EDITED BY JAN HANSEN, JOCHEN HUNG, JAROSLAV IRA, JUDIT KLEMENT, SYLVAIN LESAGE, JUAN LUIS SIMAL, AND ANDREW TOMPKINS

THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

A Multi-Perspective History of Modern Europe, 1500-2000

https://www.openbookpublishers.com

Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0323#resources

Cover image: Wilhelm Gunkel, *Fly Angel Fly* (2019). Cover design by Katy Saunders

3.3.1 Revolutions and Civil Wars in Early Modern History (ca. 1500–1800)

Lars Behrisch, Benjamin Conrad, and Laurent Brassart

Introduction

Fig. 1: M. McDonald, "Battle of Moncontour, 1569", The Royal Collection Trust (from The Print Collection of Cassiano dal Pozzo Part II: Architecture, Topography and Military Maps, London), 2019, https://militarymaps.rct.uk/other-16th-century-conflicts/battle-of-moncontour-1569. A middle/high oblique view of the Battle of Moncontour, fought on 3 October 1569 between the French Catholics, commanded by Henry Duke of Anjou (later Henry III; 19 September 1551–1552 August 1589) and the French Huguenot army, commanded by Admiral Gaspard de Coligny (16 February 1519–24 August 1572) resulting in a Catholic victory. French Wars of Religion (1562–1598); Third War (1568–1570). Oriented with north (Tramontana) to top.

Civil wars are presumably as old as human history; revolutions are not. There may well have been revolutions, to be sure, before the term was first used—ironically, in a rather unrevolutionary event, the 'Glorious Revolution' of England in 1688. But to talk of a revolution, as opposed, say, to a mere

rebellion, is to talk of a take-over of central power in a state, which in turn requires that some form of centralised state exists in the first place. This was not the case in Europe before the late Middle Ages (although states had also existed in ancient times—and thus, presumably, events that might qualify as revolutions took place). Some regions of Europe were more precocious than others, of course, especially those in the south; the 'Sicilian Vespers' of 1282, a bloody event which saw Sicilians drive their French masters from the island may well have been the first revolution, properly speaking. It also shows another important feature of revolutions: the participation of sections of the population and not just of a small elite in overthrowing a regime—otherwise, we might more fittingly speak of a *coup d'état*, a putsch or a palace revolt.

Western Europe

Although the phenomenon of revolutions is quite a bit older than the term itself, it was nevertheless relatively rare in premodern times for a regime to be overthrown. The reason is simple: states had been created and continued to be ruled by monarchs and their dynasties, and while it might seem legitimate to depose a particular monarch deemed unfit to rule, it was quite unthinkable to depose his (or her) dynastic kin altogether, as state and dynasty were generally seen as one and the same. The situation might be different, though, when a foreign dynasty took over—such as in late-thirteenth-century Sicily—or when the ruler's next of kin was foreign or considered as such. This was the case with the mid-sixteenth-century Spanish inheritance of the Netherlands or, somewhat less conspicuously, the Scottish Stuarts' succession to the English throne in the early seventeenth century. In both cases, rebellion and ultimately revolution were caused by grave blunders and miscalculations on the part of the monarchs—but these mistakes were committed largely because the rulers did not sufficiently understand and respect the political traditions of their new dominions and were in turn accused of just this. In both cases, too, it took many years for resistance to foment into rebellion and many more years for the latter to succeed. Still, they became full-blown revolutions, involving all parts of the population and leading to the deposition of Philip II of Spain (in 1581) and even, in the case of Charles I of England, to the first public execution of a ruling monarch (1649). Both revolutions also led to republican regimes, if only short-lived in England and never entirely without some monarchical traits in the Netherlands.

