

(U67502) Explain why and how political revolutions end, using evidence from the period 1789 - 1850.

In this essay I will discuss the ways and reasons revolutions end. There are three primary reasons for this, either the revolution achieves its aims, there is a counter-revolution, or the revolution runs its course before its aims can be achieved. In every case the nature of revolution is highly dependent on the national conditions of the time so every example I give is unique, but taken as a whole they show broad trends.

The first condition for ending the revolution is that the revolution achieves its aims. We can further define this as a condition in which the revolution is generally successful, and is then consolidated with no great risk of counter-revolution. Both Haitian slave revolt of 1791 and the Greek war of independence of 1821 could satisfy these criteria, and at face value they are presented as simple closed-case revolutions with a single aim and a single outcome.

However, there are problems with attributing a single dominant aim or narrative to revolutions which by their nature are composed of numerous different and often competing interests. The Haitian revolution for example was at the same time a slave revolt and an anti-colonial war of national liberation.

In an attempt to stem the slave revolt in 1792 the Legislative Assembly granted full legal an political rights to any 'free blacks'. According to Bob Corbett some of these 'free blacks' were then co-opted into the slave regime by becoming slave-owners themselves¹. These elements to some extent prevented a clear-cut conflict between black slaves on one side and white slave-owners on the other. This situation was further complicated by an awkward relationship with the French state. In 1799, Napoleon publicly supported the liberation of slaves in Haiti², meanwhile slavery was maintained in the nearby French colonies of Martinique and Bourbon. 3 years later the slave leader, Toussaint l'Ouverture, was arrested and imprisoned in France³.

The second complication in determining a revolution's aims have been met is its wider impact of the revolution on the surrounding area. The revolution in France quickly spilled over into the rest of Europe with the creation of the Batavian Republic in Holland, the Helvetic Republic in Switzerland, and the emergence of various other revolutionary states. We can expand the aims of the revolution such that so long as those revolutionary states remain under some form of bourgeois democracy the French revolution remains successful in that regard. It also means that the French revolution never ends until absolutist monarchy is restored in Europe.

This viewpoint can be attributed mainly to Friedrich Engels who remarked that the French Revolution "which dates from 1789, did not come to an end in 1830"⁴.

Another way in which revolutions can end is with a counter-revolution. This is further split up into internal and external counter-revolutions.

Internal counter-revolution can be defined as a change in the revolution's aims. Marx used the experience of Napoleon III's ascension to power during the 1848 French revolution to define this kind of counter-revolution as Bonapartism.

The 1848 revolution was confined to Paris until December when the siege of Paris was broken. The conditions in Paris in were those of industrial capitalism, and as a result Paris developed a population of unemployed

1 Bob Corbett, *The Haitian Revolution of 1791-1803*. Available at: <http://www.webster.edu/~corbette/haiti/history/revolution/revolution1.htm> [Accessed May 4th 2012]

2 Napoleon Bonaparte, *Proclamation on Saint-Domingue*. Available at: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/toussaint-louverture/1799/proclamation.htm> [Accessed May 4th 2012]

3 Letter from the Minister of the Marine to the Maritime Prefect. Available at: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/toussaint-louverture/1802/brest.htm> [Accessed May 4th 2012]

4 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Holy Family or Critique of Critical Criticism*. Ch. 6, Sct 3. (Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1975). Available at: http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/holy-family/ch06_3_c.htm [Accessed May 4th 2012]

labourers⁵, or what Marx called the 'lumpenproletariat'⁶. The demands of the lumpenproletariat of Paris were for the 'right to work'⁷ and these demands were manifested by the nationalisation of industry through national workshops. These demands gave the 1848 revolution a 'socialist' character in opposition to the conditions of early capitalism. It's important to point out that this situation was unique to Paris at the time, as much of the rest of France was still operating in conditions of pre-modern rural development⁸.

According to Marx, when Napoleon III came to power he championed the class of "small-holding peasants"⁹, which at the time made up 58% of the French population¹⁰. The initially radical and socialist aims of the revolution were moderated so as to appeal to the peasantry, and the national workshops scheme was shut down.

