

# THE NATURE OF REVOLUTIONS

*A revolution is a struggle to the death  
between the future and the past.*

Fidel Castro, 1961

This section will focus on:

- the meaning of revolution
- the characteristics of revolutions
- models of revolutions
- the causes of revolutions.

## THE MEANING OF REVOLUTION

Few concepts have inspired more interest and debate in modern historical inquiry than revolution. The term *revolution* conjures up all sorts of images. For some it may be masses of people marching and demonstrating in the streets and governments being overturned through violent revolt; others may imagine more subtle, long term events like the *industrial revolution* or the *computer revolution*, while some may think of revolutions in fashion, morals, culture or music. Regardless of what type of revolution you think of, all of these types have certain key elements in common. They all:

- involve some form of change
- involve relatively sudden or abrupt happenings or accelerations of previously existing rates of change
- have significant and far-reaching effects.

For example, the computer revolution involved a *change* in the size, cost, capability and versatility of the machines we call computers. This change occurred relatively *abruptly* after, say, 1970 and this change has resulted in *significant* and *far-reaching* effects on industry, communications and entertainment.

The main focus of this book is on one particular type of revolution that has occurred in the last two hundred years of history, namely *political revolution*. How do historians define these types of revolutions? What are their common characteristics? Do they tend to follow similar paths and what causes them to occur in the first place? The main problem in dealing with these questions is acknowledging the enormous variations and com-

plexities that occur from one revolution to the next. Clearly, every revolution is to some extent unique, with circumstances, individuals and outcomes all dependent on the particular context of the revolution. Yet historians have been able to uncover a number of features common to most revolutions and it is this generalised pattern that can assist in any analysis of the nature of revolutions.

The concept of revolution is one of the oldest known political concepts dating back from before the 'golden age' of ancient Greece. The great Greek philosopher Aristotle believed revolution was a necessary fact of political change brought about by gross inequalities in society.

It is a political phenomenon, both violent and non-violent, representing the fundamental process of change which leads to the alteration or displacement of social groupings.

Since the time of Aristotle, the concept has been debated at length with many actual instances of revolution providing further momentum to the debate.

In addition to the general features of revolutions mentioned above, political revolutions have a number of common characteristics that distinguish them from other types of revolutions. Political revolutions:

- are mass movements whereby all of society is inevitably involved or affected
- are aimed at the government or ruling class and involve the transfer of political power from this group to a new revolutionary government
- involve, in addition to political change, gradual long term social change whereby all the facets of society (economic, cultural, psychological) are altered
- are unauthorised or illegal—there is no lawful provision for change via revolution
- involve the use or threat of violence.

Political revolutions then (or more simply, revolutions, as will be the case from now on), are relatively *sudden*, *violent* and *fundamental* changes to government which, over a period of time, *change the nature of society* as well. Where revolutions are unsuccessful, or limited in their location or extent, they tend to be called *rebellions*, *revolts*, *insurrections* or *uprisings*.

Another important feature of revolutions is that they are essentially a process rather than an event. Revolutions are best seen as a series of interconnected events involving significant change over time. They may have starting points but their conclusions are less easy to see. It seems that once revolutions commence they need to continue or face the threat of collapse. Hence the phrase 'ongoing revolution'. In some cases, such as in the Cultural Revolution in China, the revolutionary leadership actually believed that it was desirable to continue the process of revolution, albeit in a modified form.

