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The World Wide Web

Using the Internet to Teach Revolutions

STUART SALMON and BEN MARSH

Introduction

Revolutions have always depended to significant degrees on ideological reach, social credibility, and the technologies of dissemination. Today, in the age of the microchip, it is hard to imagine a successful revolution that does not involve the strategic mobilization of modern computer technology, mobile phones, and online platforms. Ask your class how many characters they associate with twenty-first-century revolutions and they will likely respond 140—the maximum number of characters that Twitter allows in tweets. The sorts of revolutionary protests, movements, insurgencies, and events that now make the global news (and many that don't) owe much of their existence or their persistence to the internet. The web, which began as an intellectual exercise in research coordination and then became commercialized, has become not just a repository of information or a method of transmission but an active vehicle for spreading ideas, events, goods, and people, and for contesting power. Cyber-activism and cyber-repression abound, simultaneously humanizing and dehumanizing the face of regional revolutions, in seemingly ever smaller bite-sizes. And as well as its revolutionary functionality, at its inception in the second half of the twentieth century the digital domain carried much of the insignia of the Age of Revolutions. The internet was to be free from global control at the operations level, was to cross national borders, was to establish new communities, and was hailed as an agent of universalism and democratization.

The rapid development of the internet and the personal computer (in whatever form) has also revolutionized the history classroom and has exponentially widened the range of independent research and learning that is practicable. Those teachers and students based in countries or institutions lucky enough to be able to access the internet's full scope can tap into a bewildering array of information, tools, and networks, to the point where the most critical resource becomes our time: the time for our small human brains to locate, process, digest, and then make use of the vast material on offer. To help with the challenge, this chapter offers a selective (and subjective) survey of some of the best materials and online resources relating to the Age of Revolutions that are free at the point of access. Most of these are found on institutional sites hosted by libraries, museums, archives, and universities (offering a certain safeguard against the sorts of factual inaccuracies and questionable opinions that lurk online).

Teachers can use such material to create their own Age of Revolutions webs, tailored to the shape of their courses and drawing from multiple sites and media rather than falling back on prepackaged content. This is worth doing, we feel, because the most engaged classes, like the most engaged revolutions, depend strongly upon the personalization of the experience. The internet has made it possible—in a way it was not a generation ago—for students to locate and analyze for themselves the historical residues of the Age of Revolutions. It is important to make time to allow them to do so. This is not just for the richness it affords them in historical knowledge and perception or to make the classes more dynamic and interesting, though both are commendable outcomes. It is also because, in a way, nonprescriptive engagement with our own digital revolution brings them closer to the upheavals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. So, assuming time is tight, what can you do with the history that is materializing online to make your classes more effective? For some of our suggestions, see the text following this list of recommended sites.

American Revolution

[Library of Congress:](#)

[Digital Collections in American History](#)

One of the best-known sites for digitized primary material, containing some useful guides for teaching with the documents. The collections

range across political history, cultural history, African American history, Native American history, and social history and many have material from the American Revolutionary era. There is a range of primary source sets and of particular interest are sets on “The American Revolution and Its Era: Maps and Charts of North America and the West Indies, 1750 to 1789,” “Documents from the Continental Congress and the Constitutional Convention, 1774–1789,” and “George Washington Papers,” which includes several useful articles, images, and resources, some of them specifically tailored for history teachers. If you are pushed for time or are running more of a survey, then start with the [web guide and online exhibitions](#), which contains some of the iconic documents of the American Revolution and plenty of accessible reading and interpretation for students.

[United States National Archives](#)

Collates a vast range of material, including plenty from across the state archives, and allows you to cross-search it, which can be productive and connective if you want to pursue local themes or figures. It is inevitably somewhat inward looking, but there are some strong subject sets for teachers, including fine coverage of the military aspects of the American Revolution and good material on images and iconography. The US National Archives also has a specialized teaching website, “[DOCSTeach](#).” Each topic section has a number of document exercises, all the documents are digital images with added transcriptions, and the worksheets are nicely adaptable to suit level and learning objectives—plus, there is one dedicated to the [American Revolution](#).