Marx goes on to point out that "the parliamentary republic, in its struggle against the revolution, found itself compelled to strengthen the means and the centralization of governmental power with repressive measures. All revolutions perfected this machine instead of breaking it." He means that the Bonapartism is a natural process which all revolutions encounter at some point. In not all cases does the Bonapartist process consume the revolution, in some cases such as during the terror the 'centralisation of government power with repressive measures' was eventually overcome.

In the same line of argument Jean Jaurès argued that Robespierre initiated the Terror because he believed the revolutionary process was happening too quickly and he wanted to see it end as soon as possible¹¹. This is a form of internal counter-revolution, albeit not as obviously counter-revolutionary as the Napoleonic periods.

Counter-revolution also exists in the form of foreign military intervention designed to stop a revolution. For the Sixth Coalition this form of external counter-revolution followed a similar pattern to the Napoleonic wars in the way that it acted in a wave-like motion with some degree of momentum in the way it spread across Europe. After the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy in France in 1815 the counter-revolution spread into Spain in 1823 with the French invasion to restore Ferdinand VII to power.

Like with the initial French revolution, counter-revolutions cannot be studied independently of their surroundings and to some extent I can argue that the Spanish counter-revolution actually began in 1814 with the counter-revolution in France. In 'the Second Vendée'¹², Gwynne Lewis takes this even further and argues that the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy can be traced back to the revolt in the Vendée. He backs this up by saying that "the White Terror of 1815 was to erupt in the same cities and towns which had supported Catholic royalist movements from the beginning of the revolution"¹³. He also shows how foreign powers like Britain sent agents to France to co-ordinate underground royalist organisations¹⁴. This shows that the conditions in which counter-revolutions emerge can be influenced by strong historical factors which are sometimes overlooked from

5 Hubert Bonin, *Encyclopedia of Revolutions of 1848*, Employment and the Revolution of 1848 in France. Available at: <http://www.ohio.edu/chastain/dh/francemp.htm> [Accessed May 4th 2012]

6 Karl Marx, *the German Ideology*. Ch. 3. "Stirner" Delighted in His Construction. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1932) Available at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch03d.htm> [Accessed May 4th 2012]

7 Louis Blanc, *Organisation du Travail*. (no publisher, 1840) Available at: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1840blanc.asp> [Accessed May 4th 2012]

8 James Lehring, *Peasant and French, Cultural Contact in Rural France during the 19th Century*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995) Pg. 16-21

9 Karl Marx, *the Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Ch. 7 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1937) Available at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch07.htm> [Accessed May 4th 2012]

10 Population of France in 1851: 36,250,000 (estimate) Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Population2Centuries.jpg>
Number of peasants: 21,000,000 (estimate). Source: <http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/lecture11a.html>
Peasants constituted 58% of the French population.

11 Jean Jaurès, *the Socialist History of the French Revolution*. (Paris, Éditions Sociales, 1968) Available at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/jaures/1901/history/great-terror.htm> [Accessed May 4th 2012]

12 Gwynne Lewis, *the Second Vendée* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978)

13 Lewis, *Vendée*, Pg. 153

14 Lewis, *Vendée*, Pg. 87

the more circumstantial factors.

The Haitian revolution is also interesting with respect to external counter-revolution, as it features both an external attempt to stop it, and also internal conflict over the aim of the revolution.

The last way in which a revolution ends is a case in which it just fails before it has a chance to achieve its aims. In most cases the main factor is that the revolution simply isn't popular enough to mobilise the popular masses. The swing riots in Britain suffered from this problem, and like France in 1848 it can be partly explained by the demographic split between the urban proletariat and the rural peasantry. Unlike in France the British peasantry were the ones advocating socialist demands and the revolt had some difficulty spreading beyond the countryside. Urban workers did take part in riots in Liverpool and Bristol, but these riots did not hold political power for long and were quickly suppressed. Despite the failure of the actual revolt it can be directly attributed to the creation of the trade union movement in Britain with the Tolpuddle Martyrs¹⁵¹⁶. The demands of the peasantry were eventually met with the implementation of a rural minimum wage set by the Agricultural Wages Board over a century later¹⁷. So even though the revolt failed, it had wide-reaching historical implications which eventually resulted in their demands being met.

