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Q13

Explain how the foundations of the modern world were laid by the American and French Revolutions.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2019 · GS I · 15 marks · History of the World

History of the world will include events from the 18th century such as industrial revolution, world wars, redrawing of national boundaries, colonization, decolonization, political philosophies like communism, capitalism, socialism etc. - their forms and effect on the society.

Core demand of the question

- Explain how the American Revolution laid foundations of the modern world
- Explain how the French Revolution laid foundations of the modern world

Revision summary

The American Revolution made consent, a written constitution, and a federal republic practical politics.

The French Revolution made legal equality, national sovereignty, and a civil code European and then global tools.

Both taught that peoples, not only dynasties, found states.

Haiti and later constitutions extended the same rights language against slavery and empire.

The foundations are political and legal; industry and empire completed other parts of modernity.

Introduction

The American Revolution (1775-83) and the French Revolution (1789-99) turned subjects into citizens and thrones into problems. Written rights, popular sovereignty, nation, and law codes from those decades still sit under modern republics, including the language later used in India.

Body**American political foundations**

- The Declaration of Independence (1776) stated that governments derive just powers from the consent of the governed, which undercut divine-right empire everywhere.
- The United States Constitution (1787) and the Bill of Rights modelled a written constitution, federalism, separation of powers, and judicial review as tools of a large republic.
- A president in place of a king, and no legal aristocracy in the federal charter, made republican government a working fact, not only a pamphlet idea.
- The revolution was incomplete on slavery and on Native nations, yet its texts still travelled as a kit for later liberals and anti-colonials.
- Latin American independence wars, and later Asian and African constitutional drafts, borrowed the American habit of a founding document and a rights list.

French political foundations

- The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789) put liberty, equality before the law, and national sovereignty in a European heartland of old regime privilege.
- Abolition of feudal dues, the Civil Constitution experiments, and then the **Napoleonic Code** spread property, contract, and uniform civil law across much of Europe.
- "Liberty, equality, fraternity," the metric system, and the idea of the nation-in-arms made the people, not the dynasty, the unit of politics.
- The Revolution's terror and Napoleonic wars showed the dark side of mass politics, but they also ended the assumption that estates and the Church must rule the state.
- Haitian revolutionaries used French rights language against slavery, which made the modern world confront race and empire, not only European constitutions.

Shared modern grammar

- Both revolutions taught that a people can found a state, tax themselves through representatives, and list rights against arbitrary power.
- Nationalism as civic membership, secular public law, and careers open to talent became the European and then the global template of the nineteenth century.
- 1848 in Europe, the unification of Italy and Germany, and later anti-colonial movements quoted 1776 and 1789 even when their social programmes differed.
- The modern world's map of republics, flags, and constitutions is unthinkable without these two ruptures.

Limits and differences

- America built a federal commercial republic with a slower social levelling; France tried a sharper social and anti-feudal break and then swung through empire and restoration.
- Neither revolution gave full political rights to women or to the enslaved at once; the foundation is liberal citizenship, which later movements had to widen.
- Industrial capital and empire also made the modern world; the two revolutions are political foundations, not the whole of modernity.

Way forward for policy

- Pair consent, written constitution, and federal republic with France's rights, nation, and civil code.
- Add Haiti and later constitutions so the "modern world" is not only white Atlantic men.
- Note that India's Preamble and fundamental rights sit in this same lineage, adapted to a post-colonial republic.

Flow diagram

American 1776 1787 -> Consent constitution republic
French 1789 -> Rights nation civil code
Consent constitution republic -> Modern political world
Rights nation civil code -> Modern political world
Haiti and later nations -> Modern political world
Limits slavery gender -> Modern political world

Conclusion

America gave the modern world a working republic, a written constitution, and consent as the source of power. France gave rights, legal equality, the nation, and a civil code that travelled with and against Napoleon. Together they laid the political foundations on which later democracies and anti-colonial states still stand.

Facts & figures

Declaration of Independence, 1776

American statement of consent of the governed and the right to replace unjust rule.

US Constitution, 1787

Written federal charter with separation of powers, later joined by the Bill of Rights.

Declaration of the Rights of Man, 1789

French charter of liberty, legal equality, and national sovereignty.

Napoleonic Code

Civil law of property, contract, and family that influenced Europe and many colonies.

Haitian Revolution

Caribbean rising that used French rights talk to attack slavery and colonial rule.

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