

# Revolutions in World History

**Michael D. Richards**



Themes in World History

## Revolutions in World History

Revolutions have been a part of politics for centuries. Their ideologies, their leaders, and their successes or failures have shaped the history of nations worldwide. This comparative survey focuses on five major case studies, beginning with the English revolutions in the seventeenth century, and continuing with the Mexican, Russian, Vietnamese, and Iranian revolutions.

*Revolutions in World History* traces the origins, developments, and outcomes of these revolutions, providing an understanding of the revolutionary tradition in a global context. The study raises questions about motivations and ideologies. In particular, it examines the effectiveness of these revolutions—and revolution as a concept—in bringing about lasting political changes.

**Michael D. Richards** is Samford Professor of History at Sweet Briar College, Virginia. His previous publications include *Twentieth Century Europe: A Brief History* and *Europe, 1900–1980*, and he writes on occasion for the History News Service.

# **Themes in World History**

**Series editor: Peter N.Stearns**

The *Themes in World History* series offers focused treatment of a range of human experiences and institutions in the world history context. The purpose is to provide serious, if brief, discussions of important topics as additions to textbook coverage and document collections. The treatments will allow students to probe particular facets of the human story in greater depth than textbook coverage allows, and to gain a fuller sense of historians' analytical methods and debates in the process. Each topic is handled over time—allowing discussions of changes and continuities. Each topic is assessed in terms of a range of different societies and religions—allowing comparisons of relevant similarities and differences. Each book in the series helps readers deal with world history in action, evaluating global contexts as they work through some of the key components of human society and human life.

## **Gender in World History**

Peter N.Stearns

## **Consumerism in World History**

Peter N.Stearns

## **Warfare in World History**

Michael S.Neiberg

## **Disease and Medicine in World History**

Sheldon Watts

## **Western Civilization in World History**

Peter N.Stearns

## **The Indian Ocean in World History**

Milo Kearney

## **Asian Democracy in World History**

Alan T.Wood

## **Revolutions in World History**

Michael D.Richards

## **Migration in World History**

Patrick Manning

# Revolutions in World History

Michael D. Richards



NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2004  
by Routledge  
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Simultaneously published in the UK  
by Routledge  
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group*

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

“To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge’s collection of thousands of eBooks please go to [www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk](http://www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk).”

© 2004 Michael D. Richards

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*  
Richards, Michael D.

Revolutions in world history/Michael D. Richards.  
p. cm.—(Themes in world history)

1. Revolutions-History. 2. Revolutions-Case studies. I. Title. II. Series.

JC491.R497 2003  
303.6’4’0903—dc22 2003020464

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the  
British Library

ISBN 0-203-64457-3 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-67293-3 (Adobe eReader Format)  
ISBN 0-415-22497-7 (hbk)  
ISBN 0-415-22498-5 (pbk)

# Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vi
------------------------	----

1	Bringing revolutions back into history	1
2	The British Revolution of the seventeenth century	11
3	The Mexican Revolution	23
4	The Russian Revolution	37
5	The Vietnamese Revolution	55
6	The Iranian Revolution	71
7	Revolutions in world history	85

<i>Index</i>	97
--------------	----

# Acknowledgments

Over the years Peter N. Stearns has generously afforded me several opportunities to write about revolutions and their impact in history. It is a particular pleasure to continue that association by participating in the “Themes in World History” series edited by Professor Stearns.

I want to thank all those at Routledge who have helped turn my initial outline into a book. I begin with the very patient Victoria Peters, Senior Editor. Ruth Whittington, Production Editor, and Colin Morgan, Project Manager, have also been most helpful.

Sweet Briar College has supported me in two ways. For many years now, it has allowed me to teach “Revolutions in the Modern World.” In 2003 the administration kindly made it possible for me to spend two weeks traveling in Vietnam and Cambodia, seeing for myself many of the sites of the Vietnamese Revolution.

Molly Kalkstein, a superb editor with whom I have worked on several other projects, gave the entire manuscript a careful and most helpful reading. Her comments and suggestions were enormously useful.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the support and help of Dr. Nancy Dutton Potter. She insisted, quite rightly, that I rethink and rewrite the introduction. Her insightful questions helped me do that. Naturally, neither she nor anyone else I have mentioned bears responsibility for any errors or infelicities that may yet remain.

