

7 The revolutions of 1848

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- ① No prior political crisis,
- ② No war
- ③ Spread Rev (not via revolutionaries)
- ④ Short Rev phase v 1789/1917
- ⑤ Failure

Introduction

By comparison with the 'great' revolutions such as those of 1789 or 1917, the revolutions of 1848 exhibit at least four peculiar features. First, the revolutionary outbreak was not preceded by political crisis triggered by conflict within the ruling order (1789) or failure in war (1917). Europe was at peace – there was no major war between 1815 and 1854. The ruling order did not appear to be badly split. There were tensions and disputes but nothing like political crisis. * ↓

Second, revolution spread rapidly across Europe. Revolution extended beyond France in the 1790s and Russia after 1917 but principally promoted by the original revolutionary regime. In 1848 there was no national centre; virtually every part of Europe between Britain and Russia experienced revolution 'from within'. *general points: intro + concl*

Third, the revolutionary situation lasted for a comparatively short time. By the summer of 1849 counter-revolution had triumphed. The 'great' revolutions lasted, in terms of regime instability and civil war, at least until 1795 in France and 1921 in the USSR. Finally, in the judgement of many contemporaries and historians, the 1848 revolutions 'failed'. Although the revolutions of 1789 and 1917 did not realise their proclaimed ideals, few would deny that they transformed both society and state and that the post-revolutionary world is unimaginable without them. It is more difficult to argue that case for 1848.

These four distinguishing features provide keys to understanding the revolutions of 1848. First, I outline and analyse the initial revolutionary outbreak and ask why so many governments collapsed so quickly. Second, I characterise the new revolutionary situation and ask how this could lead on to further political conflict. Third, I consider three broad political strands – radicalism, liberalism and conservatism – and how these combined to enable rapid counter-revolution. Finally, I link these arguments to broader comparative historical treatments of the revolutions and suggest how one should evaluate their significance. A *

Outbreak***The rapid spread of revolution***

* Historians in thrall to the calendar date the start of the 1848 revolutions to the January disturbances in Palermo in Sicily. However, most historians see the revolutions as beginning in Paris in February, because revolution in Paris triggered revolution elsewhere in a way which events in Sicily could never have done.

In Paris the banning of a reform banquet¹ led to mounting demonstrations on 22, 23 and 24 February, culminating in the erection of street barricades and fighting. After a brief attempt at military repression which only escalated the crisis, Louis Philippe (reign 1830–48) abdicated. A short-lived project to create a regency failed. A republic was proclaimed and a provisional government established by prominent opposition politicians, grouped around two newspapers.

There was acceptance – enthusiastic or resigned – of this Parisian achievement throughout France. In some places the news led to the planting of liberty trees, changes in municipal government and peasant defiance of unpopular laws. The provisional government set about securing its hold on power and setting in hand preparations for the election of a National Assembly on the basis of universal manhood suffrage.

[News from Paris had an electrifying effect beyond France] On 26 February Heinrich von Gagern proposed in the Parliament of Hesse-Darmstadt that there be national representation and a provisional German head of government. (In referring to Germany, Gagern meant the German Confederation established in 1814–15 and which consisted of thirty-nine states of differing size, dominated by the two major powers of Austria and Prussia.) The following day there were demonstrations in the Baden city of Mannheim demanding reform, including national representation. The following two weeks saw many urban demonstrations in south-west Germany. These were accompanied by rural disturbances. Already by 29 February there were peasant actions in Odenwald and the Black Forest. On 4 March 30,000 peasants invaded the town of Wiesbaden. Two days later there were serious disturbances in the state of Württemberg. Sometimes peasants stormed the residence of the lord and destroyed it, along with records of dues and services owed. The smaller states turned to Prussia and Austria for help but they were preoccupied with their own problems. Consequently the smaller states gave way, proclaiming press and other freedoms, appointing opposition liberals to the ministry, promising to convene constituent assemblies.

Next came the Habsburg Empire. There were initially fewer rural disturbances, but news of events in France and Germany sparked off * urban demonstrations. On 3 March in Buda the Magyar radical journalist Kossuth spoke out against Vienna in the name of greater Hungarian autonomy. Within a week there were demonstrations in Vienna demanding reforms. By 12 March these had enlisted student support. These peaceful

Small
peasant
revolt

A-H = urban



Map 7.1 The 1848 revolutions in Europe

demonstrations affected the working-class suburbs of the city where violence broke out on 13 March. The government responded with concessions – above all the dismissal of the Austrian Chancellor Metternich – and military action. Within days the government concluded the situation was beyond control, called off military action and promised many reforms.

News of Metternich's fall had a dramatic effect elsewhere; more than any other individual, he symbolised the old order. In the Polish parts of the empire and in Bohemia and Moravia there were demonstrations and reform demands. In parts of Transylvania groups took over local government. More serious were the repercussions in Italy. Already in February the King of Piedmont and the Grand Duke of Tuscany had granted constitutions. Austria directly controlled Lombardy and Venetia with their regional capitals of Milan and Venice. When news of Metternich's dismissal reached Milan there was a rising in the city. The Austrian commander Radetzky had to retreat from the city on 22 March after five days of bitter fighting. Popular risings in Venetia, especially Venice, led to the expulsion of Austrian troops from the city on 21 March. Radetzky withdrew his troops to a secure mountain region of northern Italy. Without Habsburg support the remaining Italian states were vulnerable.

In Prussia in early March there had been rural unrest in Silesia and demonstrations in some cities. Disturbances in Berlin led to the shooting of civilians on 14 March. By 16 March news of Metternich's dismissal reached the city. A large demonstration on 18 March before the royal palace heard the announcement of concessions such as press freedom but reacted hostilely to the presence of troops. Unrest led to firing upon the crowd which retreated from the palace square to surrounding streets, where barricades were built and buildings taken over. After a night's hard fighting the King decided to withdraw troops from the city. The victory of the crowd was symbolised by the parading of the corpses of those killed during the fighting in carts before the palace where the King was compelled to stand on his balcony, bareheaded, and to bow in repentance before these victims of his army. Within the next three days Prussia announced the calling of a constituent assembly along with a range of freedoms.

