

Helping Students Analyze Revolutions

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A visitor to a random sampling of Modern World History classes in the United States will find that the subject of “revolution” is a favorite for many students. Reading about and researching individuals and topics such as Tsar Nicholas II, Rasputin, Marie Antoinette and guillotines is never boring. Unfortunately, in too many classrooms, revolutions are studied in complete isolation of each other; a student might study the French Revolution near the beginning of the school year and the Russian Revolution several months later and make absolutely no connection between the two events. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, numerous political scientists and historians have written about the connections between various revolutions, discovering common patterns, structures, and characteristics of both historical and contemporary revolutions.

This article will review important general theories of revolution written in the modern era that have influenced the study of revolutions. They will be presented in a format that enables any Modern World History teacher to understand them and utilize them with his or her classes without much difficulty. It is critically important that, when studying history, students should make connections across historical time; the material presented in this article will help them do that.

Another goal of this article is to compare and contrast the Russian and Chinese revolutions of the twentieth century with the French Revolution of 1789. A number of Modern World History students study the French and Russian revolutions in great detail; in many classes the Chinese revolution is studied in far less detail. Sociologist Theda Skocpol compares these three revolutions in her important book *States and Social Revolutions*, which will be discussed in this article.

To assist teachers to compare and contrast the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions in class, this article includes a three-page section on pp. 41–43 presenting seven important aspects of each revolution—the economic crisis immediately preceding the revolution; the relationship between the elite and other classes; the spread of revolutionary ideas among the intelligentsia; the goals of the revolution and major revolutionaries; the establishment of a revolutionary dictatorship; national mobilization in response to foreign hostility; and the main legacy of the revolution. Although the details in this section are necessarily brief, it offers information and themes for inquiry that can prompt and guide students as they conduct their own research into the revolutions. Students can be divided into groups, each of which studies a different aspect of the revolutions. By sharing their findings, students will help each other to identify the kinds of crises that have led to revolutions, and classes can acquire a greater understanding of the dynam-

ics of revolutions that can be usefully applied to subsequent and contemporary revolutions.

What Is a Revolution?

Before we can even begin to compare revolutions or theories of revolution, it is important to identify what the term “revolution” actually means. By virtually every definition, a revolution is more than just a change of a single leader, even if that leader is removed by violent means. Crane Brinton (whose theory of revolution will be analyzed shortly) states that in a revolution there is a “drastic, sudden substitution of one group in charge of the running of a territorial political entity by another group hitherto not running that government.” By this definition, the *entire* government, and not just the single leader, would have to be replaced for a genuine revolution to take place. This is accomplished by violence; Brinton notes that a revolution “if not made by actual violent uprising, is made by *coup d'état*, *Putsch*, or some other kind of skullduggery.”¹

By Brinton’s definition, a revolution can be purely political in nature; other historians and political scientists write of *social* revolutions, during which the entire social structure of a country is altered. Samuel P. Huntington writes that “a revolution is a rapid, fundamental, and violent domestic change in the dominant values and myths of a society, in its political institutions, social structure, leadership, and government activi-



People in the city of Beijing raise their clenched fists in a welcoming salute for Chinese Communist Forces entering the city after driving out the Nationalist Forces, Feb. 5, 1949. The center portrait behind them is of General Mao Zedong. (AP Photo)

ties and policies.”² In Huntington’s view, a revolution does much more than simply alter the leadership of a country. In addition, virtually all students of revolution agree that either urban or agrarian unrest is a central component of any revolution. As Lenin states: “Revolutions are the festivals of the oppressed and the exploited. At no other time are the masses of the people in position to come forward so actively as creators of a new social order.”³

Crane Brinton’s *The Anatomy of Revolution*

In the 1920s and 1930s a number of historians attempted to determine patterns in the events of important revolutions. It should be remembered that for these historians the 1917 Russian Revolution was more a “current event” than history; many were fascinated (and horrified) by this most-recent revolution and were attempting to place it in the context of other famous revolutions. The most famous book on revolutions to come out of this period was Crane Brinton’s *The Anatomy of Revolution*. This book was

first published in 1938; it was revised in 1952, and revised and expanded in 1965.

