

# Part 1 – Introduction and Background

## Chapter 1

### Introduction to the Revolutions course

#### Starting to think about the Revolutions course: the big questions

The study of two major revolutions in just one school year is an ambitious task. The *narrative* itself – or story of events – requires a great deal of attention, and so too does the study of the main people, ideas, revolutionary movements and events. Before you start to study the actual events of the two revolutions, you should begin by understanding the big questions you will answer later. Rather than try to get an overview at the last moment, when the course is completed, let us try to gain an overview first, so that you can think about these issues while you study the revolution itself. This book will examine the main themes of the VCE Revolutions course (2005–2013), with reference to the French Revolution.

#### What is a revolution?

The course of study you have chosen is described by just one word: Revolutions. This familiar word calls up dramatic images of heroic leaders urging the revolutionary crowd to take the violent action that will bring down the existing political system, and introduce a new one.

Cultural historian Raymond Williams warns us that the word revolution is quite complicated. It suggests a major change in human affairs, but we have to ask what changes did actually occur as a result of the revolution we are studying. We cannot assume that *everything* changed or, for that matter, that the changes were all *for the better*.

Williams also points out that *revolution* is closely associated with two other words, *revolt* and *rebellion*, reminding us that in most cases – not all – revolution involves a violent rejection of existing authority. The word *revolution* therefore means something much more serious than reform. Reform can also mean quite considerable political and social change, but it is often carried out peacefully within the existing system. We are studying a process that involves violence, which in turn causes loss of life and destruction of property. We will need to understand the nature of this violence, and the ways in which it was used.

Political historian Peter Calvert has suggested that the three main features of a revolution are the successful overthrow of an existing political order, but adds that to be more than just a rebellion there needs to be two more elements: the change must occur quickly – otherwise it is just reform or

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evolution – and it must usually be implemented by the use of revolutionary violence, which is essentially targeted violence.

The French Revolution fits many of these classic criteria of a revolution. There is an existing political regime (the Bourbon absolute monarchy) that is seen to be abusing its power (becoming ‘despotic’), and challenged by an alternative political system. However, historians are divided about the use of revolutionary violence, and about the degree to which the revolution introduced change.

### The key issues raised by revolutionary history

Our first line of inquiry concerns the crisis of an existing political and social system, and the origins of the revolution itself. We might tend to assume that the crisis is started by those people in society who are *not* powerful or wealthy. This is not always so. In many revolutions, the first criticism of the existing order often comes from people who are at the top of the political and social system. In France, for example, some of the most influential critics of the old regime were wealthy nobles, such as the Marquis de Lafayette, and liberally minded members of the clergy, such as Talleyrand. The starting point of the crisis of a regime might very well be the moment when the regime starts to lose faith *in itself*, not simply when other people criticise it.

This brings us to the related idea of *causes*. We now know, with *hindsight* (the ability to look back), that in France the existing government did fall, and that the revolution did create a new political and social system. It is easy to assume that the revolution was inevitable, yet historians still argue very heatedly about the causes of the revolution. You will need to accept that there are different theories, and that you will have to form some opinion as to which ones you believe are correct. This means that you have to learn not only the *history* of the revolution, but also its *historiography* (the different theories and explanations offered by historians).

The second key idea is the theme of what the revolution intended to achieve. In many cases, a generation of thinkers will have spent quite some time saying what was wrong with the old government, and this leads them to define their ideals for a new political and social system. It is important to look at their theoretical writings, such as revolutionary pamphlets, to clarify what exactly they intended to do once they were in power. These revolutionaries also often found themselves in power quite quickly and unexpectedly, and had to translate their ideals into a real political system and set of laws. It is therefore important to study the constitutions they created to establish a system of government, and the laws they might have designed to create new social, economic and legal systems.

### Sudden and complete change?

In theory, the occurrence of revolution implies that the old order will be overthrown, and that a new society will be created.

