CHAPTER 24 - REVOLUTIONS IN THE TRANSATLANTIC WORLD

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter begins by noting that the various wars between European rivals in the mid-18th century (War of the Austrian Succession, Seven Years' War, etc.) required great sums of money. Britain, though victorious, was especially hard pressed. The government, believing that the colonists themselves should bear part of the cost of their protection and administration, levied new taxes on America. The Sugar and Stamp Acts of 1774 helped drive the colonists into rebellion. With the help of Britain's old enemies, France and Spain, the Americans won the Revolutionary War (1775-1783). The colonists had shown how to establish revolutionary, but orderly, political bodies that would function outside the existing political framework. European writers sensed that a new era was dawning, one of constituent assemblies, constitutions and declarations of rights.

The chapter continues with a survey of French problems on the eve of revolution. It then describes the revolution of 1789 and the reconstruction of French government as a constitutional monarchy, the second revolution which began in 1792, the foreign wars which France started in that year, and finally the infamous Reign of Terror and its aftermath. The chapter then concentrates on the figure of Napoleon Bonaparte: his rise to power, his campaigns, his final defeat and the settlement reached at the Congress of Vienna.

Eighteenth century France was a rich nation, but the government was deeply in debt. The monarchy was unable to come to terms with a resurgent aristocracy, and the aristocratic parlements won the battle for public opinion by presenting themselves as protectors of French liberty. When Louis XV tried to assess new taxes, the parlements declared the taxes illegal. Constant friction between Louis XVI and the aristocracy concerning fiscal and political reform resulted in the convocation of the Estates-General in 1787 by the Assembly of Notables; the Estates-General had not convened since 1614. In 1788, Louis XVI was forced to accept the convocation.

But this aristocratic triumph unleashed social and political forces that neither nobles nor king could control. The Estates-General was composed of three groups: the First Estate of the clergy; the Second Estate of the nobility, and the Third Estate which represented everyone else. After a political standoff among the estates in 1789, the Third Estate invited the others to join a new legislative body, the National Constituent Assembly. In August 1789, this Assembly tried to halt the spreading disorder in Paris (the Bastille had recently been stormed) by renouncing feudal dues, rights and tithes and declaring
that all Frenchmen were now subject to the same laws. On August 27, the Assembly adopted the
Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. Louis XVI, after first hesitating, sanctioned the measures.

After a period of reorganization, the Constitution of 1791 established a constitutional monarchy.
In order to deal with the continuing financial crisis caused by the royal debt, the Assembly decided to
confiscate and sell the property of the Catholic Church in France. This decision proved to be a serious
blunder as it created formidable opposition within the French church. Many aristocrats known as emigres
left France and fomented counter-revolution.

During the short life of the Legislative Assembly (1791-1792), domestic political factions
competed for power. In 1792, the Assembly was compelled by a hostile crowd to write a democratic
constitution. That body, called the Convention, declared France a republic. This second revolution, as it
was called, was quite radical; in January 1793, Louis XVI was executed.

By April 1793, France was at war with Austria, Prussia, Great Britain, Spain, Sardinia and
Holland. The Convention established the Committees of General Security and Public Safety. The latter,
under the leadership of Danton, Carnot and Robespierre eventually enjoyed almost dictatorial power. The
major problem was to wage war and at the same time secure public support. In August, a levee en masse
was issued which conscripted males into the army and directed economic production for military
purposes. In November, the Convention outlawed the worship of God and tried to start a Cult of Reason
which alienated many Christians. In autumn of 1793, the Convention eliminated opposition through a
Reign of Terror which saw the execution of more than 25,000 people, including Robespierre himself.

A tempering of the revolution called the Thermidorian Reaction began in July, 1794. There was a
general amnesty for political prisoners and the Convention issued a new constitution led by a five-person
Directory. The winter of 1794-1795 saw serious food shortages, and riots had to be quelled by artillery.
In March, 1795 the Convention concluded peace with Prussia and Spain. The war with Austria and Great
Britain continued, however, and the new and unstable Directory increasingly depended on the power of
the army to govern the country.

A society and a political structure based on rank and birth had given way to one based on civic
equality and social status. Representation had been established as a principle of practical politics. But
domestic tranquility had not yet been assured. In the coming years, France would continue to influence
Western Civilization under the leadership of Napoleon Bonaparte.

