

The historical context

The revolutions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries should be taught as one unit because the political influences of the Enlightenment appear in all of them and because they significantly influenced one another. Moreover, new ideas of liberty and popular sovereignty began to spread around the world in the context of the emerging global economy.

Britain's Thirteen Colonies

After the Seven Years' War (1756-1763) ended, Great Britain and France were both motivated to make their empires self-paying enterprises. Although in both countries there were calls for fiscal reforms at home, the impetus to revolution in the British colonies of North America can be seen in the increasing number of taxes, best exemplified by the Stamp Act. The Third Estate in France, that is, the great majority of the population that did not have the status of aristocrats or high Roman Catholic clergy, also felt the crunch of increasing taxes and dues. This oppression propelled them to seek greater representation in government. The free inhabitants of the French colony of Saint Domingue (later, Haiti) also sought a more equitable balance between taxes and representation, as did the creoles, that is, people of Spanish heritage born in the Americas, in Spain's empire.

By 1770, North American colonists resented the British government's new financial program as expressed in the Stamp Act and the Tea Act, so they rebelled using both nonviolent and violent ways. They were unsuccessful in their attempt to win their own representative institutions. Their physical attacks on the crown's officials, whom they tarred and feathered and whose houses they burned, gained more attention. The organized armed rebellion gained momentum after the dumping of the British East India Company's tea in Boston harbor. The Declaration of Independence in 1776 clarified the grievances of the colonists, who won their eight-year war partially through their guerilla tactics, French support, and help from some Native Americans. In 1789, the first written constitution was ratified by the individual states, unifying them into a single federal state and giving a new model of a political structure with a balance of power among three branches of government. The constitution also included a Bill of Rights based on British and Enlightenment ideas for protection of citizens' rights. These ideas spread to other parts of the Atlantic world. In the new United States of America, however, citizenship was by definition limited to males of European origin and some other men of property. Women, Native Americans, people from other parts of the world, and slaves received limited, if any, rights to participate in government.

France

In France, popular discontent broke out in revolution in 1789, leading to the creation of a government that gave rights to a minority of the citizens. The violent and nonviolent protests against King Louis XVI's tax program mirrored the grievances of the North American colonists. The majority of the French population, labeled the Third Estate, refused to accept the heavy burden of increased taxes and insisted on creating a constitution to regulate the government, including the king. The elite comprising the First and Second Estates—that is, the aristocracy and the high clergy—strongly resisted the changes and encouraged monarchs of neighboring countries to help them fight against the new constitutional monarchy. The French Declaration of the Rights of Man issued in 1791 and the constitution for the new French Republic, established after the king was executed for treason, were inspired by the documents of the American revolution. Some of the key figures of the American experiment, including Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, were in France at that time.

Once Napoleon Bonaparte took over France in 1799 as head of the French military, the European wars that had started during the revolution, expanded more. Napoleon insisted that his new law code, giving suffrage and political rights to men of all economic groups across Europe, be implemented in the territories he conquered. The revolutionary model for political change continued to enlarge, but the extension of rights to all residents of the Atlantic world did not keep pace. Napoleon, like his North American counterparts, valued the profits derived from slave labor, especially in the sugar-producing plantations on Saint Domingue. He sought to roll back the changes the French revolution wrought in the Caribbean.

Haiti

Although the inhabitants of the French colony of Saint Domingue desired full rights as citizens of the French empire, the new French government did not clearly offer them those rights in the early years of the revolution. Slaves were at first denied any rights, but free blacks who were property owners sought and

eventually were granted equality. The leaders of the French Republic had mixed ideas, and Napoleon decided that Saint Domingue was an essential economic tool for further imperial expansion. Under the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture and others of African heritage, an armed rebellion succeeded in freeing the colony from French control and led to the creation of Haiti, the second independent republic in the Americas. Most of the white colonists moved their assets to North America or British-controlled islands so they could continue their slave-enhanced lifestyle. The British and Spanish governments attempted to gain control of the island during the confusion of war but also at times helped the rebellion, which was carried out mostly by newly-freed slaves.

Latin America

In the Spanish colonies of Latin America, the tensions between the elite and the masses reflected issues similar to those of other Atlantic revolutions. Talk among the elite born in the Americas mirrored the concerns over the economic exploitation and the political indifference of the Spanish government. Latin American revolutionary leaders traveled throughout the Atlantic world, gaining insights into Enlightenment ideas and military strategies. One of them, Simón Bolívar, learned directly from the revolutionaries in North America, France, and Haiti. The Haitians also gave his cause financial support, an ironic twist given Bolívar's belief that only creoles should have political power in the new republics created in South America. Despite disagreements over the territorial boundaries of the new republics, most of Latin America was independent by the 1830s.

