

# Revolutions, 1789–1917

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The cover painting, by Jacques-Louis David, shows the French revolutionary  
leader, Jean-Paul Marat, dying in his bath after being stabbed by Charlotte  
Corday, a Girondin supporter, on 13 July 1793.

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# 1

## What is revolution?

### Introduction

The period 1789–1917 saw four great upheavals which, either directly or indirectly, had a huge impact on the lives of millions of people. Since then, in virtually every decade and continent, the twentieth century has experienced an almost continuous cycle of revolutionary advances and counter-revolutionary setbacks. These events have generated admiration and support, or horror and opposition, depending on the aims of the revolutionaries and the beliefs of the audiences.

However, precisely because revolutions are such ‘exciting times’, the actual term ‘revolution’ is almost impossible to define in a way that would be acceptable to everyone. The very terms ‘revolution’ and ‘revolutionary’ are ones of pride or of abuse, depending on people’s different political perspectives.

It is this fear and hatred of revolution that sometimes leads countries to deny much, or all, of their own revolutionary pasts. Yet, in addition to the countries to be examined in this book, there are very few states today which are not the product of revolutionary upheavals. Even Britain and the United States of America – the latter probably the most anti-revolutionary state in existence – had their own, earlier, revolutions: in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, respectively.

Even more confusing is the fact that the word is often used to describe *any* change in a whole range of areas: a fashion revolution, the communications revolution, or a technological revolution, for instance. Consequently, it is often easier to arrive at an understanding of revolution in a negative way, by establishing what it is not.

### What a revolution is not

Not all political change and upheaval is a revolution: in fact, the majority of political struggles occurring throughout history have not been revolutions. The most common non-revolutionary forms are listed below.

- *Coup d’état / Putsch*. This is essentially the seizure of power by a relatively small group of people, often involving sections of the military. In the main, the aim of such events is to replace one group of rulers with another – the fundamental social and economic features of society are left intact.

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- *Civil war*. Similar to a coup, this often starts as a political struggle for power between different groups of people who want to rule. The struggles become so intense that they spill over into the bitter violence of civil war. In the past, such disputes were common amongst royal families and those related to them; nowadays, they are frequently linked to religious or ethnic differences. But, as with coups, the leaders' main aims are usually to change a set of political rulers in order to secure power and privileges for themselves.
- *Revolt/Rebellion*. Though these can be large-scale and violent, they are not normally revolutionary. At the most, they are massive social upheavals which aim to secure a few specific reforms to improve situations which have become unacceptable. Most frequently, however, they are mass protests, organised in opposition to a particular government and some of its laws. Very often, the rebels claim to be attempting to force a return to a time when life was better; this is a feature particularly associated with the numerous peasant revolts which have erupted throughout history.

Though these political phenomena are not revolutions, each one of them can help precipitate a revolution. Coups and civil wars sometimes generate political weaknesses, and thus create opportunities for revolutionaries, while a large-scale revolt, if prolonged enough, can begin to generate increasingly radical demands and actions.

## Revolution

Essentially, a revolution is when people attempt to completely transform the social, economic, political and ideological features of their society. Unlike reform or revolt, it is no longer a question of simply passing or repealing some specific laws in order to make an improvement or right a wrong. Revolution happens when enough people come to see the status quo as essentially rotten and unreformable, so that the only remedy is to sweep it all away, and to put something totally new in its place.

Contrary to popular understanding, revolution – as opposed to revolt – tends to occur when situations are beginning to improve, rather than when poverty and oppression are becoming ever more severe. This is precisely why revolutionaries are the most determined fighters for reforms – much more so than reformists, whose objectives do not go beyond achieving those reforms. This is because revolutionaries realise that poor or deteriorating conditions produce demoralisation and apathy amongst the masses. Not only does this undermine the chances of revolutionary mass actions, it even prepares the way for reaction and counter-revolution, by further weakening the mass movement. If poverty and oppression were sufficient recipes for revolution, then the whole of human history would be one of almost continuous revolution.

This desire for a new society, for fundamental change and transformation, *and* the belief that these things are now possible, help explain why revolution is a phenomenon especially associated with the young. Hope and idealism tend to be more a feature of youth than of age, so it is not surprising that young people –

especially those who continue their education – are attracted to revolutionary movements in large numbers, and are often the most ready to risk their lives. This is partly a reflection of the fact that, traditionally, societies tend to ignore and exclude young people. While conventional politicians tend to be middle-aged, or older, revolutions frequently produce young leaders who, a few years before, were virtually unknown.

For the same reasons, other marginalised sections of society – women and the poor – also tend to come to the fore in revolutionary periods. The more prolonged and deep-going the revolution, the more such groups begin to take independent action, in addition to giving their support to more general initiatives. This is why total revolution has been described as a ‘festival of the oppressed’: the belief that positive change is both possible and imminent is a truly intoxicating and revolutionary thought. This is one reason why counter-revolution is often so bloody – it is not just a question of prevention, revenge and punishment, but also a determination to crush the possibility of such hope for decades to come.