[Founders Online](#)

This is an umbrella or gateway website (established by the National Archives with the University of Virginia Press) that allows users to search and cross reference the papers of six of the Founding Fathers: George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams (and family), Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison. The volume of material may appear daunting, but for more imaginative and capable students the remarkable search facilities and linkages make the correspondence a treasure trove for unpacking themes, emotions, practices, and priorities. Of particular interest to those teaching on wider courses may be the ways in which other revolutions and their key personae and events crop up in the founders’ personal records—such

as William Jackson's characterization of France as seeming "at once splendid and awful" in his April 1794 report to George Washington or John Quincy Adams's musings on developments in Hispanic America in 1818, avowing that "the resemblance between this Revolution and ours is barely superficial."

[American Archives:](#)
[Documents of the American Revolutionary Period,](#)
[1774-1776](#)

Hosted by Northern Illinois University, this site has digitized and transcribed material from the Peter Force collection, one of the biggest collections of early revolutionary documents. The vast majority of the documents are political and military and provide an excellent record of the beginnings of the Revolutionary War, as well as some distinctive themes (including attention to loyalists). The documents are hyperlinked with notes, which can lead readers on some interesting journeys. However, because the material is quite eclectic and the presentation a bit dated, it's a good idea to ensure students have a clear idea of what is expected of them (or what they should be targeting) before they are let loose.

[Massachusetts Historical Society](#)

Many state historical societies host fine online offerings, and the Massachusetts Historical Society is one of the best in terms of its digital collections and its natural attention (given Boston's prominence) to the revolutionary era. In particular, its material on "[The Coming of the Revolution, 1764-1776](#)" includes some splendid teaching packets and ideas from a range of contributors that are readily adaptable at different levels and offer quick and accessible exercises and insights. Also worthy of special mention is the collection of "[Annotated Newspapers of Harbottle Dorr, Jr.](#)" Newspapers, pamphlets, and broadsides were key political and social battlegrounds for the revolutionary movement and subsequent debates about the structure and nature of American political and cultural identities. Sadly, many of the best runs of early newspapers are locked behind commercial sites with paywalls (however, a shrewd use of free trials ahead of term can furnish some great materials for the classroom). So this shopkeeper's 805 issues and other miscellanea are wonderful entrees into New Englanders' sensibilities and their growing imperial frustrations.

[Online Library of Liberty](#)

A decent alternative or complement to subscription sites for pamphlets, broadsides, and other printed material, with free access to many of the most important documents and written collections on the American and subsequent revolutions. This site is in some ways more outward facing than several others dedicated exclusively to the American Revolution, but it is also artfully selective, reflecting its conservative foundation. The listings include many works on the intellectual and cultural history of the American Revolution, and there is also a range of academic essays that work well as preparatory or contextual reading assignments (with the above caveat about political inclusiveness and slant). Of particular interest is a free downloadable edition of Charles Hyneman and Donald Lutz's two volume *American Political Writing during the Founding Era: 1760-1805* (1983), which is an excellent resource for teachers as each document has a short summary and many are brief enough to be used in class activities and group work.

For those looking for multimedia resources (such as blogs and podcasts) to accompany—hopefully not to replace—teaching, a wider range of strong offerings have come online over the last decade. Among those we have assigned or recommended are “[The Juntocast](#),” which brings together several historians to offer discussion of a range of early American topics, including many aspects of the revolution, aimed at students and teachers as well as an interested public. “[Ben Franklin’s World](#)” is a wide-ranging podcast hosted by Liz Covart, lately in partnership with the Omohundro Institute at Williamsburg, which offers neat insights into recent scholarship (via its guest interviews) and engages with many aspects of the revolution—far beyond Franklin himself. “[Boston 1775](#)” is an exhaustive blog on the American Revolution with entries covering almost every conceivable topic, including an online index for those turning over particular stones (such as “Digital Historiography”). It has excellent links to other sites, especially document resources.

