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Revolutions Without Borders

“Pamphlets, not muskets, ignited the revolutions that swept through America and Europe at the end of the eighteenth century.” (Polasky, 17). Polasky sets the scene for the depth of her fierce book about the earnestness of freedoms. Throughout Janet Polasky’s novel, *Revolutions without Borders*, she portrays the ideas of liberty and equality at a transatlantic scale from 1776 to 1804. The book expresses the unknown notion of independence and how it spread from various forms of communication. Polasky structures her novel through discussions of various written documents and conversations that shaped the world today. A new meaning of liberty and life was established, and Polasky clearly displays this throughout this work.

As the story begins, Polasky describes the pamphlets to be as intimidating, if not more, to those in power at the time of 1776. During this time period, England was still reigning over the American colonies, and many people began to believe in different idealisms than that of their English rule. Thomas Paine was thought to have written the first mass pamphlet appealing to all social statuses. His work, *Common Sense*, shed a new light on the ideas of liberty, which reaches a myriad of audiences outside of just the literate elite class. The purpose of *Common Sense* was to establish a writing that exemplified the need for independence from the British to even those who were illiterate. Paine’s work exceeded his expectations, and it traveled across the Atlantic with the notion that the need for freedom should be “common sense.” Because this pamphlet received ample popularity, it opened the door to new opinions and even more pamphlets like

Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty, written by Richard Price. Polasky explains how these pamphlets that began in the American colonies sparked revolution across the Atlantic to places like Geneva and The Netherlands. Without these pamphlets, the world would be insanely different from today if there was never someone to proclaim the necessity of liberty and equality.

In addition to the globally known pamphlets, Polasky discusses other means of communication that circulated the ideas of revolutionaries globally. As the eighteenth century neared the end, transatlantic travel became very attainable to people outside of just the upper class. With travel being more accessible, itinerants explored revolution to revolution in search of those with similar ideals. Revolutionary journals explained the thoughts and scenes travelers had experienced throughout their time abroad. Watson and Brissot were two notable travelers who sought out revolutions and took note of European rule. They saw themselves as unique for pursuing natural rights. “Were Europeans perhaps too the luxuries and privileges of the Old Regime to see a revolution through to the end.” (60). Polasky said this to articulate the concept that there were people in Europe that did not strive for their independence like that of Watson or Brissot. These journals were personal accounts that inspired freedom to those individuals who read them. Along with journals, Polasky depicts that the spread of progressive ideas occurred due to narratives, clubs, the press, rumors, and correspondence of friends and family. Through each document or conversation, everyone shared the common interest for the quest for liberty. Many countries sought out the ideals of the successful American revolution after hearing about it through some form of communication that spread globally.

Furthermore, Polasky delved into the feelings of numerous individuals to verify the many different ways these revolutions affected the world on a global scale. The American revolution specifically accounted for an innumerable amount of runaway slaves, searching for the freedoms

and equal rights they just heard of. “The war for American independence created the conditions for the physical exodus of slaves away from the plantations of American patriots.” (83).

Although the American patriots prayed for the equality of men, they did not intend on that equity to be for men of color. Without the American Revolution, slaves may have never sought out their own freedoms. Not to mention, political ideas became rampant within the newspapers and press all throughout. Newspapers were considered superior to pamphlets and journals because newspapers spread word of these pamphlets and journals. Polasky explains this by quoting Brissot, “According to Brissot, without the newspapers, the American Revolution, in which the French played so glorious a part, would never have been achieved.” (114). Not only did this new world order expand new political ideas, but it also altered many social aspects of life as well. These revolutions even affected the classical family structure, which created more voices for women. Ultimately, these revolutions established innovations worldwide in every imaginable aspect.

Revolutions without Borders portrays that by informing the world of new ideas, people can create their own values and opinions to completely progress in the world. Polasky created a marvelous work discussing the many documents that publicized the demand for liberty and equality. The American Revolution impacted the entire world in some way, sparking a sense of enlightenment to nations worldwide. Without these documents, revolutions may have never happened. Polasky shows how socially, politically, and economically nations changed just because a few people had some radical new ideas to share. Through pamphlets, journals, narratives, letters, clubs, the press, rumors, and correspondence, people and nations gained much more than new ideals, they gained freedom.

Works Cited

Polasky, Janet L. *Revolutions without Borders: The Call to Liberty in the Atlantic World*.

Yale University Press, 2016.