The government of the Directory represented a society of recently rich and powerful people
whose chief goal was to perpetuate their own rule. Their chief opposition came from the royalists, who
won a majority in the elections of 1797. With the aid of Napoleon, the anti-monarchist Directory staged a
coup d'etat and put their own supporters into the legislature. Meanwhile, Napoleon was crushing Austrian
and Sardinian armies in Italy. An invasion of Egypt, however, was a failure. Upon his return (1799),
Napoleon led a new coup d'état and issued the Constitution of the Year VIII, which established the rule of one man and may be regarded as the end of the revolution in France.

Bonaparte soon achieved peace with Austria and Britain and was equally effective in restoring order at home. In 1801, he reached an agreement with the pope. In 1802, a plebiscite appointed him consul for life and obtained full power from a new constitution. A general codification of laws called the Napoleonic Code soon followed and in 1804, Napoleon made himself emperor Napoleon I with yet another constitution.

In his decade as emperor (1804-1814), Napoleon conquered most of Europe. He could put as many as 700,000 men under arms at any one time and depended on mobility and timing to achieve the destruction of the enemy army.

The chapter now details Napoleon's impressive victory at Austerlitz (1805), setback at Trafalgar (1805) and defeat of the Prussians and Russians, which resulted in the Treaty of Tilsit (1807). Napoleon organized Europe into the French Empire and a number of satellite states over which ruled the members of his family. To defeat the British, Napoleon devised the Continental System, which aimed at cutting off British trade with the European continent. However, Britain's other markets (in the Americas and the eastern Mediterranean) enabled the British economy to survive.

Napoleon's conquests stimulated liberalism and nationalism. As it became increasingly clear that Napoleon's policies were to benefit France rather than Europe, the conquered states and peoples became restive. In 1808, a general rebellion began in Spain (over Napoleon's deposition of the Bourbon dynasty) and in 1810, the Russians withdrew from the Continental System. The invasion of Russia that followed along with the disastrous retreat from Moscow in the winter of 1812/1813 exposed French weaknesses. A powerful coalition defeated the French in the "Battle of Nations" (1813). In 1814, the allied army took Paris and Napoleon abdicated, going to the island of Elba.

The Congress of Vienna met from September 1814 to November 1815. The arrangements were essentially made by four great powers: Britain, Austria, Prussia, and Russia; the key person in achieving agreement was British foreign secretary Castlereagh. The victors agreed that no single state should dominate Europe. Proceedings were interrupted by Napoleon's return in March, 1815. They soon defeated him at Waterloo. The episode hardened the peace settlement for France, but the Congress settled difficult problems in a reasonable way. No general war occurred for a century.

The wars of Napoleon also sparked independence movements from European domination in Latin America. Haiti achieved independence from France following a slave revolt led by Toussaint L'Ouverture. The efforts of Jose de San Martin (Peru and Chile), Simon Bolivar (Venezuela) and Bernardo O'Higgins (Chile) are also discussed, as well as events in Mexico and Brazil.
KEY POINTS AND VITAL CONCEPTS

1. **The American Revolution**: In both its theoretical and practical aspects, the American Revolution had its roots in Europe. The Declaration of Independence derived largely from John Locke's idea of political contract. But, if American revolutionaries had been influenced by Europe, they, in turn, provided a model to Europeans. Britons as well as Americans believed that they were improperly represented in Parliament. In the late 1770s, the extralegal Association Movement began to call for reforming the corrupt system of parliamentary elections; it failed, however, because its leaders did not appeal for broad popular support as the American example dictated.

2. **Chronology of Revolution**: Below is a summary of the political phases of the French Revolution; a complete chronology of the revolution is given in the text:

   - **Estates-General (May 1789 - June 1789)**: Monarchy still in control of government; war is the expected foreign policy of the ancien regime.

   - **National Assembly (1789-1791)**: Nominal absolute monarchy; state church with priests paid by the state.

   - **Legislative Assembly (1791-1792)**: Constitutional monarchy; war is promoted to solve domestic problems; state church.

   - **Convention (1792-1795)**: Committee of Public Safety administers government; universal manhood suffrage; Cult of Reason promoted; Reign of Terror (1792-1794).