Michael D. Richards  
Sweet Briar, Virginia  
8 December 2003

# Chapter 1

## **Bringing revolutions back into history**

World history is filled with coups, revolts, and rebellions. It offers, by way of contrast, relatively few revolutions. The first is arguably the Dutch Revolt against the Spanish crown, beginning in the late sixteenth century. This book attempts to put revolutions back into history. It does this by examining the role of revolutions in world history from the seventeenth century through the twentieth century. To accomplish this goal, it makes use of comparative studies of the seventeenth-century British revolutions and twentieth-century revolutions in Mexico, Russia, Vietnam, and Iran.

Three propositions have guided the comparative study of the five revolutions. The first asserts that political repertoires have included the phenomenon of revolution since the seventeenth century. Put another way, revolutions became at some point in the seventeenth century one way of doing politics, one way of deciding who paid what price to accomplish certain ends.

The second proposition is that the use of power is more important than the seizure of power. Obviously the seizure of power is a prerequisite to its use and of considerable interest, but one cannot claim to fully understand a revolution without studying its life course. If this book has some claim to originality, it lies in the idea that revolutions go well beyond the seizure and consolidation of power. They may be episodic or segmented, as was, for example, the Russian Revolution. The events of the 1930s, the Stalin Revolution, might be considered a second and much more convulsive part of the 1917 revolution. It is, in fact, difficult to say where a revolution ends. It becomes embedded in the history of a nation, constantly used or misused in contemporary politics.

Thirdly, whether revolutions ever are completely finished, there are criteria by which a revolution may be considered a “success” or a “failure.” Such a proposition is inherently controversial in that it seems to rest on a highly subjective evaluation. Nevertheless, there are a few criteria that, applied to a particular revolution, may lead to an objective assessment of that revolution. A “successful” revolution, then, should do the following: (1) it should provide for individual liberty; (2) it should result in a flexible and open political system that can deal with economic, social, and cultural changes; and (3) it should generate improvement in the well-being of those it affects.



The phenomenon of revolution is best understood in historical terms. The comparative studies that follow occupy a middle ground between the study of individual revolutions, the approach of many historians, and overarching theories that explain the dynamics of revolution, an approach taken mostly by political scientists and sociologists.

Some time ago, I advanced the idea of “clusters of revolution,” as in the Atlantic revolutions of the late eighteenth century, the revolutions of 1848 in Europe or the several revolutions between 1900 and 1920 in what might be called semi-colonial countries (Russia, Persia, Mexico, China). Looking at clusters of revolutions offers a good approach to the task of recognizing broad patterns. At the same time, it is still important to insist that geographical locations and cultural traditions make a difference even when the revolutions are contemporaneous and subject to similar environmental factors. The search for patterns, for typologies, is useful in dealing with what is otherwise a jumble of detail. Ultimately, however, the useful insights derived from these efforts must be anchored in the historical details of a particular revolutionary experience.

It is also important to understand that the concept of revolution has its own history. Anyone thinking about revolution in the early years of the twenty-first century cannot help but think about it differently from the way someone thought about it early in the twentieth century. Events in Russia, China, Vietnam, the German Democratic Republic and elsewhere in the past century have changed the way people view revolutions. Revolutionaries themselves often have a historical perspective, hoping to find in the past lessons or answers they can use.

At this point, a definition of revolution is probably overdue. At a minimum, revolution involves the use of or the threat of the use of force either to recover a political system that appears to have been eroded or to bring into being a new political system. In many cases, revolution also involves the creation of different social or economic arrangements. In some cases, it may even entail thoroughgoing cultural change.

It would be all too easy to get lost in the thickets of theory, but, as is the case with a working definition of the revolution, a brief theoretical orientation is also useful. The year 1979 was a good one for revolutions. It featured not only two very different revolutions in Iran and in Nicaragua but also publication of a groundbreaking book by Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolution*. A review of the literature since the publication of *States and Social Revolution* makes it clear that Skocpol’s ideas, somewhat modified in response to critics, have continued to exert extraordinary influence down to the present (it is interesting to note a kind of lineage in that Skocpol was a student of Barrington Moore, Jr., a major contributor to comparative studies of revolution, and that one of her students, Jeff Goodwin, has emerged as a major figure in comparative studies in his own right).

I take from Skocpol’s work primarily the emphasis on the state as an autonomous actor, both on the domestic level and on the international. For there to be a chance of revolution the state must, inadvertently of course, create a

potentially revolutionary situation. This may involve a fiscal crisis, as in the case of France in 1789, or a regime that fails to maintain an adequate coalition of elites, as in the case of Mexico in 1910.

Some group, or perhaps a coalition of groups, then has to respond to the potentially revolutionary situation. The would-be revolutionaries may already have been in existence before the situation developed or may have found each other only after the appearance of new possibilities. Charles Tilly's work, in *From Mobilization to Revolution* among others, has been helpful in understanding how revolutionaries organize and locate necessary resources.

