

World History Makeover: The French Revolution

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This is a regular column that takes European history and western civ lessons and suggests world historical approaches. This is not meant to be a comprehensive review of the literature, or of possible lessons, but a means for teachers new to global approaches to see beyond the box. Readers are encouraged to send in additional suggestions for adaptations they have tried in their own classrooms. Readers are additionally urged to submit topics that they need revamped for their own world history courses.

Traditionally, the French revolution has been a major focus of Western Civilizations classes. Indeed, it is difficult to deny the importance of the French Revolution as a critical turning point in European social and political history. In world history courses, however, the very breadth of the course does not usually allow for extensive coverage of the revolution. For example, the AP world history course devotes only scant attention to the French revolution, and even then it is in the context of other, similar movements. Those who come to teaching world history from teaching Western Civilizations can rest assured, however, that world history courses need not sacrifice the global importance of the French revolution even when it cannot be examined in detail. In other words, students need not know the ins and outs of the Girondin/Jacobin conflict to understand something of the importance of the French revolution in its global context. Here, I will explore three possible ways of approaching this pivotal European event in the world history classroom.

First, we might approach the French revolution from the vantage point of ideological or intellectual influence. For instance, students can explore how French

revolutionary ideals—especially ideals of nationhood and universal rights— influenced the development of other national movements. One resource for making these connections is a series of UNESCO Courier articles from 1989, which highlight connections between French revolutionary ideals and national movements in Japan, China, Egypt and Haiti. In the French Caribbean colony of St. Domingue (modern Haiti), for example, ideals of freedom and self-determination arrived from France during the revolution, where the colony’s African population put them to use as ideological justification for emancipation. Influence also worked both ways across the Atlantic, and students can explore the impact of American revolutionary ideals in France through the influence of key American figures like Benjamin Franklin, who served as U.S. ambassador to France after American independence. Finally, students can explore how ideological connections could take more complex routes. For example, John Thornton’s “I am the Subject of the King of Kongo” demonstrates the ways that popular leadership among the Kongolese slaves helped contribute to the Haitian revolution.

Secondly, we might approach the French revolution through a comparative lens. Beginning with the Beatle’s song, Revolution, students might explore what the concept of revolution means, which groups of people tend to initiate revolution, and which institutions support or reject change. Students can research some of the many definitions of revolution, and discuss how the French revolution and other revolutions fit these definitions. Here, we might ask students to consider the motivating factors of revolution across time and space, such as what role land reform plays in early versus late revolutions. We might also ask students to consider the short- and long- term effects of various revolutions in various time periods. For example, students might explore the French and Haitian revolutions as case studies for the 18th/ 19th century, and then compare those revolutions to 20th century revolutions in Russia and Iran. One of the things my students regularly discover when using this comparative approach is that generic definitions and patterns of revolution do not tend to hold up under the weight of real examples. One way to reinforce this is to use the concept of a ‘recipe for revolution.’ Here’s how it works: ask students to create a recipe for Revolution in the 18th/ 19th century where they determine the necessary ingredients. For example, they might consider how much peasant unrest is needed in proportion to intellectual ferment. In addition to ingredients, students should also include the most appropriate method of cooking, ie. whether a revolution is best prepared as a stir fry, in a crock pot, or in some other fashion. Students then should describe how best the revolution should be served. Flambe, perhaps? Finally, students use their recipe to demonstrate how it helps explain the Haitian, American and French experiences. In my own class, I make a habit of saving the recipes for later, after students have prepared a graphic organizer comparing 20th century revolutions. As an open note quiz, each student receives another student’s earlier recipe for the purpose of analyzing whether or not that recipe works for one or more of the 20th century revolutions. If not, students are free to modify or adapt the

recipe as they see fit. As you might imagine, this exercise provides entertainment while encouraging students to think more broadly about the nature of global revolutions.

Thirdly, we might explore the French revolution from a thematic perspective. For example, I have developed a unit on Coffeehouses exploring how such establishments in the Near East as well as in Europe and the Americas have frequently been places where revolutions are “brewed.” The unit addresses the history of coffee and the global controversies that have surrounded its consumption. It is about much more than coffee, however, for through this students gain an understanding of how coffee consumption fit into both the Enlightenment (Voltaire drank 100 cups of coffee a day!) as well as the American and French revolutions. For example, American Patriots left the Green Dragon – a Bostonian coffeehouse—to dump tea in the Boston harbor, and the storming of the Bastille followed politically charged discussions that had occurred in the Café De Foy in Paris.

The breadth of world history courses requires our very best creative efforts in curriculum design. Whereas we might spend three weeks on the French revolution in a Western Civilizations class, in a world history course we might have only one week to address the same revolution through its global connections, comparisons and themes. In the end, students may not remember the details of the Tennis Court Oath, but they will be able to discuss the global intellectual, political and social significance of the French revolution alongside other revolutions through time and across the globe.

Selected Resources

Fink, Carole, Philipp Gassert, and Detlef Junker, 1968: *The World Transformed* (Cambridge University Press for the German Historical Institute, 1998). Part 2 features five articles under the heading “From Chicago to Beijing: Challenges to the Domestic Order” – 1968 in the US, France, Poland, Germany, and the Third World. An epilogue by Konrad H. Jannusch, “1968 and 1989: Caesuras, Comparisons, and Connections.”

Goldstone, Jack, *Revolutions: Theoretical, Comparative and Historical Studies*

Peguero, Valentina “Teaching the Haitian Revolution: Its Place in Western and Modern World History” *The History Teacher* volume 32, number 1, November 1998.

Thornton, John K. ““I am the Subject of the King of Congo”: African Political Ideology and the Haitian Revolution”, *Journal Of World History* volume 4, number 2 , 1993, pp. 181-214.

“Rethinking the Revolution”, UNESCO Courier Special Issue, June 1989.

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