



The Atlantic Revolutions

By Malcolm F. Purinton

Revolutions can be contagious. In five short decades from 1775 to 1825, several revolutions in the Americas and Europe brought down the colonial system and European monarchies that had been profiting from it.

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An Era of Revolutions

Between 1775 and 1825, revolutions broke out across the Americas and Europe. Within 50 years, European empires in the Americas shrank. Nations throughout the Atlantic became independent. Revolutionaries were inspired by the ideals of the Enlightenment, such as individual freedom. They rejected the authority of the aristocracy, or the traditional ruling class. Revolutions during this era included the American War of Independence, the French Revolution, the Haitian Revolution, and the many revolutions of Latin America. These revolutions were connected by a network of ideas, trade, and global events. While each revolution was unique, they were all influenced by global political conditions and by each other.

For much of the eighteenth century, European empires fought each other all over the world. The British Empire won the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), but the war effort left the empire in debt. France was defeated and left in even more debt. The debt from this huge war led the American colonists and French citizens to revolt. To pay off their loans, Britain and France raised taxes on their colonial subjects, who had little say in the matter.

At that point, the American colonists had gotten comfortable being more or less in charge of themselves. When the British Empire started raising their taxes, many began to openly challenge British authority.



[A badly damaged British ship after a battle near Havana, Cuba.](#) This kinda thing isn't cheap. By Rafael Monleón Torres, Public domain.

The American Revolution

Beginning with the Stamp Act of 1765, Great Britain issued a number of new taxes in the American colonies. These taxes led the American colonists to protest and riot. After a tax was put on tea in 1773, several men from Boston dressed up as Indigenous Americans and threw tea from British ships into the Boston harbor. In response, the British announced the Coercive Acts in 1774, also known as the Intolerable Acts. These new laws closed Boston's harbor, restricted local elections, and expanded the power of the royal governor. In April 1775, fighting broke out between British and American troops in Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts.

During the Second Continental Congress in 1776, the representatives of the colonies adopted the Declaration of Independence on July 4. This document declared the sovereignty of the American states and listed the natural rights of mankind. In 1777, French volunteers began arriving in North America in support of the revolution. In 1778, the French government officially allied itself with the revolutionaries against the British. The Americans soon got the support of other countries, including the Spanish and Dutch, who declared war on Great Britain in 1779 and 1780. Eventually, the international pressure and costs of war became too much for the English. They finally recognized the independence of the 13 North American colonies in the 1783 Treaty of Paris. A new nation was formed and the United States was structured as a representative democracy.

American revolutionaries rejected the authority of the king, in part, based on the idea that all people were equal. Even after the revolution, though, deep inequalities remained. For example, the new government continued to allow and profit from slavery.



A painting depicting Bostonians tar and feathering a tax-collector while the Boston Tea Party takes place in the background. By John Carter Brown Library, public domain.

The French Revolution

When French soldiers came home from the Seven Years' War, they returned to a country whose royal government was almost completely out of money. King Louis XVI was determined to raise taxes, so in 1788 he called a representative body known as the Estates General. It was the first time such a meeting had been called since 1614.

The French people were divided into three "estates." The First Estate was the clergy, or members of the Catholic church. The Second Estate was the nobility, the traditional ruling class that controlled the country's wealth. The Third Estate was everyone else. The first two estates enjoyed many special privileges, while the Third Estate paid all the taxes and had no say in government or lawmaking. When the king called the Estates General, the Third Estate suddenly had a voice.

In May of 1789, the opening session of the Estates General was deadlocked. Though the Third Estate represented more people and had twice the number of delegates, each estate had an equal vote. In June, the Third Estate met alone and declared itself the National Assembly. In response, King Louis XVI sent an army towards Paris. On July 14th, Parisians responded by storming the royal prison, called the Bastille. There, they freed a handful of prisoners, seized weapons to defend the city, and cut off the heads of two officials. The king backed down, but the country was now in revolt. Revolution spread from the cities to the countryside. By the end of the summer of 1789, all the privileges of the nobility and the church had been taken away. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, passed by the National Assembly, declared that all citizens had individual rights and were equal before the law. Within the next two years, a new constitution was written, establishing France as a representative democracy.

