

Teaching the Age of Revolutions

HA Teacher Fellowship Programme 2018 (Secondary)

Katie Hall

Week 3: What was the true significance of the French Revolution?

As part of Week 3 of the online course Fellows considered the significance of the French Revolution and why it is important to teach it at secondary level. Many had already shared their disappointment at the topic being increasingly left out of Key Stage 3 studies and others wanted to look at new ways of teaching the topic at A Level.

The Fellows engaged whole-heartedly in curricular thinking about the 'place' of the French Revolution...

- 'Over the course of this week, reading the brilliant William Doyle and others has convinced me that the French Revolution deserves significant 'air time' in our curriculum (and wider culture) for at least three key reasons:
 - it represented the first, most complete attempt to reorganise a whole society on 'rational' lines (metric measurements have conquered the world, the new republican calendar did not, establishing new standards by which all governmental systems would have to justify themselves against in future – in this sense, was it the first 'true' revolution?);
 - it advocated a fuller-throated form of democracy than the American Revolution, beautifully encapsulated in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789), which ultimately have given us the modern paradigm of universal human rights;
 - yet – as Alexis de Tocqueville's brilliant mid-nineteenth century analysis of the Revolution argued – its events also illustrated the potential flaws and dangers of democracy and democratic revolution, in that 'rule by the people' can so quickly become an intolerant tyranny of the majority, and so rapidly be subverted into a more complete form of authoritarian dictatorship (as Napoleon's rule from 1799 demonstrates). Timely lessons for the 'populist' age in which we are living?

To engage with these three aspects of the Revolution in Year 8 teaching, I would probably focus in turn on the contrasting long-term success rate of decimalisation and the reform of the calendar, the abolition of feudalism (allowing a good revision of Year 7 study of medieval England), and the paradoxical career/reputation of Napoleon.'

- 'A case might also be made that studying the French revolution is particularly useful for developing key skills in young historians. Simon Schama and William Doyle both make the case for the role of contingency in the revolution as a whole, and David Andress when discussing the terror. By teaching students about the ways in which events develop seemingly beyond the control or understanding of those who witness it, could serve two purposes: to aid their deployment of empathy as a historical skill (useful when attempted properly) and to see how events in the past are not merely the result of obvious, discrete

predictable forces, which can tend to lead to considering those in the past stupid – either for not seeing the event around the corner, or failing to deal with it once it arrived. Louis reading Hume's account of Charles I's execution illustrates this perfectly: one out of touch, directionless King seeking some sort of guidance or solace by discovering how another acted in a similar situation.'

- 'If we think about Counsell's seminal article on significance (massively improving upon earlier efforts of others in my opinion) it is useful to think in terms of the 5Rs. Just taking a selection of these would demonstrate the value of teaching the FRev. For instance, REVEALING. The FRev is incredibly revealing of the time, in France and abroad. It shows the way these (mainly) men were so inspired by events in America while also forging their own path, setting their own agenda, creating their own set of problems. It reveals the confusion over the role of monarchy; it reveals the opportunity of defining the very nature of human rights. But then, what about RESONANCE? Well the Arab Spring, and indeed the Brexit-Trump axis, both show what happens when new technologies cause radical upheavals which in turn leave huge power vacuums that don't end well, with the reverberations chiming through the subsequent ages.'

Others began to think about how links could be made from the French Revolution to many other topics...

- 'The revolution was significant as it was wide-ranging, within France and without. The new ideas of liberty and equality impacted on many different groups of people such as slaves (e.g. Haiti), women (Olympe de Gouges and her Declaration of the Rights of Women) as well as the peasants, middle classes and townspeople. The impact of these ideas across Europe was also important, for example those who feared it and readied themselves to fight against these ideas in Britain, as well as those that it influenced positively. The fact that it led to wars across Europe also shows its significance in impacting on the whole continent, not just France and its overseas territories.'

Some Fellows also used this week to develop their ideas about using different types of evidence...

- 'One of the most enjoyable readings so far has been the Ledbury article, on art and revolution, and the effect on collective memory, legacy and narrative. One of the most fascinating aspects of History is giving students a sense of period, and one of the best way to do this is using Michael Baxandall's 'period eye', learning about culture and meaning from the period as a way of interpreting art and visual culture. The French Revolution helps to set up the visual culture of revolution, from marches, prints, epic paintings, news, letters and papers, food and fashion. As was pointed out by Andress in his podcast, the final few acts of the Ancient regime are seen as 'cou d'etat against the people', and the subsequent visual culture that is produced by the people is a fascinating counter attack, again establishing the plan to which people will refer to when conducting subsequent revolutions in the late 19th and early 20th century.'

References

Core resources

- Marsh, B. and Rapport, M. (Eds.), *Understanding and Teaching the Age of Revolutions* (2017)
- [HA podcast series: "The French Revolution to the Fall of Napoleon"](#)

Secondary sources

- Bayly, Christopher A., *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914* (2004)
- Hobsbawm, Eric, *The Age of Revolution, 1789-1848* (1962)