

## 1 Prologue

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The year 1848 was the great revolutionary year of the nineteenth century – the year when barricades appeared on the streets of all the major European capitals and people demonstrated all over Europe against arbitrary, autocratic government. No one outside of Italy paid much attention in January when rebels in Palermo forced Ferdinand II, the King of the Two Sicilies, to grant a liberal constitution. But then in February Parisians overthrew King Louis Philippe. During three days of street fighting, barricades went up all over Paris (see Figure 1.1), soldiers refused to fire on demonstrators, the National Guard went over to the insurgents, and, on February 24, the king abdicated and fled to England. That afternoon the insurgents proclaimed the Second French Republic, and a Provisional Government established itself at the Paris city hall.

In the next few weeks, a revolutionary wave swept across Europe: from the Atlantic to the Ukraine, from the Baltic to the Black Sea. “This was,” writes Christopher Clark, “the only truly European revolution that there has ever been.”<sup>1</sup> Its echoes were felt far beyond Europe: in Latin America and North Africa and even in Tsarist Russia. To begin with, the Parisian scenario of banquets and barricades, mass meetings and street demonstrations, played out in the capitals of the two great central European powers: Prussia and Austria. By the end of March, liberal constitutional governments had been proclaimed not only in Berlin and Vienna, but also in Milan, Budapest, Prague and Cracow, and there were stirrings of nationalist revolt throughout the great, sprawling Habsburg Empire.

In Paris, on February 25, the Provisional Government issued a decree calling for elections for a Constituent Assembly to be held by universal male suffrage. Other decrees established freedom of the press, assembly and association, opened the National Guard to all adult male citizens, and abolished the death penalty for political crimes. Under pressure from

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Clark, “Why Should We Think about the Revolution of 1848 Now?,” *London Review of Books* (March 7, 2019), 12.



Figure 1.1 Photo taken by Hippolyte Bayard from the steps of the Madeleine late February 1848, looking down the rue Royale toward the Place de la Concorde and the Palais Bourbon. The remains of two barricades are visible in the foreground. Hulton Archive via Getty

a huge crowd gathered in front of the Hôtel de Ville, the Provisional Government also issued a decree guaranteeing all citizens the right to work (*le droit au travail*). To expedite this decree a program of National Workshops was organized and a special Commission of Labour established under the direction of the socialist Louis Blanc. In a gesture of obvious symbolic importance, it was decided that the Commission would meet in the Luxembourg Palace, the former seat of the Chamber of Peers. The National Workshops were regarded by the moderate majority of the Provisional Government as a temporary expedient to provide relief to unemployed workers. But by treating the workshops as a means of implementing a basic human right, the right to work, and by designating the workshops as “National,” the Provisional Government seemed to suggest that this revolution would do more than establish a democratic republic. Its aim would not only be to extend the right to vote to all adult males, but also to confront what had come to be known as “the social question” – the problem of endemic poverty and unemployment among the labouring poor. This, at any rate, is how the declaration of the right to work was understood by many members of the working class. In their eyes, the National Workshops represented a permanent commitment

and the recognition of a right. They saw the Workshops, as William Sewell has put it, as “a first step in the direction of a state-aided system of producers’ associations.”<sup>2</sup>

The confrontation with the social question was largely absent from revolutionary outbreaks outside of France in 1848. These revolutions were directed against autocratic regimes established or reinforced in 1815 by the Congress of Vienna. In most of them, the goal was liberation from subservience to Austria or Prussia. They began with working-class agitation in the cities, with the attempts of peasants to reclaim traditional rights, and with student demonstrations in university towns. But leadership generally fell into the hands of middle-class liberals. And these revolutions culminated not in the overthrow of existing monarchies but in the abolition of vestiges of feudalism and in liberal reforms including a widening of the suffrage and promised constitutions granting freedom of speech, the press, association, assembly and religion. Some of these reforms were short-lived; and outside of France, as the saying went, “revolution stopped at the foot of the throne.” Nonetheless and taken as a whole, the revolutions of 1848 constituted the most widespread and sustained burst of revolutionary activity of the whole nineteenth century. They touched all of Europe, and they raised the hopes of liberals and radicals like nothing since 1789. Many ‘forty-eighters were writers and intellectuals, and their activities during this revolutionary springtime became infused with messianic dreams, heroic impulses, and a seemingly limitless faith in the power of ideas to change the world.

