

## Introduction

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The European revolutions of 1848 have not always received the kindest of treatment at the hands of historians. Gentle mockery, open sarcasm and hostile contempt have frequently set the tone for narrative and evaluation. More favorable treatments of the period have not been much of an improvement, since their poetic interpretations have subtly downgraded the revolutions as serious political movements, not to be compared to the real business of 1789 and 1917. We might point to three major interpretative traditions.

One is characterized by its description of 1848 as the “romantic revolution.” Historians writing along these lines apostrophize the barricade fighting born from a combination of youthful enthusiasm and romantic poetry; they evoke a revolution reaching its climax in the brief euphoria of liberation in March 1848, the “springtime of the peoples” as the contemporary German phrase described it. In this version, attention is often focused on the romantically heroic deeds of individual great figures: Lajou:Kossuth travelling from village to village in the Hungarian plain, to rally the peasants against the invading Habsburg armies; Giuseppe Garibaldi leading the improvised armies of the Roman Republic against the French expeditionary force; Daniele Manin single-handedly rallying the Venetians to fight the Austrians against terrible odds. It was all great and glorious, but primarily in gesture and pathos – whether it really accomplished anything, is quite another matter.

Rather darker is another version of the 1848 revolutions, that views them primarily as farce, a revolution made by revolutionaries who were at best incompetent dilettantes, at worst cowards and blowhards who stole away from the scene when the going got rough. This version features the story of the Parisian revolutionary (most versions have him being Alphonse de Lamartine, the poet who was Minister of Foreign Affairs in the provisional government of the French Republic) observing from his window a demonstrating crowd go by, springing up from his chair, and rushing out, proclaiming, “I am their leader; I must follow them.” Another typical victim of retrospective contempt is the Frankfurt National

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Assembly, the all-German parliament. Historians have had their fun with the “professors’ parliament,” mocking its lengthy debates about whether Germany should be a *Bundesstaat* or a *Staatenbund*, noting how, after a year of deliberation, the deputies voted to name the King of Prussia emperor, only to discover that he had no interest in the post.

The third, and probably most substantial of the historians’ versions of 1848 directs attention to the failure of the revolutions of that year to establish new regimes, pointing out that after a shorter or longer – and usually shorter – interval, the authorities overthrown at the onset of the revolution returned to power. Historians working in this tradition contrast the failed revolutions of the mid-nineteenth century with the more successful ones in 1789 and 1917, and offer a variety of explanations for the differences. Some follow a Marxist analysis – one first devised by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, personally, since they were themselves participants in the revolutionary events – that emphasizes differences in class formation and class struggle. Others look to sociological modernization theory to explain the failure of the revolution; still others point to differing diplomatic configurations and the military initiatives of energetic and insightful generals.

None of these ways of understanding the 1848 revolution is totally false. All can testify to a long lineage, going back, ultimately, to interpretations offered by participants in the revolution themselves. Yet, ultimately, none of them seem adequate to the event. Even if the leaders of the mid-nineteenth century revolutions were blowhards and dilettantes, even if the revolutions were ultimately failures, they were still the largest, the most widespread, and the most violent political movement of nineteenth-century Europe. For that reason alone, they deserve to be taken more seriously.

Over the past several decades a different, more appropriate interpretation of the mid-century revolution has gradually emerged. In some ways encouraged by the east-central European revolutions of 1989, that have caused some rethinking of the nature of revolution and some redefinition of the criteria of success and failure of revolutions, this new interpretation has come into its own in many of the commemorative works published in conjunction with the one hundred fiftieth anniversary of the 1848 revolutions in 1998. One aspect of this new approach has been a change in focus. Following the broader trends of social history, newer studies of the 1848 revolution have moved away from the revolutionary parliaments and the capital cities to the towns and villages of the provinces, from the well-known barricade struggles of 1848, to the less emphasized uprisings and civil wars of 1849 and 1851, from the romantic national leaders to the obscure local activists and the craftsmen, laborers, and peasants, who

made up a majority of the European population and of the participants in the revolutionary events.