What continues to surprise historians is the rapid shift from calls for reform to violent revolution in the Atlantic world. The creation of republics using violence to separate themselves from their monarchs was very different from earlier acts of protest. New social, political, and economic structures were created that continue to exist today. Big Era Eight was indeed the beginning of what we know as the modern world.

Lesson 1

Student Handout 1.1—Problems and Issues in the Atlantic World

The main issue for those who led the revolutions in the Atlantic world of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was unreasonable exploitation of economic resources of less powerful people by more powerful people. While the governments of both Great Britain and France may have needed more money to finance their military operations, the people who were asked to pay resented the new taxes or new labor obligations. The cause of the British and French government's indebtedness was in part the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), which was fought between France and Great Britain over land in North America, the Caribbean, West Africa, and the Indian subcontinent. In its global scope, the Seven Years' War is considered the first world war, and it is fitting that one consequence was the common dissatisfaction with the way the British and French governments then chose to pay off their war debts. Specifically, in the British colonies in North America, the problem was the Stamp Act. In France it was the new taxes requested by Louis XVI. The other financial burden that angered the subjects of the European powers was the *exclusif*, a mercantile policy that restricted colonists to trade exclusively with the colonial power.

It is lucky for historians that most of the grievances were put into print. The American colonists published pamphlets and newspaper articles attacking the new taxation policies. The French peasants recorded their complaints in the *cahiers de doléances* (lists of grievances) solicited by the king. The ideas of the **bourgeoisie**, or propertied middle class, appeared in pamphlets, newspapers, and books. The inhabitants on Saint Domingue also had their local newspapers and pamphlets, as well as books from France and the newly founded United States. Finally, the South Americans copied their predecessors by using printing presses, as well as public lectures and coffeehouses.

Many Enlightenment publications influenced the trends of thought. For this lesson you will look at excerpts from just two authors, Locke and Montesquieu. In their books, these philosophers supported the need for liberty when either political or economic pressures by monarchs were too great to bear. Most importantly, the idea of political liberty developed into a belief in freedom as a natural right. The Enlightenment thinkers believed that humans were born with the ability to think and act for themselves, as in Locke's words: "Liberty, it is plain, consists in a power to do, or not to do; to do, or forbear doing, as we will." How then did the transition from grievances to demands for liberty happen?

How did abstract ideas lead to the violent overthrow of **governments**? There are events unique to the birth of each revolution, but to get the broadest view, in all the revolutions we will analyze the influence of the political ideal of liberty. We will see how the revolutionaries understood the freedom to choose their own type of government and how that government might protect the natural rights of life, liberty, and property. Most of the revolutions resulted in republics, where the succeeding governments were selected through elections. In the case of France and Haiti, however, imperial or authoritarian systems subsequently were put into place, giving the executive branches much more power perhaps than intended by the revolutionaries who

overthrew the previous regimes. What will emerge most clearly is that these revolutions led to dramatic new ways in which political change was understood and implemented.



French Revolution Poster

French History Timeline, created by the University of North Carolina at Greensboro,
<http://www.uncg.edu/rom/courses/dafein/civ/timeline.htm>.

Lesson 1

Student Handout 1.2—Excerpts from Locke and Montesquieu

Locke

John Locke was an English philosopher who trained first as a doctor but gained an important post as an advisor to Britain's Lord Chancellor, the Earl of Shaftesbury. From his insider government position, Locke was able to observe in 1688 the bloodless change in power from the reign of James II to the limited monarchy of William and Mary. Locke recorded his ideas in the book *Two Treatises on Government*. It explained how natural law leads to governments' existing to protect natural rights.

Liberty, it is plain, consists in a power to do, or not to do; to do, or forbear doing, as we will.

Source: Brian Tierney, Donald Kagan, and L. Pierce Williams, ed., *Great Issues in Western Civilization*, Vol. 2 (New York: Random House, 1976), 94.

The following is a brief paraphrase of John Locke's ideas on revolution also expressed in his book *Two Treatises on Government* (1689):

All people have the natural rights of life, liberty, and property. The power of government comes from the people and the duty of the government therefore is to protect those natural rights. If the government fails in its duty to protect those rights, then the people have the right to overthrow the government, by force if necessary.

Source: Brian Tierney, Donald Kagan, and L. Pierce Williams, ed., *Great Issues in Western Civilization*, Vol. 2 (New York: Random House, 1976), *passim*.

