1848/1849 Revolutions

“Revolution”

A revolution is a profound and far-reaching change of circumstances in social, political, moral, economic, cultural or technical dimension that affects large portions of the population in a defined geographical area. Traditionally, it was considered as a return to justice, while a more modern interpretation suggests it marks advancement in social or political matters.

Revolutions mostly take place in a short period of time and are often rooted in disadvantaged groups of society that are dissatisfied with the incumbent political system or living conditions, who often find influential supporters within a higher class who help them overthrow the power structure. Revolutions often see bourgeois, proletarian, peasant, national or religious groups gain access to power by means of violence in the public sphere.

There are also examples of revolutions “from above” in history where change is driven by the ruling class instead. The European Industrial Revolutions saw that technical inventions have a significant impact on economy and thus, on society. Attempts to restore the old order after a revolution are called counter-revolutions. Revolutions are considered formative for history since they are often in line with a change of paradigm.

Why did revolution break out in 1848?

Roots of the revolution lie in the dissatisfaction of the German middle-class with its lack of political involvement and repression of political opinion not in line with the respective regime. Liberal leaders called for participation and the establishment of a German nation-state. In 1848, the cause of the middle-class was aided by the socio-economic circumstances of the time, uniting lower and middle-classes in a struggle against the ruling class.

A major influence was industrialization, which caused a population explosion in Germany in the first half of the 19th century and led to increasing urbanization. People moved to cities to find work, and many emigrated. The rural population suffered under the land-owning Junker class (Prussia), but even tenant farmers renting land found it difficult to make a living.

Towns and cities were incapable of dealing with the large influx of inhabitants, particularly in terms of the sanitary conditions, which led to the spread of diseases. Also, the industries in the cities could not provide enough jobs for all migrants, resulting in unemployment and mass poverty, also referred to as Pauperism. Experience with the new, mechanized industry was little and led to overproduction, which forced employers to cut jobs. Those who remained in work often faced inhumane working conditions and safety problems with machines. Meanwhile, skilled workers felt threatened by the rapid rate of industrialization, often making handicraft obsolete and forcing prices down.

These living conditions led to a growing unrest in both rural and urban areas, manifested in high crime rates, strikes, and riots against the ruling classes. These intensified after in 1846 and 1847, there were severe crop failures with corn and potatoes in Germany, the latter of which were affected by the potato blight, a disease destroying harvests, particularly disastrous since potatoes were a
staple of popular nutrition. The bad harvests entailed rises in food prices, which consequently lowered consumer spending, hurting the economy and forcing unemployment rates further up, leading to more violence in the cities.

In February 1848, the French king Louis Philippe was forced to abdicate due to pressure by political opposition from the middle-class who were able to gather large crowds taking control of Paris. The news of the February Revolution and the declaration of the Second Republic of France quickly spread to all parts of Europe, providing an example for the distressed and boosting riots in Germany as well as in other countries, shifting economic protests into the political sphere. The Europe-wide upheaval of peoples against autocratic authority as practised by the rulers, triggered by economic hardships and the success of the movement in France, has been described as “springtime of the peoples” (Völkerfrühling) since formerly uninvolved population strata entered the political stage.

Where was the impact of revolutionary uprising felt most?

In March 1848, the March Revolution spread over large parts of Germany, encouraged by the February Revolution in France. Violent protests led to clashes with police and military in many cities. Demonstrators, initially calling for better wages and working conditions, quickly started making political demands for more rights to the people.

In many places, the March movements were successful at the beginning: The rulers granted concessions in many of the German states, for instance by instituting new liberal governments called March Ministries. Most notably, concessions were made in the states of Prussia, Bavaria, Baden and Württemberg.

In Austria, the riots had a significant impact in particular. Firstly, economic struggles hurt the empire, which was behind Prussia in its economic growth, infrastructure and industrialization, anyway. Unemployment was a problem in the cities where migrants from rural areas could not find jobs due to the lack of industry. In addition, the multi-ethnic Habsburg Empire faced national movements in its eastern areas, threatening to break the empire apart. On March 13th, violent protests in Vienna forced conservative chancellor Clemens von Metternich, who had been a major figure in European politics for decades, out of office and into exile. King Ferdinand decided to give in to public pressure and implemented reforms in April concerning the freedom of the press, a civic guard and a constituent, representative assembly.

