

# **The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789-1848 Study Guide**

**The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789-1848 by Eric Hobsbawm**

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# Plot Summary

The Age of Revolution is Eric Hobsbawm's survey of Western Europe during the years between 1789 and 1848. Major events covered during that period include the storming of the Bastille marking the beginnings of the French Revolution and the publication of The Communist Manifesto by Karl Marx, signaling the widespread political upheaval in Europe that comes in 1848. Hobsbawm divides his book into two sections, the first describing the actual events of the period and their immediate results, and the second examining the larger transformations that occur.

The two major events during this period are the Industrial Revolution which begins in Britain and the French Revolution and subsequent wars under Napoleon. This "dual revolution," as Hobsbawm calls it, transforms not only Britain, France and the rest of Europe, but has economic and social repercussions around the world. Through increased trade, Britain, and to a lesser extent France, export their new industrial system to other parts of the world. In politics, the French Revolution stands to inspire other peoples to organize and rise in revolution. The conquests of Napoleon redraw the map of Europe, and the codes of law that he implements in newly conquered countries transform the political landscape.

Rather than seek the direct causes of this dual revolution, the author examines the conditions that make such enormous changes possible and documents the transformative forces these events have on the people of the time. Owing to differences in the existing political and social conditions, different countries respond in different ways to these forces, and Hobsbawm explains why. However he also draws parallels between groups and events in different countries, suggesting that these different responses are more closely linked than they appear at first.

Aside from the political upheaval and the advances in industry and trade that emerged as a result of this dual revolution, Hobsbawm chronicles a social environment the diminishes the importance of the aristocracy and allows for economic and social advancement based on a man's talent. A new middle class of people emerge, as the former agrarian peasantry become disconnected from the land and form a new class of working poor. It is this new social order that makes possible the imagination of new social theories like socialism and communism, a thread Hobsbawm follows closely through the period. He describes the seeds of nationalism that will expand in the second half of the 19th century, classifying it as largely a middle class phenomenon supported by a flowering of literary arts in the native languages of the different regions of Europe.

Hobsbawm also examines the significant advances in science during this period, particularly in the field of social science, and the unprecedented achievements in the arts. He connects these advances to the social upheaval and transformation following the dual revolution. Hobsbawm concludes the book looking ahead to the tumultuous year 1848, in which Europe sees a series of national revolutions and the first emergence of communism.



# The World in the 1780s

## The World in the 1780s Summary and Analysis

Hobsbawm begins his analysis with an overview of the social and economic state of the world at the beginning of his chosen period of focus. The world is both "smaller" and "larger" than at present, he writes. It is smaller in that the estimated population is much smaller and even the average physical size of the people is smaller. The circles within which people move are small, with most people never leaving the area where they are born. Population areas along seacoasts are better connected with one another than large cities are with the smaller towns around them. The world is larger in that large areas of it are still unexplored.

The population is largely rural, Hobsbawm explains, with most agrarian workers of the world being "unfree," as the slaves of the Americas or the serfs of Eastern Europe. In Britain, however, agriculture has begun to take on capitalist features and the tenant-farmer with hired labor has begun to dominate.

Agricultural advance is slow, however, compared to the growth in science and commerce. A merchant class of people positioned between part-time craftsmen and the commercial world is gaining power. Science is largely focused on solving practical problems associated with production. This is the Enlightenment period, when great advances in science and political theory are made.

Politically, except for Britain, Europe is ruled by absolute monarchs. Although absolute in theory, these monarchies are under pressure from the land-based system that supports them, as well as pressure from foreign wars. In France, protracted fighting with Britain has shaken the monarchy and set the stage for the French Revolution.

Nearly every monarchy during this time period espouses an ideal that servile serfdom should be ended, but very little is done to bring this freedom about. The system of large landholders relying on servile labor, and their influence on the monarchies, prevents any real change. It will take complete upheaval, even revolution, to bring actual change to the system Hobsbawm explains.

Worldwide, the expansion of European power that would eventually dominate much of the world continues during this period with Britain gaining control over part of India. China is still a major cultural and political force throughout Asia; however, the technological advantage that northwestern Europe holds over the rest of the world makes its eventual domination inevitable. Bringing this technology to the rest of the world will also give those conquered the tools to fight back, however, Hobsbawm notes.



# The Industrial Revolution

## The Industrial Revolution Summary and Analysis

Hobsbawm next addresses the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in Britain, pegging its "take-off" to that point in the 1780s when production was freed from the limitations imposed by earlier social and economic conditions and became essentially independent and limitless.

Hobsbawm calls the Industrial Revolution "the most important event in world history" (p 29). It could only have happened in Britain, he claims, for only Britain at this time has the strength in trade and the social conditions that will support it. Britain leads Europe in per capita trade and output, and its agricultural system is largely a market system, unlike most other European nations whose governmental structures are still closely tied to the land.

The Industrial Revolution is a revolution in the common sense of the word, Hobsbawm says, but unlike a political revolution, it is not deliberately undertaken as a movement. Rather, the conditions are right in Britain to move into the Industrial Revolution, requiring only the right kind of market to take advantage of the conditions. Hobsbawm claims that the cotton market is the catalyst.

The cotton market is a world market, with much of the raw materials coming from colonial trade and supplied by cheap slave labor. It is closely tied to the slave market and is dominated by Britain. Because the supply of raw cotton can be expanded quickly in the colonies by planting more land, the potential for expansion in production is large. Relatively modest improvements in the technology of spinning and weaving produce large increases in production. The older system of spinning and weaving performed by individuals in their homes for sale back to merchants who supply the materials begins to become centralized and formerly independent producers begin to look like employees.

The pressure to mechanize production becomes greater as the drive to enlarge profits increases. As workers are moved into cotton mills, they are paid just enough on which to subsist. Since wages cannot be lowered any further without the work force starving to death and disappearing, producers look to mechanization to increase production.