In four weeks the political situation in France, Germany, Italy and the Habsburg Empire had been transformed. There was a republic in France; the Habsburg Emperor no longer controlled Hungary or northern Italy and was barely master in Vienna; the King of Prussia had been humiliated by crowd action in his capital; most of the smaller German and Italian states had promised new constitutions and appointed new ministers. Freedom of publication, assembly, association and speech had generally been achieved.

Analysis of the outbreak

One can distinguish three elements: popular action, oppositional politics and governmental responses. By the standards of other revolutions or even later

Am.
empire

Italian
states

Prussia

respectable & limited demands
or remove Radical priv
The revolutions of 1848 113

in 1848 popular action was limited in size, demands and behaviour. Most crowds numbered hundreds rather than thousands. Eyewitnesses remarked upon the respectable appearance and peaceful character of most demonstrations. Demands were usually confined to constitutional reform or the removal of burdens upon landed peasants. With the crucial exception of capital cities, there was little violence, much of that symbolic, such as the destruction of records of seigneurial privilege, or unfocused, as with working-class rampages in the suburbs of Vienna. Insurrections in Paris, Vienna, Milan and Berlin were crucial to the breakdown of authority in those cities and beyond. However, with the exception of Milan, these disturbances lasted for only a day or two and troops were withdrawn before there were many casualties.

Established political opposition – whether moderate or radical – was surprised by the dramatic success of these popular actions. Street leadership, in erecting barricades and organising fighting, was provided by largely anonymous figures. [Opposition politicians had to act quickly to assert their authority, presenting themselves ambiguously as both popular leaders and people who could be coopted to government.] Governments responded with an injudicious [mixture of concession and repression] followed by panic and a rapid capitulation to small protest movements. Only in Milan was repression given a serious try, although its escalation and eventual failure could be used as an argument against that policy.

Why did government prove so inept and weak? There are specific reasons to do with the machinery of law and order. None of the capital cities had a regular, uniformed police force with experience in crowd control. Where there was dependence on civilian militias, such as the National Guard in Paris, these forces failed to rally to the government. Soldiers, trained in conventional battle methods, were a blunt instrument, escalating violence and failing to clear streets of barricades and insurgents. This compares markedly with the response of the British government to the mass demonstration called by Chartist leaders in London for 10 April. Uniformed police, good intelligence (easier when dealing with massive but organised popular movements compared to smaller scale but unorganised popular action), the swearing in of special constables, ostentatious security measures, well-publicised holding in reserve of large bodies of troops: all this stopped the challenge in its tracks. By contrast, continental governments feared revolution inexorably escalating in and beyond their capitals. They felt that middle-class opinion did not support them. Beyond France other governments were worried that a French republic might provoke a crisis, even war, for which soldiers had to be held ready. Some rulers – certainly Louis Philippe and Frederick William IV – had scruples about shooting down their subjects on the streets of their capital. For all these reasons, governments gave way to limited popular movements and brought established opponents into government to fill the power vacuum.

Central to understanding this is the 'myth' of revolution founded by 1789. Revolution in France had led to war and revolution throughout Europe

fear of Fr Republic
return to war!!

Rev i France -> freedom Rev
 elsewhere -> encourage
 as fatalistically accept

between 1793 and 1815. The peace settlement of 1814-15 was not simply about creating diplomatic stability and rewarding the victors; it was also about restoring and supporting 'legitimate' government. Governments should support one another against the potentially dangerous movements of liberalism, nationalism, radicalism and republicanism. France was regarded as the centre for such movements. In 1815 Napoleon's escape and return to power caused panic. In 1830 revolution in Paris stimulated uprisings and unrest in German and Italian states and was linked to the Polish rising of 1831. Political exiles congregated in Paris where they formed international networks and plotted the next revolution. That in turn spawned a minor industry in police spying. When Louis Philippe was overthrown in February 1848 many people saw this as the start of 'revolution'. [Such hopes or fears helped produce the deed.] Accounts of the early stages of revolution frequently deploy the conceit of events following a script, of participants acting out the parts allotted to them by 'revolution'.

Thus it was 'natural' in France that a republic be declared. It was 'natural' that French radicals proclaim the need to restore an independent Poland and that liberals and radicals throughout Europe support that demand. Frederick William IV found it 'natural' to write to Queen Victoria describing revolution as a rising tide which had submerged smaller thrones and was lapping at the feet of mightier ones. One cannot shoot a flood. The constant resort to terms like 'flood' or 'avalanche' is testimony to fatalism. The myth of revolution produced unities of action which turned revolution into fact. This disabling/enabling myth acted as a substitute for the politico-military crises which more normally furnish the immediate conditions for revolution.

The initial impetus came from the towns, especially capital cities. Rural protests followed urban leads once peasants were confident that they could act without risk. Most demonstrations remained moderate and limited. The shift to violent conflict brought in larger and more lower-class participation about which we have some evidence from those killed or injured. Artisans, especially building workers, carpenters, shoemakers, tailors, seem to have been disproportionately involved. This can be linked to structural changes in such trades, less the cause of new technology or factory competition and more due to deskilling, penetration by merchant capital, and increasing use of domestic and female rather than workshop and male labour. Urban unemployment had sharply increased as rising food prices due to poor harvests in 1845 and 1846 reduced disposable income available for non-food purchases. Some of the initial 'social' demands were for 'organisation of work' and the right to work or at least some kind of unemployment support. One should distinguish between artisanal response to structural change and that of the unemployed to a cyclical crisis.

* The centrality of urban movements can be linked to the relatively good
 * harvests of 1847 which meant that the agrarian crisis had already passed
 * its high point by the time revolution began. Food riots, a central feature

Start of
 something
 big? night
 of 1849

urban 1st
 rural later

High % of artisans involved = deskilling

1847/8 good harvest - less food
worse than 'wages' and fewer
The revolutions of 1848 115

of popular protest in 1846 and 1847, were less important in 1848. Rural movements were initially focused on issues that concerned peasants with some land – the end of remaining seigneurial privilege and more locally responsive government – although other issues like free access to the forests had a wide appeal and brought demonstrators directly into conflict with the state. However, these years of hardship had also alienated and even radicalised middling opinion, fatal for governments which had not provided institutional channels for the expression of such opinion.