This new interpretation is, admittedly, less romantic and more prosaic, featuring inquiries into the nature of political organization and agitation during the revolution, as well as discussions of the forms and symbols of political activity, both of a peaceful and violent nature. Also characteristic of this interpretation is an attempt to connect the outbreak and course of the revolution with the social, economic, and cultural changes of the preceding decades. All this can – and all too often does – make for less interesting and exciting reading than the drama or contempt of other versions, yet there is nothing inherent in this new interpretation to make it so. The meetings of a political club of a small provincial town can be no less fascinating than the impassioned debates of national parliamentarians; the aspirations and struggles of impoverished and illiterate peasants no less moving than those of romantic poets. The best authors writing in this vein have vividly conveyed the drama and passions of the revolutionary experience of the mid-nineteenth century; whether anything of that sort is accomplished in this book is something its readers will have to decide.

Depending on where one looks, this new interpretation of the 1848 revolution exists to very different extents. Pioneered by French historians, it is most detailed and complete for France, somewhat less so for Germany, and noticeably more sketchy concerning 1848 in Italy and the Habsburg monarchy. Added to these differences in the depth of the scholarly literature, is its polyglot nature, to be expected in studies of a political movement that extended from the Atlantic coast to the Carpathians, from the Mediterranean to the Baltic. I make no pretense to being able to read all or even most of the dozen languages in which works on the 1848 revolution have been written. Still, enough has been written, and is physically or linguistically accessible, that it seems worthwhile to include the mid-nineteenth century revolutions as a topic in the series “New Approaches in European History,” and make available to students and interested general readers a synthesis of the latest historical interpretation of 1848, working into it the still useful elements of older views.

One major aspect of these new approaches to the study of the 1848 revolutions has been placing them in their proper historical context. Therefore, the reader should not expect to jump right onto the barricades. Rather, the book begins with a consideration of the background to and causes of the revolution. The first chapter studies social, economic, cultural, and governmental institutions of and developments in Europe towards the middle of the nineteenth century, with an eye to their

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relevance for the forthcoming revolutionary events. In particular, it pays careful attention to the forms of social and economic conflict that existed even before the outbreak of revolution. The second chapter then outlines the nature of political life in the 1840s, briefly explaining the major ideologies, the forms of political organization, and the political struggles existing before the revolution greatly deepened and broadened them.

Only in chapter three does the revolution begin and do barricades get built. This chapter will concentrate on the early months of the revolution, showing the rapid collapse of most governments in the first months of 1848. It will move rapidly, though, from the barricades in the capital cities out into the provinces, and explain the course of the revolution there and, in particular, how the news of the fighting on the barricades led to an outpouring of social conflicts. The chapter will end with a consideration of where the revolutionary movement stood at the end of the spring of 1848.

The fourth chapter deals with the subsequent year of revolution, in analytic fashion. Its main theme is the explosion of political participation and organization during the revolution. Political clubs and other kinds of organization, elections, petitions, demonstrations, public meetings, and other forms of activities are important topics. An analysis of the participants in the revolution and of the bases of their loyalties to different political doctrines is included, as is a section on a topic of recent considerable interest – the activities of women during the revolution. The chapter ends with a discussion of trends and developments across the year running from May 1848 to May 1849.

The fifth chapter returns to this same period, but in a narrative rather than an analytical mode. It discusses the major events and struggles between the spring of 1848 and the summer of 1849, concentrating on the decline of the initial consensus, the increasing polarization of politics, the defeats of revolutionary forces in the summer and fall of 1848, their rallying and reorganization in the fall of that year and the winter of 1849, and the second round of revolutionary struggles in the spring and summer of 1849. A last section discusses further events until the final struggles of the mid-century revolutions in December 1851. The sixth and final chapter uses the new approaches to the mid-century revolutions developed in the book in order to place them in European history, in the context of the nineteenth century and in comparison to the revolutions of 1789, 1917, and 1989, and in the forms of historical memory and commemoration by which their course and outcome were transmitted to subsequent generations.

