

The Age of Nationalism, Realism, and Mass Politics, 1850-1914

The revolutions of 1848 failed largely because those that agitated for change could not agree on common goals. Particularly, the tensions between middle and working classes were manifestations of ideological differences that crystallized in 1848 with the publication of Karl Marx's Communist Manifesto on the eve of the revolution in France. As Marx and his colleague Friedrich Engels agitated on behalf of an international socialist revolutionary movement, the latent antagonism between liberal and socialist ideals became clear and definite. Forces in European politics realigned as the middle classes became increasingly uncomfortable with more radical social revolutionary doctrines, and liberals all over Europe shifted emphasis to the goal of national unification. The era that followed, then, from 1850 to 1914, may be characterized above all as an "age of nationalism."

The era was also characterized by a new kind of intellectual and political realism. After the failure of the 1848 revolutions, idealism and romanticism were discredited in European culture and politics. Revolutionaries became less optimistic, and conservatives more resigned to the use of repression. Imaginings of what ought to be were replaced by acceptance of what was real, but the trend did not halt the changes set in place by the mixture of conservative, liberal, and radical ideologies. By the end of the century, Europe had moved into the age of mass politics, accelerated by mass-circulation newspapers, increasing levels of education, and rapid economic growth. Universal manhood suffrage was a reality in many countries, and political parties grew in numbers and diversity of political beliefs, including socialism. Mass politics reinforced the growing nationalism as communications and access to government improved, and more governments organized around the concept of nationality.

France Under Napoleon III

The collapse of the French Second Republic in 1852 ushered in an age of conservative leadership in France. After the Revolution of 1848, Louis Napoleon, nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, was elected president of the new Second Republic. The Bonaparte name reassured voters during this time of turbulence, and Louis cooperated with the legislature and did his duties as president while gaining personal popularity among the French people. During the short life of the Second Republic – from 1848 to 1852 – republicans and socialists, who had cooperated to overthrow King Louis Philippe in 1848,

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soon quarreled, and after some months the socialists were repressed by force. After Louis's request to stand for reelection was turned down by the National Assembly in 1851, he used the military to seize control of the government. In 1852, he first restored universal manhood suffrage, and then used a device invented for France by his uncle – the plebiscite, or a national referendum – to get support for restoring the empire. The French people voted overwhelmingly for their new emperor, who was crowned on December 2, 1852, as Napoleon III, and the Second Republic was replaced by the Second Empire. (Napoleon's son had briefly held the title of Napoleon II in 1814.)

More than any other political leader of the era, Napoleon III symbolized the new combination of economic liberalism, nationalism, and authoritarian rule. He kept an extravagant court with royal ceremony, and as chief of state, he controlled the armed forces, police, and civil service. Only he could introduce legislation and declare war. Yet he maintained universal manhood suffrage, he did not pretend to reign by divine right, and he repeatedly called for plebiscites to reinforce the legitimacy of his rule. Napoleon III also supported economic liberalism by promoting a strong economy, public works programs, and jobs, and so kept the support of many middle and working-class people, who otherwise might have succumbed to radical politics.

Economic prosperity and political success characterized Napoleon III's first years in office. He believed that the government should actively promote the economy, and he took many steps that stimulated economic growth. He initiated slum clearance projects that provided healthier living conditions, and he sponsored other public works projects, such as ports, roads, railroads, and grand new public buildings. Railroad connections grew tremendously under Napoleon III, and iron production boomed. One of his most famous projects was the reconstruction of the city of Paris, in which many narrow medieval streets and city walls were destroyed and broad boulevards, large public squares, and an underground sewage system were constructed. The projects not only made the new Paris look more modern, but the broad streets also made it almost impossible for rebels to throw up barricades to protest the regime. The new configuration allowed military troops to move easily around the city should revolts occur. These projects provided jobs for urban workers, and the new rail lines allowed peasants to get their produce to market more efficiently, so most French people enjoyed better living standards as a result of economic growth in the 1850s and 1860s.

In international affairs, Napoleon III's main goal was to reinvigorate

French power after the restraints imposed by the Congress of Vienna. He unabashedly desired to restore international glory to France, and in the true Bonaparte style, he also sought to exert his own personal power. He challenged Russia in the Crimean War, and then confronted Austria in the War of Italian Unification. Louis Napoleon also asserted French rule in Algeria and Southeast Asia and maneuvered (unsuccessfully) to restore monarchical power in Mexico. In the 1860s, when his authoritarian methods began to be questioned more seriously, he liberalized his regime by legalizing trade unions and granting workers the right to strike. He also allowed a Legislative Corps more say in policymaking, including debate over the budget. These tactics allowed him to remain immensely popular, so that when a plebiscite was held in May 1870 on whether to accept a new constitution that might restore a parliamentary government, the people again supported their emperor.

