

Riots, Revolts, and Rebellion

01:506:299 History Workshop
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What is history? How do historians use and interpret sources to analyze the thoughts and behaviors of people who lived in the past? How do historians construct narratives to convey the complexity of lives and experiences that often happened in times and places far removed from their own lives? These are some of the broad questions you will explore in History Workshop as we roll up our sleeves and learn how to use primary and secondary sources to explore the past.

To focus our exploration of these broad questions, we will examine a topic that has long fascinated historian: why do groups of people at particular times and places riot and revolt? What are the long term causes and proximate triggers that lead groups of individuals to defy authority and the status quo?

Answering these questions will require us to hone our skills as investigators who collect sources and to strengthen our skills as interpreters who create models to explain the complex motivations of individuals and groups. Fortunately, many riots, revolts, and rebellions produce precisely the kinds of paper trails that historians find most useful -- police records, eyewitness accounts, newspaper accounts, governmental commission reports, visual depictions, and autobiographical recollections.

Interpreting the meaning of revolts will also require us to engage deeply with how historians have created models – drawing on insights from the fields of anthropology, sociology, and political and economic theory – to explore the question of why people revolt. Studying riots, revolts, and rebellions also challenges us to interrogate how historians use fundamental categories such as class, gender, sexuality, and race to explain the past.

Our case studies will range from religious riots in 16th century Europe, to workers revolts in the 18th century, to riots over culture in 19th-century America, to prison riots in 20th century America. Possible riots will include the Boston Massacre of 1770, the storming of the Bastille in 1789, the Astor Place riot of 1849, the Stonewall riots of 1969, the Attica prison riot in 1971, and perhaps the Delafest riot of 2013. We'll end the course with a project on a series of riots close to home, focusing on urban unrest in New Brunswick and on the Rutgers University Campus.

Note: History Workshop (506:299) is a required course for the History major. The History department recommends that students take this course between the spring of one's first year in college and the end of one's sophomore year. Transfer students should ideally take this course the first semester they attend Rutgers.