Liberal Revolutions in the 19th Century

The First Wave of Revolutions: The Pre-March Era (1830–1848) and its French Origin

In the early phase of the revolutionary movements the middle class did not meddle in politics, only when they felt their economic interests endangered did larger parts of the middle class stand up against the reactionary system. This was first the case in France in July 1830. Supported by Metternich and the other victorious powers, the House of Bourbon had returned as kings of France after Napoleon had been defeated. This step was well in accordance with the principles of restoration and legitimacy. But in order to reunite the different fractions of French society that had rebelled so violently against each other, the Bourbon kings did not return to the feudal system of Louis XVI. Instead, Louis XVIII, the brother of the beheaded king, managed to re-unite his people behind the Crown by keeping some of the standards of the revolution. Orientating his government along the lines of the constitution of 1791, he thus favoured the bourgeoisie. In the first phase of the revolution, this upper level of the middle class had bought the confiscated land of the nobles and now replaced the nobles as advisers to the king in the constitutional monarchy. By introducing a bicameral legislature*, Louis XVIII partly acknowledged the growing importance of this social group. Though a Chamber of Peers was chosen by the king alone, the more important Chamber of Deputies was elected. As the franchise for this chamber was restricted to propertied people, the bourgeoisie became the most powerful political element in society. However, their power was at risk with the accession of Charles X, the brother of Louis XVIII. Charles felt his own constitutional monarchy to be morally weakened in the circle of the major continental powers who had almost all restored their absolutist systems. In order to gain supporters of a monarchy based on divine right only, Charles X tried to lure nobles back to France by promising high indemnities, but the wealthy middle class feared that the costs of these indemnities to emigrants who had lost their estates – approximately 989 million francs – would lead to a severe slump in the French economy. In the ensuing conflict over this matter, the king censored the press, replaced the cabinet, and even dissolved the Chamber of Deputies. Not only did the bourgeoisie now fear the loss of their money, but also their political influence. Even if it is not clear how real the danger of a new absolute monarchy was, the threat of it was enough to bring the people to the street. When Charles X was informed of the riots, he sent soldiers into Paris, but they could not take the barricades or even changed sides. There was nothing left for Charles X to do but to abdicate and flee back to England. Turning France into a republic was out of the questions because this would automatically bring France into conflict with all its neighbouring states. To prevent this, the bourgeois rebels chose Louis-Philippe*, Duke of Orleans, to become the new king of France, now ‘king by the grace of God and the will of the people’. As this member of the royal family had sided with the moderate republicans during the French Revolution – he had even exchanged his hereditary title for the second name of “Egalité” – he seemed to be predestined for the role of a king controlled by a constitution and a Chamber of Deputies. And indeed, for about a decade the power of the king remained limited. For example, the king was not allowed to censor the press or to pass emergency laws. Moreover, the legislative initiative was passed to the Chambers. To symbolize the political influence of the people, the tricolour became the national flag of France once again.
Unsuccessful Imitations of France: Poland, Italy, Germany

While the monarchs of the Holy Alliance disapproved of France’s new “barricade king,” many people throughout Europe were awakened by the French July Revolution. In Poland, there was hope for renewed French assistance in an uprising against the Russian Tsar Alexander I*. The comparatively small country had long suffered under the attempt of the Russian sovereigns to expand their empire to the west. Thus, the Polish people had really seen Napoleon as a liberator to free them from growing Russian influence and had followed him loyally to the end. As a result, Poland had been punished severely at the Congress of Vienna: large areas of the country were distributed amongst the members of the Holy Alliance, and the remaining part was put under the strict control of the Russian Tsar. Although this so-called “Congress Poland” was officially provided with a constitution and a parliament, Alexander I disregarded both, and his orthodox belief further alienated him from the traditionally Catholic Polish population. In the wake of the July Revolution, Polish liberals and nationalists therefore tried to depose him as their head of state. An uprising in Warsaw was crushed by the superior Russian military. Poland was now completely incorporated into the Russian Empire, and underwent a harsh policy of Russification.

Several smaller states in Italy experienced a defeat comparable to that of Poland. Their wealthy middle class citizens regarded the bourgeois July Revolution in France as an example to take action for their own economic interests. Their uprising was soon supported by people with strong Italian nationalism and by people who were simply tired of the repressions of the Austrian occupation. But, as in Poland, no French support arrived, and on their own, the Italian rebels did not stand a chance against the well-trained Austrian troops. Thus, the Metternich System was enforced again: censorship was intensified, and suspected political troublemakers were expelled. One of them was the lawyer Giuseppe Mazzini*.