Cotton is used to produce consumer items like clothing and cloth, and so is the base for a very large market. This is not the case with other raw materials at this time, such as iron and steel Hobsbawm says. These require more expensive manufacturing facilities and tying up larger amounts of capital. Iron production does not take off during the early Industrial Revolution like cotton does.

Improvements and expansion is seen in mining, however, particularly of coal. Coal is not only used by industry, but also by consumers to heat their homes, so like cotton it has a large market. The main challenge facing coal producers is transportation, and it is

from improving and extending the rail systems used to move coal out of the mines that railroads are born.

As railroads move out of the coal mines, they find an eager source of investment in the merchants and investors who are making more money than they can spend from the rapidly expanding economy. Within Britain, railroads increase at an explosive rate, and British investment backs railroad development in other countries.

Hobsbawm remarks that the transformative power of the Industrial Revolution was evident to the people of the day. The new law of the world is that of the merchant, to buy low and sell high.

# The French Revolution

## The French Revolution Summary and Analysis

The Industrial Revolution is the main influence on the world's economy in the 19th century, Hobsbawm claims, and the French Revolution is that century's greatest influence on politics and ideology. While other revolutions take place during this period, none are as radical or "fundamental" as the French Revolution, he says, and none influenced political thought in the same elemental way.

By the 1780s, France has a thriving world trade that rivals Britain's, but unlike Britain which has a foreign policy dictated by capitalist goals, France is still an absolute monarchy, although an "enlightened" one that places competent men from the growing middle class in offices of power that had traditionally been held by noblemen. The nobility, left without any political power, begin to exercise their hereditary rights to these offices, replacing more effective people and weakening the government. When the monarchy becomes financially strapped after helping America fight Britain, the nobility take advantage of the weakness and call a States-General, a national assembly, in an attempt to take over the monarchy.

The States-General is made up of three groups, the nobility, the clergy and the so-called "Third Estate," representing the "people" of France and dominated by the middle class. This Third Estate soon separate themselves from the States-General, calling themselves a National Assembly modeled on the British House of Commons. This assembly has the backing of the overwhelming majority of the population of France, including the large peasantry, which is stumbling under the pressure of a harsh winter and high food prices. In a mass uprising on July 14, 1789 revolutionaries storm the Bastille, a prison and symbol of the authority of the monarchy, where they believe they can get weapons. The movement spreads throughout the country, and the nobility and monarchy, having no organized military strength, cannot stop it.

The moderate government that takes power in 1789 creates a Constituent Assembly and makes sweeping changes between 1789 and 1791, when a new constitution creates a constitutional monarchy and subsequent legislation reduces the power of the clergy. The nobility, having fled to neighboring monarchies, amasses support from them to re-conquer France and restore the monarchy. As the economy becomes more capitalistic, the price of bread begins to rise, creating opposition to the government from the lower classes of Paris.

Thus attacked from both sides, the French government declares war in April, 1792 to defend the revolutionary government. Within five months, the monarchy is completely overthrown and the French Republic is established under a National Convention. It engages in a policy of total war to defend the country from enemies within and foreign invaders. By 1794, France has secured its borders and occupied Belgium and stabilized its currency.



It is during this time that the Jacobins reach the height of their political influence under their leader Maximilien Robespierre. As part of the Committee of Public Safety, Robespierre oversees a policy of violent suppression and execution by guillotine called the Reign of Terror. The working classes of Paris support the Jacobins at first, but become increasingly disillusioned as the reforms promised by them do not materialize. The ongoing crisis of war keeps the Jacobins in power, but when France finally expels the last of its invaders, support disappears and the leaders of the Jacobins are executed.

The result of the war is a strong organized military and a weak civil government. It is in these conditions that Napoleon Bonaparte, having risen through the ranks of the military, becomes a mythical figure and symbol of France, enabling him to eventually rise to the position of Emperor.





# War

## War Summary and Analysis

Europe is in a nearly constant state of war between 1792 and 1815, when Napoleon is finally defeated and the expansion of France is halted. Jacobinism has its followers in countries outside France, but nowhere does the movement have the strength or political power to produce a revolution. Rather, these factions sympathetic to the French serve to offer support once France has conquered their countries.

The war is primarily France against the rest of Europe and Britain. Several successive coalitions of anti-French forces attempt to defeat France, some intending to restore the French monarchy, but none are successful until 1814, when Napoleon's forces are defeated at Leipzig and the British occupy Paris. Napoleon is exiled, but returns in 1815 and regains control of the French forces. He is finally defeated at Waterloo in 1815.

The military organization of the French allow them to achieve such success on land, although they are still inferior to the British at sea. It is the French army's ability to improvise and high morale that gives them the advantage, Hobsbawm claims.

The old map of Europe is redrawn after the successive victories of the French. Prior to this period, Europe was made up of hundreds of scattered political entities ruled by various lords and princes under the feudal system. In the wake of Napoleon's victories, the feudal system is abolished and lands are consolidated into "nations" for the first time. The government of these nations is usually based on the Code of Napoleon, the bureaucratic system established in France. In some countries, such as Spain, reaction against these French reforms create new forms of government. Thus, Hobsbawm claims, virtually all of Europe has its political institutions influenced by those of the French during this period.

But larger than the change in political institutions, Hobsbawm argues, is the change in the "political atmosphere." France's example shows the rest of Europe that an entire country can rise up against its rulers and go on to achieve great feats. This notion of power emanating from the masses is to change the relationship between the governments and the governed throughout Europe.

Hobsbawm next examines the economic aftermath of this long period of war. While long in total duration, the fighting during this period is concentrated in bursts of activity and does not create the widespread devastation as earlier or later wars. In fact, Hobsbawm claims, for most Europeans, the wars do not have much effect on their daily lives.

The economic costs are high. Hobsbawm writes that this is the most expensive war to date. It is during this period that banking families like the Barings and Rothschilds grow to great prominence financing the wars. Paper money comes into wider circulation as

nations print more to pay off war debts, leading to devaluation and inflation. No adequate system of taxation exists.

