



Unit 4: Revolutions 1750 to 1914

By Trevor Getz

Many major changes occurred between 1750 and 1914. These changes led to the world we know today.

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The period from 1750 to 1914 is known as the *long nineteenth century*. This period saw revolutions in politics and economics. The word *revolution* makes us think of rebellion. That is often part of it. But revolution really just means change on a very large scale.

In this unit, we will study the development of new political ideas. These ideas helped to create political revolutions. In turn, those revolutions led to new states. These states were unlike earlier states. They practiced democracy more than any large countries ever had. Democracy is the rule of a nation by the people.

Political change in the long nineteenth century

Before 1750, governments almost everywhere in the world were pretty similar. A small group of people made decisions for everyone else. Often, these people ruled by right of birth. Nobles, kings, and emperors never applied for the job. They inherited it from their parents. They made decisions and wrote laws that suited them. Most people had no real political rights.

After 1750, things began to change. New ideas emerged. These were called liberal political ideas. They were focused on a demand for *liberty*. This is the belief that people should have the freedom to govern themselves.

Ingredients for revolution

Why did this change happen? There are several reasons. One of the major reasons is the economic change that took place during these years. This period saw new economic opportunities arise for some people. But for others, economic transformation meant more suffering. Those experiences were key causes of the era's political revolutions.

In the years before 1750, new ideas had been traveling around the world. There were calls for greater personal and group rights. Many people found these new ideas appealing. Those who were oppressed were drawn to them. They offered a chance of liberation. This was true for enslaved people in the Americas. It was also true for peasants in Europe. At the same time, wealthy people were also drawn to the new ways of thinking. They saw revolutions as a chance to take power from the kings and nobles.

Revolutions helped various groups of people get a share of power in government for the first time. But they did not quickly end the rule of the few. Many people still lacked basic political rights.



The splendor of Aurangzeb, Emperor of the Mughal Empire. Eighteenth-century rulers, whether Aurangzeb or his counterparts in Europe or elsewhere, ruled because of their own authority, not the will of their people. © Getty.

Revolutions, beginning in the Atlantic

In the second part of this unit, we will look at four major political revolutions of this era: the Haitian, French, American, and Latin American revolutions. Each of these was unique. But they were also connected. They shared many of the same ideas and goals. They were also linked together through a network of revolutionaries.

We will follow the path of each one of these revolutions. We will examine how they influenced each other. Finally, we will consider what limited them. Who got to take part in the new politics? Who was left out?



Toussaint Louverture, one of the leaders of the Haitian Revolution. A liberated Black man himself, he fought a war both to abolish slavery and to provide new opportunities for free Blacks in Haiti. © Getty.

Nationalism

In the third lesson, we will explore one of the main ideas of the period: nationalism. Nationalism is the idea that a nation should have a state¹ of its own. It is tied to another important idea: *sovereignty*. This means self-rule. Nationalism played a key role in the creation of new countries. This was true for Haiti, France, and the United States. It was true for many new countries in Latin America, too.

¹ *State* can be a confusing word. Here it means a country, though it can also mean a province or territory within a country. The United States of America is one state in this sense, but it contains 50 territories that are called *states* in the other sense of the word. In this course, we only use the word state to mean a country with laws, borders, and self-government.

But nationalism didn't end with these revolutions. There were nationalists around the world. They all fought to create new countries. Nationalists built the nations of Italy and Germany. They created these new countries by uniting dozens of smaller states.



A scene from the Taiping Revolution. © Getty.

Conclusions

Liberal political ideas continue to affect our world today. So does nationalism. The laws that govern most countries were shaped by these forces. Those laws created new opportunities. They offered the promise of equality and liberty for all. But they also fell short of that promise for many people.

The long nineteenth century brought many changes. These changes helped create the world we live in today. But it would be a mistake to think this is the end of change. Could other political revolutions happen in the future? Could they be happening now?

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Toussaint Louverture, one of the leaders of the Haitian Revolution. A liberated Black man himself, he fought a war both to abolish slavery and to provide new opportunities for free Blacks in Haiti. © Fine Art Images / Heritage Images / Getty Images.

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