

1815-1848

By 1815, the emancipating promise of the French Revolution had turned almost entirely to ashes in the horrible conflagration which had engulfed Europe. In the years immediately after the carnage, Europeans had good cause to tremble at the thought of a new continental war. Policy makers had a further reason: the French Wars of 1792-1815 had been visited on Europe by a revolutionary state which had wielded power of an awe-inspiring magnitude, driven (it seemed) by the revolutionary fervour of its citizens. Moreover, the ferocity of the Terror of 1793-4 had captured the fearful imaginations of Europeans and would play on their minds for decades to come. For most, concepts such as 'democracy', 'republicanism' and even 'the rights of man' evoked the shadow of the guillotine.

The genteel, mainly aristocratic, diplomats who gathered at the glittering Congress of Vienna in 1815 were largely successful in creating a peaceful international order. There would be plenty of localised conflicts in the nineteenth century, but (without downplaying the horrors of the Crimean War of 1854-6) there would be nothing on the scale of the Napoleonic cataclysm for another hundred years. Yet the relative stability in international relations came at a price, for it was based on the assumption that not only a general European war, but also the threat of revolution, should be avoided at almost any cost. For the Austrian foreign minister Clemens von Metternich, this meant that both nationalism and liberalism (what he called the 'mania for constitutions') had to be suppressed. It was no accident that Metternich should have been the chief architect of the post-Napoleonic order: from 1821, he was Chancellor of the Austrian Empire, which was a polyglot patchwork of some eleven different nationalities. Should these different groups develop their own demands for constitutions and autonomy, then the Empire, would fragment into a dozen pieces. Metternich wanted to maintain the integrity of this vast central European monarchy not only for the sake of his imperial masters, the Habsburg dynasty, but also because he genuinely believed that the Empire was a European necessity whose role was to keep the potentially warring nationalities of Central and Eastern Europe in check. The entire post-war continent was also to be ordered so as to discourage the emergence of nation-states which might threaten the delicate political balance allegedly struck by the 'legitimate' ruling dynasties of Europe. France saw the Bourbon monarchy restored, albeit with a constitution and a parliament: Louis XVIII - brother of the guillotined Louis XVI - returned to Paris, his detractors grumbled, 'in the allies' baggage train'. Germany was divided into thirty-nine different states, bound together by a loose, conservative Confederation. Italy was also split between nine separate kingdoms and principalities: there was no federal structure and the peninsula was dominated by Austrian power. Long-suffering Poland was partitioned between the three monarchies of Austria, Prussia and Russia.

The French Revolution had, however, not only visited the horrors of political terror, war and military occupation on Europe: it had also trumpeted its promises of political liberty and civil rights for the individual and of freedom and independence for those peoples subjugated by foreign rulers. Napoleon himself, in his mid-Atlantic exile on Saint Helena, began to concoct the legend that his real intentions had been to emancipate all the peoples of Europe. There were, moreover, plenty of embittered intellectuals, frustrated professionals, over-worked but low-ranking officials, struggling military officers on half-pay and idealistic students who believed that there were fairer and freer ways to organise the post-war order than the new conservative system. These people – educated, articulate, but denied a political voice – offered a receptive ear to the arguments of liberals and

nationalists. In this era, liberalism and nationalism went hand-in-glove, since liberals envisaged realising their dreams of civil rights, constitutions and parliaments within the framework of the nation-state, while nationalists saw their dreams of unification and of liberation from foreign rule as inextricably linked to the individual rights of citizens. So when one of the greatest nineteenth-century visionaries of national liberation and international brotherhood, the Italian revolutionary Giuseppe Mazzini, established his organisation Young Italy in 1831, he declared that its aims were both 'republican and unitarian', because republican government would ensure freedom for all, while unity was necessary since 'without unity there is no true nation; because, without unity there is no real strength'.

Mazzini grew out of the same soil from which, in the first decade after the Napoleonic Wars, some of the disaffected and the idealistic had sprung to try to overthrow the conservative order through conspiracy and insurrection. The two generations after Waterloo experienced a tortuous and often subterranean struggle between, on the one hand, liberal opposition in the shape of revolutionary secret societies, attempts at military coups and popular uprisings, radical journalism, intellectual and cultural criticism, mass petitions, demonstrations and (where they existed) electoral politics, and, on the other hand, government repression in the form of censorship, arrests, surveillance and military intervention. Europe in the 1820s saw liberal uprisings in Spain, Portugal, Italy and Russia, none of them successful. More encouraging was the wave of revolutions which swept the continent in the early 1830s, with liberals emerging victorious in France (where the Bourbon Charles X was toppled and replaced by the more liberal Louis-Philippe, Duke of Orléans), some German states, Belgium and Portugal. In Spain, bloody civil conflict between liberals and ultra-conservatives (the Carlists) erupted in 1833, ending in victory for the former in 1840. The Greeks, having fought with their Turkish rulers since 1821 in an atrocity-ridden war, finally had their independence recognised at the Treaty of London in 1830. Even the orderly Swiss stirred, forcing political reform on the cantons. Elsewhere, however, the revolutionary outbreaks were ruthlessly crushed. The Poles succeeded in expelling the Russians at the end of 1830, but Tsar Nicholas I retaliated with a terrible vengeance the following year, breaking stubborn resistance with a 120,000-strong army and exiling 80,000 Poles to Siberia. Revolutions in central Italy in 1831-2 were swept aside when Metternich sent the Austrian army southwards. The conservative order had buckled in the 1830s, but it did not collapse.