The initial period of revolutionary euphoria lasted just a few months. In France it was marked by a flood of radical newspapers and pamphlets, and by the creation in Paris alone of some 450 revolutionary clubs. It was punctuated by two *journées* or popular interventions. In the first, on March 17, 100,000 workers took to the streets to protest the assertion of special prerogatives by elite National Guard units. The second intervention, on April 16, began as a democratic election rally, but turned into a conservative triumph when, fearing a radical coup, leading democrats withdrew their support. When elections for a national Constituent Assembly were held on Easter Sunday, April 23, the enthusiasm of democrats and radicals cooled. For the French provinces strongly favoured conservative candidates, and traditional elites did well everywhere. Of 900 new representatives, 700 were wealthy enough to have served in the Chamber of Deputies during the July Monarchy, and most

<sup>2</sup> William H. Sewell, Jr., *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge, 1980), 243–253. See also Rémi Gossez, *Les Ouvriers de Paris* (Paris, 1968), 10–14.

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of these were royalists. *La Revue des deux mondes* summed up the attitude of conservatives in noting that they could hardly complain about universal suffrage “since it gives our principles such wise defenders.”<sup>3</sup>

After the elections the Provisional Government gave way to a more conservative Executive Committee, and conflict developed between Paris and the provinces and between the radical democrats and the conservative majority in the National Assembly. The social question was put on hold. In newspapers and club meetings radicals talked about overthrowing the Assembly and proclaiming a revolutionary dictatorship. In May an attempt was made to do just that. But the only result of the abortive insurrection of May 15 was to get some radical leaders arrested, to compromise others, and to strengthen the position of what was becoming known as the “Party of Order.” By June, the conservative majority in the Assembly had had enough of the radical social experiment initiated in February. This meant the end of the National Workshops. On June 21, a decree put all members of the Workshops on call for army duty in the provinces.

This decree was understood by many Parisian workers as a declaration of war. On June 22, barricades rose in the working-class quarters of Paris – the whole Eastern and Central parts of the city. What followed was four days of the bloodiest street fighting that Paris had ever known. Regular army troops and bourgeois National Guard units were called in to combat the insurrection, and these were followed by trainloads of provincial militia units. Finally, after four days of fighting, the insurrection was put down. About 1,500 insurgents were executed without trial, and the number killed in the fighting was probably two or three times greater.

The insurrection of June 1848 was remarkable on many counts. The most extraordinary thing to contemporary observers was that some 50,000 working-class insurgents fought entirely on their own, without the leadership or even the help of the middle-class democrats and socialists who had long been claiming to speak on behalf of “the people.” The rebels fought, in Tocqueville’s words, “without a war-cry, without chiefs or a standard, and yet with a cohesion and a military skill that surprised the oldest officers ... Women took part as much as men ... It was not a political struggle ... but a class war, a kind of slave war.”<sup>4</sup> Tocqueville’s verdict, which was echoed by Karl Marx, surely exaggerates the clarity with which many of the participants saw the situation. The workers who

<sup>3</sup> “Revue des deux mondes, September 30, 1848” in Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le sacre du citoyen: Histoire du suffrage universel en France* (Paris, 1992), 299.

<sup>4</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Souvenirs* (Paris, 1978), 212–213.

put down the insurrection believed they were defending democracy and constitutional government. Class lines were shifting in 1848, and there were workers on both sides of the barricades. But the outcome of the June insurrection was clear. It smashed the hopes of the socialists and romantic intellectuals who had greeted the February Revolution as the start of a new era. It also inaugurated a period of political repression and red-baiting that lasted through the fall. Censorship was restored, radical clubs shut down and leftist leaders brought to trial. It was in this atmosphere of reaction that a constitution was drafted and a new election organized, this time for the presidency of the Republic. The leading candidate who soon emerged was none other than Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, a nephew of the great Napoleon.

Until 1848 Louis-Napoleon had led the life of an unsuccessful political adventurer. He was a failed conspirator who had spent most of the 1840s in prison or in exile. Still, he had three things going for him. First, there was the magic of his name. The Napoleonic legend still resonated in France, especially among peasants. Secondly, he had a negative appeal to members of the working class, because he had not even been in France at the time of the June insurrection and had had nothing to do with its repression. Finally, his apparent mediocrity seemed to make him an attractive figurehead for the designs of the royalist politicians. When the presidential elections were held in December, they threw the weight of their influence behind Louis-Napoleon, expecting that his election would prepare the way for the restoration of monarchy in France.

