

## Year of Revolutions: 1848

In 1848, the tensions that had been present in Europe came to the surface in a series of revolutions that involved practically the entire continent with the exception of Russia and Spain. The revolutions began in Sicily and in other parts of Italy. When revolutions broke out in the major countries, particularly France and Austria, they gave a new impetus to revolutionary movements—the Paris Revolution providing an example and the Austrian Revolution paralyzing at least temporarily the capacity of the Austrians to crush revolutions in other parts of Europe, as they had in the past.

### The “Revolution of Contempt”

In France, Louis-Philippe’s political stubbornness had been arousing opposition for years. During the 1840s, however, the severe economic downturn created more hardships and, in addition, the regime had become ridiculous in the eyes of many people. An important sign of this development occurred in 1844, when Napoleon’s ashes were returned to Paris to be entombed. The event gave the populace an opportunity to compare their glorious past with their bland present under Louis Philippe who, many people agreed with the artist Daumier, looked like a pear. Alexis de Tocqueville, the political thinker who left a memoir



of the revolution, saw the “spiritual degradation” of the government as the main cause of the 1848 revolution.

Goaded by the “banquets” during which speakers constantly denounced him, Louis-Philippe condemned them as “blind and hostile” and in January 1848 his government banned a scheduled banquet of radicals. The king was convinced that he could unite conservative groups around him and crush any opposition, but the government’s action instead united public opinion against the monarch. The opposition scheduled another banquet for February 22 to test the government’s intentions.

On February 22, after some minor fighting, the government called out the National Guard, but it turned against the king. Louis-Philippe tried first to save himself, and then his dynasty, but fled into exile. The king had fallen after in observers labeled the “revolution of contempt.”

The February Revolution had a popular character. Its center was Paris, which was radical and counted many Socialist thinkers who now brought their ideas forward. In fact, in order to contrast the dire economic conditions, “National Workshops” were set up to give work to the poor and to pay them. These were the brainchild of Socialist thinker Louis Blanc. The problem was, however, that the Paris bourgeoisie opposed such schemes and feared that the revolution would become radicalized. Tensions grew in Paris between the workers and poor and the bourgeoisie. The well-off classes, however, were disoriented by the speed with which the revolution had occurred and were on the defensive. This



situation would prove to be temporary and complicated by an important factor. The majority of the French population was still rural and peasant—and it disapproved of revolutionary schemes and socialism. Furthermore, it would object to the hefty increase in taxes required to pay the people in the “national workshops.” Thus a social division split the Paris radicals on the one hand and the rural population that opposed them. What emerged in France was a struggle between Paris and the rest of the country, and a struggle between the new class of industrial workers and the traditional peasants.

### The Second Republic

Elections were held for a Constituent Assembly under male universal suffrage (all men over 20 had the right to vote, regardless of how much property they owned). Ironically, more nobles and landlords won election than in previous elections, reflecting the wish of the peasants to contrast Paris. The provisional government, headed by the poet Lamartine (see his account of the Revolution of 1848: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1848lamartine.html>) included some radicals—but these were more conservative than those who remained outside—and was practically paralyzed. On May 15, the Constituent Assembly met amid great tension with the Paris crowd, which invaded the meeting hall. The members scattered but called out the National Guard which arrested the mob’s leaders Auguste Blanqui (<http://www.encyclopedia.com/html/B/Blanqui.asp>) and Armand Barbes (<http://www.cats.ohiou.edu/~Chastain/ac/barbes.htm>).



These leaders were thus unavailable when the bloody “June Revolution” broke out against the Provisional Government. The government’s action in “reorganizing” (in effect doing away with) the National Workshops on May 24 touched off the revolution. The government acted in response to the protests of the rest of France against a special tax that had been imposed in order to pay the workers in the national workshops; the peasants saw themselves as paying radical workers to do nothing except to engage in subversion. In effect, the June revolution sought not only to overthrow the government but to restructure society. The revolution failed completely when the army under General Louis Cavaignac (<http://www.bartleby.com/65/ca/Cavaigna.html>) fired canons at the crowd and peasants poured in from the countryside on the newly-built railway to suppress the revolutionaries. Cavaignac then imposed what was the first example of permanent martial law in modern times.

With the suppression of the June revolution the Constituent Assembly wrote a constitution for the Second French Republic.

### The German Pattern

In Germany, as in France, there had been widespread discontent in the 35+ states before the revolutions of 1848 broke out. The beginning of industrialization meant less security for the artisans and journeymen and, on the land, there had been a potato famine in 1846-47 that caused increased tension.



