

The Revolutions of 1848 and the birth of
Germany and Italy
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LE TRÔNE BRÛLÉ.



Le peuple ayant été trompé par Louis-Philippe qui avait promis un gouvernement Constitutionnel lors de son avènement au Trône, en 1830, résolut de s'en venger; étant dans l'enceinte de l'habitation monarchique, il s'empara du siège Royal et le transporta au pied de la colonne de Juillet afin de l'offrir en holocauste aux mânes de ces innombrables victimes de la liberté qui vient d'être reconquise par de nouveaux héros, le 25 février 1848, et du foyer de l'oppressur est sorti la République appuyée sur le Patriotisme Français.

The 1848 Revolutions

We plan to do three things:

First, we will see what happened in 1848.

Second, we will consider what happened to what had happened in 1848.

Third, we will investigate why 1848 failed to be a historical turning point.

References

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The 1848 Revolutions

- Besides the reasons and outcomes of the 1848 Revolutions, historians find them fascinating for their pace and spread. Historians Dennis Sherman and Joyce Salisbury used the phrase “the Dam Bursts” to define the 1848 events, and said, “The dam broke first in France.”
- Political scientist Weyland cites Huntington to explain the 1848 Revolutions as an example of how political change could be contagious. It comes in waves. “Pressures for a regime transition in one country tend to exert demonstration effects on other nations. Protest movements or revolutionary uprisings prove similarly contagious... In all these cases, a challenge to the established authorities within a nation inspires people across borders; it induces people in neighboring countries (...and beyond) to defy their governments as well and seek political or socioeconomic transformation.”

Waves and Exceptions

- Social sciences cannot afford mathematical formulas, so we need to make exceptions.
- Thirteen British colonies on the East Coast went through a revolution in 1776. Although the enslaved people of Saint Domingue began their rebellion in 1791, the British North American rebellion and revolution had no ripple effect. The British Empire in the rest of North America and the Caribbean remained intact. So, did the Spanish and Portuguese empires in their neighborhood.
- Only because of the Peninsular War (1807-1814) did the political pendulum in Spanish and Portuguese America swing and create a contagion.
- Beginning with Haiti in 1803, more democracies joined the American Republic.

Waves and Exceptions

- The French Revolution of 1789 also had no ripple effect. The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars introduced some of its gains to the areas under French control.
- The Congress of Vienna rolled back the political and territorial impact of the French Revolution outside France. This situation changed in 1848.

Regime Contention, One After the Other.

Political scientist Kurt Weyland provides an extensive timeline of the 1848 Revolutions. Paris took the lead and then, “...half of Europe stood aflame, engulfed by protest and rebellions against the autocratic princess,” (p. 1). He adds, “...the 1848 Revolution spread explosively within days... Louis Philippe's downfall on February 24 triggered mobilization and protest in Baden on February 27... Stuttgart on March 3... Munich on March 6-7... Vienna on March 13-15... Berlin on March 18-19... and Copenhagen on March 20-21” (p. 1).

Far away in the Americas, beginning in April 1848, protest movements emerged in Brazil, Colombia, and Chile.

In North America, Weyland suggests that the July 1848 Seneca Falls Convention for women's rights could also be viewed in that context, as part of regime contention.

Regime Contention, One After the Other.

Earlier in 1830, France had overthrown its King in July, which in August sparked an uprising in “Belgium, the Prussian Rhineland, Brunswick, and Southern England.”

In September, the regime contention spread to Berlin and some German middle states such as Saxony.

In October, Switzerland was the site of protests, and in November, it was Poland’s turn.

In November, the Parisian July revolution also inspired the English movement for electoral reform, contributing to the suffrage extension of 1832.

Regime Contention, Why?

Weyland seeks to answer the question: “Why do people emulate a foreign precedent, such as an autocrat’s downfall in a neighboring country, and engage in regime contention in their own polity? (p. 7).

In response, he argues, “... this decision is not based on careful, rational cost/benefit calculations... Instead, people regularly resort to cognitive shortcuts that draw disproportionate attention to striking, dramatic events, such as the unexpected overthrow of a seemingly powerful prince, and that inspire rash, exaggerated hopes in the replicability of this successful transformation...People thus overestimate the evidentiary value of this foreign success...”(p. 7).

Regime Contention, Success or Failure?

In the 1848 Revolutions, for example, the failure of several of these efforts indicates that the authorities in their countries resisted. Weyland adds, “The established authorities in Central and Eastern Europe stood on much firmer ground than their colleagues in Paris. In particular, they retained control over the forces of organized coercion, which they used to renege on initial concessions, suppress mass mobilization, and tighten the reins of autocratic rule again. In sum, people's heavy reliance on cognitive shortcuts produced quick but unsuccessful diffusion: Haste made waste” (p. 8).