Brinton’s work established common patterns in the English Revolution of the 1640s, the Russian Revolution of 1917, the French Revolution, and the American Revolution (although, the American Revolution does not fit together as neatly as the other three do). When explaining Brinton’s work to students, you should discuss how the time period in which he was writing influenced his ideas. Brinton wrote the first edition of the book when Stalin was in power; he discusses “the recent—or present—revolution in Russia.”⁴ Brinton had no idea that communism in Europe would collapse or that democracy would ever become commonplace in the Soviet Union. American high school students today would find it odd that Brinton spends as much time on the English Revolution of the 1640s as he does on the French, Russian, and American revolutions; in many world history classes today, weeks might be spent on the French and Russian revolutions while analysis of the

English Revolution discussed by Brinton might be done in one or two days. It should be remembered that in the era when Brinton was writing, the impact of British history on American thinking (and on American social studies curriculum documents) was far greater than it is today.

What patterns does Brinton see in the revolutions he describes? He begins by describing revolutions “as a kind of fever.” In the pre-revolutionary era (the period that Brinton and many others term the “old regime”), symptoms of the disturbance can be found. At some point, the “full symptoms” reveal themselves, and that is when the actual revolution takes place. The fever reaches a crisis point; in a revolution, this is usually the most violent phase. After a while, the fever subsides and the patient feels more like himself again; this is when the revolution subsides, and the political system reverts to somewhat “back to normal.”⁵

In a general sense, Brinton sees the revolutions in question moving through “a progression, from internal breakdown of the old regime, through moderate re-

form, to the rise of extremism (“Reigns of Terror and Virtue”), followed by an inevitable reaction against this violence” which Brinton calls a “Thermidorian Reaction.” The extremes of the revolution are now curtailed, and “a more stable government emerged...” The new government is dominated by a previous military commander, or a dictator, or both (Cromwell, Napoleon, Washington, and Stalin).⁶

A brief description of the stages described by Brinton will follow. Detailed descriptions of what happens in each of the stages in the countries described by Brinton can be found in his text (or can be researched by your students).

1. Under the **Old Regime**, the country exhibits serious economic and political structural weaknesses. In the years before the revolutions in question, every country exhibited severe economic difficulties (remember the events leading to the calling of the Estates General in France). Brinton makes the point that it is the government that is in financial difficulty, not the society itself. Another critical characteristic of this pre-revolutionary era is that some economically powerful groups feel that the system as it exists is preventing economic growth. The government is perceived as inefficient. Intellectuals in society become opponents of the government. Social tensions between classes increase.⁷

2. During the **first stages of the revolution** the government helps cause a crisis by attempting to collect money from groups who refuse to pay. There is violence between the party of the old regime and the party of revolution. Brinton emphasizes that in each case those in power attempt to use force against their opponents, but do this badly. The ruling classes act ineptly during this period. Discussion about revolution turns into action. At some point (after the fall of the Bastille or the abdication of the tsar) there is a “honeymoon period,” where it appears that the goals of revolutionaries have

been obtained relatively peacefully.⁸

3. Initially, moderates were in control at the beginning of each revolution. During the **rule of the moderates** it is soon apparent that there are ideological divisions among the “winners” of the revolution. Moderates attempt to govern, but are soon on the defensive; radicals were critical that moderates were attempting to kill the “true goals” of the revolution. Extremists are better organized, and are continually on the attack against the moderates. A dual sovereignty develops: there is an official government and an “unofficial” government that many radicals are loyal to (the Provisional Government vs. the Soviets in Russia, for example). Moderates are increasingly identified with the “old regime.” According to Brinton, moderates “are not haters, are not endowed with the effective blindness which keeps men like Robespierre and Lenin undistracted in their rise to power.”⁹

4. The **accession of the extremists** to power is accomplished through the power of the illegal governments discussed above. The extremists are few in number; many people drop out of politics when the extremists come to power. Extremists are fanatical and disciplined, and follow their leaders without question. Extremists clamored for liberty and toleration when they were in the opposition; when they get into power they turn very authoritarian.¹⁰ Government becomes centralized under the extremists.