In fact, Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte proved to be a shrewder politician than anyone expected. He won the presidential election of December 1848 by a 4:1 margin over his nearest rival. In the three years that followed – in the course of some complicated political jockeying – he managed to frustrate the designs of the royalists as well as those of the democrats and socialists. Then, on December 2, 1851, the anniversary of his uncle's coronation as emperor, after failing to persuade the National Assembly to revise the constitution to permit his reelection, he staged a carefully planned coup d'état, suspended the republican constitution, and assumed dictatorial powers. A year later, he had himself proclaimed Emperor and began a reign that would last until 1870.

The revolution of 1848 has been described as the revolution of the intellectuals.<sup>5</sup> In France especially the revolution served to galvanize the energies of many of the major romantic writers and intellectuals of the time. The poet Lamartine became the leader of the Provisional

<sup>5</sup> Lewis Namier, *1848: The Revolution of the Intellectuals* (London, 1962).

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Government and its foreign minister. The novelist George Sand wrote electoral bulletins for the Interior Ministry. Victor Hugo, Tocqueville, Lamennais, Proudhon, the poet Béranger and the popular novelist Eugene Sue were all elected to the National Assembly. Even Baudelaire – who was subsequently to express contempt for all forms of political action – formed his own club and edited his own journal. And the painter Courbet designed the illustration for Baudelaire’s short-lived journal.

The outcome of the revolution of 1848 in France was to destroy the hopes that many writers and intellectuals had come to place in politics and in collective action in the public sphere. Some of the ‘forty-eighters were thrown into exile, others into silence. Some continued to look forward to an ideal Republic, others to a great revolutionary event in the distant future. Many came eventually to believe that there could be no lasting republic without universal education and a universal appreciation of civic virtues. A few, like Victor Hugo, became more fervent advocates of social change after 1851. But to most of the writers and intellectuals who had invested their energies in the revolution and identified with its aims, the collapse of the Second Republic seemed to demonstrate the futility of political involvement and the collective pursuit of social ideals. This withdrawal of intellectuals from politics and political commitment was a striking outcome of the revolutionary upheavals of 1848–1851. It was accompanied in literature by the triumph of the doctrine of “art for art’s sake” and in political theory by the recourse to the critical, ironical and elitist stance that has been described as “Parnassian liberalism.”<sup>6</sup> It was also accompanied by attempts on the part of many intellectuals to look critically at the ideals and practices of 1848 and to explain what had “gone wrong.”

While the Second French Republic lasted almost four years, elsewhere in Europe things went more quickly. Just as in France, there was an initial period of euphoria marked, in Central Europe, by the overthrow of absolutist regimes, the abolition of remaining seigneurial privileges, the proclamation of constitutions, and the organization of elections. In the Rhineland, the Palatinate, and throughout Southern Germany, there were instances of peasant unrest that contemporaries compared to the Peasants’ War of 1525. But, except in Hungary where an established gentry elite took control, the radical movements were not durable. Within a few weeks, nationalist rivalries, emerging social conflicts and unresolved political issues brought political activists down to earth.

<sup>6</sup> George Armstrong Kelly, *The Humane Comedy: Constant, Tocqueville and French Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1992), 221–255.

The reversal in Vienna, the capital of the Austrian Empire, was particularly rapid. On March 13 and 14, demonstrations in Vienna forced the resignation of Metternich, the creation of a Civic Guard, and the promise of a constitution. Two months later the future of the Empire was in doubt. The North Italian provinces of Lombardy and Venetia were in revolt. Effective authority was divided between three centres of power: German Vienna, Hungarian Budapest and Croatian Zagreb – each claiming sovereign authority. Half a dozen other national movements – Polish, Romanian, Slovenian, Serb, Czech and Slovak – were aspiring to sovereign status. The state was virtually bankrupt and, on May 17, the feeble-minded Emperor Ferdinand I and his court fled the capital.