## QUESTIONS

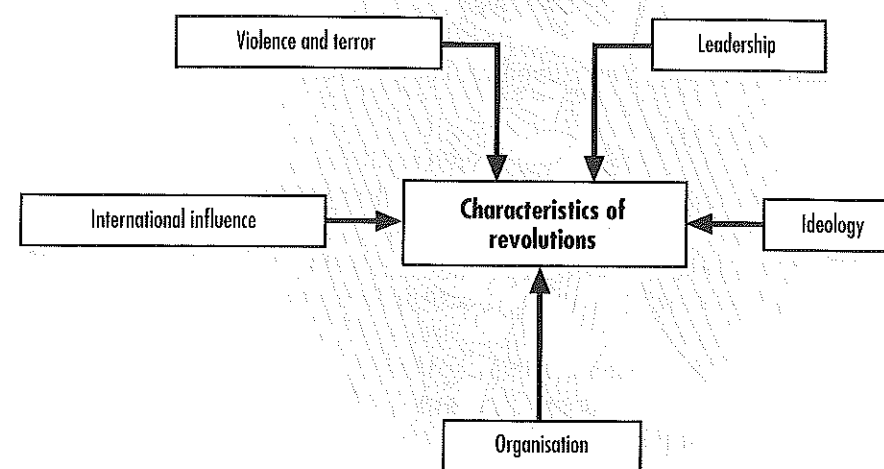
- 1 Distinguish between revolutions in general and political revolutions.
- 2 Make a list of all the revolutions you can think of. Classify them as either political revolutions, social revolutions, technological revolutions or other, and discuss the type of change that has taken place and the consequences of such change.
- 3 Debate the issue: 'Political revolutions do not necessarily have to involve violence.' Try to envisage a non-violent revolution.



## THE CHARACTERISTICS OF REVOLUTIONS

While revolutions in one form or another have been documented throughout history for over 2000 years, only since the French Revolution of the late eighteenth century have they acquired a particular character consistent with the definition discussed above. Prior to the French Revolution people saw revolutions coming from the gods or nature. The Romans believed revolutions were cyclical and dependent on non-human, elemental forces. In more recent times revolutions have developed a new meaning whereby human factors play a very important part. These revolutions have a number of clear characteristics which, to varying degrees, are present in all instances.

The characteristics of revolution



### Violence and terror

Violence and terror are the very essence of revolution. Indeed, when most people picture revolutions they visualise scenes of violence—the storming of the Bastille in 1789, the bread riots in St Petersburg in 1917 or the civil war in China during the late 1940s. In his study of revolutions, Peter Calvert (in *Revolutions*, 1970, p. 15) defines the concept in terms of violence:

... revolution may be understood throughout as referring to events in which physical force (or the convincing threat of it) has actually been used successfully to overthrow a government or regime.

This view was echoed even more bluntly by the Communist writer, Friedrich Engels:

A revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is; it is the act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets and canon.

Similarly, the Cuban revolutionary, Fidel Castro, wrote:

A revolution is not a bed of roses. A revolution is a struggle to the death between the future and the past. The old order always resists to the death and the new society fights with all its energy to survive.

The famous Latin American revolutionary, Che Guevara, goes even further in his conviction of the importance of violence as the only way forward in a revolution:

The Revolution must be a deed beyond all measure, burning all things before it ... If mankind is ever to escape from its misery, there is only one method: the destruction of everything in fire and blood ... There is no other way, no other hope.

Revolutions use violence to achieve their goals of undermining the government regime, destroying opposition forces and striking fear and hence compliance into the civilian population. Acts of violence usually include assassination and murder, sabotage and destruction of property, and guns and bombs are the most common tools used to achieve these ends.

The role of the military is paramount here. As the military is always the main source of war equipment and personnel, and hence potential power, their role in defending the existing government or supporting the revolutionaries is critical in determining the outcome of the revolution. The part played by the Gardes Francaises in the fall of the Bastille and the insurrection of the Russian army in the Revolution of February 1917 provides clear evidence of this. Conversely, the lack of military support for the revolutionaries in 1848 and in more recent times, the Chinese students in Tian An Men Square and the hard-line anti-Yeltsin forces in Russia in 1993, demonstrates how potential revolutions can be extinguished very quickly when the government commands the loyalty of the military. Certainly, no revolution could possibly succeed without at least the support, if not the active participation, of the military in the overthrow of the government.