The shifting of resources during wartime also has an economic impact, and gives rise to industries that might not have been profitable during peacetime. The iron industry, which Hobsbawm describes as sluggish prior to the war, turns to manufacturing cannons. A domestic source for sugar is developed in the beet. Food preservation technology advances to meet the needs of the British navy.

Hobsbawm asks the theoretical question of whether these advances in the economy outweigh the adverse effects of war, and determines that they do not. He also speculates on what might have happened to the economies of France and Britain if their growth had not been interrupted by revolution and war. They would certainly have continued to expand, he concludes, but adds that the cost of war is not only weighed against the economic gain. The political and diplomatic gains must also be measured, and compared to these gains for both Britain and France, this period of war is "not excessive" he states.

# Peace

## Peace Summary and Analysis

After twenty years of continuous war, Europe experiences a long period of peace. During this peace, the map of Europe is "redrawn" to reflect the balance among the five great powers, Russia, Britain, France, Austria and Prussia.

A "concert of Europe," a form of international congress, is formed, but disintegrates after a few years as the interests of the main powers diverge. The main powers do all agree that revolutionary movements should be contained in the interest of overall stability, however movements start that benefit on or more of the powers, they are supported. Russia and Britain both support an independence movement in Greece; however, they are at cross purposes in Turkey.

None of these tensions reach the level of international war, however. This is partly due to the relative strengths and ambitions of the major powers, Hobsbawm writes. Austria and Prussia are not strong enough to start anything, he writes. Britain, which Hobsbawm describes as being far beyond all others in the scope of its empire and level of industrialization, is content. Russia does not have any large ambitions to add more territory. France is not so satisfied, Hobsbawm says, but realizes that the price of reintroducing Jacobinism is too high.

Outside of Europe, however, the powers continue to fight to expand their influence. Britain establishes itself in Africa and strengthens its hold on India while building trade with China. Russia begins to take over portions of the Caucasus, and the United States expands westward through war with Mexico.

One occurrence crucial to peace during this period, Hobsbawm argues, is the abolition of the international slave trade. Cotton has replaced the sale of men and sugar as the main commodity of international trade. Hobsbawm is quick to add, though, that illegal slave trafficking still occurs, and slavery itself remains in place.



# Revolutions

## Revolutions Summary and Analysis

Hobsbawm identifies three main waves of revolutions in Europe between 1815 and 1848. The first wave is in the 1820s in several Mediterranean countries. Except for Greece, these are suppressed. The second wave comes in the 1830s and is "more serious," affecting western Europe and Britain with upheaval in Ireland, Poland, Belgium and France. This period is a turning point in Hobsbawm's larger assessment. He argues that 1830 marks an end to aristocratic political power the emergence of a self-identified working class.

In 1848, a nearly worldwide third wave of revolutions breaks out affecting most regions of Europe. As opposed to revolutions before Napoleon, all of these revolutions are "planned." Hobsbawm claims that secret revolutionary groups such as the Carbonari in southern Italy are typical. These groups eventually become split along geographical and ideological grounds, but they have several things in common. They all see themselves as benefactors of a common people who lack the means to create change themselves, and who will welcome liberation. These groups all envision taking power after a political crisis in the present government allows them to seize control of the seats of power. They imagine their struggle as international in that it applies to all common people and not only as associated with one particular country or region.

Indeed, Hobsbawm argues, the idea of a nation in the modern sense is not yet fully developed throughout Europe, but is growing. The emergence of nationalism and its effects is taken up by Hobsbawm in the following chapter.



# Nationalism

## Nationalism Summary and Analysis

Another turning point after 1830, Hobsbawm argues, is the idea of a "self-conscious" nationalism, first among some of the fraternal revolutionary groups and then among the educated middle class. While the uneducated masses may identify themselves with local traditions, they are not the source of national movements. Hobsbawm claims. It is among the educated middle classes and the universities where native-language publications are published and circulated, which contribute to the development of a national identity. Only in Ireland, Hobsbawm claims, does any national movement based in the masses occur.

There are incidents of revolt against "alien-rule" in this period, Hobsbawm explains, mainly of a religious nature. He does not consider these national movements, however, nor did they claim to be. Hobsbawm gives special attention to one movement which he does feel combines a nationalism based in the middle classes with the revolutionary spirit of the French Revolution. This is the revolution in Greece.

Through trade and its dominance of the Orthodox Church, Greek people occupied important positions throughout the Balkans and the Mediterranean prior to this period, and it is among these people that the idea of a Greek nation gains strength. Once Greece obtains its independence, Hobsbawm argues, something paradoxical occurs. Because Greece has now been more strongly defined as a distinct nation within defined borders, it loses its previous cultural influence over the Balkans, opening the door for national movements to take place in those regions.

The nationalistic ideal is spread throughout the region from west to east, facilitated by the conquests of Napoleon, Hobsbawm argues, which brought the idea from France to Egypt. Everywhere it appears in this period, Hobsbawm asserts, it can be traced back to the "dual revolution" of the French Revolution and Industrial Revolution.

# Land

## Land Summary and Analysis

The period Hobsbawm covers sees a dramatic change in the way people are connected to the land, and in the way land is connected to the economy. Hobsbawm calls this change "the most catastrophic phenomenon" of the period (p. 149).

The traditional system of agriculture is a hindrance to economic growth, Hobsbawm claims. To unleash its economic potential, he writes, it must be freed from the ownership of large landlords and the Church and made into a commodity that can be bought and sold. It must be bought by a class of people who will develop it with an eye toward making a profit, and the people formerly tied to the land must be cut loose to provide a labor force that can be controlled.

Peasants and landlords therefore stand in the way of this economic development, and they are dealt with in different ways, Hobsbawm explains. In many countries, feudalism is abolished in various ways and peasants bound to the service of a lord are made free. With the exception of Britain and the US, Hobsbawm ties the elimination of feudalism directly to the influence of the French Revolution. Land reform took place in France as a result of the revolution, and Napoleon's armies eliminated feudalism wherever they conquered. Even in places that were not conquered by France, were directly inspired by the revolution. In some of the areas under foreign control, such as India and North Africa, the conquering powers attempt to impose a system over the traditional systems with varying success. In North Africa, France's abolishment of the traditional system of land ownership inadvertently creates a class of dissatisfied, educated people who later lead a revolt against their occupiers. In India, Britain's imposition of a British model of land ownership results in economic failure.