Mazzini fled to Marseilles where he established a secret society called “Young Italy” in 1832. He also supported the broader idea of a democratic league of nations to replace the monarchs’ influence on Europe with that of the people. To this end, he also founded the “Young Europe”* movement in Bern in 1834. This movement acted as an umbrella organisation for other existing “young” movements such as “Young Poland” and “Young Germany.” “Young Europe” established a network to prepare rebellions and to support political refugees. It was largely coordinated from Mazzini’s exile in London. Their supranational cooperation could already be seen at the Hambach Festival* for example.

Held at Hambach Castle in southwest Germany in 1832, the festival’s 30,000 participants had not only been attracted from other German states, but also from France and Poland. The Hambach Festival showed that their ideas diverged immensely. Some members like Siebenpfeiffer* and Wirth* wanted to deprive the sovereigns of all their power in order to replace the old system with a German republic. But, for many others, such claims were far too radical. The sovereigns kept up their repressions. The most famous example is the abolition of the constitution of Hanover by its new king Ernest Augustus*. When seven professors at Hanover’s university at Göttingen (among them the Brothers Grimm*) protested against this step, they were relieved of their offices and exiled. Even though this caused an outcry throughout Europe, it did not change the matter itself. This once again illustrates the
prevailing atmosphere in the German states in the 1830s: Even if many people were not content with their political situation, they did not suffer enough to make them act.

**Successful Imitation of France: Belgium**

Only the foundation of Belgium can be cited as a positive example: In 1831 the people managed to establish their own parliament after they had left the United Kingdom of the Netherlands. Their general call for a liberal state independent of the Netherlands was quickly accepted by Europe’s major powers in order to prevent an escalation of the conflict. Moreover, the major powers checked the spread of the Belgian liberal movement in several ways: They committed the new state to strict neutrality and agreed on Leopold of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha to become king, thus giving the small new state a monarchical appearance. Nevertheless, as King Leopold I of Belgium*, he had to respect the constitution drafted by a provisional government. It included civil rights and established the parliamentary system. Though the Belgian example can be counted as a victory for the liberal movement, it illustrates at the same time that such a victory was only allowed because Europe’s monarchies did not feel their own position endangered.

Fearing the spread of liberalism, these committed the new state to strict neutrality, though, and sent their candidate to become king of the small state. Nevertheless, as King Leopold I of Belgium*, Leopold of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha had to respect the constitution drafted by a provisional government. It included civil rights and established the parliamentary system.

**The Second Wave of Revolutions: 1848 and its French Origin**

It took until 1848 for a situation to develop in Europe which motivated various social circles to stand up for their demands. The bourgeois citizens had fulfilled their first mutual aim – the guarantee of their own prosperity – so many of them could now direct their interests to their second aim: equal opportunity should now be expanded to political representation. Moreover, the third common aim of the middle class, the minimisation of economic restrictions, became increasingly essential to many industrialists: experiencing that particularism* caused financial damage because of its various customs and differing units of measurement, their call for national unity grew louder. Especially in fragmented areas like Germany or Italy, nationalism was thus strengthened by this new economic motivation. The economic motivations which finally triggered the revolutions were much simpler, however, and, affecting unqualified workers and farmers mainly, involved far larger crowds. Firstly, industrialisation began to endanger smaller artisans, replacing their jobs by cheaper and faster machines. Secondly, a series of bad harvests created a feeling of unrest among farmers. In contrast to the chiefly bourgeois insurrections of the early 1830s, the revolutions of 1848 were therefore based on a social background which was both broader and more diverse. Although this scenario gave the revolutions their initial momentum, it would also help to crush them in the end.

This paradox can best be seen in France. The “Citizen King” of 1830 had started to rely less and less on the bourgeoisie throughout the 1840s. When King Louis-Philippe’s rejection to extend the vote to the growing middle class coincided with revolts of unemployed Parisian workers in 1848, these oppositional forces quickly united and forced the abdication of the “Citizen King.” Together they established a provisional government which was supposed to transform France into a republic. But once the mutual enemy Louis-Philippe was gone, it proved difficult to bring working class and middle
class interests into line. The socialist Louis Blanc* propagated a 10-hour workday (instead of 12 hours) and national workshops which provided jobs to the unemployed. However, the middle class regarded the costs of the workshops as too high. When their representatives decided to close them, the workers rose in riot against this decision. Although the riots had been crushed brutally, they had caused a general fear of nationwide socialist revolts. This atmosphere drove many Frenchmen to the “Party of Order.” It advocated the introduction of a strong president as head of the republic. Driven by the propaganda of the “Party of Order,” Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, nephew of the ex-emperor Napoleon I, was elected into this office by popular vote. However, as his uncle had done 48 years before, he used his dominant position and his popularity for a coup d’état, crowning himself Napoleon III*. He soon reversed most changes of the revolution of 1848. With his three-year residency requirement, for example, he excluded large parts of the migrant workers from elections again. On the other hand, he favoured the factory owners by re-introducing the 12-hour workday. Deepening the division between workers and bourgeoisie, the allies of 1848, he managed to foster his own position as an authoritarian emperor. Even though the French February Revolution finally failed to establish a liberal republic, it once again caused a chain reaction throughout Europe.