### Leadership

The role of leaders in the making and execution of revolutions is a curious one. The popular image of the idealist hero leading the masses in an uprising against a tyrannical regime is in most cases nothing more than a romanticised myth perpetuated by the victorious revolutionary government as an exercise in propaganda. While the names of Robespierre, Lenin, Trotsky and Mao are famous in history as successful revolutionaries, the precise nature of their contribution to the outbreak of revolution is at best questionable.

The prevailing opinion among historians of revolutions is that the majority of revolutions are spontaneous and popular outbreaks that occur with very little pre-determined planning and leadership. William Doyle, in his analysis of the French Revolution (*Origins of the French Revolution*, 1980, p. 213), for example, admits that:

It would be truer to say that the revolutionaries had been created by the revolution ...

Krishan Kumar, in his study of revolutions (*Revolution*, 1971, p. 68), generalises even further:

In nearly all cases the professional revolutionaries, after years or decades of theorising, organising and plotting, are caught unprepared. They experience something ... like a 'happy surprise' at the sudden turn of events, and leave their libraries, or hurry home from exile, or are liberated from prison. Since the collapse of the state has had so little to do with their own activities, they are even likely to be unduly gloomy about the prospects of revolution. De Tocqueville observed the perplexity of the 'leaders' of the February Revolution of 1848, sitting in their clubs and newspaper offices trying to organise the forces that had been unleashed with such apparent spontaneity. In 1871, the year of the Paris Commune, there was no leadership to the insurrection, and none for some time afterwards.

Even Lenin, perhaps the greatest of all revolutionary leaders, was, only weeks before the February Revolution of 1917, languishing in Switzerland saying 'we, the old, may not live to see the decisive battles of the coming revolution'.

Notwithstanding these conclusions about the part played by leaders in the outbreak of revolutions, few historians would discount the role of leaders in shaping the course of the revolution and its outcomes. If indeed Lenin was caught napping in Switzerland in February 1917 it wasn't long before he was hurrying across the eastern front to the Finland Station in St Petersburg to announce his significant April Thesis and, in time, take charge of the revolution. As a consequence of this a number of studies have been conducted by historians on the identity and characteristics of these men who have had such a profound affect on the course of modern history. In acknowledging the obvious generalisations

involved in this exercise, an intriguing portrait of the typical revolutionary has emerged. This portrait says something about the typical revolutionary's age, social and vocational background, place of origin, gender and education, and provides us with a useful yardstick to measure-up and compare particular revolutionaries under investigation.

- **Age:** Revolutionary leaders were neither very young nor very old. The leaders of the English, French, American and Russian revolutions, for example, were in their thirties and forties. The French radicals, Robespierre and Danton, were only 36 and 35 respectively, while Mao in China and Castro in Cuba were only in their thirties when they became committed revolutionaries.
- **Social and vocational background:** Revolutionary leaders were mainly from middle class backgrounds. The English, American and French revolutions were dominated by middle class professionals and over 90 per cent of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party had middle class backgrounds or were engaged in middle class occupations. Both the lower class (whether workers or peasants) and the upper class played minor roles in revolutionary leadership, largely because the former lacked the necessary skills and the latter were usually the defenders of the established order.
- **Place of origin:** Most revolutionary leaders came from urban areas rather than from the countryside. Perhaps this was because towns and cities provided better opportunities to organise large groups of people or perhaps this was merely the environment where middle class people lived. As the seat of government and administration was always located in cities, and this was the obvious target of revolutions, this too would have drawn the revolutionary leaders to these areas.
- **Gender:** All major revolutionary leaders were men. Although some women, like the German Spartacist, Rosa Luxemburg, were active revolutionaries, none of them have been successful in overturning a government and installing a new revolutionary government.
- **Education:** Generally speaking, revolutionary leaders were far better educated than most people. A good number of them could be regarded as being members of the intelligentsia. Most leaders of the French Revolution were either lawyers or well educated members of the bourgeoisie, while 78 per cent of modern developing nations' revolutionary leaders have received university or advanced professional training. Jefferson, Lenin, Sun Yat-sen (Yixian), Gandhi, and Castro were all highly educated professionals.

