



# 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 across the Americas and Europe changed the maps and governments of the Atlantic world. Within 50 years, the European empires in the Americas would shrink and new nations would spread across the whole of the Americas. Revolutionaries were inspired by the ideals of the Enlightenment including individual freedom. But they also rejected the authority of distant aristocratic rulers. Revolutionary leaders established new countries that only sometimes lived up to promises of democratic rule. The American War of Independence, the French Revolution, the Haitian Revolution, and the many revolutions of Latin America were connected through networks of ideas, trade, and global events that rocked the world over a few dramatic decades.

For much of the eighteenth century, European empires fought each other all over the globe. The British Empire won the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), but the victory was expensive, and it put the empire into debt. France was defeated, humiliated, and in even more debt than the British. The debt from this huge war helped spark the American and French Revolutions. Both governments attempted to pay off their loans by taxing subjects who had little say in the matter. For Britain, taxing their American colonies seemed like a great idea, but after such a long time of self-rule and near autonomy, the colonists in North America had ideas of their own.



[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 tried and failed to raise revenue from their subjects in the American colonies. The colonists protested these heavy-handed taxes and rioted in the streets. In 1773, the British imposed a new tax, known as the Tea Act. In response, several men from Boston dressed up as Indigenous Americans and threw tea from British ships into Boston harbor. In response, the British announced the Coercive (Intolerable) Acts in 1774, which closed Boston's harbor, curtailed local elections, and expanded the power of the royal governor. In September of 1774, the colonists called the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia and decided not to allow any concessions to the Crown. In April of the following year, fighting began between British and American troops in Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts.

During the Second Continental Congress in 1776, the representatives 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 support of the revolution, and in 1778 the French government officially allied itself with the new American country against the British. Other countries also supported the Americans, including the Spanish and Dutch, who declared war on Great Britain in 1779 and 1780. The cost of the war and pressure from their European rivals was too much for the English. So they finally recognized the independence of the 13 North American colonies in the 1783 Treaty of Paris. A new nation was born, but it was not entirely egalitarian. For one thing, despite winning their own independence, the leaders of the United States of America continued to enslave millions of people living in this new country.



[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

As French soldiers returned home from the Seven Years' War, they came home to a nearly bankrupt monarchical regime. The nobility and clergy blocked King Louis XVI's attempts to raise taxes. To change the laws, the king called a representative body known as the Estates General in 1788. It hadn't met since 1614.

The French populace was divided into three estates. The First Estate was the clergy, the Second Estate was the nobility, and the Third Estate was everyone else. The first two estates had many privileges while the Third Estate paid all the taxes and normally didn't have any voice in the government or in making laws. When the king called the Estates General, the Third Estate suddenly had a voice.



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In May of 1789, the opening session of the Estates General was deadlocked. Though the Third Estate represented many 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. Feeling threatened by this development, King Louis XVI sent an army towards Paris. On July 14th, the Parisians responded by storming the royal prison, called the Bastille. There, they freed a handful of prisoners, seized weapons to defend the city, and beheaded two officials. The king backed down, but the country was now in revolt, not just in the cities but across the countryside. By the end of the summer of 1789, all the privileges of the nobility and the church were abolished, and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen declared that all citizens were equal before the law and had individual rights. Within the next two years France would completely abolish the nobility and pass its own constitution, establishing a representative democracy.

## The French empire strikes back

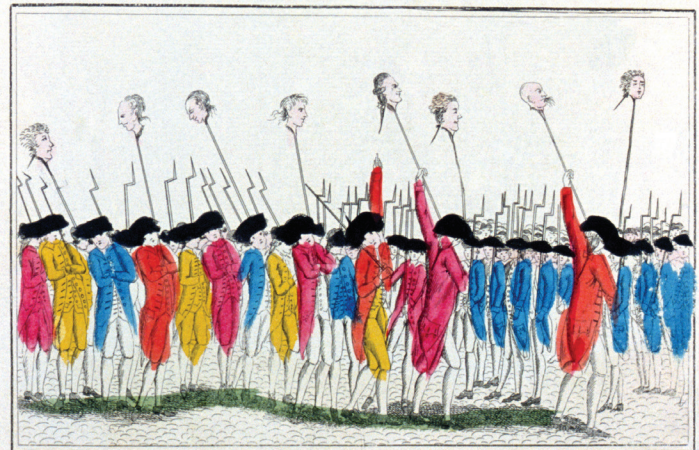
The leaders of the French Revolution were inspired by the American Revolution with its established representative democracy. Using the language of the Enlightenment, they initially tried to promote harmony between France's social classes and establish a constitutional monarchy with King Louis still on a throne. But the revolution soon turned more violent and radical as peasants attacked castles and burned records of their debts. The new government seized and sold church lands. In 1793, King Louis XVI and Queen Marie Antionette were both executed by guillotine and a French Republic was declared. Understandably, the other European monarchs were pretty shocked.

The first French Republic radically changed the political and social structure of the country. It demolished traditional power structures and transformed how the country was organized and ruled. The National Assembly ended the privileges of the nobles and ended feudalism in France. They even briefly abolished slavery, which would have a strong effect in the French Caribbean colony of Saint Domingue. But the republic was short-lived. A powerful and popular general named Napoleon Bonaparte soon rose to power and declared himself emperor in 1799. His armies nearly conquered all of Europe. Everywhere the French went, they ended feudalism, promoted equal rights and religious tolerance, and modernized government administrations. But, as liberating as that sounds, Napoleon also enforced French values and authority with an iron fist.