French and Haitian Revolutions

Primary source material is available via a number of excellent websites that address the French and Haitian Revolutions. Naturally, most are in

French, but as with Spanish material, translations for many of the websites are easily available and many sites have versions or subsections in English—much depends on whether or not original documents have been transcribed.

[French Revolution Digital Archive](#)

A collaboration between the Stanford University Libraries and the Bibliothèque nationale de France to digitize some of the most important resources on the French Revolution, bringing a bibliographic process initiated in the mid-nineteenth century into the twenty-first and including coverage up to the Terror. Beyond the helpful hyperlinked timeline on the landing page, which offers speedy access to core documents, there are two major collections: the Parliamentary Archives and Images of the French Revolution. The archives collection is a full digitization of the records of the *Archives Parlementaires* from 1789 to 1794. This includes debates, speeches, and a full index. The image collection consists of some fourteen thousand images from 1782 to 1804, including drawings, cartoons, newspaper images, and more esoteric items such as medals and engravings and works well to zoom in on particular events or individuals (such as getting a class to examine the fifty-two images pertaining to the assassination of Marat in 1793). Some documents include translations from the French and there is an excellent search facility allowing more advanced users to trace connections, events, and participants.

[Gallica](#)

One of the most important free research tools for any student of the French Revolution, administered by the Bibliothèque nationale de France with a vast remit across all of French history. As one would expect, the revolution is particularly well detailed and supported, with coverage including full books, manuscripts, theses, newspapers, pamphlets, broadsides, and images. Its strengths include its links to other collections and the volume of freely downloadable material. While the site has an English option, and actually includes a huge number of works in English relating to the French Revolution, it is something more of a repository and there is less support at the collection or documentary level than the more targeted French Revolution Digital Archive.

[Liberty, Equality, Fraternity](#)

This is a more condensed and accessible site for an American or Anglo audience, comprising a fine set of materials jointly compiled and hosted

by George Mason University and the City University of New York. Although its layout feels a bit dated, it contains more than six hundred images and primary documents in translation from the French Revolutionary era, with twelve nicely framed topic essays that provide helpful context for assignments and for engaging with not just the key texts, themes, and characters but also with the songs and artwork emerging through the revolution. Because it is properly referenced throughout, it also serves as a handy site for offering students varied options for diversifying and complicating their own essays without drowning in historiography.

[A Colony in Crisis:
The Saint-Domingue Grain Shortage of 1789](#)

Those interested specifically in developments in Haiti can find a fine mixture of French originals and English translations at the University of Maryland's project blogsite. The resources are presented using the now-recognizable WordPress format and include extensive translations and explanations, but part of the site's strength lies in its creators having picked an intriguing moment to scrutinize in some detail: the grain shortage faced by the colony of Saint-Domingue in 1789, which helped precipitate wider agitations.

More material relating to the French Revolution is liable to come online soon, as a subset of some twelve thousand French pamphlets from the revolutionary era is being uploaded under the University of Maryland Libraries' wider project "[Revealing La Révolution](#)." Other interesting sites, albeit with a good amount of overlap, include dedicated collections and online materials hosted by the [UK's National Archives](#), which contains an online teaching resource with class plans (skewed toward the British response to events in France, but still enlightening). Also good value, if more rudimentary, is the [Alpha History](#) site, an Australian-based not-for-profit set of resources that incorporates plenty of seminal documents in English translation, alongside some eclectic teaching outlines and suggestions—so best to strip for primary sources that can be placed in handouts and reading packs.

Blogs and podcasts to chase up, again assuming English language as a prerequisite, include the British-based [Society for the Study of French History](#), which addresses the revolution in different ways, along with question-orientated videos and podcasts compiled by Brown University's [Choices Program](#) in relation to the Haitian Revolution. Lastly,

a special mention should go to the [French Revolution Network](#), which is built across a global platform of academic expertise and contributors and maintains a lively blog with a range of accompanying articles on the revolution. Visitors can also find links to a range of worthy supplementary sites and it always scores well with student users.