Montesquieu

A French thinker, Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, published his book *The Spirit of Laws* in 1748 on the various types of governments in the world: republics, monarchies, and dictatorships. He found that special circumstances, such as climate, could affect the form of government in a particular region. Most famously, though, he argued that governmental powers should be separated into executive, legislative, and judicial branches and balanced to guarantee individual rights and freedom.

It is true that, in democracies, the people seem to act as they please; but political liberty does not consist in an unlimited freedom. In governments, that is, in societies directed by laws, liberty can consist only in the power of doing what we ought to will, and in not being constrained to do what we ought not to will.

We must have continually present to our minds the difference between independence and liberty. Liberty is a right of doing whatever the laws permit; and, if a citizen could do what they forbid, he would be no longer possessed of liberty, because all of his fellow citizens would have the same power.

Source: Brian Tierney, Donald Kagan, and L. Pierce Williams, ed., *Great Issues in Western Civilization*, Vol. II (New York: Random House, 1976), 142-3.

Lesson 1

Student Handout 1.3—Stamp Act, British Parliament, 1765

An act for granting and applying certain stamp duties, and other duties, in the British colonies and plantations in America, towards further defraying the expenses of defending, protecting, and securing the same; and for amending such parts of the several acts of parliament relating to the trade and revenues of the said colonies and plantations, and direct the manner of determining and recovering the penalties and forfeitures therein mentioned.

Source: Edmund Morgan, ed., *Prologue to Revolution : Sources and Documents on the Stamp Act Crisis, 1764-1766* (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 35.

Patrick Henry was one of the many colonial voices in North America urging resolutions against the Stamp Act. In a speech to Virginia's Colonial Legislature on March 23, 1775 he argued that:

We have done everything that could be done to avert the storm which is now coming on. We have petitioned; we have remonstrated; we have supplicated; we have prostrated ourselves before the throne, and have implored its interposition to arrest the tyrannical hands of the ministry and Parliament. Our petitions have been slighted; our remonstrances have produced additional violence and insult; our supplications have been disregarded; and we have been spurned, with contempt, from the foot of the throne! ... I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!

Source: Henry, Patrick. "Speech before the Virginia House of Burgesses", in L. Carroll Judson, *The Sages and Heroes of the American Revolution* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1970), 157.

Lesson 1

Student Handout 1.4—“Cahiers de Doléances”

In 1789, King Louis XVI convened the Estates General to get approval for changing the economic structure of the French government, and for an increase in taxes. He also ordered that complaints from the people, *cahiers de doléances*, be collected.

Cahier of The Third Estate of Dourdan, 29 March, 1789

The order of the third estate of the City, *Bailliage*, and County of Dourdan, imbued with gratitude prompted by the paternal kindness of the King, who deigns to restore its former rights and its former constitution, forgets at this moment its misfortunes and impotence, to harken only to its foremost sentiment and its foremost duty, that of sacrificing everything to the glory of the *Patrie* [fatherland] and the service of His Majesty. It supplicates him to accept the grievances, complaints, and remonstrances which it is permitted to bring to the foot of the throne, and to see therein only the expression of its zeal and the homage of its obedience.

It wishes:

1. That his subjects of the third estate, equal by such status to all other citizens, present themselves before the common father without other distinction which might degrade them.
2. That all the orders, already united by duty and a common desire to contribute equally to the needs of the State, also deliberate in common concerning its needs.
3. That no citizen lose his liberty except according to law; that, consequently, no one be arrested by virtue of special orders, or, if imperative circumstances necessitate such orders, that the prisoner be handed over to the regular courts of justice within forty-eight hours at the latest.
4. That no letters or writings intercepted in the post be the cause of the detention of any citizen, or be produced in court against him, except in case of conspiracy or undertaking against the State.
5. That the property of all citizens be inviolable, and that no one be required to make sacrifice thereof for the public welfare, except upon assurance of indemnification based upon the statement of freely selected appraisers. ...
15. That every personal tax be abolished; that thus the *capitation* [a poll tax] and the *taille* [a seigneurial tax] and its accessories be merged with the *vingtièmes* [twentieth parts] in a tax on land and real or nominal property.
16. That such tax be borne equally, without distinction, by all classes of citizens and by all kinds of property, even feudal and contingent rights.
17. That the tax substituted for the *corvée* [required labor on public works] be borne by all classes of citizens equally and without distinction. That said tax, at present beyond the capacity of those who pay it and the needs to which it is destined, be reduced by at least one-half. ...”

Source: John Hall Stewart, *A Documentary Survey of the French Revolution* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 76-7.