5. In every case Brinton analyzes **reigns of terror and virtue** that occur under the rule of the extremists. There were efforts to destroy remnants of the past (thus the changes in calendars and street and city names). Brinton compares “true believers” during this era with religious zealots; he states that “the Terror is in some sense overcompensation for the inability of the extremists to carry their ordinary brothers along with them. The Terror is a desperate overshooting of the mark.”¹¹ Brinton offers several explanations of

the terror: he notes that in every case a series of troubles prepared the way and created a “habit of violence.” In addition, these extremist governments all felt the pressures of foreign and civil wars. Acute economic struggles and class struggles exerted pressure on these governments; all of these factors made terror an almost inevitable policy choice for the extremists in charge.¹²

At some point, countries decided that the Terror had gone too far. Brinton calls this period the **Thermidorian Reaction**; he states that in France this occurred with the fall of Robespierre and in the Soviet Union when Lenin introduced the New Economic Policy (N.E.P). The Terror ceases to be widespread, amnesty is given to former moderates, and former extremist leaders are executed (Robespierre, Trotsky). Writing in the mid-twentieth century Brinton wonders if Russia actually exists in a stage of “permanent revolution”; did the Terror associated with the Russian Revolution really end with the N.E.P. or was Stalin a continuation of that Terror?¹³

Beyond Brinton: States and Social Revolution by Theda Skocpol

Historians in the 1960s and 1970s continued to study revolutions; many increasingly found Brinton’s analysis of revolutions incomplete. Brinton is only describing the stages of revolution; there is no discussion in his text of how and why revolutionary events take place. Historians, political scientists, and sociologists increasingly saw the importance of China as a presence on the world stage; where in the 1930s Brinton was drawn to study the relatively-recent Bolshevik Revolution, many turned in the 1960s and 1970s to the revolution in China, which was completed in 1949. Theda Skocpol’s seminal *States and Social Revolution* compares the Russian, Chinese, and French Revolutions, and demonstrates how state structures, class relations,

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The French Revolution (1789)

1. The economic crisis immediately preceding the revolution:

The monarchy's mismanagement of the country's finances was compounded by financial problems arising from the country's wars; the 1778 alliance with the U.S. supporting the revolution against Britain, although successful, ended in a huge debt. Attempts at tax reform failed, and 60 per cent of the collections never reached Paris. The tax burden was unequal; farmers and shopkeepers in society continued to pay the village's property tax, or *taille*, and the personal income tax, paying more than wealthy nobles or wealthy churchmen. In the year 1788, drought and poor crops caused famine and led to a rising tide of discontent among workers. In the many years before the taking of the Bastille there were seven *jacqueries*, or major peasant outbreaks of violence. In 1789, the King had to convene the Estates General (legislature) to obtain money for the empty treasury.

2. The elite and other classes: The nobility represented a tiny percentage of the French population; they ran the government but were exempt from the land tax. The middle class (merchants, lawyers, businessmen), whose economic activities were increasing French wealth, were taxed but had few economic, political, or social rights. French peasants labored under a heavy burden of rent, dues and tithes paid to landowners and the Church, as well as taxes collected by the monarchy. The urban lower classes had a precarious, poverty-stricken existence.

3. Spread of revolutionary ideas among the intelligentsia:

The American Declaration of Independence combined with the writings of the *philosophes*: Voltaire called for popular government and freedom of speech; Montesquieu discussed the three forms of government; Rousseau wrote about the social contract. All these ideas appealed to the middle class, who were often educated and affluent, but had no privileges in the army, church or government. As U.S. Minister to France, Thomas Jefferson lent his support to the revolution until his departure in September 1789.

4. Goals of the revolution and major revolutionaries: The revolutionary slogan was liberty, equality and fraternity. Deputies in June 1789 took an Oath at the Tennis Court to require all three estates (clergy, nobles, commoners) to meet as one legislature with all groups equal. The king must give up dictatorial powers. All were to be taxed equitably. In July, a crowd stormed the Bastille Prison, a place for commoners sent by *lettres de cachet*, warrants that did not have specifics. Peasant revolts erupted in many rural areas. In August, the Assembly abolished feudal privileges, and adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man proposed by Lafayette. The March of the Women (6000 strong) went the distance of 15 miles with Lafayette to Versailles in October 1789, calling for food from their King and Queen. They returned 30,000 strong to Paris, accompanied by the monarchs. In 1792, the *Marseillaise* united the nation.