The German South-West, especially the Rhein-Neckar region, played a special role in the March Revolution since the news of the events in France was first received there. The March Demands were strongly influenced by the demands declared by a group of leading middle-class personalities on February 27th in Mannheim, including Heinrich von Gagern, a later president of the Frankfurt Parliament. The collective term describes demands made all over Germany, including the creation a German nation-state, the formation of a civic guard, freedom of the press, a liberal German constitution and constitutional assembly, an independent jury system, the abolishment of the feudal system, human rights and an overall reduction of the privileges of the nobility.

The rulers of Prussia, Bavaria, Baden, Württemberg and other states even agreed to be part of efforts forming a German parliament. On March 5th, 51 liberals, mostly academics from the southern states, met at Heidelberg to pave the way for a German parliament by postulating a Vorparlament, issuing
the Declaration of Heidelberg calling for representative elections for a national assembly that would then prepare the unification of Germany.

How and why was the Frankfurt Parliament created?

The function of this preliminary parliament was to agree on the election process for the German national assembly, which protesters demanded in all of Germany, and to supervise it. The execution of the elections was, however, the responsibility of the respective state.

574 members, representing most states of the German Confederation, met in the Paulskirche in Frankfurt on March 31st until April 4th, and decided that the parliament would meet in Frankfurt (because of its central location and historic significance), have one delegate for 50,000 voters and should be elected by adult, economically independent citizens, which meant that women were excluded, as well as all servants or people on poor-relief. In the end, between 75 and 90 per cent of men in 39 German states were able to vote in successful, yet mostly indirect elections involving electors who would then determine the representatives in the assembly.

On May 18th 596 representatives of the Frankfurt Parliament met for the first time. Most of them were from the middle-class and many had an academic background, earning the Paulskirche parliament the nickname Parliament of Professors. Only very few members represented other classes, such as craftsmen, landowners, or peasants. Thus, conservatism and radicalism were hardly present in the Frankfurt parliament, which was essentially liberal and moderate, trying to set up a unified German state with a central government and a German constitution.

The Frankfurt Parliament

The Frankfurt Parliament was supposed to function as an institution to fill the power vacuum after the revolutions. Its main objective was to set up a new constitution which could serve as the basis for further parliamentary work. Moreover, ‘Basic Rights and Demands’ were to be included in this. Elements like freedom of press, a fair taxation or citizenship for all people were considered to be inevitable in the new constitution. A question of particular importance was the system of government in a unified Germany, with some members favouring a constitutional monarchy.

However, the parliament had to deal with some more topics which required attention. First of all, there was the question how to distribute power between the central government and the states and in how far they should remain independent. By the end of May it was managed to declare authority over the states. Nevertheless, a new constitution was not developed so far because different ideas and interests clashed. To bridge the time until an agreement was found, a provisional government was initialised, but it turned out to be ineffective without clearly defined legitimacy.

The first noticeable progress made was the catalogue of fundamental rights, including 50 articles, which was passed by the parliament. Another essential issue were the boundaries of Germany. The existing borders did not seem to be logical since large parts of the German-speaking provinces were excluded, whereas other provinces belonged to German territory although German was not spoken.
What is more, one had to find an agreement concerning the **Greater** (including Austria) or the **Smaller German Solution** (without Austria and dominated by Prussia). This discussion revealed the major problem of the Frankfurt Parliament. Without any strong leadership, and with no army backing it (respectively: no willingness to back the Parliament of the Prussian forces = strongest army), the parliament was a **talking shop** and remained a rather powerless institution.

The question about the role of Austria was of particular importance due to the fact that it decided whether Germany should be dominated by Prussia or Austria as the most powerful state. However, no solution was found. The impression of a parliament as a “toothless tiger” was underscored by the fact that it was not possible to organise a central army because of lack of cooperation between the states.

Furthermore, disloyalty within the population spread because not all social classes were represented equally. Divisions also occurred inside the parliament. Different political groups formed and there was a lot of disagreement between liberals and radicals as well as between conservatives and politically uncommitted members.