### Ideology

One historian (M. Rejai in *The Strategy of Political Revolution*, 1973, p. 33) has defined ideology as:

... an emotion-laden, myth-saturated, action-related system of beliefs and values ...

In more simple terms, ideology is the set of ideas or beliefs that characterise a particular revolutionary movement. Revolutionaries use ideology to spell out to the masses their hopes and dreams of a new social order. Revolutionary ideology always contains the solution to society's problems. Some ideologies are simple and straight-forward while others are based on complex philosophical doctrines like, for example, Marxism. Often ideologies are modified or temporarily abandoned to suit the changing circumstances of the revolution. Lenin's implementation of the pro-capitalist New Economic Policy in 1921 is a good example of this.

Revolutionary ideologies have a number of important features:

- they often harness mass philosophies, like nationalism, patriotism or liberty
- they are often used as a medium for propaganda



- parts of them are often directed towards morals and emotions
- they sometimes deliberately exaggerate or distort the truth
- they are often a source for slogans and revolutionary symbols
- they are a source of social control—a way of manipulating the minds and actions of the masses.

Although ideology is regarded as an important feature of revolutions, the question has to be raised as to what extent successful revolutions implement their ideologies. Are ideologies merely used to gain power and are they too unrealistic in their hopes and dreams?

### Organisation

Organisation is the essential link between ideology, leadership and action. Although many revolutions occur spontaneously, the ability of revolutionaries to harness the energies of the people is largely dependent on their capacity to organise themselves into effective agents of change. Lenin once wrote that organisation is the most effective weapon of the revolutionary classes:

The proletariat can become and inevitably will become a dominant force only because its intellectual unity created by the principles of Marxism is fortified by the material unity of organisation which welds millions of toilers into an army of the working class.

Revolutionary organisations usually take three main forms:

- **Political organisations:** These usually take the form of political clubs, societies and associations and, since the nineteenth century, political parties. Revolutionary political parties have a number of features:
  - they are usually small and elitist in structure, often dominated by 'career or professional' revolutionaries
  - they are tightly controlled and highly disciplined with little tolerance for minority views
  - they are single-minded in their determination to achieve their goal—'the ends justifies the means'.
- **Military organisations:** As revolutions are violent overthrows of government, revolutionary movements need a military organisation to fight their battles. Sometimes these organisations can be very large, with thousands of men and a well defined chain of command, but more commonly they are smaller, well structured forces employing guerilla tactics. Indeed, the Latin American revolutionary, Che Guevara, claimed that 'a nucleus of 30 to 50 men is sufficient to initiate an armed fight in any country in the Americas'.
- **Popular organisations:** These organisations are spontaneous and usually unanticipated social groups thrown up by the revolution. They are essentially the people's response to the turmoil and include clubs, communes, councils, workers' unions and soviets. Often they take the professional revolutionaries by surprise. In the French Revolution they took the form of clubs and corporations, in 1871 they reappeared as the Paris Commune, while in Russia in 1905 Soviets or workers' councils appeared as a popular organisation. Sometimes these organisations served as an important link between the professional revolutionaries and the people while in other circumstances they were ruthlessly destroyed by the revolutionaries as a potential threat to the success of the revolution.

### International influence

Few revolutionary movements have been unaffected by the international environment. Revolutions do not occur in isolation; they are influenced by, and in turn, have an influence

on, the international context in which they occur. The French Revolution was clearly influenced by the royalist opposition from abroad, particularly England, and the Russian Revolution of October 1917 caused such an uproar among western nations that many of them intervened by sending agents and small armies into Russia to destroy Lenin and the Bolsheviks.

There are two main reasons why neighbouring countries are usually drawn into a revolution. First, in most situations the revolutionaries need, or at least desire, foreign support, either military or diplomatic, in their efforts to topple the existing government. The Soviet Union's support of the Chinese Communist Party in their formative years in the 1920s and then after the revolution was a case in point. Second, the fate of a revolution sometimes relies on the international 'climate of opinion' with large and powerful nations exercising as much influence as possible on the revolution. The support the Austrians gave to the French monarchy during the French Revolution in the late eighteenth century and the United States counter-revolutionary activity against Castro's revolutionaries in Cuba in the mid twentieth century are examples of this.