For the peasants, this "artificial earthquake" (p. 160) in their legal standing appears to provide them with a certain freedom, but at the same time it removes many of the protections they enjoyed under feudalism. Economically, this change in traditional models of land ownership is hard on these former peasants, who do not yet have alternatives to provide a livelihood. The situation is particularly bad in Ireland, where the population becomes higher than can be supported by the available food supply.

# Towards an Industrial World

## Towards an Industrial World Summary and Analysis

While the movement toward industrialization gains momentum, only Britain can be considered to be industrialized by 1848, Hobsbawm claims. Elsewhere, the economy is still closely tied to agriculture, which has not yet been fully capitalized.

Increases in population and improvements in science, communication and transportation, in particular the railroad, occur during this time period, as does migration. In 1830, Hobsbawm writes, this rate of change increased rapidly. Production and industry grow quickly, and industrial centers begin to emerge. Britain is especially situated to adopt these changes and grow its economy as a result.

Paradoxically, Hobsbawm says, France's economy does not keep pace. It is still too closely tied to the peasantry, a result of the reforms of the French Revolution which provided more autonomy to common people. The population of France does not shoot upwards as in other countries, thus no market for common goods explodes as it does elsewhere. France begins to produce luxury goods for export rather than domestic goods for its own people.

As some economies grow, others lag, opening up the divides between the developed and under-developed parts of the globe which will widen with time.

# The Career Open to Talent

## The Career Open to Talent Summary and Analysis

A self-conscious middle class emerges as a result of the dual revolution, Hobsbawm explains. It is now possible for a member of the laboring poor to become educated and move into a profession, an opportunity not available previously. The bureaucracy and hierarchy of a civil service arises in France and elsewhere, created by Napoleon. These bureaucracies expand with the growing population, providing a system within which a person of talent or sufficient motivation can rise in authority.

Increasingly, Hobsbawm writes, the traditional form of professional development where a son follows into the work of his father falls away as more mobility appears. The contrast between the working poor and the new middle class is sharp, Hobsbawm explains. These new workers do not get dirty. They do not use their hands.

This new professional freedom has the effect of providing a kind of religious freedom, as well, Hobsbawm explains, particularly for Jews. Already largely an urban group, Jews are more readily able to take advantage of the new opportunities to join the middle class. Protestant Christians in Catholic nations like France are also able to hold positions they could not before.

Because elevation into this class is available to anyone who applies himself, Hobsbawm asserts, those who do not elect to join it are viewed with increasing contempt by those who do. Although all citizens are legally equal before the law, legislation is passed designed to discriminate against the working poor.





# The Laboring Poor

## The Laboring Poor Summary and Analysis

Hobsbawm defines three possible paths for a member of the working poor during this period. They can continue to suffer, try to elevate themselves to the middle classes, or rebel.

Conditions for the working poor deteriorate during this period. Working class neighborhoods become segregated from those of the middle class. Conditions in these slums are unclean and unhealthy. Disease runs high, and not until it spills over into the middle class is anything done about hygienic conditions.

Rebellion comes easily to the working poor under such conditions, Hobsbawm suggests. Unlike the rebellion of the French Revolution, however, which was led by the educated Jacobins and supported by the urban poor of Paris, this new "working class" rebels against the middle class business owners and merchants as well as the rich upper class.

Rebellion comes in the form of organization of workers into unions, political campaigns, demonstrations and occasional strikes or riots. In Britain, supporters of Chartism, a movement that calls for election and parliamentary reform, are elected to local councils.

The gap between the rich and the poor continues to increase, and some working class organizers begin to imagine a permanent change that would elevate the workers to the importance they deserve as the original source of the riches of the wealthy. These are the foundations of communism, Hobsbawm asserts, although there is not yet the level of organization behind the idea to offer a threat.

# Ideology: Religion

## Ideology: Religion Summary and Analysis

Hobsbawm describes a general decline in the importance of religion in the lives of the emerging middle classes during this time period. While people are not outwardly hostile toward religion, society becomes increasingly secular following the French Revolution.

The working classes are also less influenced by religion compared to the standards of that time, even though looking back from a modern viewpoint they seem to have been quite religious Hobsbawm claims. Science advances and frequently clashes with the teachings of the church. Politically, organized churches also come under attack by new governments.

While the influence of the Catholic Church wanes, two religions actually grow in number during this period, Islam and sectarian Protestantism. Islam expands outward from Turkey through Africa and to the east. Protestantism gains hold in the most capitalist countries, especially those not traditionally Catholic. In Britain and the US especially, protestant sects are at the head of religious revivals among working class people.

Religion is still useful as a "prop" for the middle classes, however, lending them credibility and authority. The nobility continues to rely on religion as a source of social stability and legitimacy. Generally speaking, however, Hobsbawm claims that both governments and the emerging middle classes become increasingly secular during this time period. He pairs the expansion of Protestantism with a growing liberal ideology taking hold among the working classes, supported by anti-clerical and anti-monarchy governments.



# Ideology: Secular

## Ideology: Secular Summary and Analysis

All the important thought taking place during this period is secular, Hobsbawm claims. It is all closely associated with a liberal view of society and the progress of society through use of reason and philosophical enlightenment, and a "middle class liberal ideology" emerges (p. 236). Hobsbawm marks the beginning of this ideology with the publication of *Wealth of Nations* by Adam Smith in 1776 and its peak at the publication of *Principles of Political Economy* by David Ricardo in 1817. By 1830, the turning point in Hobsbawm's assessment of the period, the true liberal ideology begins to decline, having become "vulgarized" by business interests.

