

# The 1848 revolutions in europe

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



The fall of Napoleon marked the beginning of a new era for Europe. The people had witnessed 25 years of warfare. Old boundaries had been eliminated or altered. New political and social systems had arisen. New ideas and opinions had spread throughout Europe. The history of Europe after 1815 is therefore characterised by a struggle between revolutionary and reactionary forces. The struggle would, however, not be conducted merely in the political arena. A new economic factor was evolving in European life, namely the Industrial Revolution. Europe would therefore move in new directions, unheard of only a century earlier.

### **European Society in 1815**

Despite their widespread acceptance amongst certain sectors of the European population, the ideals of the French Revolution and the political settlements dictated on greater Europe by Napoleon Bonaparte could not entirely eradicate the institutions of the Old Order. The monarchies were far more deeply rooted for that. Indeed, after Napoleon's final defeat, the people of Europe were weary of warfare and tended to look upon the monarchy as a symbol of unity and peace. The reactionary monarchies tended, therefore, to retain the support of the Church, the nobility and the great land-owners.

In France the Revolution had attacked the Church quite as much as it had done the royal houses and the nobility. The fall of Napoleon tended, therefore, to be regarded as a victory for the Catholic Church. Because the Church was one of the more powerful forces in restraining the powers of the Revolution, it was natural that every effort would be made after 1815 to

restore the Church to its traditional position. The Church therefore became a rallying point for reaction and the forces of continuity.

In 1815 Europe generally was merely on the verge of the Industrial Revolution. Land therefore remained the chief source of wealth. As a result, landowners continued to be one of the paramount figures in determining social status and political power. On the other hand, because of the nationalisation of land belonging to both Church and aristocracy, a new landowning class had come into existence. This was particularly so in France. In essence, however, although differing considerably from the older order of landowner, the new class modelled itself on the old and remained extremely conservative.

The widespread longing for peace created the atmosphere in which reactionary governments were able to introduce repressive measures against the revolutionary forces. Britain, for instance, (arguably the most liberal of states) brought in measures suspending individual rights and freedoms, prohibiting public gatherings and introducing press censorship. Similar proclamations were issued in France and Germany in 1819. Suppression by military force, use of secret police, control of universities and press censorship became the order of the day throughout Europe.

The process of urbanisation had already long started in Europe. With the sudden evolution of the Industrial Age, however, a new industrial proletariat was suddenly created, totally different to the conservative agricultural community. These were people who had an axe to grind because often they had been rendered unemployed by that very revolution. They would

therefore be ready followers of any radical political philosopher which promised them better conditions. There was also the new and steadily growing class of industrial bourgeoisie who were using their wealth and power to press for the abolition of obsolete laws and demanding greater political recognition.

## **The New Political Philosophies**

New political philosophies were taking root during this period: Liberalism, Democracy, Socialism, Communism, Nationalism.

One must also be careful not to confuse the liberalism of 1815 with democracy. Liberalism was the political system advocated by the wealthy financiers, merchants and industrialists who formed the backbone of the bourgeoisie. The movement aimed at breaking the political monopoly of the landed nobility.

Liberal thinkers urged that birth was not the criterion of political power. Power had rather to depend on land-ownership, intelligence and education. The liberals were certainly not in favour of universal franchise. They did, however, believe in a free economy (*laissez faire*). To achieve this, they advocated limiting the activities of the state, especially in the economic field.

Democrats, on the other hand, believed that political equality was a basic principle. Universal franchise was the basis for this political equality. The democrats therefore tended to be the political rallying ground of the lower classes, especially the *petit bourgeoisie*. As such they were feared by conservatives and liberals alike.

Socialism at the beginning of the 19th century derived its inspiration from Rousseau and the ideals of the French Revolution. While the liberals stressed liberty and the democrats equality, the socialists stressed fraternity. As a result, socialists tended to be regarded as anti-national in character.

The socialists were mainly interested in problems of poverty and social inequality which they blamed on the capitalist system of private ownership and production. Since socialism aimed at overthrowing the existing order, it threatened the liberals, the democrats and the conservatives.

The nationalism of 1815 must not be confused with the nationalism of the 20th and 21st century. First, it was less militant than modern nationalism. It tended to focus on loyalty to the king rather than on loyalty to the state. It was also more cultural than political.