However, in addition to the belief in the possibility of transforming society, revolution is also linked to evolution. No revolution is a one-moment event that comes totally unexpectedly, and with no links to the preceding decades. For there to be hope that change is possible, there have to be *economic* and *social* developments that can provide a basis for such hope. Prior to successful revolutions, the old societies will have seen the appearance of new technologies, social groups and ideological developments which increasingly call into question traditional economic structures, political institutions and ways of thinking. These developments result in ever-sharper contradictions in the economic, social and political structures of existing society. In fact, without such developments, attempts at revolution will be premature and doomed to failure – either immediately or at some point in the future. For instance, many would cite the Russian Revolution of 1917, and the final collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, as just such a case.

## **Types of revolution**

Revolutions have various features in common. In addition to those mentioned in the previous section, *all* revolutions (as opposed to most coups, for instance) involve mass mobilisations, sometimes led by revolutionary leaders and parties, and sometimes erupting independently of the conscious wishes and intentions of such leaders and parties. While a coup, organised by a few individuals, can seize political control, revolutionaries – no matter how pure and determined – cannot transform a society without the active support and involvement of huge sections of the population.

All revolutions almost always involve a certain amount of violence. This varies according to the relative strength and determination of revolutionaries and dominant groups alike. In fact, most people’s image of revolution is no doubt one of crowd violence and organised terror – most likely coloured by stories of the

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guillotine and Jacobin terror during the 1792–94 upheavals of the French Revolution, or by the operations of the Bolsheviks' Cheka during the civil war between Reds and Whites from 1918 to 1920. Yet, generally, it is counter-revolution rather than revolution which is more violent.

In part, the amount of mass mobilisation and violence will depend on exactly what kind of revolution is taking place. The two main types are political revolutions and social revolutions.

### **Political revolutions**

These occur mainly when new economic and social developments have already begun to transform society, but where existing political rulers and institutions are tending to hold back further changes. The belief behind such political revolutions is that once changes in political personnel and structures have been achieved, the economic and social transformations can continue at a quicker pace, and even be assisted to their final conclusion.

The significant feature of political revolutions is that there is no intention to bring about a major transference of wealth and property from one social group to another. Very often, in fact, those pushing most strongly for a political revolution already have significant economic power – all they desire is the removal of restrictions and the provision of assistance that will enable their wealth to increase. As a consequence, political revolutions tend to be relatively bloodless. In their beginnings at least, it is possible to argue that the French Revolution of 1789 and the 1848 revolutions were both essentially political revolutions.

### **Social revolutions**

These are much more fundamental and deep-going upheavals than political revolutions in that they are attempts, above all, to transfer economic assets and power, and social and political status and privileges, from one social group to another. Consequently, social revolutions tend to be much more violent than political revolutions – especially as the dominant economic and social elites have so much more at stake. The Paris Commune of 1871 and the Russian Revolution of 1917 can both be seen as examples of social revolutions.

What begins as a political revolution can develop – sometimes only briefly – into a social revolution. When it does, it nearly always results in violent conflict between different revolutionary groups. This happened in both the French Revolution of 1789 and in the 1848 revolutions.

Social revolutions tend to happen when a particular economic and social system is seen as having stagnated, or as being incapable of any further progressive development. In such situations, revolutionaries argue that only a fundamentally new type of social system will enable humanity to progress. In fact, they often argue that failure to effect such a revolution runs the risk of a regression to barbarism.

## Revolutionary stages

Many revolutions, if they last long enough, seem to pass through at least three distinct phases.

### First stage

In the early stages, revolutions usually go in the directions desired by those revolutionaries who have been most active in pressing for changes in the preceding years. In the main, crowds tend to take action in support of the demands of such revolutionaries.

### Second stage

If unrest continues despite early revolutionary gains, a second – more radical – stage begins to unfold. Crowds tend to press for changes more specifically in their own interests, and they become increasingly independent in their demands. At the same time, new revolutionary leaders and groups begin to emerge, who demand that the revolutionary process be widened and deepened. Very often, the early leaders of the revolution now come to be seen as too conservative, and are replaced by more radical ones. Sometimes, these changes of leadership are effected by revolutionary purges and terror – especially if a violent counter-revolution is threatened or is already in progress.

At times, the original direction of the revolution can be deflected into areas never desired by the revolutionaries who helped spark off the original revolution. Such aspects can be seen in the French Revolution between 1792 and 1794, the later stages of the 1848 revolutions, and the Russian Revolution from March 1917 to July 1918.

### Third stage

A third stage frequently develops after the more radical second stage: here, the fact that revolutionaries remain in power means they have to deal with the practicalities of government. At the same time, the revolutionary energy and idealism which helped fuel both the early and the more radical phases begin to dissipate – as it is not possible to maintain such heightened levels of enthusiasm and activity indefinitely.

In such circumstances, more administratively-minded leaders come to the fore to consolidate the revolution. In this phase, the more radical aspects are sometimes rolled back, and the revolution reverts to its original aims. (It is possible to see the post-Thermidorian developments in France after 1794 as just such a third stage; see pp. 102–3.) Sometimes, leaders in this more conservative phase can begin unwittingly to undermine even the more moderate gains of the revolution, in part by stifling mass involvement and initiative, and so engendering apathy and alienation. Trotsky and his supporters, for instance, began to argue as early as 1933 that a new political revolution against the Stalinist bureaucracy was needed in the Soviet Union, in order to safeguard against the possibility of the restoration of capitalism.