This ideology is only reluctantly embraced by those in political power, who are torn between an ideological desire for democracy and the idea that people should be ruled by an elite group best suited for it. This prevents any sweeping liberal change, Hobsbawm claims. It is out of these conditions that an even more liberal political ideology emerges, that of socialism and communism. Authors such as Karl Marx postulate the arrival of communism as a natural result of the cycle of history, the progress of society, and a resolution of the contradictions found in capitalism.

On the conservative side, Hobsbawm finds no thinking of any real importance. Conservative thinkers resist the upsurge of liberal ideology by appealing to history. The current state of affairs exists, the conservative thinking goes, because it has been naturally refined by human society over the centuries.

In between the radically liberal ideas of socialism and communism and the conservative resistance of those in political power, a third kind of secular thought develops during this period, Hobsbawm claims, built on the ideas of the French political thinker Rousseau and the German philosopher Hegel. All of these streams of thought peak prior to 1830, Hobsbawm claims, after which no thinker of equal importance is to come.

# The Arts

## The Arts Summary and Analysis

The arts flourish during the period covered by Hobsbawm. An increasingly literate public allow for the rise of several significant contributors to the arts in literature, music and painting, including Goethe, Wordsworth, Dickens, Beethoven, Mozart, Chopin and Delacroix. These high achievements in the arts span across all the nations of Europe, and even today are looked at as defining classical taste.

Hobsbawm relates this astounding advancement in the arts to the dual revolution. He simplifies the connection by suggesting that the French Revolution provided an inspirational example to the artists of the day, while the Industrial Revolution provided stimulation through the "horror" of the plight of the working classes. Artists of the day are closely connected to public affairs, Hobsbawm explains. Mozart writes *The Magic Flute*, a piece promoting Freemasonry and its political aims, Charles Dickens writes about life in industrialized England, and Beethoven dedicates *Eroica* to Napoleon.

Hobsbawm pays particular attention to Romanticism, an era in the arts that originates during this time frame. Although difficult to classify, he says, it does not seem to have any guiding political structure except to attack the middle. Romanticism is an "extremist" creed, with contributors from both the right and left, he writes. The figure of the alienated "genius" emerges around this time.

The effects of industrialization are a common theme among the arts of the day, and Hobsbawm identifies three widely used sources, "the middle ages, primitive man (or, what could amount to the same thing, exoticism and the 'folk'), and the French Revolution" (p. 264). Conservative artists tend to focus on the old order of things, glorifying the middle ages. The elevation of the "folk" is closely tied to the developing nationalism. The image of the "noble savage" becomes common in literature. The French Revolution provides direct inspiration to writers such as Byron, Keats and Shelley, whose politics are revolutionary.

Romanticism is not influential among the aristocracy and lower classes during its time, Hobsbawm claims. It is propagated through the middle class primarily by bourgeois women and girls, who are now encouraged to a life of "bored leisure" as their fathers and husbands make money.

Older popular culture of the masses has not been completely destroyed by the dual revolution, however, Hobsbawm says. Folk music and fairs continue on in adapted form as cities grow.



# Science and Conclusion: Towards 1848

## Science and Conclusion: Towards 1848 Summary and Analysis

Advances in science are not as significant as those in the arts during this period, Hobsbawm claims, but there are some very important developments that lay the foundations for the structure of scientific inquiry in subsequent periods. These developments are associated with the dual revolution as well, he argues.

The discoveries on the physical sciences are not of the major kinds made earlier in astronomy and physics, Hobsbawm writes. They are more modest, but will prove to be significant. The discovery of the cell in biology, for example, will lead to greater advances. Its significance during this time, Hobsbawm claims, is more in its revelation of a basic building block of life. This idea will reverberate through political science, Hobsbawm says. Significant advances are made in the field of mathematics, but these are of interest to only a few advanced thinkers of the day.

In the social sciences, Hobsbawm explains, great strides are taken, and these he ties more closely with the dual revolution. Drawing on earlier discoveries in the physical sciences, thinkers began to apply similar ideas to the interaction of people in society. The idea of social and historical evolution is an idea original to this period, Hobsbawm claims, and this idea of evolution permeates the social sciences as well as fields such as biology and geology.

Philology, the study of the language culture of groups of people, develops in this period, tied closely to the growing ideals of nationalism. This newly emerging consciousness of national groups also leads to new theories about race and the development of civilization. The theory that most European languages descended from one common language is developed, supporting the thread of evolutionary thinking that Hobsbawm says runs through most of science at this time.

Biology and geology are especially concerned with evolution. While Hobsbawm claims the time is not yet right for evolutionary biology to take hold as it would be described by Charles Darwin after this period, the early lines of thinking in these terms are visible. In geology, the direct evidence is quite clear. The varying strata of the earth can be seen, along with the very different types of fossils found in each layer. Hobsbawm notes with some satisfaction that the person credited with advancing the idea that the earth has evolved through different stages is a drainage engineer who takes note of the layered strata as he digs ditches to support the growing industry of Britain. In this and other ways, Hobsbawm says, scientific advances are tied to the dual revolution.

However, thought is also independent of social change, Hobsbawm adds, and he does not suggest that the connection between scientific advances and the dual revolution is a



direct one. Rather, he hints, during a time of such social upheaval we might expect that people will begin thinking about things in new ways.

Hobsbawm concludes with a short chapter entitled "Conclusion: Towards 1848," which takes an overall look at the period he has examined. It is a period of "superlatives," he writes (p. 297). Communication, trade, science, the arts and social theory are at heights never obtained before. Yet it is also the "ugliest" period to date, as conditions for the working poor decrease in livability.

While great changes take place during this period, Hobsbawm notes that they are not as large as the changes that are to follow in the next fifty years. While feudalism has been abolished almost everywhere, only in a few places has the land been fully incorporated into capitalism. Monarchy is still the most common form of government. While peasants are increasingly losing their agrarian roots and becoming part of the working masses, only in Britain does the urban population approach that of the rural.

The 1840s are an "unbalanced" time, Hobsbawm writes. It is not yet certain to the people of the day what path has been opened by these changes. Hobsbawm claims there is an overall sense, however, that even larger change is ahead. This proves to be true, as the region explodes in revolution in 1848, a subject that Hobsbawm takes up in a subsequent volume.