5. Establishment of dictatorship: After initially establishing a constitutional monarchy, the revolution came under the control

of radicals who ended the constitutional monarchy and silenced their enemies. Lafayette tried to maintain constitutional monarchy and free the King from prison; unsuccessful, he fled to the Netherlands and was imprisoned by the Austrians for five years (1792–1797). Thomas Paine was imprisoned by Robespierre for his views, and freed only through the assistance of James Monroe, the American minister to France. The King was executed in January 1793. A period of revolutionary strife ensued. The radical Marat was assassinated and Robespierre and the Jacobins pushed through the Law of Suspects in September 1793, which led to a Reign of Terror with over a year of guillotine use on tens of thousands from all classes. Many of Robespierre's Girondist opponents were executed, as well as some of his former Jacobin comrades, like Danton, before the guillotine felled Robespierre in July 1794, and the Reign of Terror ended. Nobleman DuPont Nemours, a leader in the Assembly and outspoken opponent of executing the monarch, was slated for the guillotine until Robespierre was executed. DuPont left for the U.S. Napoleon eventually stabilized France through his authoritarian rule from 1799 to 1814, declaring himself Emperor in 1804.

6. National mobilization in response to foreign hostility: In August 1792, fear of an attack by Austria and Prussia to restore the powers of Louis XVI led the Assembly to conscript an army of 1 million soldiers. When England, Spain and Holland joined Austria and Prussia to invade France, war united the French, though many nobles became *émigrés* who conspired with foreign powers to overthrow the revolution. Although the French suffered initial reversals in the Netherlands, Napoleon eventually defeated the Austrians; war dragged on for 23 years, as Napoleon succeeded in defeating neighboring countries, acquiring territories and dominating Europe until his conflicts with other powers eventually led to France's military defeat and the re-establishment of a constitutional French monarchy in 1815.

7. Main legacy of the revolution: Socially, the Revolution helped establish legal equality by abolition of feudal rights and inherited privileges. The days of absolute monarchy ended. Politically, the Revolution opened opportunities to those of all classes to serve in government. French revolutionary political and social ideas affected subsequent worldwide revolutions. The French state became secular, and the confiscation of lands belonging to the Church and their sale to pay back the national debt diminished its religious influence. As for economic development, the Revolution established a metric system and standards for weights and measures, as well as a uniform civil law code that helped pave the way for the Industrial Revolution. Napoleon's occupation of Italian and German territories provoked a rise of nationalism in Italy and Germany. Although Napoleon's coup d'état of November 1799, ended liberal democracy, it did not end the revolutionaries' belief that a nation was not a group of royal subjects but a society of equal citizens.

The Russian Revolution (1917)

1. The economic crisis immediately preceding the revolution:

Russia was the poorest of the major European countries, with vast inequality between rich and poor. In World War I, Russia lacked the industry to support its war effort and did not have a railroad system that could get supplies to the front. Lack of equipment, ammunition and supplies led to the loss of two million men and the occupation of significant west Russian territories by Germany. Fifteen million peasants were in the army and not producing food on their farms. Military defeats and food shortages set the stage for demonstrations. In Petrograd in 1917, 150,000 workers marched in the bitter January cold and then massed again in March calling for food and reforms; this went on for days. Women stood in breadlines. When the Czar ordered the Duma (parliament) to go home and commanded the city garrison to fire on the strikers, the soldiers refused and declared their solidarity with the rioters. The Duma created a Provisional Government led by Kerensky in defiance of the czar. These events led to the collapse of the monarchy.

2. The elite and other classes: Russia was a country characterized by great inequality between most of the population and the landed and business elites. Class tensions were exacerbated by deprivation due to the war. Kerensky's Provisional Government promoted political freedom and reforms, but lost control as peasants in the provinces killed landlords to take over their lands. Two million soldiers deserted from the Russian Army, many returning to assist fellow peasants. The Tsar's autocratic rule meant that the interests of most Russians were unrepresented in government as the costs and defeats of World War I devastated the country.

