

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional Origins of Modern Politics

Paper 2 • Unit 17

The American and French revolutions, Napoleon, and the British reform tradition: 110 marks in four years and the joint-largest unit in Paper 2's world history half.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

Origins of modern politics: European states system; American Revolution and the Constitution; French Revolution and aftermath, 1789 to 1815; American Civil War with reference to Abraham Lincoln and the abolition of slavery; British democratic politics, 1815 to 1850, parliamentary reformers, free traders, Chartists.

The European states system

Everything in this unit assumes the framework built at Westphalia and rebuilt at Vienna. Give it two paragraphs at the start of any answer on nineteenth century Europe and the rest of your argument has somewhere to stand.

- Ending the Thirty Years War, the **Peace of Westphalia, 1648**, is conventionally treated as the origin of the sovereign territorial state, the principle of non-interference in internal affairs, and diplomacy conducted between formal equals.
- Organising doctrine of the period was the **balance of power**: no single state should dominate the continent, and coalitions would form against any that tried, which is the logic of every eighteenth century war and of the coalitions against Napoleon.
- **Enlightened absolutism** in Prussia under Frederick II, Austria under Joseph II and Russia under Catherine II applied rational administration and legal codification without conceding political representation, and its failure to satisfy the educated classes is part of the background to 1789.
- Historians use the term **fiscal-military state** for what followed: eighteenth century warfare drove the growth of taxation, public debt and bureaucracy, and the states that borrowed cheapest, above all Britain after the founding of the Bank of England in 1694, fought longest.
- France's participation in the American war worsened a debt crisis that the monarchy could not resolve without touching noble and clerical privilege, which is the direct fiscal road to the Estates General of 1789.
- Properly a topic of the Nation-State System unit, the **Congress of Vienna, 1814 to 1815**, but its three principles of legitimacy, restoration and compensation close this unit's narrative and should be named here.

KEY TERMS

Balance of power — The doctrine that no state should be allowed to dominate Europe, enforced through shifting coalitions rather than through any standing institution.

Fiscal-military state — John Brewer's term for the tax, debt and administrative apparatus that eighteenth century warfare compelled European states to build.

The American Revolution and the Constitution

Asked in 2023 on the 1783 settlement and in 2025 as a manifestation of the Enlightenment. Both questions want you to connect ideas to institutions, so keep the documents and the thinkers together.

- Immediate causes were fiscal, running through the **Sugar Act 1764, Stamp Act 1765, Townshend Acts 1767** and **Tea Act 1773**, each an attempt to make the colonies contribute to imperial defence after the Seven Years War.

- Constitutionally the grievance crystallised as **no taxation without representation**, which was a claim about the rights of Englishmen before it became a claim about natural rights.
- Drafted by Thomas Jefferson, the **Declaration of Independence of 4 July 1776** translates **John Locke** almost directly, replacing Locke's life, liberty and property with life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.
- **Thomas Paine's** *Common Sense* (January 1776) converted a constitutional dispute into a republican argument and is the single most effective piece of political pamphleteering in the period.
- Secured after Saratoga in 1777, the **French alliance of 1778** turned a colonial rebellion into a general European war, and Spanish and Dutch entry made British defeat at **Yorktown in 1781** possible.
- Referred to in the 2023 quotation is the **Treaty of Paris, 1783**, by which: Britain recognised American independence and ceded territory to the Mississippi, and the phrasing of that question invites you to note that recognition in 1783 formalised an outcome already decided at Yorktown.
- Government under the **Articles of Confederation** failed because Congress had no power to tax or regulate commerce, and Shays's Rebellion in 1786 to 1787 supplied the crisis that justified replacing them.
- Enlightenment political science is embodied in the **Constitution of 1787: Montesquieu's** separation of powers, checks and balances, federalism, and a written supreme law, with the **Bill of Rights** added in 1791.
- One unresolved contradiction is what a strong answer names: a republic founded on natural rights entrenched slavery through the three-fifths compromise and the fugitive slave clause, which set up the Civil War seventy years later.
- For the 2025 question specifically, the Enlightenment reading works in the political sphere through Locke and Montesquieu, in the civil sphere through equality before law, and in the ecclesiastical sphere through the First Amendment's disestablishment, which was genuinely novel.

Thinker	Idea	Institutional expression
John Locke	Natural rights, government by consent, right of resistance	Declaration of Independence, 1776
Montesquieu	Separation of powers	Three branches, checks and balances, 1787
Rousseau	Popular sovereignty	We the People preamble
Voltaire and the philosophes	Religious toleration, anti-clericalism	First Amendment disestablishment, 1791

Enlightenment thinker to American institution. This mapping is what the 2025 question was asking for.

