Introduction

The rise of modern states in Turkey and Iran are generally credited to two military leaders, Atatürk and Reza Shah. Often depicted as larger-than-life figures acting outside history, they are portrayed as fashioning modern states and new political arrangements single-handedly, bringing about transformations that had defied preceding generations. If some historical continuity is acknowledged in the best accounts – continuity with nineteenth-century reforms – it is widely agreed that something extraordinary was taking place under the new rulers, that something more fundamental than reform was indeed unfolding. This book should help make clear that, more than the new rulers, it was the preceding revolutions that were responsible for the radical reorientation to politics, institutions, religion, and nationality. Without the revolutions, the transformations later would indeed appear to be outside history.

The Ottoman Empire and Iran experienced near-simultaneous constitutional revolutions in the early years of the twentieth century. The present book explains why and how the revolutions happened and what made them constitutional. As part of that explanation, it enquires what the broad spectrum of actors understood by constitutionalism and why they joined the movement. Furthermore, it accounts for why the Ottomans and the successor Turkish republic fared better than Iran in preserving the new system. Its more general ambition is to propose a historically grounded understanding of revolutions. At a time when a wave of largely peaceful uprisings is sweeping the Middle East to bring about fundamental change, movements that have an eye on similar insurrections throughout the world and the region, it is time to take stock of the changing form of revolutions through history.

As an analytical, comparative approach to the Young Turk revolution of 1908, the book draws upon the Iranian constitutional revolution of 1906 to give greater weight to its generalizations, highlight major similarities, and probe deeper into distinctive features of each. The comparisons are carried out in the spirit of “commentary on one another’s character.”¹

The book engages these histories in implicit dialogue between the social sciences, history, and area studies. The hallmark of social sciences is generalization and theory building through comparison and concept formation; history relies at its core on narrative as a superior mode of explanation and displays extreme sensitivity to the sequence of events that unfold through time; area studies is adamant about uniqueness of the object under study and its irreducibility to other contexts. It is apparent that these three approaches are in tension, if not outright contradiction. How can the irreconcilable elements be resolved, and to what benefit? It should not be hard to fathom that if each approach has unique powers in generating valid insights, it will be possible to attain a deeper understanding by drawing upon them all, supposing that their core principles are not violated. Can we proceed comparatively and be concerned with generating robust, general concepts, but remain faithful to complexities of causal narrative, contingency, and agency, and probe deeper into each context in search of its unique characteristics? I can hardly offer a general method, but in this instance I believe that tensions may be reduced by recognizing the shortcomings of each approach and then overcoming them by relying on the strengths of others. This is done by considering these events at the global, regional, and local levels.

Historians are often weary of ahistorical social scientific notions, such as revolution defined as a concept for all times and places, and their sensitivity to context makes them not keen on drawing strong conclusions about revolutions and particular social classes. In that spirit, the present book does not aim at a more precise definition of revolution. Instead, it offers a historically grounded generalization that takes note of revolutions’ changing form through time. Placing the historical era at the forefront of analysis, it distinguishes contentious episodes organized under the constitutional rubric after the French Revolution from events under the sway of Bolshevism. The book thus historicizes revolutions by considering the times – and the ideologies associated with those times – as a chief organizing principle. Fine distinctions between political and social revolutions, and between narrow and popular social movements, are less significant here. Assumptions about the tight connection between classes and revolutionary ideologies are also deflated. Instead the book calls for reversing the order by first paying attention to revolutionary programs – historical products of their times – and then looking to the actors that rallied behind them, investigating the actors’ reasons for wanting them, and evaluating their capacity to implement them. The popular or narrow base of a movement certainly figures in calculations of actors’ capacity, but that effect is not always straightforward. The more popular revolution in Iran lacked, for example, the well-placed actors of the Young Turk revolution, and hence it fared much worse in confronting the monarchy. This is not to argue that it is immaterial if the participants are peasants, or members of the working class, the middle class, the bourgeoisie, or other groups. However, the approach implies that the connection between social classes and general ideologies (e.g., constitutionalism, socialism) is more tenuous than generally acknowledged. Naming revolutions after their political
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form (constitutional) rather than after the social actors identified a priori by theory (bourgeois) is preferable, for it gives priority to the political over the social, highlights the most general characteristic, and affords a better basis for classification and comparison. In agreement with area specialists, these events are ultimately unique, but their singularity should be arrived at and not taken for granted. Systematic comparison can single out relevant particularities, after allowing recognition of general global and regional currents that organized each conflict and gave it a shared form. Generalities and singularities become recognizable only by moving outside the particular setting.

