

CHAPTER 7

THE REVOLUTIONS OF 1848

The year 1848 is considered the watershed of the 19th century. The revolutionary disturbances of the first half of the 19th century reached a climax in a new wave of revolutions that extended from Scandinavia to southern Italy and from France to Central Europe. Only England, Russia, and Sweden-Norway avoided violent upheaval.

The issues were substantially the same as they had been in 1789. What was new in 1848 was that these demands were far more widespread and irrepensible than ever before. Whole classes and nations demanded to be fully included in society. The French Revolution of 1789 came at the end of a period ("Ancien Regime") while the revolutions of 1848 signaled the beginning of a new age. Aggravated by a rapid growth in population and social disruption caused by industrialism and urbanization, a massive tide of discontent swept across the Western world.

7.1 CAUSES

Generally speaking, the 1848 upheavals shared in common

the strong influences of romanticism, nationalism, and liberalism as well as a new factor of economic dislocation and instability throughout most of Europe. Some authorities believe that it was the absence of liberty that was most responsible for the uprisings.

Specifically, a number of similar conditions existed in several countries:

- 1) severe food shortages caused by poor harvests of grain and potatoes (e.g., Irish Potato Famine);
- 2) financial crises caused by a downturn in the commercial and industrial economy;
- 3) business failures;
- 4) widespread unemployment;
- 5) a sense of frustration and discontent of urban artisan and working classes as wages diminished; a system of poor relief which became overburdened; and living conditions which deteriorated in the cities;
- 6) middle class predominance with the unregulated economy continued to drive these liberals to push for more reform of government and civil liberty by enlisting the help of the working classes in order to put more pressure on government to change; and
- 7) the power of nationalism in the Germanies and Italies as well as Eastern Europe to inspire the overthrow of existing governments.

7.2 REPUBLICANISM: VICTORY IN FRANCE AND DEFEAT IN ITALY

7.2.1 *France: The Second Republic and Louis Napoleon*

Working class discontent and liberals' unhappiness with the corrupt regime of King Louis Philippe (reign 1830 – 1848) – especially his minister Guizot – erupted in street riots in Paris on February 22 – 23, 1848. With the workers in control of Paris, King Louis Philippe abdicated on February 24 and a provisional government proclaimed the Second French Republic.

Heading the provisional government was the liberal Alphonse Lamartine (1790 – 1869) who favored a moderate republic and political democracy. Lamartine's bourgeoisie allies had little sympathy for the working poor and did not intend to pursue a social revolution as well.

The working class groups were united by their leader Louis Blanc (1811 – 1882), a socialist thinker who expected the provisional government to deal with the unemployed and anticipated the power of the state being used to improve life and the conditions of labor. Pressed by the demands of Blanc and his followers, the provisional government established national workshops to provide work and relief for thousands of unemployed workers.

The "June Days" revolution was provoked when the government closed the national workshop. A general election in April resulted in a National Assembly dominated by the moderate republicans and conservatives under Lamartine who regarded socialist ideas as threats to private property. The Parisian workers, feeling that their revolution had been nullified, took to the streets in revolution.

This new revolution (June 23 – 26) was unlike previous

uprisings in France. It marked the inauguration of genuine class warfare; it was a revolt against poverty and a cry for the redistribution of property. It foreshadowed the great social revolutions of the 20th century. The revolt was extinguished after General Cavaignac was given dictatorial powers by the government. The June Days confirmed the political predominance of conservative property holders in French life.

The new Constitution of the Second French Republic provided for a unicameral legislative (with the National Assembly designating themselves as the first members) and executive power vested in a popularly-elected president of the Republic. When the election returns were counted the candidate of the government, General Cavaignac, was soundly defeated by a "dark horse" candidate, Prince Louis Napoleon Bonaparte (1808 – 1873), a nephew of the great emperor. On December 20, 1848, Louis Napoleon was installed as President of the republic.

It was clear the voters turned to the name of Bonaparte as a source of stability and greatness. They expected him to prevent any further working class disorder. However, the election of Louis Napoleon doomed the Second Republic. He was a Bonaparte, and dedicated to his own fame and vanity and not republican institutions. In December 1852 Louis Napoleon became Emperor Napoleon III and France retreated from republicanism again.

