The Failed Revolutions
of 1848 / 1849

The year 1848 brought Revolutions in almost all of Europe. Already in 1847, it came to violent conflict between the liberals and the existing powers in Switzerland. In January of 1848, rebels in Napoli obtained [by force] a constitution. But the revolutionary center was again Paris. The French actually had, since 1830, a king who was dependent upon popular representation. But a strict procedure ensured that only about three percent of the French could participate in elections. In February of 1848, in demonstrations in Paris, a different election law was now demanded. When the government forbade a popular convention, it came to fighting in the streets, in the course of which the military remained inactive. As in 1792, a republic was proclaimed. The events in Paris functioned like a spark landing in a barrel of gunpowder. A few days later, important cities in Europe stood in uproar. Above all, it affected countries in which the Restoration had suppressed liberal and nationalistic movements. After a year and a half, however, the uprisings had been put down. What was responsible for that?

The March Movement in Germany

In February, but above all in March of 1848, people from all layers [of society] from all around Germany participated in popular conventions and demonstrations. Many leaflets pointed to the western model: “France is a republic! The time has come for us, too!” Some demands were soon raised everywhere: freedom of the press, freedom to meet, trial by jury, public trials, citizen’s militias, completion of the freeing of the peasants, and finally: a constitution, a parliament for all of Germany.

In the last demand, the desire for national unity and freedom stirred again. But also the other wishes are easy to understand, because they relate to the methods by means of which the governments in the previous years - in the “pre-March” - had operated against freedom movements. There was the muzzling of the press, the prohibition of public meetings, and the obscure legal actions against “demagogues” which often ended with the most severe punishments. In order to be better observed, legal hearings should become public, and juries of the people should operate along with professionally-trained judges. Finally, the standing army, the sharpest instrument of the authorities, should be replaced by a citizen’s militia.

The governments in central Europe shrank back. It was the first time that they had experienced simultaneous demonstrations in many places, in which citizens, craftsmen of the trades, workers, and students participated together. The rulers appointed liberals as ministers. They [the rulers]
intended that they [the newly-appointed liberal ministers] would calm the uproar and content themselves with small reforms. The freeing of the peasants was quickly completed all around the area. [This was] a big step, which however soon weakened the revolution, because the peasants departed from the ranks of those making demands. These reforms did not content the democrats and the socialists, among others. They desired a republic. The social inequality was for, above all, the socialists a topic which was at least as important as the constitutional questions. Freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly, were for them not only goals in themselves, but rather at the same time the means to reach further goals: they wanted the workers to share in the profits which were made in the factories, education for the poor, and equal wealth for all. It was as in the French revolution: not all who demanded change wanted the same things.

A preliminary decision was made already in April of 1848. In Frankfurt, a city located on the Main River, 574 men met in a preliminary parliament. They thus acted according to the principle of popular sovereignty - without, however, having been elected. Certainly, they had all in the previous years made themselves well-known.

The democrats and the socialists in the preliminary parliament demanded, that the convention create laws, and place the executive role upon a committee. Central Europe would have thus had a revolutionary government based on the French model of 1793/1794. But didn’t exactly this phase of the French revolution led to a dictatorship and the reign of terror? The liberal majority in the preliminary parliament thought about this. They decided to have elections for a national convention, and the preliminary parliament dissolved itself.

The Revolution in Prussia and Austria

It would never have come to elections for a German national parliament, if the March movement hadn’t been victorious in the two most important German countries, in Prussia and in Austria.

Prussia. In Prussia, the memory of the royal promise of a constitution in 1815 was still alive. One awaited, finally, the fulfillment of this promise from Friedrich Wilhelm IV, who had been ruling since 1840. But he conceptualized the government very differently: he saw a constitution as an expression of mistrust between between the monarch and “his” people.

The news of the revolution in Paris came quickly to Berlin [the capital of Prussia]. The economic status of Berlin in 1848 was - as elsewhere - bad. The city had grown quickly in the previous decades, and housing conditions were poor. The poorest of those moving into the city came from
the countryside - an effect of the freeing of the peasants, and of the growing population. Grocery stores were plundered, the police were no longer able to control the situation, and the military involved itself. On March 18th, about ten thousand Berliners assembled in front of the palace. Representatives were supposed to demand freedom of the press and a citizen’s militia from the king. According to most reports, the participants in the assembly behaved peacefully; many had put on their best clothing. The military was also there, and the crowd demanded their removal. Instead of that, the soldiers were ordered to dissolve the assembly. Two shots were fired, which had the effect of signaling a fight between the citizens and the soldiers.