CONSTITUTIONALISM IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

The revolutions in the Ottoman Empire and Iran were continuous with the short-term wave of democratic movements that swept across Russia in 1905, Mexico in 1910, China in 1911, and Russia again in February 1917. These in turn were part of a much broader long-term wave of democratic movements in England, America, and France, a wave that continued with the 1848 revolutions in Europe. To this could be added the Meiji restoration of 1868 in Japan, the Young Ottoman uprising in 1876, the 1881 Urabi revolt in Egypt, and a host of other revolutions and uprisings, successful or not, including the Young movements in Europe.2 These movements had in common their timing – they all took place between the French and Russian revolutions – and this is crucial in understanding their constitutional political form. The temporal juncture of the globe, the ideological “world time,” informed the movements’ political ideals and defined the broad contours of conflict and its processes. Revolutions thus gave birth to globally recognizable distinctive political regimes and institutions associated with that juncture.

Although I insist on the influence of global time, I consider revolutions to be intensely local phenomena. In fact, revolutions are approached here as a series of unrelated, heterogeneous, local conflicts over particular issues. At a distance they

appear like a single, homogeneous event, but the singular voice breaks into multiplicity at close inspection. Given the heterogeneity of actors and the disparity of grievances, it is only logical to expect conflict and difference to be roiling under the uniform veneer. Nonetheless, for some brief period, contradictory goals, interests, and messages dissolve to reappear as a single unifying notion. In the interest of unity and sometimes after explicit compromises, a variety of grievances and local revolts become channeled into a single stream and transformed into abstractions acceptable to all. This conjunction of various revolts and the accompanying ideological progression is what distinguishes revolutions from mere rebellions or localized uprisings that do not reach the national stage, and whose demands never attain the intellectualism of hegemonic abstractions.

The often-forgotten early theorists of revolution also insisted on the distinction between revolts and revolutions by pointing to the ideological leap from the particular to the general, from specific, target-oriented revolts to the far broader goals of revolutions. This insight, and the role accorded to intellectuals, should be taken seriously, although we may go further. If, under some circumstances, local conflicts become national, in the course of revolutions ideologies leap from the national to the international arena. In the process the available choices become surprisingly few — certainly far fewer than if particular demands had developed to generality on their own and without negotiation with global currents.

In fact, the choices are astoundingly limited. For two centuries, the great majority of revolutionary events (successful or not) were either constitutional or of the Bolshevik type. These orientations were neatly marked off temporally.

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The constitutional type was in vogue in the era started by the American and French revolutions and came to an abrupt end with the October Revolution of 1917. “Russia . . . took the place of France as the nation in the vanguard of history,” is how Furet characterized the French Revolution’s fall from grace. This meant that “the French Revolution ceased to be the model for a future that was possible, desirable, hoped for . . . Instead, it became the mother of a real, dated, and duly registered event: October 1917.”5 But before France lost its place, it was the central features of that revolutionary model, assisted by its aura of success, that were congealed into master-frames or master templates that traveled from one context to another.6 As Anderson notes, “patents are impossible to preserve” on the invented twins of revolution and nationalism that became modular at the end of the eighteenth century.7 Yet, if it is surprising that multiple actors may speak in a unified voice even in a single context, it must seem bewildering that actors in disparate times and places across the globe may articulate the same language of revolution.