3. Spread of revolutionary ideas among the intelligentsia:

For over a century, dissidents protested aristocratic ownership of land, the oppression of peasants, low wages, lack of universal suffrage and education, and political repression by the Czars. Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin were steeped in the writings of 19th century Russian revolutionaries and Marxist thought. Each had been a revolutionary since his youth, suffered imprisonment in Siberia, and experienced exile. Under Kerensky's general amnesty of 1917, all three returned to Petrograd to use words and violence to achieve socialism.

4. Goals of the revolution and major revolutionaries: In his *April Theses* of 1917 upon his return to Russia, Lenin called for Peace, Bread and Land: ending the war against Germany; using state resources to feed hungry workers; and taking land from the nobility and giving it to the peasants. The Bolsheviks used concise slogans: All Power to the Soviets and Freedom for non-Russian Nationalities. Lenin aimed to undermine the Kerensky government. In his view, workers could not do this unaided, and the revolutionary intellectual must lead the way. Trotsky returned from New York to be a mastermind of the revolution, developing plans to organize the armed soviets and control the postal, telegraph and rail services. On October 24, 1917 at 9:00PM, the *Aurora* and the Peter and Paul Fortress began to open fire with blanks on the palace. The Bolshevik revolutionaries stormed the Winter Palace with support from the armed Red Guards, their factory militia.

Two women revolutionaries were: the wife of Lenin, Nadezhda Krupskaya, who actively promoted the right of women to vote and have equal positions in the trade unions; and Alexandra Kollontai, who led the important citywide laundry workers' strike in 1917 and went on to serve as the only woman in an executive leadership position in the new government.

5. Establishment of dictatorship: The Bolsheviks agreed to elections in 1917, but when only 25% of voters supported them, they arrested the opposition leaders, and dissolved the Constituent Assembly. A dictatorship of the proletariat was established. Many of the intelligentsia who welcomed the 1917 Revolution became its victims in the cellars of Lubyanka prison, Moscow. Under communist rule, land and livestock were confiscated from owners. Rail, mines, communications, stores, factories, and banks became government controlled without compensation to their previous owners. Peasants eventually became state workers on state land. Religious activities were limited. Lenin set up the *Cheka* to combat counter revolutionaries. Communist Party members made the political decisions. After a dreadful famine killed nearly five million and necessitated the acceptance of food from America, Lenin called for a New Economic Policy in 1921, disbanding the Food Requisitioning Detachments, which had been confiscating peasant production; Lenin allowed peasants to choose their form of land tenure: communal or individual. Lenin also allowed limited capitalism. Stalin later reversed Lenin's policies, but his collectivization of agriculture led to the 1932-33 famine in which millions died. "Stalinist rule" became a phrase meaning intense political repression and persecution of suspected dissidents and opponents. The concrete result of the revolution of 1917 was the institution of state capitalism for most of the 20th century until, after Gorbachev's *Perestroika* and *Glasnost*, Russians claimed their freedom in 1991 and established a form of capitalism coexisting with communism.

6. National mobilization in response to foreign hostility:

In 1918, seeking to protect their investments and loans, the French, British and Americans landed in Murmansk, Archangel, and other parts of Russia. They helped the White Russians, who were led by landlords, aristocrats, conservatives, and capitalists opposed to the communists. The communists rallied the country against this foreign intervention. Trotsky organized the Red Army of three million, which defeated the occupying forces and their White allies. The Czar and his family were executed in 1918 to ensure that no one would rally around the royal family.

7. Main legacy of revolution: From the ascendancy of Stalin in 1928 until the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russians lived under a command economy, in a country known for its military might, prowess in space, and state sponsored sports teams, but few consumer goods. Education, health care and housing were free; men and women had equal access to services and jobs. The practice of religion, the expression of opinion and political freedom were suppressed by a state apparatus in which political decisions were made by the Party elite.