Latin American Revolutions

A selection of strong online offerings relating to revolutionary movements across Central and South America, with English-language materials, is offered below—again with an emphasis on sites with digitized primary sources that lend themselves to analysis in classrooms or assignments.

[Library of Congress: Hispanic Reading Room](#)

Turning out materials at some of the national and state archives can be hit and miss, which is also true for this site that hosts several digital collections (among them sections on Mexican Revolutions as well as the United States and Brazil). Some of the best alternatives tend to come from academic institutional portal sites or listings, which offer plenty of content in translation or transcription. One of the most comprehensive, concentrating particularly on the colonial period and with handy annotations giving an idea of content, is John Worth's page listing "[Selected Archival Links](#)" for research and teaching on the Americas.

[Vistas: Visual Culture in Spanish America, 1520–1820](#)

Originally a multi-institutional collaborative operation hosted by [Smith University](#), now imaginatively repackaged at Fordham, this site contains numerous productive links to museums and archives and a wide range of digitized material, concentrating particularly on images and visual culture—from architecture to photographs of material objects in an impressive gallery. There are superb interpretive texts accompanying many of the subsections, and the chronology covers up to independence in the 1820s. More interesting than textbook entries, the texts and images often work well as introductions to conventional narratives or subject areas. They offer a great way of inviting the students to learn through analysis

of visual culture. For instance, one narrated slideshow offers insights on “[The Political Force of Images](#)” that culminates in a portrait of Simón Bolívar in Lima in 1825. The gallery is also a neat teaching aid, because the images can be dropped into classes or lectures and the instructors can draw profitably on the galleries’ “discussion” panels, which provide miniature bibliographies and very handy summaries and elaborations on the significance of the various objects and images. The Vistas site also incorporates an excellent annotated page of links to major museums, libraries, and primary document collections online—both in Spanish and English.

[The Age of Spanish American Revolutions:
Spanish South America](#)

The John Carter Brown Library’s digital exhibition is another useful project that likewise offers a fine entry point and links to a strong range of potential teaching materials, including many primary sources in Spanish and English. The exhibit originally ran from 2009 to 2011 and users can find insights spread along a timeline that deals with local juntas, international concerns, royalist responses, and new constitutions. As emphasized by several chapters in this book, the site invites readers to examine and think about the nature of connections between revolution and place in the Americas; for instance, how the memory of Tupac Amaru II’s rebellion and the developments on Saint-Domingue influenced the failure of Francisco de Miranda’s incursions in Venezuela. While many of the primary sources are snappy handbills or excerpts (such as the Spanish royalist General Pablo Morillo’s terms of surrender to Bolívar’s troops in 1815), notice particularly how several documents feature embedded links to full-text versions in free online repositories such as the Internet Archive.

Varied Spanish- and Portuguese-language materials can also be found in institutional collections. These include the early issues of the [Diario de Pernambuco](#) (the oldest newspaper in circulation in Latin America, from 1825) at the University of Florida’s online collection; Vanderbilt’s [J. Leon Helguera Collection](#) relating to nineteenth-century Colombia; the collaborative [Digital Library of the Caribbean](#), which offers resources from and about the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean, including plenty of attention to Haiti and some useful K-12 teaching guides with documents; the [Early Americas Digital Archive](#), an eclectic

electronic archive of texts from across the Americas hosted by the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities that has links to some important works from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (such as the works of Francisco de Miranda); "[Mexican Political Pamphlets, 1808-1832](#)" compiled by James McKegey and hosted by the University of Toronto; in the same vein, the [Latin American Pamphlet Digital Collection](#) at Harvard, which is somewhat awkward to search; and the handful of Spanish American political texts made available by the [James Ford Bell Library](#) at the University of Minnesota, among them a feisty 1789 anti-revolutionary churchman's pamphlet in Peru.

Outside of North America (and its domination of resources), those teaching courses with more in-depth components on Latin American revolutions, and with students with language capacity, can track down further insights and links via the huge portal listing—including all the national archive websites—helpfully compiled by [Steven Volk at Oberlin College](#); note particularly the sections on "Late Colonial Revolts" and "The Waging and Winning of Independence." Also worthy of note is the "[Liberalism in the Americas](#)" digital archive of London's Institute of Latin American Studies, which offers access to a wide range of primary sources treating the rise and consolidation of liberal ideology and practice during the long nineteenth century—with works organized helpfully by theme and by country.