Yet by August everything had changed. Most of North Italy had been reconquered. The emperor was back in Vienna. His government was now discussing the future shape of the monarchy with a pliant constituent assembly. Financial problems remained, Venice still clung to a shaky independence and the Hungarians remained defiant, but steps were being taken to restore Habsburg authority throughout the Empire. In October radicals took control of Vienna, killing the Austrian Minister of War and seeking to prevent Austrian troops from joining the effort to suppress the revolution in Hungary. Ferdinand and his court fled the capital for a second time. In response a force of 70,000 imperial troops, led by Prince Alfred Windischgrätz, “the very epitome of the feudal and absolutist regime that had been overthrown in March 1848,” put Vienna to siege and crushed the insurgency.<sup>7</sup> In November Prince Felix von Schwarzenberg, the brother-in-law of Windischgrätz, became Austrian prime minister, persuaded the Emperor Ferdinand to abdicate in favour of his nephew, Franz Josef, and reestablished autocratic rule over the empire, returning Austria to “a form of centralism and absolutism even more severe than under Metternich.”<sup>8</sup>

The revolt of Czech nationalists in the Austrian province of Bohemia followed a similar course. In Prague radical students, intellectuals and artisans took to the streets in March demanding political and social reform and Czech autonomy. But the initial euphoria soon gave way to conflict between German and Czech nationalist movements, both of which were strong in Bohemia. In early June Czech nationalists organized a Slavic Congress in Prague to discuss the reorganization of the Habsburg Empire as a federation of relatively autonomous South

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Sperber, *The European Revolutions, 1848–1851* (Cambridge, 2005), 216–225.

<sup>8</sup> Alan Sked, “The Nationality Problem in the Habsburg Monarchy and the Revolutions of 1848: A Reassessment” in Douglas Moggach and Gareth Stedman Jones (eds.), *The 1848 Revolutions and European Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2018), 344.

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German and Slavic states. The leaders of the Czech nationalist movement were, like their German counterparts, constitutional monarchists, loyal to the Habsburg Emperor. But on June 12 a radical insurrection broke out at Prague. This gave Windischgrätz, who wanted a confrontation, the opportunity to subdue the Czech insurgency with an artillery bombardment of Prague. Thereafter, while young Czech radicals continued to talk of revolution, the chief spokesmen for Czech nationalism were moderates like the historian Frantisek Palacky for whom the goal was not independence but autonomy within a reformed Austrian Empire.

It was in Hungary that the most significant challenge to Austrian sovereignty emerged. In the spring of 1848, Hungary acquired a constitution, a charismatic leader, a national army and a parliament elected by a broad suffrage but dominated by the gentry. The leader, Lajos Kossuth, was an eloquent and tireless orator and an ardent patriot who rose from the lesser nobility to the status of a national icon.<sup>9</sup> The constitution, which included the abolition of serfdom and all manorial obligations, called for the annexation of Croatia and Transylvania and it left Hungary essentially self-governing. But it also privileged the Magyar language and limited the rights of non-Hungarians. By the end of the summer, Hungary was ringed by hostile nationalities including Croats, Serbs, Slovaks and Romanians, whom Austria could play off against Hungary. Soon Hungary was at war not only with Austria, but also with Croatia and Romania. In the fall of 1848, Kossuth tirelessly travelled over the Hungarian countryside, rallying the Hungarian people and calling on them to defend their country. After a series of defeats, including the occupation of Budapest by Windischgrätz in January 1849, the Hungarians won victories in the spring, recapturing Budapest and driving the Austrians out of Transylvania. On April 14, 1849, the Hungarian Diet made Kossuth president of the Hungarian Republic. For four months Hungary was an independent state. The Austrians, fearing a Hungarian attack on Vienna, requested aid from the Russia of Nicholas I. The Tsar responded by dispatching 200,000 Russian troops to Hungary. Finally, in August 1849, with Russian help, the Austrians crushed the independent Hungarian Republic.

The situation in the Prussian capital of Berlin was complicated by the fact that the revolution of 1848 produced two elected assemblies. The first was a Prussian parliament charged with writing a constitution for Prussia. The second was the German Constituent National Assembly,

<sup>9</sup> Istvan Deak, *The Lawful Revolution: Louis Kossuth and the Hungarians, 1848–1849* (London, 2001).

otherwise known as the Frankfurt Parliament, which met at Frankfurt to draw up a constitution for a united Germany. Both of these assemblies were created in the aftermath of the March 18 Revolution, and both were dissolved within a year. As it turned out, Frederick William IV had second thoughts and German liberals proved more adept at discussing first principles than at initiating significant reforms. The task facing the Frankfurt Parliament was not made easier by the fact that the “Germany” for which its members were writing a constitution did not yet exist.