# Characters

## Napoleon

The leader of France who first makes his name during the French Revolution and then rises to power through the military to be proclaimed First Consul. Under Napoleon's leadership, France embarks on a period of war that lasts nearly twenty years and expands France's influence throughout Europe and into Africa. Napoleon creates a bureaucratic system of government which is set up in the countries conquered by France and widely adapted by France's neighbors.

Napoleon withstands several attempts by coalitions of France's enemies to oust him, but is finally defeated in 1814. He is exiled to the island of St. Helena, but in 1815 escapes and takes control of the French army which has marched to re-capture him. For three months, Napoleon again leads France before he is finally defeated at Waterloo in a battle with the British.

Napoleon's influence on the period treated by Hobsbawm is significant, and he is an important figure in Hobsbawm's theory of the dual revolution. For the artists and authors of the day, Napoleon embodies the revolutionary ideals that emerge in this period and explode in the years that follow it.

## Robespierre

Robespierre is a lawyer who rises into the upper levels of the French government following the French Revolution. Although only one member of the Committee of Public Safety, Robespierre exercises considerable influence over the government of France in his role of defining those officially considered enemies of the revolution. As such, Robespierre is accorded a leading role in the Reign of Terror, a period when all opposition to the French government is violently crushed.

Robespierre is also a leader of the Jacobins, a group of politicians who control the Convention that governs France. He remains influential as long as the Jacobins retain power, but when their political influence disappears in 1794 Robespierre is arrested and executed.

The specter of Robespierre and the Jacobins remains long after they disappear, Hobsbawm claims. The Reign of Terror of the Jacobins serves as an example to the other governments of the world of what might happen again if revolutionary movements are allowed to gain momentum. As a result, Hobsbawm explains, all efforts are made to suppress revolution in the years following the death of Robespierre.



## **Karl Marx**

A political theorist and historian who writes the Communist Manifesto, published in 1848. Marx theorizes that history is a series of class struggles erupting in regular revolution when the previous social system is replaced by a new one. He forecasts that capitalism will be replaced by socialism and eventually communism. Hobsbawm places Marx at the final point of convergence between the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution, each event being necessary for the formulation of Marx's ideas.

## **Count Saint-Simon**

A French philosopher whose ideas center on building a new social order. His ideas are not always well-formed; however, Hobsbawm asserts that his thinking is widely influential among the socialist thinkers who follow in his footsteps, particularly Karl Marx. Unlike Marx, Saint-Simon does not call for political revolution in order to obtain his ideal social system, but imagines it can be created through education.

## **The Duke of Wellington**

The military leader who leads the British army in the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815.

## **Giuseppe Mazzini**

The founder of an Italian group called "Young Italy" which Hobsbawm claims is an example for other similar movements throughout Europe. Young Italy has as its goal the formation of one Italian state out of the various associated kingdoms that exist at the time. Thus, it is an early example of the nationalist movements that make their first appearance during this period.

## **Thomas Malthus**

A British political economist whose examination and analysis of population levels and their growth is widely influential during this period when the social sciences are making great strides.

## **Josiah Wedgewood**

An innovative potter who was among the first to bring industrial methods into production in Britain.





## **Johann Wolfgang von Goethe**

A German author and philosopher considered one of the greatest ever to have written in the German language. Goethe is one of several notable authors and artists who flourish during this time period.

## **Lord Byron**

A Romantic British poet and author who also fought in the revolutionary forces of Italy and Greece. Through him, Hobsbawm connects many of the common themes of Romanticism to the revolutionary ideals of the French Revolution.

## **William Wordsworth**

One of the earliest poets of Romanticism, and one of the outstanding authors that flourished in this period.

## **Charles Dickens**

A popular English author of novels, many of which described the changing urban social structures of the Industrial Revolution

## **The Chartists**

Supporters of The People's Charter, a political document that appeared in Britain in 1838, and which called for election reform and suffrage for all men over 21.

## **The Carbonari**

A secret organization in Italy that advocates revolution. Such secret organizations exist in other parts of Europe following the French Revolution, Hobsbawm claims, all of them variations on the Carbonari.

## **The Sansculottes**

The working people of Paris who formed the forces of the French Revolution. The term "sansculottism," used by Hobsbawm, refers to a social theory that provides equality for all classes of people.



## **David Ricardo**

A British economic theorist. With Malthus, Ricardo is one of the first to apply a systematic approach to examining economics. His ideas of value being connected to labor is influential in socialist thinking.

## **The Bourgeoisie**

A class of people who occupy the upper part of society, but who gain their position by virtue of what they have earned, rather than aristocratic succession. This is a term widely used in Marxist philosophy.

## **The Proletariat**

A Marxist term for the working class of people who have little of value except their own ability to work.

## **The Jacobins**

A revolutionary political club that rose to power in Paris and which is associated with the Reign of Terror . Well organized and supported by a widespread network of affiliated groups and the Parisian lower classes, the Jacobins established considerable power despite their relatively small numbers. Initially moderate in their politics, the Jacobins eventually called for the execution of the King. They fell from power after their leader, Robespierre, was executed in 1794.

# Objects/Places

## The Industrial Revolution

The period of technological and industrial advancement that takes place in the second half of the 18th and first half of the 19th centuries. It is marked by a major increase in production capacity, the expansion of markets and trade, and the transformation of an agricultural and local economy to an international industrial economy.

## The French Revolution

A ten-year period beginning in 1789 during which the absolutist monarchy of France is replaced by a constitutional government. The period is marked by several upheavals in France and the emergence of Napoleon Bonaparte as its leader.

## Britain

The island nation encompassing England, Scotland and Wales. Britain is the leading power in the world at the beginning of this period, and the location of the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution.

## France

The western European country separated by England by the English Channel, and Britain's main military and economic rival during this period. France is the location of the French Revolution, and becomes a powerful force throughout Europe under the rule of Napoleon.

## Paris

The capital of France and the location of the revolution.

