

What were the major causes of dissension between the Bourbon monarchs and their subjects in the second half of the eighteenth century?

It is clear that the causes of dissension between Bourbon monarchs and their subjects after 1750 cannot be explained by reference to one factor alone, such as France's humiliating defeat in the Seven Years War. Leopold von Ranke famously saw the international position of France, which brought the royal government into deep discredit as key to explaining resistance to the monarchy in this period¹. However, the resistance of Parlements (particularly that of Paris), the structural weaknesses inherent in France's taxation system, the personal kingship of both Louis XV and Louis XVI, as well as the growth in this period of a 'public sphere' of opinion hostile to the monarchy, all caused significant troubles for the Bourbon monarchs. Other factors such as the popularity of Jansenism at this time and a succession of bad harvests at critical moments did not help matters either.

In the Seven Years' War from 1756 to 1763 France lost large blocks of territory, including her colonial possessions in modern-day Canada to her arch-rival Great Britain, and even more prestige². Though Riley has questioned whether this war was as costly in fiscal terms to the French monarchy as previously believed, it is clear that after humiliating defeats, such as in 1757 at the battle of Rossbach to a Prussian army significantly inferior numerically, it was far harder for the Louis XV to justify his war expenditure³. Additionally, the fact that it was well known that the French commander at Rossbach, Prince de Soubise, was a close friend of both the king and Madame de Pompadour meant blame for this failure could be laid firmly at Louis's door. The French fleet was also soundly defeated by the British in a number of engagements and these defeats were not only unpopular in themselves but also discredited Louis XV's 'diplomatic revolution' of allying with France's traditional continental enemy, Austria⁴. Though Colin Jones is correct to emphasise that at the time the 'diplomatic revolution' which dragged France into the Seven Years' War made sense in the geo-political context of Europe, it is clear that most contemporaries judged the 1763 Treaty of Paris as "massively humiliating for the institution of monarchy"⁵.

France's involvement in the Revolt of the Thirteen Colonies did start with some success, most prominently the defeat of the British at the siege of Yorktown in 1781. However, naval defeat at Saintes and the failure of the siege of Gibraltar in 1782 meant that the French government received much less in the Treaty of Paris of 1783 than public opinion expected⁶. A further loss in prestige was caused by Russia's seizure of the Crimea from France's supposed ally, The Ottoman Turks, in 1783 while the French monarchy stood idly by. All this, combined the Louis XVI's failure to support the Dutch Republic in 1787 when it was invaded by Prussia, combined to make the Bourbon monarchs appear weak and hence stimulate revolt against them by their subjects. Additionally, victory, or the gaining of prestige, in any of these theatres would

¹ Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture*, p.423

² Riley, *The Seven Years' War and the Old Regime in France: the Economic and Financial Toll*, p.223

³ Riley, *Seven Years' War*, p.224

⁴ Blanning, *Culture of Power*, p.390

⁵ Jones, *The Great Nation: France from Louis XV to Napoleon* (2002)

⁶ Blanning, *Culture of Power*, p.420

have helped, as comte de Segur the contemporary Secretary of State for War at the time of the Dutch crisis points out, divert public opinion away from the monarchy's failings as well as creating more support for the additional taxes needed to prevent the royal government becoming completely bankrupt.

The fiscal situation of the Bourbon monarchs in the second half of the eighteenth century was also far from advantageous. When the Seven Years' War began France was in full economic bloom, however, according to Collins, once full-scale war with Britain broke out in 1756 trade with French colonies dried up; sugar imports dropped by 90% and many workers, particularly in the textile industry, lost their jobs⁷. Though, as has previously been mentioned, Riley has questioned the extent to which the Seven Years' War damaged the French economy, by the 5th year of the war it is clear royal finances were in a disastrous shape. Collins estimates that the Seven Years' War cost 1.5 billion *livres* in total and nearly two thirds of this money came from borrowing. The size of the debt the royal government was then saddled with seriously hampered Louis XV's and Louis XVI's subsequent efforts to rule and was further augmented by the 1.5 billion to 2 billion *livres* Necker borrowed to pay its involvement in the American Civil War⁸. According to Collins the real deficit in 1781 was 50 million *livres*, not a surplus of 10 million *livres* as claimed by Necker. This deficit was compounded by a lack of fiscal soundness in French borrowing practices such as not applying basic (known) life expectancy tables to help calculate interest rates and not using double-entry bookkeeping as the Dutch and British governments had for over 150 years.

In this period the personality of the monarch was still key for maintaining support among both the nobility and the lower classes for the king. In the second half of the eighteenth century both Louis XV and Louis XVI had serious personal failings that significantly contributed to their unpopularity among their subjects. Louis XV was a serial adulterer whose conquests were common knowledge among the Paris populace. The situation was compounded because the King would only touch sufferers for scrofula when he knew himself to be in a state of grace and, therefore, the announcement he was stopping this practice in 1739 advertised to the country that he was an unabsolved sinner⁹. Though Bourbon kings had always taken mistresses they had not done so in the kind of publicity which Louis XV endured and they had also been more discrete. The 1740 installation of marquise de Pompadour who had a strong reputation for intervening in politics, such as the 1755 negotiations with the Austrian Empire, further served to make the monarchy unpopular and highlights Louis XV's inability to play his political cards correctly. That the king allowed his official painter to paint one of mistresses, Louise O'Murphy, in such a revealing position says a great deal about Louis XV's 'insouciant' attitude towards the image he projected¹⁰.