The Crimean War

Nationalism was promoted at mid-century by the Crimean War, fought in 1853-4. The war encouraged the nations of Europe to realign and become more suspicious of one another, leading them to ignore the concerns of other major powers and focus on their own national interests.

The Crimean War had many causes, and once it started, it revealed to all the major powers how weak the Ottoman Empire had grown. The war was sparked as Russia's armies attacked southward, threatening Ottoman lands. Fearing that the Ottomans would fall under Russian pressure, France and Britain sent troops to the area. Louis Napoleon believed that a successful war against Russia would solidify popular support for his regime and would check Russia's surge for power. Britain had long worried that the collapse of the Ottoman Empire would lead Russia to seek territorial gains in the Mediterranean, which would challenge Britain's naval supremacy in that region. Austria and Prussia remained neutral, since Austria had its own ambitions in the Balkans, and, for the moment, Prussia followed Austrian leadership. Much of the fighting took place on the Crimean Peninsula on the north shore of the Black Sea, and it resulted in a sound, humiliating defeat of Russia, but it also cast the Ottomans in the role of a lesser power that had to be protected by others.

The Crimean War was significant beyond the individual countries that fought in it partly because it marked a transition from traditional to modern

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warfare. The high casualty rate was largely due to varying levels of technology that were used by different sides at different times. For example, highly trained cavalry traditionally had been used to break through the front lines of the infantry while the infantry reloaded their guns. The cavalry did not carry guns because they were too heavy, a situation that made them vulnerable to new technologies of the percussion cap and the breech-loading rifle. Both inventions made firing rapid and more accurate, and had been adopted throughout Europe in the years preceding the Crimean War, and the result was a widespread slaughter of cavalry. Warfare methods had to change, since a line of marching soldiers could be decimated by the new technology.

Marker Event: Hygiene on the Battlefield

Throughout history, a soldier who escaped death on the battlefield did not always survive the war. Often people died from diseases, such as septicemia and dysentery, or from wounds that bled excessively or became infected. An important turning point for hygiene for battlefield wounds came in the mid-1800s when a young Englishwoman named Florence Nightingale applied techniques she learned in France and Prussia to bring about significant improvements in British healthcare. Nightingale went to the Crimea to tend to wounded soldiers in the war there in 1853-1854, and she found the need to improve the sanitation of the hospitals. Her influence led the British government to flush out the sewer systems and improve ventilation, measures that greatly reduced death rates. When she returned to London she established institutes for nursing that were widely imitated in other countries.

One reason that Florence Nightingale became so well known is that she lived in a time when another technological marker event – the telegraph – made it possible for news from the battlefield to get back home quickly. To sell their papers, journalists looked for heroic actions, and Florence Nightingale became a “star” with the folks back home.

The war changed the balance of power among European countries in many ways. First, it shattered the image of an invincible Russia that had influenced the Continent’s international politics since the close of the Napoleonic wars. Just as importantly, the Concert of Europe was dismantled as a means of dealing with international relations among European powers. Following the successful repression of the 1848 revolutions, the powers feared uprisings less than they had earlier in the century, and they moved away from the bonds created by the Congress of Vienna. France, of course, was glad to be distanced from the agreements that had thwarted its ambitions (especially

since its new leader was a Bonaparte), Prussia became increasingly impatient with Austria's domination of German politics, and Russia was motivated to overcome the humiliation of revealing its weakness in losing the Crimean War. The breakup of old patterns of international relations, then, set the stage for each country to shift emphasis to its own military power and diplomatic influence, which could be strengthened through nationalism, and it opened the opportunity for two nations – Italy and Germany – to at last become unified under their own governments.

Italy had never been a united nation prior to 1860, but had been divided into competing city-states since the Middle Ages. After the power of the city-states waned during post-Renaissance days, the Italian peninsula became a battleground for great powers, and was reorganized in 1815 at the Congress of Vienna. The northern provinces of Lombardy and Venetia were given to Austria; Sardinia and Piedmont had been united; central Italy and Rome were ruled by the papacy; and Naples and Sicily were ruled by a branch of the Bourbon family.