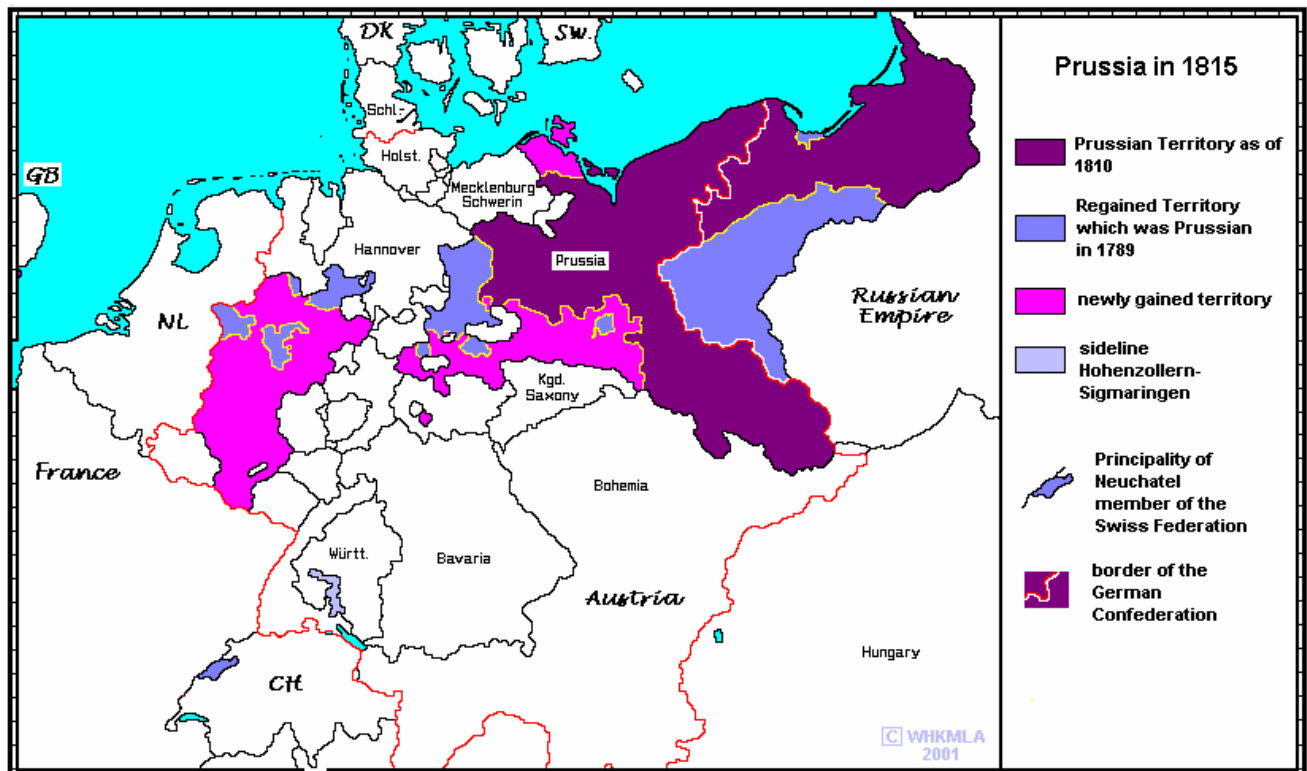


The German 1848 Revolution: A German Perspective

Historians generally agree on the term Deutsche Revolution (German Revolution) or Märzrevolution (March Revolution) for the events of [March 1848](#) through [1849](#).

Its supporters and participants are called the Achtundvierziger (Forty-Eighters). The period leading up to the March Revolution is called [Vormärz](#) (pre-March period) with some historians starting it as early as 1815.





THE GERMAN REVOLUTION OF 1848

After Napoleon Bonaparte's defeat at Waterloo, the victorious European powers met in Vienna to establish a new European order for peace and stability (Wiener Kongress 1814/15). Under the leadership of Austria's Chancellor Fürst Metternich, this treaty was meant to turn back the clock of history and restore and conserve as much of the pre-war order as possible. (1) The positions of ruling monarchs were to be strengthened and liberal ideas threatening to undermine them were to be eradicated.