The new situation

Many contemporaries felt that the world had been turned upside down. With the benefit of hindsight one can see that this was not so. Many regions – 'silent zones' is a phrase used by one historian – saw no popular movements at all. How they would respond to news of revolution made elsewhere remained to be seen. The very rapidity of governmental collapse meant it was superficial. With the exception of Louis Philippe and Ludwig of Bavaria, existing princes remained on their thrones (and Ludwig only abdicated in favour of his son). Armies withdrew resentfully from capital cities to barracks but remained intact, under their regular officers, loyal to their rulers. Government officials continued to administer, collect taxes, enforce laws. The popular movement was small and unorganised, uncertain of where to go having achieved the initial objective of governmental surrender. The new political leaders had no close connections either to these movements or the routine levers of power, and would face the dilemma of whether to focus their attention on securing and extending a popular base or extending their control over the apparatus of government.

However, this initial revolutionary step set up a dynamic. The granting of basic political freedoms stimulated an explosion in publishing, associating, assembling and talking. People who had played no part in the initial phase came forward to form organisations, found newspapers, express demands. There was an immediate focus for this new activity: the elections to be held to many different constituent assemblies – above all, those for France, Prussia and Germany in April. (Austria and Hungary had elections in June. There were elections in the Papal States and mainland Sicily in April and plebiscites in Lombardy and Venetia in May.) New and complex levels of action opened up which could maintain this dynamic: popular movements, associations and communication, elected assemblies, newly constituted governments, the old order.²

The multiple centres and levels of action and the inability of any one centre to impose its will upon others is arguably what defines a 'revolutionary situation'. In some cases this situation characterised a particular place. For example, in Paris there developed power centres around political clubs, militias, the public works, as well as the government (Ledru-Rollin organised his own military force at the Ministry of Interior) and the

lack direction/clarity
+ organisational focus on the

National Assembly. The situation uncannily resembles that in Paris in the 1790s with its *sansculotte sections* and clubs, or Petrograd in 1917 with its provisional government and soviets. One power centre usually controlled affairs in a particular locality, but this varied from locality to locality within the country as a whole. [Counter-revolution is the process of closing down multiple power centres and re-concentrating power into one centre.]

The dynamic established through fragmentation of power and the scope it offered for hitherto unorganised groups to enter the world of politics had an ambivalent character. It mobilised new groups with new demands which could push the revolutionary process further. Conversely, it revealed contradictions between different groups and demands and increased anxiety and concern for an end to the revolutionary situation. How political forces formed and responded to this dynamic and its inherent tensions and how they interacted with one another now need to be considered.³

Radicalism

Before 1848

If radicalism had a buzz-word it was 'the people'. The people, sometimes understood as those who had to work to live; sometimes, more narrowly, as those who worked by the sweat of their brow, and were oppressed by a system which kept power in the hands of parasites. When Georg Büchner wanted a vivid image for propaganda purposes he used the state budget of a small German state. Each item of the budget, for the royal family, the army, the civil service, represented one group of parasites living off the people. Auguste Blanqui, the French revolutionary, constantly contrasted thirty million French 'people' (or 'proletarians') with thirty thousand parasites.

Büchner fled Hesse after peasants handed in copies of his pamphlet to the police; Blanqui spent much of his life in prison. The parasites were adept at protecting their privileges. Radicals envisaged change in two contrasted ways. One was education; once the people understood their situation the sheer weight of numbers would ensure an end to injustice. The other was conspiracy; precise blows at state power would break the hold of the small elite of parasites.

During 1848

Radicals were surprised by a revolutionary outbreak which was the result neither of conspiracy nor enlightenment. They had to think anew about how to act in a revolutionary situation. They began with certain advantages, especially in Paris and a few other cities with a lively tradition of radical organisation. Radicals with their 'power to the people' approach were quick to get on the streets, form newspapers, put up placards, organise political clubs.

The decision to hold elections presented new challenges. In France radicals like Blanqui and Louis Blanc opposed early elections, arguing that the indoctrination of centuries could not be removed in weeks. They feared that existing power-holders would exploit their control over the minds and bodies of the people to get them to vote the wrong way. The provisional republic should rule until the situation had been sufficiently altered to enable people to vote in an informed and enlightened way. There were radical efforts to mobilise crowds in Paris to delay elections. However, the concern to legitimise the republic quickly, the easy exposure to a charge of hypocrisy, even the feeling of many radicals that they could not stand in the way of early elections, help to explain why such reservations were overruled and the decision taken to hold elections to a National Assembly in April.

Radical fears proved well founded. The elections returned a more conservative assembly than that of the Chamber of Deputies elected on the narrow franchise of the July monarchy. The influence of Catholic priests, local notables and Legitimist nobles, as well as peasant indignation at additional taxation to support the Parisian unemployed – all this and more explains conservative success. Beyond France the lack of a developed radical movement and therefore a strong anti-radical reaction meant that liberals did better in elections, though radicals were in a distinct minority.

Radicals had to rethink their politics. 'The people' was a slogan, not a real category; it dissolved into groups with different, even conflicting interests. Radicals had to take note of these different interests and decide where to pitch their appeal, while emergent collective organisation among hitherto poorly organised groups could push radicalism in socially responsive directions. Work had to be done to develop appropriate organisation for an era of mass, open political organisation and regular elections. The process of relearning went furthest in France where radical and republican ideas were most developed and where the setback of electoral defeat was most keenly felt.

This was not a sudden or unified change of direction. Many radicals still hankered after simpler notions of direct action. There were attempts at *coups* or insurrections through the summer and autumn of 1848 but these failed. Many radicals distanced themselves from what they now regarded as obsolete and wrong-headed politics. However, one effect of these failed uprisings was to scare off moderates.