These two major early modern revolutions had yet another feature in common: a civil war that accompanied them. In both instances, opponents and defenders of the king fought each other over many years; and in both cases, different religious allegiances played a major part in this division (which

remained permanent in the Netherlands with a predominantly Protestant north and a Catholic south—today's Belgium). Other major civil wars in the early modern period were caused principally by religious divisions, too. This is not surprising in a period when, on the one hand, religion was of primordial importance in people's lives, while on the other hand, different variants of Christianity claimed to be the only route to God's grace and to eternal life. The French Wars of Religion (1562–1598) and the Thirty Years' War in Germany (1618–1648) were both civil wars of this kind, although they would have ended considerably sooner had they not intersected with long-standing factional and dynastic strife as well as interventions from the outside—a feature of practically all civil wars.

Factional or dynastic strife, combined with outside interventions, also fuelled a number of civil wars, smaller in scope, that were caused neither by full-blown revolution nor by religious strife. This goes for, among others, the mid-seventeenth century "Fronde" in France, a series of extremely bloody feuds of various groups and factions against the despised regime of Cardinal Mazarin. It also applies to the Portuguese and Catalan uprisings against the Spanish King in the 1640s, of which only the former was successful. France used this opportunity to intervene on behalf of the separatists; Spain soon returned the favour and intervened on behalf of the "Frondeurs". There was a concentration of internal feuds and civil wars in the decades around the mid-seventeenth century, from Portugal and Catalonia through France and England to Germany. Each scenario had its own specific roots and circumstances, but apart from marking a final apogee of confessional strife, this concentration also expresses the fact that across Western Europe, princely dynasties now consolidated their power over large territories, triggering massive resistance from various regional and factional elites. As a rule, princes gained the upper hand—although in Germany, this was not the case for the Emperor but for the individual regional princes. In England, too, royal power was essentially restored in 1660, only to be limited, some thirty years later, by the bloodless 'Glorious Revolution'.

Eastern Europe

As in Western Europe, some civil wars of early modern Eastern Europe took on international significance. Such was the case, for example, in the Hungarian civil war of the sixteenth century, in which Austria and the Ottoman Empire took part as neighbouring countries, each supporting different kings who claimed the Hungarian throne. The war ended in a split of the Kingdom of Hungary. The western part was ruled by the Habsburgs, while the larger, eastern part became a vassal of the Ottoman Empire.

In the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, it was more common for rebellions of the nobility to take on the character of civil wars. The Hen War of 1537 is widely seen as the first rebellion of the Polish nobility. Noblemen demanded that King Zygmunt I Stary ('The Old') relinquish parts of a planned implementation of reforms that would establish a provisional centralised government. However, the noblemen were not confident enough to confront Zygmunt I Stary by force. Some of their demands were accepted, but most were rejected. The Hen War is therefore seen as a failure for the nobility.

Perhaps the best-known civil war in early modern Poland-Lithuania was the Zebrzydowski uprising (1606–1607), in which parts of the nobility opposed the abolition of the elective monarchy and its replacement by a hereditary monarchy. The rebellion was crushed by King Zygmunt III Wasa and his supporters. However, Zygmunt abandoned his initial plans and in 1609 reintegrated the rebels into the political system. In 1665–1666 Poland experienced another uprising, led by Jerzy Lubomirski, against higher taxes. Lubomirski's troops defeated the army of Jan II Kazimierz Wasa in 1666. A compromise was settled and Jan later abdicated. The Lubomirski uprising was therefore more successful. It also marked the end of the Wasa Dynasty in Poland-Lithuania.

In the eighteenth century, struggles in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth were exploited in the foreign policy of neighbouring states, which instructed and financed the noble confederations. After 1770, Poland-Lithuania was under extensive Russian influence. The 1792 Targowica Confederation—under the patronage of Russian Empress Catherine the Great—was the last confederation to oppose political reforms in Poland; above all, it advocated repealing Europe's first modern constitution, the *Ustawa rządowa* of May 1791. After the 1793 (second) partition of Poland-Lithuania between Russia and Prussia, an uprising led by Tadeusz Kościuszko (1746–1817) against Russia in 1794 is seen as the first national uprising (*powstanie*) by historians, as Poles fought without help from abroad.