Nevertheless, the Napoleonic Wars had given nationalism a new turn. The French armies had been national rather than mercenary. Napoleon had therefore given his people the desire for national prestige. His conquests in Europe, on the other hand, fostered a national desire amongst the conquered nations to resist. Nationalism, rather than any other political philosophy, would in fact become one of the greatest threats to the European state system after 1815.

## **Why were there so many Revolutions in 1848?**

### **Introduction**

The revolutions of 1848 were the most widespread in the history of Europe. They directly affected France, Germany, Prussia, the Austrian Empire (F-G A P), various Italian states, Moldavia and Wallacia.

They also indirectly affected Switzerland, Denmark, England, Spain and Belgium.

Of all the European states, only Russia was unaffected.

Two aspects draw our attention.

First, the immediate course of the revolutions where the drawing up of democratic constitutions was the order of the day.

Second, the fact that by 1850 all the revolutions had collapsed into nothing and hard-nosed reaction appeared to triumph. To understand both these aspects, one needs to understand the forces underlying both the revolutions and militating against them.

### **Conditions Underlying the Revolutions**

The conditions which triggered the 1830 uprising were still there in 1848 but were more widespread. Liberalism and nationalism were growing apace. Yet two new forces were fermenting just then, namely socialism and communism. Each of these forces, when harnessed and working with the others, would serve to drive the old order into retreat. But, if and when they

pulled against each other, the old order could come back with full force and in alliance with one or other of these very forces to suppress the rest.

The Radicals (from the Latin radix meaning root) desired to cut things “ to the root”. They desired a complete reconstruction of the laws, law-courts, prisons, poor relief, municipal organisation and state constitution. On the continent the majority of the radicals were republicans who were generally drawn from the class of intelligentsia such as students, writers, university professors and lawyers.

On the fringe were the socialists who saw the existing economic system as “ aimless, chaotic and unjust” because too much economic power was in the hands of the capitalists. They generally believed in the right to be employed and wanted the nationalisation of essential institutions like banks, factories, the land and transportation.

On the far fringe were the communists. These were a group of Germans who coined the name “ communism” for their movement during the 1840s. The name was then adopted in 1848 by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to differentiate their beliefs from general socialism. A glance at the society of the day would indicate that there were factions within it, each wanting its own particular goal. Each would initially enter into alliance with the other to gain a concerted drive towards its objective. But, when it was seen that the other was either going too far or not far enough, then the alliances would break and new alliances would be forged.

At the top end of the political/class structure was the government itself which was distrustful of any movement which might seek to destabilise Europe and bring about the chaos of 1789. Below the government were the aristocrats and landed gentry who were also essentially conservative (reactionary). They feared the philosophy of the masses because it could mean that they would lose everything as the result of a successful revolution.

Then there were the wealthy merchants and industrialists (bourgeoisie). They were intent on a transfer of power from the aristocracy to themselves. Their desire was for a constitutional monarchy which would favour them in some form of a qualified franchise.

Below the bourgeoisie were the petit bourgeoisie. Most vociferous here were the lawyers who desired greater equality before the law which would benefit their own businesses. They therefore formed the backbone of the democratic movement. The poorer bourgeoisie were generally democratic, wanting the franchise to be extended at least as far as themselves as a guarantee of liberty and equality.

The academics at the universities, especially those in Germany, also desired constitutional reforms to bring about equality and justice for all. It had to be done, however, in an orderly and civilized fashion and not in such chaos as had happened in France in 1789. The university students (revolting at the best of times!) they owned nothing and had little to lose by revolution, they tended to favour forms of socialism.



The urban artisans were at the forefront of the economic suffering. It was they who stood to lose most by the industrial revolution. They were therefore the most radical group in the revolutionary climate, producing most of the socialists and communists.

The proletariat had little to lose but much to gain from socialist revolts. They had little loyalty or sympathy either for the aristocracy or the monarchy. It was from this group that the convinced republicans would emanate.

The country peasants, on the other hand, desired little more than freedom of movement and freedom from serfdom. They were essentially conservative, deeply religious (superstitious), loyal to their aristocratic overlords and fearful of revolutionary excesses.

