

ANATOMY OF REVOLUTION

Source: A Preface to History, Carl G. Gustavson, 1955, pp. 102-109.

Misconceptions about revolutions and the truth about the French Revolution

Definition: A true revolution is one in which a social or economic group is superseded in control of the state by another social or economic group under circumstances of violence.

Misconceptions — and the true perspective

- (1) A revolution is caused by the misery of the people.

France: The fundamental change in the situation was the growth of economic strength and organization of the middle class, especially the upper middle class, coincident with a diminution of real power in the status of the nobility and clergy. . . . The French government, which had undergone no fundamental revision for upwards of a century and a half, was out of date; it did not properly represent the social forces of France in 1789. Also, French peasants were better off than all others elsewhere in Europe.

- (2) One of the principal reasons for a revolution is the tyranny and brutality of the government.

France: The picture that emerges [of Louis XVI's government] is not one of strength, but of such ridiculous weakness as to evoke derision. Someone has very aptly said that governments are not overthrown, they commit suicide An outbreak is most likely to occur when a government is obviously incompetent.

- (3) The transfer of power occurs when the people storm the citadels of the government in the course of a civil war.

France: Actually, civil war occurs after the ruling class is deprived of power and then tries to get it back. In the words of Gustavson: We have discovered that the virtual collapse of an old regime permits peaceful accession to power by the reformers. Those who usually start the civil war are the former ruling classes, who have been deprived of more than they had expected, and who now realize what loss of power really means.

- (4) In a revolution, the people rise spontaneously and take power.

France: Judging from the French example, a revolution enters a violent stage due to a combination of resistance from the opposition, the presence of a well-knit revolutionary group that wishes to carry the movement to its logical conclusion, and the proximity of the mob, whose arms are ready for use when force is necessary. . . . A fairly good rule-of-thumb standard for thinking about the radical stage of a revolution is to assume that about 10% of the people are strongly in favor of the movement and another 10% are equally strongly against it The momentum and the leaders emerge from a small minority; any revolution is certain to be a minority revolution after an initial swelling of popular enthusiasm. In France, the society which ultimately emerged as the guiding spirit of the radicals was the Jacobin Club with HQs in Paris and clubs established throughout the country.

- (5) The result of a revolution is to gain greater freedom for the people.

France: Successful revolutionists naturally claim to have restored liberty to the people. The fact obviously is, however, that the French under the Jacobins or Napoleon were more directly affected by the government and were better controlled by it than under the Old Regime. The Communists gave the Russians a police system far more efficient than that of the tsars. The American government, after the establishment of the Constitution, was stronger than the British predecessor. Judging by these examples, one must decide that a revolution usually replaces a decrepit authority with a vigorous one. The new administration will exercise more effective control than its predecessor, which is likely to result in a positive lessening of individual liberties. At the same time, the removal of the principal abuses existent before the insurrection will give a sense of added freedom.

The Pattern of Revolution

Following is a brief sketch of the probable successive stages in a revolution. We must take care to remember that the pattern can only be a tentative one because of inevitable variations.

- (1) Generally speaking, the initial indication of impending upheaval is the activity of writers in denouncing existent conditions, pointing out the worst maladjustments, satirizing and rendering ridiculous certain common practices and ideas, and destroying faith in existent institutions. These men provide new goals for humanity, coin popular slogans, and paint pictures of future utopias if suggested reforms were to occur.
- (2) In the second stage, widespread public dissatisfaction manifests itself and culminates in riots, assassinations, and other acts of violence.
- (3) The ruling group is intimidated into making repeated concessions until a real transfer of power takes place—the third stage. Then, by peaceful means, the reformers try to carry out their ideas.
- (4) If the measures are of so drastic a nature as to split the nation, the ability of the moderates to maintain control is lost, and the initiative passes to the extremists. In this, the fourth stage, the former ruling group, now out of power, and experiencing the disabilities of this position, attempts to regain control of the machinery of government. Civil war follows! This struggle entrenches the radicals in power.
- (5) In the fifth stage these radicals attempt to bring into realization their utopian dreams. In France, this meant the nobles lost their heads!
- (6) When their tenure of power has run its course, the drift to normalcy occurs, which is called the Thermidorian Reaction in the French Revolution. According to Crane Brinton, whose book The Anatomy of Revolution should be consulted in this connection, Russia would seem to be undergoing a protracted Thermidorian Reaction.
- (7) Some writers add a seventh stage to the pattern, that of Bonapartism or imperialism, in which the new regime embarks upon a career of conquest under the guise of liberating other countries.