CHAPTER 23

Revolutionary Changes in the Atlantic World,
1750–1850

I. Prelude to Revolution: The Eighteenth-Century Crisis
   A. Colonial Wars and Fiscal Crises
      1. Rivalry among the European powers intensified in the early 1600s as the Dutch
         attacked Spanish and Portuguese possessions in the Americas and in Asia. In the
         1600s and 1700s the British then checked Dutch commercial and colonial
         ambitions and went on to defeat France in the Seven Years War (1756–1763)
         and take over French colonial possessions in the Americas and in India.
      2. The unprecedented costs of the wars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries
         drove European governments to seek new sources of revenue at a time when the
         intellectual environment of the Enlightenment inspired people to question and to
         protest the state’s attempts to introduce new ways of collecting revenue.
   B. The Enlightenment and the Old Order
      1. The Enlightenment thinkers sought to apply the methods and questions of the
         Scientific Revolution to the study of human society. One way of doing so was to
         classify and systematize knowledge; another way was to search for natural laws
         that were thought to underlie human affairs and to devise scientific techniques of
         government and social regulation.
      2. John Locke argued that governments were created to protect the people; he
         emphasized the importance of individual rights. Jean Jacques Rousseau asserted
         that the will of the people was sacred; he believed that people would act
         collectively on the basis of their shared historical experience.
      3. Not all Enlightenment thinkers were radicals or atheists. Many, like Voltaire,
         believed that monarchs could be agents of change.
      4. Some members of the European nobility (e.g. Catherine the Great of Russia,
         Frederick the Great of Prussia) patronized Enlightenment thinkers and used
         Enlightenment ideas as they reformed their bureaucracies, legal systems, tax
         systems, and economies. At the same time, these monarchs suppressed or banned
         radical ideas that promoted republicanism or attacked religion.
      5. Many of the major intellectuals of the Enlightenment communicated with each
         other and with political leaders. Women were instrumental in the dissemination
         of their ideas, purchasing and discussing the writings of the Enlightenment
         thinkers and, in the case of wealthy Parisian women, making their homes
         available for salons at which Enlightenment thinkers gathered.
      6. The new ideas of the Enlightenment were particularly attractive to the expanding
         middle class in Europe and in the Western Hemisphere. Many European
         intellectuals saw the Americas as a new, uncorrupted place in which material and
         social progress would come more quickly than in Europe.
      7. Benjamin Franklin came to symbolize the natural genius and the vast potential of
         America. Franklin’s success in business, his intellectual and scientific
         accomplishments, and his political career offered proof that in America, where
         society was free of the chains of inherited privilege, genius could thrive.
C. Folk Cultures and Popular Protest
1. Most people in Western society did not share in the ideas of the Enlightenment; common people remained loyal to cultural values grounded in the preindustrial past. These cultural values prescribed a set of traditionally accepted mutual rights and obligations that connected the people to their rulers.
2. When eighteenth century monarchs tried to increase their authority and to centralize power by introducing more efficient systems of tax collection and public administration, the people regarded these changes as violations of sacred customs and sometimes expressed their outrage in violent protests. Such protests aimed to restore custom and precedent, not to achieve revolutionary change. Rationalist Enlightenment reformers also sparked popular opposition when they sought to replace popular festivals with rational civic rituals.
3. Spontaneous popular uprisings had revolutionary potential only when they coincided with conflicts within the elite.

II. The American Revolution, 1775–1800
A. Frontiers and Taxes
1. After 1763, the British government faced two problems in its North American colonies: the danger of war with the Amerindians as colonists pushed west across the Appalachians, and the need to raise more taxes from the colonists in order to pay the increasing costs of colonial administration and defense. British attempts to impose new taxes or to prevent further westward settlement provoked protests in the colonies.
2. In the Great Lakes region, British policies undermined the Amerindian economy and provoked a series of Amerindian raids on the settled areas of Pennsylvania and Virginia. The Amerindian alliance that carried out these raids was defeated within a year. Fear of more violence led the British to establish a western limit for settlement in the Proclamation of 1763 and to slow down settlement of the regions north of the Ohio and east of the Mississippi in the Quebec Act of 1774.
3. The British government tried to raise new revenue from the American colonies through a series of fiscal reforms and new taxes including a number of new commercial regulations, including the Stamp Act of 1765 and other taxes and duties. In response to these actions, the colonists organized boycotts of British goods, staged violent protests, and attacked British officials.
4. Relations between the American colonists and the British authorities were further exacerbated by the killing of five civilians in the “Boston Massacre” (1770) and by the action of the British government in granting the East India Company a monopoly on the import of tea to the colonies. When colonists in Boston responded to the monopoly by dumping tea into Boston harbor, the British closed the port of Boston.

B. The Course of Revolution, 1775–1783
1. Colonial governing bodies deposed British governors and established a Continental Congress that printed currency and organized an army. Ideological support for independence was given by the rhetoric of thousands of street-corner speakers, by Thomas Paine’s pamphlet *Common Sense*, and in the Declaration of Independence.
2. The British sent a military force to pacify the colonies. The British force won most of its battles, but it was unable to control the countryside. The British were also unable to achieve a compromise political solution to the problems of the colonies.
3. Amerindians served as allies to both sides. The Mohawk leader Joseph Brant led one of the most effective Amerindian forces in support of the British; when the war was over, he and his followers fled to Canada.
4. France entered the war as an ally of the United States in 1778 and gave crucial assistance to the American forces, including naval support that enabled Washington to defeat Cornwallis at Yorktown, Virginia. Following this defeat, the British negotiators signed the Treaty of Paris (1783), giving unconditional independence to the former colonies.

