

# WHAT IS A REVOLUTION?

Good definition of Rev<sup>n</sup>

Source: Alpha History <http://alphahistory.com/vcehistory/what-is-a-revolution/>

Revolutions are history's great turning points. A revolution is a tumultuous, ground-breaking event that seeks to transform a nation, a region or society – in some cases even the world.

Revolutions vary in their aims: some seek to overthrow and replace the political order, while others seek radical social and economic change. One common factor in all revolutions is that they are fast moving. In a short period of time, often just a few years, a revolution can bring about significant change and upheaval. Most revolutions are driven by people and groups inspired by hope, idealism and dreams of a better society. They challenge the old order and fight to remove it, while the old order strives to maintain its power. The outcomes are confrontation, conflict, disruption and division, which can lead to war, violence and human suffering. Eventually the revolutionaries emerge victorious and set about trying to create a better society. In most cases, however, this proves much more difficult than they had anticipated.

Revolutions are unique to their times and locations, so do not follow a single plan or model. But despite this, revolutions often follow a similar course. Most revolutions in history have unfolded and developed in stages or phases. Some of these phases include:

Long term causes. Most revolutions do not just occur suddenly or 'out of the blue': they develop from a long accumulation of grievances and dissatisfaction. These grievances can be political, economic or social, or a combination of the three. Grievances on their own may not be enough to spark a rebellion or revolution – however they do undermine or erode faith in the ruling class, the political order or the economic system. Ordinary people become dissatisfied and frustrated with their lot, and revolutionary sentiment begins to circulate and grow. These unsettling ideas can simmer for years or even decades before any action is taken against the old regime. They provide a context of dissatisfaction in which the revolution can succeed.

Short term causes. Every revolution is triggered by at least one short term event or crisis. These events create or worsen existing grievances, conditions or suffering, which brings about more urgent demands for action or reform. Some examples of crises that might trigger a revolution are disastrous wars or military defeats, the passing of unpopular laws, government resistance to reform, a rapid deterioration in economic conditions or standards of living, or the use of state violence against the people. Revolutionary sentiment intensifies when people believe the old regime is unwilling or incapable of reform and improvement. If change and reform cannot come 'from above', it is more likely to come 'from below'.

Ideology. Ideas play a critical part in all revolutions. Those who seek change are motivated by new ideas about politics, economics or society. Revolutionary ideas are developed, adapted and articulated by important writers and thinkers, such as the philosophes in France. These ideas are used to promote the revolution, explain its objectives and justify its actions. In the American and French revolutions, for example, Enlightenment ideas about self government and republicanism challenged old ideas about hereditary monarchy. In Russia and China, Marxist socialism was adapted to underpin revolutions there. A revolution may

Def: Euro intellectual mov't emphasising reason & individualism rather than tradition.

Which was France trying to do?

Typical history themes.

May be good form of expression re: France.

AOS 1

AOS 2.

Typical of all hist. events.



also involve a struggle of ideas between the old order and the revolutionaries, or between multiple revolutionary factions.

*Likely to be AOS 1 for i -*  
**Flashpoints.** In the timeline of every revolution there are one or more critical moments when revolutionaries come into direct confrontation with the forces of the old regime. This may be a showdown between government troops and protesting civilians, such as in Boston (America, March 1770) or 'Bloody Sunday' (Russia, January 1905). Alternatively, it may be a confrontation of words or ideas, like the signing of the Declaration of Independence (America, July 1776) or the passing of the Tennis Court Oath (France, June 1789). Whatever form these flashpoints take, they bring revolutionary ideas and movements to a head. They directly challenge the power and authority of the old regime and bring about an acceleration in the pace of the revolution.

**Armed struggle.** Revolutions by their nature are violent struggles between the old regime and those who wish to remove it. The revolutionaries will prepare for an armed struggle by forming militias or armies, to protect themselves and to overthrow the old order. The old regime will also mobilise to defend its hold on power. Eventually the two groups will clash – such as at Lexington Concord (America, April 1775), the Bastille (France, July 1789) and the Winter Palace (Russia, October 1917) – and war will erupt. As this revolutionary war unfolds, society will become polarised and individuals and regions may be forced to take sides. The outcomes of this violence are often dispossession, death and destruction.

*bit by bit -*  
**A grab for power.** Having openly demanded change and signalled its intentions to fight, the revolutionary movement will seek to displace or overthrow the old order. How easily this is achieved depends on the level of popular support and military backing, enjoyed by the old regime and the revolutionaries themselves. Sometimes the old regime is so weak that a transition of political power is made swiftly and with minimal violence, such as in China (October 1911) and Russia (February 1917). Sometimes the old regime may lose its political power gradually or incrementally, as occurred in France. There may be a period of military struggle or attempted counter revolution, as conservative forces resist political change and attempt to restore the power of the old regime.

*AOS 2 →*  
**Consolidation and confrontation.** Once it has claimed control of the nation the new regime will seek to consolidate its grip on power. The new regime must defeat remaining military threats or deal with lingering counter revolutionaries. It must also face the challenge of rebuilding the new society. Having thrown off the old political system, the revolutionaries must devise and implement a new one. Most importantly, the new regime must earn the support of the people – not just those who supported the revolution but the people at large. The new regime must find solutions for the same social or economic problems and grievances that caused the revolution, such as debt, inflation or food shortages. They must justify their actions by fulfilling their promises and revolutionary ideas.

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**Division.** As the new regime attempts to rebuild society it may become divided over its aims and methods. Revolutions tend to be better at destruction than construction; they are more effective at dismantling the old order than deciding what will replace it. The plans for a new society are often formed 'on the run', in the fires of the revolution. As these plans appear, ideological cracks may divide the revolutionaries into internal factions or distinct groups. There is dispute and possibly conflict over the future of the new society. New leaders with different ideas or methods may also appear.



Extreme  
↓

**Radicalisation.** Many post-revolutionary societies enter a period of radical political leadership. Radical leaders may claim that the revolution is failing to meet its objectives; or that the needs of the people are not being met; or that the revolution is in danger from civil war, counter revolutionaries or foreign threat. The radicals may seek to address these problems with extreme measures, including war, terror, grain seizures or price controls. This radical phase can also produce a peak in state-sanctioned violence, such as during the Reign of Terror (France, 1793-94) and the Red Terror (Russia, 1918).

**Moderation.** A radical phase will come to an end when the new regime becomes more moderate. It may relax its position – or the radicals may be displaced and the leadership of the new regime seized by moderates. Radical policies and methods are abandoned and possibly discredited. Radicals may be isolated or excluded; there may even be a period of retribution against them (a 'White Terror'). The new society winds back its radical policies and seeks to restore order, control, stability and prosperity. In most cases it does this by returning to some of the structures, conventions and policies of earlier times – including some from before the revolution.

Depending on their political and historiographical positions, historians offer different interpretations about the meaning of revolutions. Crane Brinton (1898-1968) famously likened revolutions to a "fever", an analogy that suggests they are a negative event, an illness to be treated or cured. Brinton described radical revolutionaries as "lunatics" and the moderates who slow or halt revolutionary change as "level-headed". Some historians have more measured views about revolutions. They see them as inevitable, human-driven events that are necessary for society to develop, progress and advance.