Along these lines, the Deutscher Bund (German Federation) was formed by 35 sovereign monarchs and four independent Free Cities as a successor to the Deutsches Reich (German Empire) which had ceased to exist in 1806. The only and very loose connection between the states was the Bundestag in Frankfurt, where their delegates met under Austrian chairmanship. Economic development of the mostly small and economically unviable states was hindered by borders and customs regulation. In rural areas, where 80 percent of the population lived, sole ownership of land by aristocracy and church and the servitude of farmers were undiminished.

In towns a strict social order and economic regulations had to be observed. In accordance with the Karlsbad resolution, which all rulers had agreed upon, strict censorship radically suppressed every notion of a free press.

However, the population in general cared little about politics. Theirs was the world of Biedermeier, the term used to describe this period of comfortable, but stagnant and sleepy, inward-looking and narrow-minded society. But increasingly intellectuals felt the lack of

individual rights, as compared with those achieved in England (Glorious Revolution, 1688), the United States (Declaration of Independence of 1776, and the Constitution, 1787), and France (Revolution of 1789) and began to voice their discontent. Individuals like Gottlieb Fichte and Ernst Moritz Arndt spread liberal ideas through their literary works.

A first indication that these ideas were catching on was the growth of the Burschenschaften (student associations) at German universities with "Ehre, Freiheit, Vaterland" (honor, freedom, fatherland) as their motto. The Wartburgfest (student festival at Wartburg castle (2) in October 1817) was their first major appearance, commemorating both the Protestant Reformation of 1517 and the Battle of Leipzig four years earlier (1813). As shown by the word "fatherland" in their motto, Germans began to feel increasingly uneasy with the disparity between sharing one cultural heritage, thus belonging to one nation, but living in 39 separate states. The cry for national unity became louder, creating a second threat to the established order, in addition to liberal ideas.

The students chose black, red, and gold as the colors for their flags, ribbons and caps. These were the colors of the uniforms of the Lützower Jäger, an

infantry unit of volunteers which had distinguished itself in the wars against Napoleon. Many veterans of this unit, some by now students, were present at the Wartburgfest, among them Friedrich Jahn (see below). Black, red and gold were also the colors used for the flag of the Deutsches Reich in medieval times (a black eagle on a golden rectangular cloth attached to a red shaft). Thus these colors symbolized German unity in a dual sense.

Two years later, Karl Ludwig Sand, one of these students (he had carried the black, red and gold flag), murdered August von Kotzebue, a popular poet and writer because of his conservative views. As a result, censorship was tightened and all universities were placed under close state supervision.

Another patriotic and liberal movement, the Turner, were led by Friedrich Ludwig Jahn. (3)



Political conditions come to a head

The French Revolution of July 1830 deposed the reactionary King Charles X and installed Citizen-King Louis Philippe of Orleans. This ignited unrest and rebellion in parts of Braunschweig, Hessia, Baden, Saxony, Hanover, and Bavaria.

Some of the liberal demands were fulfilled by the granting of constitutions and a relaxation of oppressive measures. In 1831 a wave of sympathy and support for the Polish rebellion against the Russian Czar and its attempt to reestablish a free and united Poland swept through Germany.

On May 27, 1832, approximately 30,000 people, many of them again students and Turner, gathered at the Hambacher Fest (4) to voice their demands for a liberal, unified Germany, for freedom of the press, for the lifting of feudal burdens, for religious tolerance-- and even, as demands grew bolder and more radical, for proclamation of a republic. Predictably, a wave of arrests followed, as well as new laws to suppress liberals.

On April 3, 1833, a group of students and young citizens tried to storm the Hauptwache and Konstablerwache (police headquarters) in Frankfurt to liberate political prisoners. After that they planned to arrest the delegates to the Bundestag and form a revolutionary government. The attempt failed, as authorities had been forewarned and the expected support from the citizenry failed to materialize. Again, ruling aristocrats reacted with tightening restrictions agreed upon at the Wiener Ministerkonferenz of 1834. An alphabetical list--the "black list"--was drawn up, which contained the names of all the persons who had been investigated and/or sentenced for revolutionary activities. They were to be denied entry into other German states and ineligible for employment by the states.