The historiographic debate of the French Revolution is of help in navigating this puzzle. At the core of this debate is the revaluation of the relationship between the political and the social, or rather, the socioeconomic. It questions the extent to which the political form—in this case the liberal constitutionalism of the French Revolution—was a product of the actions of specific social classes, the bourgeoisie in particular; and whether this or other classes could be endowed with the Hegelian teleological task of bringing their “historic mission” to fruition. In a more general mode, the debate between the Marxists and the revisionists was over whether the political was to be reduced to the socioeconomic, or, alternatively, accorded autonomy.

If indeed the “bourgeois” political form could appear in contexts where capitalism was far from making any headway and the bourgeoisie did not yet exist, as in 1906 Iran; and if emerging social classes other than the bourgeoisie

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5 Furet, Interpreting the French Revolution, pp. 5–6.

could be the champions of the bourgeois political form, as in the 1876 and 1908 Ottoman Empire (even if it is generously assumed that an Ottoman bourgeoisie existed); or if the bourgeoisie finally threw in its lot with the monarchy to oppose the bourgeois political order, as in 1905 Russia, then the autonomy of constitutional politics from the bourgeoisie and its lack of a historic mission needs to be taken seriously. Examples beyond France certainly favor the revisionist orientation in this limited sense. Need one invoke socialist revolutions without the working class?

When the model traveled beyond France, it was the politics of the French Revolution that cast a shadow. What became modular was a political form abstracted from social and historical context. This is not to claim that the French Revolution or the events inspired by it were devoid of social content, or to argue that the bourgeoisie or other social classes had little to do with the revolution’s occurrence, sustenance, or results in France. No serious revolution can avoid the social question, but to conclude that the social classes and their projects determined the political form is another matter altogether. Rather, I argue that in the Ottoman Empire and Iran, various social groups and their concerns found expression in a political framework that was external to them.

For the constitutionalists, although the symbols, slogans, and language of the French Revolution occupied a privileged position, an ahistoric model bereft of context was at the forefront of revolutionary consciousness. It was the legacy rather than the historic event that mattered. The legacy hollowed out the experimentations, improvisations, and hesitations of its making and inserted itself into the teleological march of the inevitable, be this the triumph of liberty, rationality, an economic system, or something else. The later constitutionalists were positively uninterested in knowing that the meaning of the constitution in its modern form was fixed only in the course of the revolution, or that the French Assembly began as a traditional and undemocratic council of estates that was yet to assume representative character and legislative powers, or that it took the revolution a few years before it could utter the words “old regime.” The French Revolution improvised and wrote its own script, with some help from

8 The revisionists also asked the question with respect to France, where “bourgeois” revolution happened in an agrarian setting with minimal capitalist development. For a sophisticated argument about the connection between bourgeoisie and democracy, see Barrington Moore, Jr., Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

9 A critical social program of the French Revolution was the abolition of feudalism, even though the meaning of the term was contested. For one of the latest and most important contributions to this issue, see John Markoff, The Abolition of Feudalism: Peasants, Lords and Legislators in the French Revolution (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

Britain and America. For the constitutionalists, it was the modern political culture – the legacy – that mattered the most, and this turned all constitutional polities in Europe into valid examples. Still, France derived its intellectual resonance from being the first European site of popular sovereignty, modern revolution, and theoretical and institutional challenge to the methods and privileges of monarchy.

The French Revolution and the Russian Revolution of 1917 were thus transitional paradigms that effected radical ruptures in global history. Their actors stepped into unknown and unknowable futures. This uncertainty was lost to later emulators who read results back into beginnings, and attributed them to the earliest intentions of real or imaginary actors. Modular models were stripped of history and circumstance, ready for adoption by the enthusiast.  

It is by separating the two events that a historicized notion emerges. At one level, their differences were obvious – one is associated with capitalism and the other with socialism; one consolidated private property and the other abolished it. Yet, as different as their social programs were, their politics set them apart in a more fundamental way. Breaking down the constitutional type into its basic constituent parts will help to differentiate them. The transition to a constitutional polity entailed a redefinition of the legislative and the executive, the separation of the two, and the creation of a delicate and difficult-to-achieve balance. It entailed the transfer of sovereignty from the monarch to the nation, giving the latter the right to decide its future through its own independent agency and rationality. The rules of the political game were set down in written constitutions. Constitutional polities themselves were differentiated by the content of constitutions and their modes of defining sovereignty, the kind and number of governmental branches and subdivisions, the degree of power and oversight of each branch and institution, the franchise and definition of nation, and the like. Theoretically and practically, the monarchs could survive revolution but were reduced to having mere ceremonial functions, or prevailed with minimal loss of power.