For Raymond Williams, the first and most important aspect of a revolution is political change. The course asks you to investigate more than this, because a revolution might be expected to change *a number of aspects* of a given society. A revolution might change:

- *political structures*: how the country is governed, and who governs
- *civic and legal structures*: how people's rights are defined
- *diplomatic structures*: how the country relates to other countries internationally
- *social structures*: how society is divided into classes, and who is dominant
- *economic structures*: who owns the means of production (property)
- *cultural/psychological structures*: how people understand themselves in society, and how they *feel* different in a new social order
- *gender structures*: how male and female roles are defined.

Keep these categories in mind as you start your study of the revolution, and use them to structure your notes under headings.

### Radicalisation: revolutions create new hopes and demands

Remember that revolutions start with a definite set of ideals, aims and intentions, but the experience of revolution itself often leads people to make further new demands. This process is known as *radicalisation*, meaning that the revolution makes more extreme demands or uses increasingly tough measures. A revolution is not a single event; it is a long process that occurs over a number of years, and which itself then starts to change people. The revolutionary project often expands far beyond what the original revolutionaries dreamt of.

In France, for example, the revolutionaries of 1789 originally believed that society could be changed by a three-part program: *political reform* (creating a constitutional monarchy), *administrative reform* (creating an efficient and fair bureaucracy) and *civic reform* (abolishing privilege and creating legal equality for all citizens). As the revolution progressed, however, new demands appeared when the working classes demanded a role in politics, the women's movement asserted women's rights, and the slaves in French colonies demanded their own rights.

### The role of crowd action and violence

Another common aspect of the revolutionary experience is the role of protest, crowd action and collective violence. The image of the crowd taking

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action – such as the attack on the Bastille prison – is the most common popular image of the revolutionary experience. You will, however, need to look closely at the crowd, and to understand *who* joined in the action, and *why*. You will also need to understand that the crowd was not a completely spontaneous, uncontrolled and destructive force. In eighteenth-century France, the crowd had a long tradition of collective action, and tended to act for specific reasons and in very deliberate ways.

In most revolutions, the crowd does use violence as an instrument, but this is not necessarily a sign of mindless brutality or vandalism. As you study the action of the crowd, you will become aware that the crowd used intimidation and violence in a number of deliberate ways. One was strategic: to deal with those who wanted to stop the revolution. Another was symbolic: to show that the old order really was gone by destroying its symbols of authority.

### The causes of crises and challenges to the new society

A fourth important theme is the idea of *crises and challenges*. Typically, revolutionaries claim to create a new and better political and social system based on new principles. In France, revolutionaries often spoke of their project in terms of *Reason, Progress and Humanity*; the principles they defined were, they felt, universal.

It is therefore important to remember that revolution often involves its opposite: *counter-revolution*, the desire to resist, prevent or destroy the revolutionary project. When the counter-revolution uses military resistance, it often results in civil war, or armed conflict within that society. You need to be able to define who resisted the revolution, and why. You will also need to be able to explain what effect the counter-revolution had on the revolutionary project, either by preventing it from achieving what it set out to do, or by forcing the revolution to take strong measures – such as secret police and the suspension of basic freedoms – in order to deal effectively with an emergency situation.

This raises the question of *responses* of the revolutionary government, group and individuals to resistance. Resistance might come first from members of the old regime, especially members of the royal government, the administration, army and church. When they call upon foreign powers for help, the situation rapidly becomes more serious. This sort of resistance is predictable, because you would expect that those who had been powerful would not surrender their position without a struggle. In France, the revolution faced this challenge by 1792–1793, when it was engaged in international war on most borders, as well as civil war and other rebellions within its own territory. It is important that you understand that revolutionary change is often made in a situation of extreme crisis, not in the relatively calm political conditions that we enjoy in our own time.

## How did key individuals and groups respond to crises and challenges?

A revolutionary government finds it especially difficult to face resistance from the very people whom it is trying to help. If the French Revolution was indeed based on *reason*, and *humanity*, why did so many people resist it? The responses of a revolutionary government to challenges are normally very strong, because they feel that the revolution itself is at stake.

