

Mike Duncan's *Revolutions* podcast shows how history repeats itself

His ongoing exploration of political instability feels excruciatingly relevant.

by [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#) in the [August 25, 2021](#) issue



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Podcaster Mike Duncan pauses briefly in front of his microphone, just long enough for a gentle implied sigh, after he has dispatched King Charles I. Charles was, “let’s face it, a terrible leader.” Unable to judge people or politics, he was so obstinate that he “almost forced his own subjects to behead him” after many chances to save his life and crown. But he wasn’t a monster. He just “fell into traps that no one had actually laid for him.” It didn’t have to end this way. He did it all to himself, and it cost him his head. Pause. Implied sigh. Then the story of history moves on without him.

Over seven years and more than 300 episodes of Duncan’s gripping and well-researched *Revolutions* podcast, he has seen off many crowned heads and erstwhile revolutionary leaders. These valedictory moments assess, with poignant but unsparing clarity, both the rulers who ultimately couldn’t save the old order and the

revolutionary firebrands who couldn't stay atop the new. Every time he closes the book on one of the dead, alternative histories hang in the air. What if Louis XVI had been consistently either aggressive or accommodating? What if Robespierre hadn't emerged from a month's seclusion in a paranoid and fanatic state? What would have happened to Haiti and the rest of the Caribbean if Napoleon had accepted the deal offered by Toussaint Louverture instead of destroying him? Could Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata have pressed their momentary advantage and led Mexico instead of dying in ambushes? We'll never know.

Revolutions has no guests, no audio clips, and no transition music except a few bars of a Haydn symphony at the beginning and end of each episode. It is simply the engaging, earnest voice of Duncan reading his scripts. And it is, at least by the standards of general history publishing, very popular. Starting with the English Civil War and Oliver Cromwell's protectorate, the show has covered the American, French, Haitian, and South American revolutions; the July Revolution in France in 1830; the 1848 revolutions across all of Europe; the Paris Commune of 1871; the Mexican Revolution; and the Russian Revolution. He has put out substantial episodes almost every week, with brief hiatuses between revolutions. And during these years, Duncan has also written two books: *The Storm before the Storm*, on the period before the collapse of the Roman Republic (Duncan's previous podcast was *The History of Rome*); and *Hero of Two Worlds*, on the Marquis de Lafayette, which is out this month. It is a huge body of work compiled in a strikingly short time.

After two strong seasons, on the English Civil War and the American Revolution, the show hits its stride with its mammoth tour through the French Revolution and the gut-wrenching story of Haiti. Over time the background and stage setting Duncan offers have gotten much more extensive; the season on the Russian Revolution goes for 53 episodes before World War I starts. But this has only made the stories better, especially for those revolutions with which many listeners may be less familiar. While the production style is plain and direct, Duncan knows how to set up a cliff-hanger, how to foreshadow, and how to lay on some heavy dramatic irony.

By treating these revolutions in chronological order, the show tells a single, interconnected story. The battles over revenue and prerogative in the English Civil War presage the conflicts that sparked the American Revolution, whose Enlightenment republicanism in turn inspires the French revolutionaries. The theories of universal rights and the political instability coming out of revolutionary France advance the Haitian Revolution. Simón Bolívar stops over in revolutionary

Haiti after an early failure in his long campaign to kick the Spanish out of South America, and he dies just before revolution again whipsaws back across the Atlantic to France, deposing the Bourbons a second time in July 1830. The embers of the July Revolution ignite in 1848, a year of mostly failed revolutions that will lead to the socialist and nationalist uprisings of 1871 and beyond. Each revolutionary triumph creates a reaction, and each revolutionary defeat pushes the forces of upheaval down and out to a new time or place. The American colonists and French republicans start out mimicking the ancient Romans; 100 years later, a new generation of revolutionaries is modeling themselves on the Jacobins.

Revolutions presents no grand theory of historical change. Duncan's own politics are liberal and egalitarian, and his moral intuitions seem to line up more often with the revolutionaries than with the old regimes or reactionaries. But he acknowledges the virtues, claims, and failures of people in all factions. He explicitly favors adaptable leaders over rigid ones and compromisers over hard-liners. Again and again he tells the stories of old regimes that can't adapt, granting a constitution or some concession and then immediately taking it back, creating a body for representative input and then hobbling it with a restrictive franchise or royal vetoes, and in general accepting far too little reform, far too late for it to do any good. Concurrently, he tells the stories of radicals from South America to Russia who underestimate the conservatism of the countryside and of liberals who abandon or sacrifice their more radical supporters to gain acceptance from reactionaries that never comes. When a revolutionary faction wins, they often fall prey to what Duncan calls "the entropy of victory," turning to infighting before a new regime is consolidated.

And there is, of course, the recurring pattern of violence and cruelty, both in the defense of old regimes and in the establishment of new ones. Casual students of history will likely remember the image of the guillotine and the Terror from the French Revolution, but they may not have heard the story of Catholic recusants in the Vendée who were bound and thrown out of boats in "republican baptisms" by the representatives of the revolutionary government. The secret police of czarist Russia are better remembered than the atrocities against civilians enacted by Czar Nicholas II after the abortive 1905 revolution. Every old regime, and every revolution against it, has backed up high ideals with unscrupulous violence. The one almost admirable exception in these stories is Louis Philippe, who reigned without conviction or violence for 18 years and abdicated bloodlessly in 1848.

