middle Ages.¹ A corrupt monarchy and a selfish aristocratic class were united for their own interests while the remainder of civil society was led by a wealthy and ambitious bourgeoisie; it was the French Revolution, in contrast with popular protests before 1789, that succeeded in destroying this monarchic structure and in spreading the progressive ideas of liberty and democracy.² This essay will analyse how

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1 Jacques Le Goff and Paul Archambault, 'An Interview with Jacques Le Goff', in *Historical Reflections* (1995), 21.1:155-185

2 Yves-Marie Berce, *Revolt and Revolution in Early Modern Europe: An Essay on the History of Political Violence* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 198.

the popular protests before 1789 challenged the social order. It will attempt to shed light on the lesser-known causes, conflicts, and social impacts of the French Wars of Religion and the Flour War, before discussing the relationship between these cases the eventual French Revolution. Through this comparative analysis, it will seek to reveal a wider picture of social upheaval and reflect the nature of protest and conflict in France at the time.

The French Wars of Religion

The French Wars of Religion were conflicts between the royal power (the King) and feudal forces, led by the nobility, and were characterised by an intensification of tensions among religious factions between 1562 and 1598³. The feudal economy was still dominant, and ninety percent of the population was engaged in agriculture.⁴ In France, the process of the King's constant struggle against aristocratic authority and separatist forces gradually achieved the enhancement and consolidation of royal power. This led to the emergence of capitalism and the bourgeoisie; capitalists became part of the upper class by purchasing dilapidated nobles' properties and titles and accepting official positions. Their economic and political interests were inseparable from the King's authority: they supported the King's power to restrain the nobility internally and expand their power externally, in order to develop wealth.⁵ However, the nobility was unwilling to have their power limited, and strove to maintain their privileges and control over the King by challenging his power. As the King gradually became the head of the aristocracy and the church, the nobility split into two broad groups which both opposed the monarchy.⁶

In the 1540s, Calvinism had begun to spread in France; the theology, promoted by John Calvin, a Protestant reformer, and developed by his followers, emphasised the idea of *sola fide* (salvation by faith alone), denied the authority of the Holy See and feudal hierarchy, desired to abolish religious rituals, idolatry, pilgrimage and fasting, and elected clergy members to establish a simplified, pure, and cheap church.⁷

³ 'The Wars of Religion, Part I', from *Le Poulet Gauche* (2004) <<http://www.lepg.org/wars.htm>> [accessed 20 October 2020].

⁴ 'Medieval Europe: The Feudal System', from *TimeMaps*, <<https://www.timemaps.com/encyclopedias/medieval-europe-feudalism/>> [accessed 20 October 2020].

⁵ 'Wars of Religion, Part I', *Le Poulet Gauche*.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ 'The Rise of Protestantism in France (1520-1562)', from *Musee Protestant*, <<https://www.museeprotestant.org/en/notice/the-rise-of-protestantism-in-france-1520-1562/>> [accessed 20 October 2020].

Simultaneously, Calvinism promoted the spirit of capitalism; Zafirovski has argued that Calvin's first adherents were capitalists.⁸ Calvinism attracted a large number of skilled workers, especially publishers, tradesmen, peasants, and lower priests, who accepted the above teachings and became Calvinist Protestants; these people were known as the Huguenots.⁹ Indeed, much of the nobility in southern France became Calvinists and used the Reformation to seize church estate. They had a profound conflict of interests with the Catholic aristocrats in the north, which eventually evolved into a long-term civil war.¹⁰ In the 16th century, eight individual conflicts between Catholics and Protestants caused great damage to France. The established royal power collapsed, the aristocratic separatist forces rose, and there was an interregnum: France had fallen into a period of anarchy. These were the French Wars of Religion, and they led directly to the death of approximately 3 million people due to violence and famine.¹¹ In terms of European conflicts up to this point, the casualties of the French Wars of Religion were second only to the Thirty Years War, which killed over 8 million people¹².

