

What Are the Differences Between the American and French Revolutions?

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Although both led to the establishment of new governments, there are differences between the American Revolution and the French Revolution. The primary difference is the motivation of the revolutionaries.

Basic Differences

From 1775 to 1783, the American colonists launched a campaign against Great Britain, eventually winning their independence and ushering in a period of revolution during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It started with the French Revolution against King Louis XVI and the storming of the Bastille prison in 1789. Although both revolutions resulted in new forms of government, there are significant differences that extend beyond how long they lasted and where they took place.

Roots of Revolution

Inspired by ideas from the Enlightenment, the American and French revolutionaries shared a similar goal of breaking free from a government they felt was unfair. However, they had different reasons for pushing for change. The Americans had no intention of dismantling the British government. Instead, they wanted to maintain the form of representative government already established in the colonies along with the right to tax themselves. On the other side of the ocean, the French wanted to completely eradicate the monarchy and the religion teaching the belief that the monarchy was established by divine rule.

Violence in Combat

At the storming of the Bastille, the French revolutionaries executed the commander of the garrison, cut off his head and carried it around at the end of a stick. They also arrested and executed King Louis XVI and his wife, Queen Marie Antoinette. The brutality and violence of the initial revolution increased as the conflict progressed, culminating in a period that became known as the Reign of Terror after the revolutionary government decided to harshly punish anyone it viewed as enemies of its cause, including some of those who had fought on its side in the revolution. Although nearly 50,000 people died during the course of the American Revolution, most of these deaths occurred during or as the result of battles against the British.

Fate of the Leaders

Another striking difference between the two revolutions is what happened to their leaders during and after the conflicts. Most of the American leaders survived the revolution and went on to become leaders of the new nation. General George Washington accepted the role as the country's first president. Benjamin Franklin helped draft the country's constitution. James Madison and John Adams eventually served as the second and fourth presidents. However, in France Maximilien Robespierre and Jacques Pierre Brissot went to the guillotine while Jean-Paul Marat was stabbed to death in his bath.

Effect of the Revolutions

Following the philosophy of John Locke, the leaders of the new American nation established a constitutional government. The French, however, leaned more toward the beliefs of Rousseau and opted for a government that ruled by the absolute will of the people. This eventually contributed to the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte, who established a French empire and claimed the title of emperor. Americans still had the right to practice their religions without interference from the government. Conversely, the French attempted to eradicate religion from the country, going so far as to rename the Cathedral of Notre Dame the "Temple of Reason."

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