France

- Between 1814/15 and 1848, France experienced three constitutional monarchies, after the self-appointed monarchy of Napoleon. While they all sought to disrupt the French revolutionary gains, Napoleon stood out in military and political achievements and in prestige abroad. Above all, he had no love for the royalists and the French cherished him more as frustration with the Bourbon monarchy grew.
- All three divine right Monarchs belonged to the restored Bourbon dynasty. Louis XVIII ruled from 1814/15 to 1824. Charles X replaced him until July 1830, when he fell to a revolutionary outburst, but the monarchy survived. Louis Philippe replaced him and reigned until February 1848, when the revolution of 1848 ousted him.

France Frustrated

Over the decades between 1814 and 1848, public frustration with the restored monarchy accumulated in several ways.

- The divine right Monarchs faced great difficulties in balancing the revolutionary and hereditary royalist forces.
- Violence erupted in various regions at the beginning of the Louis XVIII era to the extent that historians referred to it as White Terror of 1815. Researcher Lewis describes it this way: In July 1815, counterrevolutionaries, a diverse group of royalists and Catholics, massacred a detachment of about two hundred Bonapartist soldiers stranded in the casernes of Nimes and thus began the 'White Terror' of 1815.

France Frustrated

- Besides the killings and eruption of Catholic-Protestant hostilities, the Royal authorities also sought to purge the officials from the Napoleonic era and politicians from the revolutionary period.
- They struggled to reverse the French Revolutionary gains, pleasing the royalists and the Catholic clergy. Not only did they compensate the royalists and the clergy for their losses, but they also punished the revolutionaries and their associates for siding with anti-Royalist forces.

France

- Voting rights became the most immediate trigger of the 1848 Revolution in France. One way to understand the 1848 Revolutions then would be to return to the essence of the French Revolution, its three Constitutions of 1791, 93 and 95.
- These Constitutions had an ambivalent perspective on the formal representation of people in the power structure. While the Constitution of 1791, and until April 1944, all such legislation excluded women, France also excluded domestic servants from the voters' list.

France

- The revolutionaries initially took a censitary suffrage (a census, tax, or property qualification for voting) approach, which means restricting voting to a person's status in a tax or property census.
- Based on this census, the constitution of 1791 divided the male voters of twenty-five and above into active and passive categories. Only active voters, i.e., persons 25 or older, paying direct taxes equivalent to three days' wages, could vote.

France

- The 1791 constitutional monarchy collapsed amid the Revolutionary Wars and the ouster of Louis XVI on August 10, 1792.
- Between August 10 and September 20, 1792, the legislative assembly held elections for a National Convention to draft a new constitution for a Republic. These elections were held based on adult franchise, 21 and older residents of an electoral district for a year, excluding servants, could vote.

France

The National Convention drafted two constitutions.

- First, the 1793 Constitution, which granted the first-ever universal male suffrage to all adult French males and dropped the voting age to twenty-one. It was never implemented because of the Reign of Terror and Revolutionary Wars.
- Second, the Constitution of 1795, which raised the voting age back to 1791's 25 years, and increased the direct tax requirement to 200-300 days' wages.
- Both 1791 and 1795 observed a two-tier electoral system.

France

- Napoleon's coup d'état in 1799 granted universal male suffrage for males aged 21 years and older, but also introduced a multi-tiered electoral system that allowed him to control the results of elections, or three plebiscites he held to legitimize the Consulate and then the empire.
- Louis XVIII converted Napoleon's appointed Senate into an appointed Chamber of Peers and added an elected Chamber of Deputies. The voting rights reverted to the censitary approach, allowing male voters paying 300 francs in direct taxes, and double the amount if they were candidates.
- Through the appointed Chamber and discriminatory electoral law, the royalists and landed classes entered the legislative bodies and the government. The "Third Estate" resented the fact that the regimes failed to enhance their limited and constrained voting rights.

France Frustrated

- By 1848, the parliamentary opposition and bourgeois reformers, in support of the workers' cause, chose to hold banquets to rally support for widening the right to vote. They planned to host one in Paris on February 22nd in honor of George Washington's Birthday. They viewed the United States as a symbol of democracy.
- The Louis Phillipe regime realized that the event promised to attract thousands of sympathetic workers. So, they tried to prohibit it. In response, a protest erupted in the streets of Paris.
- A character of Flaubert's *L'Education Sentimentale* summed up the rising level of public frustration in these words:

France Frustrated

"Are the newspapers free? are we ourselves free?" said Deslauriers in an angry tone.