Wider Revolutions

For websites with podcasts that offer different but substantive treatments of revolutions, and that often place them in wider perspectives (be it geographical, chronological, or thematic), three sites in particular are worth searching for materials that lend themselves to teaching (or assigning as supplementary listening). "[In Our Time](#)" is the podcast of a BBC radio program that brings three experts around a table to discuss a subject in depth and has featured several episodes on European and American revolutions. "[Revolutions](#)" is a set of podcasts scripted and presented by Mike Duncan, with a heavy proportion of content covering the Age of Revolutions, largely of a narrative structure, that students report can work well as a revision tool or accompaniment. Lastly, a recent foray in providing online discussion and resources is the Historio BLOG titled "[Age of Revolutions](#)" edited by Bryan Banks and Cindy Ermus. It is punchy and accessible, and students find especially helpful

the bibliographies and strong links to ongoing digital humanities projects.

Directed Primary Sources; or,
Stones for the Pond

In this section we offer some suggestions for how to deploy the range of materials available through such online portals and archives. One of the safest and most effective ways to use online materials in history classes on the Age of Revolutions is to direct students straight to raw materials or sets of primary sources and invite them to discuss or report on them, even if this leaves the readers initially somewhat bereft of context. The degree of specificity (whether prescribing a particular historical text or image or a whole archive for them to freely rummage around in) can be tailored to the age and stage of the students and the remit of the curriculum. Starting in this way, from digitized primary sources, has the advantage of temporarily bypassing the huge quantity of online secondary works (factual summaries, interpretive narratives, timelines, essays, blogs, dubious opinions, and so on) and offering the students a good balance of independent research, personal engagement, and then open, collective discussion.

One way to conceptualize this kind of pedagogy is to think of a stone dropping into a pond. There is no “right” sound for the impact and the noises will be different each time it is tried, but the shape of the ripples should be fairly predictable and patterned. And the patterns from each microhistorical splash, as they are enlarged by the students (with your help), will likely interact with one another to the point where you can draw out larger inferences about the issues and topic under discussion.

Let us imagine four stones, of different microhistorical shape. We have selected them because they are accessible, multidimensional, can speak to each other, and are less trodden and smoothed over than some of the more familiar terrain (including various works discussed in the accompanying volume). They comprise a newspaper, a petition, a declaration, and a letter across multiple sites of revolution:

1. The [Virginia Gazette](#), Williamsburg, June 14, 1776,
2. [The Loyalist Declaration of Dependence](#), New York, November 28, 1776,

3. [The Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen](#), Olympe De Gouges, Paris, 1791,
4. [The Carta de Jamaica](#), Simón Bolívar, Kingston, September 6, 1815.

Students exposed to the Virginia Gazette Postscript (an extra edition) are immediately confronted with the official promulgation of the Virginia Declaration of Rights, which occupies almost half of the four pages of the newspaper, being the basis for its publication. The declaration was groundbreaking and influential, having been tweaked and approved by the Virginia Convention on June 12, 1776, built around the earlier draft authored by George Mason (one of the largest slaveholders, along with George Washington, in Fairfax County). In relatively blunt and simple terms, it proclaimed the constitutionality of the individual rights of North American citizens and laid out both legal means and moral grounds for their protection. Students do not particularly need to know that the first phrase—“That all men are by nature equally free and independent, and have certain inherent rights”—was deliberately qualified by the clause “when they enter into a state of society” because the document was edited by slaveholders concerned about granting political freedoms to those considered outside the body politic. Nor do they particularly need to know that many of the precepts (about the rule of law, consent, and the separation of powers) derived from a learned understanding of the language of rights, bearing the imprints of earlier English ideas, Enlightenment tracts, and European thinkers from Magna Carta to the late eighteenth century.