### QUESTIONS

- 1 Why is the role of the military so important in a revolution? Give examples of where the military have contributed to and resisted revolutionary movements.
- 2 Describe and account for the typical revolutionary leader. Compare examples of revolutionary leaders with this generalised portrait. Account for any discrepancies that you notice.
- 3 How important is ideology in the success of a revolution? What methods are used by revolutionaries to communicate ideology to the masses?
- 4 What are the types of organisations that develop with revolutions?
- 5 How important is the international climate of opinion in the success of a revolution? Give an example of a revolution that was clearly influenced by international pressures.

### MODELS OF REVOLUTIONS

Historians who have specialised in the study of revolutions have sought to understand them better by proposing models which most revolutions follow. A model is a description of a generalised pattern of events—a type of 'template' that particular types of events tend to follow. These theoretical patterns are based on observations of revolutions in the real world and are useful historical tools for the study and comparison of revolutions.

Ever since the French Revolution the pattern of the great revolutions seems to have a basic uniformity. One historian (K. Kumar in *Revolution*, 1971, p. 72) has likened this pattern to a type of natural organic growth rather like a disease.

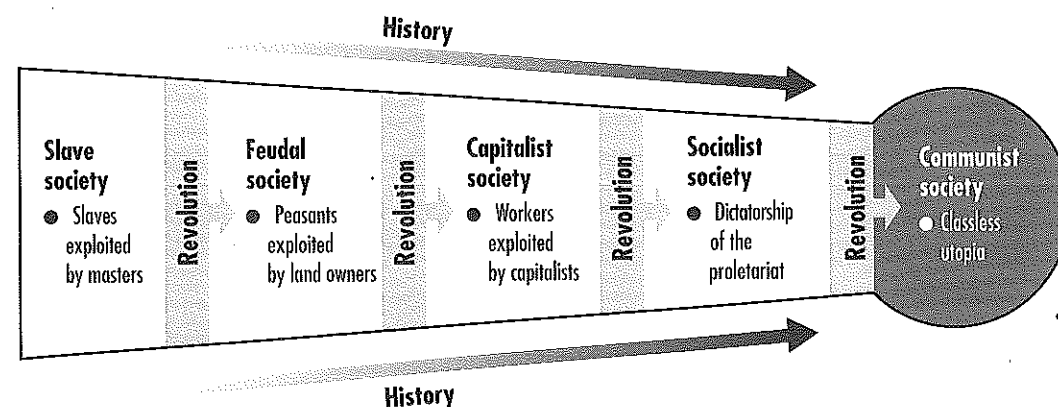
... more significant was the conviction that there was a sort of 'natural history' of revolution, a development as regular as the growth process of organisms, and exhibiting the same orderly sequence of stages or phases. Knowing the particular species of an organism, we know enough about its general characteristics to be able to predict the direction and rate of growth of its development. Revolution too was a 'species' of social life, with its own particular features of form and substance. Since all revolutions had similar causes and were composed of similar elements, their courses were bound to follow a basically uniform pattern.

This notion of revolution as 'social pathology', which predictably followed the sequence of symptoms, onset of illness, crisis and restoration of health, led historians to believe that a theoretical model of modern revolutions was possible.



The German philosopher Hegel (1770–1831) was one of the first to suggest a general model of revolutions. Hegel saw revolution as a compelling process commencing with liberty or freedom as its aim but ending in suppression and the annihilation of ideals, that is, the revolution 'devouring its children'. This so called 'dialectical logic' had a profound influence on thinkers that followed Hegel, the most important being Karl Marx. Marx (1818–83) and Friedrich Engels (1820–95) developed the theory of 'dialectic materialism' based on the notion that history was driven by an inevitable struggle between classes for the control of the means of production and wealth of a nation. This theory, first espoused in their document *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848, claimed that human history progressed by way of stages and that each one of these stages succeeded one another through violent revolution. Revolution then, was an inevitable and predictable part of the human struggle, one which was necessary for 'civilisation' to progress.