Radicals were tied to existing constituencies. This was especially true in France where the main base of urban radicalism in Paris was torn apart by the growing polarisation between popular institutions (above all, public works projects) and the National Assembly. The crisis came to a head in June after the issuing of a decree ordering public works employees out of Paris to remote areas. Protest led to barricade-building and the taking over by insurgents of working-class sections of eastern Paris. Republicans were split between those wishing to defend the legitimacy of the new republic and those arguing for a move forward to the 'social republic',

that is, one which sought to provide jobs or benefits for unemployed urban workers. The army and other paramilitary units remained loyal to the 'legitimate republic' position. There was no panic as in February. The republican general Cavaignac allowed the insurrection to develop to its full extent and then systematically repressed it.

The repression of the insurrection emboldened regimes elsewhere to take tough action in their capital cities. Insurrection was put down in Prague in June; Vienna followed in October. By November the Berlin population had no stomach to resist the expulsion of the Prussian National Assembly and the introduction of more troops.

This loss of capital cities hastened the reorientation of radicalism to more patient and extensive political activity. (Where it did not happen, for instance, in Venice and Rome, radicalism continued along a more traditional path.) The tragedy was that this major setback also accelerated counter-revolution so that even as radicals extended their support, demonstrated by success in parliamentary elections in France and Prussia in early 1849, so their enemies built up strength even more quickly for a final confrontation which came with the 'second revolutions' of 1849. This new type of social radicalism was repressed almost as soon as it took shape. Radicals were killed, imprisoned, exiled or withdrew from active political life. Only from the 1860s, with the formation of socialist and labour parties, did this kind of radicalism re-emerge, though it was utterly changed.

Nevertheless, those second revolutions revealed the strength of radicalism even in the face of a triumphal counter-revolution. In Italy, Rome and Venice had to be retaken by force. In some of the smaller German states such as Baden, radicals put armies into the field and briefly held power. In Hungary, a movement forced reluctantly into rebellion, with a significant element of existing elite leadership, could only be suppressed by Habsburg and Russian armies, aided by Croatian troops and Rumanian guerrillas.

Liberalism

Before 1848

For liberals the buzz-word was 'constitution'. Liberals sought rule of law, government subject to impersonal constraints imposed by a constitution. They wanted a greater role for elected parliaments but, unlike radicals, were prepared to see that as one element in a constitutional monarchy, rather than the sovereign institution. They were not enamoured of universal suffrage, believing that most men lacked the education or 'stake' (i.e. property) necessary to play a constructive role.

Liberal nationalists had little time for 'small nation' nationalism. Liberals – educated people used to exercising authority in government bureaucracy, university, private enterprise and the professions – thought of the nation in terms of established political institutions and a dominant public

culture. Magyar speakers of the eastern Habsburg Empire, German speakers in the western half, Polish elites of the territories of partitioned Poland, Italian speakers: these all represented 'nations'. By contrast, Slavs or Rumanians were at best regarded as groups whose identity required limited recognition in cultural terms. However, at the level of politics liberals considered that members of such groups would advance by assimilating into the dominant national culture. This was understandable, as these non-dominant cultural groups⁴ had little in the way of political organisation and consciousness by 1848. This was not a view exclusive to liberals in the dominant cultural groups of East-Central Europe but was shared by others in those groups and public opinion in Western Europe.

During 1848

Liberals had been catapulted into apparent power through the capacity of limited popular movements in early 1848 to bring about governmental collapse. Governments had called liberals into ministries; they dominated many of the early parliaments outside France. Their task now was to use these positions to liberalise state institutions and policies and to enact constitutions. In Germany and Hungary these were seen as national constitutions, although this was complicated in the case of Germany by parallel attempts to enact constitutions for individual states. The more localised and uncoordinated movements of Italy meant that this did not take a national form. Poles failed to act effectively as a national movement in 1848.

However, liberals were handicapped. They were beneficiaries of revolutions they had not provoked, did not want, and often denied. Many were unhappy about the continuing dynamism of the revolutionary process. Liberals saw their task not to build a popular base for the future but to deliver the right policies and institutional reforms, in the hope that this would secure a new and stable political system. Often the best way to achieve this was seen as through agreement with the princes who still wielded great power through their control of the civil service and army. Liberals, therefore, often delayed any decisive action before they could be clear as to where such authority lay. In Germany, for example, the German National Assembly was reluctant to take a lead until it was clear whether those in power in Prussia or Austria (prince or parliament) offered the best prospect for cooperation.

Liberals, like radicals, were discovering that actual politics were more complicated than their programmes and plans had allowed. In Germany, there were divisions between Catholics and Protestants over whether Austrian or Prussian pre-eminence was to be preferred, as well as between the liberals of Prussia, Austria and the 'third Germany' (that is, the other German states apart from Austria and Prussia). Liberals in government in individual states were unwilling to cede leadership to liberals at a national level. (There were key exceptions, for example, the willingness of Lombard

liberals to accept the lead of Piedmont as the only way to acquire military power against Austria while marginalising radicalism.)

Liberals found that many of their policies were unpopular. There was antipathy to liberal measures such as dismantling guilds. The principle of free movement alienated communities cherishing the power to block settlement of outsiders. Liberals were unsympathetic to interventionist measures such as the establishment of public works. All this pushed liberals towards princely authority as a bulwark against popular opposition. By September 1848 liberals were welcoming the use of troops to deal with popular opposition. If princes made concessions, this could lead to abandonment of revolution. It would be wrong to portray this as betrayal of the Revolution or class cowardice because liberals had never wanted revolution in the first place.

The 'springtime of peoples' was soon replaced by the 'nightmare of nations'. Dominant national movements came into conflict, as is shown by the German reaction against Polish nationalism in the Prussian province of Posen. More significantly, the revolution accelerated organisation and consciousness among the non-dominant cultural groups. Nationalists insisted on recognition of their cultural identity and political interests. Czechs could not accept that Bohemia and Moravia belonged to 'Germany'; Rumanians that Transylvania belonged to 'Hungary'. German and Magyar liberal nationalists found their nationalism challenged and their liberalism questioned. In response, the Habsburgs could dangle the prospects of federalism before these smaller national movements as the best way to secure their own autonomy.