## The Austrian Empire

Along with Britain, France, Prussia and Russia, one of the five major forces of Europe during this period. Encompasses most of southeastern Europe at this period.



## **Prussia**

One of the main forces in Europe during this period. Bordered by Poland on the east, the Baltic Sea on the north and the Austrian Empire on the south, Prussia covers much of what is modern day Germany and the Baltic states.

## **Russia**

A vast empire located east of Europe and bordering on Prussia, Poland, the Austrian Empire and the Turkish Empire. Russia is one of the major forces during this period.

## **The Turkish Empire**

Also called the Ottoman Empire, this region covers much of what is modern day Turkey and Greece, and extends into the Middle East and North Africa.

## **Saint-Simonism**

A group of related Utopian socialist theories named after the Count Saint-Simon, which hold that the prosperity of a capitalist society can be shared with all classes.

## **Socialism**

A form of social and economic system that aims to share the prosperity from production with all people through various means. Marx claims that socialism is a transitional state between capitalism and communism

## **Communism**

A political, economic and social system that abolishes classes and calls for communal ownership of property. This is the type of system called for by Marx in the Communist Manifesto, which he sees as the inevitable result of the eventual fall of capitalism.

## **Capitalism**

An economic system where private individuals control industry and stand to lose or gain based on market forces. Capitalism first becomes viable during this period, but its implications are not yet fully known. Theories of socialism and communism emerge in response to capitalism.

## **The Bastille**

A Parisian prison that was overrun on July 14, 1789. This date is commonly recognized as the beginning of the French Revolution.

## **The Reign of Terror**

A period of 15 months in 1793-1794 during which opposition to the government was crushed by violence and thousand of executions by guillotine.



# Themes

## The Emergence of Socialism and Communism

Hobsbawm pointedly ends the periods he treats in the book with the publication of *The Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx. While the historical importance of the work is yet to be realized in 1848, Hobsbawm expects the reader to understand its importance in the century that follows. He marks the appearance of the work as the culmination of a series of developments that stem from the dual revolution.

It is the Industrial Revolution that makes socialism possible, Hobsbawm claims, and connects its earliest proponents directly to the newly envisioned prosperity they imagine an industrial society will bring. The Count Claude de Saint-Simon is both the inventor of the word "industrialist" and an influential socialist thinker. Men like Saint-Simon look at the enormous potential for wealth from the new industrialism and expect it will be able to raise the standard of living for all people. This expectation is made plain by the appearance of the new class of working poor who seem not to be benefiting from the potential wealth. In practice, industrialism is making the rich richer and the poor poorer, Hobsbawm explains.

This is a profound disappointment to the Saint-Simonists, as Hobsbawm describes the socialist thinkers who follow in his thinking. Had capitalism been able to fulfill its promise to bring prosperity to all, Hobsbawm theorizes, socialism would never have gained a foothold among the social scientists of the day. As conditions worsen for the working poor, however, an even more radical form of socialist thinking emerges, one that calls for political revolution as well as social and economic transformation. This is communism as proposed by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in the *The Communist Manifesto*.

Marx's theory that history evolves in regular cycles of revolution is connected directly to the new ways of thinking about history and society and even biology and chemistry that emerge in the wake of the dual revolution, Hobsbawm claims. Marx is not strictly anti-capitalism, but proposes that like the systems that preceded it, it has inherent contradictions that can only be overcome by sweeping revolutionary changes. This idea of revolution, Hobsbawm suggests, like all such thinking after 1789, is based on the ideal of the French Revolution. Thus the conditions during this time period were perfect for such an idea to incubate and be born.

## The Dual Revolution

The Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution have been extensively examined separately by historians, but Hobsbawm introduces a new thesis by connecting the two into what he calls a "dual revolution." Hobsbawm does not claim that one is the product of the other, or even that the two arise from the same source. The changes that arise



from each of these revolutions converge and combine to create a new way of thinking among the people of this time that would not have been possible had one or the other revolution not occurred.

For example, Hobsbawm suggests that the advances in the social sciences that are made in this period occur at this time because never before has society been so unequally split into social classes. This division is a direct result of the Industrial Revolution. Also contributing to the development of social science is the overarching realization that great changes in social structure can be made intentionally. It is the French Revolution that makes this realization possible. Hobsbawm also describes how each revolution contributes to the advances in the physical sciences, political theory, and the arts.

The ultimate result of this dual revolution, as Hobsbawm describes it, comes when Karl Marx combines the politics of revolution from the French Revolution to the changed social conditions caused by the Industrial Revolution and calls for a systemic overthrow of capitalism to be replaced by communism.

## The Influence of Napoleon

When Hobsbawm refers to the French Revolution and its effects on the landscape of Europe, he means not only the events that transpired in Paris in the early part of this period, but also the resulting years of war that follow as Napoleon Bonaparte rises to the leadership of France and marches his armies through much of Europe up to the disastrous invasion of Russia.

Napoleon serves several roles during this period. He is of course a national symbol for France, which becomes one of the great powers of the world under his leadership. Although he is eventually to declare himself an emperor, he still embodies the spirit of the French Revolution. He is celebrated by the artists and authors of the day.

Politically, Napoleon's conquests have a direct bearing on the government of the lands conquered by France. He introduces a bureaucratic system of secular government which becomes a model for government even in states not under the control of France.

Napoleon also serves as a competitor for the world's major power of the age, Britain. Fighting Napoleon stimulates new industry in Britain, where the Industrial Revolution is already underway. War creates new markets and accelerates the development of new technology. Internationally, Britain races to establish dominance over France in trade.

Thus Napoleon acts as a catalyst in the combination of the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution into Hobsbawm's "dual revolution."

# Style

## Perspective

The Age of Revolution first appears in 1962. This is a time in world history when one of the largest world powers is the communist Soviet Union. It is therefore not surprising that Hobsbawm would choose the emergence of capitalism, socialism and communism as political theories as one of the important threads examined in his book. In the period following World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in the Cold War, a war of ideologies often fought by proxy in other parts of the world. Framing his history in strong economic terms seems to reflect the perspective of the time in which the book is written, and probably resonates strongly with readers of the day.

