

# Teaching the Age of Revolutions

## HA Teacher Fellowship Programme 2018 (Secondary)

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### Week 1: Was this an Age of Revolutions?

Inspired by their residential experience, the Fellows have been tackling the online course in advance of developing their own resources. Week by week they research and comment on major historical issues in this period.

For Week 1 it was really big picture stuff, addressing the question of whether the Age of Revolutions really deserves the title in the truest sense. Select reading and online exchanges with our experts generated some really interesting and valuable insights.

One of the most immediate challenges which raised its head was finding a definition of the term revolution which all parties accepted ...

- 'Why do historians need the word 'revolution'?' is something I've wondered about and we should perhaps have pupils pondering as well. It seems to me that coming up with any more specific but universally applicable definition of 'revolution' beyond 'an event or period featuring significant, transformational developments' is nigh-on impossible. That is not to say that trying to has not clearly been worthwhile for a number of thinkers, and perhaps it could well be an intellectually fruitful exercise for pupils as well (Wikipedia has a very interesting page on the history of revolution as a term, discussing the work of Charles Tilly and many others who have developed their own typology of revolution and in doing so – I think –slightly proven the point above). I have found any form of meaningful comparative history in the classroom quite a hard feat (especially at Key Stage 3), but using the struggle to find similarities and differences across revolutions as the focus for such a comparative enquiry could be one approach.

Along with competing definitions of revolution another pattern emerging was the different perspectives applied to the revolutions of the period, including ideology, class, race and gender...

- One area that is of clear importance in the historiography of this period is the political and ideological context and world view of the author. This period has of course been dominated by Marxist and Leftist historians of the 1960s and 1970s, one only needs to think of Age of Revolution and the front cover of Hobsbawm pops into the mind. But while this may be politically problematic (if we think of Russia and China), it has produced fertile methodological insights. We owe a great deal to the bottom up methodology of these historians, for as Marsh states, the inclusion of forgotten people, such as the poor, disabled, women and those from persecuted minorities allows us to gain that 'bird eye view' of the period and the experience of living through a revolution.

For some it was another opportunity to consider the power of narrative and how it might reshape some of their teaching:

- For the second week now, I am left wondering about ordinary people and where their voices can be heard in our courses across all Key Stages. I fear that within our current A-Level course there is still too much emphasis on the 'founding precepts' of the French Revolution and now enough on the 'peoples, structures, and connections' such as counter-revolutionaries and loyalists. Partly, and fittingly for the theme of this week, this is to do with problems of definition (for example, a counter-revolutionary in France in 1789 can be seen as different to a counter-revolutionary in 1793), and using the term can feel too homogeneous to adequately cover the range of counter-revolutionary motivation, but also to do with lack of accessible evidence for teachers that allow these stories to be told. For this reason, I enjoyed Linda Parker's exploration of women's rights and gender, as it offered food for thought but also something more tangible in terms of ideas I can bring to the classroom. Marsh and Rapport's concept of revolutionary 'waves that crashed differently on social, racial and cultural landscapes – tending always to celebrate freedom and yet dispense its fruits unequally', seems to offer a valuable approach to strengthen the human element of revolution without losing the notion of 'founding precepts'.

## References

### Core resources

- Marsh, B. and Rapport, M. (Eds.), *Understanding and Teaching the Age of Revolutions* (2017)
- Marsh, Ben, *Age of Revolution - Theme Summaries and Key Messages* (2018)
- [HA Podcast: Professor Mark Philp, "Re-imagining Democracy"](#)

### Secondary sources

- Bayly, Christopher A., *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914* (2004)
- Hobsbawm, Eric, *The Age of Revolution, 1789-1848* (1962)