All this explains why, by early 1849, liberals had been removed from power by radicals or conservatives. Liberals would only make gains from now on by acting as subordinate partners to conservatives.

Conservatism

Conservatism before 1848

So long as those who hold power are not challenged in terms of a different way of holding and using power, they have no need to elaborate arguments and actions in explicit defence of their power. Revolutions create conservatism. Modern conservative ideas were born in reaction to the French Revolution, most famously Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution*. Conservative defences of church and monarchy were elaborated by exiles from the French Revolution and animated Bourbon policies after 1815. Legitimate government was an explicit ideological creed for Metternich, Tsar Nicholas I and Frederick William IV of Prussia.

However, this did not produce conservative movements. Restoration regimes were suspicious of popular appeal, even if it worked in their favour. A church-and-king mob was still a mob. It was better to work against

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liberals and radicals with repressive laws and police spies than arguments. Furthermore, restoration regimes had gravely compromised conservative values. The Bourbons had accepted a constitution, and when Charles X offended against it he was ejected from power in 1830 and replaced by Louis Philippe, acceptable because he was not Bourbon, republican or Bonapartist and therefore represented no principle at all. Metternich was a man of the Enlightenment who defended monarchy and religion in functional, not sentimental terms. The secular bureaucrats who ruled in central Europe had displaced localised aristocratic and church power and could hardly appeal to such traditions. Many principled conservatives found the existing order scarcely preferable to the schemes of liberals and radicals. Occasionally there was a hint of populist conservatism in regime actions but such measures were half-hearted, usually forced by events and soon abandoned.

This helps to explain the impotence of the ruling order in the spring of 1848. There was no strong sense that the form of the regime was really *worth* defending or might have any hold upon popular affection. At local level, expressed vividly in the *Verzichtsbriefe* (literally, resignation letters) drawn up by some Badenese noble landowners surrendering their privileges, there was a genuine sense of resignation. Arguably the most important political feature of the revolutions was the emergence of strong, effective forms of conservatism.

The conservative response to revolution

One can distinguish four modes of conservative response: exercise of traditional authority to mobilise segments of the population against the revolution; making of timely concessions to neutralise potential revolutionary forces; use of established institutions of authority, above all the army, to repress revolution; and construction of an innovative popular politics.

Traditional populism occupied a role in the early elections, and areas untouched by revolution could now play a part. This is clearest in the April 1848 elections in France. Legitimist elites did better in these elections than under the restricted franchise of the July monarchy. This conservatism was especially important in France because Legitimists had opposed the July monarchy and were not compromised by the overthrow of the regime. This was not the case elsewhere, where peasants had grievances against privileged landowners, who in turn were linked to the established monarchy. In Austria, slightly later elections could exploit a backlash against revolution, with areas like the Tyrol and rural Austria following a conservative lead.

However, traditional populism proved inadequate. With elections and liberties people became aware of interests and values against established authority. One response was to make concessions in order to rally certain groups to the restoration of the old order. The key group was the peasantry.

Beyond France, early 1848 witnessed widespread rural disturbances aimed at the removal of existing burdens upon peasant proprietors such as seigneurial dues, unpopular taxes and exclusion from forests. Once these achievements were legalised by new governments and accepted by princes, such peasants had little further interest in revolution. On 26 July 1848 in the newly elected Austrian Reichstag, Hans Kudlich, a peasant's son, proposed the abolition of 'all servile relationships together with rights and obligations coming therefrom'. Ninety-two of the 383 deputies were peasants. The only contentious issue concerned indemnification of the seigneurs. After debate a principle of indemnification was accepted. The Emperor signed the law as 'constitutional Emperor of Austria' on 7 September. By the time of the Vienna insurrection the peasant population of Austria had been neutralised.

A similar policy of concessions to peasants by the existing princes can be observed in other German states. Elsewhere it was less important. In Hungary, peasant emancipation was granted, but by the Magyar leaders acting in the name of the fictive King of Hungary rather than the Emperor of Austria. The effect was to mobilise Magyar peasant support behind that leadership, itself drawn largely from the landowning aristocracy. In Italy, land reform was occasionally taken up by radicals as in the Roman Republic. It has been argued that Radetzky appealed to northern Italian peasants and set them against their nationalist lords, though he did not follow a pro-peasant policy after the restoration of Habsburg rule. Finally, in France the revolutionary settlement had already created a conservatively minded smallholding peasantry whose interests were not threatened by any kind of regime except a 'social republic', and so was available for a variety of political appeals.

A less important area of concessions concerned artisans. A number of German princes opposed the extension of occupational freedom, and supported guilds and the authority of the master. A law to this effect was passed in Prussia in early 1849. However, it was more the insistence of liberals on *laissez-faire* principles which alienated artisans, and such artisans could as easily move towards illiberal radicalism. Political opinion in artisan circles varied with trade, position and region.

Concessions to artisans were inhibited and undermined by concessions to liberals. Although he dissolved the constituent assembly, the Prussian King issued his own constitution a month later. The Austrian Reichstag was moved out of Vienna before the end of 1848, but allowed to continue work on a federalist constitution until March 1849. Even when that had been rejected the government decreed its own constitution. In France, Louis-Napoleon came to the fore as constitutionally elected President of the Republic.

However, there were limits to these constitutional concessions. The Prussian constitution was revised unconstitutionally in an authoritarian direction in 1850. The Habsburg government immediately suspended the

constitution it had decreed and later returned to unconstitutional rule. Louis-Napoleon abrogated the republican constitution by a *coup* in December 1851 and decreed his own imperial constitution in 1852. However, in the short term conservatives had felt obliged to make these concessions.

Things were different where counter-revolution was simply repressed. In Hungary and northern Italy, and smaller German states like Baden and Saxony, the army restored the old order without benefit of constitutions. Yet in less polarised situations the combination of conservative concession and liberal fear of radical revolution helped produce a pragmatic conservatism which embraced a wide range of social groups and political opinions. Most of France rallied behind the repression of the June insurrection. In Berlin and other German cities, businessmen who had supported liberal ministries in the spring welcomed back troops in the summer, even if accompanied by the removal of liberal ministries. There was a national dimension to this, illustrated by the approval by German liberal opinion of the crushing of the Prague insurrection by Windischgrätz who, having done the same in Vienna, ordered the execution of two deputies from the German National Assembly.