One form of response is *military*: the revolutionary government will rapidly create a military force – France's citizen armies – to meet the emergency. A second response is *legal*: the revolutionary government will first suspend any laws which granted the freedom to meet and the freedom to speak, and will then create new and special laws to allow it to deal quickly and decisively with its enemies. When this happens, the revolution appears to have betrayed its original ideals. The third response is *cultural*: the revolutionary government will use many forms of culture – paintings, statues, music and song, parades and ceremonies, cartoon and posters – to convince people that the new revolutionary order is right, and that its enemies are wrong. It will also try to use the education system to create a new type of citizen who will come to adulthood already convinced of the values of the new society.

## Has the wheel come full circle?

We naturally assume that a revolution will change everything, but this is not necessarily so. If change is an important theme, so too is *continuity*, that is, the continued survival of some aspects of the old system. You might like to think about whether this can also be described as a 'revolution' in the second sense of the word: something turning in a full circle, like a wheel, until it comes back to its starting point. In most revolutions, there is a suggestion that despite the enormous upheaval, some things remained very much the same. Your task will be to decide to what extent this is true.

## How the Revolutions course approaches these issues

The Revolutions course asks you to think deeply about this problem of the revolutionary achievement. It will ask you to reflect on three broad questions, and it will be useful for you to be aware of them from the start.

First, what exactly was the nature of the new society the revolutionaries hoped to create? What precisely were their intentions?

Second, what happened when they began the process of creating the new society? What challenges and crises did they encounter, and what caused these problems? How did key individuals and groups respond to that

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resistance? Did this 'crisis' of the revolution force them to introduce strong measures against their enemies and, in doing so, to betray some of the original ideals of the revolution?

Third, what was the nature of the society that was actually created? In particular, can you decide whether there were in fact real *changes* in the political, social, economic and civic structures of society? If not, you should investigate whether there were real *continuities* between the old society and the new society, that is, elements that seemed to remain very much the same.

### A note on dates

The study of revolution is sometimes complicated by changes to the system of dating, which can cause confusion.

In France, the revolutionaries did not interfere with the system of dating until 1792 when, after the toppling of the monarchy and the creation of the republic, they chose to define the period as a new era, rewinding the clock to Year 1. To further complicate the dating, the names of the months were also changed to nature-based words of great beauty, such as Germinal (the month of growing).

### A note on the examination paper

It is very important that you enter the examination having a complete familiarity with the structure of the examination paper, the nature of the tasks and the timing you will need to use in order to finish in time.

First, your examination will come in the form of a question and answer book. You can see what format it has in the VCAA sample examination paper, and you should make sure that you are familiar with its layout before you do the actual examination.

Second, the examination is now divided into two sections, labelled Section A and B, each of which is worth an equal 40 marks (making a total of 80 marks). These two sections are then divided into two parts. You do not have any choice between these four parts: you have to do all of them. Each section will contain a different sort of task.

Third, the time of the examination consists of 15 minutes of reading time, followed by 120 minutes of writing time. Because the four parts are of equal mark value, you might consider giving them equal time value, that is, 30 minutes each. You could, however, discuss with your teacher the idea of allowing slightly more time for the extended response in the last section.

Fourth, the structure of the examination requires you to write two answers on one of the revolutions you have studied, and two answers on the other revolution you have studied. Section A will now be labelled 'Revolution One', and Section B will be labelled as 'Revolution Two'. However, this does not mean that you have to write on your revolutions in

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the order you studied them; this is your choice. For example, you might have studied the French Revolution and then the Russian Revolution. You might decide that you would like to do Section A on the Russian Revolution, so this becomes your 'Revolution One', and this means that you must do Section B on your other revolution, so the French Revolution becomes your 'Revolution Two'.

Finally, remember that all four sections will be very strictly related to the Outcomes described in the Study Design. For your 'Revolution One', Section A part 1 will be about Revolutionary Ideas, Leaders, Movements and Events and Section A part 2 will be about the New Society. For your 'Revolution Two', Section B part 1 will be about Revolutionary Ideas, Leaders, Movements and Events and Section B part 2 will be about the New Society.