1848, the European People's Spring

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Abstract

In 1848, a revolutionary wave shook the conservative order that had presided over the fate of Europe since the fall of Napoleon and the Congress of Vienna in 1815. Rebellions drove out sovereigns or forced them to grant a constitution, and established new regimes founded on national sovereignty and fundamental rights. This was the "People's Spring." The European dimension of the event is undeniable, although its form and content remain open to debate.

Article

A transnational European movement and its limits

"Do you not feel, through a kind of instinctive intuition that cannot be analyzed but that is certain, that the ground is shaking once again in Europe? Do you not feel—how shall I call it?—that a revolutionary wind is blowing?" These prophetic lines from Alexis de Tocqueville's Souvenirs, written in January 1848, show that the political crises affecting a number of countries took on a continental turn from the outset. The movement's transnational character had already been noted by contemporaries, making Europe the cutting-edge continent for protest, much more so than in the late eighteenth century or the first decades of the nineteenth. However, the European sentiment always remained limited, and the dream of continental unity was marginal albeit not totally absent, contrary to the Bolivarian movement that had roiled Latin America a few decades earlier. On the contrary, 1848 was a moment of national affirmation, as was the aftermath of the Great War between the years 1919-1923, or the more recent sequence that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989. The demands of most movements were inscribed within a national framework, or aspired to the recognition of a nationality. For that matter, the geography of the People's Spring did not include territories homogeneously, and was most often limited to major cities or routes of circulation, whether by road or river, thereby excluding most of the countryside.

Capitals and other major cities were affected in full force. From Palermo to Paris and Milan to Vienna, Neuchâtel to Venice and Berlin to Bucharest, Europe was submerged by a revolutionary wave in 1848 that spared only a very few countries. The "Old Europe" of princes, principalities, and empires was largely replaced by the "young Europe" of liberals, democrats, and patriots. As François Fejtö has written in his history of the People's Spring, "Magnificent youth who believed in liberty, equality,

fraternity...who gave their lives by the tens of thousands between 1815 and 1848, so that there could be a free Italy, a unified Germany, an independent Poland, a revived Greece."

The causes and nature of the People's Spring

The year 1848 cannot be understood without 1815. The People's Spring was in fact a direct consequence of the Congress of Vienna and the restriction—by the Quadruple Alliance and the Holy Alliance—of the national and liberal aspirations that emerged during the Revolution and the Empire.

Nor can 1848 be understood without 1830, and the first challenges to 1815, for instance the proclamation of national sovereignty by the new Citizen King Louis-Philippe in France, the independence of Greece and Belgium, or Poland's rebellion against its Russian occupier and the rebellion of part of Italy against its princes.

Finally, 1848 cannot be understood without demographic expansion or the economic and social crisis that erupted a few months earlier in most of Europe, which was all the more serious because its was simultaneously agricultural, industrial, and commercial. Within half a century, the European population grew by 25–45% depending on the country, totaling nearly 80 million. It became younger, and swelled the ranks of cities like never before. This young and more urban population faced an unprecedented crisis, with its procession of unemployment, food scarcity, and poverty. The intellectuals, bourgeois, and members of the minor nobility who were a driving force (Mazzini, Ledru-Rollin, Mickiewicz, Kossuth, Bălcescu, etc.) were joined by the mass of anonymous protagonists. The latter included students—and in his own way the character Frédéric as depicted by Flaubert in L'Éducation sentimentale—who served as the archetype of this "génération quarante-huitarde" (generation of forty-eight) drunk on hope and thirsting for liberty, equality, and fraternity, as well as artisans, laborers, and the unemployed of major cities. The People's Spring began in direct contact with power, in the European capitals where these protagonists lived.

The year 1848 was more powerful than 1830 because its was a connected and transnational revolution. Political exiles were legion at the time, with the circulation of revolutionaries whose exemplary ideas spread like a contagion, in addition to a more powerful and widely diffused press, and wider networks than those that had existed eighteen years earlier. These transfers in all directions created a genuine European public sphere. The hopes were the same everywhere, and crossed borders: a thirst for liberty, a desire for democratization and fraternity, aspirations for employment law, hopes of national independence for some and the coming of a universal Republic for others, and sometimes both for the same individual. Women took part on an unprecedented scale in the movement to help assert their own political and social rights, by creating newspapers, opening clubs, and even seeking to have women stand for elections, for instance Eugénie Niboyet, who appealed to George Sand in vain.

The revolutionary wave

In a matter of weeks, this wave of protest swept across "old Europe." Unlike 1830, everything did not begin in France. In Sicily the people rose up against their king on January 12. Turin and Florence experienced unrest one month later. Louis-Philippe and his primary minister Guizot refused to expand suffrage, and were overthrown by the people in favor of a republic during a three-day revolution (22-24 February). On March 2, the new Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lamartine, made public a memorandum sent to his diplomatic agents, in which he reassured foreign powers—albeit with a certain amount of ambiguity—that the young Republic was peaceful. He did this to avoid having an army sent out against it, but also added that the treaties of 1815 were no longer relevant. He also secretly encouraged the Italians, Moldavians, and Vlachs to rise up. Be that as it may, the example set by Paris as the cradle of revolutions created ripples. "When Paris sneezes, Europe catches cold," as the Austrian Chancellor Metternich rightly said. The same list of violent actions was used everywhere, including calls for rising up against the established powers, street demonstrations, erecting barricades, and bloody clashes.

