

Democracy in 19th century western europe



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Democracy in 19th century western europe – “ How democratic were France, Germany and Britain by 1900?”

Table of contents:

- Part I: Summary;
- Part II: Outline;
- Part III: Limitation of this study;
- Part IV: Democracy in France;
- Part V: Democracy in Germany;
- Part VI: Democracy in Britain;
- Part VII: Conclusion.

Part I:

Summary: Just over a century ago, the kind of government that existed in these frontline western European states was a far cry from what is seen today. The political earthquake called the French Revolution had its epicentre in France, but its rumblings were felt through most of the continent, as well as in faraway colonies, leaving the politics of most European countries in a state of flux. But the intended harvest of this revolution, an obliteration of monarchy and the rule of law, the indispensable elements of a democracy, took its time to get ingrained in the political systems of these countries, and evolved as a form of government very differently in each of the three countries taken up in this paper. If the advent of Napoleon affected these three countries, and the Vienna Congress stunted France and Germany's graduation to democracy, the internal political dynamics in all these countries were different from each other's. In Britain, whose brand of democracy was mixed, the Reform Acts turned out to be

<https://assignbuster.com/democracy-in-19th-century-western-europe/>

milestones on the road to democracy. Such serious and well-intended steps to democracy were not taken in the other two countries. This is mainly because France kept seesawing between monarchy and autocracy through most of the 19th century, while Germany was a disparate state for most of that century. In sum, in Britain, by the end of the 19th century, a parliamentary democracy, which the nation had been having for a long time, was fairly well established, although under a monarchy. The same was not the case with the other two; in all, Germany enjoyed the least democracy. The reasons for this discrepancy form the backbone of this paper.

Part II:

Outline: This paper takes up separately the extent to which democracy was ushered in into these three countries. In each of these cases, a narration is made of how democracy developed. Since the nature of this paper is analytical, too much detail is not made of this aspect; this explanation is given only to reinforce the thesis question. The starting point for the evolution of democracy in each of these countries is taken up separately. This is for the simple reason that while the French Revolution happened in France, such an event did not take place in the other two countries. For these, appropriate historically important dates or events are taken up.

Part III:

Limitation of this study: While 1789 may be termed a signal event for modern democracy, no event of such importance concerning democracy happened in 1900, the cut off date for this paper. However, since this is the period up to which this paper is concerned, it restricts itself to developments in most parts of the 19th century, in which the major themes were

unification for Germany, political uncertainty for France, and the reform of the parliamentary system in the Victorian Era for Britain.

Part IV:

Democracy in France:

France was home to one of the watershed political events of modern Europe, the French Revolution, in which the people rose in revolt with the slogan, *war to the châteaux, peace to the cottages*. The gravity and repercussions of this event are far too great to bear banal repetition; however, while the essential aim of the Revolution was to bring an end to the autocratic and inept regimes that misruled the nation, (Frey & Frey, 2004, p. 57) the result it sought to instil, democracy, did not have a smooth inception or development, either, suffering from several long and enduring birth pangs.

Strangely, for most part of the 19th century, it seemed as if the great revolution had turned out to be no more than an isolated, standalone event. The dividend the Revolution sought to pay, democracy, had to wait for a seemingly interminable period of time to fructify and get implanted in the nation's political system, because the succession of governments it brought were anything but democratic. Leading political figures of the day, such as Robespierre feared that the system the revolution put in place was one which had a penchant for forgetting "the interests of the people", would "lapse into the hands of corrupt individuals", and worst of all, "reestablish the old tyranny" (Cohen, 1997, p. 130) Later decades showed that his prognosis was not far off the mark.

The decades following the Revolution saw a chain of events, none of which took the country anywhere near democracy, the avowed aim of the Revolution. The years from the Revolution to the Franco-Prussian War saw political fissures of one or another kind, which had no semblance of democracy, starting with the ascent of Napoleon, perhaps the most powerful dictator the country had ever produced. His defeat was followed by the Restoration of the monarchy; this gave rise to the Revolution of 1830, and the rule of Louis Philippe, till 1848. It took another revolution to bring down his regime, this time in 1848. Finally, this heralded the era of the Second Republic, and the tenure of the fickle Napoleon III, leading to another event of seminal importance for the nation, the Franco-Prussian war, to be followed by yet another Republic, the Third. (Haine, 2000, p. 97) This regime, too heavily weighed down by palace intrigues, scandals, wars and renewed national pride in the wake of a highly recharged and resurgent neighbour, Prussia, (Wright, 1916, pp. 2-4) was left with little room or time for democracy. Nothing of import happened in the period till the end of the 19th century to necessitate the emergence of a democracy.

Part V:

Democracy in Germany:

Germany's tryst with democracy in the 19th century needs to be seen in circumstances that were peculiar and unique to the nation's history. This was when the German people united as a nation for the first time. They had been a loosely knit confederation of princely states that owed its allegiance to the Holy Roman Empire by the time of the French Revolution; yet, in about a century of this event, they had been cobbled together almost magically

under the Prussian banner. A series of moves replete with uninhibited daredevilry, gamble, deceit and sheer diplomatic astuteness on the part of its Chancellor, Otto Von Bismarck had united the German people, ridding them of the yoke of Austrian domination of its peoples. (Snell, 1976, pp. 3, 4)