It was a very different story in the greatest revolutionary maelstrom between the French Revolution of 1789 and the Russian Revolution of 1917 (or perhaps even the collapse of Communism in 1989): the Revolutions of 1848. The mid-1840s witnessed the worst economic crisis of the nineteenth century (these were the years of the catastrophic Irish potato famine), which popularised the liberal opposition. Meanwhile, the conservative order seemed to be impotent in the face of the distress as unemployment spiralled disastrously upwards and as hunger knotted the stomachs of the poor. At the same time, liberals across Europe pressed their demands for political reform, probing for weaknesses in the conservative edifice. Despite – or perhaps because of – Metternich's best efforts to dig in his heels and to yield not an inch to the opposition, the pressure was such that when the collapse came, it was sudden and dramatic. Almost every major European state – and most of the smaller ones – was wracked by insurrectionary violence in that breathtaking year. The first stirrings occurred in Italy at the beginning of the year, but it was the shockwaves from the revolution in France which brought down the conservative order. The Orléanist monarchy was overthrown on 24 February and the Second Republic proclaimed. The news electrified liberal Europeans who now demonstrated, remonstrated and rose up, so that in a matter of weeks Paris, Berlin, Vienna, Prague,

Budapest, Milan, Venice, Rome, Naples, Palermo, Kraków and many other places in between had become scenes of mass protests, of barricaded streets and of bitter fighting, at the end of which monarchs were forced to promise constitutions where none had existed before and to sacrifice their unpopular conservative ministers: the most impressive political scalp taken by the liberals was Metternich's on 13 March. In the 'Springtime of Peoples' which followed, hopeful liberals in Germany and Italy worked towards unification, while Polish and Romanian patriots seized the chance to try to throw off, or lighten, the yoke of foreign rule. The peoples of the Habsburg Empire, including the Czechs, the Hungarians, the northern Italians, the Poles of Galicia, the Romanians of Transylvania and the Serbs and the Croats along the Empire's southern frontier, pushed for greater autonomy or full independence.

For liberals, 1848 represented the greatest opportunity to secure national freedom *with* constitutional liberties and individual rights. Some permanent breakthroughs were made: France adopted universal male suffrage and has had it - almost uninterrupted - ever since. In many other countries, peasants and workers enjoyed their first taste of politics, voting in elections, joining political clubs and forming trades unions. Although women were denied formal political rights, they participated in political societies, engaged in journalism and played important roles in supporting the revolutionaries. Serfdom was abolished where it existed in Central and Eastern Europe and slaves were emancipated in the French colonial empire.

Yet the nascent liberal order was throttled before it had time to develop. The revolutions were defeated partly because they never really challenged the essential strength of the conservatives: except in France, all the other major states were still monarchies, where the armed forces remained under royal control – a fact which was to be essential in the survival of the Habsburg Empire and in the defeat of the liberals in Prussia. The main reason for the failure of the revolutions was because they excluded too many people from the new order. As the liberals seized the unprecedented opportunity to realise their visions of national freedom, they did so in the interests only of their own nationality. In Central and Eastern Europe, the territorial claims of different nationalities overlapped, sowing the seeds of immediate and future conflict. Ethnic minorities within the boundaries of the putative liberal states demanded their own national rights, threatening to fracture the new order from the very start. Consequently, the 'Springtime of Peoples' rapidly became a bleak winter of ethnic conflict, sometimes accompanied by the kind of the atrocities with which our own age is all-too-familiar. Moreover, since most liberals were constitutional monarchists who wanted political reform, but denied the need for radical social change, workers and artisans struggling in the economic crisis were open to the seductions of their left-wing critics. In the summer there were violent and bloody confrontations between moderates and radicals in the streets of Paris, Berlin, Vienna and Frankfurt. Fear of working-class militancy and social 'anarchy' drove many middle-class liberals away from their original principles and into the arms of conservatives who offered the 'bullet solution' to the threat of social revolution. In the countryside, after their emancipation the peasants were promised little else from the liberal order and their old habits of deference, particularly to the paternal figure of the monarch, died hard. All this allowed the conservatives to mobilise the frightened, the disillusioned and the angry, so that they performed respectably in parliamentary elections. In France, the strange, authoritarian figure of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, the great Emperor's nephew, won the presidency by a landslide. By the end of the year, having gathered their strength, the monarchs had struck back, usually with armed force, and destroyed the liberal regimes almost everywhere. There was a second wave of revolutions in Germany and Italy in 1849, but these

were crushed. The Hungarian liberals also held out, but they collapsed under the combined hammer-blows of the Austrian, Croatian and Russian military.