In Russia, rebellions and civil wars were rarer. Historians consider the transition period after the extinction of the Rurik Dynasty and the accession of Mikhail I of the Romanov Dynasty in 1613 as a form of civil war. This period was later called the Time of Troubles (*smuta*). In addition, the exclusion of the Old Believers during Patriarch Nikon's reform of the Russian Orthodox Church in the middle of the seventeenth century exhibited some elements of a civil war. The best-known rebellion in Russia of the early modern period is the Pugachev Rebellion (1773–1774). The peasant leader Emelyan Pugachev organised an army of farmers and Cossacks in central-southern Russia, claiming to be Tsar Peter III and promising land reform and the expulsion of the nobility. After some initial success, Pugachev was captured in 1774 by troops loyal to Empress Catherine the Great and later executed.

1776–1789: An "Atlantic Revolution"?

The American Revolution (1776–1783) was a powerful matrix for the emergence of European revolutionary movements during the 1780s. It was, on the one hand, a triumphant example of a war for national independence; on the other hand, it represented the success of a major political transformation based on Enlightenment ideas—liberty, sovereignty of the people, property, democracy, and the republican ideal (a political system that contemporaries had so far believed to work only in city-states or very small countries).

The influence of the American Revolution was such that in 1955, in the context of the Cold War, two non-Marxist historians, the American Robert Palmer and the Frenchman Jacques Godechot, elaborated the concept of an 'Atlantic Revolution' to link the different revolutionary movements that broke out in America and Europe between 1776 and the 1820s. From the moment it was formulated, however, the Atlantic Revolution was contested by other historians who were critical of a US takeover of European history. In their view, the concept presupposed a centre-periphery framework, negated the power of the French Revolution in European transformations, and obscured the national contexts that made each European revolution different. Recent historiography allows a more nuanced vision that does not entirely disqualify either of these two conflicting approaches.

Two types of revolutionary movement broke out in Europe in the 1780s: those chiefly directed against the occupation of a ruler from abroad (Ireland and Belgium), and those directed against political domination by local oligarchies (Geneva and the Netherlands). In several cities of the Helvetic Confederation, particularly in the French-speaking and Calvinist city of Geneva, well-established and widely held democratic demands began to challenge the existing oligarchic order from the end of the 1770s. The 'Natives'—Genevans born of foreign parents—and the inhabitants of the rural hinterlands wanted to obtain the right of citizenship, while the Genevan bourgeoisie wanted to open up the municipal power held only by a few rich patrician families. Despite its resistance, the municipal oligarchy was overthrown on the revolutionary day of 8 April 1782. But by July, this 'Genevan Revolution' was already crushed by the military intervention of neighbouring powers—the kingdoms of France and Piedmont and the cantons of Zurich and Bern—at the request of the oligarchs.

The traditional political conflict in the Republic of the United Provinces of the Netherlands, inherited from the seventeenth century, pitted the Orange Party of the *stadhouder*, the head of the fleet and army, against the republican States Party, composed of the so-called 'regents' (*regenten*)—the bourgeois and Calvinist oligarchy of the large merchant cities, who held municipal and provincial power in the autonomous provinces. This conflict was revived

after the defeat of the Republic in the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780–1784). Consequently, *stadhouder* Wilhelm V, a traditionalist supporter of the British alliance, was accused of being a traitor to the nation. At the same time, a third political force appeared, largely inspired by the American example, from which it took its name: the 'Patriot' movement. This movement was a coalition of the liberal nobility, who no longer recognised themselves in the Orange Party, and the urban middle classes (lawyers, shopkeepers, craftsmen), who lacked political rights *vis-à-vis* the urban oligarchy. In 1781, the liberal nobleman Johan Derk van der Capellen tot den Pol (1741–1784) anonymously published the best-selling pamphlet 'To the People of the Netherlands', using the American example to call for armed revolt against inadequate government. From 1784 onwards, the Patriot movement demanded that a new constitution be drawn up to recognise the sovereignty of the people and declare the natural rights of man, as in the United States. Militias were formed following the example of the American National Guard and violently attacked oligarchic municipal authorities. Frightened, the regents' party now rallied with the Orangemen against the Patriots; and in 1787, King Frederick-William II of Prussia (1744–1797), the *stadhouder*'s brother-in-law, intervened with his military to crush the Dutch Revolution.