However, Germany had only been united, resulting in the realisation of a long-lasting and cherished dream of a German nation; this did not in any way mean that a democracy had been put in place. Even so, the newly-knit entity did not have the prerequisite groundwork for democracy, suffering from a basic flaw –it “ was constructed by its princes, not by its people. That important fact distinguished Germany from nations like England, France, and the United States, where the constitutions were designed “ with the consent of the governed.” The German Empire was a federation of sovereign states, its constitution created by a treaty among the hereditary rulers of those states. The “ wars of unification” were not revolutionary popular movements; they were narrowly focused international conflicts designed by Bismarck to help Prussia eliminate Austrian power within Germany and to create a new Prussian-led German nation within Europe.” (Turk, 1999, pp. xvii-null22)

Whatever spattering of democracy the nation had towards the fag end of the century was limited to social democracy, in which it was confined to labour unions. (Berghahn, 1994, p. 160)

Part VI:

Democracy in Britain: The year 1815 is considered a benchmark for the politics of Britain, as it was for several other European countries, for the simple reason that this year saw the end of the power and influence of one of the greatest nemeses it ever saw, Napoleon. However, while this was the

major issue for the nation externally, Britain had its share of internal problems, as well, during this century. The Industrial Revolution brought in its wake dramatic changes which the nation had to ingest, with both the promises and the pitfalls it spawned. Among the most important social effects the Industrial Revolution had on the nation was a near-explosion in population, and the drawbacks of nascent industrialisation, at which it had no forerunners from any part of the world. Thus, the greatest priority at that time was a set of policies that gave the country social solidity and some element of peace. (McCord, 1991, p. 1) With the high rates of population growth and their attendant problems such as high infant mortality being great priorities during the early part of the 19th century, (Brown, 1991, p. 30) the air of politics was abuzz with the question of which of the institutions the British had so assiduously built up over the previous centuries was best suited to give coherence to the society that was changing at a feverish pace. In this milieu, the emphasis for British politics was more over what kind of reform was suited and needed for the society, polity and the economy, rather than which form of government was best suited to carry these changes out. Opinion was sharply divided among the Conservatives and the Liberals about which of its institutions could carry the day for Britain.

The unshakable British faith in the monarchy was as firm as ever, not diluting or eroding even slightly on account of these changes. (Park, 1950, pp. 3-5) In essence, the 19th century, during whose most part Britain was under the rule of one of its longest-reigning monarchs, Queen Victoria, saw the emergence of a peculiarly hybridised, yet often contradictory system of governance. Quintessential democratic institutions, such as the parliament,

the judiciary, the cabinet and the local government were alive and well, but functioned under a monarchy. On the one hand, fair and free elections, the ultimate identifier of a democracy, were being held with amazing regularity; on the other, it could not be denied that participation in these elections was limited to the handful of rich and powerful. It was to correct this set of imbalances and to draw more people into the electorate that the Reform Acts were passed. The basic intent of these sets of legislation was the promotion of greater democracy, by drawing the excluded and marginalised sections of society into the electorate. (Pugh, 1999, p. 20) The nation went through three Reform Acts, passed in 1832, 1867 and 1884, whose central aim was increasing the numbers of the electorate. (Hammond & Foot, 1952, pp. 212-214) At about the time these Acts were passed, a parallel social and political reform movement, Chartism, was very active. The basic demand of this radical, unionised movement was greater political participation for the working classes, so that the fruits of the Industrial Revolution percolated down to the labour class, too. (Maccoby, 1935, p. 33) However, in the light of the needs of the day, and the priority these Acts had, they met with little success in actually bringing in democracy to the country. What has been said about the Reform Act of 1832, perhaps holds good for the other Acts, too - that they were "...an excellent example of the British skill of muddling through. An aristocracy muddled through to a democracy, taking many of the aristocratic virtues with them; and they muddled through from an age of privilege to an age of numbers. The democratic implications of the act(s) were not in fact revealed for more than a generation..." (Smellie, 1962, p. 164) As a result, through most of the Victorian Era, although efforts were made haltingly towards bringing in more democracy, there was no more than

a sprinkling of democracy; even this happened at the grassroots level, being restricted to the municipal level, as a series of Acts were passed at the local government level. (Harrison, 1996, p. 20)

Part VII:

Conclusion: A study of the thesis question throws up a mixed picture.

Overall, democracy, so essential a feature of these countries today, had had to make a bumpy and potholed journey. In all these countries, democracy was nebulous and uncertain in the 19th century, albeit in varying degrees. In Britain, a parliamentary democracy was very much in full bloom, but the inherent love and pride of the British people for their monarchy pre-empted a switch to a full-fledged democratic form of government. As a result, these democratic institutions functioned under a monarchy that controlled the largest empire of the day.

In France, the scene was different. In the absence of democratic institutions of the kind Britain had nurtured, the governance the French Revolution brought about vacillated between various kinds, with the result that democracy took a backseat.

In Germany, the struggles inherent in a newly unified nation, coupled with its naivety in running its newly developing imperialism resulted in too many squabbles and bottlenecks for democracy. The nation that Bismarck had welded together had the ingenuity to only work under a newly consolidated empire, not having been inculcated the necessary mindset for a democracy. It was never going to be easy for these fissiparous peoples to be administered a sudden dose of democracy, as by definition they had been

inured to centuries of localism. By the end of that century, democracy was nowhere registered in the average German psyche.

Of all these nations taken up for this study, it can be said that Britain had the highest form of democracy by the end of the 19th century; yet, here too, despite the Reform Acts, which could not be termed a great harbinger of democracy, it was nowhere near what may be termed a pure democracy, something that came so naturally to some of its colonies, principally America.