

# 1848: REVOLUTION AND REACTION

<http://mars.wnec.edu/~grempe/courses/germany/lectures/081848.html>

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## I. Background

By the late 1840's the effects of the industrial revolution had become fully apparent. A class of wage workers had been created. The antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat became sharper and sharper. So the tensions between the remains of the old order and an increasingly powerful middle class rose to the breaking point.

The Revolution of 1848 was a social revolution: a movement of repressed peasants, of a rising middle class, and of an exploited urban proletariat. Radical social ideas had been in gestation since 1800, but they were now brought into the foreground, and began to penetrate liberal and democratic circles. Above everything loomed the question of German unification, which remained the starting point of all subsequent movements to democratize Germany.

The antecedents for the social revolution were to be found in the liberal and constitutional movements of the south German states. Here liberals like Struve and

Hecker had for some time demanded a variety of reforms:

1. universal arming of the populace;
2. freely elected parliaments;
3. universal suffrage;
4. freedom of the press, religion, conscience and teaching;
5. trial by jury;
6. universal German citizenship;
7. just taxation;
8. universal instruction;
9. protection of labor and the right to work;
10. adjustments of capital vis-a-vis labor;
11. popular and economic administration;
12. responsibility of ministers and all officials;
13. abolition of all privileges;
14. a national militia;
15. a national assembly.

In Prussia a combination of the two curia assemblies (nobles and 3 estates) finally formed a united Landtag. But according to the king the Landtag represented rights not opinions. As far as a constitution was concerned, he swore that no mere piece of paper would and come between him and the Lord God. The paragraphs of a constitution could not replace the old loyalties, the king thought.

The February Revolution in Paris had great effect on Germany. In the spring peasant revolts mushroomed in the South and West. These peasants--at least many of them--were impressed by the success of the German immigrants in the United States. So they demanded the abolition of the nobility, since the USA did not have any.

## II. Early Initiatives

The first organized initiative came at Mannheim on February 27 when the rebels issued a series of demands to the Baden government. Another such incident occurred at Heidelberg two days later. Then on March 19 a group of radicals called a meeting at Offenburg where they came up with a plan to organize Jacobin clubs in Germany. The leaders of the South German radicals were two Mannheim lawyers: Peter Struve and Frederick Hecker. Hecker led an abortive putsch and then emigrated to the United States. Struve, the son of a Russian diplomat, wanted an egalitarian republic. He also led an abortive putsch and then followed Hecker to the USA.

But in Cologne and Berlin the social protest was more organized and centered on the industrial proletariat. These movements were influenced to some extent by

Marx and Engels, who had just written their famous Manifesto, a product of the program of the Communist League, earlier called the Federation of the Just. Marx disseminated propaganda through his *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* between June 1848 and May 1849 and sent agents in all directions to sharpen the ensuing class struggle.

In Berlin the increasing revolutionary activity of workers was heightened by an economic crisis and widespread unemployment. There had been an incipient worker movement since at least 1844. There were, for instance, the famous "Rhebergers", a group of 600 to 700 unemployed huskies who marched through the streets striking fear in the hearts of the enemies of liberty, as they said. Wilhelm Weitling, an early and relatively mild communist, was active in Berlin. Friedrich Held, another radical, was popular among machinists. There were also radical republican groups and extreme communists (Gustav Schlöffel).

The most intelligent, significant and lasting of the worker groups in Berlin was that led by Stephan Born. He was in touch with Marx but operated independently. Born believed that workers must organize to assert their powers. The goal he and his men pursued was social freedom and the independent

existence of the people. He presented a petition to the Frankfurt Assembly which had some interesting demands:

1. maximum wages and maximum hours of labor;
2. the right of association;
3. a progressive income tax
4. state education
5. free public libraries
6. regulation of the number of apprentices taken by a master
7. abolition of travel restrictions for workers
8. reduction of the voting age to twenty-four.

You may notice that not one of these demands seem very radical or communistic to us today. They are the standard liberal fare--even some conservatives could live with them. Born started the first all-German workers organization. Eventually he moved to Leipzig where he prepared the ground for Ferdinand Lassalle, one of the founders of German Socialism.

The proletarian role in the Revolution played an important part, yet the influence of the Communist League and the Communist Manifesto was very small. Marx had trouble getting his ideas across to the workers. What moved them really were economic conditions and political oppression. Since the worker

movement seemed to be relatively free of propaganda, Prussian conservatives like Radowitz suggested to Frederick William IV that the socialist movement could be harnessed to the monarchy. Bismarck, no doubt, learned much from Radowitz, as we shall see. It is clear that the most consistent and most earnest advocates of political democracy were to be found among the bourgeois democrats and liberals rather than among the communists of 1848.

