

The 1848 revolutions

Action point

Make your own notes on the words shown in bold in the text.

The jargon

Feudalism is a system of duties and responsibilities based on the ownership of land. Monarchs distribute land to the nobility in return for loyalty and soldiers in time of war. Peasants receive land from the nobility for their livelihood, but are then effectively owned by the nobles.

On a point

What kinds of problem did these social and economic changes create?

On a point

Why did the Frankfurt Parliament achieve so little?

The revolutions of 1848 spread across most of the European continent. They were caused by the economic crisis of 1846–1847, which exacerbated existing social and political tensions. The revolutionaries were united by their belief in liberalism and nationalism but divided by their varying interpretation of these ideas. Despite the failure of revolutionaries to replace the existing regimes (except in France), Europe was never the same again.

Long and short term causes

Apart from the constitutional monarchies of Britain and France, Europe was a collection of states ruled by **absolute monarchs**, mainly along 'feudal' lines. This had been the case since the Middle Ages. By the middle of the 19th century, however, these societies were undergoing fundamental change:

- Rapid population growth (dating from the late 18th century).
- Rapid **urbanization** – towns were swollen from within but also by excess peasants from the countryside.
- Rapid **industrialization** – industrial change led to the emergence of an urban (and class-conscious) working class, working for middle-class capitalists (the bourgeoisie).

In addition to these social and economic changes two major political ideas were increasingly espoused by an articulate, educated but excluded (in the political sense) middle class:

- **Liberalism** – essentially human rights and freedoms, first put into practice during the French and American revolutions of the 18th century.
- **Nationalism** – people of the same race and speaking the same language should have the right to form an independent state.

It is crucial also to consider the particular circumstance of 1846–1848:

- Harvest failures of 1845–1846, leading to chronic food shortages across much of Europe.
- Financial crisis – expensive food affected manufacturing. Consequent unemployment made it even more difficult for the masses to feed themselves.

France and the German states

The decision of King Louis Philippe to ban a hostile political meeting (the Banquet movement) led to rioting on the streets of Paris. An already unpopular monarch, Louis Philippe lacked loyal troops to defend his regime. By 24 February he had abdicated.

Events in France certainly acted as a catalyst in the German states. On 18 March Frederick William IV had granted a constitution, following widespread unrest. On 18 May, an elected assembly of nationalists and liberals from across the German states met for the first time at Frankfurt. Achieving little over the next year, the **Frankfurt parliament** was forcibly dissolved in June 1849. Germany was not united, and the rulers of the German states remained in power.

The Italian states

Rebellion in Sicily against the king of Naples actually preceded the February revolution in Paris. By the end of March there had been successful uprisings against Austrian rule in Lombardy and Venetia. In addition, the rulers of the independent (but Austrian-influenced) states of northern and central Italy had been forced to grant liberal constitutions. Most of these rebellions had been crushed by May, following the recovery of Austria from its own internal problems. In 1849 Mazzini declared a liberal republic in Rome, but this too was crushed by French troops in July, thereby restoring Pius IX to power.

Austria

Unsurprisingly, the revolutions in Austria's multi-ethnic empire were of a nationalist character. The uprising in Vienna itself was of a liberal nature and led to the resignation of Metternich in March 1848. An alliance of students and workers forced the emperor to flee and led to the creation of a constituent assembly, which passed various liberal reforms.

In October, loyal imperial troops surrounded Vienna and forcibly crushed the revolution. The Hungarians, under Louis Kossuth, were striving for independence from Austria, and were still fighting by April 1849. Austrian troops, having now dealt with events in Vienna, and aided by Russian troops, defeated the Hungarians in August. A similar nationalist revolt was crushed in Bohemia.

The significance of 1848

Despite the failures, 1848 was a turning point:

- Constitutions in Prussia and Piedmont (crucial to future Italian unification) and the establishment of **universal male suffrage** in France and the encouragement of liberalism elsewhere, e.g. the Netherlands. Other regimes now saw the danger of authoritarian government. There was more awareness of the political consciousness of the masses.
- In Austria, feudalism had been ended, and authoritarian government was never successfully re-established. The empire was now in decline.
- The division between liberalism and nationalism. After 1848 nationalism became a tool of conservative leaders, e.g. Bismarck.

Exam questions

answers: pages 100–101

- 1 Why were there so many revolutions in 1848? (45 min)
- 2 Why did a revolution succeed in France but fail in Italy in 1848–1849? (45 min)

Check point

What were the main reasons for the failure of the revolutions?

*“divisions of interest
between the respectable
middle class . . . and
the workers”*

Examiner's secrets

Both questions require you to show the link between socio-economic causes and political causes.