The French Revolution: causes and the first phase

Asked in 2023 on the philosophers versus social and economic causes, and in 2025 on the bourgeoisie leading the first phase. Both are historiographical questions in disguise, so name the schools.

- Associated with **Georges Lefebvre** and **Albert Soboul**, the **classical or social interpretation** reads 1789 as a bourgeois revolution against feudal privilege, with the sans-culottes and the peasantry as decisive popular forces.

- Against them, **Alfred Cobban** and **Francois Furet** advanced a **revisionist** critique denying that a capitalist bourgeoisie made the revolution, arguing that the revolutionary leadership was largely office-holding and professional, and that the revolution is best understood as political and ideological rather than class-driven.
- This is exactly what the 2025 quotation about the bourgeoisie is testing: state the classical position, then note that Cobban and Furet dispute the class identity of the revolutionaries, then take a position.
- Intellectual causes are real but insufficient on their own, which is the point of the 2023 question. **Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau** and the **Encyclopedie** of Diderot and d'Alembert delegitimised absolutism and the clerical order over decades.
- Immediate causes were fiscal and agricultural: state bankruptcy after the American war, the failure of Calonne's and Necker's reform attempts against noble resistance, and the harvest failure of 1788 that pushed bread prices to their century peak in July 1789.
- In May 1789 the **Estates General** met for the first time since 1614, deadlocked over voting by order versus by head, and the Third Estate's **Tennis Court Oath of 20 June** converted a fiscal assembly into a constituent one.
- Popular action decided the next stage, since the **fall of the Bastille on 14 July 1789** and the rural **Great Fear** of July and August forced the **abolition of feudal privileges on 4 August** and the **Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen on 26 August**.
- By requiring clerical oaths to the state, the **Civil Constitution of the Clergy of 1790** to the state, split the revolution from a large part of the peasantry and created the counter-revolution in the Vendee.
- **Olympe de Gouges's Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen** (1791) and the exclusion of women from active citizenship expose the limits of the revolution's universalism, and she was guillotined in 1793.

Radicalisation, the clubs and the Terror

The 2026 paper asked specifically about the Cordelier Club, which is a signal that UPSC now expects the institutional detail of revolutionary politics and not just the phases. Know the clubs.

- Formally the Society of Friends of the Constitution, the **Jacobin Club** began as a deputies' caucus, built a national network of affiliated societies, and became the organisational spine of the revolutionary government.
- Founded in 1790 in the Cordeliers district, the **Cordeliers Club**, formally the Society of the Friends of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, was set up in the Cordeliers district, charged low dues and admitted men without property, which made it the more genuinely popular body.
- Cordelier leaders were **Georges Danton, Jean-Paul Marat** with his paper *L'Ami du peuple*, **Camille Desmoulins** and later **Jacques Hebert**, and the club drove the movement to republicanism after the king's flight to Varennes in June 1791.
- Bloodshed followed at the **Champ de Mars on 17 July 1791**, after a Cordelier-organised republican petition, and it split the Jacobins, with the moderates leaving to form the Feuillants.
- Two factions then divided the Convention, since the **Girondins** favoured war and provincial decentralisation; the **Montagnards** favoured Parisian control and emergency government, and their conflict was resolved by the purge of the Girondins in June 1793.

- From roughly September 1793 to July 1794 the **Terror** ran under the **Committee of Public Safety**, dominated by **Robespierre**, with the Law of Suspects and the Revolutionary Tribunal as its instruments, and executions in the tens of thousands.
- **Robespierre's** own account justified terror as virtue's emergency form, and his fall on **9 Thermidor, 27 July 1794**, ended the radical phase; the Cordeliers had already been destroyed with the execution of Hebert and Danton earlier that year.
- The **Thermidorian reaction** and the **Directory of 1795 to 1799** produced an unstable regime dependent on the army to suppress both royalist and Jacobin revivals, which is the condition that made Napoleon's coup of 18 Brumaire possible.

KEY TERMS

Sans-culottes — Parisian artisans and shopkeepers, named for wearing trousers rather than aristocratic knee breeches; the popular force the Cordeliers mobilised.

Thermidor — The revolutionary calendar month in which Robespierre fell; by extension, the conservative turn that ends a revolution's radical phase.

Napoleon: ephemeral conquests, durable institutions

The 2026 paper gave you the thesis in the question itself, that his conquests were ephemeral but his civilian work was built on granite. Your job is to test it, not repeat it, and the honest verdict is that it is broadly right with qualifications.