Lesson 1

Student Handout 1.5—Haitian Cahiers, 1789

In the French Caribbean colony of Saint Domingue (later renamed Haiti when it became an independent country), the wealthier people were inspired that the French revolution might bring more economic independence and greater protection of their property. The free people of color who lived on the island also demanded that they be included in the new French government's definition of citizen.

JOURNAL, Containing the Complaints, Grievances, and Claims of the Free-citizens and colored landowners of the French Islands and Colonies:

Article I. The inhabitants of the French colonies are exclusively and generally divided into two classes, Freemen and those who are born, and live, in slavery.

Article II. The class of Freemen includes not only all the Whites, but also all of the colored Creoles, the Free Blacks, Mulattos, small minorities, and others.

Article III. The freed Creoles, as well as their children and their descendants, should have the same rights, rank, prerogatives, exemptions, and privileges as other colonists.

Article IV. For that purpose, the colored Creoles request that the Declaration of the Rights of Man, decreed by the National Assembly, be applied to them, as it is to Whites.

Therefore, it is requested that Articles LVII and LIX of the Edict [the Black Code] dated March 1685, be rewritten and carried out in accordance with their form and content. . . .

Source: Cahiers, contenant les plaintes, Doléances, et reclamations des citoyens-libre et propriétaires de couleur, des isles et colonies Françaises (Paris, 1789), George Mason University, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/searchfr.php?function=find&keyword=cahiers&Find=Find#>

Lesson 1

Student Handout 1.6—Father Hidalgo, “Grito de Dolores,” 1810.

Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla (1753-1811), a priest in the Spanish colony of Mexico, was active in revolutionary literary circles. He organized the people of Dolores to revolt against Spanish rule but was captured and executed within the year. His movement among the mestizos (people of mixed Spanish and Indian heritage) helped inspire further revolutionary movements that led to Mexican independence from Spain in 1821.

My friends and countrymen: neither the king nor tributes exist for us any longer. We have borne this shameful tax, which only suits slaves, for three centuries as a sign of tyranny and servitude; [a] terrible stain which we shall know how to wash away with our efforts. The moment of our freedom has arrived, the hour of our liberty has struck; and if you recognized its great value, you will help me defend it from the ambitious grasp of the tyrants. Only a few hours remain before you see me at the head of the men who take pride in being free. I invite you to fulfill this obligation. And so without a *patria* [fatherland] nor liberty we shall always be at a great distance from true happiness. It has been imperative to take this step as now you know, and to begin this has been necessary. The cause is holy and God will protect it. The arrangements are hastily being made and for that reason I will not have the satisfaction of talking to you any longer. Long live, then, the Virgin of Guadalupe! Long live America for which we are going to fight!

Source: Texas A & M University, Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas,
<http://www.tamu.edu/ccbn/dewitt/mexicanrev.htm#hidalgo>

Lesson 1

Student Handout 1.7—Simón Bolívar, Kingston, Jamaica, September 6, 1815

Simón Bolívar (1783-1830) was born in Caracas in the Spanish colony of Venezuela. He was educated to learn about Enlightenment thinkers by European tutors, traveled in revolutionary France under the control of Napoleon Bonaparte, visited the new United States of America, and led an armed revolt against Spanish control of South America. After one devastating defeat by the Spanish, he traveled to the Caribbean to gain support from Jamaicans and the new government of independent Haiti. Funds from the Haitian government helped pay British and Irish mercenaries from the Napoleonic wars who helped defeat the Spanish by 1824.

The emperor Charles V entered into a pact with the discoverers, conquerors, and settlers of America, which is, according to Guerra, our social contract. The monarchs of Spain entered into solemn contract with them, stipulating that they performed these acts at their own expense and risk, without any cost to the royal treasury, and in turn acknowledging them to be lords of the land, authorized to organize the administration and function as appellate court, with other exemptions and privileges too numerous to mention. The king pledged never to alienate the American provinces, since he held no other jurisdiction than that of supreme dominion, granting a kind of feudal ownership to the conquerors and their descendants. At the same time, there exist express laws exclusively favoring those born of Spanish parents in the new land in matters of civil and ecclesiastical employment and regarding collection of taxes. Thus, in obvious violation of the laws and subsequent agreements, those native-born Spaniards have been stripped of their constitutional authority granted them in the code. ...

Source: Simón Bolívar, "The Jamaica Letter: Response from a South American to a Gentleman from This Island," trans. Frederick H. Fornoff, in David Bushnell, ed., *El Libertador: Writings of Simón Bolívar* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), 20.