This repression came in two phases: the battle for the capital cities in 1848, and the crushing of 'second' revolutions in 1849.

The first phase can be linked to traditional and pragmatic conservatism. Traditional conservatism helped return a conservative French National Assembly which in turn provoked the June insurrection and the broad alliance against it. Something similar was at work in the restoration of order in Vienna and Berlin. When conservatives felt confident about support outside the capital city they could take their time systematically repressing opposition in the capital. This does not apply to the Hungarian and Italian cases where the whole country had to be pacified, along with capital cities. That pacification occurred later, in 1849.

Repression in the capital stimulated the redeployment of radicalism to a broader stage, taking up social questions and building support in both town and countryside. Where parliaments and elections continued to matter, radicalism could appear more threatening. Repression had to be organised on a more widespread basis. The key to this was the regular army. Most armies remained intact and loyal to established authority. In France, this meant the moderate republic. In the Habsburg army, this meant continued loyalty of German and Slav soldiers. The Habsburgs also drew upon the semi-autonomous Croatian army and Russian soldiers. In Italy, the Roman Republic was crushed by the armies of Austria, France and the Kingdom of the two Sicilies.

It is instructive to see what happened when such armed support was not forthcoming. In northern Italy the revolution could call upon the Piedmontese army. After its second defeat by Radetzky in the summer of 1849, that effectively ended resistance in Lombardy. Elsewhere in Italy, revolutionaries formed military forces out of militias, volunteers and

deserters. Such forces proved adept at defending certain towns but less effective at mobile warfare and open battle. In Baden some of the army abandoned their prince and put up stiff resistance. Above all, in Hungary regular officers and military units came over to the Revolution, and there the Revolution proved hardest of all to repress.

Once soldiers had established authority, this was reinforced through political and police measures. Constitutional concessions were withdrawn or limited. Restrictive laws on association and freedom of speech were introduced. New types of policing were established to carry out surveillance on suspect individuals and organisations. Show trials were held. Radicals fled abroad, were executed, imprisoned or forced underground. The restored order was more systematically and effectively repressive than the states of the pre-1848 era.

Yet astute conservatives realised it was impossible to return to the old ways, even if more efficiently. The outbreak of revolution and rapid expansion of popular organisation, especially in France and parts of Germany, made that clear. Concessions to peasants and liberals ensured there could be no simple restoration. The realisation that many elements of radicalism and liberalism were unpopular suggested possibilities for a new kind of conservatism.

The most dramatic and puzzling example of this was Bonapartism. It was difficult to accept that Bonapartism was 'conservative', so novel was it. Louis-Napoleon came from virtually nowhere to win the Presidential election of December 1848 with a massive majority which represented substantial support across society and the political spectrum. In part, this revealed the bankruptcy of conservatism. No monarchical candidacy could be launched in 1848. Apart from Louis-Napoleon and Cavaignac, there stood only radical candidates. Anyone wanting to vote against the republic had only Louis-Napoleon. Yet many republicans also found in his favour the myth of his uncle and that he had no political record, and therefore, no political profile which identified him against the republic. The lack of a mass political culture meant there were no established parties or political positions associated with regions or classes, and Louis-Napoleon provided a weak filling for this vacuum. In the period 1848 to 1850 he took a conservative direction, supporting Papal restoration, cracking down on radicalism and making an alliance with the Catholic Church. However, in 1851 he appeared to be moving in a radical direction, opposing franchise restrictions proposed by Parliament. The December *coup* was aimed against the conservative assembly and included an appeal to the people. However, popular and radical resistance re-routed the *coup* in a conservative direction. Although there was some reshuffling of elite control in such matters as prefectural appointments in the 1850s, in the political sphere the tendency was conservative. However, support for popular social associations, a more forward foreign policy and liberal economic policy made this a complex kind of conservatism.

There was nothing like Bonapartism outside France. Nevertheless, there were more limited kinds of popular conservatism. In Prussia, an assembly of landowners unconvincingly claimed a popular mandate. The newspaper *Kreuzzeitung* sought popular legitimacy for conservative principles. Many people joined the newly formed war veterans' associations, indicating potential for linking Prussian patriotism to royalism. By the early 1850s such political auguries were supported by the pioneering sociology of Wilhelm Riehl, who argued that peasants and artisans were rooted in tradition and wedded to conservative principles, while revolution was the work of rootless groups such as the modern intelligentsia.

In the field of secular politics these were but straws in the wind, marginalised by the return to straightforwardly restrictive and bureaucratic methods. They anticipated a later politics, above all those of Bismarck. More important was how conservative politics and the churches combined. Before 1848 and in the early stages of the Revolution, it was not apparent that organised religion would buttress a conservative political order. The Catholic Church was suspicious of secular, religiously indifferent, even anti-clerical governments, even in Catholic-majority countries like France and Bavaria. Where Catholics were in a minority, the Church supported demands for state/church separation, although this meant something different to bishops than to liberals. Religious reform movements meant potential support for liberal, radical, even socialist ideas. Denominational conflict aligned with political conflict.

When the threats posed by radicalism and liberalism became apparent, this changed. The Catholic Church in France played a major role in the April 1848 elections, the priest often leading his congregation to the polling stations immediately after service. Churchmen denounced radicalism as godless. The Pope moved in a conservative and anti-liberal direction. By 1850 the French government had abandoned its anti-clericalism and granted extra support to the Catholic Church in the field of education. In the German states liberal and radical forms of Christianity were repressed. The Papacy was restored. Catholic and Protestant clerics took up social measures as alternatives to political reform, creating the basis for a new kind of populist religion.

Historiography

Revolutions are about more than politics, but as revolution is the breakdown of order and ending revolution the reassertion of order, the focus of a short treatment must be on the conflicts which produced, deepened and finally liquidated revolution. I have sketched out an argument organised around the concepts of radicalism, liberalism and conservatism.