C. The Construction of Republican Institutions, to 1800
1. After independence each of the former colonies drafted written constitutions that were submitted to the voters for approval. The Articles of Confederation served as a constitution for the United States during and after the revolutionary war.
2. In May 1787 a Constitutional Convention began to write a new constitution, which established a system of government that was democratic, but which gave the vote only to a minority of the adult male population and which protected slavery.

III. The French Revolution, 1789–1815
A. French Society and Fiscal Crisis
1. French society was divided into three groups: the First Estate (clergy), the Second Estate (hereditary nobility), and the Third Estate (everyone else). The clergy and the nobility controlled vast amounts of wealth, and the clergy was exempt from nearly all taxes.
2. The Third Estate included the rapidly growing, wealthy middle class (bourgeoisie). While the bourgeoisie prospered, France’s peasants (80 percent of the population), its artisans, workers, and small shopkeepers, were suffering in the 1780s from economic depression caused by poor harvests. Urban poverty and rural suffering often led to violent protests, but these protests were not revolutionary.
3. During the 1700s the expenses of wars drove France into debt and inspired the French kings to try to introduce new taxes and fiscal reforms in order to increase revenue. These attempts met with resistance in the Parlements and on the part of the high nobility.

B. Protest Turns to Revolution, 1789–1792
1. The king called a meeting of the Estates General in order to get approval of new taxes. The representatives of the Third Estate and some members of the First Estate declared themselves to be a National Assembly and pledged to write a constitution that would incorporate the idea of popular sovereignty.
2. As the king prepared to send troops to arrest the members of the National Assembly, the common people of Paris rose up in arms against the government and peasant uprisings broke out in the countryside. The National Assembly was emboldened to set forth its position in the Declaration of the Rights of Man.
3. As the economic crisis grew worse, Parisian market women marched on Versailles and captured the king and his family. The National Assembly passed a new constitution that limited the power of the monarchy and restructured French politics and society. When Austria and Prussia threatened to intervene, the National Assembly declared war in 1791.

C. The Terror, 1793–1794
1. The king’s attempt to flee in 1792 led to his execution and to the formation of a new government, the National Convention, which was dominated by the radical “Mountain” faction of the Jacobins and by their leader, Robespierre.
2. Under Robespierre, executive power was placed in the hands of the Committee of Public Safety, militant feminist forces were repressed, new actions against the clergy were approved, and suspected enemies of the revolution were imprisoned and guillotined in the Reign of Terror (1793–1794). In July 1794 conservatives in the National Convention voted for the arrest and execution of Robespierre.

D. Reaction and Dictatorship, 1795–1815
1. After Robespierre’s execution the Convention worked to undo the radical reforms of the Robespierre years, ratified a more conservative constitution, and created a new executive authority, the Directory. The Directory’s suspension of the election results of 1797 signaled the end of the republican phase of the Revolution, while Napoleon’s seizure of power in 1799 marked the beginning of another form of government: popular authoritarianism.

2. Napoleon provided greater internal stability and protection of personal and property rights by negotiating an agreement with the Catholic Church (the Concordat of 1801), promulgating the Civil Code of 1804, and declaring himself emperor (also in 1804). At the same time, the Napoleonic system denied basic political and property rights to women and restricted speech and expression.

3. The stability of the Napoleonic system depended upon the success of the military and upon French diplomacy. No single European state could defeat Napoleon, but his occupation of the Iberian Peninsula turned into a costly war of attrition with Spanish and Portuguese resistance forces, while his 1812 attack on Russia ended in disaster. An alliance of Russia, Austria, Prussia, and England defeated Napoleon in 1814.

IV. Revolution Spreads, Conservatives Respond, 1789–1850
A. The Haitian Revolution, 1789–1804
1. The French colony of Saint Domingue was one of the richest European colonies in the Americas, but its economic success was based on one of the most brutal slave regimes in the Caribbean.

2. The political turmoil in France weakened the ability of colonial administrators to maintain order and led to conflict between slaves and gens de couleur on the one hand and whites on the other. A slave rebellion under the leadership of François Dominique Toussaint L’Ouverture took over the colony in 1794.

3. Napoleon’s 1802 attempt to reestablish French authority led to the capture of L’Ouverture, but failed to retake the colony, which became the independent republic of Haiti in 1804. Tens of thousands of people died in the Haitian revolution, the economy was destroyed, and public administration was corrupted by more than a decade of violence.

B. The Congress of Vienna and Conservative Retrenchment, 1815–1820
1. From 1814 to 1815 representatives of Britain, Russia, Prussia, and Austria met in Vienna to create a comprehensive peace settlement that would reestablish and safeguard the conservative order in Europe.

2. The Congress of Vienna restored the French monarchy, redrew the borders of France and other European states, and established a “Holy Alliance” of Austria, Russia, and Prussia. The Holy Alliance defeated liberal revolutions in Spain and Italy in 1820 and tried, without success, to repress liberal and nationalist ideas.

C. Nationalism, Reform, and Revolution, 1821–1850
1. Popular support for national self-determination and democratic reform grew throughout Europe. Greece gained its independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1830, while in France, the people of Paris forced the monarchy to accept constitutional rule and to extend voting privileges.
2. Democratic reform movements emerged in both Britain and in the United States. In the United States the franchise was extended after the War of 1812, while in Britain response to the unpopular Corn Laws resulted in a nearly 50 percent increase in the number of voters.

3. In Europe, the desire for national self-determination and democratic reform led to a series of revolutions in 1848. In France, the monarchy was overthrown and replaced by an elected president (Louis Napoleon); elsewhere in Europe the revolutions of 1848 failed to gain either their nationalist or republican objectives.