2026 THEME NARRATIVE: REVOLUTION, REACTION, REFORM IN HISTORY

CATHY GORN, Ph.D., Executive Director, National History Day®
LINDSAY MOYNIHAN, Development Assistant, National History Day®

The theme for National History Day® (NHD) 2026 is Revolution, Reaction, Reform in History. The first question that comes to mind is, "Do students have to focus on all three words—revolution, reaction, reform?" No, students do not have to focus on all three aspects of the theme. It depends on the topic. If the topic involves all three, then students should be sure to include all three. The distinctions among revolutions, reactions, and reforms are sometimes blurred. Revolutions and reforms are often reactions to ideas, actions, or events; in turn, revolutions and reforms inspire reactions. Think of it as a domino effect—knock one down, which knocks the next one down, which knocks . . . To get started, let's consider the terms. Dictionaries define them as:

Revolution

"the forcible overthrow of a government or social order, in favor of a new system," or "a dramatic and wide-reaching change in the way something works or is organized or in people's ideas about it."

Reaction

"an action performed or a feeling experienced in response to a situation or event; the resistance or opposition to a force or movement."

Reform

"the effort to change to a better state or form; to improve by alteration, substitution, abolition."

Most revolutions and reform movements are too large and complex for an NHD student research project. Rather than attempting to research and analyze an entire revolution or movement (and the related reactions and reforms), look for more manageable topics associated with it. What ideas led to revolution? Who reacted to or was affected by a revolution or movement? Did the revolution result in reform? How? Why or why not?

The American Revolution comes to mind when thinking about political revolutions, especially since the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence will be commemorated in 2026. One way to make studying the American Revolution manageable is to examine one or two of the elements that led up to it or caused a reaction on the way to revolution. Let's begin with an example of where political and economic history intersect. How did American colonists react to the Stamp Act of 1765? How did it influence the road to the American Revolution? How and why were the tea parties (up and down the East Coast) in 1773 a reaction to the British Townshend Acts? What was the reaction of the British to the tea parties? What kind of reform were colonists seeking that ultimately led to revolution?

Consider examples from social history. In what way did ordinary citizens shape the cause of the American Revolution? How did they react, and why? What were the consequences? What about those who had little say in the colonists' desire for independence? For instance, how were Native Americans affected by the rebellion? What factors led some Indigenous nations to align with British forces and others to sign treaties with the emerging American government? Or, think about enslaved people. How did they use the American Revolution to fight for their freedom? Why did some choose to support the revolting colonists who held enslaved people in bondage? Boston King chose to join the British Army. Why did he and others like him choose to side with the loyalists and support the British Crown?

How did the British and the American loyalists react? Did the Crown see it as a revolution or a rebellion? What is the difference?

Although the predominant narrative of the American Revolution focuses on the original thirteen colonies, the war also had a Western theater. Spanish, British, and French imperial ambitions came to a head in the Western Territories. Which countries allied themselves with the American colonists against the British? How did conflict with the Native Americans who lived there play a role in shaping the American Revolution and, ultimately, form the foundation for the American West?

Students who want to make connections between the American Revolution and their local communities (outside of the original thirteen colonies) might begin by exploring which imperial power laid claim to their community. Students in Mobile, Alabama, might investigate how Spanish colonization, enslavement, and the American Revolution intersected. Petit Jean was an enslaved cattleman who became a spy for the Spanish. Why? What role did he play in supporting the naval operations of the American military? Check local community archives for resources on people who played a role in supporting the American Revolution.

In the Ohio River Valley, George Rogers Clark fought the British and their Native American allies during the war. Who was he and why did he consider that important? What did he hope to accomplish? Conflict also broke out in various settlements west of the thirteen colonies, such as at Boonesborough and Blue Lick, both in present-day Kentucky. What were they reacting to and why? What was the impact?

Why did the colonists in Detroit (in present-day Michigan) react by choosing loyalty to the British Crown instead of joining the original thirteen colonies in their rebellion? What was that area's contribution to the war? How and why did the area become a prison for American prisoners of war? Students might research the many other local conflicts connected to the Revolution and consider the reactions of local settlers and Native Americans to the cultural and political exchanges that happened as a result of the conflict.

People in places that would become Texas and California supported the American Revolution. How and why did Tejanos, descendants of Mexican Creoles, assist Spanish naval forces that were supporting the Americans? What role did religion play? How did Spanish missionaries in California react to the cause of the Revolution? Why did they use their Catholic religion to justify raising money in their communities to send to the Continental Congress? How did the Congress use the funding to help defeat the British at Yorktown?

Of course, there are many more revolutions in history to explore: the French Revolution, Russian Revolution, Chinese Cultural Revolution, October (Bolshevik) Revolution, Glorious Revolution, February Revolution, Industrial Revolution, and the Student Movement. And let's not forget the many agrarian, social, green, velvet, quiet, technological, ideological, religious, and information revolutions!

How can a revolution in one country influence reactions and reforms in another? What impact did the American Revolution have on other countries in the eighteenth, nineteenth, or twentieth centuries? What was the reaction of the United States and other nations to the communist revolutions of the twentieth century?

Political, religious, and social revolutions of almost every century were complex events that were years in the making, providing a plethora of potential topics for an NHD project. Students interested in immigration-related topics might look at the impact of the European revolutions of the late 1840s. Political revolutions took place in France, Italy, Germany, and the Austrian Empire. Choosing one such revolution, what questions come to mind? What led to the revolution? Was it successful? Why or why not? What reaction or reforms followed, if any? How did the economic depression in Europe and unstable political situations drive immigration to the United States? How and why were local communities, such as Milwaukee, Wisconsin, or Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, transformed as a result?

