

The 1848 Revolutions

‘The Springtime of the Peoples’

Timeline of key events

1848

January: Revolt in Palermo, Sicily
February: Abdication of Louis Philippe and proclamation of the Second Republic in France
March: Introduction of universal manhood suffrage and the 'right to work' in France
resignation of Metternich. Violence in Berlin (see image opposite) War between
Piedmont and Austria.
May: First meeting of the Frankfurt Parliament
June: Meeting of Pan-Slav Congress in Prague. Cavaignac suppresses insurrection in Paris.
Austrian general Windischgratz bombards and captures Prague
July: Radetzky defeats Piedmontese at Custoza. Meeting of Constituent Assembly in Vienna
October: Windischgratz occupies Vienna
November: Pope Pius IX abandons Rome
December: Louis Napoleon is elected President of the French Republic

1849

February: Establishment of the Roman Republic by Mazzini and Garibaldi
March: Dissolution of the Austrian Constituent Assembly. Defeat of Piedmontese at Novara
April: Friedrich Wilhelm IV refuses the offer of the German Crown
July: Suppression of the Roman Republic by French troops
August: Hungarian rebels surrender to Austrian and Russian troops.

In brief

The European Revolutions of 1848, known as the ‘Springtime of the Peoples’ were a series of political upheavals throughout the European continent. The revolutions started in Palermo, but the real spark was in France. From there, as news spread, revolutions broke out in other parts of Italy, Prussia, Austria and the German Confederation. However, internal divisions based on nationalism and on a radical/liberal split soon weakened the revolutionaries. By 1852 conservatives had taken advantage of the weaknesses and regained power. In France, Napoleon Bonaparte’s nephew, Louis Napoleon took power in a coup d’etat. While the immediate political effects of the revolutions were largely reversed, the long-term reverberations of the events were far-reaching.

Causes

The political causes had a long history which we have already explored. A conservative ruling class resisted liberal political reform and clung tight to the ancient traditions of absolute monarchy and landowner/church/feudal power. Another dimension was provided by the rise in nationalism amongst educated Europeans wishing for independence from imperial control. But the timing of the revolutions is to be found in socio-economic causes.

An agricultural crisis brought about by failures in the potato and wheat crops (the ‘potato blight’ originated in Belgium) generated hunger and high bread prices throughout Europe. An industrial crisis resulted in a fall in industrial production and a rise in unemployment (the reversal of the ‘cycle of prosperity’). There were also outbreaks of Luddism, particularly in Germany as skilled guild workers destroyed the new industrial machinery.



France – King Louis Philippe was very unpopular by early 1848. When he attempted to outlaw all forms of criticism of his government, the people rebelled. On February 23, Fifty two people were killed in anti-government protest. Paris was soon a barricaded city; angry citizens again began converging on the royal palace. King Louis Philippe fled to England. On February 26, 1848, the liberal opposition came together to organize a provisional government, called the Second Republic. Universal male suffrage was enacted on March 2, giving France nine million new voters. Help for the unemployed was achieved through National Workshops, which guaranteed French citizens' ‘right to work’. But the revolution saw a major split between the Parisian workers and the peasants from rural areas. The elections in April resulted in significant conservative gains (the peasants were conservative) and government began to reverse the social reforms. On June 21, 1848, the National Workshops were closed provoking a second revolution – ‘June Days Uprising’ - by the working people of Paris. This time the liberal middle classes sided with the authorities who promised order and the rebellion was crushed with the loss of 1500 lives. The shift to the right was completed when, in December 1848, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte was elected president. Two years later in a coup d’état he became Napoleon III of the Second French Empire.

Italian States - As we have seen in Italy, the Napoleonic Era awakened liberalism and nationalism on the Italian peninsula. Many Italians longed for an Italy unified under a republican constitution. This movement, or the *Risorgimento* (resurgence), was led by Giuseppe Mazzini. Inspired by the lack of national unity in the 1830 revolutions, Mazzini started Young Italy, a patriotic society that campaigned for the unification of Italy.

In 1848, revolts broke out in several Italian states and patriotic Italians staged a 'tobacco strike' to prevent the tax revenue going to Austria. These revolts forced Italian leaders to establish liberal constitutions. In Piedmont, King Charles Albert was one who voluntarily granted a new constitution to his people. In March, Austrian troops were forced out of Milan and Venice. Charles tried to drive the Austrians out of north Italy, but was defeated at Custoza in 1848 and Novara in 1849 and abdicated. Revolutions elsewhere were suppressed, including one in Rome, where Mazzini had formed a short-lived republic.

