

Unit 7 – Topic 7.1: Shifting Power After 1900

Standards Table

Theme	Learning Objective	Key Concept(s)	Historical Thinking Skill(s)	Standards Alignment
Governance (GOV)	Explain how internal and external factors contributed to change in various states after 1900	KC-6.2.I, KC-6.2.I.A, KC-6.2.II.D	Causation, CCOT, Comparison	AP World History: Modern Framework

Learning Objectives

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Identify key internal and external factors that led to the collapse of major empires after 1900
- Explain how revolutions and political movements reshaped states in the early 20th century
- Analyze how different societies responded to political crises using evidence from documents
- Evaluate how shifts in global power altered governance and state structures

Lesson Overview

At the beginning of the 20th century, global power was largely dominated by Western empires. However, internal instability and external pressures led to the collapse of major land-based empires such as the Ottoman, Russian, and Qing. These collapses did not occur in isolation; they were shaped by economic strain, military defeat, nationalist movements, and foreign intervention. At the same time, revolutions such as the Mexican Revolution challenged political and social hierarchies, leading to new forms of governance.

In this lesson, students will analyze historical documents similar to those found on the AP exam. These documents will help students understand how different perspectives explain political change. By practicing sourcing, identifying claims, and connecting documents to broader historical developments, students will strengthen their ability to construct arguments for a DBQ.

Essential Vocabulary

- **Nationalism** – A political ideology that emphasizes loyalty and devotion to a nation, often leading to demands for independence or self-rule.
- **Revolution** – A rapid and significant change in political power or organization, often involving mass participation and conflict.
- **Imperial Decline** – The weakening and eventual collapse of an empire due to internal instability or external pressures.
- **Political Reform** – Changes made to improve or restructure a government without completely overthrowing it.
- **Sovereignty** – The authority of a state to govern itself without outside interference.

Background Reading

At the start of the 20th century, large empires such as the Ottoman, Russian, and Qing still controlled vast territories. However, these empires faced increasing internal challenges. Economic difficulties, corruption, and inefficient governance weakened their ability to maintain control. In the Ottoman Empire, nationalist movements among ethnic groups such as Arabs and Armenians challenged imperial authority. Similarly, in Qing China, internal rebellions and dissatisfaction with foreign influence created instability.

External pressures also played a critical role in weakening these empires. Military defeats, particularly during World War I, accelerated imperial collapse. The Ottoman Empire lost significant territory and ultimately dissolved after the war. Russia's involvement in World War I led to economic hardship and military failure, which contributed to the Russian Revolution of 1917. In China, foreign imperialism and unequal treaties undermined Qing authority and contributed to its fall in 1911.

These collapses led to new forms of governance. In Russia, the Bolsheviks established a communist state, dramatically altering political and economic systems. In the former Ottoman territories, new nation-states emerged, often under European influence. In China, the fall of the Qing dynasty led to a period of fragmentation and eventual civil war. These transformations illustrate how both internal dissatisfaction and external conflict can reshape political systems.

At the same time, revolutions outside collapsing empires also demonstrated shifting power structures. The Mexican Revolution (1910–1920) arose from dissatisfaction with dictatorship, land inequality, and foreign economic influence. Revolutionary leaders such as Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa pushed for land reform and social justice. The resulting changes led to a new constitution in 1917, reflecting demands for greater equity and national control over resources.

DBQ Documents Analysis Section

Document 1

- Type of Source: Political Speech
- Author: Vladimir Lenin
- Date: 1917

Excerpt:

The old regime has brought Russia to ruin through its failures in war and its disregard for the suffering of the working class. The people demand bread, peace, and land, yet the government continues to serve the interests of the wealthy and the aristocracy. Only through revolution can true power be placed in the hands of workers and peasants. The continuation of war benefits only imperialist powers, while the common people bear its burdens. A new system must arise that represents the will of the masses rather than the privilege of a few.

Historical Situation: Russia is experiencing political instability during World War I, leading to revolution.

Perspective / Limitation: Lenin represents a revolutionary socialist perspective and seeks to justify overthrowing the existing government.

Use in Argument: Shows how internal dissatisfaction and war contributed to revolutionary change.

Questions:

1. How does Lenin's point of view influence his argument about the government?
2. What claim does Lenin make about the causes of Russia's problems?
3. How does this document illustrate causation in the Russian Revolution?

Document 2

- Type of Source: Government Report
- Author: Ottoman Official
- Date: 1918

Excerpt:

The empire faces increasing difficulty maintaining control over its territories. Nationalist movements have grown stronger, encouraged by foreign powers seeking to divide our lands. Military losses have weakened our authority, and economic hardship has reduced our capacity to respond. The unity of the empire is threatened not only by external enemies but also by internal divisions among its diverse populations.

Historical Situation: The Ottoman Empire is collapsing at the end of World War I.

Perspective / Limitation: Reflects the perspective of imperial leadership attempting to preserve authority.

Use in Argument: Demonstrates both internal and external causes of imperial decline.

Questions:

1. What concerns does the author express about the empire's stability?
2. What evidence is given for the causes of decline?
3. How does this document show the role of external factors in state collapse?