The Chinese Revolution (1949)

1. The economic crisis immediately preceding the revolution:

The Chinese Revolution of 1949 was the outcome of prolonged strife that followed a modernizing, nationalist revolution in 1911 against the Qing dynasty. Throughout this period, most Chinese were peasants, often living in deep poverty, and subject to abuse by landowners, health problems, and low life expectancy. Land rent and taxes went to the owners. Acute poverty also existed among the urban poor. The Kuo Ming Tang nationalist party dominated China between 1927 and 1949 under the leadership of General Chiang Kai Shek (Jiang Jieshi), but a civil war between the Kuo Ming Tang and the Chinese Communist Party during much of this period drained national economic resources. China's economy was also ravaged by Japanese invasions in 1931 and 1937, resulting in Japanese occupation of a large part of China. Although the Kuo Ming Tang and Communist Party joined forces against the invasion until Japan was defeated, civil war resumed until the Communist victory in 1949.

2. The elite and other classes: The Kuo Ming Tang was allied with the Chinese business and landed elite. It was centered in Chinese towns and supported by the army. Both in rural and urban areas, Chinese society was characterized by extreme inequality and underdevelopment, and the Chinese Communist Party was able successfully to mobilize peasant discontent with landowners. The sense that China had been humiliated by foreign powers was also widespread. China's business elite had close ties with Western businesses, and the Kuo Ming Tang was backed during the civil war by Western countries, which increased the cleavage between the Chinese elite and a population resentful of foreign influence.

3. Spread of revolutionary ideas among the intelligentsia:

From education and travel overseas, Chinese intellectuals early in the 20th century urged a new era of political participation for China and a reemergence of her role in Asia. Sun Yat Sen (1866-1925) wrote a Manifesto in 1905 promoting the principles of nationalism, democracy and social welfare. Intellectuals and students became increasingly interested in Marxism, especially after the 1917 Russian Revolution made it the ideology of a major world power. The co-founders of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921, Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao (Mao Zedong's mentor), were Chinese intellectuals familiar with contemporary international currents of political thought. Revolutionary Qui Jin (1875-1907) pushed for women's rights in the new China.

4. Goals of the revolution and major revolutionaries: Led by Mao and Zhou Enlai, the communists sought societal change with major land reforms. Mao Zedong planned a People's War that mobilized the peasants through a guerrilla strategy. The Long March (1934-35) was a 6000 mile retreat of the communists into the North West to rebuild their base after defeats by the Kuo Ming Tang. As the revolutionary base grew in power, it expanded its influence, becoming the governing power of nearby regions and initiating land reform, killing the landowners, and redistributing the land to peasants. Finally, it encircled

small cities, then larger ones, until it seized power in the entire country. Maoism put great emphasis on the idealism of a classless society with equality for workers, soldiers, and farmers.

5. Establishment of dictatorship: Although the 1911 revolution had sought the establishment of constitutional rights, the Kuo Ming Tang (KMT) failed to guarantee political and economic rights, and Jiang Jishi, supported by the army, ruled autocratically from 1927 to 1949. When Mao declared the People's Republic of China after the Communist victory of 1949, he established a strong single-party dictatorship controlling the state, military and media. Mao dominated the Communist Party until his death in 1976. A radical reorganization of China began with reigns of terror to root out the old. However, the 1958 Great Leap Forward, which experimented with new collective techniques of farming, resulted in the deaths of about 30 million in the Great Famine. Leaders who dissented were purged, and Mao's *Little Red Book* became the authoritative source for Chinese communist beliefs and the basis of a personality cult. In the 1960s, Mao supported the Cultural Revolution in an attempt to restore revolutionary virtue to China. People were persecuted in factional struggles across the country. Although many Chinese economic and political leaders were ousted, the pendulum swung against the radicals before Mao's death, and the "Gang of Four" was forced out soon after he died. Supported by Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping became First Vice Premier in 1974, and eventually became the autocratic leader who moved China into a new era with major economic reforms.

6. National mobilization in response to foreign hostility: After the Communist victory in 1949, the new regime faced great hostility from the western powers. The United States refused to recognize Communist China, instead recognizing the Kuo Ming Tang, which had retreated to Taiwan (Formosa), as China's legitimate government. The Communists rallied nationalist sentiment by denouncing this as a U.S. attempt to determine China's future. In 1950, when U.S. and allied forces in the Korean War crossed the 38th parallel, China sent more than 200,000 troops to support communist North Korea. Appealing to Chinese nationalism, the Chinese leadership built up a strong army, and developed advanced weapons systems.