In 1837 the Göttinger Sieben (seven professors from the University of Göttingen--among them the famous Grimm brothers) protested the annulment of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Hanover and were promptly fired.

On the other hand, economic growth and increasing trade led to an easing and lifting of customs regulations making borders more pervious not only to goods but also to ideas. Zollvereine (free trade areas) were established and enlarged step by step, until, in 1834 the Deutscher Zollverein included almost all members of the Deutscher Bund, except Austria. In this, many saw a first step toward a united Germany. Railroads, the first of which operated between Nürnberg and Fürth in 1835, began to bring the country close together.

Beginning industrialization, combined with a rapid growth of population, led to the formation of an urbanized working class which mostly lived in utter poverty and misery. Even 15 hours of daily work (including the work of wife and children) usually failed to raise a family above the subsistence level. In an uprising in June 1844, weavers in Silesia demanded a raise of their "starvation wages." They were told "to eat grass," and the revolt was put down by the Prussian

army. Events like these added a third dimension to the pre-March era, that of demands for relief of social problems which eventually grew into the socialist and communist movements. (5) In 1847, crop failures led to famines. Unemployment rose, and hunger riots by desperate workers demanding food were put down by the military.

By March of 1848, Germany was a tinderbox waiting for a spark.

Märzrevolution (the March Revolution)

This spark appeared in the form of the French Revolution of February. Citizen-King Louis Philippe had betrayed his original supporters from the lower and middle classes, especially by denying them suffrage, and openly favored the rich upper class and aristocracy. He was overthrown and the Second Republic was proclaimed by revolutionary leaders from the working and middle classes (6) In contrast to previous French revolutions, especially the revolution of 1789, this one immediately spread to Germany (7), not only because news now traveled fast by telegraph, but because the time was ripe for rebellion.

Events began rolling on February 27 in Mannheim, where a Badische Volksversammlung (Assembly of the people from Baden) adopted a resolution demanding a

bill of rights. Similar resolutions were adopted in Württemberg, Hessen-Darmstadt, Nassau, and other areas. The surprisingly strong popular support for these movements forced rulers to give in to many of the Märzforderungen (demands of March) almost without resistance. Märzministerien (liberal governments) were installed (for example in Saxony on March 16, in Bavaria on March 20)--all in an attempt to pacify the unruly masses, to contain the spreading of revolutionary ideas and to save the monarchies by offering concessions. However, overall success of the Revolution depended upon the course of events in the two major German states, Austria and Prussia.

In Austria, Chancellor Metternich had to step down on March 13 in the face of a popular uprising and went into exile in England.

In Prussia, King Friedrich Wilhelm IV originally declined to grant a constitution because he would "not allow a sheet of paper to come between him and his people." Public protests increase, however, and threatened to turn into rebellion. On March 17, in counsel with his ministers and generals, and against the advice of most of them, Friedrich Wilhelm decided that the best way to control this movement was to lead it--and gave in to practically all the demonstrators'

demands, including free parliamentary elections, a constitution, and freedom of the press. He even promised that Prussia would lead the way to a united Germany and merge with it.

When this was published, a huge, delighted crowd wanted to show its gratitude by celebrating in front of the king's palace. When some became a little too exuberant and tried to enter the palace, troops were sent to slowly move the crowd away. Two shots were fired by the troops--by accident, and into the air--but the damage was done. People felt they had been tricked and the celebration turned into a riot.

Barricades were erected and fierce fighting erupted, leaving 254 civilians dead before troops were ordered to retreat in the night.

The king is reported to have been utterly devastated and unable to comprehend that "his people" could turn against him. On the other hand, "his army" felt its honor had been soiled by a retreat before a bunch of rag-tag civilians.

On March 19, once again a crowd gathered in the front of the palace to celebrate. A group of provocateurs had loaded some of the victims onto a cart and paraded it past the balcony on which the king and queen were standing. After shouts of "Take your hat off," the king

even complied. On March 21, he paraded through the streets of Berlin in the company of some ministers, generals and members of his family, all wearing black, red and golden sashes.

While this humbling of the monarch may have given some satisfaction to the more radical participants of the revolt, the appointment of liberal ministers and enactment of reform were seen as more important.