At the bottom of the pile were the growing numbers of poor and unemployed. They had little to lose by revolution but everything to gain. They would therefore rally behind any leader who promised them security of employment.

The religious pull was always very strong. Although many of the lawyers, university students and proletariat claimed that religion was merely the opiate of the masses, most of the population were still bound by the dictates of the Church. The Church in turn preached order, submission to authority and an afterlife where true freedom would be attained. Although the masses might temporarily be caught up in anti-religious hysteria and rioting, their loyalty to the "cause" could not be sustained.

Economic conditions were critical. With the absence of trade-unionism, most workers were prepared to accept their lot in life as long as the economic climate was favourable. An economic depression, on the other hand, produced escalating unemployment and job insecurity.

## **Economic Conditions**

The period from 1815 to 1848 was marked by significant economic fluctuations. Initially (1815-1818) there was a post-Napoleonic War depression in which the economies of all countries except France went into recession. The early 1820s saw an upswing in economic fortunes but another recession accompanied the 1830 revolutions.

Although the 1830s were generally prosperous years, a major recession descended on Europe during the 1840s. The industrialisation was making significant inroads into the European states, especially France and Germany. It was accompanied, however, with gross exploitation and increasing unemployment.

Urbanisation was therefore on the increase and the cities became centres for the unemployed masses. Poverty led to destitution, with an accompanying increase in the crime-rate. The ruling classes and the elite bourgeoisie appeared indifferent to the plight of the people. Any political philosophy which promised change would therefore be supported by the masses.

The recession of the 1840s was also accompanied by a major crop failure. The potato crop throughout Europe was destroyed by blight in 1845. This was followed by a bad harvest of cereals, leading to inflated prices and a

drop in spending power. Conditions became progressively worse in 1846 and 1847. It is estimated that about one-fifth of the population of Paris was unemployed in February 1848 when the revolution occurred. Circumstances in Germany were similar.

There was also general disillusionment over the political conditions throughout Europe. The defeat of Napoleon in 1815 had been heralded as the triumph of reason and stability. The governments which were thereupon installed promised constitutions to their people but by the 1840s the constitutions were either not forthcoming or the rulers had regressed into new forms of oppression.

A person born in 1815 would be over 30 years of age by 1848 which meant that the young people knew nothing of the hardships of the Revolutionary Wars and the Napoleonic campaigns. On the contrary, the stories had now become legends of a glorious and romantic past, in contrast to which the contemporary rulers were not only oppressive but “ boring” as well.

Pupils of year 9 are requested to please be prepared for the History test based on these notes (pages 1 – 6 only) and explanations in the class. The test will be held on Monday 27th July, 2009.

## **Why did the Revolutions of 1848 fail?**

### **Revolutionary Outbreak**

When the revolutions did break out in 1848, however, they were entirely spontaneous with no organisation whatever. The revolt in Paris erupted by the banning of the “ Reform Banquet”. Revolts then spread rapidly the

length and breadth of Europe: 22 February in Paris, 12 March in Vienna, 17 March in Berlin, thereafter in Rome, Venice and Milan that same month. There was no unity of purpose or in planning.

The very rapidity appeared to take the governments by surprise. The fact that the revolts were so sudden and so widespread meant that the governments were caught napping. They lacked policy rather than the power to suppress them. In all cases, the armies remained intact but were not initially used simply because the governments needed time to review the situation.

### **Tensions between Protagonists**

This very lack of planning and unity of purpose would also serve to tear the revolutions apart. The wealthier bourgeoisie wished to see an end to state interference in the economy so that a policy of laissez faire could operate. The socialists, on the other hand, wanted to see a new constitution which would allow more state interference in the economy so as to bring about an equal distribution of wealth and opportunities. The small communist element wanted to see the end of the state altogether and the introduction of the dictatorship of the proletariat so as to prevent both the aristocrats and the bourgeoisie from ever being able to seize power again.

Each of these three groups feared the other. The bourgeoisie desire social order as the pre-requisite for economic growth but saw the socialists and communists as destroyers of that social order. The socialists wanted a new social order that would destroy capitalist monopolies but believed that the new order could be brought about through reform of the existing state. The

communists believed that the existing state could not be reformed at all but could only be overthrown.