In a popular history world dominated by blockbuster accounts of single figures, *Revolutions* occupies a niche that was once filled by authors like Barbara Tuchman, whose *The March of Folly* and *A Distant Mirror* gave general readers the opportunity to explore a theme or a period through the delicate interplay of deep forces and contingent human choices. *Revolutions* informs and edifies in an accessible way, while remaining compulsively listenable. Its scope is magisterial, but it doesn't succumb to simplistic interpretations or just-so stories. Like all good histories, it shows us how the many possible outcomes winnow down to what only posterity can imagine was inevitable.

There is not so much as a wink-nudge allusion to any contemporary parallels to the history told in *Revolutions*. But a show exploring the many forms political instability can take—and the many ways such instability can resolve—can't help but be excruciatingly topical and relevant. So what might a listener learn about our own regime from these stories of 1789, 1848, and 1917?

First, a common factor in revolutionary periods is a regime that has stopped functioning adequately. In hindsight, scholars may identify material forces or changing political ideas as the cause of political upheaval, but in the moment the cause is more likely to be governments simply failing to accomplish basic functions. The United States in 2021 offers ample cause for anxiety on this front, from our catastrophic response to the coronavirus to the steadily decaying condition of public infrastructure. With novel viruses, climate-enhanced natural disasters, and increasing fragility in all public functions being more or less accepted as inevitable by the political class, the opportunities for crisis will not be lacking.

But public decay and fragility alone aren't enough to brew a revolution. A second ingredient is the way that lawful and ordinary political tactics escalate until they create full-blown crises of legitimacy. When Parliament starts the reign of Charles I by putting him on a much shorter fiscal leash than is customary, he dusts off some old statutes to raise revenue without them. The next thing you know, he's a head shorter. This pattern repeats over and over, as a regime or a faction plays hardball and ends up provoking a similarly creative or out-of-bounds response, until the only options that remain are violence and total capitulation.

This process is well underway in the United States. From the blockade of Merrick Garland's nomination to the Supreme Court in 2016 to the legal and legislative attempts to overturn the 2020 election, the practice of procedural hardball has

become uniformly more radical. Far from causing anyone to pause and reflect, the January 6 assault on the Capitol only seems to have accelerated the disintegration of any sufficiently neutral, respected process for adjudicating political disputes and alternating the parties in power. Arizona's legislature is still attempting to overturn the state's election. Georgia's legislature has given itself power to remove local elections officials, with the possibility of altering unwanted electoral outcomes in the state. The governor of Texas vetoed pay and health insurance for the legislature and its staff after Democrats broke quorum in May to prevent the passage of a bill massively restricting access to the ballot box. Several states have shielded drivers from civil liability when they deliberately drive into peaceful protests.

There is no obvious way for this process, advanced to this point, to move in reverse. And so far, only one side seems to be planning for the increasingly plausible death spiral. For all the revived talk on the right about Marxism and radicalism in America, the mainstream of American liberalism does not appear to have thought very far beyond the decidedly unrevolutionary tools of human resources training, education administration, and voting for Joe Biden. The militant workers of Paris in 1871 created strong community organizations for mutual aid and defense, a true internal rival to the state itself. The best American anarchists could muster in 2020 was a few city blocks that housed police-free street festivals and clinics.

Maybe this is because the left side of the spectrum is anchored by middle-class professionals. Maybe it is because revolutionary ideals like Marxism or even Enlightenment republicanism have largely been supplanted with dreary discourses no one would fight or die for. Maybe it is simply because labor organizing has become too difficult or America's demographics are too old for revolutionary street fighting. Whatever the reason, a left-driven revolution is a limited prospect.

Meanwhile, reactionaries are stockpiling guns and putting the whole electoral process under partisan control; Democrats have struggled to investigate the January 6 riot, let alone pass pro-voting reforms or extend the franchise to US citizens in Washington, DC, or Puerto Rico. They can't exercise power even in their own self-defense. If you're betting on the force that strikes the fatal blow to American democracy, put your money on reaction, happening under color of law and backed by informal violence and intimidation. This, after all, is what happened in America in the 1870s as Reconstruction, our true revolutionary moment, was throttled.

But the third contemporary lesson of *Revolutions* is that the revolutionary moment usually takes everyone, even the revolutionaries, by surprise. Duncan paused his season on the Russian Revolution to describe the experience of living in Paris and researching *Hero of Two Worlds* during a series of large-scale demonstrations. He describes joining in the massive, escalating marches of the 2019 transportation strike, at one point getting caught between a group of black-bloc anarchists and angry police. It's the one moment in the show that addresses any current events. Duncan reflects that his photographs of these massive, potentially historic moments are interspersed with the ephemera of daily life—"just a bunch of pictures of me and the kids at some Christmas village activity, just living our lives" between bouts of revolutionary chaos. "That's how these things go." Even in times of high ferment, there is much more normal life going on. We don't necessarily know when we have reached the moment when people with power have been disastrously foolish or shortsighted, when factions with the initiative have misplayed the situation, or when resistance is emerging from an unlooked-for quarter.

"We are sleeping on a volcano," Alexis de Tocqueville told his fellow members of the French parliament just before 1848 erupted. Duncan uses that quotation to start his season on the 1848 revolutions. It's an arresting moment in a series full of them. There have been so many who have slept on so many volcanoes, and so many who have scoured revolutions past for models of an unrevealed future. A good popular history can tempt us to do one or the other—to be lulled by the thrill of the narrative or to poke through the entrails of the past to divine a picture of what is to come. *Revolutions* shows us why people slept and why people sought a map for the future, but it denies us the consolation of doing either itself. Instead it does what a work of history ought to do: cultivate our curiosity and sense of contingency in our own history, before today's possibilities freeze into tomorrow's inevitability.

Read [Dueholm's interview with Duncan](#).

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Lessons from revolutions."