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Sample Enduring Issues Essay Global History Grade 10

Power, the ability to influence or control the behavior of people, is significant because it affects a lot of people and has long-lasting effects. The reigns of King Louis XVI, Robespierre, and Napoleon greatly impacted the French people. The French Revolution showed that people can bring about change and challenge authority. Power is an enduring issue because throughout history, we have seen nations across the world have governments wielding varying degrees of power. Sometimes, as in the case of the French Revolution, people become unhappy with their leaders who abuse their power, ultimately causing people to revolt. For example, in the 18th century, the French Third Estate overthrew King Louis XVI and a few years later, did the same to the French dictator, Maximillian Robespierre. The French Revolution was largely inspired by the American Revolution just a few years before it. The American Revolution set an example for the French underclass that it is possible for people to unite and change their government and its level of power over them.

King Louis XVI believed he derived his power from God and wielded absolute power over his unsatisfied French subjects. The French (majority) were discontent because of the Old Regime, the social hierarchy that separated the French people into three Estates, or classes, as well as the unfair system of taxation that put the burden of taxes on the Third Estate. The ideas of the Enlightenment, as well as the success of the American Revolution, inspired the French to overthrow their absolute monarch and form a new government. According to Friedman and Foner in *A Genetic Approach to Modern European History*, King Louis XVI was “completely oblivious to the rising tide of popular discontent…” While the King and Queen enjoyed lavish parties at the magnificent Palace of Versailles, many French people were starving due to the famine of 1789. After the King refused to change the traditional system of voting in the Estates General, members of the Third Estate broke away and formed the National Assembly. The National Assembly claimed that they were the legitimate government of France and would enact laws in the name of the French people. The members of the National Assembly took the Tennis Court Oath in which they pledged to continue meeting until a new Constitution was written for France. In 1791, the National Assembly adopted the Constitution of 1791, creating a limited constitutional monarchy and expanding rights for middle to upper class males. In 1792, the Revolution turned radical with the creation of the National Convention. The National Convention put King Louis XVI on trial for treason. He was found guilty and beheaded by the guillotine. The same fate met his wife, Queen Marie Antoinette just a few months later. The people had overthrown their absolute monarchy but unbeknownst to them would replace him with a radical dictator named Maximillian Robespierre.

Maximillian Robespierre rose to power during the French Revolution. Robespierre oversaw the Reign of Terror, a period of time in which approximately 40,000 French citizens were sent to the guillotine. The victims of the Reign of Terror crossed social and economic boundaries. Members of the First, Second, and Third Estate were executed. Those who were suspected to be enemies of the Revolution were sent to the guillotine. Robespierre and other radicals feared a return to French monarchy so they called for death to anyone who wasn’t as radical as they were. Eventually, the French people recognized Robespierre had gone mad. According to an eyewitness’ description of Robespierre’s arrest in *The French Revolution as Told by Contemporaries*, the French yelled “Down with the tyrant!” The arrest and subsequent execution of Robespierre exemplifies that large groups of people can bring about change and challenge authority. The French people looked to Robespierre to provide order and structure during a chaotic time after their monarchy ended. Instead of helping rebuild the French government, Robespierre allowed the power to go to his head. After Robespierre was executed, a moderate government called the Directory came to power in France. The Directory had good intentions as it contained separate branches of government, an executive and legislative, as inspired by Enlightenment philosopher Montesquieu. However, the Directory was weak and unable to unify the French people, ultimately setting the stage for Napoleon Bonaparte to perform a coup d’état and take over France.

Napoleon Bonaparte was hailed as a hero for his actions in the French Revolutionary Wars. In 1799, Napoleon and his troops performed a coup d’état, a forceful takeover of the weak government. Napoleon crowned himself Emperor in December 1804. According to George Rude in “Napoleon as Preserver of the Revolution”, although Napoleon was authoritarian, he did achieve some of the important ideals of the Revolution. Initially, Napoleon had a positive impact on France. Napoleon abolished the Old Regime, he restructured the system of tax collection in France, he extended rights to more people, he opened more schools, and he established a uniform set of laws called the Napoleonic Code. Napoleon’s reign influenced the people as the middle class gained more power. However, Napoleon’s quest for power ultimately led to his downfall as he made several mistakes with other nations. Napoleon’s attack on Portugal for their refusal to participate in his Continental System led to the Peninsular War in which approximately 300,000 French troops died. Napoleon’s invasion of Russia in 1812 led to the deaths of nearly 400,000 French troops. Napoleon was ultimately defeated by his European foes at the Battle of Waterloo and exiled to the island of St. Helena.

Power can be dynamic, changing, and it can greatly influence people. The French people went from having an absolute monarchy under King Louis XVI to a dictatorship under Maximillian Robespierre to an emperor under Napoleon. From studying French history, one can see that it is possible for people to challenge authority and bring about change. The idea of challenging power is enduring because people have challenged their governments in different regions during different time periods. The American Revolution, largely inspired by the Enlightenment, inspired the French people to rise up and overthrow their government.