This could mislead if it made the various revolutions appear essentially similar. Although closely connected in the opening stages, the revolutions later drew further apart. As they entered uncharted waters with the peculiar

combination of apparent collapse but underlying survival of the old order, people referred less to the 'script' of revolution and instead sought novel solutions to novel challenges, paying less attention to what was happening elsewhere.

This fragmentation favoured conservative counter-revolution as liberals and radicals failed to act together. If the Hungarian army had crossed the internal Austrian/Hungarian border in support of the Viennese insurgents in October 1848, it is difficult to see how the Habsburgs could have prevailed. However, the Hungarians were defending a constitutional achievement in Hungary, not promoting revolution throughout the empire. Radical Italians in Rome, Milan and Venice hardly cooperated until the counter-revolution was on the verge of triumph. National antagonisms could be exploited by conservative forces which later repressed all national movements.

If the revolutions became increasingly disconnected (but counter-revolution increasingly connected), were they nevertheless similar? One difficulty is that historians have written about the revolutions in different ways. Writing on the French Revolution sets it in a sequence of revolutions starting in 1789. The focus is on political ideologies and movements and the social bases of such politics treated as a self-contained national event. By contrast, revolution in Italy and the Habsburg Empire is studied in terms of national rather than social movements and seen as crucially dependent upon external forces. Historiography of the German revolutions falls in between. The national question looms large but is one of unification rather than separation from or conflict with other nationalities, and is related to social and political differences between Germans. All this makes a comparative history of the revolutions difficult to write.

The best comparisons are in the social history of the revolutions, comparing peasant or artisan actions, and linking these to economic contexts. These comparisons are best developed for France and the German lands where the social history of revolutions is most advanced. However, new developments in revolutionary historiography insist that we take politics more seriously (rather than seeing these as reflexes of socio-economic forces) and pay more attention to cultural aspects.

A longer account could explore the connections of politics to social history, for instance, considering conservative concessions to peasant interests and radical cultivation of agrarian grievances. The balance and nature of such interests and grievances varied from country to country, even region to region, as did the capacities of different political movements to mobilise them. Exploring these could lead to an integrated comparative political and social history.

Political capacities were culturally informed. Political activists deployed existing rhetorics and rituals, like those associated with carnivals and festivals, to tap support. How a hitherto non-political popular culture could be politicised during revolution remains largely unresearched. Some histor-

ians refer to an 'elementary revolution', meaning actions which were never taken up by any political movement, such as land occupations and machine destructions and which were consigned to the condescension not only of posterity but their own time.⁵

Significance

The revolutions of 1848 are frequently described as failures. This implies that revolutions have purposes. Marxists see revolutions as motors of change. Ruling classes will not give up power without a fight and only after that fight can other classes reorder society and economy in their own interest. This answers the objection that revolutions cannot have purposes; it is classes which produce revolution to realise their purposes. From this perspective an unsuccessful revolution is not a revolution at all. Yet the term 'failed revolution' implies that revolution is a type of event which can be identified, irrespective of whether it produces revolutionary change.

In 1848, revolution was identified with the purposes of certain groups but these were not usually understood as classes, at least in Marxist terms. For conservative enemies revolution meant an overthrow of monarchy, family, private property and Christianity. For its supporters it meant something less hair-raising: constitutional government, equality before the law, democratically elected parliaments, shifts of power and wealth away from elites and towards the 'the people', the liberation of nations. From all these perspectives 1848 can be seen as a failure. However, this also indicates that there were different even conflicting views of whose and what purposes were to be advanced or thwarted by revolution. That makes the question of 'failure' a complex one.

One can draw up balance sheets. Who won and who lost? In social terms the most important winner was the peasantry, especially where emancipation had not yet fully applied to peasants with some hereditary title to land. Conversely, a certain kind of privileged landowner lost, although more in terms of authority and prestige than financially. Wage-labourers lost. Public works and other concessions to the unemployed were liquidated and never revived. A doctrinaire economic liberalism, along with political repression, deprived workers of state aid and suppressed their self-help organisations. In the countryside the settlement of propertied peasant grievances left smallholders and landless labourers more impotent than before. Conversely, such policies helped entrepreneurs. It is no coincidence that the first important bout of industrialisation, under free-market conditions, took place in continental Europe in the 1850s and 1860s.

A political balance sheet can also be drawn up. The losers were radicals; 1848 liquidated not only pre-1848 radicalism, it also nipped in the bud the emergence of a more socially responsive radicalism. Along with repression of free-thinking Nonconformist religion, this undermined the potential for the type of populist liberalism which developed in England

- linear + dynamic
✓ meaning / (liquidated)

and the USA. Liberalism and nationalism were defeated, although their reorientation in authoritarian and pro-state directions laid the basis for nationalist success a decade or so later. The clear winner was the authoritarian state which entrenched itself in a much tougher and more effective way than before 1848.

This balance sheet exercise is crude. It cannot easily discriminate between short- and long-term effects, ascribes an unchanging identity to the groups (peasant, liberal, etc.) which 'win' or 'lose', and assumes a zero-sum outcome. One must also try to understand the difference which revolution made.

It altered political values. Belief in secular ideals such as 'the people', 'constitution' or 'crown' was undermined, and people turned to more 'realistic' politics. Marx insisted that radicalism, like all political values, could only be understood in relation to class interests. August Rochau⁶ argued that liberalism could advance only in tandem with economic interests and must make pragmatic alliances with current power-holders. Bismarck believed that conservatism was a matter of interests and power. All three dismissed as utopian blatherings the idealism of the 1848ers. Increasingly their realistic views came to prevail.

The revolutions ended a pattern of revolutions. There was only one more classical revolution in regions affected by revolution in 1848 – the Paris Commune – and that was confined to one city. The repression of revolutionary radicalism and the toughening of the existing state with bureaucratic and populist measures placed massive obstacles in the path of such revolution. Industrialisation and the emergence of a settled, increasingly organised working class had similar tendencies. By the end of his life Friedrich Engels, Marx's closest collaborator, concluded that fundamental change did not require revolution. When the next revolution came it would be in a backward country, in Russia, the bulwark of the counter-revolution in 1848.