The National Assembly meets in St. Paul's Church

Encouraged by these seemingly easy victories on the level of the individual states, a self-appointed Vorparlament (preliminary parliament) met in Frankfurt's Paulskirche (St. Paul's Church). They called for free elections to be held to nominate delegates to a Nationalversammlung (National Assembly) for all of Germany--and the German states agreed. Finally, on May 18, 1848 all of the events of the Vormärz and the Vormärzrevolution climaxed when this Nationalversammlung opened its session in the Paulskirche. Of the 585 delegates of the first freely elected (8) German parliament, so many were professor or had a university education that it was called a Gelehrtenparlament (parliament of scholars). It has been said that never before or afterward a more learned parliament sat anywhere in the world. Under

the chairmanship of Heinrich Freiherr von Gagern, a liberal minister from Hessen, the assembly started on its ambitious plan to create a modern, liberal constitution as the foundation for a unified Germany. First on the agenda was a declaration of the Grundrechte (a bill of rights) of the German people. Discussion lasted until October. In between, a provisional central administration was installed, headed by Austrian Erzherzog (Archduke) Johann, whose title was Reichsverweser (provisional head of government). He was extremely popular with the liberal delegates because of his winsome, unpretentious manners. By his marriage to a commoner's daughter, he seemed predestined to bridge the gap between aristocrats and Bürgertum (9). However, this is when the first disillusionment set in for the new administration: Its acts were not recognized by the German states nor by other countries--and neither was its new flag of black, red, and gold.

Another setback occurred because of the Schleswig-Holsteinische Frage (problem of Schleswig-Holstein). These two territories with a predominantly German population were associated with Denmark, which made moves to annex them. Prussia went to war to prevent this but soon agreed to an armistice, as Russia,

Sweden, and England threatened to intervene. Conditions of the armistice were such that they seemed to cede these German-speaking territories to Denmark. The Nationalversammlung, on a wave of nationalistic emotions--as its goal was to create a state to include all Germans--voted against the treaty in September 5. After realizing that it could not change Prussia's mind, the Nationalversammlung reversed its vote on September 16, thereby heavily damaging its reputation with the German public.

A third setback came the next day, when leftist and socialist agitators incited a crowd to break up the Nationalversammlung, install a more radical one, and proclaim a republic. The Nationalversammlung had to be rescued by troops of the rulers whose powers it sought to curtail.

Finally, after five months, discussions on the shape of the future constitution started. Some of the major questions waiting to be decided were these:

Should the resurrected Deutsches Reich be a hereditary monarchy, have an elected monarch, or even become a republic?

Should it include Austria, which then would probably lead it (Gross Deutschland--Grand Germany), or exclude Austria, with leadership falling to Prussia

(Kleindeutschland--Little Germany)?

Should it be a federation of relatively independent states or have a strong central government?

Again, events began to overtake the deliberate discussion. Delegate Robert Blum had been sent to Vienna by his left-wing political colleagues on a fact-finding tour to see how Austria's government was rolling back liberal achievements by military force. Not content with just observing, Blum participated in the streetfighting, was arrested and executed on November 9, despite his claim to immunity from prosecution as a member of the Nationalversammlung. The dispute of *Grossdeutschland* vs. *Kleindeutschland* finally became obsolete when on March 7, 1849 the Austrian Emperor imposed a constitution of his own making for Austria, Hungary, and the Italian and Balcanese provinces, declaring them to be an indivisible entity. The multi-national Hapsburg Empire obviously could not be a part of a German nation-state, much less lead it.

By the fall of 1848, the Prussian aristocrats (among them Otto von Bismarck) and generals had regained power in Berlin. They had not been defeated during the *Mürrevolution*, but had been forced only to temporarily retreat to their country estates by the

king's leniency toward the insurgents. General von Wrangel led the troops who recaptured Berlin for the old powers, with such troops earning the nickname "street-sweepers." The commander of the militia formed to protect the new parliament said that his men would stay at their posts, yielding only to violence. General von Wrangel sent him a message: "Tell your men that violence is now here!" Needless to say, Friedrich Wilhelm immediately rejoined these old powers who promised to restore him to his former position. In November he dissolved the new Prussian parliament and installed a constitution of his own, which however, contained many liberal elements. Although the achievements of the March Revolution were thus rolled back in Prussia, in many other German states, and in Austria, the discussions in Frankfurt continued, increasingly out of touch with reality. On March 28, 1849, the draft of the constitution was passed. The new Germany was to be a constitutional monarchy, and the office of head of state (Kaiser, or Emperor) was to be hereditary and held by the respective King of Prussia. the proposal was carried by a mere 290 votes in favor, with 248 abstentions.