Metternich, who had symbolized the order of Vienna since 1815, had to step down on March 13, and was forced to flee the revolt of the Viennese people. In the Austrian Empire, Budapest and Prague rose up. Liberal demands were coupled with a desire for national emancipation. The Hungarians and Czechs called for independence and the election of a new Parliament, and in June the latter even organized the first Pan-Slav congress for the emancipation of all the Empire's Slavs. The Danubian Principalities and Transylvania at the confines of the Austrian and Ottoman Empires revolted in turn. Poland sought once again to free itself from Russian, Austrian, and Prussian domination.

Germany and Italy were quickly contaminated. In the former, Frederick William IV of Prussia agreed to grant a few reforms after Berlin revolted. Venice drove out the Austrians and proclaimed a republic. A republic was also proclaimed in the Eternal City after the assassination of the chief pontifical minister Pellegrino Rossi and the flight of Pius IX. The United Kingdom, Belgium, Spain, and Norway saw the emergence of movements of unrest and support for the rebels of other countries, but which ultimately proved unsuccessful. Only Russia remained totally unaffected by the movement, although Russian émigrés were active.

It should also be noted that the shockwave moved beyond the European stage through colonial empires, as the decisions made in one country sparked hopes elsewhere. For example, the decrees of March 4 and April 27, 1848 abolishing slavery in French colonies had repercussions in Cuba and Puerto Rico.

The backward surge

After this phase of insurrections, the victors of the People's Spring faced the same challenges

everywhere: to build new governments, bring an end to the crisis, and restore unity between classes and peoples. Revolutionary ferment did not die out in capitals, as liberty was accompanied by a flourishing of newspapers and clubs, which served as actors of genuine democratization in political life. The new authorities proclaimed fundamental freedoms (of the press, assembly, worship) and began a constitutional process. In France, the provisional republican government proclaimed direct universal male suffrage on March 5, which applied for the first time in April during the election of a Constituent Assembly. Social structures changed, as the French Republic abolished slavery, and serfdom disappeared from the Austrian Empire. Political tensions nevertheless remained, and the struggle against the crisis proved complicated. In June, when French republicans eliminated the national workshops that they had created to keep the unemployed busy, the people of Paris revolted, leading to a bloody crackdown. The "lyric illusion," to use Georges Duveau's phrase, with its scenes of fraternization—especially during the planting of liberty trees—disappeared and extinguished hopes of a democratic and social Republic.

Elsewhere the backward surge began during the Spring itself—for instance in Poland when the Russians and Prussians crushed the revolt—although it generally came in the fall. Russians, Turks, and Austrians cracked down on uprisings in the Danubian Principalities and Transylvania. In France, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, the nephew of Napoleon I, was elected president of the Republic on December 10, and intended to establish order, initially relying on an elected legislative assembly in May 1849, which had a very large monarchist majority. In Austria the Emperor Ferdinand was unable to govern, and was forced to abdicate in December 1848 in favor of his eighteen-year-old nephew Franz Joseph, who reinforced the executive branch, centralization, and Germanization under the cover of a few liberal concessions.

Germany, Hungary, and Italy were brought back in line, and the projects for independence and unification that had emerged were abandoned. When the Frankfurt Parliament bringing together representatives from all German principalities offered him the crown of a "Small Germany" without Austria, Frederick William of Prussia refused because he believed it would be "excessively dishonored by the odor of carrion left by the Revolution of 1848." When he later reconsidered, the Emperor of Austria brought him back in line with the support of Russia during the conference of Olmütz in November 1850. Charles Albert, The King of Piedmont who had launched a crusade to unify Italy under his authority, was crushed by the Austrians at Custozza on July 27, 1848, and again in Novare on March 23, 1849; he was forced to abdicate in favor of his son Victor Emmanuel, who narrowly avoided having his kingdom dismembered by the victors. In August of the same year, the Imperial army completed the reconquest of Hungary with the help of Russia, secured the surrender of Venice, and occupied the Italian duchies. In Rome the military intervention of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte's France, along with the monarchist majority of the Assembly, brought an end to the Roman Republic and restored Pius IX to his throne. The major figures of the People's Spring—Kossuth, Mazzini,

Manin—went into exile.

In the summer of 1849, the former monarchs and conservatives that could generally rely on the solidarity of the Holy Alliance, as well as the loyalty of the army and rural masses, almost everywhere recaptured practically everything they had lost. Only a few traces of the People's Spring remained, such as in Switzerland where radicals successfully imposed a federal constitution.

By way of assessment

The experience of forty-eight left many of its supporters with a feeling of failure and impotence. In Italy, "*fare un Quarantotto*" ("to do a '48") entered common parlance in the sense of agitating to no great purpose. The International Peace Congress in Paris in August 1849 was a succession of grandiloquent speeches tinged with the last flames of romanticism—such as Victor Hugo's speech on the "United States of Europe"—but did not lead to anything concrete. One comes away with the sense of a revolution that was naturally shaped by ideals, but that was unable to defend them or translate them into reality.

Something powerful and lasting was nevertheless sparked in people's minds. Forces were tallied and errors were put to good use, for instance when Mazzini partially rewrote *Faith and the Future* in light of the events, and created his Action Party. The seeds that would yield fine harvests had been sowed. Italian, Romanian, and German unity, to name just a few, were the daughters of the People's Spring of 1848.

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