# 1 Society and social conflict in Europe during the 1840s

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## **The countryside**

Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, Europe was a continent of peasants. Even in areas that were, by the standards of the day, heavily urbanized and industrialized, such as the Düsseldorf District of the Prussian Rhine Province, or the Austrian province of Bohemia, farmers made up 40 and 55 percent of the regions' respective labor forces. The French census of 1851 counted some 64 percent of the gainfully employed as active in agriculture. Moving east and south, towards the poorer, economically less developed parts of the continent, the presence of the peasantry increased: 85 percent of the labor force in the Austrian province of Galicia, on the Habsburg monarchy's border with Russia; 89 percent of the inhabitants of the province of Basilicata in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies at the far southern end of the Italian peninsula. "The people" of 1840s Europe were the peasants – a point that would surprise not a few contemporaries in 1848, when "the people" went from being the objects of political rhetoric to the subjects of political action.

Peasant life varied enormously across Europe, and it would take several books to describe the differences in peasants' standards of living, agricultural tenures, farm products, customs, religion or folklore. For our purposes, we can note two broad groups of differences: in the kind of agriculture practiced and in the relations of production. Although European farmers generally did not specialize as they would in the twentieth century, or even in the second half of the nineteenth, it is still possible to delineate three basic forms of agriculture.

One was centered around grain production: in northern and eastern Europe, rye; in the south and west, wheat. All things considered, this was a prosperous and promising field of economic activity. To be sure, the high grain prices of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, the era of the Napoleonic wars, had dropped sharply in the early 1820s, to the particular dismay of noble large landowners, whose complaints have all too often found the ear of historians. From the mid-1820s



Map 1.1 Europe in 1848



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onward, though, grain prices throughout most of Europe began gradually to rise again, on the average perhaps 20 percent in the next two decades. When this price rise was combined with increases in productivity, as the techniques of the eighteenth-century “agricultural revolution” – division and cultivation of the village common lands, cultivation of crops providing a lot of nutritional value in a small area, such as potatoes and corn (maize), elimination of fallow, introduction of soil enhancing, nitrogen fixing crops, like vetch and alfalfa, growth of new, commercial crops, like sugar beets – spread from England to the European continent, the upshot was a favorable outlook, at least for those who had grain to bring to the market.

The new agriculture was most aggressively and successfully practiced on the great northern European plain that extends from the English Channel through northern France and the Low Countries, and across northern Germany to what was then the far eastern end of the Kingdom of Prussia. Here, fertile soil and easy access to water transportation encouraged a productive, modern, market-oriented agriculture. Conversely, that minority of grain growing regions where such agricultural progress did not take place were areas with problems of market access. One such was southern Italy, especially the island of Sicily, one of the great granaries of the ancient Roman Empire, where agricultural techniques had changed little in the intervening millennia. Farmers there had few incentives to innovate, since it was government policy in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies to tax grain exports and encourage imports, so as to keep bread prices low and thus to pacify the teeming masses of the kingdom’s capital, Naples, Europe’s third largest city. Another unhappy region was the Austrian province of Galicia, one of the poorest regions of Europe, where grain prices remained persistently low, as much as 40 percent below other parts of the monarchy, since the main waterways leading out of the region, the Vistula and Dniester rivers, passed through other countries, whose trade and tariff policies hindered exports. However, such exceptions should not take our view from the rule that for most European agricultural regions, tending to specialize in grain production, the quarter century before 1850 was a period of gradually increasing prosperity.

Most of Europe, particularly its southern half, is climatically and topographically poorly suited to grain growing, and farmers looked to alternative crops. There were many possibilities, ranging from natural dyestuffs to asparagus, to rapeseed, but the three most important at the time were wine, olives, and silk. These were all highly marketable crops, whose sale could bring in substantial returns. It was the prevalence of these non-subsistence crops that made the difference in the first half of



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the nineteenth century between a more affluent northern and central Italy and a poorer south. Yields on grain were better in the south, but elsewhere the cultivation of market-oriented crops more than compensated for a less favorable natural environment.