Chronology

1848

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| <i>January</i> | Italy: Insurrection in Sicily; King of Two Sicilies grants constitution. |
| <i>February</i> | Italy: Constitutions granted in Piedmont and Tuscany.
France: Revolution in Paris leads to proclamation of provisional republic. |
| <i>March</i> | Italy: Habsburg troops driven out of Lombardy and Venetia and Piedmontese troops move in; Pius IX grants constitution in Papal States. |

Germany: Demonstrations; concessions by smaller states; insurrections in Vienna and Berlin lead to new ministries; preparations for German Parliament.

Hungary: Demonstrations, new ministry appointed.

April

Britain: Mass Chartist meeting disperses peacefully.

France: Elections to National Assembly.

Italy: Elections in Papal States and mainland of Kingdom of Two Sicilies.

Germany: Suppression of radical insurrection in Baden; war between Prussia and Denmark.

Hungary: Emperor recognises autonomy with 'April Laws'.

May

France: Failure of radical demonstrations in Paris; Luxembourg Commission (to consider labour problems) dissolved.

Italy: Plebiscites in Lombardy and Venetia vote overwhelmingly for fusion with Piedmont.

Germany: A National Parliament elected and meets in Frankfurt; a Prussian Parliament meets in Berlin; elections called for Austria and court flees Vienna.

June

France: Insurrection crushed in Paris.

Italy: Austrian military success in Venetia; elections in Tuscany.

Germany: National Assembly creates provisional government and Archduke Johann of Austria elected imperial regent. Elections for Austrian Reichstag. Slav congress in Prague followed by suppression of street action.

July

Italy: Radetzky defeats Piedmont at Custoza.

Germany: Artisan congress; Austrian Reichstag meets.

Hungary: National Assembly meets.

August

Italy: Radetzky occupies most of Lombardy and Venetia.

Germany: Prussian government signs Malmö armistice with Denmark.

Austria: Court returns to Vienna.

September

Germany: Disturbances in Frankfurt after Parliament accepts Malmö armistice; Austrian Reichstag votes to abolish serfdom.

Hungary: Croatian leader Jelacic invades; war with imperial government; Rumanians prepare to take action against Hungarian government.

- October* Hungary: Military success against Jelacic.
Germany: insurrection in Vienna.
- November* France: Constitution finalised.
Italy: Democrats take power in Rome.
Germany: Conservative ministry appointed in Berlin and Parliament moved out of city; insurrection in Vienna crushed and Schwarzenberg appointed prime minister.
- December* France: Louis Napoleon elected President.
Germany: Prussian government dissolves Parliament and issues own constitution; Franz Joseph becomes Austrian Emperor and imperial army invades Hungary.

1849

- January* Italy: Democrats winning elections in Piedmont and Papal States.
Germany: National Parliament issues Declaration of Basic Rights.
- February* Italy: Republic declared in Rome; a revolutionary government in Tuscany.
- March* Italy: Piedmont at war with Austria and defeated at Novarra; King of Two Sicilies dissolves Parliament.
Germany: National Parliament completes constitution and offers imperial Crown to King Frederick William IV of Prussia; Austrian Constituent Assembly dissolved.
Hungary: Its forces conquer most of Transylvania.
- April* France: Soldiers sent to aid Pope in Papal States.
Italy: Grand Duke of Tuscany regains power; Austrian troops besiege Venice.
Germany: Twenty-eight states accept constitution but rejected by Frederick William IV.
Hungary: Austrian troops defeated; declaration of independence; Emperor asks Tsar for help.
- May* France: Radical successes in elections.
Italy: Austria bombards Venice; Neapolitan troops reconquer Sicily.
Germany: Revolutions in south-western states in support of imperial constitution.
- June* France: Radical demonstrations against intervention in Rome defeated.
Germany: Revolution crushed; National Parliament dissolved.

	Hungary: New assault by imperial troops and entry of Russian troops.
July	Germany: Prussia suppresses last resistance in Baden.
August	Italy: French troops conquer Roman Republic; Austrian troops occupy Venice. Hungary: Conquered by Habsburg and Russian troops, Kossuth flees country. By August 1849 the revolutions were effectively over although the business of repression went on for some time.

Notes

- 1 The established political opposition had instituted a series of these banquets where prominent political figures gave speeches and which were attended by a large audience beyond those who had subscribed to the actual meal.
- 2 I derive these ideas of 'levels' from Wolfram Siemann, *The German Revolution of 1848–49*, London, 1998.
- 3 In the section on radicalism I will pay particular attention to France, as radical movements were most developed there. In the section on liberalism I will pay particular attention to areas beyond France, as issues of constitutionalism and national government were not as important in France. By this means, and with a more balanced treatment of conservatism, I hope to combine thematic with geographical coverage.
- 4 This rather clumsy phraseology is now the accepted alternative to the unacceptable contemporary notions of 'historical' and 'non-historical' peoples and is more precise than that of 'large' and 'small' nations.
- 5 For the idea of an 'elementary revolution', see Siemann, *ibid.* A good example of how to relate politicisation to pre-political popular culture is Jonathan Sperber, *Rhineland Radicals: The Democratic Movement and the Revolution of 1848–1849*, New Jersey, 1991.
- 6 A German liberal who coined the term *Realpolitik*.

Further reading

- Maurice Agulhon, *The Republican Experiment, 1848–1852*, Cambridge, 1983.
- John Breuilly, *Mass Politics and the Revolutions of 1848*, part of *Core Resources for Historians: A Multimedia CD-Rom*, a 'learning package' produced by TLTP History Courseware Consortium, University of Glasgow, 1998.
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- Stanley Pech, *The Czech Revolution of 1848*, Chapel Hill, NC, 1969.
- Roger Price, *The French Second Republic: A Social History*, London, 1972.
- John Rath, *The Viennese Revolution of 1848*, Austin, TX, 1957.
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