In the fall of 1848, a royalist reaction took shape in Prussia. Facing an uprising of hungry workers, the King declared a state of siege, dissolved the Prussian assembly and decreed a new conservative constitution. In other German states, liberal ministers were dismissed and autocratic rule was restored. It soon became clear that, lacking the power to raise an army and impose taxes, the Frankfurt Parliament could exist only as long as the King of Prussia wished it to exist. In April 1849, when the parliament completed its work and offered the throne of a united Germany to Frederick William IV, he simply refused. He would not accept an office created by a democratically elected legislature claiming popular sovereignty. Later that spring, when revolutionary governments were proclaimed in Saxony, Baden and the Bavarian Palatinate, they were crushed by Prussian troops. Rebels held out in the fortress of Rastatt in Baden until July 23, 1849. With their surrender, the German revolution of 1848 was over.

Revolt also broke out in 1848 in the North Italian states under Austrian control and in the Papal States. Insurgents in Milan and Venice expelled the Austrians from the provinces of Lombardy and Venetia. Their initial victories on the barricades led to the creation of liberal governments which then sought aid from the Piedmontese king Charles-Albert. But the Piedmontese army was soundly defeated in July by Austrian troops under Field Marshal Joseph Radetzky. By late August the Austrians had reconquered all the Empire’s possessions in Northern Italy, except for Venice.

The radical movement in the Papal States got underway later and lasted longer. When Pius IX became Pope in June 1846, his first act was to amnesty political prisoners. Italian liberals initially had high hopes for him but were disappointed by his opposition in 1847 to constitutional reforms and his refusal in 1848 to support the nationalist struggle against Austria. By summer he faced the opposition of a robust liberal movement supported by refugees from all over Italy. The assassination on November 15 of his advisor, Pellegrino Rossi, ended any last hope for a liberal Papal State. Ten days later Pius IX fled into exile at Austrian-held Gaeta, and radical republicans took control in Rome. In January

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1849 elections were held by universal male suffrage for a Roman Constituent Assembly. The outcome was a Roman Republic led by a Triumvirate including Giuseppe Mazzini. This republic lasted less than five months. It was, as we shall see in Chapter 6, crushed by French troops in a military operation overseen by Alexis de Tocqueville during his brief tenure as French Foreign Minister.

By the summer of 1849, it was apparent that there was no solidarity among the non-German nationalities that revolted against Austrian and Prussian rule. National self-consciousness was often restricted to particular social classes, and nations at different levels of development competed with each other within the old empires instead of joining forces against them. It also became clear that – outside the cities – there was little support for the constitutional reforms and governments established in the spring of 1848 in Prussia and Austria. When universal male suffrage was applied in the framework of the old state and the old social order – and among a population still largely illiterate – the result was to return traditional elites. And the chaotic deliberations of the French National Assembly and the Frankfurt Parliament in Germany demonstrated that European liberals were not only too inexperienced but also too divided to develop parliamentary institutions capable of satisfying the aspirations of the people they represented. Thus, a main result of the revolutions of 1848 was to discredit parliamentary government. During the 1850s and 1860s, a new political order emerged in Europe. It was dominated – not by liberal or radical intellectuals, but rather by leaders like Bismarck and Louis-Napoleon, whose authoritarian rule was backed up by strong armies and large bureaucracies.

### Overview of the Book

This book considers the experience and the writings of nine European writers and intellectuals who lived through the revolution of 1848 in France and wrote about it. Some of their writings on 1848 are very well known. Tocqueville's *Souvenirs*, Marx's two essays, *Class Struggles in France* and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* and Flaubert's great novel *L'Education sentimentale* are, in their different ways, classic commentaries on 1848. Less well known are the formal histories of 1848 by Alphonse de Lamartine and Marie d'Agoult, who wrote under the name of Daniel Stern. I will also consider the memoirs and essays on 1848 written by the anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the radical Russian émigré Alexander Herzen. Finally, there are the writings of Victor Hugo and George Sand. Hugo wrote two polemical essays and a volume of poetry alternately ridiculing and chastising "Napoléon le