The Wars ended with the Edict of Nantes document, issued by Henry IV in 1598.¹³ Both Catholics and Huguenots benefited from the French Wars of Religion, the conclusion of which contributed to an ultimate revitalisation and strengthening of royal power, and created conditions for the unification of the nation-state and a revival of the economy. The Edict of Nantes was the first evidence of a Christian European country implementing a policy of religious tolerance, as it both granted French Protestants religious freedom and civil rights, and reconciled Catholicism¹⁴. Pope Clement VIII condemned the Edict of Nantes, declaring people's freedom to choose their religion as highly harmful.¹⁵ Such a strong reaction from the Pope indicates that the Wars broke the monopoly of Catholicism in French society, and succeeded in consolidating

8 Milan Zafirovski, 'Calvinist Predestination and the Spirit of Capitalism: The Religious Argument of the Weber Thesis Reexamined', from *Human Studies* (2018), 41.4: 565-602 (585).

9 'The Wars of Religion, Part I', *Le Poulet Gauche*.

10 *Ibid.*

11 David El Kenz, 'Massacres during the Wars of Religion', from *SciencesPo*, (2007) <<https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/en/document/massacres-during-wars-religion.html>> [accessed 21 October 2020].

12 'The Thirty Years' War', from *History*, (2018) <<https://www.history.com/topics/reformation/thirty-years-war>> [accessed 21 October 2020].

13 Allan A. Tulchin, 'Ending the French Wars of Religion', in *The American Historical Review* (2015), 120.5: 1696-1708 (1698)

14 *Ibid.*, 1708.

15 Antoine Arnould, *The Arrainment of the Whole Society of Jesuits in France, Holden in the Honourable Court of the Parlement of Paris* (London: Charles Yetsweirt Esq., 1594), 7.

support for new ideas among the population. However, although the Edict of Nantes had shaken the dominance of Catholicism, it had not completely resolved religious conflicts with its restrictions. The French Wars of Religion had clear social impacts, reshaping the very conception of religious tolerance in French society, and ingraining ideas about citizenship and democratic rights; as a civil upheaval, however, it did not change the country's fundamental royal power and social systems.

Here we may draw contrast with The French Revolution, which similarly used violent means to target the power of the king, but had far wider social implications. Aristocrats and religious privileges were attacked by liberal political organisations and people's protests, and protestors claimed that the priesthood needed to speak for the People.¹⁶ But further to this, the feudal system, with its unequal taxation and feudal rights determined by social structure (clergy, nobility, and peasants), was abolished, and the Declaration of the Rights of Man was announced as part of the constitution, symbolising the end of old ways of thinking, subject to gradual transformation by the idea of natural human rights (liberty, property, and security) and the separation of executive, judicial and legislative powers, before the eventual establishment of a republic government.¹⁷ Thus, the French Revolution can be understood as a 'real' revolution in comparison to the French Wars of Religion, as it resulted in both new religious tolerance but also wider social change.

The Flour War

Alongside religious disputes, a more fatal, domestic problem in France was the issue of food shortages. As early as 1529, poor grain yields caused riots in the city of Lyon: in the Grande Rebeune Uprising (also called the Great Rebellion), thousands of people ransacked and destroyed the houses of wealthy citizens, and threw grain from the municipal granary onto the streets.¹⁸ Since the 1660s, the King had been advised by the Physiocrats, a group comprising mainly of economists, who controlled land development and the value of agricultural products, and believed that domestic goods ought to have higher prices. As a result of their suggestions, the Royal Government attempted to lift controls on domestic grain trade and introduced a form

¹⁶ Roland Stromberg, 'Re-evaluating the French Revolution', from *The History Teacher* (1986), 20.1:87-107 (99).

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 101.

¹⁸ Una McIlvenna, 'How Bread Shortages Helped Ignite the French Revolution', from *History* (2019), <<https://www.history.com/news/bread-french-revolution-marie-antoinette>> [accessed 22 October 2020].

of free trade in late April and May 1775.¹⁹ This form of free trade proved to be even more detrimental to national stability as it gave some merchants greater freedom to speculate; as a result, some areas suffered from famine, while in others the price of food remained stable. Grain reserves were exhausted before the spring harvest of 1775, further contributing to the famine. Due to food shortages and high prices, there was an outbreak of public anger in the towns and villages of the Paris Basin. Over three weeks, more than 300 incidents of riots and grain looting were recorded; the rioters invaded Versailles, spread to Paris, and then out into the countryside. This wave of popular protest was called the Flour War. The government took steps to suppress it; 25,000 soldiers were dispatched and 162 people were arrested, with a 28-year-old wig maker and his 16-year-old apprentices executed in De Griff Square.²⁰