Imitations of France in Germany and Austria: Successful Start

In Germany, peasants were struck by crop failures, traders and factory owners were hindered by the existence of 38 different states with its custom barriers, cottage weavers were ruined by industrially produced goods from England, liberal freethinkers were persecuted as demagogues – just a few reasons why people welcomed the French February Revolution so openly. In numerous upheavals in March, they demanded freedom of assembly and of the press, a people’s militia, and national unity. In contrast to 1832, most princes gave in to these “March demands”* quickly and appointed comparably liberal “March ministers,”* promised constitutions, and finally abolished all manorial privileges.

The multi-ethnic Habsburg Austrian Empire faced various attacks itself. Here, apart from the usual workers’ protests of early industrialisation, Italian, Czech, and Hungarian nationalists used the wake of France’s revolution to claim their independence again. This had happened before in a country which had been created at the Congress of Vienna without regarding the religious, cultural, and linguistic differences of its peoples. Nevertheless, usually not all ethnic minorities had rioted at the same time. Single rebellions had been crushed by the superior Austrian army, but this time there was a multitude of rebellions. The members of the upper class feared national bankruptcy. This economic aspect made them join the riots of the underpaid workers and the liberal students in Vienna. In this situation, even the Austrian emperor had to make concessions. Count Metternich, the hated reactionary minister of state, had to resign on 15th March, and a constitution was promised.

The German sovereigns probably saw this as an example of how to handle their own crisis. As soon as many smaller princes had given in to liberal claims, even the larger states like Bavaria and Prussia followed. After severe street fighting the Prussian King Frederic William IV* withdrew his troops from Berlin and paid tribute to the so-called “Victims of March.”* In his proclamation “To my people and to the German Nation” from 21st March, he even promised to put himself at the head of a unified Germany. The idea of national unity had already been voiced by the poet Ernst Moritz Arndt in his popular poem and song from 1813:
Was ist des Deutschen Vaterland?
Ist’s Preußenland? Ist’s Schwabenland?
[…]
O nein, o nein, o nein!
Sein Vaterland muss größer sein!
[…]
Soweit die deutsche Zunge klingt
Und Gott im Himmel Lieder singt:
Das soll es sein! Das soll es sein!

Under these circumstances, the Federal Diet finally allowed a pre-parliamentary assembly* to meet at Frankfurt. 573 members were sent by the state parliaments of the German Confederation to organize elections to a German National Assembly*. Eventually, representatives were voted for by all male citizens. However, in some states voting was limited by property qualifications. This was one reason why the Frankfurt National Assembly mainly consisted of doctors, professors, judges, officials, and teachers. Additionally, they were often regarded as influential people in their community. Frankfurt, therefore, came to be known as the “parliament of dignitaries.”*

**Final Failure of the Liberal Revolutions**

Many peasants and workers feared their interests might not be represented adequately. Indeed, the Frankfurt Assembly concentrated on drafting a constitution, but did not focus on everyday needs such as higher wages. Unhappy with this development, Friedrich Hecker, a left-wing member of the pre-parliament, attempted to create an independent republic. Hecker and the like-minded politician Gustav Struve soon gathered democratic irregulars* in southwest Germany. Though their troops were quickly defeated by armies of the German League, this event revealed two dangers the National Assembly was facing: a lack of executive power and an alienation from the lower circles of society. As it had no troops under its command, the Assembly always depended on the cooperation of the German princes. Of course, the princes might also send their troops against the National Assembly itself if they were not content with its ideas. Aware of this situation, the representatives’ aspirations of a state very different from the old political order certainly became limited. This attitude of the National Assembly, in turn, only increased its alienation from the people. Both dangers were soon to threaten the National Assembly again when a war against Denmark broke out over Schleswig and Holstein.

The Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein had traditionally been inhabited by Germans and Danes. However, since the Wars of Liberation had given rise to nationalism in Germany and Denmark, both peoples wanted to include the duchies into their nation. German nationalists occupied fortresses and proclaimed a provisional government in Kiel. This, in turn, was seen as an act of rebellion by the Danish government, and so an armed conflict had become unavoidable. The Frankfurt Assembly sided with Schleswig-Holstein’s German minority, but lacked the means of military support. Once again, military action was handed over to the Federal Diet, the traditional assembly of the German princes’ envoys. It requested the Prussian King to send his troops. Although his military campaign was successful, Frederick William IV soon found himself trapped between foreign and domestic politics. Due to the Prussian victory, Great Britain and Russia feared that the balance of power would be disturbed and put pressure on Frederick William IV to sign an armistice with Denmark. The Frankfurt
Assembly, backed by popular opinion, opposed such an armistice, however. Nonetheless, the Prussian King gave in to international pressure and signed the Armistice of Malmö – without even consulting the Frankfurt Assembly. Officially, only the newly elected imperial vicar* Archduke John of Austria* would have had the right to sign after the Federal Diet had handed over all legal power to him. But the incident proved that neither the Federal Diet nor the king took the imperial vicar and his appointed provisional government seriously. Radical Frankfurt democrats and workers felt betrayed by their representatives. When they started to fence in St. Paul’s Church* with barricades, the parliamentarians themselves depended on the assistance of Prussian troops. Of course, Prussian forces quickly beat the rebels, but the war against Denmark and the troubles surrounding its armistice had made obvious how far the parliament had become disengaged from the masses and how much it depended on the monarch at last.

This dependence on the monarchs also influenced the drafting of a constitution. Many bourgeois members of the “parliament of dignitaries” had favoured a parliamentary monarchy as the ideal type of state from the start. Under the impression of the Frankfurt rebellion, this system of authority and order still gained more support within the National Assembly. Although all men over 25 years of age were granted to vote for the members of the Lower House in universal, equal, and secret elections, the legislative power of this popular assembly would be limited. Firstly, the Lower House would only pose one half of the Reichstag. It had to agree with the Upper House, consisting of the representatives of the 38 states, sent by their governments and state parliaments. Elections to such state parliaments would partly still be restricted by property qualifications, however. Secondly, the king would be equipped with extensive executive powers. He would be the supreme commander of the armed forces, and he would appoint the ministers. He would even have the right to veto bills of the Reichstag or to dissolve it completely. Despite all these restrictions, the constitution can still be seen as an improvement because it included the Basic Rights of the German People* and it gave male citizens at least some political influence.

But this democratic influence finally kept the Prussian monarch from accepting the crown. Unfortunately, Frederick William IV of Prussia had remained the only realistic choice of the National Assembly after the Greater German Solution* had not worked out. The Greater German Solution favoured by the southern states had aimed at the creation of a nation-state including all German-speaking communities of the Austrian Empire. The Austrian government did not accept this solution because, practically, it would have meant the end of its huge multiethnic state. Instead of joining Germany with only one part of its empire, Austria demanded to join completely. This, in turn, could not be accepted by the National Assembly as the inclusion of Czechs, Italians, Hungarians, Serbs, and Slovenes contradicted its central goal of unifying all Germans. Consequently, the Smaller German Solution* was pursued by the majority of the representatives. According to this model, Austria was to be excluded, and Prussia, as the second largest power of the former Holy Roman Empire, was to take the crown from the National Assembly. However, the Prussian monarch was not willing to accept a crown presented to him by the people. In his opinion, sovereigns were designated by god, and only the other German princes could choose him as their leader among their own exclusive ranks.

On 28th April 1848 Frederick William IV could easily state this opinion to the delegation from Frankfurt because the monarchs and their army had proved to be the decisive factor, whereas the
revolutionaries had achieved no practical goals. Even though their representatives had decided on a constitution and on the boundaries of Germany after endless discussions, they lacked the military, financial, and administrative means to put them into action. And with Frederick William’s refusal, they even lacked the monarch for their monarchy. The people’s only means of exerting political pressure had been the unity of bourgeois citizens, farmers, and workers – and this unity had long broken up. This break was still deepened by the imposed constitutions* ‘granted’ by the monarchs. These constitutions clearly favoured the bourgeoisie by a three-class voting system* and by the sovereign’s right to simply appoint the members of the Upper House and the ministry. While this secured the goodwill of the rich middle class, it excluded more radical members of the lower class from gaining any influence. On the surface, the monarchs appeared to keep their promises of constitutions, but in reality they fostered the social and political conditions which had existed before March 1848. They re-established the German League and closed the National Assembly. When one hundred members refused to leave and organised a rump parliament* in Stuttgart, it was soon disbanded militarily. “Radicals” who still demanded the constitution to come into force were brutally opposed and court-martialled, the most violent example of such events being the fall of the fortress of Rastatt*. Surviving liberals either emigrated to the United States in large numbers or withdrew from politics, once again focusing on their private lives and their economic progress.

As France had already developed into an authoritarian monarchy after its February Revolution and Austria had called on Russia to help put down its various rebellions, the German liberals were the last to fail. However, some of their basic ideas would be taken up later on in history. For example, the constitution of the German Empire of 1871 was modelled on the one drafted by the National Assembly. But to the people of the 1850s, this was no comfort, of course.

Matthias Rose