

Intellectuals at the Gates

Some revolutions fail when the enlightened misread the national mood.

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Democracy Denied, 1905–1915: Intellectuals and the Fate of Democracy, by Charles Kurzman (Harvard University Press, 396 pp., \$49.95)

Certain years in history carry a nearly sacred halo, so deeply are they associated with the idea of democratic revolution. Say 1848, and you summon up the springtime of nations, the rise of barricades in Paris and Frankfurt and Venice; say 1989, and it's the Velvet Revolution, the collapse of Communism in East Berlin and Prague and Warsaw. Few people have such fond memories of the years between 1905 and 1915, which we more commonly associate with the various crises leading up to the First World War. Yet as Charles Kurzman reminds us in *Democracy Denied*, those years actually saw "a wave of democratic revolutions . . . consuming more than a quarter of the world's population."

The wave began with the 1905 Russian Revolution, when Tsar Nicholas II was forced to grant his people a constitution and a parliament. Inspired by the Russian example, Iranian democrats rebelled against the Shah in 1906; the Young Turks forced the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire to grant a constitution in 1908; the Kingdom of Portugal became a republic in 1910; the 30-year-old Porfirio Diaz regime in Mexico was overthrown in 1911; and the ancient monarchy of China gave way to a republican government under Sun Yat-sen in 1912.

These democratic movements spanned the globe, and the intellectuals leading them were strongly aware of one another's example. Kurzman's mastery of a wide range of sources and languages allows him to draw surprising connections: some rebels in Portugal called themselves Young Turks, while an Ottoman newspaper urged the Turks to "strive like Russians." On the face of it, so many national revolutionary movements occurring within the same period seem to belong, as Kurzman writes, "alongside other clusters of democratic revolutions, such as the wave triggered by the French Revolution of 1789, the uprisings of 1848 . . . and the democratic movements of the late twentieth century."

Yet as Kurzman's title suggests, these six revolutions are not remembered as a glorious chapter in history. In each, pro-democracy activists scored

dramatic initial successes, only to surrender quickly to infighting, resentment, and apathy, setting the stage for counterrevolutionary coups. The Tsar did grant a Duma in 1905, but once the revolutionary danger passed, he effectively neutered it, and Russian autocracy was back in the saddle by 1907. In Turkey, the Young Turks themselves abolished the democracy that they had helped create, preferring to modernize the creaky Ottoman state along authoritarian lines. Francisco Madero, who overthrew Diaz in Mexico, was himself overthrown and killed by the army commander, Victoriano Huerta, in 1913. Similarly, Sun Yat-sen was unseated by the powerful general Yuan Shikai, paving the way for decades of civil war. Only in Portugal did the republic stagger on, despite repeated coups and royalist invasions—until 1925, when a dictatorship replaced it.

Kurzman, a sociology professor at the University of North Carolina, does not set out simply to tell the story of these revolutions (though since they are unfamiliar to most American readers, his book might have benefited from a little more straight narrative). Instead, he undertakes a comparative analysis of the six cases, seeking to construct a model of how democratic revolutions succeed or fail. His insight is that conventional Marxist theories of revolution, based on class conflict, are insufficient to explain what happened in the years 1905 to 1915. In the classic Marxist view, liberal democracy is the political expression of the rising economic power of the urban middle class; the bourgeoisie contends against reactionary forces (landowners and the military), with the inconstant support of radical workers. But in the revolutions of 1905 through 1915, Kurzman finds, “these characters played their roles inconsistently. . . . Viewed in terms of the classic social-scientific scripts, the democratic revolutions of this period were a jumble.”

Instead, Kurzman writes a different script whose protagonist isn't a socioeconomic class but a professional-ideological group: the intellectuals. In each country, he finds a self-selected corps of intellectuals who saw themselves as the bearers of enlightenment to a backward nation. Inspired by the Dreyfus Affair, which marked the emergence of French intellectuals as a liberal political force, intellectuals in these less advanced countries proudly identified themselves with what Kurzman describes as the two most progressive trends in contemporary thought: first, democracy; second, positivism, the use of scientific reason to reorganize society. Emboldened by their sense of moral right and historical destiny, groups of intellectuals—sometimes extraordinarily small ones—managed to convince more potent social classes that they deserved revolutionary leadership.

Kurzman traces this dynamic in all six countries, dissimilar though they were in most respects. In Russia, the intelligentsia, as it called itself, numbered in the hundreds of thousands and included liberal gentry,

university students, doctors, lawyers, and teachers. A study of the Union of Liberation, the main pro-democracy organization, found that 82 percent of its members had obtained higher education. In Iran, by contrast, there were “no full-fledged universities, only several thousand secondary-school students, and possibly several hundred graduates of European schools.” Yet the tiny group of intellectuals educated or influenced by Europeans enjoyed a strong esprit de corps, defining themselves against the Muslim clergy who dominated traditional education. Kurzman quotes one Iranian activist: “Two days in a modern school is a thousand times closer to the judgment of these needs [of the country in the present era] than embarking on a hundred marginal commentaries” on Islamic texts. In China, meanwhile, the intellectual avant-garde was largely composed of junior officers who had gone to Japan to study modern military methods.

Nowhere, however, was the intellectual class anywhere nearly large enough to take power on its own. It relied on the support of other groups dissatisfied with the existing regime. Thus the Russian revolution only succeeded, after nearly a year of agitation, when railway workers went on strike, paralyzing the Tsar’s armies (already in disarray after the disastrous Russo-Japanese War). Yet once the intellectuals took power—in most cases, only to a limited extent—it became clear that their programs were not very appealing to their supporters. The rich disliked the intellectuals’ plans for popular education, which meant raising taxes, while the poor were dismayed to find their former allies trying to break strikes and disarm rebel groups. Meanwhile, the Great Powers—including democracies like the U.S., Great Britain, and France—generally preferred to deal with a stable authoritarian regime than with an unstable democracy. Sooner or later—in most of the six cases, sooner—the ancien regime counterattacked, and the democrats found themselves without allies at home or abroad.

In short, the revolutions of 1905–1915 failed because intellectuals overestimated popular democratic support and underestimated the challenges that democracy presented. Kurzman writes acerbically about these intellectuals, repeatedly suggesting that such liberal values as a free press and universal education were just parochial interests of the class that writes and teaches for a living. But are democracies’ enthusiasms for these values really just examples of “hegemony” in the Gramscian sense, as Kurzman argues—“the acceptance of the interests of the ruling group as though they were the interests of the whole society”? If so, it’s hard to understand why, as Kurzman acknowledges in his concluding chapter, these rights became the goal of the post-1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe—which were led not by intellectuals but by labor movements like Solidarity. The intellectuals of 1905–1915 were, Kurzman amply shows, deluded about their peoples’ readiness for democracy. They were ahead of their time, a misfortune not just their own, but their countries’.