The success of the revolution of 1848 touched off the revolutions in Germany. In general, the revolutions in the German states followed a similar pattern, but one closer to the French Revolution of 1789, not of 1848, because Germany was less industrialized the bourgeoisie believed the revolutions would become radicalized in the mode of France in 1792. Therefore, the German leaders would elect to give up and let the conservatives regain control rather than allow the revolutions in their states to become radicalized.

In the German states, therefore, the pattern was as follows:

When news of the revolution in Paris reached the German capitals, revolutions followed that easily overthrew the existing governments. The monarchs, however, remained in place and allowed liberals to form governments. But the armed forces of the states remained loyal to the monarchs. As time went on, the liberal governments and the monarchs would fall out, with the monarchs resisting the governments as they made more demands, no matter how moderate. A breaking point would be reached, in which the bourgeoisie would face the dilemma of calling out the crowd against the monarchs (or supporting the mob if it was already actively involved in the revolution), because the monarchs had control of the army, or of giving up. The bourgeoisie, fearing that the revolutions would become radicalized if they allied with the people, who would then turn against them as it had in France in 1792, gave up and let the monarch regain control. If the people tried to resist the army (as in Austria), the bourgeoisie stood aside and let the crowds be suppressed.

### The Prussian Revolution

Prussia fit this pattern but it is important to look at the revolution that occurred there because this state would lead the movement for German unification making the changes that took place there particularly important.

In Prussia, King Frederick William IV, one of the stranger kings in an age of strange monarchs

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick\\_William\\_IV\\_of\\_Prussia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_William_IV_of_Prussia)), had refused to establish a national parliamentary assembly. In March 1848, after news of the revolution in Paris reached Berlin, a revolution broke out. The army fired on the people, killing a number before the king ordered it out of the capital, deciding this was a good way to show his trust in his people. Instead the crowd was hostile and forced him to view the bodies and remove his hat when he did so.

Frederick William declared himself a supporter of German unity and allowed an assembly to be called. Soon, however, he decided that it was too much close to the mob. He refused to cooperate with it and when the question of who should control the army came up, Frederick William called the army in and dissolved the assembly.

The 1848 revolution, however, had an important aftermath. In 1849, Frederick William issued a constitution that was modified in 1850. The constitution gave the king veto power over legislation. In addition, it established the three-class system of voting. That is, the persons who paid the highest 1/3 of



taxes elected one-third of the deputies, those who paid the next highest third elected one-third of the deputies, and the lowest third elected one-third.

Although the percentages varied, this system meant that approximately 5% elected 1/3 of the deputies, 15% elected the next third, and 80% elected the next third.

This system survived German unification, which allowed Prussia to be the most important state in and dominate a united Germany. Some observers stated that this undemocratic constitution made people less willing to fight for the state during World War I and contributed to the German defeat.

### The “Revolution of the Intellectuals”

At the same time as these events were taking place, there was an attempt to unite Germany. All over Germany deputies were elected to go to Frankfurt to discuss the question. On May 18, 1848 the “Frankfurt Parliament” met but quickly bogged down on the question of boundaries. The question: should the Austrian Empire be included in a united Germany? If yes, it would bring a host of non-Germans into the country, and if no it would leave many Germans (i.e., Austrians) outside. This question was never resolved and, in fact, the deputies demonstrated little sympathy for the feelings of other nationalities. In addition, Austria and the German princes opposed unification.

The Frankfurt Parliament’s downfall came when it declared war on Denmark over a territorial dispute. Since the Parliament had no armed forces of



its own it had to utilize those of the German states, especially Prussia's. When the Parliament refused to agree to peace when the British objected, the Austrians and Prussians dissolved the Parliament and ended this "revolution of the intellectuals"—the name given to the Frankfurt Parliament by a historian who thought the deputies talked too much.

Prussian king Frederick William seemed to remain faithful to his wish for German unity (under his leadership), trying to get the agreement of the German princes (the "Erfurt Union"). However, he was forced to back off by the Austrians and the Russians in November 1850 (the "Humiliation of Olmutz" ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Punctation\\_of\\_Olm%C3%BCtz](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Punctation_of_Olm%C3%BCtz)), by which Austria regained control of Germany through a restored German Confederation.