During the Flour War, the food rioters showed a paradoxical nature, demonstrating economic and moral outlooks embodying the concept of moral economy, as described by historians E.P. Thompson and Charles Tilly²¹. During the Flour War, rioters 'acted on the basis of moral judgments about markets', revealing their beliefs about social norms, proper economic functions, and criticism of the government policy: rioters were acting on the assumption that they were safeguarding traditional rights or norms, and they were supported by a broader majority of the community. Their specific complaints were founded on a broad agreement as to what were valid and illegitimate marketing methods and predicated on a coherent conventional conception of social norms and duties. They exercised two opposing logics in the moral economy: the law of property and the logic of morality.²²

This was one of the reasons why the Flour War ultimately failed: even if the government's measures alleviated the social conflicts caused by the famine to a certain extent, such measures were insufficient, and lack of bread served as a catalyst for revolutionary ideas. This lack brought a great challenge to social order, leading to even greater polarisation: a small group of elite farmers opposed the poorer farmers. The Flour War was part of the wider social and political crisis, serving as a prelude to

19 Ingo Barenz, Volker Caspari and Bertram Schefold, *Political Events and Economic Ideas* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2004), 150.

20 Bernard Vincent. *Louis XVI. France: Gallimard Folio Biographies* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 111.

21 John Bohstedt, 'The Moral Economy and the Discipline of Historical Context', in *Journal of Social History* (1992), 26.2: 265-284 (265-267).

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 265-267.

the French Revolution.²³ Due to the limitations of the aforementioned measures taken by the government to tackle famine, the struggle between the emerging bourgeoisie and the royal family escalated, and people lost confidence in the government.²⁴

While the French Wars of Religion introduced the concepts of citizenship and democratic rights, the Flour War developed these conceptions further and gave them a more explicitly material and secular basis in terms of rights to bread.²⁵ Lack of food became increasingly acute in the 1780s. With a significant increase in population (approximately five to six million more people in France in 1789 than in 1720) there was no corresponding increase in local food production.²⁶ The French people's complete reliance on a grain-based diet further exacerbated the problem. Before the Flour War, bread accounted for sixty to eighty percent of a peasant's budget, so even a small increase in grain prices had the potential to trigger public outcry.²⁷ The tone was set, therefore, for the subsequent outbreak of the French Revolution.

Concluding Comparisons

Both the French Wars of Religion and the Flour War caused social upheaval. In the Wars of Religion, Catholics and Huguenots fought eight times, destabilising French society. Henry IV issued the Edict of Nantes in 1598, from which both sides benefited. However, it also established a policy of religious tolerance, which challenged the social order and threatened the dominant status of Catholicism at that time, granting people more freedom to choose their belief. Compared to the French Revolution, the French Wars of Religion settled the conflicts between the old and the new. Even though it failed to solve their issues completely, it laid the foundation for future social changes. During the Flour War, errors in policy formulation led to an unstable grain market. After riots broke out, the Royal Government's attempt to use the army to suppress them as a means of solving the problem weakened people's confidence in the royal family and intensified the conflict between the bourgeoisie and the royal family. The Flour War extended the gap between the poor and the rich and acted as a key stepping stone to the French Revolution. Therefore, the Flour War was, ultimately, more closely related to the French Revolution than the Wars of Religion. In revealing

23 Mellvenna, 'Bread Shortages'.

24 Ibid.

25 Berce, *Revolt and Revolution*, 101.

26 Mellvenna, 'Bread Shortages'.

27 Ibid.

a broader political and social crisis, based on the intensification of social conflicts among the royal power, bourgeoisie, and peasants, the Flour War pointed out that the problems of the French hierarchal system caused internal instability; this sowed the seeds of upheaval that would lead to the overthrowing of royal power and the advocacy of equality during the French Revolution.

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