In contrast, for Bolshevik-type events, revolution meant uniting the separated legislative and executive into one. It also meant the complete transfer of sovereignty from the nation (or monarchy, if it still happened to be intact) to a class far less inclusive than the nation but with the purported greatest degree of generalized interest. In practice, sovereignty was exercised through a single, undivided political party.

At some moments, in their indeterminacy, actors in “subjective time” produce new models that shift the paradigms of action and, as Ermakoff points out, create new “objective times” of revolution. These objective times are products of indeterminacies, hesitations, false starts, and reversals of subjective times that are selectively forgotten by the emulators. For a discussion of objective and subjective times, see Ivan Ermakoff, “On the Time of Revolutionary Conjunctures,” 33rd annual Social Science History Association meeting, October 2008.


I am ignoring the place of judiciary, which detracts from our major concerns here.
The actual process of the French Revolution, as opposed to its legacy, makes my points on two counts: first, as a transition point between the old and new, and second, as an experiment in creating a new legislative and executive, and balancing the two. As is well known, the revolution started with a conflict between the nobility and the crown over taxation and resulted in the invoking of tradition and the recalling of the Estates-General, a body that had not met since 1614. In the course of events that followed, the Estates-General was transformed into the National Assembly, into the National Constituent Assembly, and into the National Convention, undergoing a transformation from a body composed of the three traditional estates into one that represented the nation. This body was to give itself the power to write the Declaration of the Rights of Man and various versions of the constitution, and to abolish feudalism and the monarchy and declare a republic. Along the way it experimented with various ways of separating the legislative from the executive. How far the Reign of Terror and the Jacobin dictatorship tarnished its liberal reputation has been the subject of much controversy. Whether it was an overreaction to a real necessity, a contingency, or an organically related and logical culmination of the thought and political processes of the democratic revolution are issues beyond our concern. Suffice it to say that even at the height of the Terror, when the constitution was suspended and terror was the order of the day, the Convention, however manipulated and abused, continued operations. And although the constitution was put aside temporarily, as Woloch has noted, “the legislature remained the sole source and interpreter of [the] law.” In addition, “the committee [of Public Safety]’s virtually dictatorial powers . . . derived from a monthly ritual in which it reported to the Convention and received a new mandate. What the Convention granted with regularity month after month it could in fact withhold. The Robespierrists were ultimately overthrown in Thermidor not by an armed coup, but by the Convention’s sudden decision to oust them.” The Robespierrists lacked a permanent theory of uniting the legislative and executive; and when they nearly united the two in practice, they did so by pointing to war and internal threats. However true or exaggerated their claims, it could only be temporary. Lasting less than a year, the extremists gave way to the Thermidorian regime. Yet, still entangled with striking the right

14 The Estates-General met at Versailles in May 1789 after the Assembly of Notables refused to cooperate with the government’s reforms for more taxation. Although a radicalizing mood swept the country in the interim, the Estates-General declared itself the National Assembly after the disputes that arose over the voting procedure. The Third Estate argument prevailed; its 1,200 members were to vote as individuals and not along traditional lines as three distinct estates. By allowing itself the right to draw up the constitution, it then transformed itself into the National Constituent Assembly, and then, in September 1792, into the National Convention that proclaimed the abolition of the monarchy and inaugurated the Republic.


16 Woloch, The New Regime, p. 43.
balance between the executive and legislative, that regime’s failure to reach stability delivered it into Napoleon’s hands.