Other revolutionary movements in the same decade targeted foreign domination. In Ireland, colonised by England, the American Revolution encouraged the Anglo-Irish Protestant elite to organise themselves into a 'patriot' movement in order to obtain greater political autonomy, including a proper parliament and a constitution. A militia, the Irish Volunteers, was formed in 1779, with recruits found among the Protestants. To avoid opening a new front in the middle of the American War of Independence, Lord North's British government granted autonomy to the Dublin Parliament in January 1783 and relaxed anti-Catholic measures.

In the Austrian Netherlands (Belgium), from 1784 to 1786, Emperor Joseph II (1741–1790) authoritatively imposed several measures, typical of enlightened despotism, to reform administration, justice, and taxation, as well as the economy and the Catholic clergy. But these measures were perceived as an attack on local traditions. Opposition movements were formed: the more conservative Statists, advocates of the *ancien régime* who called for armed foreign intervention; and the Vonckists, who sought to create a new democratic regime. Taking advantage of revolutionary events in France, the Statists and the Vonckists joined forces and launched the Brabant Revolution in October 1789 against their Austrian overlord. On 7 January 1790, they proclaimed the formation of the Republic of the United Belgian States, clearly endorsing the American federal model. But unity was short-lived: the Vonckists, more sensitive to the French revolutionary model, reproached the new state for being undemocratic. In March 1790, the Statists launched a

violent popular offensive against the Vonckists, who then went into exile in France. The Brabant Revolution now openly took the form of a conservative revolution: the Statists re-established the old regime, only without the Austrian sovereign. However, they soon succumbed to the counter-offensive launched in November 1790 by Austria and its Prussian and British allies.

All of these failed revolutions of the 1780s were inspired by the success of the American Revolution: they took up its slogans, its symbols, and its experience of insurrection and militias. These revolutions, however, cannot be considered merely a European import of the American model, as their objectives and characteristics were so different.

The French Revolution

The nature of the French Revolution, which broke out in the spring of 1789, differed fundamentally from any previous political conflict in Europe. It intensified quickly and massively over a period of five years, as the zeal to 'complete' or 'deepen' the revolution clashed with growing resistance to these ambitions across the country. It also produced entirely new forms and models of politics, society, and culture, and it had massive repercussions throughout Europe and beyond, from Russia to Haiti.

1789 was completely different from all previous revolutions. Unlike the Dutch and English revolutions, the French Revolution originated not with a rebellion but instead with a bid from above to revamp the obsolete machinery of government. It might have ended with the strengthening of royal government through a 'revolution from above', had Louis XVI not been so utterly indecisive and inconstant. As it happened, the old-fashioned Estates-General—convened to re-float governmental finances, but without clear instructions as to how to go about their business—set their own agenda and created a constitution. But while it constrained the power of the King, the revolutionary National Assembly, born out of the Estates-General, did not create a functioning framework for political action; it was not up to the task of overcoming the fissures opening within French society, with religion still being the single most divisive issue. And so the revolution radicalised: in the summer of 1792, the King was deposed; half a year afterwards, he was beheaded, while external and internal war, terror and the guillotine took centre stage until a political thaw set in—fittingly, in the revolutionary calendar's 'heat month' (*thermidor*) of 1794.

