

AGE OF REVOLUTIONS

The Atlantic Revolutions — 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.