With the case of German unification, the national revolution failed to be carried through because of an unwillingness on the part of the parliamentary elite to carry out the demands of the masses. They were slowed down with the minor details and complexities of political unity while the nobility, military and the Prussian monarchy conspired to stop the nationalist project from succeeding. When the military putsch took place in Berlin in November 1848 the Frankfurt Parliament was unable to mobilise the masses in its support and so it was dismantled without much resistance.

Only 1 out of 141 delegates to the Parliament was a common labourer¹⁸. This was a result of concerted attempt on behalf of the nobility to disenfranchise the common population. With much of the revolutionary process taking place within the official structures of the Parliament the masses were denied any influence, and so the revolution failed. In April of 1849 King Frederick of Prussia rejected the proposals for a federal and constitutional Germany¹⁹, the Frankfurt Parliament was dismissed and its delegates sent back to their respective states.

The last factor in which a revolution can fail is for lack of good weaponry. Revolutions with mass popular support can forego to some extent the need for armed struggle. However, for those which are led by a small vanguard, it is crucial that they are able to take power by force and can target the highest concentration of authority. The Decembrist revolt in Russia is a good example of this, an army unit deserted and occupied the Senate Square. The soldiers had the support of the local population, but they were unable to take power due to being outgunned and outmanned. According to Edward Crankshaw's account the loyalist soldiers outnumbered the mutineers about 3:1, with 9,000 loyalist troops and 3,000 revolutionaries. An attempt was made to storm the Tsar's Winter Palace, but unlike in 1917 it was unsuccessful. The Decembrists were eventually defeated with the use of artillery by the loyalist military²⁰. If the Decembrists would have had access to such artillery, they would have been in a much better position to win.

Inspired by the Decembrist revolt the Chernigov Regiment also mutinied in Ukraine. Unfortunately the revolt

15 The Martyrs' Story. Available at: <http://www.tolpuddlemartyrs.org.uk/index.php?page=swing-rebellion> [Accessed May 4th 2012]

16 Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *the history of Trade Unionism*. Pg. 130 (AMS Press, 1976)

17 Agricultural Wages Act 1948. Available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6/11-12/47/contents> [Accessed May 4th 2012]

18 Brian Vick, *Defining Germany: The 1848 Frankfurt Parliamentarians and National Identity*. Pg. 10 (Harvard University Press, 2002)

19 Constitution of the German Reich. Available at: <http://www.documentarchiv.de/nzjh/verfdr1848.htm> [Accessed May 4th 2012]

20 Edward Crankshaw, *The Shadow of the Winter Palace*. Pg. 13-18 (Viking Press, 1976)

was too dissipated and was taken apart by the loyalist military who were able to pick off isolated troops and wear down morale. Anatole Mazur argues that had the Chernigov Regiment been able to take Kiev they would have had access to an 'arsenal' of weaponry, which would have given them a great advantage over the loyalist forces²¹.

In both cases the revolt took place in a military context, and so we can judge it in military terms. The Decembrist revolt took place within conditions of political destabilisation by groups such as the United Slavs and various secret societies²². Attempts to analyse them in political terms are useful, but they fall second place to the military strategic analysis.

In conclusion all revolutions are unique to the national conditions of the time, and yet they also follow common paths and similar traits which emerge repeatedly whenever a revolution takes place. With the benefit of hindsight we can see these broad trends, but due to the chaotic nature of revolution they are very hard to predict from the outset.

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21 Anatole Manzour, *The first Russian revolution, 1825: the Decembrist movement, its origins, development, and significance*. (Stanford University Press, 1961) Pg. 199

22 Manzour, *revolution*, Pg. 64