Document 3

- Type of Source: Revolutionary Manifesto
- Author: Emiliano Zapata
- Date: 1911

Excerpt:

The land belongs to those who work it, yet it has been taken by a small number of wealthy landowners who exploit the labor of peasants. The government has failed to protect the rights of the people and instead supports those who profit from injustice. We call for the return of land to rural communities and the establishment of a system that ensures fairness and dignity for all citizens.

Historical Situation: The Mexican Revolution challenges inequality and dictatorship.

Perspective / Limitation: Represents peasant interests and may overlook complexities of governance.

Use in Argument: Highlights social inequality as a cause of revolution.

Questions:

1. What is Zapata's main argument about land ownership?
2. What evidence does he provide about inequality?
3. How does this document illustrate causes of the Mexican Revolution?

Document 4

- Type of Source: Newspaper Article
- Author: Chinese Reformist Writer
- Date: 1912

Excerpt:

The fall of the Qing dynasty marks the end of centuries of imperial rule. Foreign influence and internal corruption weakened the state, leaving it unable to respond to the needs of the people. Reform efforts came too late, and revolution became inevitable. The future of China now depends on whether new leadership can unify the country and resist further foreign domination.

Historical Situation: The Qing dynasty has recently collapsed.

Perspective / Limitation: Reflects reformist viewpoint critical of imperial rule.

Use in Argument: Shows internal weakness and foreign pressure as causes of collapse.

Questions:

1. What reasons does the author give for the fall of the Qing dynasty?
2. How does the author view foreign influence?
3. How does this document demonstrate continuity or change in Chinese governance?

Document 5

- Type of Source: Personal Letter
- Author: Russian Soldier
- Date: 1917

Excerpt:

We are tired of fighting a war that brings us no benefit. Supplies are scarce, and morale is low. Many soldiers question why we continue to suffer while those in power remain distant from our struggles. There is growing talk among the troops that change is necessary, even if it means defying authority.

Historical Situation: World War I contributes to unrest in Russia.

Perspective / Limitation: Reflects the experiences of common soldiers.

Use in Argument: Provides non-elite perspective on causes of revolution.

Questions:

1. How does the soldier's perspective differ from government leaders?
2. What evidence shows dissatisfaction among soldiers?
3. How does this document support the idea of internal causes of revolution?

Document 6

- Type of Source: Diplomatic Statement
- Author: European Leader
- Date: 1919

Excerpt:

The reorganization of former imperial territories presents an opportunity to establish stable and self-governing states. However, these regions must be guided toward political systems that ensure order and align with broader international interests. The transition from empire to nation-state must be carefully managed to prevent further conflict.

Historical Situation: Post–World War I restructuring of empires.

Perspective / Limitation: Reflects imperialist perspective prioritizing stability and influence.

Use in Argument: Shows external influence on state formation.

Questions:

1. What is the author’s purpose in this statement?
2. How does the author justify foreign involvement?
3. How does this document illustrate external factors shaping new states?

Document 7

- Type of Source: Political Essay
- Author: Chinese Nationalist
- Date: 1920

Excerpt:

China must reclaim its sovereignty from foreign powers and internal division. The people have suffered under both imperial rule and foreign domination. A strong national government is necessary to unify the country and restore its independence. Without unity, China will remain vulnerable to exploitation.

Historical Situation: China faces fragmentation after Qing collapse.

Perspective / Limitation: Nationalist viewpoint emphasizing unity.

Use in Argument: Demonstrates nationalism as a response to imperial decline.

Questions:

1. What is the author’s main goal for China?
2. What challenges does the author identify?
3. How does this document reflect the role of nationalism in state-building?

Causes of Political Change

Internal Factors	External Factors
Economic hardship	War (WWI)
Corruption	Foreign intervention
Social inequality	Imperial competition

Document Grouping

Group	Documents
Internal Causes	1, 3, 5

External Factors	2, 6
Nationalism Responses	4, 7

Historical Reasoning Section

Change Over Time

Political systems shifted dramatically after 1900 as empires collapsed and new governments emerged. Russia transitioned from monarchy to communism, while China moved from imperial rule to fragmentation and later nationalism. These changes were driven by both internal dissatisfaction and external pressures. Over time, governance structures became more ideologically diverse. Students can use this change to argue that the early 20th century marked a major turning point in global governance.

Continuity Over Time

Despite these changes, many challenges persisted. Governments continued to struggle with maintaining control over diverse populations. External influence remained significant, especially in newly formed states. Economic inequality also continued to drive unrest. Students can argue that while regimes changed, underlying tensions often remained.

Comparison

Different regions experienced political change in distinct ways. Russia underwent a radical ideological transformation, while China experienced prolonged instability. Mexico's revolution focused more on social and economic reform. Comparing these cases allows students to argue that while causes were similar, outcomes varied depending on local conditions.

Key Takeaways

- Internal and external pressures both contributed to the collapse of major empires.
- World War I played a critical role in accelerating political change.
- Revolutions often emerged from inequality and dissatisfaction with leadership.
- Nationalism was a powerful force in both destroying empires and building new states.
- Different regions experienced political change in unique but comparable ways.

DBQ Practice Section

Prompt:

Evaluate the extent to which internal and external factors contributed to political change in states after 1900.

Task Instructions:

- Develop a clear thesis
- Use at least 4 documents
- Include outside evidence
- Explain sourcing for at least 2 documents

Documents:

Use Documents 1–7 above.