"When one reflects that there might be as many as twenty-eight different formalities to set up a boat on the river, it makes me feel a longing to go and live amongst the cannibals! The Government is eating us up. Everything belongs to it—philosophy, law, the arts, the very air of heaven; and France, bereft of all energy, lies under the boot of the gendarme and the cassock of the devil-dodger with the death-rattle in her throat!"

The future Mirabeau thus poured out his bile in abundance. Finally, he took his glass in his right hand, raised it, and with his other arm akimbo, and his eyes flashing:

"I drink to the utter destruction of the existing order of things—that is to say, of everything included in the words Privilege, Monopoly, Regulation, Hierarchy, Authority, State..."

(Flaubert, *Education Sentimentale*, Chapter VIII).

France

- The workers also had not benefited from the relative prosperity of the period. In addition to the right to vote, they also sought the right to organize unions, but got neither.
- Besides the rising social discontentment, the economy was not helpful. It suffered from poor harvests and a financial crisis in 1846 and 1847. Unemployment was as high as 40% of the workforce.
- The February 22 protest challenged the troops. They panicked in the overwhelming presence of protestors and fired a murderous volley into the mob. This triggered a full-scale insurrection.

France

- The protestors erected barricades against governmental troops. Paving stones became a convenient weapon for protestors. In a crucial move, the National Guard began to take the rebels' side.
- Louis Philippe fled into exile.
- Alphonse de la Lamartine (1790-1869) and a group of bourgeois liberals proclaimed the Second Republic.

Habsburg Empire

- Austria was another place for 1848 events. Vienna was the seat of the Habsburg government. The developments in Paris mobilized the students, middle-class reformers, and workers. They charged into the streets, clamoring for an end to Metternich's system.
- Women, like elsewhere in Europe, including France, joined the effort, building the barricades, taking care of the wounded, supplying the fighters with meals, and sometimes taking part in battles against armed forces.
- Metternich fled for his life.
- Emperor Ferdinand I immediately abolished the country's most repressive laws, ended serfdom, and promised constitutional reform.

Habsburg Empire

- In Hungary, the Magyars, under the leadership of Louis Kossuth (1802-1894), rose and demanded national autonomy from Austria.
- The Czechs followed suit in Bohemia and called for a Pan-Slavic Congress to meet in Prague.
- By June 1848, it appeared that the Habsburg empire was splintering along ethnic lines and that its German core would commit to liberal reforms.

Prussia

- Prussia's Frederick William IV (r.1843-1861) responded to the events in Austria by granting some reforms and promising a liberal constitution.
- Paris and Vienna inspired middle-class liberals and artisans to throng to the streets of Berlin, nonetheless.
- Williams retaliated. Some three hundred protestors had lost their lives in Berlin by March 1848. This brutality stiffened support for the revolutionary cause. William withdrew the deployed troops and promised more reforms and support for German national unity.
- Hohenzollern Prussia, like Habsburg Austria, appeared on the road to liberal government.
- In several other German states, rulers acceded to the revolutionary demands.

Prussia

- A self-appointed group of liberal leaders went beyond the regional perspectives, called, and later convened a popularly elected assembly representing all German states in Frankfurt. The Assembly sought to construct a liberal German nation. It wrestled with three crucial questions:
 - Whether German-speaking portions of the multilingual Habsburg empire and other states should be included in the projected German nation.
 - What should be done with non-German ethnic groups living within German States, and
 - Who should head the new nation?
- After about a year of deliberations, the Frankfurt Assembly decided on a smaller Germany and offered the crown to the King of Prussia.

Italy

- Several states in Italy established new constitutions. Giuseppe Mazzini-led movement for national unification morphed into an insurrection employing guerrilla warfare.
- In Austria's Italian provinces of Lombardy and Venetia, the rebellious populace drove the Austrian forces into defensive fortresses and declared their independence.
- Within a year of the revolt in France, popular demonstrations ousted the papal government.
- Pius IX bolted from Rome.
- Mazzini joined the triumvirate that headed the newly formed Republic of Rome.

What Happened to the 1848 Revolutions?

France

- Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte (1808-1873), a nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte and a conservative, won the December presidential elections. He promised something for everyone and projected an image of order and authority.
- He held the elected office for three years and then destroyed the republic in 1851 by taking power for himself in a coup d'état.

What Happened to the 1848 Revolutions? Habsburg Empire

- In Austria, the Habsburgs prevailed over the inexperienced and ethnically divided rival groups, playing one group against another. They also deployed their formidable military force to defeat the liberal and national revolts one after the other.
- In Hungary, the reactionary Nicholas I helped them with his army to overwhelm the Magyar rebels.
- In Italy, Austrian military powers and, in Rome, French arms, eventually prevailed.



What Happened to the 1848 Revolutions?