Added to this were the disagreements over the question of the nationalities. A feature of Europe of the 1840s was the lack of national states.

The Habsburg Empire consisted of Germans, Magyars, Czechs, Slavs, Italians and other assorted peoples.

Prussia consisted of Germans, Poles and Slavs.

Italy was a miscellany of small states with no cohesion.

Nationalists within these states wanted not only new constitutions but also the creation of national states. If they were to have their own way, the existing states of Europe would be carved up.

Italy, for example, could only be united into a nation state if Lombardy and Venetia were taken from Austria.

Hungary could only become a nation state if the Habsburg Empire was destroyed.

The Poles could have had a national state only if both Prussia and Russia were destroyed.

Germany could become a nation state only through the destruction of the Habsburg (Austrian) Empire and the incorporation of parts of Prussia.

At the same time, those very nationalists could not agree with one another. Magyar nationalists wanted a Magyar state of Hungary which would incorporate the other minority groups and thereby suppress their nationalist ideals. German nationalists wanted the incorporation of the whole of Prussia which would deny national rights to the Poles. Communist groups, on the other hand, had no desire for any nation states at all but believed that the proletariat of all nations must be united. They were therefore advocating the creation of a stateless society.

The disunity of objectives then allowed the armies, which had not been overthrown, to intervene and suppress the revolutions.

The Habsburg Empire, first to respond, used nationalistic squabbles as the pretext to suppress the entire movement.

The Prussian King then gained courage and used the insurmountable political confrontations to pull the rug from under the revolutionaries' feet.

In Italy there was no agreement as to whether the new national state would be formed under the Pope, under the King of Sardinia or would be a simple republic. In the end the nation state wasn't formed at all.

In France the revolt was essentially a Parisian affair, dominated by the socialists. Discord in the ranks of the revolutionaries, however, allowed Louis Napoleon to seize control and impose yet another dictatorship and empire.

## **The New Philosophies**

The 1848 revolutions, though so wide-spread, had little of lasting value to show. Only a handful of countries gained constitutions. France had adopted universal franchise but it was not a lasting democracy because Louis Napoleon quickly established a popular dictatorship. In Prussia, Germany, Austria and Italy the pre-1848 conditions were soon restored.

For Germany particularly this was a tragedy. It meant that a future German Empire would be created not on the foundations of liberalism and democracy but on Prussian militarism. Prussia would soon embark upon major expansion, using her military might to defeat both Austria and France. That in turn would set imperialism in motion which would ultimately end in the Great War (1914-1918), the 2nd World War (1939-1945) and finally the Cold War (1945-1990).

As in France in 1789, the real winners in 1848 were the peasants. They were emancipated in most countries except Russia and would maintain their liberty even after the collapse on the revolts. Yet the peasants were essentially conservative and, having gained freedom, would become another element in the support of the reactionary governments.

The failure of the revolutions led to the evolution of new attitudes throughout Europe. Romanticism, the backbone of revolutionary idealism, had failed and was now discredited. After more than half a century of struggle, the ideals of liberalism and nationalism seemed to be no closer than before. The governments felt more secure and could afford to be reactionary. The economic depression of the 1840s eased (it was ironically already easing in

1848 when the first revolts took place) and ushered in a period of relative prosperity.

## **Realism**

A new philosophy therefore came to dominate Europe which based itself on realism rather than romanticism. The Age of Realism had therefore been born. It was similar to the Age of the Enlightenment but encompassed a far greater spread of the population.

The emphasis in Realism was on science, not only for understanding nature, as in the Age of the Enlightenment, but to understand humankind itself. It therefore gave rise to two new sciences: psychology and sociology. Religion also came under renewed attack because of its unscientific nature. Indeed, the radicals went as far as to claim that religion was the invention of the aristocrats and bourgeoisie for the sole purpose of keeping the proletariat subservient. Religion, Karl Marx would say, was simply the “ opiate of the masses”.

Politically, the failed revolutions ushered in the “ politics of realism”, known generally by its German term *realpolitik*. For the people, this meant giving up utopian dreams and relying on the hard work of honest governments. For the governments it meant giving up ideologies and working pragmatically for the best interests of the state, without scruples and without “ natural alliances”. War now became a natural means to gain objectives. War was neither glorious nor romantic. It was not an end in itself but it was certainly a useful tool in the hands of the statesman. (The Prussian statesman, Otto von Bismarck, was a convinced advocate of *realpolitik*, as is seen in his policies.)