Additionally, Heinrich von Gagern was not able to provide the Frankfurt Parliament with a strong and charismatic leadership. This became apparent when the parliament opposed the Prussian withdrawal from the provinces of Schleswig-Holstein, but was unable to intervene. The raising opposition culminated in violent uprisings by the radicals.

The end of the Frankfurt Parliament became foreseeable in the following months. After the new constitution was finally implemented, the members were supposed to elect a new Emperor. Frederick William won the election with a bad result, though, and he distrusted the parliament himself. He saw the position of Prussia harmed by the dependence on the parliament. Besides, Frankfurt was doomed to fail when several states such as Bavaria rejected the new constitution. Eventually, there were some desperate attempts by parliamentarians to recover the situation, but the parliament had to leave Frankfurt and settled to Stuttgart where only a **Rumpfparlament** gathered which was dispersed a few years later. Consequently, the Frankfurt experiment came to an end.

---

**Second Wartburg Festival**

The second Wartburg festival took place from 11\(^{th}\) to 13\(^{th}\) June, 1848, in Eisenach, as a gathering of about 1200 students. It was mainly concerned with the future of German universities and academic reforms, a major demand being that they should be national property. Also, universities were supposed to be financed by the German state and self-governed, with the participation of students in the election of academic officials. Student councils and associations were to be set up at all universities.
Why did the Prussian liberals fail?

In Prussia, the liberal movement ultimately failed for reasons similar to those that prevented a true revolution in Austria and other German states, as well.

King Frederick William IV was a shaky character, undecided between a more liberal and a traditional conservative course, making his actions unpredictable. After violent clashes of working-class demonstrators and army troops in Berlin on March 13th with lots of casualties, and upon hearing the news of the resignation of Metternich in Austria, he made concessions, but on 18th March, even after being cheered on his balcony by crowds, he ordered troops to have the square cleared, leading to more than 300 deaths as the army regained control of Berlin. Afterwards, to calm the population down, he ordered the army to leave the city, leaving him with weak protection and forcing him to grant reforms, including the creation of an elected assembly, a constitution and a liberal ministry.

However, the king’s position remained unclear, and the promises made to Prussian liberals were let go, letting the revolution fail eventually. Frederick William proclaimed he had no intentions of receiving the “crown from the gutter” and being made a “citizen king”. Similarly, he rejected the German crown offered to him by the Frankfurt Parliament in 1849, saying it was “molded out of the dirt and dregs of revolution, disloyalty and treason” (and not the Parliament’s to offer).

The Prussian military was one of the main reasons the revolution did not last. As a well-trained army, it was capable of containing rioting crowds easily and was able to restore order relatively quickly. In November 1848, thousands of army troops moved into Berlin, forcing out the Prussian Parliament and the Civic Guard and, under martial law, suppressing all demonstrations and closing political clubs.

Secondly, the liberal ministry created by the king, originally as a concession, remained loyal to him, with many conservative members furthering the causes of the land-owning class. The “Junker Parliament”, an association of landowners, and other interest groups were formed to aid the counter-revolution and limit the reforms demanded by the Prussian Parliament that was summoned in May. The fragmentation of the assembly made it difficult to agree on a Prussian constitution.

Eventually, the parliament was dissolved by the king in December 1848, and Frederick William imposed a constitution “from above” which was able to appease parts of the population due to the inclusion of some liberal ideas like a representative assembly with two houses, a jury system and fundamental rights. However, most power remained with the king, who was enabled to rule alone in emergency situations and to change the constitution to his liking. Also, he was still the head of the army and ministers were responsible only to him. The three-class voting system (votes weighed according to taxes paid) introduced revealed the doubtfully democratic nature of the constitution, giving far more electoral significance to voters who paid higher taxes.

Further reading:

- Collins book, pp. 13f., 18-30
- Kitson book, pp. 10-14
- Horizonte book, pp. 88-107
Problemfrage: Was 1848/9 an unsuccessful attempt of the middle class?

➢ Positive / negative outcomes?

➢ roots of political parties / Catalogue of Fundamental Rights => cf. Weimar Constitution / Basic Law / Sonderweg?

➢ Paving the way for Bismarck / Hitler? “halbe Revolution”? (cf. SPIEGEL cover)