Violence and civil war had occurred before, as had depositions and even a decapitation of a king. What was radically new in the French Revolution was that its protagonists began to think in terms of creating a completely new society, rather than just restoring ancient rights or defending religion—the rallying cries of all rebellions and revolutions before it. As a result, the French

Revolution saw the birth of ideologies as blueprints for the future of society; it saw the birth of 'the nation', the idea of a community with a common destiny and a common struggle; and, as a result of these new, comprehensive, and ambitious dimensions of political activity, the French Revolution massively enhanced state power, for example through the invention of mass conscription (the *levée en masse*), and a sense of the state's entitlement to all sorts of action. In short, it brought about the modern state with its almost unbounded capabilities, potentially benign but also potentially destructive.

There is something else that the French Revolution bequeathed to the modern era: the very idea of 'making a revolution'. So far, revolutions were the unintended results of rebellions or else, as in 1789, of derailed governmental attempts at reform. After 1789 it became conceivable, and in some quarters desirable, to change a regime or a political system through concerted revolutionary action.

More immediately, too, the French Revolution had massive repercussions. Perhaps most conspicuously, the revolution in Haiti (1791–1804) led to the abolition of slavery in all French colonies and to the first successful independence of a former European colony. Within Europe, conquests between 1794 and 1799 by French revolutionary armies—of Belgium and the United Provinces, of the left bank of the Rhine, Switzerland and the Italian Peninsula—all led to the overthrow of monarchical regimes and to the creation of an alliance of 'Sister Republics' around France. The invaders could rely on the support of a minority of local revolutionaries, active since the end of the 1780s, who imitated many French inventions—such as the Milanese revolutionaries who drafted the Italian tricolour flag in 1797. But local revolutionaries tended to be influenced less by the French model than by their own experiences, referring also to the republican models of Roman antiquity, the republicanism of Machiavelli and the reformism of the Italian (in particular Tuscan) Enlightenment. In fact, the constitutions of 'Sister Republics' in Naples, Genoa, and Bologna, drafted in 1797 and 1798, were much more democratic and socially-minded than the contemporaneous French one (Constitution of the Year III/1795), even though they drew on the French Jacobin Constitution of the Year II (1793). Like the French revolutionaries of Year II, the Italian revolutionaries also aimed a national, unitary, republican, and social state and are therefore labelled the "Italian Jacobins".

Conclusion

Clearly, revolutions and civil wars in early modern Europe, embedded in their own specific contexts, were too divergent from each other to be subsumed in strong generalisations. What can be said, however, is that dynastic and factional

(especially noble) feuds were the main ingredient for civil war scenarios, often enhanced by foreign intervention and—particularly in Western Europe—by confessional strife, which could also kindle major and long-lasting internal warfare. Rebellions that grew into revolutions with more specific political goals, such as the deposition of a king, were a rare exception and only found true, long-term success in the late-sixteenth-century Netherlands. It was the French Revolution, while to some extent precipitated by rebellious movements in the 1780s, that ushered in an entirely new era and dimension of revolutions: revolutions that were planned and organised, with specific political and social goals, often of a radical nature and a clear ideological basis.

Discussion questions

1. What is the difference between civil war, revolution, and rebellion?
2. Why was the American Revolution so significant for early-modern Europeans?
3. In which ways was the French Revolution different to earlier civil wars?

Suggested reading

Asch, Ronald G., *The Thirty Years War: The Holy Roman Empire and Europe, 1618–1648* (London: Springer, 1997).

Martin, Jean-Clément, *Nouvelle histoire de la Révolution française* (Paris: Perrin, 2019).

Neely, Sylvia, *A Concise History of the French Revolution* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

Parker, David, ed., *Revolutions and the Revolutionary Tradition in the West* (London: Routledge, 2000).

Popkin, Jeremy D., *A New World Begins: The History of the French Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

Schama, Simon, *Patriots and Liberators: Revolution in the Netherlands, 1780–1813* (New York: Knopf, 1977).

Worden, Blair, *The English Civil Wars 1640–1660* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2009).