For a good part of the twentieth century, the popular and social scientific conception of revolution was colored by the events in the Russia of 1917. Associated with violent and permanent seizure of the state executive organs, this kind of revolution overshadowed the constitutional type of transformation, which looked reformist at best in retrospect. The encyclopedias and dictionaries predating 1917, however, give us a different impression. Here revolutions were described as the forcible substitution of a new form of government, by the old government’s subjects, that entailed a fundamental change in structure and constitution that was sudden and violent and accompanied by rapid and significant transformation of society. Nowhere before 1917 does one come across violent seizure of the state executive organs on a permanent basis as the yardstick by which revolutions may be judged a success.

A recent ambitious analysis of revolutions during the Cold War era by Goodwin shows the intellectual hold of the Bolshevik legacy. Goodwin defines “a revolutionary movement . . . as that type of social movement which attempts to overthrow, supplant, and/or fundamentally transform state power.” To this he adds, “when revolutionaries fail to seize power, we may speak of a failed revolution.”

By failing to seize power, Goodwin means failing to seize state power, the latter defined as “those core administrative, policing, and military organizations, more or less coordinated by an executive authority, that extract resources from and administer and rule (through violence if necessary) a territorially defined national society . . . As Lenin put it, by ‘state’ or ‘apparatus of government’ is meant, first of all, the standing army, police and officialdom.”

Although this is a perfectly good definition for the period under consideration, it fails us in the pre-Bolshevik era. Constitutionalists as a rule did not aim at seizing executive power, and if they did, it was not to monopolize it permanently but on an interim basis, until it could be transferred to an independent executive. Revolutions are not timeless categories with fixed definitions suitable for all eras.

The 1917 revolution raised the stakes tremendously. It was a model in negotiation with constitutionalism that broke from it gradually and reluctantly, as the French revolution had broken from premodern uprisings. For later generations, it signified a different type of regime change: the sudden seizure of the executive and the overthrow of the entire structure of the old regime. Yet the actual, not the legendary, 1917 shared the earlier constitutional processes. Only a final decisive moment transformed the model of revolution, and its definition.

18 Goodwin, No Other Way Out, p. 11.
The tremendous influence of the French Revolution over Russia in 1905 and especially 1917 is too well known to be in need of commentary. But 1917 as an inventive moment deviated from 1789 when it introduced elements that made it uniquely Bolshevik. These novelties were later read back into the event as if they had been its principal purpose from the start by the activist intent on emulating the results.

In Trotsky’s memorable phrase, 1905 was a dress rehearsal for 1917. The statement intimates that the first event, whose goal was a constituent assembly and a written constitution – and thus was modeled after the French – came to be the inspiration for a revolution that was itself a trend-setter. This raises the question of the extent to which 1917 was different from 1905. A more detailed look at 1917 is warranted to establish the difference and demonstrate the dynamics of a transitional case that heralded a new era of revolutions.

In 1917 there were two revolutions in one, February and October. The February revolution came in the context of a downturn in Russia’s military fortune during World War I. Combined with grave political mistakes at the domestic front, the crisis led to serious disputes between the deputies to the Fourth Duma and the government. The latter, a remnant of the 1905 revolution, was an institution badly weakened. In the aftermath of 1905 revolution, the autocracy had drastically reduced the Duma’s legislative powers and narrowed the franchise substantially. Despite this, in the midst of the military and political crisis of late 1916, the Fourth Duma could still demand a serious enough revival of its powers to prompt the tsar to order its dissolution and postpone elections for a year. This crisis coincided with protests on the international Women’s Day on 23 February 1917, which escalated to workers’ protests and ended in a widespread mutiny of the army in Petrograd on 26–27 February. By 2 March, the Petrograd Soviet (also a remnant of 1905) had been revived, the Duma had annulled the government and appointed the provisional government, and the tsar had abdicated. The provisional government was formed in anticipation of the elections to the Fifth Duma, which was widely expected to be the most representative and powerful of all the legislative assemblies Russia had seen so far. The Petrograd Soviet, however, refused to participate in the Duma-appointed cabinet, and on 1 March issued the famous Order No. 1 that gave it substantial control over the rank and file of the military, among other powers. Thus, with the tsar’s abdication (on 2 March; it took another six months for the republic to be declared on 1 September), the Russian state came into de facto possession of two legislative and two executive organs. The conflict now moved