#### Revolutions from a Marxist perspective



These philosophical models help us understand when revolutions occur but they do not specify the nature of revolutions themselves. For this we need to turn to the historians of revolution. Crane Brinton, in his *Anatomy of Revolution* (1965), argues that revolutions have a life cycle passing through phases of increasing fervour and zeal for radical changes until they reach a climax of intensity, which is followed by a phase of disillusionment, declining revolutionary energy and then finally the restoration of stability and order. J. H. Stewart, in his study of the French Revolution (*A Documentary History of the French Revolution*, 1951, p. 790), provides a simple three stage model of:

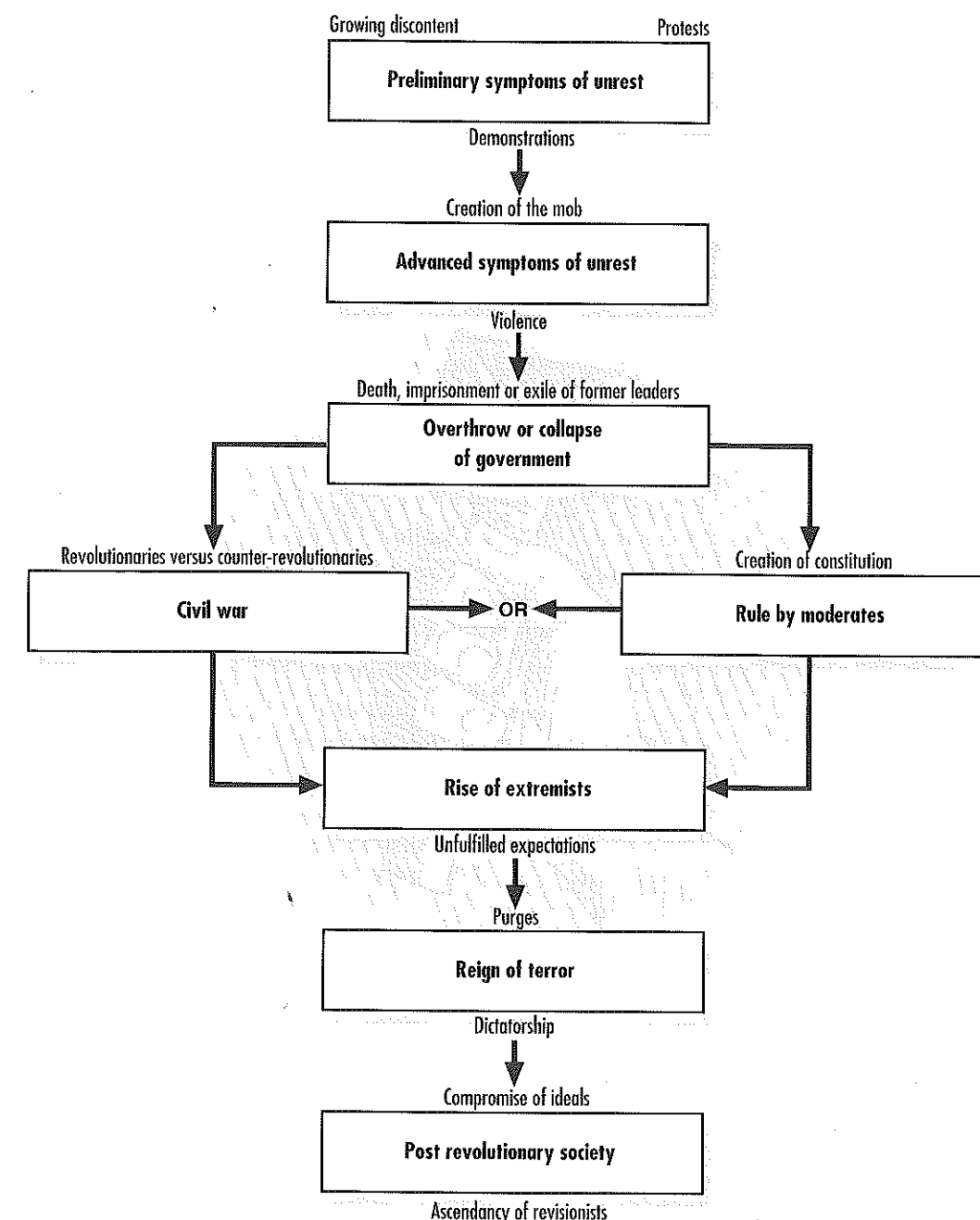
1. Disestablishment (breakdown of the established regime)
2. Innovation (new ideas implemented through new institutions)
3. Compromise (adapting the new institutions to the necessities of the times)

