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XI. The Revolutionary Years, 1776-1815

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XI. The Revolutionary Years, 1776-1815

Abstract

The intellectual ferment of the eighteenth century gave rise to a popular discontent with the status quo which culminated in two major revolutionary upheavals near the end of that century. We may fully understand the distinctive features of contemporary Western society only as we consider the transformations wrought by the American and French Revolutions. Discontent deep enough to produce widespread resistance to constituted authority is not an infrequent social phenomenon, but rarely has it resulted in movements which so profoundly rent the fabric of society as in the years between 1776 and 1815. A logical fulfillment of the intellectual unrest of the Enlightenment, these two great disruptive movements ushered in a new set of basic ideals in the Western World. Henceforth political democracy, economic liberalism, and social egalitarianism were acceptable, and although reactionary elements returned temporarily to power in subsequent years, their rule was tempered by the new social and political creeds. [excerpt]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Revolution, American Revolution, French Revolution, Authority, Discontent, Free Assembly, Rioting, Reign of Terror

Disciplines

European History | History | Political History | Social History | United States History

Comments

This is a part of [Section XI: The Revolutionary Years, 1776-1815](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

Authors

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study of revolutions as to idea and material circumstances leading to (cause).

XI. THE REVOLUTIONARY YEARS, 1776-1815

1788 - bad years of harvest; prices rising, wages lagging behind;

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just oppressive enough to make people angry, but not oppressive enough to start with the depressed.

Revolutionary movements of great magnitude often develop according to a certain pattern. They begin in a growing disenchantment with the status quo on the part of the better educated and more intellectual elements of society. - Eventually the public at large becomes aware of and shares in this discontent, protesting at what they consider prevalent injustices. Those who hold the political reins, after first ignoring or underestimating indications of mounting unrest, move to suppress it by restricting free expression and free assembly. When this policy fails to quiet the protestants the authorities frequently resort to arbitrary arrests and imprisonment. The dissatisfied elements in the population, convinced that legal means of redress of grievances are denied them, are now easily persuaded to turn to conspiracy and subversion, rioting and sabotage, and at length open defiance and civil war. Growing desperation on both sides leads to ruthlessness. The original moderate and temperate movement falls into the hands of a radical and disciplined minority who employ any means without restraint to destroy the existing regime.

merchant, shop-keeper (crafts-men & businessmen)

does not start with the depressed. ruling power loses hold. Then gets religious and tries to enforce the laws.

Idea try to stop it.

Once the extremists gain control of the movement they move swiftly, and in what often becomes a bloody "reign of terror," hunt down and either convert or exterminate all supporters of the old system. At length the public mind sickens at the hysterical excesses and social chaos which threaten personal security and the rights of property. A general yearning for the

starts moving toward the left.

Revolution is a normal way to do things.

Revolution - to many things, economic, and social changes also.

coup d'état - reference to gov't, no structural change in life.

return of law and order, for peace and prosperity, and for political and economic stability, prepares the way for a conservative resurgence which historians have labeled a Thermidorean reaction (named after the month of the French Revolution calendar in which the conservatives ended the Terror.) The people are now ready to welcome the downfall of the revolutionaries and are content to entrust power to some strong man or group who, it is hoped, will stabilize conditions without at the same time completely abolishing the gains won during the upheaval.

stand for the state apparatus. (not as far to the left, but not the other way, neither)

Not every revolution has followed each of these stages in exact order or with the same degree of intensity. The American Revolution and the French Revolution were not precisely alike, although there exist striking similarities between them. First of all, considering the long stretch of Western Civilization, they occurred at about the same time. Moreover, they moved against common foes -- monarchical obstinacy, a purblind aristocracy, and general intellectual obscurantism. They were more than mere "palace revolutions" because new social classes emerged to power, the political framework was drastically altered, and the prevailing economic system was extensively modified. It is a significant fact that both revolutions took place after decades of effort to clarify and define the "rights of mankind." To both of them could be applied George Washington's view of the American Revolution, that it "was not laid in the gloomy age of Ignorance and Superstition, but at an Epoch when the rights of mankind were better understood...than at any former period."