Louis XV also stopped holding court at Versailles in the same way as predecessor Louis XIV had done and, indeed, in 52 only slept 52 nights at Versailles. His excessive timidity, expressed in a fear of the new, reluctance to take decisions, and inability to stick to decisions, led his enemies to label him as ineffectual to rule and only served to detract from his popularity. To charges of impotence and sleaze, therefore, was added the grievance of despotism by Louis XV's

⁷ Collins, *The State in Early Modern France*, p. 225

⁸ Collins, *State in Early Modern France*, p.237

⁹ Blanning, *Culture of Power*, p.388

¹⁰ Blanning, *Culture of Power*, p.389

assertion that as king he embodied the law of the state¹¹. In 1770 for instance, Louis intervened in proceedings against duc d'Aiguillon in what Blanning sees as a “quintessentially despotic move” which gave the impression of putting his executive officers beyond the reach of the law.

Louis XVI was no better and arguably alienated a large amount of support by his marriage to Marie Antionette. She was popularly seen as being both “promiscuously and rampantly bisexual”, as well as a creature of wild extravagance¹². Though the annual cost of the court at 42,000,000 *livres* in 1788 represented only 6.6% of total expenditure, the most detrimental effect was not the actual money spent but the fact it prevented a ‘credible commitment’ on the part of the government that was a prerequisite of an efficient fiscal system. Francois Furet argues that “had he attacked court wastefulness Louis XVI would not have saved his finances, but he might perhaps have salvaged even more – the monarchy itself”. Marie Antionette caused further unpopularity for the French Monarchy because of her close connections with Austria and her very real attempts to influence official policy. One can, therefore, clearly show that the personal conduct of both Louis XV and Louis XVI contributed markedly to the problems they faced with their rebellious subjects, in that it not only made the monarchy less effective at opposing revolt, but also often primarily fuelled rebellion.

The Parlements of France were also key in causing dissension between Bourbon monarchs and their subjects during the period. After 1750 this was primarily because of the forbidding of the sacrament of the last rites to Jansenists which the Parlement of Paris vigorously opposed. In opposing this royal decree the marquis d'Argenson noted that Parlement not simply claimed to be representing the laws of the nation to the king, but also seemed to imply that they, rather than the monarch, now represented the body of the nation. Louis XV vehemently denied this fact and his dismantling of Parlements under Maupeou in 1771 is evidence of his belief that the monarchy, and not Parlements, represented the true law of the nation¹³. Louis XVI, also violently clashed with Parlements, especially after the Parlement of Paris claimed to be the legitimate descendant of the assemblies called by Frankish kings and to form the head of a single national tribunal including the princes peers and members of provincial Parlements. One of the reasons the Parlement of Paris posed such a problem to Louis XV was because of the Jansenists within it, which though small of number exerted quite a large influence on its policy. When Louis XV supported the papacy against Jansenism it alienated much of his latent ‘nationalistic’ support as the monarch was seen to be supporting the jurisdiction of another power, the pope, in France. Jansenism also carried a distinctively conciliarist approach to church government which would easily be applied to royal government and the results of the Louis XV’s quarrel with it ‘bespattered and besmirched a sacral monarchy’¹⁴. The integration of the factional court politics which grew up in Louis XV’s and Louis XVI’s reign into the Parlement of Paris (which held jurisdiction over nearly half of the French kingdom) caused it to be further thorn in both monarchs’ sides up until the French Revolution.

To conclude, the strength of Parlements, due in a large part to the practice of hereditary office-holding, rampant endogamy among the magistrates, and *parlementaires*’ status as legally immovable, meant that they represented a significant cause, and focal point, of

¹¹ Blanning, Culture of Power, p.404

¹² Blanning, Culture of Power, p.410

¹³ J. Swann, Politics and the Parlement of Paris under Louis XV 1754 – 1774, p.28

¹⁴ Van Kley, The Religious Origins of the French Revolution, p.370

rebellion to the monarchy¹⁵. However, other factors were also undoubtedly important such as the foreign policy of the Bourbon monarchs as well as their personal conduct while in office. The growth of a public sphere that openly criticised the monarchy exacerbated the problems caused by this personal conduct because it caused it to be publicised to a much greater extent than it ever had been in France. Arguably, even the achievements made in France's road system at this time also made it harder for the French kings to rule because political events in Paris spread quicker across country, and allowed the Parlement of Paris to coordinate with other Parlements, as well as meaning that rebellion sprang up faster than in previous centuries.

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¹⁵ Swann, *Politics and the Parlement of Paris*, p.4