E. J. Hobsbawm, in his *Age of Revolution* (1964, pp. 159–60), suggests a model based on the European experience of revolution:

1. Crisis in the political affairs of the state.
2. Insurrection and overthrow of the government
3. Formation of the provisional government
4. Formation of a national guard.
5. Acceptance of the revolution by the country or civil war.
6. The creation of a constitution and revolutionary government
7. Diplomatic and/or military support for similar revolutions in neighbouring countries.

An amalgamation of these and other models proposed by historians leaves us with the following model of revolutions in the modern world.

#### Model of revolutions in the modern world



#### QUESTIONS

1. What purpose do historical models serve? How do the foregoing models help us understand revolutions?
2. According to Marx, when and why do revolutions occur? How useful is his theory in explaining when and why revolutions occur?
3. After you have completed a study of a revolution, analyse the foregoing models of revolution. Account for any similarities and differences.

## THE CAUSES OF REVOLUTIONS

One of the most important questions about revolutions is 'Why do they occur?' Like all complex issues in history there is no one simple answer to this question. The French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–59) argued that revolutions are not caused by periods of long term repression alone but by periods of steadily improving social and economic conditions followed by a sudden recession or crisis.

It is not always by going from bad to worse that a country falls into a revolution. It happens most frequently that a people, which had supported the most crushing laws without complaint, and apparently as if they were unfelt, throws them off with violence as soon as the burden begins to be diminished. The state of things destroyed by a revolution is almost always somewhat better than that which immediately preceded it; and experience has shown that the most dangerous moment for a bad government is usually that when it enters upon the work of reform.

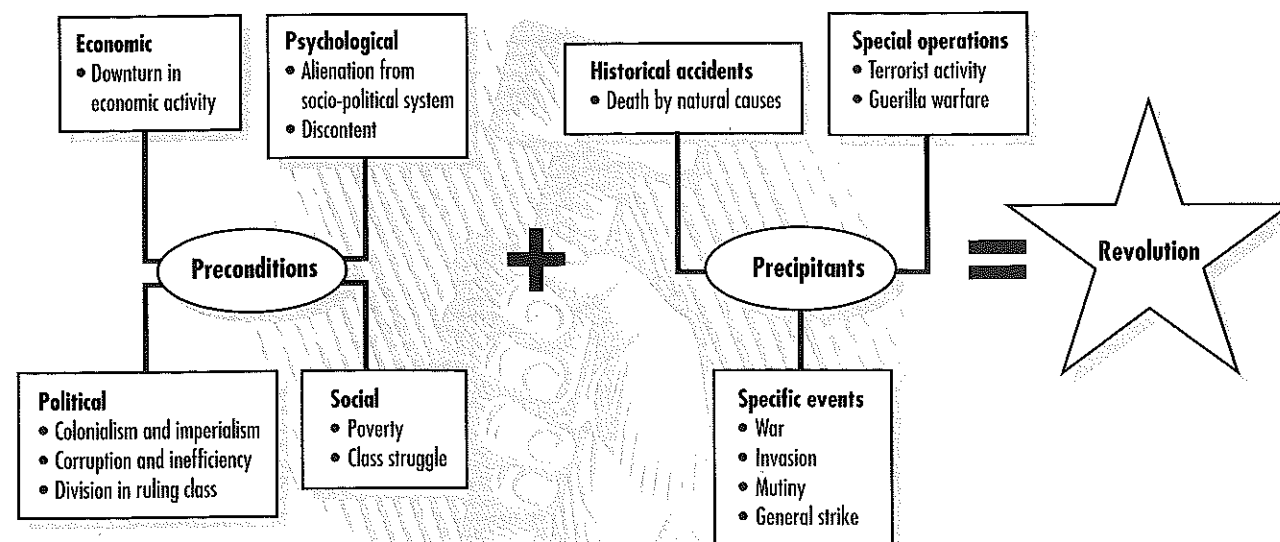
For example, the Russian Revolution of 1905 occurred after the depression of 1900 and the Russo–Japanese War had interrupted the industrial boom of the 1890s, and in 1917 after the First World War destroyed the gains initiated by the Stolypin period from 1906–11.