   - **Directory (1795-1799)**: Thermidorian Reaction; restricted franchise; separation of church and state promoted.
3. **Revolutionary Political Factions:** During the short life of the Legislative Assembly (1791-1792), political factions competed for power. The best organized faction was the Jacobins, who had been the most advanced group in the National Constituent Assembly and had wanted a republic rather than a constitutional monarchy. A group of Jacobins known as the Girondists assumed leadership in the National Assembly and declared war on Austria, believing that the war would bring the most radical revolutionaries to power. In September, 1792 the Paris crowd murdered about 1200 people who were in the city jails and compelled the Legislative Assembly to call a new assembly to write a democratic constitution. That body, called the Convention, declared France a republic. The second revolution had been the work of Jacobins more radical than the Girondists, and of the people of Paris known as the sans-culottes (artisans, shopkeepers, wage earners and some factory workers). The sans-culottes wanted immediate relief from hunger and inflation, resented most forms of social inequality and were suspicious of representative government. They opposed the unregulated economy that most Jacobins favored. But some extremely advanced Jacobins, known as the Mountain, began to work with the sans-culottes. The willingness to cooperate with the forces of the popular revolution separated the Mountain from the Girondists. The Convention, under the domination of the Mountain and the sans-culottes, tried and executed Louis XVI in 1793.

4. **Napoleon Bonaparte:** Like many great figures of history, Napoleon has been judged as a force for good: a law-giver and reformer who spread revolutionary ideals throughout Europe; others have viewed him as an egomaniac whose lust for conquest and glory overshadowed any other secondary achievements. He was certainly a military leader of genius, but his achievements inspire more philosophical thoughts about the ability of the individual to change the course of history. Is history motivated by economic and social forces over which individuals have no control? Or does the "hero" actually change history by force of personality and ability? The figure of Napoleon is central to that debate as are such figures as Alexander the Great, Lenin and Hitler.

5. **The Congress of Vienna:** In this settlement, the Bourbon monarchy was restored in France and a non-vindictive boundary settlement left France satisfied. The settlement of eastern Europe divided the victors and enabled Talleyrand, representing France, to join the deliberators. France, Britain and Austria were able to prevent Russia and Prussia from gaining all of Poland and Saxony respectively. The victors agreed that no single state should dominate Europe; the concept
of "balance of power" was formally put into practice and proved to be successful for the next hundred years.

6. **Consequences of Latin American Independence**: The Wars of Independence left Latin America liberated from direct European control, but economically exhausted and politically unstable. There was an absence of funds for investment. The situation of the most disadvantaged people in Latin America improved only marginally as a result of independence. Landowners replaced urban colonial officials as the major governing group and functioned almost entirely in their own interests.

7. **The Transatlantic Revolutions in World Perspective**: The American and French Revolutions opened a new epoch in world history by bringing common people to the fore of political action. Henceforth, one of the persistent elements in world political history has been the emergence of political leaders from relatively obscure social backgrounds. The revolution also demonstrated for the first time the power of a nation mobilized for war when united behind a popular political ideology. Finally, the revolution brought forth the demands for political and social equality by the urban lower classes. This question would need to be addressed again before the mid-nineteenth century. The political and social ideals of the French revolutionary experience would fire the Latin American wars for independence and stir nationalism in both Italy and Germany as well as in Asia at the opening of the twentieth century.

**SUGGESTED FILMS**

*Civilisation XI: The Worship of Nature.* Time-Life. 52 min.

*French Revolution.* Coronet. 16 min.

*The French Revolution: The Bastille.* Learning Corporation of America. 28 min.

*French Revolution: Death of The Old Regime.* Encyclopaedia Britannica. 17 min.

*Napoleon: The Making of a Dictator.* Lutheran Church in America. 28 min.
Napoleon: *The End of a Dictator*. Lutheran Church in America. 27 min.

The Hundred Days: *Napoleon - From Elba to Waterloo*. Time-Life. 40 min.

The Napoleonic Era. Coronet. 14 min.

Goya: *The Disasters of War*. Radim Films. 20 min.

Civilisation XII: *The Fallacies of Hope*. Time-Life. 52 min.