- The civilian achievement is genuinely durable. The **Code Napoleon of 1804** codified civil law around equality before the law, secure property, contract and secular marriage, and it remains the basis of legal systems across Europe, Latin America and beyond.
- The Code's limits are as important as its reach: it restored patriarchal authority within the family, restricted married women's legal capacity, and reintroduced slavery in the French colonies in 1802.
- Other lasting institutions include the **Bank of France (1800)**, the **Concordat of 1801** which settled relations with the papacy, the **prefectural system** of centralised administration, the **lycees** and the **Legion of Honour** as a career-open-to-talent hierarchy.
- The conquests were indeed ephemeral in territorial terms. The empire reached its height around 1810 and collapsed within four years, and the Vienna settlement restored the dynasties.
- But the conquests were not without permanent effect, which is where the quotation needs qualifying. French occupation abolished serfdom and guild restrictions in parts of Germany and Italy, dissolved the **Holy Roman Empire in 1806**, created the Confederation of the Rhine, and thereby made German and Italian unification thinkable.
- The **Continental System** from 1806 attempted to defeat Britain economically, failed because of smuggling and British naval supremacy, and alienated satellite economies, contributing directly to the Peninsular War and the Russian campaign.
- The **Peninsular War from 1808** and the **Russian campaign of 1812** are the two strategic errors usually cited, and both were driven by the logic of enforcing the Continental System.
- Napoleonic rule also provoked the nationalism that destroyed it, in Spain, in the German states through figures such as Fichte, and in Russia, which is a genuine paradox worth stating.

- The verdict to argue: the epigram is right about institutions and territory, but wrong if it implies the conquests left nothing, since they redrew the political map of central Europe and seeded the national movements of the next sixty years.

The American Civil War and the abolition of slavery

Named explicitly in the syllabus with reference to Lincoln. It was asked in 2024 from the industrial and agrarian angle, which is the economic reading, so hold both the economic and the moral account.

- The economic account, which the 2024 question stated, sets an industrialising north wanting tariffs, internal improvements and free labour against an agrarian export south wanting free trade and slave labour for cotton.
- That framing is incomplete on its own. The proximate cause was the **extension of slavery into the western territories**, which is what the Missouri Compromise of 1820, the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 and the **Dred Scott decision of 1857** all turned on.
- **Lincoln's** election in 1860 on a platform of no extension, not abolition, triggered secession, and the war began at Fort Sumter in April 1861.
- Lincoln's stated war aim was initially the preservation of the Union, and his 1862 letter to Horace Greeley says so explicitly, which candidates should quote carefully rather than presenting him as an abolitionist from the outset.
- The **Emancipation Proclamation**, issued September 1862 and effective 1 January 1863, freed slaves in the rebelling states only, and its immediate effect was strategic, deterring British and French recognition of the Confederacy and enabling black enlistment.
- Legal abolition came with the **Thirteenth Amendment in 1865**, followed by the **Fourteenth** on citizenship and equal protection in 1868 and the **Fifteenth** on voting in 1870.
- **Reconstruction** collapsed with the compromise of 1877, and the subsequent Jim Crow regime and sharecropping system reproduced much of the old labour relation without formal slavery, which is the point at which a good answer refuses a triumphal ending.
- The comparative angle worth a line: the American Civil War is the largest of a cluster of nineteenth century emancipations, following Britain in 1833 and preceding Brazil in 1888, and it was the only one achieved by war.

British democratic politics, 1815 to 1850

The 2023 and 2025 papers both came here, on the Chartists and on the Reform Act of 1832. Treat British reform as the counterfactual to continental revolution: the same pressures, a different outcome.

- Post-1815 Britain combined economic distress, the **Corn Laws of 1815**, and repression, including the suspension of habeas corpus, the **Peterloo massacre of 1819** and the Six Acts that followed.
- The **Reform Act of 1832** disenfranchised rotten boroughs, gave seats to industrial towns such as Manchester and Birmingham, and extended the franchise to roughly one in five adult men, leaving the working class excluded.

- In 2025 the quotation, that with 1832 began an unparalleled activity in reconstructing legislation, is defensible and should be evidenced: the **Factory Act 1833**, **abolition of slavery in the empire 1833**, the **Poor Law Amendment Act 1834**, the **Municipal Corporations Act 1835** and the **Mines Act 1842** followed in quick order.
- The **Chartist** movement arose precisely because 1832 excluded working men, and the **People's Charter of 1838** demanded universal male suffrage, the secret ballot, equal constituencies, payment of members, abolition of the property qualification and annual parliaments.
- Chartism organised three great petitions in **1839, 1842 and 1848**, all rejected, and it divided over **moral force** under William Lovett and **physical force** under Feargus O'Connor.
- Chartism failed in the short term and succeeded in the long term: five of its six demands were enacted by 1918, and the 2023 quotation about its ramifications reaching the working class and the colonies is asking you to trace that longer influence, including on colonial franchise agitation.
- The **Anti-Corn Law League** under **Richard Cobden** and **John Bright** ran the more successful campaign, using the new railways and penny post to organise middle class opinion, and the **repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846** split the Conservative party and made free trade orthodoxy.
- The contrast that answers a comparative question: Britain avoided 1848 because the political system proved capable of incremental concession, because the middle class was absorbed in 1832 rather than allied with the workers, and because economic conditions improved after 1842.