7. Main legacy of the revolution: China became a single party state with central planning. Mass literacy campaigns in the cities and countryside were organized throughout the 1950s and included reading, math, and political education. There was an emphasis on using the arts to promote revolution. The literacy rate for girls and women rose sharply as more schools were built and they were required to attend. There was greater equality of higher education for all classes after the end of the old nationwide exam system ended; millions of women received a share of property and left the household to work for the first time, helped by the nationwide establishment of nurseries and kindergartens. Women were recruited for the Communist Party. Marriage laws made bride prices illegal. One-child policies were imposed by law.

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and international factors all have important roles in explaining these revolutions.

As Skocpol explains:


Social revolutions in France, Russia, and China occurred during the earlier world-historical phases

of modernization. They occurred in agrarian bureaucratic societies situated within, or newly incorporated into, international fields dominated by more economically modern nations abroad. In each case, social revolution was a conjuncture of three developments: (1) the collapse or incapacitation of central administrative and mili-

tary machineries; (2) widespread peasant rebellions, and (3) marginal elite political movements. What each social revolution minimally “accomplished” was the extreme rationalization and centralization of state institutions, the removal of a traditional landed upper class from intermediate (regional and local) quasi-political supervision of the peasantry, and the elimination or diminution of the economic power of the landed upper class.¹⁴

Skocpol begins her analysis by noting that there were political crises in France from 1787-89, in Russia in the first half of 1917, and in China early in the twentieth century that “not only undermined autocratic regimes but also disorganized centrally coordinated administrative and coercive controls over the potentially rebellious lower classes. The revolutionary crises developed when the old-regime states became unable to meet the challenge of evolving international situations.”¹⁵ China was assaulted by imperialist nations, France had undergone a series of major wars, and Russia was unable to cope with the crisis of World War I. Skocpol states that all three agrarian states found themselves in competition with states that “possessed relatively much greater and more flexible power based upon economic breakthroughs to capitalist industrialization or agriculture or commerce.”¹⁶ The result was that “revolutionary crises emerged precisely because of the unsuccessful attempts of the Bourbon, Romanov, and Manchu regimes to cope with foreign pressures.... the upshot was the disintegration of centralized administrative and military machineries that had theretofore provided the sole unified bulwark of social and political order. No longer reinforced by the prestige and coercive power of autocratic monarchy, the existing class relations became vulnerable to assaults from below.”¹⁷

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Many analyses of revolution (see the writings of Karl Marx and others) see the revolt of urban workers as being the cornerstone of the revolutionary experience. To Skocpol, peasant insurrections played an absolutely critical role in the social revolutions she analyzes; in her view, “peasant revolts have been the crucial insurrectionary ingredient in virtually all actual (i.e., successful) social revolutions to date, and certainly in the French, Russian and Chinese Revolutions.”¹⁸ Without the breakdown in central authority described in the previous paragraph, however, Skocpol points out that peasant revolts would not have taken place; they took advantage of situations where the government could not deploy its usual repressive power.

Skocpol states:

In all three Revolutions, the revolutionary political crisis of the autocratic state itself occasioned by national and international developments quite independent of the peasantry—was also a crucial cause. The political factor interacted with the structurally given insurrectionary potential of the peasantry to produce the full-blown social-revolutionary situation that neither cause alone could have produced. It was the breakdown of the concerted repressive capacity of a previously unified and centralized state that finally created conditions directly or ultimately favorable to widespread and irreversible peasant revolts against land-lords. If similar agrarian class and local political structures had not previously given rise to the pattern of peasant revolts, it was because the missing ingredient was a world-historical development in the affairs of the dominant class. As soon as—and only when—that class, under international pressure in a modernizing world, had backed itself into a revolutionary political crisis,

did the peasantry become able to achieve long-implicit insurrectionary goals. The conjunctural result was a social revolution.¹⁹