German States - The wave of revolt also swept across the states of the German Confederation. In the spring of 1848, riots broke out as German people sought liberal constitutions. Even the Prussian king, Frederick Wilhelm IV, was forced to agree to a democratic constitution and to support a move to unify the German states. The Frankfurt Parliament was established to draw up a constitution for the unification but members of the Assembly began to argue over which territory to include in the new Germany. Denmark lay claim to territories on its border and Czech leader Frantisek Palacky organized a Pan-Slav Congress in the city of Prague calling for Bohemia and Moravia to be part of a new Czech state within Austria. This dispute forced the Frankfurt Parliament into a compromise and a constitution that would accept Frederick Wilhelm IV to be the head of this new government. However, Frederick Wilhelm refused to take this position, delivering the famous line, 'I do not accept a crown from the gutter!', and had, by this time, gained control of the Prussian army once again and soon brought the demise of the Frankfurt Parliament.



(left) Prague barricades in 1848

Austrian Empire – The Hapsburg Empire was deeply affected by the events of 1848 and was already by this time an empire in decline. The rise in nationalism was particularly threatening to the multi-national empire which included Hungarians, Slovenes, Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Ukrainians/Ruthenians, Romanians, Serbs, Italians, and Croats. Again inspired by events in France, Viennese liberals, students and workers joined together in street demonstrations. The Emperor reacted by sacking Metternich and promising constitutional reform. Across the empire, but especially in Budapest and Prague, nationalist demands for official language recognition combined with liberal demands for equality before the law and free press. However, the tide soon turned when differences among the revolutionaries gave the reactionary forces an opportunity to suppress the revolution. In the summer of 1848 Austrian troops retook Prague and then Vienna. In December 1848 Francis Joseph succeeded Ferdinand I as the emperor of Austria and, using 140,000 Russian soldiers, forced the Hungarian revolutionaries to surrender their independence in August 1849.

Consequences and analysis

Within a year it was becoming clear that the liberal and radical movements of 1848 had brought about relatively little lasting change. In part, this was due to the incoherence of the 'revolutionary' groups. The political interests of middle-class liberals rarely coincided with the more fundamental, material requirements of unemployed workers. The revolutions of 1848 failed notably because three kinds of demands—social and economic, liberal, and national—were not easily reconciled. This is illustrated in France by the Socialists Blanc and Albert on the one side, and the Liberal Republicans Marie and Arago on the other. Middle-class moderates like Lamartine gained control of the revolutionary movements and resisted the more radical demands of the lower classes, thus losing much of the popular support that was essential to their success. In addition, it had often been possible for liberals in one state to establish common ground with those in neighbouring states in terms of their constitutional demands. Yet, in 1848, as was seen in Prague, this community of political interests was often cancelled out by conflicts between the nationalist demands that often accompanied progressive constitutional ideas. The most important element of all in the failure of the revolutions lay in the enduring strength of the governmental systems that they appeared to

The revolutions did leave behind certain achievements. Prussia and Piedmont retained constitutions that their rulers could not easily ignore. Feudal obligations were abolished in parts of eastern Europe, never to return. It is tempting to conclude, however, that the main beneficiaries of the 1848 revolutions were, in fact, the governing conservatives. After many years of living in fear of liberal revolt, they had now confronted it and survived. It is just possible, however, that the confidence of the conservatives was misplaced in the long term. There can be little doubt that the events of 1848-49 brought profound disappointment for liberals and nationalists across Europe, yet their causes did not perish. Within 20 years, the ambitions of moderate nationalists in Italy and Germany had been realised. Conservative leaders - forced to adopt and to adapt the programmes of groups whose ideologies were too popular, and who had too great an economic impetus behind them to be resisted - had unified both states. But perhaps the most important consequence was in the development of working class socialism. The lesson of 1848 was that they could not rely on middle class liberals. If socialists wanted a new world, they would have to build it themselves.



(above) International Working Men's Association 1864

Activity

1. Fill in the information boxes on the map of Europe entitled 'The 1848 Revolutions 'The Springtime of the Peoples'. For each of the countries include information about how and why the revolution started and how the revolution was defeated.
2. Explain in general terms why the revolutions were defeated.
3. Explain the view that although the 1848 revolutions brought 'profound disappointment' to revolutionaries, they also brought very real achievements.