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SYMBOLS OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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PROFESSOR HARRELD, HISTORY 309

Abstract

During the French Revolution, France as a nation did not exist yet. There were many different ethnic and linguistic groups that had to be united in order to form the France that we know today. To bridge the divide between the different regions of France and the different classes involved in the Revolution, symbols were used to convey certain ideas. The liberty cap, the tricolor flag, Marianne, and other symbols became important in the spread of Revolutionary ideas. Our research aims to show that these symbols served an important role in creating a national identity in France.

Research Summary

Creating a Nation

Music in the French Revolution

Music has always had an important role to play in political and revolutionary movements. Music can come from a great composer and inspire and enlighten or it can come from the common people in the taverns and cheap theaters with the intention of enraging the masses to some violent deed. During the French Revolution music became an important tool because of its “ability to circulate political information and opinions through a society that was only partly literate.” Catchy tunes helped listeners remember instructive or polemical lyrics as they inspired political passions and military fervor. During the French Revolution hymns by great composers or common bar songs were both used in this manner. One of the songs that invoked great emotion for revolutionaries was the Marseillaise. The French hymn La Marseillaise (originally entitled The War Song of the Army of the Rhine) was written by Claude Joseph Rouget de Lisle after he learned that France had declared war with Austria in the spring of 1792 and it became one of the most influential songs of the revolutionary period. The song gained its current name from the revolutionary enthusiastic soldiers of Marseilles who popularized the song on their march into Paris. The song urged the French people to defend the motherland and fight against a foe that would return them to their slavery under a monarchy. It assured them that glory and liberty were on their side and that their fight was a righteous one. La Marseillaise enjoyed unusual lasting popularity and was sung at both official revolutionary events and in the streets and taverns of the time. The hymn would eventually become the national anthem of the new Republic and is the national anthem of France today.

Fasces, Liberty Caps, and the Tricolor in the new Republic

The new Republic of the French Revolution needed symbols that were familiar to the people that signified unity and strength. In the ancient Roman symbol of the fasces they had just that. Already common in French society, having been used by previous Kings, the new Republic continued to use the fasces as a symbol of their strength through unity. In addition to the fasces a strong symbol of the Revolution is the liberty cap. Although not proper to France itself the liberty cap was adopted to denote adherence to the new regime and their solidarity. It became a national symbol of the revolution and even today can be found on the head of national symbol—Marianne. The tricolor red white and blue finds its roots in the combination of the traditional colors of Paris, red and blue, and then white, a traditional color of France. The tricolor is a symbol of the fall of kings and the rise of the republic and unity of France.

The Common Man’s Revolution

This image is of a Savoyard man celebrating the liberation of Savoy, a province in Southeastern France. The purpose of this image is to show that the French Revolution was popular in all parts of France, not just in Paris. It was intended to show that the Revolution was the general will of the people and not just of a few urban revolutionaries. It is apparent that he is a peasant because of his clothing. He is wearing sans-culottes pants, which were a symbol of the lower classes. His rustic shoes also emphasize this. The background shows him in a rural, mountainous region, which emphasizes the fact that he is not Parisian. His support for the Revolution is clear because of the tricolor flag he is holding and the cockade on his hat.

Conclusion

As evidenced by these examples, the symbols of the French Revolution took many forms, ranging from clothing to masterpiece paintings. French history had not yet known nationalistic ideals until the advent of the revolution. In a time when literacy was uncommon among the lower classes, these symbols served as a way to unite a people divided by culture, tradition, and long distances. Not only did these symbols serve to unify otherwise diverse groups of people, they helped educate other members of the lowest classes of society.

Our research has led to the conclusion that besides appealing to the working class’ passion for change in the government, these symbols evolved into an open invitation to all struggling members of society to join their cause. Numerous regions throughout France housed thousands of people who had little inclination to consider themselves “French” because their loyalties did not often extend far beyond their cities. The symbols of the French Revolution greatly aided in the overall construction of a French identity, and the nationalistic feelings borne during this time are still largely evident today in French culture.