The Results: How States Changed as a Result of These Social Revolutions

Skocpol states that the organized elites who ended up ruling in France, the Soviet Union and China eventually created more centralized, rationalized, and bureaucratized state institutions; this was necessary, she notes, to fend off “counterrevolutionary threats at home and abroad, peasant anarchist tendencies, and the international crises faced by their societies.”²⁰ The structures of the new governments created after the revolutions were very different. In France, a very bureaucratized “modern state” was created: the officer core of the French army was professionalized and the staff of central ministries rose from 420 in 1788 to 5,000 in 1796.²¹ In Russia, a revolution based on “equality” soon transformed the country into a “highly centralized and bureaucratic party-state, which eventually became committed to propelling rapid national industrialization by command and terror.” Skocpol explains some of the reasons why this took place: “...revolutionary state-builders in Russia faced more demanding tasks—at first of sheer revolutionary defense, and then of state-propelled industrialization—under far more threatening domestic and international conditions. The result was a Russian New Regime broadly similar to the French in its political centralization and urban-bureaucratic basis, yet also qualitatively different from the French New Regime in its dynamic orientation toward national industrialization under party-state control.”²²

According to Skocpol, China provided a very different model. In China, a “mass-mobilizing party-state” was created; in China, the peasants provided “both the revolutionary insurrectionary force and the organized popular basis

for the consolidation of revolutionary state power. And the result was a revolutionary New Regime uniquely devoted to fostering widespread participation and surprisingly resistant to routinized hierarchical domination by bureaucratic officials and professional experts.”²³ Skocpol notes that the Chinese Revolution could only be completed when “some revolutionary leaders learned to tap the enormous insurrectionary, productive, and political energies of the peasant majority.”²⁴ Their strategies guided the revolution to success. China is the most obvious example of what Skocpol says is one of the most profound changes of the social revolutions in question: the landed upper classes lost their control, and “the peasantry and the urban lower classes were directly incorporated into now truly national polities and economies, institutionally and symbolically.”²⁵

This article has provided two different ways to compare and contrast critical revolutions that should be studied in any Modern World History class: Crane Brinton’s comparison of the stages of the English, Russian, French, and American revolutions and Theda Skocpol’s analysis of the motivating forces behind the social revolutions in China, Russia, and France. There are many other approaches to revolution: social scientists study the anti-communist revolutions of 1989-1991, revolutions against dictatorships, and various Marxist revolutions. Some political scientists specialize in what happens to societies after revolutions take place. There are scholars who study the impact of gender on revolution. In the past year, there has been an increased interest in the study of revolution. Were the events of the Arab Spring the beginnings of true social revolutions in the Middle East? In America, many speak of the 1% vs. the 99%: some wonder if Marx is being validated in contemporary society.²⁶ Are members of the Occupy Wall Street movement the vanguard of some new revolution-

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ary movement? The topic of revolution should continue to be a vital topic in any present and future social studies curriculum.

Notes

1. Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 4.
2. Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968). Cited in Theda Skocpol, *Social Revolutions in the Modern World* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997), 133.
3. Stephen T. Possony, ed., *The Lenin Reader* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1966). Cited in Skocpol, 133.
4. Brinton, 7.
5. *Ibid.*, 16-17.
6. Marion Elizabeth Diamond, "Crane Brinton, Egypt, and the Anatomy of Revolution", <http://learnandreturn.wordpress.com/2011/02/02/crane-brinton-egypt-and-the-anatomy-of-revolution/>
7. Brinton, 27-66.
8. *Ibid.*, 67-91.
9. *Ibid.*, 146.
10. *Ibid.*, 164.
11. *Ibid.*, 190.
12. *Ibid.*, 198-204.
13. *Ibid.*, 205-236.
14. Theda Skocpol, *Social Revolutions in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 135.
15. *Ibid.*, 47.
16. *Ibid.*, 50.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, 112-113.
19. *Ibid.*, 117.
20. *Ibid.*, 157.
21. *Ibid.*, 196-199.
22. *Ibid.*, 206.
23. *Ibid.*, 236.
24. *Ibid.*, 236-237.
25. *Ibid.*, 158.
26. See Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011) & Chris Harman, *Zombie Capitalism: Global Crisis and the Relevance of Marx* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010).

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