

The Revolution of 1848



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Throughout the nineteenth century, Europe witnessed its most widespread revolutionary wave now often referred to as the Spring of Nations or the Year of Revolution in 1848. This affected more than 50 countries with France, the Netherlands, the states of the German Confederation, Italy and the Austrian Empire being the most affected. But it did not reach Russia, Great Britain, Spain, Sweden, Portugal, or the Ottoman Empire. The uprisings led to little political change but had a significant social and cultural change.

Beginning shortly after the New Year in 1848, Europe exploded into revolution. The revolution that took place in France was called the February Revolution. Klemens von Metternich, foreign conservative minister of Austria, architect of the Congress of Vienna once stated: "*When France sneezes, Europe catches a cold...*" This basically states, that whenever a revolution happens in France, it will also affect Europe.

But the French Revolution of 1848 presented a unique change from the revolutions sweeping through the rest of Europe. Where other revolutions in Italy, Germany, and Hungary centered on nationalist feelings and attempts to create a new state, the French Revolution was profoundly social in its nature. The French working class was attempting to create a new type of unified Republican state out of the shambles left behind by the July Monarchy.

Despite this difference from the other revolutions, the February Revolution was fated to end the same way, in failure. The provisional government that developed from the revolution addressed many of the issues that faced the working class, however, after only a few months of existence the working class values in the government were destroyed by conflict between the rural and urban working

class. Understanding the 1848 revolution is not possible without comprehending the political and social situations in the years following 1815 and the end of the Napoleonic Wars.

Causes of the Revolution-

These revolutions arose from such a wide variety of causes that it is difficult to view them as resulting from a coherent movement or social phenomenon. Numerous changes had been taking place in European society throughout the first half of the 19th century. The decisive factor in 1848 was the coincidence between severe economic and social crisis and political difficulties. The main factors that come together and act as the sparks of revolution for the common man are:

1. **Severe Economic crisis** -A key factor provoking revolutions throughout Europe in 1848 were the poor economic conditions, a fact that was true in France as much as it was anywhere else. In the provinces of France, the primary activity was agriculture and an increase in population led to an increase demand for land. Amplified demand led to increased prices and smaller land plot sizes, making it difficult for many rural workers to make a living. Besides it, a depression in commerce and industry also intensified the condition.
2. **Food Shortage-** A substantial rise in food prices occurred over most of Europe - frequently by over 50 per cent in particular localities, with complex effects on commercial, financial and industrial activity, already suffering from a cyclical downswing. One obvious effect of rising food prices was to threaten the already low living standards of the mass of poor people in town and country.

3. **Upsurge of new values and ideas-** Technological change was revolutionizing the life of the working classes. Despite forceful and often violent efforts of established and reactionary powers to keep them down, disruptive ideas like democracy, liberalism, nationalism and socialism gained popularity. A popular press extended political awareness. It enhanced the desire for more political power by the middle class political liberals. This revolution was driven by nationalist and republican ideals among the French general public, who believed that the people should rule themselves.
4. **High burden of tax-** The burden of tax was placed squarely on the backs of the rural farmers. Two types of government taxes existed: one was a salt tax and the other was based on land holdings. The rural working class detested both of these taxes as unfair. The tax based on land holdings was particularly unfair to rural farmers who typically controlled a great deal of land, but did not have a great deal of wealth. This burden affected those least able to pay it and became a constant source of antagonism for rural French workers. The tax collector became one of the most hated figures in the provinces.
5. **Population growth-** Economic pressure was also being felt due to the ever increasing population of France in the early 1800s. A perfect example of the increasing population that could be seen in France was in Paris. The concentration of large numbers of working class people in Paris was important to the revolution. Paris was the capital of France, the seat of the government, and for any political or social “revolution” to take place Paris would be the key to it. This population increase was not limited to Paris, but

existed throughout the country. The result was increased pressure on food and resources.

6. **Discontent among the working classes-** In more urban areas the increase in population could be felt in other ways. Most of the working urban class in France was made of artisans who specialized in particular craft. These workers were printers, shoemakers, fabric makers, innkeepers, and other skilled and unskilled trades. The number of these types of jobs was limited and could not provide work for all.

7. **Conservative Politics-** Even though the people of France had fought for and won many liberal concessions from the government, France was still quite conservative. The bourgeoisie class controlled much of the power in the government. Even the power to vote was limited to the wealthy who had land and money, virtually eliminating the working class from government. Money remained the path to power and the landed elite had most of the political, social, and economic influence. Only those with a certain income levels could vote, effectively shutting the working class out of official politics. The working class was soon placing the blame for its position squarely on the July Monarchy.

8. **Poor condition of working class-** The condition of working class was under nourished, disease ridden, and struggling. In addition, the majority of them were conservative in their political outlook due to poor communication, lack of education, and influence from local conservative elites. Even after the February revolution the rural areas remained conservative. This conservative outlook meant those in the rural areas

supported a more monarchical political structure as in contrast to a republican or socialist regime.

9. **Widespread unemployment-** Although industrialization was still in its beginning stages mechanization had eliminated the need for certain types of trades. One machine could do the work of many which meant less manual labor was needed, decreasing the overall number of jobs. The 1840s saw the French working class in a precarious position. Due to increasing population and mechanization many were unemployed and those who were employed found themselves barely able to get by on their meager wages. High unemployment combined with high prices sparked the liberal revolt.