The greatest strength of these crops, their marketability, was also their main weakness. While grain growers could feed their families from their own harvest, non-subsistence crops had to be first turned into cash and then back into food. Although price figures for such crops are more uncertain and variable than those for grain, the available ones often suggest a less favorable development, meaning that ever more grapes or raw silk needed to be sold to obtain the same amount of bread, potatoes, or corn (maize). More important than price trends, though, were the uncertainty and difficulties of the market. Some of these crops were quickly perishable and hard to get from the grower to the seller promptly, particularly before the creation of a railroad network. There were potential expedients available to the ingenious, like the peasants of southern France who distilled their low-quality, quickly souring wines into brandy, that kept much better and thus could be sold before it spoiled. More typically, such farmers preferred to avoid specialization, devoting some of their land to growing their own grain, even on and in climates poorly suited to it, rather than placing all their eggs – or olives – in one market basket.

The last version of agriculture we can mention was practiced by those peasants who lived in the hilly and mountainous parts of Europe. The steep terrain and harsh weather of these regions were poorly suited to either of the two forms of agriculture discussed above. Peasants of the uplands turned to pasturage, the most successful and prosperous example being the dairy farming of the Alpine lands. Most hill and mountain peasants were not so fortunate, lacking the land needed to pasture enough cows, sheep, or pigs, to provide for their needs. Life in the rural up-country thus became a miscellany of expedients: selling the meager crops raised and living on chestnuts, cutting (or stealing) wood in the forest areas frequently covering the high country, and, when possible, engaging in large-scale seasonal migration. During the construction season, Paris's masons could be heard talking the dialect of the Limousin, a mountainous, impoverished area of central France; at least twenty thousand mountain peasants came yearly from the northern Italian Kingdom of Piedmont-Savoy to work in southern France. Everywhere in Europe, peasants came down out of the hills and mountains to the more prosperous lowlands each year at harvest time. As all these examples suggest, living standards in the uplands were low, and all the evidence historians have at their disposal, from travellers' accounts, to reports of government

officials, to land-tax records, describe the mountain peasants as the poorest people on the continent, at times living on the very edge of starvation.

To complete this discussion of the divisions of mid-century European agriculture, we need to make a distinction between agriculture and agriculturalists, since the prosperity of the former did not necessarily imply the wealth of the latter. This was a result of the division of agricultural property: it was most uneven in the most prosperous grain growing areas, which were rich in large landed estates, and/or substantial peasant farmers, whether actual property owners or large tenants. These held most of the land; most of the people who lived on it were landless laborers or small proprietors whose holdings did not suffice to support their families. While far from egalitarian, landed property in areas of non-subsistence production, or in the mountains, was more likely to be more widely distributed. To give just one simple example from the province of Bologna, at the northeastern end of Italy's Papal States, during the 1840s in the fertile, rice growing plain of the Bolognese, tenants, sharecroppers, and day laborers made up some 95 percent of the agricultural population. They worked for or rented from large, often noble landowners or urban absentee landlords. In the far poorer mountainous regions of the province, on the other hand, landowners, mostly small proprietors, made up 45 percent of the agricultural labor force with about 22 percent tenants and sharecroppers, while laborers were just above one fifth.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, a landless rural laborer in a wealthy farming area might well be better off than a property-owning peasant on a barren patch of land in the hills, but would be living in a far more inequalitarian social environment.

Ownership of the land had a quite different meaning across the continent and this brings up the second major division of rural society in Europe during the 1840s, the freedom or unfreedom of the land and those who worked it. We can point to a tripartite distinction reflecting the influence of the French Revolution of 1789 on feudal and seigneurial conditions in the countryside. One version was prevalent in the western part of the continent: France, Spain, the states of the Italian peninsula, the Low Countries, Switzerland, and western Germany, as well as to the north in Scandinavia. There, feudal and seigneurial relations had been abolished and the rules of the free capitalist market prevailed in agriculture. Anyone could own, rent, mortgage, sell or otherwise freely dispose of land. This right to own land did not necessarily mean that all or even most of the peasants in those areas actually owned it, as the many

<sup>1</sup> Figures from Luigi del Pane, *Economia e società a Bologna nell'età del Risorgimento introduzione alla ricerca* (Bologna, 1969), 403.