1200 UNIT 4:

Revolutions

1750 to 1914 CE

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Unit 4 Overview

In 1750 CE, most people didn't take part in the government of the state in which they lived. For most people, the most important communities were religion, family, or local. With increasing interconnections between societies, however, new ideas emerged about sovereignty—who has the right to govern. These ideas gave birth to many of the concepts of community we have today, such as democracy, human rights, citizenship, and the nation-state. In some places, the mix of ideas and conditions was right for revolution. But there were limits to who could participate in the new political order being created.

0:01

Kim Lochner and Colby Burnett in conversation.

What are you doing Colby?

Well, to prepare for this video I checked out the lessons in this unit and I found this great recipe for revolutions.

I don't think... It's a French dish!

Colby, when they say "ingredients for revolution", I think they mean the causes of revolution, like how new ideas about sovereignty and individual freedoms combined with economic crises...

Yep sounds great Kim. Now, but I can't find my guillotine. How am I supposed to chop vegetables?

All right Colby, its time to get cooking on this overview video.

Fine, lettuce... eat cake.

Hi I'm Kim Lochner. And I'm Chef Colby Burnett. We're here to introduce Unit 4: Revolutions 1750 to 1914.

0:59

Modern day photographs of protests and cities around the world

We live in a world of nation-states. Of countries where the people largely share both a political status and a government. But for most of our ancestors who lived before the long 19th century, the period from 1750 to 1914, it wasn't like that at all.

Today, citizens expect to have their right to participate politically in a state that represents and governs their national community. This is the very definition of a nation-state. In this unit, we'll use the communities frame to explore how these new ideas developed. As we look around the world today, we see that most everyone is a citizen of a nation-state. We're Americans or Russians or Paraguayans or Nigerians, both by law and in terms of the identities we claim. Many of the rights we have are civil rights guaranteed mostly by our governments whether through a constitution, or laws, or just practice. Then there are what we call human rights: rights we believe everyone deserves no matter their government.

2:11

Image of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

All of these ideas are tied together by sovereignty, which means the right to govern. In our modern world the nation-state has political sovereignty: the right to govern a country. But, we also believe that individuals have personal sovereignty, that is, the right to govern their own bodies and minds. These ideas are expressed most often through democracy: the system of government in which all or many people participate in governing their state or electing people to represent them.

2:50

Artworks depict religious gatherings in 1750; a montage of artworks show different scenes from around the world.

We tend to think of all these things—sovereignty, nation-states, citizenship, democracy, and rights—as natural and perpetual like they've always been there. But looking at 1750 through the communities frame, we see that these concepts hardly existed. During the periods we've studied so far, the world was not made up of nation-states. Empires, yes. Kingdoms, sultanates, chieftaincies, and principalities, check. But not a lot of democracies, republics, or, you know, voting. The right to govern was generally given to just one individual or a royal family. . People were subjects without rights except what their rulers granted. But beginning soon after 1750, many people's views about the right to govern and the rights of the governed started changing.

3:40

Montage of paintings that show great trading ships on the sea; other artworks show political gatherings taking place

A diagram of a ship that would carry enslaved African people to Europe and the Americas.

The expansion of trade routes also moved ideas around the world and led to the development of new outlooks. In a few regions, mainly in some European, American, and African communities around the Atlantic Ocean, these ideas found just the right conditions to ripen into political revolutions. Those revolutions gave birth to the nation-state and modern ideas about citizenship and rights as well as the division between religion and the state which we call secularization.

Of course, these changes had their limits and they didn't take hold everywhere. In many cases, the new kinds of governments and new ideas about individual sovereignty did not extend to everyone. Nevertheless, they marked a giant transformation in the way the world worked.

4:29

In this unit we'll ask, "Why did the long 19th century witness so many revolutions?", "How did people transform the political systems under which they lived?", "Were these changes felt equally around the world and within communities?", "What were the limits of these transformations?"

A map shows the locations of major revolutionary cities, then zooming in to Saint-Louis Senegal.