The effects of the February revolution in Paris then brought social and political demonstrations throughout Germany. Liberal ministries were established in Württemberg, Hanover, Brunswick, Saxe-Weimar and Oldenburg. King Ludwig I (mad Ludwig) of Bavaria had to abdicate and get rid of his free-spending mistress, Lola Montez. Even the German Diet became more liberal in some respects.

### III. Vienna

Now let us turn to Vienna. There the Paris Revolution created a panic on the stock market, which had social ramifications. Two organizations took the lead--the Gewerbeverein (petty bourgeois artisans) and the Leseverein (wealthier elements). They began to send petitions to the Austrian emperor, largely because they were stimulated by Louis Kossuth's revolutionary

success in Hungary. Soon people were in the streets crying: "Down with Metternich"!

So revolutionary workshops were organized. The government was compelled to declare a constitutional state by decree. This was probably an attempt to bypass the revolution from below by giving the people what they wanted from above. A bicameral legislature was established, the lower house being elected by popular suffrage. The vote was given to all adult males except domestics. There was even ministerial responsibility. But the Constitution satisfied no one.

Mass demonstrations broke out on May 15. The emperor was forced to leave Vienna and go to one of his other palaces at Innsbruck. Anarchy soon reigned in the streets of Vienna and barricades, in the French fashion, rose on street corners. So one of the revolutionaries took things in his own hands. Adolf Fischhof created a security commission of 100 and assumed dictatorial powers.

#### IV. Prussia

In Prussia the first revolutionary reverberations were felt in the Rhineland, where the Communist League drafted a petition to the king on March 8. But the most important events took place in Berlin. Here

revolutionary action coincided with the dismissal by the Borsig Works of 400 workers. On March 14 the streets were filled with soldiers. On March 15 crowds swarmed around the royal palace. Barricades went up and several people were killed. On March 16 while the news of the Viennese revolution reached Berlin, Prince William strongly opposed any form of concession to the demonstrators.

But a delegation of protesters went to see the king, who gave in somewhat by removing censorship and agreeing to call a general parliament. But the crowd refused to leave the courtyard of the royal palace and had to be removed forcibly. There were two unidentified gun shots which triggered eight long hours of streetfighting.

But the revolutionary movement in Berlin lacked effective leadership. Several hundred soldiers and civilians were killed as a result. The king was horrified and made a speech: "To My Beloved Berliners". He said in effect, take away the barricades and I will remove the troops. General Prittwitz had removed the troops at the king's order and left him unprotected. Thus when there was a mass demonstration on March 19 in honor of the fallen, the king was forced to participate and march in the procession. In the



evening the king issued another proclamation: "Prussia will merge itself forthwith into Germany." He also agreed to the earlier demands and the Prussian Diet was to become a general national assembly. Ludolf Camphausen was called in to form a liberal ministry, as the cleft between right and left widened.

Few people made any meaningful distinctions between the agitation of Marx, the social revolutionary activity of Hecker and Struve, the labor organizations of Born and the revolutionary democratic movement of Robert Blum. Reaction against the workers began to set in. The only thing the Communist minority did was to muddy the waters. Nothing was altered in Prussia except the ministry of the government. Very soon the questions of unity and constitutional reform superseded all other questions. 1848 represents the only attempt in German history to solve the question of unity by liberal-democratic action of the people.

## V. Frankfurt

Meanwhile, at Heidelberg, 51 self-appointed delegates begin to make plans for an election to a national German assembly. Then a so-called Pre-Parliament met in Frankfurt with 500 delegates, although it had no constitutional authority. But it decided to call for a general election on the basis of universal suffrage.

There were no feudalists or communists in this constitutional convention, as we might call it. Out of the 500 delegates about 150 of them were republicans, but only Hecker and Struve were interested in society or social reforms. The rest were concerned with the state and the magic charms of constitutionalism. The respectable, orderly, political revolution had triumphed over the ideas of a social revolutionary upheaval.

When the first national, general, German election took place, unrestricted suffrage was carried out only in Austria, Prussia, Hesse-Darmstadt, Schleswig-Holstein, Brunswick and Nassau. The other states encumbered the election process in various ways. The resulting National Assembly convened in St. Paul's Church in Frankfurt on May 18, 1848.

Out of 831 representatives, 569 were academicians. It was a professors parliament, and some people have said that was precisely the reason for its failure. Be that as it may, it is true that there were few independent men of the people. There were few practical politicians. Some 437 delegates can be identified in terms of political factions:

Right Wing was made up mostly of Austrians (40) and Prussian officials (122).

Right Center contained mostly academicians and representatives from the North (40).