### The Austrian Revolution

In Austria discontent was widespread during the 1840s. The peasants had been freed from personal bondage but still were subject to the political, judicial, and economic power of the landlords and still had to pay numerous fees. Increasing industrialization had brought misery, with long hours and widespread exploitation of women and children. Even the middle class was disaffected because it suffered discrimination in favor of the nobility. Finally, the cost of living rose steadily during the 1830s and 1840s and skyrocketed after bad harvests in 1846 and 1847.





In March 1848, Vienna erupted in revolt following news of the Paris revolution. A petition demanding reforms and employment was drafted and sent to the king. Instead the army was called out and fighting began. Students formed an “Academic Legion” and allied with the workers in a successful fight against the troops. Metternich was forced to flee Vienna disguised as a woman. It seemed as if the revolution had won.

A constitutional assembly met in Vienna. Among the measures it took was to abolish the feudal obligations of the peasants. The peasants were thus satisfied and in effect dropped out of the revolution. The revolutionaries fought among themselves, giving the Hapsburgs time to recover. In August the alliance between the radical democratic leaders and students with the workers ended. In the meantime, the Austrian ruling class called on Prince Felix von Schwarzenberg (<http://www.anecdorage.com/index.php?aid=1027>) to head the government. He persuaded the retarded Ferdinand to resign in favor of his nephew Francis Joseph (who would rule until his death in 1916).

Schwarzenberg bided his time but had no intention of giving in to the revolutionaries. When he had enough strength, he moved in the army and suppressed the revolution (the “Battle of the Prater”:  
<http://www.univie.ac.at/archiv/tour/13.htm>). This was, in effect, a bloody class war in which the industrial workers were suppressed. The students who had encouraged them stood aside and let them be slaughtered.



In March 1849, Francis Joseph issued a constitution which he abrogated in 1852.

Besides Austria, revolutions took place in the possessions of the Austrian Empire and succeeded at first, but the government slowly restored control. In Hungary, the Russians had to intervene. The revolution had an important effect in Eastern Europe in that the fees that peasants had to pay were abolished by the 1848 revolutions, but they had to indemnify the landlords. In another area of Austrian domination, Italy, the revolution had profound effects.

### The Italian Revolution

In Italy the revolutions preceded the one in France. In January 1848, an uprising expelled the Neapolitans as the Sicilians demanded their constitution of 1812. Although the Sicilian revolution had social implications, the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy on the island combined to block them.

From Sicily the revolution quickly spread to the mainland. The king, Ferdinand II, rapidly granted a constitution that was based on the French constitution of 1830. The king did not do so out of conviction but bided his time until he could get rid of the instrument.

In Piedmont things took a different and more positive turn. Charles Albert had favored economic reforms, but not political. When news of the Neapolitan constitution spread to the capital of Turin on January 31, there were



demonstrations and demands for a constitution. Charles Albert resisted but finally agreed to grant a constitution, known as the Statuto (Statute).

This constitution (completed in March) was based on the French constitution of 1830 and reserved all possible powers to the king while introducing a representative assembly. This assembly consisted of two houses, the Chamber of Deputies elected by restricted suffrage, and the Senate, appointed by the king. The constitution guaranteed freedom of association and of the press even while guarantees of personal liberty were vague. However, three important points about it should be remembered: 1. It was the only constitution given in Italy during the 1848 revolutions which survived; 2. When Piedmont led Italy to unity, the Statuto became the Italian constitution; and, 3. While the Statuto reserved to the king the power to rule, it in fact evolved in a liberal direction that gave the Chamber of Deputies more power, including “ministerial responsibility,” i.e. the right to vote governments in and out of power.

In Rome and Tuscany constitutions were also granted during the turmoil of 1848. In Tuscany the constitution was based on the French constitution of 1830, but because Rome was a clerical state, the Roman constitution consisted of three houses instead of two. The College of Cardinals was declared a “Senate.” There was also a “High Council” made up of Papal appointees and a “Council of Deputies” elected by the taxpayers. The significant point was that the latter two houses had no say in religious matters and could only offer advice in mixed lay and religious matters. In a clerical state, however, everything was bound to be

mixed lay and religious. This fact reduced the power of the Council of Deputies. In the general rejoicing, however, the people overlooked this fact.

### The “Five Days of Milan”

In addition to reform, the Italians also wanted independence from Austrian control. In Lombardy-Venetia, directly controlled by Austria, tensions with the Austrians had been very high for years. When news of the revolution in Vienna reached the area, the populace rose immediately. In Milan, the revolution was coordinated by followers of Mazzini. In five days’ bloody and hard fighting between Milanese civilians and the Austrian army led by the seasoned general Joseph Radetzky ([http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/encyclopedia/j/jo/joseph\\_radetzky\\_von\\_rade\\_tz.htm](http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/encyclopedia/j/jo/joseph_radetzky_von_rade_tz.htm)), the Austrians were pushed out of the city. Expelled from other Italian cities in a similar manner, Radetzky and the Austrians holed up in a series of fortress cities known as the “Quadrilateral” to regroup and to await reinforcements.