The French empire strikes back

As the French Revolution spread, it became more radical in its vision for a just society and it also turned violent, as peasants attacked castles and burned debt records. The new government seized and sold church lands. In 1793, King Louis XVI and Queen Marie Antionette were executed, and the French Republic was declared. Understandably, the other European monarchs were pretty shocked.

The first French Republic was a dramatically more equal society. The National Assembly stripped the nobility of their titles, abolished slavery and ended feudalism, the economic system in which peasants had to work on land they could never own.

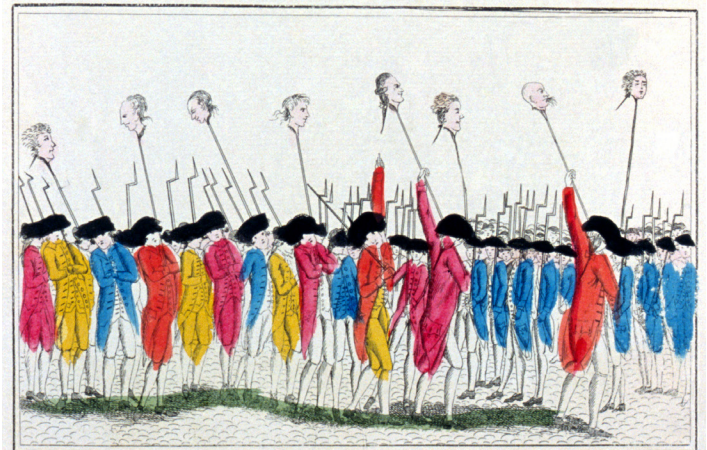
The republic was short-lived, however. A powerful and popular general named Napoleon Bonaparte soon rose to power and declared himself emperor in 1799.

While Napoleon ended the first republic, his empire spread many of the ideas that had sparked the French Revolution. Everywhere his armies went, they ended feudalism and promoted equal rights and religious tolerance. As a result, many government administrations became modernized. But as liberating as that sounds, Napoleon enforced French values and authority with an iron fist.



PRISE DE LA BASTILLE

*Par les Citoyens de Paris ayant à leurs têtes M^{rs} les Gardes Françaises, le 14 Juillet 1789
Cette Forteresse fut commencée en 1369 sous le règne de Charles V. Hugues Aubriot Prevot de Paris en posa la 1^{re} Pierre: elle ne fut entièrement achevée qu'en 1382. Il étoit natif de Dijon. Il y fut un des premiers réformés sous proteste d'hérésie. Il fut dévoré par les Parisiens pendant les troubles qui agitoient la Capitale, et se sauva dans sa patrie.*



C'est ainsi que l'on Punit les Traîtres.

[The storming of the Bastille](#), royal prison in Paris to seize weapons and free political prisoners on July 14, 1789. From the Library of Congress, public domain.

A revolt leads to a new nation

Across the Atlantic Ocean, in modern-day Haiti, France continued to rule over a colony called Saint Domingue. People there watched the French Revolution very closely.

Saint Domingue was the richest plantation colony in the world. It had around 8,000 plantations that produced 40 percent of the world's sugar and about half of its coffee. Enslaved laborers made up 90 percent of the population and performed the back-breaking work on these plantations. There were around 500,000 enslaved people in Saint Domingue, along with around 30,000 free people of color and 40,000 whites. The social structure of the colony was complex and unstable, with great division and tension. In 1791, a revolt broke out that became the most radical revolution of the era.

The Haitian Revolution (1791-1808) was a social revolution for human rights and racial equality. In 1791, enslaved people revolted. This forced the French National Assembly to abolish slavery in 1794. When it ultimately succeeded, Haiti became the second independent republic in the Americas. It was the first independent nation-state ruled by people of African descent.

Toussaint Louverture emerged as the leader of the revolution. He overcame internal resistance in the colony and outmaneuvered foreign powers like the Spanish and British. He was a brilliant general who stopped Napoleon's attempt to regain French control over the colony.