7.2.2 Italy: Republicanism Defeated

Italian nationalists and liberals wanted to end Hapsburg (Austrian), Bourbon (Naples and Sicily), and papal domination and unite these disparate areas into a unified liberal nation. A revolt by liberals in Sicily in January, 1848 was followed by the granting of liberal constitutions in Naples, Tuscany, Piedmont, and the Papal States. Milan and Venice expelled their

Austrian rulers. In March, 1848, upon hearing the news of the revolution in Vienna, a fresh outburst of revolution from Austrian rule occurred in Lombardy and Venetia with Sardinia-Piedmont declaring war on Austria. Simultaneously, Italian patriots attacked the Papal States forcing the Pope, Pius IX, to flee to Naples for refuge.

The temporary nature of these initial successes was illustrated by the speed with which the conservative forces regained control. In the north, Austrian Field Marshal Radetsky swept aside all opposition, regaining Lombardy and Venetia and crushing Sardinia-Piedmont. In the Papal States, the establishment of the Roman Republic (February 1849) under the leadership of Giuseppe Mazzini and the protection of Giuseppe Garibaldi, would fail when French troops took Rome in July 1849 after a heroic defense by Garibaldi. Pope Pius IX returned to Rome cured of his liberal leanings. In the south and in Sicily the revolts were suppressed by the former rulers.

Within eighteen months the revolutions of 1848 had failed throughout Italy. Among the explanations for these failures were the failure of conservative rural people to support the revolution; the divisions in aim and technique among the revolutionaries; the fear the radicals aroused among moderate groups of Italians who would be needed to guarantee the success of any revolution; and the general lack of experience and administrative ability on the part of the revolutionists.

7.3 NATIONALISM RESISTED IN AUSTRIAN EMPIRE

The Hapsburg Empire was vulnerable to revolutionary challenge. With its collection of subject nationalities (more non-Germans than Germans), the empire was stirred by an acute spirit of nationalism; its government was reactionary (liberal

institutions were non-existent); and its social reliance on serfdom doomed the masses of people to a life without hope. As soon as news of the “February Days” in France reached the borders of the Austrian Empire, rebellions began. The long-suppressed opponents of the government believed the time had come to introduce liberal institutions into the empire.

7.3.1 *Vienna*

In March, 1848, Hungarian criticism of Hapsburg imperial rule was initiated by Magyar nationalist leader Louis Kossuth (1802 – 1894), who demanded Hungarian independence. Students and workers in Vienna rushed to the streets to demonstrate on behalf of a more liberal government. The army failed to restore order and Prince Metternich, the symbol of reaction, resigned and fled the country. Emperor Ferdinand I (reign 1835 – 1848) granted a moderately liberal constitution but its shortcomings dissatisfied more radical elements and continual disorder prompted the emperor to flee from Vienna to Innsbruck, where he relied on his army commanders to restore order in the Empire. The Austrian imperial troops remained loyal to the Hapsburg crown. Prince Schwarzenberg was put in charge of restoring Hapsburg control.

A people’s committee ruled Vienna where a liberal assembly gathered to write a constitution. In Hungary and Bohemia revolutionary outbreaks indicated ultimate success.

The inability of the revolutionary groups in Vienna to govern effectively made it easier for the Hapsburgs to lay siege to Vienna in October, 1848. The rebels surrendered and Emperor Ferdinand abdicated in favor of his eighteen-year-old nephew, Francis Joseph (reign 1848 – 1916), who promptly restored royal absolutism.

The imperial government had been saved at Vienna through

the loyalty of the army and the lack of ruling capacity on the part of the revolutionaries. The only thing the revolutionaries could agree on was their hatred of the Hapsburg dynasty.

7.3.2 *Bohemia*

Nationalist feeling among the Czechs or Bohemians had been smoldering for centuries. They demanded a constitution and autonomy within the Hapsburg Empire.

A Pan-Slav Congress attempted to unite all Slavic peoples but accomplished little because divisions were more decisive among them than unified opposition to Hapsburg control.

In June, 1848, Prague submitted to a military occupation followed by a military dictatorship in July after all revolutionary groups were crushed.

7.3.3 *Hungary*

The Kingdom of Hungary was a state of about twelve million under Hapsburg authority. Magyars or Hungarians, who represented about five million subjects of the emperor, enjoyed a privileged position in the empire. The remaining seven million Slavic and Rumanian natives were powerless.

