

Global Revolution (1789 through the end of the 20th Century)

The idea of revolution can be romantic, exhilarating and frightening depending on your social position and individual involvement. Two of history's most famous romantic revolutionaries were the British poet Lord George Gordon Byron (1788-1824) and the Argentine-born doctor Ernesto "Ché" Gueverra. Both died while involved in movements to liberate other countries. In 1823, Byron joined insurgents against the Ottoman Turkish occupation of Greece, but he succumbed to fever before seeing any military action. In his poem, "Don Juan," Byron wrote: "The mountains look on Marathon, And Marathon looks on the sea; And musing there an hour alone, I dreamed that Greece might still be free." Gueverra joined Fidel Castro and other Cuban revolutionaries and played a major role in overthrowing the Batista dictatorship and building a socialist society in the 1950s and 1960s. He left Cuba to support revolutionary movements in other countries and was assassinated by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency in Bolivia in 1968.



Lord Byron



Ernesto "Ché" Gueverra

But not all revolutionaries and revolutions are remembered with the fondness of Byron and Gueverra. Part of the problem, as historian Edward Hobsbawm notes in his book, *The Age of Revolution* (NY: Mentor, 1962), is that once they begin, "Revolutionary wars impose their own logic" (89). Each of the revolutions discussed in this issue of *Social Science Docket* (7.1) had a broad impact on world events and raises important questions about the role of revolutionary struggle in human history. The French Revolution transforms French and European society, but leads to periods of "terror," reaction and dictatorship under Napoleon. Historians have debated whether all revolutions are doomed to follow this pattern. The Haitian Revolution of 1793-1803, the most successful slave rebellion in human history, had a horrendous level of violence against both life and property and an independent Haiti has been mired in poverty since. It raises the question whether revolutionary violence is justified. Similar issues were raised in the struggle

for Congolese, Kenyan and Algerian independence. All of these revolutionary movements confronted savage repression by occupying forces and require students to consider "who are the real terrorists?"

The Irish "Easter Rising" was a disaster that motivated a much broader and successful struggle. Was the sacrifice by Irish revolutionaries justified by future events? The Russian Revolution also raises the question of whether ends justifies means as the seizure of power by revolutionaries led to the eventual creation of a repressive government in the Soviet Union. In India, Gandhi led a principled non-violent movement that achieved independence, but the country was left divided and millions of people still died.

The reports on the revolution in the Congo and the anti-revolutionary movement in Chile ask the question: "How can revolutionary movements survive powerful foreign foes?" The articles on Cuba, China, Vietnam and the novel *Animal Farm* focus on revolutionary societies after the achievement of political power. These articles ask the question: "How do you build a revolutionary society?"

Major works of fiction have glorified and condemned revolutionary upheaval and can be used to help students think about the consequences of human actions. In volume two of *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo described a revolt as a "whirlwind in the social atmosphere" that "inspires those it lays hold of with extraordinary and mysterious powers." For Hugo, "insurrection is the furious assertion of truth." Other novels that tend to praise revolutionary movements include Thomas Flanagan, *The Year of the French*, which is about the 1798 revolt in

Ireland, *Dr. Zhivago* (Boris Pasternak) and *And Quiet Flows the Don* (Mikhail Sholokhov), about Russia, and Andre Malroux's, *Man's Hope* (Spain) and *Man's Fate* (China). Charles Dicken's *A Tale of Two Cities* is a classic tale of revolution leading to mob violence and terror. In *Matigari*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o describes a revolution betrayed in Kenya. One of the most complex portrayals of revolution is the trilogy by Martin Smarrt Bell about Haiti from 1793-1804. In *All Souls' Rising*, *Master of the Crossroads* and *The Stone that the Builder Refused*, Bell shows both the dignity of human struggle and the horror of war once social constraints are abandoned.— Alan Singer