The nation of Haiti formally declared its independence on January 1, 1804. It rejected European racial categories, which placed whites above other groups, and defined all Haitians as "black." The plantation system was taken apart, and Haiti became a nation of farmers who grew their own food on their own land.



Napoleon's army fighting the Russians during the Napoleonic Wars.
By Viktor Mazurovsky, public domain.



The colony of Saint Domingue on the western half of the island of Hispaniola that would soon become the nation of Haiti. By Aldan-2, CC BY-SA 4.0.

The Latin American revolutions

The Creoles led the revolutions at first. The Creoles were native-born descendants of Spanish and Portuguese settlers. The first revolutions in Latin America were sparked by events in Europe. In 1808, Napoleon invaded and conquered Spain and Portugal, the two colonial powers that controlled Latin America. Suddenly, the Latin American colonies found themselves without a direct European power telling them what to do. This triggered revolts throughout the colonies, led first by the Creole population. The Creoles were native-born descendants of Spanish and Portuguese settlers.

In 1810, peasants in Mexico revolted because they wanted their own land and food prices were too high. Two priests, Miguel Hidalgo and José Morelos, led the uprising. It was eventually put down, however, by wealthy Creole landowners. They were alarmed by the peasant revolt, worrying that it would end like the French and Haitian revolutions and take away their power as a ruling class. So they formed an alliance with anti-revolutionary priests. In 1821, they negotiated Mexico's independence from Spain while maintaining their privileged position in society.

In other parts of Latin America, several revolutionary movements were gaining strength. In the northern regions, general Simón Bolívar successfully claimed large amounts of land from Spanish forces. In 1819, he created a new nation called "Gran Colombia" modeled after the United States, though it only lasted until 1830. It included the territories of present-day Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, and Venezuela. Bolívar had the support of the young nation of Haiti. Haiti even sent soldiers and weapons to help him fight the Spanish.

Meanwhile, another revolutionary general named José de San Martín led a revolt against the Spanish in southern Latin America, freeing the future nations of Argentina, Chile, and Peru. Although Bolívar and San Martín liberated huge parts of the region, neither revolution created a long-lasting constitutional republic. Instead, South America was taken over by rulers who valued power over democratic ideals. They ruled on the basis of democratic politics, family networks, and military strength.

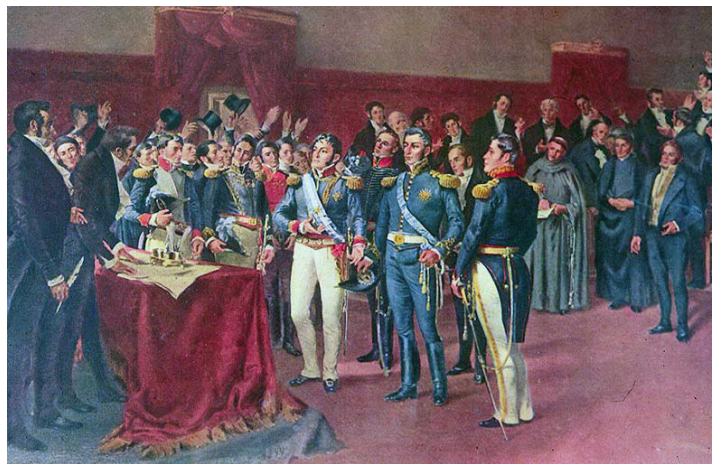
An era of revolutions

Though each of these revolutions had its own origins, important figures, and results, they were all tied together by three things. First, they were inspired by the moral and political ideas of the Enlightenment. Second, each revolution rejected systems in which people were ruled over without having political representation. Finally, they were all connected by a network of global events, economic ties, and political structures.

The era of revolutions dramatically transformed the world. Colonial powers shrank and new nations were formed. They went on to create radically new kinds of governments and societies.



[Haitian revolutionaries fighting for independence in 1802.](#) By [Auguste Raffet](#), public domain.



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