The failure of the 1848 Revolutions was arguably a tragedy for the long-term development of European politics. The ethnic conflicts of that year implanted visceral hatreds which would fester in Eastern and Central Europe deep into the twentieth century. Instead of Italian and German unification taking place through democratic, parliamentary means, they would be to a greater extent imposed by force, on terms which suited the established elites and without the same emphasis on political freedoms and civil rights. This, it is argued by some historians, would set Italy on the path towards Fascism and Germany irrevocably towards authoritarianism, with disastrous consequences for Europe in the following century.

Quotes:

'I am convinced that we are now asleep on a volcano ... Can you not feel the soil trembling again in Europe? Can you not sense the wind of revolution in the air?'

- Alexis de Tocqueville, historian, social thinker and politician, in the French Chamber of Deputies, 29 January 1848.

'The whirlwind which set everything in movement carried me, too, off my feet; all Europe took up its bed and walked – in a fit of somnambulism which we took for awakening ... And was all that ... intoxication, delirium? Perhaps – but I do not envy those who were not carried away by that exquisite dream.'

- Alexander Herzen, Russian socialist and revolutionary intellectual, recalling the exhilaration of 1848.

'The great questions of the day will not be settled by speeches and majority decisions – that was the great mistake of 1848-9 – but by blood and iron.'

- Otto von Bismarck, who first rose to prominence as a conservative martinet in 1848.

Map captions:

North-Western Europe: Belgium declares independence from Dutch rule in 1830, finally securing it in 1839. In Britain, parliamentary reform in 1832 enfranchises the middle classes, but provokes working-class demands for the suffrage, expressed in the Chartist movement which culminates in a

massive demonstration in London in 1848. That same year in Ireland, a small nationalist insurrection is crushed.

France: a revolution in July 1830 topples the restored Bourbon dynasty, replacing it with the Orléans line under King Louis-Philippe. This 'July Monarchy' is overthrown in the 1848 Revolution and the Second Republic is proclaimed. The Republic is in turn destroyed by Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, who is crowned Napoleon III in 1852.

The Iberian peninsula: Spanish liberals seize power in 1820, but they are overwhelmed by French military intervention in 1823. The Carlist War of 1833-40 between liberals and reactionaries secures constitutional rule. In Portugal, a seesaw struggle between liberals and reactionaries from the early 1820s culminates in the establishment of a constitutional monarchy by 1834.

Germany: the radical student societies, the Burschenschaften, are driven underground by the repressive Karlsbad Decrees in 1819. Demands for constitutional reform and for unification flower in response to the French 1830 Revolution, but they provoke another wave of repression. In 1848 the liberals try in vain to forge a constitutional, unified German state.

Italy: revolutions aimed at establishing constitutional government in Naples and in Piedmont are crushed with Austrian military assistance in 1820-1. Revolutions in central Italy in 1831-2 are also destroyed by Austrian intervention. In 1848-9, revolutions erupt over the length of the country, involving a failed bid for unification and an unsuccessful war against Austria.

The Habsburg Empire: Clemens von Metternich is alert for signs of liberal opposition and he encourages international co-operation and intervention to prevent revolutionary outbreaks in Europe. In 1848, the polyglot empire nearly disintegrates as the different nationalities make bids for autonomy, but the Habsburgs hold on, partly thanks to conflict and rivalries among these ethnic groups.

South-eastern Europe: The Greek war of independence erupts in 1821 and culminates in French, British and Russian intervention destroying the Turkish-Egyptian fleet at Navarino in 1827. The Kingdom of Greece is recognised in 1830, joining Serbia (which won autonomy in 1812) as the two first Balkan states to win independence from the Ottoman Empire.

The Russian Empire: liberal army officers, later known as the Decembrists, try to overthrow the Tsarist regime in a botched coup on the accession of Tsar Nicholas I in December 1825. In Russian-ruled Poland, a revolution erupts in November 1830, but this bid for independence is crushed by the Russian army against stubborn Polish resistance in 1831.

Mike Rapport,

University of Stirling.