Exposure to the protections, priorities, and ambitions expressed in Mason’s Virginian declaration usually spurs students to thinking about its more familiar counterpart—in important ways its offspring—Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence, and opens the door to productive conversations about timing, semantics, region, and revolutionary ideologies. And there are plenty of sound places that you can use either to forearm yourself as instructors or to invite students to explore to add comparative texture, among them the Library of Virginia’s [“Virginia Memory”](#) website and the Library of Congress’s section within [“Primary Documents in American History.”](#)

In our experience, however, what works really well about sending students to the *Virginia Gazette*—and this holds true of any historical newspaper, increasing numbers of which are available online—is that it

immerses them not just in the powerful ideas and reprinted documents but also the urgency of local events and the immediacy of social context. The second half of this gazette reports on what is happening across the colonies and in particular the South, and students are invigorated by discovering and discussing these pressing matters that framed and assisted the development of understandings of citizenly rights and responsibilities. British pirates are raiding Georgia plantations (and being “soundly drubbed”), companies of light horse and militia are being raised and the Virginian western frontiers defended, exiled governor Lord Dunmore’s dwindling “army” (including its hundreds of armed escaped slaves) are threatening the coast. Further on, readers find potted news from other cities relaying the king’s stubbornness, military jostling in Canada, the strangulation of oceanic trade, and the authorization of recruiting officers from the Lower South. All in all then, this one source captures a handy range of themes, events, and developments to discuss and then set in context. The key features of the reportage to draw out are, of course, the militarization of the colonies, the evidence of wide participation in various agitations, the importance of information transmission, and the sense of revolutionary momentum that is conveyed. The primary source thereby provides a way of looking from the bottom up at much larger historiographical debates about the origins, ideological influences, social reach, and military disruption that came with the American Revolution.

Whereas this first stone invites scrutiny of the zeitgeist of 1776, revealing commonalities and collective sensibilities expressed by the revolutionary press, dropping the second and third stones brings students into satirical contact with groups protesting discomfort at the turn of revolutionary events. The second source, the so-called Declaration of Dependence, is often surprising reading for students, bringing to light with vehemence the antipathy of New York loyalists to the changing worlds around them (“the tumult of the times”). Among the seven hundred names affixed to the document in late November 1776 at Scott’s Tavern on Wall Street were great landowners and merchants, several from prominent families (DeLanceys, Livingstons and Philippses), Anglican clergymen, and above all plenty of ordinary folk: farmers, bakers, blacksmiths, and carpenters. The document is dedicated, in inevitably fawning tones, to the preservation of British constitutional

supremacy and is directed at the Howe brothers who both orchestrated Britain's military invasion of the colonies and made fitful overtures for peace in their capacity as commissioners.

Students usually quickly pick up on the supine expressions in these four paragraphs, but discussion and then further research inevitably brings us to the very real traumas and challenges to which loyalists were exposed—which would deepen and darken as the war dragged on and the notion of martial law or civil control evaporated. The document is a route into considerations of who the loyalists were and on what grounds they resisted the changes justified so meticulously in Patriot counterparts. It is also a platform for thinking about timing, the direction of the war in late 1776, and the distinctive features of New York, which would remain in British hands and act as a beacon for fugitive loyalists for the duration of the conflict. The Declaration of Dependence is an early public marker in the Age of Revolutions, then, of the eddies of counterrevolution and conservatism that would cohere with varied strength all around the Atlantic basin to undermine the full force of the challenges to monarchy, imperialism, inequality, and institutionalized power. It labeled the revolution as “unnatural” and “unprovoked,” and offered instead an appeal to custom, prosperity, stability, and loyalty.

The third microhistorical online offering brings us to the French Revolution, and while it shares with the all-male Declaration of Dependence a pointed disdain for the claims of the revolutionary establishment—in this case, the National Assembly's 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen—it captures the opposite end of the political spectrum, being a work of ideological satire and profound radicalism. Students confronted with this deft deconstruction of the “perpetual tyranny of man” toward the female sex are energized not only by the specific claims vested in the parodied articles but also particularly by the more emotive postscript and its description of marriage as “the tomb of confidence and love.”