In March, 1848 Nationalist leader Louis Kossuth took over direction of the movement and tamed a more radical Hungarian rebellion; Hungarian autonomy was declared in April but failed to win popular support for the revolution because of the tyrannical treatment of the Slavic minorities. Because the government in Vienna was distracted by revolutions everywhere in the empire in the summer and fall of 1848, Louis Kossuth had time to organize an army to fight for Hungarian independence.

War between Austria and Hungary was declared on Octo-

ber 3, 1848 and Hungarian armies drove to within sight of Vienna. But desperate resistance from Slavic minorities forced the Hungarians to withdraw. Hungary was invaded by an Austrian army from the West in June, 1849 and a Russian army (Tsar Nicholas I of Russia offered assistance to new emperor Francis Joseph) from the north. Along with Serbian resistance in the south and Rumanian resistance in the east the combined opposition proved too much for Louis Kossuth's Hungarian Republic (proclaimed in April 1849) which was defeated. Kossuth fled into exile while thirteen of his guards were executed. Not until Austria was defeated by Prussia in 1866 would Hungary be in a position again to demand governmental equality with the Austrians.

7.3.4 *Italy*

Charles Albert, King of Sardinia, having granted his people a constitution, and hoping to add the Hapsburgs' Italian holdings to his kingdom, declared war on Austria. Unfortunately, the Sardinian army was twice defeated in battle (Custoza and Novara) by the Austrian General Radetsky.

King Charles Albert abdicated in favor of his son, Victor Emmanuel, who was destined to complete the unification of Italy in the second half of the 19th century.

The Revolutions of 1848 failed in Austria for these reasons:

- 1) The subject nationalities sometimes hated each other more than they despised Austria. The Hapsburgs used the divisions between the ethnic groups as an effective weapon against each: Croats against Magyars and Serbs and Rumanians against Magyars in the Hungarian Revolution; Germans against Czechs in the revolt in Bohemia.

- 2) The imperial army had remained loyal to its aristocratic commanders who favored absolutism.
- 3) There were too few industrial workers and an equally small number of middle class. The industrial workers could not exert any political power and the middle class feared working-class radicalism and rallied to the government as defender of the status quo.

7.4 LIBERALISM HALTED IN THE GERMANIES

The immediate effect of the 1848 Revolution in France was a series of liberal and nationalistic demonstrations in the German states (March, 1848) with the rulers promising liberal concessions. The liberals' demand for constitutional government was coupled with another demand: some kind of union or federation of the German states. While popular demonstrations by students, workers, and the middle class produced the promise of a liberal future the permanent success or failure of these "promises" rested on Prussian reaction.

7.4.1 *Prussia, The Frankfurt Parliament and German Unification*

Under King Frederick William IV (reign 1848 – 1861) Prussia moved from revolution to reaction. After agreeing to liberalize the Prussian government following street rioting in Berlin, the king rejected the constitution written by a specially-called assembly. The liberal ministry resigned and was replaced by a conservative one. By the fall the king felt powerful enough to substitute his own constitution, which guaranteed royal control of the government with a complicated three-class system of indirect voting that excluded all but landlords and wealthy bourgeoisie from office. This system prevailed in Prussia until 1918.

Finally, the government ministry was responsible to the king and the military services swore loyalty to the king alone.

Self appointed liberal, romantic, and nationalist leaders called for elections to a constituent assembly from all states belonging to the German Bund for the purpose of unifying the German states. Meeting in May, 1848, the Frankfurt Parliament was composed of mostly intellectuals, professionals, lawyers, businessmen and middle class. After a year of deliberation over questions of (1) monarchy or republic; (2) federal union or centralized state; and (3) boundaries (i.e., only German-populated or mixed nationalities), the assembly produced a constitution.

The principal problem facing the Frankfurt Assembly was to obtain Prussian support. The smaller German states generally favored the Frankfurt Constitution as did liberals throughout the large and middle-sized states. Austria made it clear it was opposed to the work of the Assembly and would remain in favor of the present system.

The Assembly leaders made the decision to stake their demands for a united Germany on King Frederick William IV of Prussia. They selected him as emperor in April 1849 only to have him reject the offer because he was a divine-right monarch, not subject to popularly-elected assemblies. Without Prussia there could be no success, so the Frankfurt Parliament dissolved without achieving a single accomplishment.