Demand	Enacted
Universal male suffrage	1918
Secret ballot	1872
No property qualification for MPs	1858
Payment of members	1911
Equal electoral districts	1885 onwards
Annual parliaments	Never

The six points of the People's Charter and when each arrived.

What connects the four revolutions

The unit is a set of separate events until you can say what makes it one syllabus heading. Examiners reward the synthesis, and it is the easiest place to show range.

- All four episodes replaced **subjecthood with citizenship**, at least in principle, and the contest over who counted as a citizen is the through-line: propertyless men, women and enslaved people were excluded from each settlement in turn.
- The **written constitution** as an instrument of government is an American invention of 1787 that France adopted repeatedly and Britain never did, and the comparison illuminates both.
- **Property** is the recurring limit. Locke's natural rights protected it, the French revolutionaries abolished feudal dues but not property, the American founders protected property in persons, and the Chartists were excluded because they had none.
- Each revolution produced a **counter-revolution**: the Vendee and Thermidor in France, the Confederacy and the end of Reconstruction in America, and the long resistance to reform in Britain.

- The **Indian connection** is worth one sentence in a Paper 2 answer, since Indian nationalists from Naoroji to Nehru drew explicitly on these episodes, and the Chartist demands reappear in Indian franchise agitation.
- The historiographical caution to carry: the social interpretation of revolutions dominant until the 1960s has been substantially revised by Cobban, Furet and their successors, and an answer that presents the class account as settled fact will read as dated.

Last-mile revision

- Westphalia 1648 sovereignty, balance of power, fiscal-military state; Vienna 1815 legitimacy, restoration, compensation.
- American sequence: Stamp Act 1765, Declaration 1776, Saratoga 1777, French alliance 1778, Yorktown 1781, Paris 1783, Constitution 1787, Bill of Rights 1791.
- French sequence: Estates General May 1789, Tennis Court Oath 20 June, Bastille 14 July, feudalism abolished 4 August, Declaration 26 August.
- Cordeliers founded 1790, low dues, Danton Marat Desmoulins Hebert; Champ de Mars 17 July 1791; Terror to 9 Thermidor 1794.
- Lefebvre and Soboul for the social interpretation; Cobban and Furet for the revisionist critique.
- Napoleon: Code 1804, Bank of France 1800, Concordat 1801, Holy Roman Empire dissolved 1806, Continental System 1806.
- Civil War: Dred Scott 1857, Lincoln 1860, Fort Sumter 1861, Emancipation Proclamation effective 1 January 1863, Thirteenth Amendment 1865.
- Britain: Peterloo 1819, Reform Act 1832, Charter 1838, petitions 1839, 1842 and 1848, Corn Laws repealed 1846.

Common errors to avoid

- Presenting Lincoln as an abolitionist from the start. His 1860 platform was no extension, and his stated aim in 1862 was the Union.
- Saying the Emancipation Proclamation freed the slaves. It applied only to rebelling states; the Thirteenth Amendment of 1865 abolished slavery.
- Treating the social interpretation of the French Revolution as settled. Cobban and Furet must be engaged for a top-band answer.
- Confusing the Jacobins and the Cordeliers. The Cordeliers were the cheaper, more popular club and drove the republican turn after Varennes.
- Claiming the Reform Act of 1832 was democratic. It enfranchised roughly one adult man in five and provoked Chartism precisely by excluding workers.
- Saying Chartism failed. Five of six demands were law by 1918; only annual parliaments never came.
- Repeating the Napoleon epigram without qualification. The conquests dissolved the Holy Roman Empire and seeded German and Italian nationalism, which is not nothing.

Mains Practice

The conquests of Napoleon were ephemeral but his civilian work was built on granite. Explain.

20 marks · 250 words · 2026

“The American Revolution was, in many respects, a manifestation of the Enlightenment in political, civil and ecclesiastical spheres.” Explain.

20 marks · 250 words · 2025

The philosophers and thinkers may have laid the foundation of the French Revolution, but it was precipitated by social and economic reasons. Explain.

20 marks · 250 words · 2023

“The rise of the Cordelier Club in France was significant for the revolutionary movement.”

10 marks · 150 words · 2026

“The French Revolution started and led to victory in its first phase by the bourgeoisie.”

10 marks · 150 words · 2025

“With the Reform Act of 1832 began an activity in reconstructing legislation to which there had been no parallel in British history.”

10 marks · 150 words · 2025