## **Rise of Communism**

Another philosophy also began to grow as a result of the failed 1848 Revolutions. It became known as Marxism. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels both worked in England but became caught up in the radical Communist League in 1844. During the revolutions in Germany the Communist League became a vociferous voice working for radical ideals.

It was for this group that Marx and Engels wrote their Communist Manifesto (published in January 1848) as a guiding document for their future action. But there was still no philosophy of Marxism which would only become a major force in the 1870s after the publication of *Das Kapital* in 1867.

The foundation of Marxist ideology was the French Revolution of 1789 which Karl Marx believed (a) had been successful and (b) had been a revolution of the bourgeoisie. He believed therefore that, if the bourgeoisie could attain success in a revolution, then the proletariat could do the same.

Marx also believed that the French Revolution had left unfulfilled promises. It had promised liberty, equality and fraternity for the masses. It had, however, only provided these for the bourgeoisie. The proletariat had therefore been left in a condition of exploitation.

Marx saw in the failed 1848 revolutions a major source of concern. First, the revolutionaries had worked with no real objective. Second, much of the concern had been over the creation of national states. Both Marx and Engels believed therefore that the great "revolution of the proletariat" had to be systematically worked for, with clear guidelines of action. Nationalism could

have no place in this revolution. Instead, all workers in all countries had to be united in the common goal of overthrowing the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. Hence their battle-cry: " Workingmen of all countries, unite!"

All things are in a state of movement and evolution. All change comes through a clash of antagonistic elements. Every event therefore happens in a sequence and never due to accident. History cannot therefore happen in any way different from the way it has happened.

Ideas, claimed Marx, could not change society but ideas stemmed from altering material conditions. These economic conditions determine such things as religion, law, government philosophy, etc.

According to Marxist philosophy, therefore, historical development evolved in the following pattern. Material conditions gave rise to economic classes. Agrarian conditions gave rise to feudalism and mercantilist conditions gave rise to capitalism. Each class then develops an ideology suited to its needs.

Class conflict is then inevitable and happened in France in 1789. But, as the bourgeoisie developed as a class, the antithesis became inevitable: the development of an antagonistic proletariat. The more a country becomes capitalist, the more it becomes proletarian. Ultimately capitalism leads to monopolies whereby capitalists eat each other. The conflict that then ensues leaves the field clear for the revolution of the proletariat.

Such a revolution is inevitable. Moreover, it will eventually lead to a classless society. But there is always the danger of a counter-revolution in which the bourgeoisie regain control. To prevent that, the proletariat need to establish

an interim “ dictatorship of the proletariat”. Ultimately, however, the state would simply disappear as it would no longer be necessary except as an organisational or facilitating vehicle.

The great “ revolution” nevertheless had to be planned and fought for. The natural antagonism between the capitalists and worker had to be fostered. It was a war, said Marx, and there could be no negotiations and compromises. Capitalism could not be reformed; it could only be overthrown.

The problem, as far as Europe was concerned, was that the workers were not united. They were also not prepared to sink their all into a continual class war. Indeed, many of the workers were fundamentally conservative. More dangerous was the fact that religion still played a major factor.

Another major problem, said Marx, was the fact that the decades after 1848 were generally prosperous ones during which worker salaries had been gradually raised. As a result, the worker failed to see the government as the enemy which was to be overthrown at all costs. The aim of the dedicated communist was therefore to remind the worker continually of his fundamental loyalties: to work incessantly to bring about the “ revolution of the proletariat”.

It is probable that Marxism would have died a natural death had it not been for the great catastrophe of international war in 1914. The economic structure was creating a more prosperous working class which would naturally have killed off communism. The Great War would change all that.

The war would bring about two periods of major depression, the first from 1918 to 1923 and the second from 1929 to 1935. Furthermore, Russia collapsed during the war, allowing the radicals to take control. From Russia, then, the idea of exporting communism as a means of destabilising the international community saw Marxism become a potent threat of the 20th century. But that's another story.