The Prussian King Frederick William IV had his own plans for uniting Germany. Right after refusing a "crown from the gutter" he offered his own plan to the German princes wherein Prussia would play a prominent role along with Austria. When Austria demanded allegiance to the Bund, the Prussian king realized pushing his plan would involve him in a war with Austria and her allies (including Russia). In November, 1850,

Prussia agreed to forego the idea of uniting the German states at a meeting with Austria called the "Humiliation of Olmutz." Austrian domination of the German Bund was confirmed.

7.5 GREAT BRITAIN AND THE VICTORIAN COMPROMISE

The Victorian Age (1837 – 1901) is associated with the long reign of Queen Victoria, who succeeded her uncle, King William IV at the age of eighteen and married her cousin, Prince Albert. The early years of her reign coincided with the continuation of liberal reform of the British government accomplished through an arrangement known as the "Victorian Compromise." The Compromise was a political alliance of the middle class and aristocracy to exclude the working class from political power. The middle class gained control of the House of Commons, the aristocracy controlled the government, army, and Church of England. The process of accommodation was working successfully.

7.5.1 *Highlights of the "Compromise Era"*

Parliamentary reforms continued after passage of the 1832 Reform Bill. Laws were enacted abolishing slavery throughout the Empire (1833). The Factory Act (1831) forbade the employment of children under age of nine. The New Poor Law (1834) now required the needy who were able and unemployed to live in workhouses. The Municipal Reform Law (1835) gave control of the cities to the middle class. The last remnants of the mercantilistic age fell with the abolition of the Corn Laws (1846) and repeal of the old navigation acts (1849).

Working class protest arose in the wake of their belief that passage of the "Great Reform Bill" of 1832 would bring them prosperity. When workers found themselves no better off, they turned to collective action of a political nature. They linked the

solution of their economic plight to a program of political reform known as Chartism or the Chartist movement from the charter of six points which they petitioned Parliament to adopt:

- 1) universal male suffrage,
- 2) secret ballot for voting,
- 3) no property qualifications for members of Parliament,
- 4) salaries for members of Parliament,
- 5) annual elections for Parliament, and
- 6) equal electoral districts.

During the age of Victorian Compromise these ideas were considered dangerously radical. Both the middle class and aristocracy vigorously opposed the working class political agenda. Chartism as a national movement failed. Its ranks were split between those who favored violence and those who advocated peaceful tactics. The return of prosperity with steady wages and lower food prices robbed the movement of momentum. Yet the chartist movement came to constitute the first large-scale working class political movement that workers everywhere would eventually adopt if they were to improve their situation.

After 1846 England was more and more dominated by the middle class; this was one of the factors which enabled England to escape the revolutions which shook Europe in 1848. The ability of the English to make meaningful industrial reforms gave the working class hope that its goals could be achieved without violent social upheaval.

7.6 EVALUATION

The revolutions of 1848 began with much promise, but they all ended in defeat for a number of reasons:

- 1) They were spontaneous movements which lost their popular support as the people lost their enthusiasm. Initial successes by the revolutionaries were due less to their strength than to the hesitancy of governments to use their superior force. Once this hesitancy was overcome, the revolutions were smashed.
- 2) They were essentially urban movements, and the conservative landowners and peasants tended in time to nullify the spontaneous actions of the urban classes.
- 3) The middle class, who led the revolutions, came to fear the radicalism of their working class allies. While in favor of political reformation, the middle class drew the line at social engineering much to the dismay of the laboring poor.
- 4) Divisions among national groups, and the willingness of one nationality to deny rights to other nationalities, helped to destroy the revolutionary movements in central Europe.

However, the results of 1848 – 1849 were not entirely negative. Universal male suffrage was introduced in France; serfdom remained abolished in Austria and the German states; parliaments were established in Prussia and other German states, dominated, to be sure, by princes and aristocrats; and Prussia and Sardinia-Piedmont emerged with new determination to succeed in their respective unification schemes.

The Revolutions of 1848 – 1849 brought to a close the era

of liberal revolutions that had begun in France in 1789. Reformers and revolutionists alike learned a lesson from the failures of 1848. They learned that planning and organization is necessary; that rational argument and revolution would not always assure success. With 1848 the Age of Revolution sputtered out. The Age of Romanticism was about to give way to an Age of Realism.