There is much to engage here, even without contextual knowledge, and it is often revealing to begin by inviting groups to conjecture about why and when this was authored, and by whom. The ripples become more significant when students discover that the declaration was authored by a self-educated butcher's daughter from Montauban, Olympe de Gouges (née Marie Gouze), though she believed herself to be an

illegitimate child of the lettered Marquis de Pompignan. De Gouges escaped an unhappy marriage when her first husband died and relocated to Paris where—thanks to the financial assistance of male supporters—she clambered to prominence in the world of the salon in the 1770s and published widely in the 1780s, using plays as well as pamphlets and essays to advance her passion for social justice and reform (interested students can find a wider spread of her publications online at [Clarissa Palmer's website](#)). In spite of her hopes in our document, de Gouges's "right to mount the scaffold" eventually outweighed her "right . . . to mount the rostrum," for she faced the guillotine two years after its publication, officially "for having forgotten the virtues that belong to her sex" and for her opposition to the execution of the royals. If few women achieved the public prominence and notoriety of de Gouges, hers was only a more extreme incarnation of the point Lindsay Parker emphasizes in her chapter in the accompanying volume: "Women engaged in the revolution by asserting their rights."

Depending on your course and its breadth, students should be invited to think about this growing female self-assertion and its wider parallels around revolutionary Europe and across the Atlantic. Women's "place" was a key battleground in arguments for and against revolutionary social changes—a battleground that was sometimes, as in this source, out in the open but often less visible. Ultimately, sexual inequality and its ancient customary guardians (marriage and patriarchy), though scarred, were arguably among the great survivors of the Age of Revolutions, along with racial slavery. Explaining their resilience exposes many of the limiting contours of the revolutions on both sides of the Atlantic. Indeed, it is no coincidence that both de Gouges and the later American female satirists who caustically mirrored the Declaration of Independence (in the [Declaration of Sentiments](#) at the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, a document worth comparing if time permits) firmly connected anti-slavery and anti-patriarchy.

Having so far largely evaded Founding Fathers and the more iconic declarations, the fourth and final stone proposed here to drop with students splashes into the world of Latin American and Caribbean revolutions through the pen of Simón Bolívar—or more precisely, his secretary, Pedro Briceño Méndez. The letter is based on three months of self-reflection, Bolívar having fled to Jamaica in May of 1815 following a series of setbacks in his bid to rally revolutionary spirit and

combat royalist forces across modern-day Venezuela and Colombia. He was invited to assemble his thoughts in response to an English request for insights into the liberation movement, which had collapsed in the face of a Spanish counteroffensive as internal divisions (including the opposition of many Indians, blacks, and people of mixed race) undermined Creole republicans' claims to represent "the people" in Venezuela. The attraction of his letter as an exploratory source is that it triangulates several of the themes and ideals common to the earlier revolutions (notably the American and French, both of which he admired) and maps them onto his scheme for understanding hemispheric identity and political evolution. In a way, Bolívar is gluing together a conception of the "Age of Revolutions" even as he seeks funding to project it onto the Americas. In the short run, it would not be the British audience (to whom this letter was aimed) from whom Bolívar secured military and logistical support, but his fellow revolutionaries in newly independent Haiti, a development that amplified the importance of racial egalitarianism in his coming campaigns in Gran Colombia and beyond.

Students tend to respond well when they are invited to begin by considering for whom Bolívar is writing—and their answers can range from the limited (the titular addressee, Henry Cullen, an English gentleman in Jamaica), to the continental (European states and intelligentsia), to the hemispheric (the inhabitants of the Americas, especially Hispanic America), and ultimately to the existential (the notion that Bolívar is writing for himself or the future). This process of imagining Bolívar's intended readership, and its variability, is a helpful reminder of the profound interconnectedness of revolutionary developments around the globe by the 1810s and of their increasing complexity and uncertain outcomes in Latin America. Bolívar's revolutionary vision in the letter was grand yet also pragmatic; it was self-limiting in recognition of the empirical constraints that had operated upon other revolutions (or within them) in recent years. Reluctantly, he acknowledged that the path to substantial, enduring political reform required taking unsavory steps: reliance on foreign powers, begging for help, militarization, and, perhaps hardest of all, moving forward on the assumption that your countrymen and countrywomen were not yet really fit for full self-government.