The expulsion of the Austrians made the task seem easy, which it was not. Italians rushed from all over the country to volunteer to help. Among those rushing to help was Charles Albert and his army, but his participation created a split. The Lombards and the Venetians were republicans, followers of Mazzini, and were suspicious of the king. They felt that Charles Albert wanted to annex



their areas and, in addition, to champion the cause of the aristocrats. This dispute eventually doomed the effort to expel the Austrians from Italy.

In the meantime, Schwarzenberg reestablished Hapsburg control in Vienna and sent reinforcements to Italy. When the war turned into a conventional one, the Austrians had the advantage and proceeded to defeat the Piedmontese and to reconquer their lost territories. They won two battles against the Italians, Custoza (July 1848) and Novara (March 1849). Charles Albert resigned in favor of his son, Victor Emanuel II. Victor Emanuel worked out a peace but resisted Austrian demands that he revoke the Statuto (thus gaining the nickname “The Gentleman King”).

Venice had also rebelled and had set up a republic under the Mazzinian leader Daniele Manin. After the Austrians won in Lombardy, they reduced Venice, which gave up after a heroic siege.

### The Roman Revolution

In Rome, Pius IX finally reached the point at which he felt compelled to state clearly that he could not support the Italian war against the Austrians. Italian volunteers had been streaming north under the assumption that they had the Pope’s blessing. When he did so (April 29, 1848), his people immediately revolted. His minister, Pellegrino Rossi, was assassinated and Pius fled into exile. After the Pope fled an elected assembly declared Rome a republic and called on Giuseppe Mazzini to head it.



The Roman Republic under Mazzini's leadership gained the support of the people by means of social reforms. The republic granted religious tolerance and freedom of the press; it opened up the Civic Guard to all; it took over the offices of the Inquisition and transformed them into housing for the poor; it took over Church lands, cut them into small plots, and distributed them to the peasants.

After the Battle of Novara, the Romans expected to be attacked by the Austrians. However, the attack came from the French, where Louis Napoleon had been elected President of the Second Republic. Louis Napoleon was hoping to extend his term beyond four years and tried to get Catholic support by restoring the Pope (he also hoped to retain liberal support by getting the Pope to keep the constitution he had given).

When the French attacked Rome, defended by Giuseppe Garibaldi, they found they could not take it. They asked for an armistice and then cheated by bringing in reinforcements. They finally took Rome and restored the Pope, but he refused to keep the constitution.

In the meantime, the revolution had been defeated in other parts of Italy as well and the constitutions had been revoked. In the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, Ferdinand II had used so many bombs that he was henceforth known as "Re Bomba" (King Bomb). See <http://www.cats.ohiou.edu/~Chastain/dh/ferd.htm>.

Results of the 1848 Revolutions



The revolutions of 1848 had a number of important results. Although they seemed irresistible, by 1850 they had all been defeated and the old monarchs or their heirs had been restored (with the exception of France, where a republic had been set up, although it was destined to be short-lived). Some historians have described the 1848 revolutions as “a turning point where history failed to turn.” But is this so?

Although the aims of the revolutionaries of 1848 were not fulfilled in 1848, they were fulfilled during the next 25 years. Those aims—which might be described as the implementation of the French Revolutionary principles of liberalism and nationalism—came into fruition with the unification of Italy and Germany and with domestic changes in other countries. In fact, the principles of 1848 would not upset society, but the methods of 1848—revolution and violence would. That is why, ironically, those principles would be implemented by leaders who were more conservative than those who took the lead in 1848.

Another result of the revolutions was the elimination of feudal dues in Eastern Europe, i.e., Prussia, Austria, and Hungary (feudalism remained in Russia). However, the peasants had to indemnify (pay) the lords for the loss of this income.

Finally, one important result was the coming to the surface of the modern class struggle in which factory workers created by the industrial revolution began to organize and challenge the old elite, aristocrats and bourgeoisie, for power. This struggle would be the hallmark of European history throughout the rest of



the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. It was no accident that the war cry of this struggle, Karl Marx's Communist Manifesto, was published in 1848.

Following the revolutions of 1848, Europe settled down at least for a brief period.