The Revolution fails

On April 2, 1849, a delegation of the Nationalversammlung met with King Friedrich Wilhelm IV in his residence in Berlin and offered him the crown of the Emperor under this new constitution.

In polite diplomatic terms, Friedrich Wilhelm told the delegation that he felt honored but could accept the crown only with the consent of his peers, the other sovereign monarch. When the delegation later examined this response, they realized that in effect they had been accused of overstepping their bounds, that the crown was not theirs to offer. Friedrich Wilhelm felt that he was King of Prussia "by the grace of God" and did not accept the idea that a legal government required the consent of the governed as represented by the elected parliament--and got away with it. In a letter to a relative in England, he wrote what he really thought of the crown that had been offered to him--that he felt deeply insulted by being offered "from the gutter" a crown, "disgraced by the stink of revolution, baked of dirt and mud."

Deeply disappointed, the German Revolution had to admit failure, the Nationalversammlung slowly dissolved. Its most progressive and radical faction of 104 members retired to Stuttgart where they sat from June 6-18 as a Rumpfparlament (parliament of

hold outs) until it too was dissolved by the military. This fanned armed uprisings by workers, farmers, artisans and some students in the Rhineland, Westphalia, Saxony, the Palatinate and Baden--short-lived, however, as the local military, aided by the Prussian Army, put them down quickly. Leaders and participants, if caught, were executed or sentenced to long prison terms.

The old feudal, militaristic order was basically reestablished, although with some liberal trimmings. The Bürgertum made its peace with this order, as it tended to profit from it. Workers and farmers, still the vast majority of the population, were too disorganized and leaderless to do anything about it.

Emigration

Many Germans who had hoped for the success of the German Revolution were unwilling to return to a life under the restored authoritarian regimes and chose emigration--mostly to the United States. Numbers almost tripled, reaching a peak of 252,000 in 1854. While previous emigrants often left Germany for religious or economic reasons, this new wave brought many highly educated people who fled for political reasons.

Carl Schurz (1829-1906) is probably the best known of them. He joined the liberal movement as a student in Bonn and there became one of its leaders. He was involved in uprisings in the Rhineland-Palatinate and Baden. He managed to flee from the fortress at Rastatt when it was encircled by the Prussian Army in 1849. After working in conspiratory circles in Berlin, he finally gave up and emigrated to the United States where he became a spokesman for German immigrants. He supported Abraham Lincoln's presidential campaign and was rewarded with the post of ambassador to Spain. During the Civil War he commanded Union troops as a general. In 1869 he was elected Senator from Missouri and in 1877 was appointed as U.S. Secretary of the Interior.

Delayed effects

Although the German Revolution of 1848/49 by the old rulers fell short of the aspirations of the Forty-Eighters, they contained at least some of the elements they fought for.

Germans had learned the lessons that idealism is not enough to succeed in politics, that they had to organize as pressure groups to achieve their political objectives--political parties formed as a result. The people took an increasing interest in political affairs.

Increasing numbers of newspaper, journals and books both fanned this interest and stilled it.

After a short reactionary period and the apparent re-institution of the conditions prevailing before the March Revolution, a number of former members of the National Assembly took over government responsibility as of about 1860 in Prussia, Austria, and Baden. The General Amnesty of 1862 granted all revolutionaries freedom from prosecution and allowed their return to Germany.

But when the aim of the March Revolution--German unity--was achieved on January 18, 1871 it was not through the idealistic work of liberal democrats, but rather it was "forged by blood and iron," as conservative Otto von Bismarck, its first Chancellor put it. (10)

It arose out of military victory in a war against France. Prussian King Wilhelm I was proclaimed German Emperor by his fellow monarchs. The incorporation of many elements of the constitutional draft of 1848/49 into the constitution of 1871 could give some late satisfaction to the Forty- Eighters. However, the flag of the new Germany was not the black, red, and gold of the democrats, but rather the black, white and red of Prussia. The national unity thus achieved arose not out

of an esteem for the rich cultural heritage of the German people, but out of an overheated fervor directed against France.

