

Student's Name

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Compare and Contrast Essay Sample (Block Approach):

French versus American Revolution

In the history of the Western world, few events could equal the magnitude of the revolutions that swept through Europe and the Americas in the 18th and 19th centuries. These revolutions changed not only the fate of the countries where they occurred, but also the course of history itself. But among the many revolutions that took place, perhaps the most important are the American Revolution and the French Revolution. Many people often fall under the assumption that these two events are the same in every aspect. But in reality, there are crucial differences as this essay will show. While the French Revolution and the American Revolution have important similarities including the reasons that triggered them, the revolutionaries' desire to overthrow monarchic rule in exchange for democratic governments, and the influence of the Enlightenment's ideas, they differ in terms of the sociopolitical context in which they took place and their immediate outcomes.

Among the main similarities between the French Revolution and the American Revolution is the role of taxation and representation. At the time of the American Revolution in the 18th century, the territories that would eventually constitute the United States were colonies of Great Britain. However, the British crown began to impose taxes that the colonies viewed as unjust. In particular, the revolutionaries rejected the fact that

they were made to pay taxes without representation in Parliament (Breen 81-82). For example, the Stamp Act of 1765 and the Townshend Acts of 1767 were among the new taxation laws imposed by the crown upon the colonies. Similarly, over-taxation and lack of representation were at the core of the French Revolution. In the late 18th century, French society was characterized by a massive gap between the extremely affluent royalty, nobility, and clergy and the common people composed mainly of the lower and middle classes. But despite this, the common people paid most of the tax while the ruling class lived luxurious lives (Doyle 45-49). Worse, the common people's vote in the general assembly was considered as of the same weight as the vote of the nobility and the vote of the clergy, despite these two latter groups representing a minuscule minority of the population. These factors led to the common people rebelling against the monarchy and the system it represented. Apart from taxes the French Revolution and American Revolution also shared the ultimate goal of overthrowing monarchic rule and establishing democratic governments. The American revolutionaries eventually sought to rid the colonies of British rule, while the French revolutionaries wanted to replace the absolutist monarchy with a republic with its constitution. Finally, the two revolutions were both influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, leading intellectuals progressively questioned traditional sociopolitical systems and established dogma (Zafirovski 144). In particular, thinkers and philosophers such as Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Denis Diderot among others believed in inalienable rights, limitations to the power of the government, intellectual progress, and separation of church and state. These ideas eventually fueled the French and the

American revolutionaries, who toppled governments in the hopes of establishing a more just society (Duignan).

While the revolutions in France and America were similar in some aspects, they were also different in important ways. For one, the two revolutions differed in their context. The American Revolution was waged by a colony against Great Britain (Wallace). This means that the revolution was between two different political entities where one sought to free itself from the power of another. A successful revolution, in this case, did not necessarily lead to the removal of the other. Both the United States and Great Britain are countries to this day. On the other hand, the French Revolution took place within a single government ("French Revolution"). In the case of France, the success of the revolutionaries resulted in the removal of the old system. France today is a republic rather than a monarchy. Apart from the context, the two revolutions differ in their immediate results. The American Revolution resulted in the founding of the United States as a new country. It replaced the colonial system that was under the power of the British crown and the parliament with a democratic government elected by the people. The writing of the American constitution, in turn, ensured that his new system would be preserved (Wallace). Another difference is the immediate outcomes of the two revolutions. In America, the revolution resulted in the emergence of the United States as a separate country free to determine its destiny. The revolutionaries were victorious against the British, thus ensuring the founding of a country that exists to this day. In France, however, the revolution took a darker turn. The overthrow of the monarchy triggered a series of chaotic and bloody events. Governments were toppled one after another. France was overwhelmed by an atmosphere of paranoia that saw political dissidents and critics

executed by the thousands or dying in prison in a period known as the Reign of Terror. The fall of the monarchy also compelled many European nations to wage war against the new French republic. In many ways, the revolution paved the way for the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte (Davidson). The French Revolution's successes and failures were many and perhaps equal in number.

In the end, the French Revolution and the American Revolution were two important movements that shaped modern history. Both revolutions were born from the struggles of people who were taxed by an unjust system and deprived of adequate representation. The two were also influenced by the ideas promulgated by the great thinkers of the Enlightenment. But while they share some aspects, the two are also distinct in many ways. In particular, the two revolutions had different contexts and had different immediate consequences. Yet despite their crucial differences, these two events rank among the most influential, with their effects equal to what impact the Renaissance had on the Western world. The magnitude by which they altered history is perhaps on a par with how World War I's aftermath changed the modern world forever.

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