To answer these questions, we must look at the long 19th century from several perspectives. The great revolutionary cities of the age such as Port-au-Prince, Paris, and Philadelphia certainly matter, but there are also some less obvious locations around the world that participated in this age of revolutions in different ways. One was the port town of Saint-Louis, Senegal in West Africa. Often ignored by world histories of this period, this city was connected to both the African interior and the Atlantic world.

5:29

Drawings depict Saint-Louis and its people

As a colony of the empire, the city of Saint-Louis was legally governed by France. Many of the leading citizens of Saint-Louis were merchants and they spoke both French and local languages. These merchants thought of themselves as French subjects as they traded between the African interior and France. But they increasingly had to compete for business and profits with a French company that got special privileges from the king.

Painted depictions of the French Revolution, including battle scenes.

When the French Revolution broke out in 1789, these solemnly merchants quickly embraced the language of rights and the nation of citizens that was a hallmark of revolutionary France. Now France, which had colonized Senegal over 100 years earlier, was thousands of miles north but connected to Saint-Louis by trade, migration, and empire.

6:19

Paintings show African merchants in front of a large building, and a meeting of African and French revolutionaries.

These French-speaking African merchants saw themselves as natural allies of the revolutionaries seeking to overthrow the king. And the merchants hoped that they could overthrow the French company they competed with as well. They also hoped to govern themselves through an elected mayor and to be represented in the new national assembly: the first attempt at democracy in France. They quickly wrote to the French revolutionaries calling them brothers. Despite differences in skin color, they wrote, we are all French and no people show more patriotism and courage than we do. But despite this spirit and claim to citizenship there were limits to the French political revolution. The merchants of Saint-Louis were not invited to join the national assembly and it was not until 1916, more than 120 years later, when they finally got representation in the French government.

7:14

Photos of Senegalese citizens, many years ago, and more recently.

Soon after, West Africans embarked on a 40-year struggle for independence from the French Empire. In 1959, 170 years after the French Revolution, the people of Saint-Louis would become citizens of their own, independent West African country of Senegal.

The story of Saint-Louis stretches across the long history of how nation-states and democracy spread. So it's a great example of how the modern world was made.

A photograph of Gandhi walking alongside fellow revolutionaries; a chart shows the number of democracies increasing overall between 1900-2018.

This spread was not inevitable. It was the result of 250 years of revolutionary work by people around the world. We can see their success in this chart. It shows time since 1800 across the x-axis and measures the number of democratic states on the y-axis. As we can see, more and more democratic countries have been created over time, gradually in the 19th century then more rapidly in the late 20th century. There have been times, like the late 1930s, when the number of democracies diminished as some countries went back to rule by an individual or a few people. But overall, the trend has been towards democracy.

8:32

A chart shows the number of people living under different political regimes in various regions

This chart displays something similar. It shows that the number and percentage of people living under democracies has grown substantially over time, from less than half a billion in 1816 to almost 4 billion today. But, this conclusion may obscure the fact that not everyone who struggled for democracy and the rights of citizenship had succeeded. Like the inhabitants of Saint-Louis Senegal, people in many parts of the world tried to gain political rights during this era only to be denied. Indeed, as this chart shows in red, many people still do not live in states considered democracies. We have no proof that the trend to democracy is continuing or will continue in the future.

9:23

Although it was gradual and uneven, the political transformation of the long 19th century revolutionized how we think of ourselves and our rights. And it was an important element in creating our world of today. That doesn't mean that the nation-state or citizenship or even democracy is the last transformation in the communities frame that we'll see. There are probably a lot of political innovation still to come, but the liberal and national revolutions of the long 19th century definitely played an important role in creating the modern world. We can't understand our world or orient ourselves to it unless we know where those revolutions came from and what their legacy is to us.

Those revolutionaries were amazing they changed colonies into countries.

I don't even have the energy to change my internet provider. I can't even bother to change my socks.

Oh, I can tell and I'm in another hemisphere. I'm just kidding, don't chuck a wobbly. (music playing)