Hobsbawm is British, and his examination of this period is centered largely on developments in Britain and Britain's chief adversary for much of the time frame, France. There is certainly justification for this focus, as it is in these two European nations that most of the changes in this era occur. He mentions important developments in other parts of the world only as they are connected to the events in Britain and France.

Hobsbawm assumes a certain level of familiarity with British history in his perspective. A certain amount of pride in the industrial, military and economic achievements of Britain underlies some of Hobsbawm's descriptions, as well as a hint of sadness and nostalgia as he concludes the book looking ahead to the eventual decline of the British Empire and Britain's international influence.

## Tone

Hobsbawm's tone is that of an academic describing complicated events to an educated, but non-academic reader. While he cites sources for quotations and other references, he does not document his argument as completely as a purely academic book might. This is partly because he is treating some subjects that are outside his own area of expertise, and wishes only to summarize them as they relate to his central argument without resorting to dry, academic prose.

Aiming at an educated and interested reader, Hobsbawm adopts a direct, knowing tone that is aimed at entertaining as well as informing. He injects occasional humor and irony into his descriptions, and sometimes makes very subjective remarks. He does not hesitate to call one historical figure "chicken-brained," for example, without further explanation. His prose is very dense, with frequent references to people, places and events which are mentioned only in passing in order to support the present point.

However, Hobsbawm's argument does not always require further explanation, for it is primarily descriptive rather than analytical in tone. This frees him from the rigorous



process of documenting an academic argument and allows him to synthesize an entertaining narrative that captures the highlights of the period under discussion.

## Structure

Hobsbawm limits the time frame of his work from 1789 to 1848, but he does not treat the period in strictly chronological order. Rather, after presenting chapters on the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, he examines the period by different subjects as they span the years covered.

The book is divided into 16 chapters in two main parts. The first part, called "Developments," is a roughly sequential account of the events leading up to an including the dual revolution and the periods of war and peace that follow. The second part, called "Results," examines the changes in work life, social conditions, the arts, science and political theory that occurred during and following the dual revolution. Hobsbawm closes with a short chapter summarizing the period and looking ahead to the year 1848, which he covers in a sequel volume.

The book is supplemented with several maps showing the changes in political boundaries, population, culture (as measured by the performance of opera) and industrial output as a result of revolution and economic expansion. Charts are included to demonstrate the state of agriculture and industry during the period, and the increase in export activity in the cotton industry, which is the leading industry during Britain's industrial revolution.



## Quotes

"The world of 1789 was therefore, for most of its inhabitants, incalculably vast. Most of them, unless snatched away by some awful hazard, such as military recruitment, lived and died in the county, and often in the parish, of their birth." p. 10

"By any reckoning, [the Industrial Revolution] was probably the most important event in world history, at any rate since the invention of agriculture and cities. And it was initiated by Britain." p. 29

"And both Britain and the world knew that the Industrial Revolution launched in these islands by and through the traders and entrepreneurs, whose only law was to buy in the cheapest market and sell without restriction in the dearest, was transforming the world. Nothing could stand in its way. The gods and kings of the past were powerless before the businessmen and steam-engines of the present." p. 52

"The problem which faced the French middle class for the remainder of what is technically described as the revolutionary period (1794-9) was how to achieve political stability and economic advance on the basis of the original liberal program of 1789-91. It has never solved this problem from that day to this..." p. 72

"In terms of political geography, the French Revolution ended the European middle ages." p. 88

"After more than twenty years of almost unbroken war and revolution, the victorious old regimes faced problems of peace-making and peace-preservation which were particularly difficult and dangerous. The debris of two decades had to be cleared away, the territorial loot redistributed. What was more, it was evident to all intelligent statesmen that no major European war was henceforth tolerable; for such a war would almost certainly mean a new revolution, and consequently the destruction of the old regime." p. 99

"Working class or urban revolution and socialism therefore appeared very real dangers in Western Europe, though in fact in the most industrialized countries like Britain and Belgium, government and employing classes regarded them with relative - and justified - placidity." p. 123

"What happened to the land determined the life and death of most human beings in the years from 1789 to 1848. Consequently the impact of the dual revolution on landed property, land tenure and agriculture was the most catastrophic phenomenon of our period." p. 149

"Only one economy was sufficiently industrialized by 1848, the British, and consequently dominated the world." p. 168



"However, the economic development of this period contains one gigantic paradox; France. On paper no country should have advanced more rapidly...Yet in fact French economic development at the base was distinctly slower than that of other countries." p. 177

"In a word the society of post-revolutionary France was bourgeois in its structure and values. It was the society of the parvenu, i.e. the self-made man, though this was not completely obvious except when the country was itself governed by parvenus, i.e. when it was republican or bonapartist." p. 183

"In purely religious terms we must therefore see our period as one in which increasing secularization and (in Europe) religious indifference battled with revivals of religion in its most uncompromising, irrationalist and emotionally compulsive forms." p. 229

"If a single misleading sentence is to sum up the relations of artist and society in this era, we might say that the French Revolution inspired him by its example, the Industrial Revolution by its horror, and the bourgeois society, which emerged from both, transformed his very existence and modes of creation" p. 255

"Yet the sciences too in their way reflected the dual revolution, partly because it made specific new demands on them, partly because it opened new possibilities for them and faced them with new problems, partly because its very existence suggested new patterns of thought." p. 277

## Topics for Discussion

Hobsbawm points to 1830 as a transitional year during this period. What evidence does he offer for this?

What does Hobsbawm mean when he refers to the events of this period as a "dual revolution?"

How does Hobsbawm view Romanticism, and how does he connect it to the dual revolution?

What role does religion and secularization play in the developments of this period?

Why does Hobsbawm choose the years 1789 and 1848 to frame this era?

Discuss the emergence of socialism as it is described by Hobsbawm.

The Industrial Revolution has different effects in Britain and France. What are some of these differences, and why does Hobsbawm say they exist?