Other writers stress the political causes of revolution. The ancient Greek philosopher Plato argued that revolutions occur when there is a breakdown of consensus in the governing classes. He said 'in any form of government revolution always starts from the outbreak of internal dissension in the ruling class'. Hannah Arendt, in her study (*On Revolutions*, 1963, p. 112), supports this view:

Generally speaking, we may say that no revolution is even possible where the authority of the body politic is truly intact ... Revolutions always appear to succeed with amazing ease in their initial stage, and the reason is that the men who make them first only pick up the power of a regime in plain disintegration; they are the consequences but never the causes of the downfall of political authority.

In a sense, then, governments are not overthrown, they simply fall under the burden of their own advanced decay. The French, Russian and Chinese revolutions are all good examples of this view.

The causes of revolution



A more structured approach to the issue may be to identify two types of causes, preconditions and precipitants. Preconditions are the long term factors that generate discontent and create a revolutionary environment while precipitants are more like short term factors that commence the revolution. Under this analysis both types of causes are needed to create a revolution—the combustible environment and the spark to ignite it.

## QUESTIONS

- 1 Outline the socio-economic and political reasons why revolutions occur. Test the accuracy of these causes against a revolution you are familiar with.
- 2 What are the differences between preconditions and precipitants? Why are they interdependent?

## DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

- 1 What is a revolution? What are the main characteristics of revolutions and how are they different from insurrections and rebellions?
- 2 Analyse the contribution made by revolutionary leaders to the causes of revolutions.
- 3 Consider the hypothesis: 'Revolutions are the creators of revolutionaries.' Test this statement against a number of revolutionary situations you have studied.
- 4 Why do revolutions occur? Are regimes 'pushed' or do they 'fall'?

## THINKING CRITICALLY

- 1 If, as Marx says, revolutions are the locomotives of history, what then is the fuel of the locomotive?
- 2 How useful are historical models in studying the events from the past? Is it possible and appropriate to theorise in such a way as to reduce all human behaviour to fit a particular 'mould'?
- 3 Revolutions can be defined as the self-destruction of a decaying regime. Discuss.
- 4 What will the revolutions of the future be like? Do you expect they may take a different form from what has occurred over the past two hundred years? Are there any new factors that may change the pattern of revolutions?
- 5 Research: Make a comparative study of European revolutions and 'developing world' revolutions, such as the ones in Central and South America. Do they exhibit similar characteristics or can you see clear differences between them?

## CHALLENGING YOUR KEY UNDERSTANDINGS

- 1 Analyse the contribution made by revolutionary leaders and ideas to the causes and course of a revolution.
- 2 Explain the role played by social, economic and political discontent in bringing about revolution.
- 3 How important are local factors in influencing the nature of revolution? Discuss with reference to a revolution you have studied.
- 4 Are generalisations about the nature of revolutions possible and valid?