10. **Famine of 1846-** The final event that pushed many over the edge was the crop failures of 1846 and the resulting economic depression of 1847. Food prices increased sharply all across Europe. Bread, the staple food for most of the working class, was becoming too expensive to afford. Lack of grain drove up food and other prices while wages remained stagnant, thus reducing consumer demand. With consumers buying less and less, profits plummeted, forcing thousands of industrial workers out of their jobs.

Events-

In 1848 France was ruled by a king named Louis Phillippe, who had been installed after the Bourbons were unseated in 1830. Philippe is a fan of the bourgeoisie, known as the bourgeoisie king, he tries to help the bourgeoisie with his policies but they are not working. After adopting reforms in the 1830s and the early 1840s, Louis-Philippe of France rejected further change and thereby spurred new liberal

agitation. King Louis Philippe was very unpopular by early 1848 because the monarch and his minister, Francois Guizot, were conservative by nature and were consistently trying to limit reforms that would benefit the working class because they felt the reforms were socialist in nature.

Banquets were the popular way to have a protest in the 1840s and this particular banquet was set for February 13, but was banned by the government. Radicals ignored the ban and organized a mass demonstration on February 22nd. To the surprise of many the demonstration turned to revolution as barricades were constructed in the Paris streets. Skilled workers, factory laborers, and middle class liberals poured into the streets. On February 23, Fifty two people were killed in anti-government protest.

The National Guard, a citizen militia of bourgeois Parisians, defected from King Louis-Philippe, and the army garrison stationed in Paris joined the revolutionary protesters as well. Louis-Philippe attempted reform, but the workers rejected the halfhearted changes. The king fled together with the premier Francois Guizot who had a big influence over these policies and the demonstrators proclaimed the Second Republic on February 24th. The February Revolution had demonstrated itself to be primarily a working class revolution.

The revolt led to the establishment of a provisional republic that granted universal male suffrage, giving France nine million new voters. It was led by poet, Alphonse de Lamartine. Another key figure, Louis Blanc (1811–1882), became director of the commission on labor. Louis Blanc was an active socialist who believed in a national right to work, that everyone deserved to have a job.

The revolutionary coalition could not agree on a common program. A split occurred between the moderate, liberal republicans represented by Lamartine and the socialist republicans, led by Louis Blanc who wanted national workshops for the unemployed. National Workshops were a compromise between the socialists' demand for work for all and the moderates' determination to provide only temporary relief for the massive unemployment.

It is important to remember that the rural working class was not as politically informed as was the urban working class. With the freedom of assembly reinstated, Paris witnessed a dramatic growth in political organizations. These political clubs would agitate against the newly found government, pressuring it into following their political agenda. The problem for the clubs and for the provincial governments was that the majority of France did not live in Paris, but in the rural provinces. These rural areas remained for the most part conservative, being least affected by the February revolution. When national elections took place in mid-April and the National Assembly was elected, the majority of representatives were conservative.

The national assembly, elected by the rural working class, contained little sympathy for socialism. This fact did not stop Parisians from continuing their efforts to influence the government. Throughout May the struggle between these two forces continued. By June the demonstrations by the political clubs had progressed. Revolution reappeared as people took the streets in what was to be called the June insurrections. This rebellion was the ultimate conclusion of the tug of war between the socialist forces of Paris and the elected conservative National Assembly that had been going on through May of 1848. The National Assembly's

use of troops on June 24th settled the question of who had the ultimate authority in France.



Barricade fighting in 1848

At the cost of over 3,000 lives the National Assembly broke away from the influence of the Paris clubs. The National Assembly creates a Constitution which allows for a strong president and a unicameral legislature. The shift to the right was completed when, in December 1848, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte (nephew of Napoleon I) was elected president. He had demonstrated himself to be a competent leader by this time, but more importantly, his name held respect among the people. On December 1851 he dissolved the French Parliament and one year later declared himself sole ruler as Emperor Napoleon III.

The 1848 revolution in France was an attempt to establish a new republic capable of addressing the economic and social concerns of the working class. The working class nature of the revolt can be seen in the method in which the revolution happened. The king was exiled not by the bourgeoisie or even the middle class, but by the starving and ragged workers of Paris. Despite the defeat of the revolutions, however, important changes resulted from the 1848 rising. Democracy ruled in France, even under the new empire and despite considerable manipulation; universal manhood suffrage had been permanently installed.

Conclusion-

The Revolutions of 1848 in different countries of Europe present a time of massive public upheaval. This was the first time Europe had ever seen such widespread revolution. Working and middle class people became united in an effort to achieve social and political change. Even though the motivations of these two classes often differed, in most cases they were able to work together to achieve immediate successes. Although the revolutionists tried to address the immediate concerns of the workers, it did not fix the deep seated economic and social problems of both the urban and rural working class.

Most of the revolutions of 1848 generally failed due to the conflicting philosophies of the revolutionaries and thus conservatives regained power. The revolutions probably failed due to lack of organization. Another reason why the revolutions failed was because moderate liberals of the middle class feared the radicalism of the workers, preventing any type of lasting alliance. Therefore, when radicals took control of the revolutions in Paris and in Eastern Europe, the middle

class liberals turned their backs, preferring absolute rule and law and order, to the uncertainty of radical revolution.

The revolutions in 1848 ended in failure, however the seeds that were planted then, will sprung out in the events that followed. After 1848, the European powers seemed incapable of united action to maintain the status quo, probably because the revolutions of 1848 weakened the regimes in the eyes of their people. It can be considered that overall they failed in the short run, but succeeded in the long run.