

What is Revolution?

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Revolution has been central to the formation of the modern world. The word itself refers to radical, transformative change and has many generic uses describing phenomena from the “industrial revolution” to the “sexual revolution.” As a historical process, “revolution” refers to a movement, often violent, to overthrow an old regime and effect complete change in the fundamental institutions of society. After the French Revolution of the 18th century which deposed the monarchy and attempted to refashion society from top to bottom, revolution became synonymous with the radical overcoming of the past.. Modernity, many came to believe, could only be achieved through such violent and total transformation.

The inspiration for many 20th century revolutions was the Russian Revolution of 1917 led by Vladimir Lenin and inspired by the ideas of Marxist Communism. Marx believed that revolution was necessary to move societies from one historical stage to the next, and his formulation strengthened the perception of revolution as a universal and inevitable process in world history. For over a half century, the Russian Revolution provided would-be revolutionaries throughout the world with a model for political revolution and socio-economic transformation. The Soviet Union’s example was especially inspirational to anti-colonial and nationalist revolutionaries, from China’s Sun Yat-sen to Vietnam’s Ho Chi Minh, who saw in the experience of the USSR solutions to the dilemmas of their own countries.

The Iranian Revolution of the late 20th century provides yet another model of revolution. The Islamist revolution of 1979 sought the radical transformation of a state and society perceived by many as overly secular and tainted by Western values and culture. The Iranian Revolution placed nationalist, Islamic values at the center of government and society and became yet another example of modern, revolutionary change. (See also the unit “The Middle East and Asia: Revolutions in Comparative Perspective,” available on the ExEAS Asian Revolutions in the Twentieth Century website.)

The twentieth century was an age of revolution in much of Asia. One factor promoting radical change in many Asian nations was the pressure of Euro-American imperialism, starting in the 19th century. As England, then France, Germany, and the United States industrialized in the nineteenth century, their global reach expanded along with their demand for a variety of raw materials. A belief in the superiority of Western values combined with economic and technological innovations in shipbuilding, weaponry, and communications to create a potent mix that would challenge Asian societies in many ways.

The Asian experience of imperialism and revolution was as varied as Asia itself. India, directly colonized by Britain starting in the 18th century, saw the development of a small, professional middle class and a political organization, the Indian National Congress,

which spearheaded the nationalist anti-colonial movement of the 20th century. China, humiliated in the Opium Wars of the mid-19th century, was never colonized but lost substantial economic and political sovereignty as European nations, the U.S., and Japan established treaty ports and spheres of influence in the country, factors which fueled the first revolution in Asia in the 20th century, the Republican Revolution of 1911. Japan, weakened by unequal treaties it was forced to sign with Western powers in the 1850s, transformed itself by the beginning of the 20th century into an industrial powerhouse with colonies of its own — a process historians have hesitated to call a “revolution” but one which was undeniably “revolutionary.” Southeast Asian societies, from the Philippines to Vietnam, would also become colonies of various Western countries. The experience of imperialism helped spark many of the revolutions of 20th century Asia. It was the historical condition that radicalized revolutionaries from Ho Chi Minh and Mao Tse-tung, to Mohandas Gandhi.

Many Asian revolutionaries sought not simply to achieve independent nationhood, but also to transform their societies internally. In the early 20th century, many believed that becoming modern required the elimination of old hierarchies and the creation of new, more equal social relations. In China, this meant condemning old Confucian customs and hierarchies and undertaking fundamental socio-economic and political reforms. Mohandas Gandhi took a different approach, rejecting Western-inspired “civilization” and advocating a return to “traditional” Indian ways. In both examples, internal transformation was considered a necessary component of revolution for national independence.

These diverse experiences and understandings of “revolution” underline the importance of political and social revolution to modern Asian history. In recent years, with the dismantling of revolutionary regimes in the Soviet Union and elsewhere and China’s movement toward a market economy, some historians have begun revising their understandings of revolution and its outcomes. Even in light of these reevaluations, there can be no doubt about the importance of revolution — as both a goal and historical process — to the formation of modern Asia and the modern world.