Left Center was made up of younger, southern representatives championing popular sovereignty and constitutional monarchy (132).

Left with 56 delegates included Blum, Vogt and Eisenstück.

Extreme Left, or democratic party, with 47 delegates was led by Lorenz Brentano and Arnold Rüge.

The president of the Assembly, Heinrich von Gagern, was an imposing figure, but he was totally unrealistic politically. Bismarck called him a "phrase watering can." From the beginning the main problems were particularism, religion and the Austro-Prussian dualism. There was no problem in creating the post of an imperial vice regent. Grand Duke Johann of Austria was chosen for this job. It was an attempt to create a kind of temporary national executive, but it did not get very far since most states failed to fully recognize the new war minister of parliament. Thus from the start the executive weakness of the assembly became quite apparent.

The foreign policy of 1848-1849 was a curious mixture of political impotence and aggressive nationalist sentiment. Contrary to the Marxist interpretation,

which charges that the failure of 1848 was due to the fact that the Assembly refused to face the social problem, recent scholarship says that the failure can be laid at the door of the Pan-German expansionist majority. Perhaps, there is food for thought in both views.

When the Czech leader Palacky convened Pan-Slave Congress in Prague, most of the deputies in the National Assembly were shocked. German liberals and radicals took the view that Czech nationalism was without foundation and reactionary in character. Even Marx and Engels opposed the Czech nationalists. That rebellion in Prague was crushed by the Austrian general Windischgratz and thus the Frankfurt Assembly was relieved. A moderate resolution introduced by Rüge which sought to guarantee protection of all nationalities was defeated by the super-nationalist majority.

Then in July there came a stirring debate over Poland. Wilhelm Jordan advocated a chauvinistic, anti-Polish policy, whereas Robert Blum and Arnold Rüge defended the Poles. The latter were defeated. The military power of Prussia was given the blessing of the National Assembly in its suppression of Polish minority nationalists within German territory. So here

we had the same solution as in Bohemia. The Prussian government then proceeded to annex large sections of Posen.

In another territorial problem, that of Schleswig-Holstein, the nationalist sentiment of the Assembly had to yield before the political realities of Prussian policy. King Frederick VII of Denmark incorporated these two duchies, which triggered a rebellion by the German majority. They appealed for help to the German Confederation. Prussia then intervened militarily, but the Great Powers forced an armistice at Malmo. So the National Assembly became dependent on Prussian military power, rapidly losing its independence. A drift to the Right within the Assembly became very apparent.

On October 26 Count Deym gave a very pan-German speech. He was opposed by Vogt, Rüge and Blum, but without any noticeable effect. The Kleindeutsch versus Grossdeutsch issue now aggravated even the constitutional debate. When a Declaration of Fundamental Rights was passed in December, the breach with Austria became even wider. The Vienna police arrested Robert Blum on one of his trips and executed him for treason, because he had encouraged Czech nationalism in the Assembly. This was a blatant

challenge to the authority of the Assembly.

Yet the endless debates in the Assembly went on. Finally in March 1849 the Assembly adopted a constitution for a united empire. It was the Kleindeutsch solution without question. This meant that Austria would probably be excluded from the new German political union. The Constitution called for an emperor with a suspensive veto and a two-house parliament like that of the USA. Twenty-eight states were willing to accept this constitution, if the suspensive veto were changed to an absolute veto, open elections were substituted for secret elections, and increased power were given to the upper chamber. It was the conservative German character asserting itself. But the changes could not be carried out. Austria, Bavaria and Hanover rejected the constitution in any form.

Meanwhile the crown of "constitutional emperor" was offered to King Frederick William of Prussia. He rejected a crown offered to him from the gutter, as he put it. He might have accepted it, if it had been offered by the princes. Austria and Prussia then both withdrew their delegates from the Assembly, which literally disintegrated into dust.

A diehard rump met in Stuttgart and issued an appeal to the people, but Württemberg troops dispersed them on June 18, 1849. Uprisings in support of the constitution followed in Saxony, Bavaria, Palatinate and Baden, but they had little effect. In Baden the provisional government was crushed by Prussian troops.

It was the end of liberal nationalism in Germany. The French revolutionaries really won in 1789, as did the English in the 17th century. But not the Germans. Their failure was due to the enormous disparity between political aspirations of the German liberals and the mass support and actual power and influence they commanded. In other words the German liberals did not have a sufficiently large following among the people.

The ultimate cause for failure were Prussia and Austria. The people in these countries, and in the rest of Germany, were simply propagandized to believe that they did not have any political talent. Decisions had to be made for them. Many liberals, therefore, found no other solution except to emigrate, which they did by the thousands.

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