PRISE DE LA BASTILLE

*Par les Citoyens de Paris ayant à leurs têtes M<sup>rs</sup> les Gardes Françaises, le 14 Juillet 1789. Cette Forteresse fut commencée en 1369 sous le règne de Charles V. Alluques Aubriot Prevot de Paris en posa la 1<sup>re</sup> Pierre elle ne fut entièrement achevée qu'en 1382. Il étoit natif de Dijon. Il y fut un des premiers renfermés sous prétexte d'hérésie. Il fut délivré 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.*





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

## A revolt leads to a new nation

Back across the Atlantic Ocean, the people of the French colony of Saint Domingue (now Haiti) on the island of Hispaniola were watching the French Revolution very closely. The French colony was the richest plantation colony in the world, with around 8,000 plantations that produced 40 percent of the world's sugar and about half of its coffee. The colony made these profits through enslaved labor. There were around 500,000 enslaved people living in Saint Domingue along with around 30,000 free people of color and 40,000 whites. The white population were themselves sharply divided between wealthy plantation owners, known as *grands blancs*, and poor whites—known as *petits blancs*. The social structure of the colony was very unstable, as whites, free people of color, and the enslaved population who made up over 90 percent of the colony each had their own grievances. The rich colony was structured around rampant exploitation and enormous inequalities. In 1791, it revolted in the most radical of all the revolutions of this era.



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*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 Haitian Revolution (1791-1808) was, more than any other, a social revolution for human rights and equality regardless of skin color. It began with a revolt of enslaved people in 1791 after the National Assembly abolished slavery. The Haitian Revolution established the second independent republic in the Americas and the first independent nation-state ruled by people of African descent.

Toussaint Louverture emerged as the leader of the revolution. He managed to overcome internal resistance in the colony and outmaneuver foreign powers like the Spanish and British. He was a brilliant general who defeated 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 racist hierarchies and defined all Haitians as "black." The plantation system was dismantled, and Haiti became a nation of subsistence farmers who worked their own land.



## The Latin American revolutions

Can you imagine a United States of Latin America? In the early nineteenth century, some Latin American revolutionaries wanted exactly that. But a unified Latin America remained a dream only. In North America, colonists fought off the British. In France, the lower classes overthrew the Old Regime. In Haiti, the enslaved fought off the French and overthrew the wealthy plantation owners. And in Latin America—well that wasn't so clear at the start. The Creole population led the revolutions initially. The Creole are people of Spanish or Portuguese descent born in the Americas. They revolted in response to events happening 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.

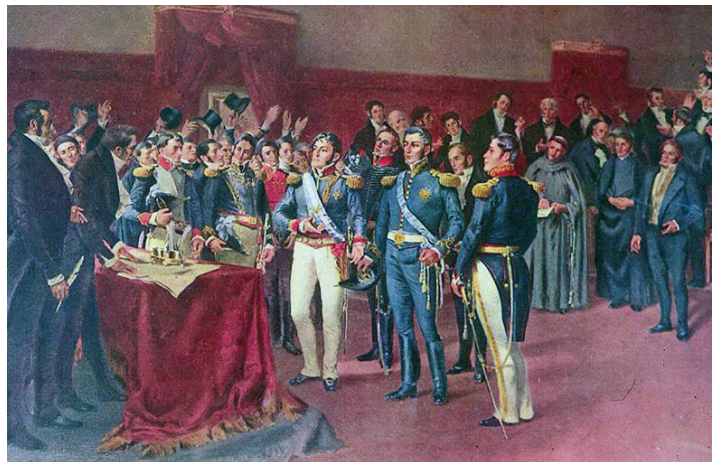
In 1810, peasants in Mexico revolted because they wanted their own land and because food prices were too high. Two priests—Miguel Hidalgo and José Morelos—led the insurrection, but it was eventually put down by wealthy Creole landowners with the support of the Catholic Church. Both the Creoles and the church were alarmed by the social radicalism of the revolt and worried that it would end like the French and Haitian revolutions. A less radical declaration of independence followed in 1821 through an alliance of rich Creole elites and more conservative clergy.

Fear of rebellions as violent as the Haitian and French revolutions loomed over the Latin American revolutions from 1810 to 1825. Divisions along racial, class, and ideological lines frequently led to violence. In the northern regions of Latin America, the revolutionary general Simón Bolívar successfully fought Spanish forces and created a short-lived “Gran Columbia” between 1819 and 1830 that was modeled after the United States.

Bolívar had the support of the relatively new nation of Haiti, and he visited that country twice. Haiti even sent soldiers and weapons to help Bolívar fight the Spanish. José de San Martín—another liberal revolutionary—led a revolt against the Spanish in southern Latin America. These revolutions did not lead to long-lasting constitutional republics and were soon replaced by rulers who cared more about power than the liberal ideas that allowed them to rule in the first place and who ruled on the basis of populist politics, family networks, and military strength.



*Haitian revolutionaries fighting for independence in 1802. By Auguste Raffet, public domain.*



*José de San Martín being received by the congress of Buenos Aires in 1818. From the Instituto Nacional Sanmartiniano, by Reynaldo Giúdice, public domain.*



## **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, Enlightenment ideas and ideals inspired all of them. Second, each revolution rejected rule without representation. Finally, they were connected by economic and political networks. It's not as if all revolutions challenged every issue. The Haitian Revolution was the most radical. The others resulted in political change—rather than social or economic change. Nevertheless, it was a remarkable era in history that led to the creation of new nations and the beginning of the end for the Old Regime in Europe and European colonialism in the Americas.



## Malcolm F. Purinton

Malcolm F. Purinton is a part-time lecturer of World History and the History of Modern Europe at Northeastern University and Emmanuel College in Boston, MA. He specializes in Food and Environmental History through the lens of beer and alcohol.

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