It was not until 1919, after World War I, that the first German parliament, with full democratic rights (the Weimar Republic) was established. It soon had to struggle for survival and was finally overwhelmed by the Nazi party in 1933.

Today's Federal Republic of Germany, founded after World War II, in 1949, chose black, red and gold for its colors to show that it sees itself in continuity with the Forty-Eighters' struggle for German freedom and unity.

Afterthoughts

Looking back at these events, one might wonder how much different those 150 years of German history might have been if the German Revolution had been more--well, revolutionary.

Can the Forty-Eighters really be accused of failing because they did not resort to more radical methods? What if they had proclaimed a republic and incited followers to overthrow their monarchs following the French example of 1789? Would this have resulted in similar bloodshed and turmoil, or might a democratic United State of Germany have evolved? Or might

someone with the theories of Karl Marx in mind have tried to establish the "dictatorship of the proletariat" in Germany?

Of course, all such speculation is futile. What remains is the memory of the many honorable citizens who espoused noble ideas in the best of German traditions even though, through no fault of their own, they lacked the political skill to implement them.

Footnotes

1) The return of the Prince of Hessa to his resident in Kassel in 1813 became symbolic for this restorative period. Kassel's inhabitants unhitched the horses from the prince's carriage and pulled it through the city to show the amount of loyalty the monarch could count on. One of the prince's first orders was to re-equip his soldiers with powdered, braided wigs.

2) The Wartburg in Thuringia is the castle where Reformer Martin Luther lived in hiding and started his bible translation.

3) See *Der Blumenbaum*, Vol. 11, No. 2, October/November/December 1993, p.53 ff.

4) Hambach Castle, the location of this meeting, is near Neustadt an der Weinstrasse near the River Rhine.

This Region, the Rhineland-Palatinate, was then part of the relatively liberal Kingdom of Bavaria.

5) Karl Marx is the most prominent exponent of these movements. He was born in Trier on the Mosel in 1818, studied law and political sciences and became editor of a liberal newspaper in Cologne. After publishing articles about the misery of farmers and criticism of censorship, the paper was closed down in 1843. Marx emigrated to Paris and later Brussels (Belgium) where, together with his friend Friedrich Engels, he wrote the Communist Manifesto in February 1848. His return to Cologne after the March Revolution was short-lived. In May of 1849 he was expelled and emigrated to London. although most of his inflammatory articles were about the coming revolution of the proletariat, his actual influence on the German Revolution is almost negligible.

6) Louis Napoleon, a nephew of Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, was elected head of state. He also switched camps and was crowned as Emperor Napoleon III in 1852.

7) Uprisings occurred in Italy, Bohemia, Hungary, and Poland.

8) Men alone were allowed to vote, but only if they were high-ranking government officials or self-employed, resulting in a composition of the parliament

that reflected this social structure of the electorate. There were a few artisans among the delegates, but no workers or farmers. While this certainly did not reflect the social structure of the overall population, it represented all the aspects of German culture.

9) The nineteenth century term for the educated, prosperous middle class.

10) For this he became known as "the blacksmith of the Reich," an honorary title.

This account of events is based mainly on the following sources:

Golo Mann, *Deutsche Geschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, Frankfurt, 1966

K.F. Becker, *Weltgeschichte*, Vol. 11, Stuttgart, 1928

Hans Muggenthaler, *Geschichte für Mittelschulen*, 1962

Chronik der Deutschen, Augsburg, 1996

Bundesarchiv, Katalog der Ausstellung Rastatt

Der Blumenbaum, Vol. 15, No. 3: January/February/March 1998, p.102 ff.

Der Blumenbaum, ISSN 1063-8849 is the official journal of the [Sacramento German Genealogy Society](#) and is published by [Lorelei Press](#):



Return to [Forty-Eighters](#) or [German-American](#) Page.

Created January 2, 1997