By making these steps explicit in his plan for action, and by limiting revolutionary ambitions in Latin America to a kind of shepherded decolonization, Bolívar signals for us a contemporary recognition that—as

Lester Langley put it in his opening essay in the accompanying volume—“revolutions are self-defining and conditional on time, place, and circumstance.” Put simply, Bolívar used other revolutions’ axes as a way of plotting his own: he charted features that were “necessary to preserve amidst revolutions” and “worthy of our century,” and elsewhere warned of the “chaos of revolution” and the ways that “large republics . . . [had] a tendency toward empire.” In other words, the students should come to appreciate (through Bolívar’s eyes) that the period between 1775 and 1815 had furnished enough historical examples of the good, the bad, and the ugly to determine which options might accompany the dismantlement of Spanish sovereignty over America.

A helpful way to nudge students toward these larger questions, perhaps after they have worked through the structure of the letter and the geographic tour that Bolívar offers around South American territories, is to invite them to list his priorities. What are his grievances about the world as it stands? What are his positive aspirations for a postcolonial future? Spain is characterized as an “unnatural step-mother,” “an aged serpent,” and its people as “destroyers” and a “race of annihilators”—so far, so clear. But the murky and moral concept of “Europe” is more complex and interesting, as are Bolívar’s pauses to clarify and impart historical lessons about his continent and its declining “habit of obedience.” On what grounds does he claim that Europe should support decolonial uprisings, and why does he believe promising “overseas commercial establishments” are the key to unlocking British support? In reporting on (or discussing) Bolívar’s grievances, students should be on the lookout for the language of slavery, references to national identity and discussions of indigeneity, and assumptions about the local and the universal—all of which invite interesting comparisons with the Virginia Declaration of Rights. We find in the letter a synthesis of the language of European rights and the righteousness of nationalistic self-defense, both expressed using the semantics of slavery—a profoundly Atlantic combination. But there are also plenty of more self-interested and discriminatory bristles, reflecting Bolívar’s own Creole status, that of an American elite bridled by peninsular oversight.

When it comes to ambitions, Bolívar celebrates—time and again—the establishing of local *juntas* and frameworks of government that rallied behind the “rights of man” and “civil liberties,” the bulwarks of liberal constitutionalism. But he tempers these aspirations by noting how “wholly representative” institutions or “wholly popular systems”

had failed or were likely to fail, and that his ideal of a great New World republic needed shelving as a distant prospect—too improbable to “dare to desire.” His realist consideration of the merits of monarchy as a structure of governance for all of Latin America (notwithstanding his dismissal of it) reminds us that the primary aim remained liberation rather than republicanism, a fact borne out by his later presidencies and the rampant polarization of his historical reputation. Lastly, Bolívar’s letter muses on the role of individual agency, proposing that “the specific actions of individuals can produce general results, especially in revolutions.” This is a good opening from which to explore both Bolívar’s own subsequent career and the place of the individual within revolutions—how and why the political becomes more personal.

The above online primary source possibilities are proposed as some that have been effective for us in the classroom in the past and good ones to start with to capture some of the local drama, ideological depth, radicalism, complexity, language, geographic breadth, and interconnectedness of the Age of Revolutions—even if only as a prelude or to give a flavor to more comprehensive study. And having undertaken this exercise collectively in class, the students should now have the understanding and the confidence and capacity to repeat and deepen the exercise in assignment form. It is usually our favorite (or least unpleasant) grading of the semester, because by sending the students and their interpretative skills into the digitized corridors of the revolutionary past, we can be sure of a good amount of variation, originality, linkage, and argument in return. There are plenty of other quarries in which to find many more stones, and new digital pedagogy developing all the time, so happy skimming!