Prussia

- In Prussia, Junker advisers stiffened Frederick William IV's resolve to disregard the reformers.
- William IV spurned the German crown offered to him by the Frankfurt assembly and blasted the Frankfurt assembly's hopes for a united liberal Germany.
- He accused liberals in the Frankfurt assembly of fighting the battle of godlessness, perjury, and robbery, and the kindling of war against the monarchy.
- His Prussian troops expelled the few remaining liberals, determined to keep the assembly alive

Why did these Revolutionary Processes Stall?

Several reasons, including:

- Internal divisions—there was no shared basis for the alliances among middle-class liberals, radical socialists, artisans, and workers. They opposed the status quo together, but their views on the reform and future differed. Their interests were too divergent for the alliances to endure.
- France experienced these divisions to the utmost. A frightened middle-class and conservative peasantry there conflicted over the extent and nature of reforms required.

Why did these Revolutionary Processes Stall?

- The lack of harmony between liberals and nationalists was particularly pronounced in central Europe, where the nationalist aspirations of German, Polish, Magyar, Croatian, Serbian, and other groups conflicted with efforts to form new governments.
- In the Frankfurt assembly, the efforts to unify Germany antagonized other nationalities that rose against German rule in Austria.

Why did these Revolutionary Processes Stall?

- Prussian conservatism remained strong.
- The middle and working classes, both discontented with the conservative status quo, were still weak.
- Revolutionary leaders were inexperienced.
- Conservative regimes joined forces and marshaled their resources to overcome the divided revolutionary forces.
- Once reassured of their victory, conservative leaders reversed most of the reforms and imprisoned, executed, or exiled revolutionaries. In December 1848, Pope Pius IX summarized the views of angry conservatives, saying that we declared null and have no effect, and altogether illegal, every act of reform during 1848.

Why did these Revolutionary Processes Stall?

- Some of the liberal reforms survived. Examples are the abolition of serfdom in Austria and Hungary and the limited constitutions in Piedmont and Prussia.
- Serfdom did not end in Russia until 1861.
- The overall failure of 1848 did not necessarily ensure a permanent victory for conservatism. As industrialization and urbanization spread relentlessly, life in the old order kept crumbling.

Why did these Revolutionary Processes Stall?

- Huntington and Weyland's theory stood its ground.
- Most recently, between 2022-2025, we have seen Gen Z imposing political change on three governments in South Asia: Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal..
- Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have already held elections. Nepal has scheduled them for next month.



Italian Risorgimento, Harking Back to the Roman Empire

- The Italian Risorgimento aspired to end Italian fragmentation, yearning for the unified glory of the Roman Empire era. It is only indirectly related to the 1848 Revolutions.
- There had been diverse movements in the Italian independent duchies/Kingdoms or dependencies of Austria to unify as a Federation since the early nineteenth century. The French Revolutionary Wars up to 1799, and later on the Napoleonic Empire from 1805 to 1814, had introduced centralized rule and reforms such as the end of the feudal system and the Napoleonic Code.
- Napoleon's fall reinstated the Austrian dominance, but by 1860, through an alliance with France, the Italian states found a unified structure in 1860 as a Kingdom.
- In 1866, another alliance with Prussia and France enabled them to move further and make Rome their capital by 1870.

Kingdom of Prussia in
1866

Annexations after the
Seven Weeks' War of
1866

Extensions towards
forming the North
German Confederation,
1867

Other Germanic
territories agreed to the
formation of a Second
German Empire after the
Franco-Prussian War of
1870-1871



German Unification, 1871.

- The French had been in control of smaller and later larger parts of the German states and Prussia from 1794 to 1812, when the French hold was at its peak.
- Different factors, such as centralized administration, as well as resentment against French conscription and foreign occupation, had reinforced nationalist feeling. By 1807, the split with the Holy Roman Empire was complete.
- By 1866, most German-speaking states, excluding Austria, were members of the Zollverein, the economic union.
- The 1870 Franco-Prussian War over French ambition for uncontested eminence in Europe spurred the Bismarck-led political union. As Northern Germany declared war, the Southern States joined the war and the union.
- Germany announced the creation of the German Empire at Versailles Hall of Mirrors, 1871.

Conclusion

- The revolutions of 1848 unmistakably showed that economic and social realities can galvanize people into political action.
- In 1787, Franklin defined the US political structure as ‘a Republic, if you can keep it.’ These revolutions show that political rights are hard to acquire and preserve. The struggle can spread over centuries.
- The contagion effect helps raise awareness and expectations regardless of consequences and outcomes. Gen Z in our era has leveraged that effect to successfully challenge power structures in three states, which augurs well for citizens worldwide who aspire for a better tomorrow.