Are all revolutions political? Of course not.

Students with an interest in economics or business can consider how entrepreneurs and business leaders revolutionized industries, created new products or processes, and influenced the lives of workers and consumers. How did new ideas and inventions have an impact on society? What kind of change did they lead to and why? How did Madam C.J. Walker or Mary Kay Ash revolutionize the beauty industry? In what ways were their efforts reactions to perceived needs?

What about scientific or technological revolutions? Consider environmental history. Rachel Carson, whose book, Silent Spring, inspired the environmental movement and subsequent Green Revolution, is a popular topic for NHD students. Why not look for topics with local connections instead of choosing a topic that many have already covered? How and why have local communities reacted to issues of pollution and climate change? How and why were reforms, such as industry regulations, implemented or not? What was the reaction of local industries or the local population?

In what ways have science and technology changed the way we live, work, and entertain ourselves? How have scientific discoveries, ranging from the discovery and sequencing of DNA to germ theory and antibiotics, fundamentally reformed medicine? In what ways were these discoveries reactions to perceived needs? Of course, historians want to know the consequences of such discoveries. If these discoveries revolutionized medicine, what was the impact? To understand historical change on society is to understand the consequences of that change.

A good example of this is Thomas Edison's Kinetoscope—an invention that evolved into the motion picture industry. How did that change the way we receive and react to information and entertainment? What was the impact of that change on how we learn about the news, severe weather alerts, or the latest fashion trends? Why does this matter? What reactions or consequences did such technology cause?

Enough about revolution.

What about reform in history?

We know that reform is "the effort to change to a better state or form; to improve by alteration, substitution, abolition," and that it is often a reaction to an idea or event. The movement to abolish slavery comes to mind. Like other reform movements or revolutions, attempting to research the entire Abolitionist Movement would be too daunting and too big for an NHD project. Think locally. Many local historical societies have excellent archival materials to dig into to find local abolition societies.

Another resource is Chronicling America, a partnership between the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Library of Congress, which offers more than 20 million digitized newspaper pages dating from 1777 to 1973. Check it out at **chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/** and dig into historical newspapers for answers and evidence! What impact did local reformers have on their own communities? How did they contribute to or influence the national movement?

The Progressive Era of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a time marked by widespread social, political, and economic reform. It arose as a reaction to the challenges of industrialization, urbanization, immigration, and political corruption, aiming to improve conditions for the working class, regulate business practices, and expand democracy. Photographer Lewis Hine and Hull House founder Jane Addams are perennial favorites for NHD student research. Rather than research one of these two people, students might look for related topics in their own communities. What impact did immigration have on local communities? How and why did residents react to mass immigration? What reforms were put in place to help new immigrants and why? How did immigrants affect their new communities? What were the consequences? Conversely, how did mass immigration affect the countries they left? To answer that, of course, we have to ask why they left. What were they reacting to that led to their decisions to leave their home countries?

Students might research local or state reforms that have influenced elections and campaigns. Why did people believe reforms were necessary? What was the impact of such reforms? One example is Robert M. LaFollette's Wisconsin Idea and its push for labor and political reforms. Who was LaFollette and why did he advocate for reform? What was he reacting to and what were the reactions of Wisconsinites? Consider the Farmers' Alliance in Oklahoma (1870s–1890s) and its effort to organize tenant farmers. Why and how was the Alliance created? Was it successful? Why or why not?

How did Ida B. Wells react to lynching of African Americans during the post-Reconstruction era? How did she use her skills as a journalist to raise awareness and seek reform to put a stop to lynching? What were the reactions of her fellow Americans? What about local and state governments? When did the passage of the federal Emmett Till Anti-Lynching Act, which finally made lynching a federal hate crime, happen and why did it take so long?

There are scores of topics related to reform that have influenced local, state, national, and even global events. How did grassroots activism in South Africa, such as local boycotts and protests, play a critical role in dismantling Apartheid? What were the global reactions and repercussions? In what ways have local sanitation projects and clean water reforms addressed diseases, such as cholera and malaria, worldwide? What sparked such reforms and why? What were the reactions and consequences locally and globally?

Why did Martin Luther post his 95 Theses on the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, in 1517? What kind of church or religious reform did he seek? How did the Catholic Church react? How did people beyond the Catholic Church hierarchy react? What were the consequences for Christianity in Western Europe? Can his theses be considered revolutionary? How and why?

How did the nonviolent activism of Mahatma Gandhi help India gain its independence from British rule? How can his actions be considered revolutionary? What impact did his nonviolent resistance have on civil disobedience movements around the world? Why did Símon Bolívar agitate for the independence of Latin American countries? What was he reacting to and what were the consequences? What impact did this have on the unification of countries in Latin America? What social reforms developed? How, why, and what changed as a result?

What about reaction?

Reaction is the significant and critical element to analyzing any topic, whether related to revolution, reform, or both.

A revolution causes reaction; reform causes reaction; reaction can cause reform and revolution. So, back to the first question at the beginning of this article: there may be topics related to revolution; there may be topics related to reform; there may be topics that include both revolution and reform. But any way you look at it, reaction is key to understanding the change.

To get students started, ten NHD affiliates have contributed articles and images about local issues to help show how the nation's 250th anniversary and the NHD theme apply to topics ranging from 2,000 years in the past to the 1960s. Explore these ideas and see if any spark an interest.

The theme, Revolution, Reaction, Reform in History, is very broad. Students should select their topics carefully, start with a research question, read secondary books written by historians, dig into primary material, think critically, and develop a historical argument. Then, students may produce thoughtful NHD projects related to the theme in which they analyze and interpret the impact of their topic in history.