Finally, the military was removed, the king relented. On the next day, he had to prostrate himself before the coffins of the fallen citizens. In an address to his “dear Berliners”, one even read: “Prussia will now become part of Germany.” During a ride through the city, the king showed himself wearing black, red, and gold royal garments: the colors of the German national movement. The revolution seemed to have succeeded in Berlin. A “Prussian National Convention” was elected. But the citizen’s militia, which had been demanded, didn’t happen. The French had built up their national guard after July 14th, 1789. The Prussian army had indeed pulled itself back, but its stability wasn’t endangered.

**Austria.** From Vienna, a Saxon diplomat reported, on March 12th, “at the Metternich salon, peace and security.” On March 13th, at noon, he wrote, “the slogan ‘down with Metternich’ is becoming the common rallying-cry.” And at 9:30 pm that evening he wrote, “there is no way out for Metternich.” A few days later, Prince Clemens of Metternich, who had co-determined the fate of Europe for almost four decades, left Vienna and Austria. In Vienna, the Revolution was victorious.

In order to evaluate the revolution in Austria, we must also look at Prague, Budapest, and Mailand: black, red, and gold could not be the colors of the revolution here. If that national demands in Germany were “unity”, then here they were “freedom.” That meant, indeed, also - as in Germany - a constitution, but above all, “freedom” meant the demand for a national self-determination, perhaps even separating from Austria [remember, at that time, Hungary and Italy were part of the Habsburg empire, as was Bohemia].

**The Frankfurt National Convention.**

In the summer of 1848, an elected parliament met in St. Paul’s church in Frankfurt, in order to give Germany a constitution and to prepare for unity.
Political Groupings. “Honoraries”, above all, sat in the national assembly; they were men of good reputation from the respected middle-class professions. Almost 300 of the representatives and elected officials were professors, authors, lawyers, and physicians. There were more than 300 bureaucrats and judges. More than 100 elected [officials] represented economic activity. Soon a variety of political groups had formed, forerunners of the parties. Named after their meeting places - bars - they ranged from the “German Beer Garden” on the left to the “Café Milan” on the right. Right and Left: this division of political views was taken from the seating chart in the meeting hall in the French Revolution. The left wanted a republic, the right wanted the monarchy, and were against the equality of citizens, and therefore for the retaining of aristocratic rights in a united Germany. The majority was the liberal middle, which wanted to moderate between the positions of the right and left.

The assembly instituted a preliminary governmental superstructure. The Austrian arch-duke Johann was chosen as the head of the government, the “imperial administrator.” The governments did indeed recognized this provisional central power, but the large states - Prussia and Austria, as well as Bavaria and Hannover - did not submit their armies to it.

The Polish Question and the Schleswig-Holstein Question. At the Frankfurt assembly, problems arose, for which it was not prepared. The Poles wanted, in this European revolutionary year, to again attain their own nation-state. The area called “Posen” was also supposed to be part of this new Poland; Prussia had gotten Posen in the second partition of Poland, and retained it at the Vienna Congress. A liberal could actually not approve of the partitions of Poland: they were an insult to the right of the population to determine for itself. But now that there was fighting in Posen between the Germans and the Poles, some people saw it differently. One of the liberals, speaking at St. Paul’s Church, said, “to want to create Poland, simply because its demise fills us with justified sorrow - that is what I call simple-minded sentimentality.” And then he declared himself to be in favor of a “healthy national self-interest.” To be sure, the minutes of the meeting recorded, along with “Bravo from the right wing”, also “hissing from the left wing.” But the liberal middle at the St. Paul’s Church meeting agreed primarily in this matter with the speaker. In 1813, the “freedom year”, a “national desain” against the French oppressors had been propagandized; now a German “national self-interest” was called up against the neighbors to the east. Quickly, the national sentiment changed into a readiness for conflict. And the turning of the liberals against Poland had another aspect: they sided with the Prussian army, the force which had shot at the Berlin revolutionaries in March.

The second question, too, which was placed before the national
convention, was national: about Schleswig and Holstein. Both wanted to join the German nation-state; Schleswig was, however, bound to Denmark by personal union. Again it was with Prussian military, which intervened in Schleswig, with the approval of the national convention. But Prussia agreed to a cease-fire in August of 1848, which left both duchies to Denmark. Prussia understood that England and Russia would allow no changes in the power politics in the Baltic area. The powerless national convention agreed to this cease-fire.

The unsolved constitutional problems. The debate about these problems cost much time. And still no answer had been given by the national convention to the decisive questions:

[1] How big should the German nation-state be? Should all of Austria, with all its nationalities, belong to it, or only Austria’s German parts? Or should Germany be united without any part of Austria? The representatives of the latter view were called “small Germans”; those who who wanted to include all or some of Austria were called “big Germans”.

[2] Should Germany be a republic or a monarchy?

[3] How powerful should the central power of the federal government be, compared to the individual German states?