Although class-based analyses have grown increasingly sophisticated, they nonetheless do more to obscure the dynamics of revolutions than to clarify them. And, also problematic, they reinforce a tendency to concentrate on the origins of revolution. As a graduate student, I read Georges Lefebvre's brilliant study of 1789, published in English as *The Coming of the French Revolution: 1789*, which laid out the role of each class in the revolution very convincingly: an aristocratic revolution providing an opening, a bourgeois revolution creating a national assembly and beginning the work of drafting a constitution, a popular revolution and then a peasant revolution protecting and extending the initial efforts, all of these streams coming together in the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen" in August and in the October days that led the revolutionaries and the royal family from Versailles back to Paris. In the end, however, Lefebvre's analysis, brilliant and convincing as it was, was simply too schematic to reflect the complicated opening months of the revolution.

Finally, culture matters. In 1981 I arranged a panel on "States and Social Revolution" for the annual meeting of the American Historical Association. One of the panelists, William Sewell, contributed a long paper, later published in *the journal of Modern History* with a rejoinder by Skocpol. Without taking sides in that very fruitful debate between Sewell and Skocpol, I will note that it made me aware of just how much culture mattered. Emiliano Zapata's role in the Mexican Revolution furnishes one example of the power of culture. In 1909 he was elected president of the village council of Anenecuilco. At the age of thirty, he had already proved himself an able defender of village rights. Although Zapata was not a peasant and had never worked as a day laborer on the hacienda, he was nonetheless regarded as a man of the people. Understanding the problems of his own village and the many other similar villages in the state of Morels made him a formidable leader in the Mexican Revolution. His inability to see the larger national picture, however, meant that eventually he would lose out to revolutionaries with wider perspectives.

Because of the need to bring revolutions back into history, this book begins with an examination of the British Revolution of the seventeenth century rather than the French Revolution of the eighteenth century. The former reveals in a striking manner the ways in which revolution is simply another way of doing politics. It is worth noting that the people involved in revolutions in Britain in the 1640s and 1650s and again in 1688 only reluctantly changed the existing political

system. Change, in fact, was disguised as the recovery or the preservation of old rights and institutions.

In France the revolution appeared first as a response to the contemporary political situation, but it soon became, in effect, an attempt to escape from history, to start over. It was, to be sure, a very different approach to politics, perhaps stretching the idea of politics to its limit. Nonetheless, even in France and the subsequent revolutions that aimed at beginning afresh, revolution was still an integral part of politics.

Whether revolution builds on existing institutions and procedures or attempts to make a fresh start, it must be seen as part of the historical process. Sometimes, in the life of a society or nation, as the title of a recent book on revolutions by Jeff Goodwin has it, there is *No Other Way Out* of a particular situation than through revolution. There are costs involved in dealing with any situation where politics comes into play. Politics is essentially a process for determining who pays, how much, and in what manner to accomplish the desired goal.

The Cold War produced an obsession with the origins of revolution. The reasoning was that if it were possible to understand what caused revolutions, it might be possible to find ways to prevent them from occurring. To some extent, we have moved from an over-emphasis on the origins of revolution and the seizure of power to a concern with the use of power. In any case, beginning with the British Revolutions of the seventeenth century also helps us see the importance of taking a long-term view of the phenomenon of revolution.

Until we have seen how revolutionaries put power to use it is difficult to determine whether a revolution has succeeded or failed. Of course, a revolution that does not result in the seizure of power is clearly a failure even though it may leave a legacy, as was, for example, the case with the 1905 Revolution in Russia. It is possible that the “failure” of a revolution may create conditions leading to its eventual “success.” In the case of the British Revolution of the 1640s and 1650s, the restoration of the Stuart kings in the person of Charles II seemed to mark the mid-century revolutionary efforts as a failure. The Stuart dynasty, however, ran into problems, to which the Revolution of 1688 formed one possible solution. Over an additional period of more than a century, an evolutionary process, with occasional near-revolutionary situations, led to the development of a constitutional monarchy with the House of Commons as its political center—a successful and enduring political system.

Once the idea of revolution became part of the political repertoire, even if many political actors did not care to acknowledge it as such, individuals and groups tried with increasing frequency to make use of it. The nineteenth century is filled with efforts, mostly unsuccessful, to imitate the French Revolution of 1789. Several of these efforts took place in France itself, as the French seemed doomed to repeat their initial revolutionary experience.

Ultimately, the revolutions of the nineteenth century demonstrated the *historical character* of revolution. Revolution in the nineteenth century was mostly about politics, although with the social question and even some ideas about