The Revolution

of Revolutions

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The French Revolution, though seemingly squandered after the rise and fall of Napoléon, set the stage for a sweeping wave of revolutions in Europe in the Spring of 1848 by allowing for the politicization of the people. The French Revolution brought the ideals of the individual rights of man and citizen as well as the Sovereignty of the people and showed that they could be universally applicable. This shone a light of self-determination into the subjugated lives of common Europeans and the subsequent repression of these ideas was the catalyst that was essential for the explosion of revolutions in 1848.

The French revolution could only begin originally thanks to the growing involvement and awareness of politics — or politicization — within the people. Thanks to this, more of the general public became involved in protests. This process of politicization continued and as a result, King Louis XVI called for a convening of the Estates General, a deeply classist medieval governing body that stood to advise the king. But, because of its inherent inequality — as the common people, who were 99% of the population comprised one third of the assembly — the third estate declared themselves the National Assembly. This Assembly had the vast support of the common people which influenced the King’s decision to have the other two noble and clergy estates join the national assembly, creating one homogeneous governing body. This was a monumental step for all Europeans that desired democracy as it showed that with the support of the masses, the people could contradict the Nobles, King, and Clergy. After this victory, tensions only grew in Paris as the king was suspected to be plotting a royal coup, having moved thousands of soldiers to the outskirts of Paris. This was what finally lit Paris aflame and resulted in the storming of the Bastille. Popular violence only grew after this with the great fear, where peasants would ransack noble chateaus in the countryside and leave a note signed: “The Nation.” With their cause being more fervent than ever the Government abolished ‘privilege’, having each noble do so in front of the National Assembly. Along with this they also proposed to the King: The Rights of Man and Citizen, a radical treatise at the time that put forward many ideas that would not be realized till much later in both France and Europe. The French revolution showed that with enough popular support a nation of people can change ancient systems in a matter of months.

The revolution continued with the King being deposed and an Emperor — Napoléon — being put in his place. Napoléon Brought France to the zenith of its power on the backs of French revolutionaries. Unfortunately, after Napoléon’s defeat Europe was pointedly reverted to pre-Napoléonic times. This was done during the Vienna Convention, where the emphasis was reinstating a conservative order of monarchical legitimacy in Europe. While it seemed like all progress achieved by the French revolutionaries had been for not, the once intense flame of democracy still flickered in the minds of those who yearned for equality, no matter to what degree. Europeans had been given a shimmering glimpse of democracy and with it, became more resentful of their apathetic rulers.

In the years leading up to 1848, multiple social-economic factors only compounded the unrest in Europe. Failed harvests, including the Irish potato famine, devastated livelihoods and killed millions of people. This was only worsened by a continent-wide economic downturn in 1846-47 that further disenfranchised many Europeans. One solution had been co-authored by a Karl Marx that proposed the labourer should be the sovereign of the country as they are what allows it to operate, and that wealth should be shared equally between them. The communist manifesto certainly inspired some ideas of the Spring revolution, particularly in France. In these preceding years there were already calls for reform in places like Prussia and Austria, as their rulers were seen as too conservative for the economic situation and inept to rule. This was known as the Vormärz. The desire for reform even in the conservative German lands was an important indicator as to how much pressure there was for change within Europe.

In the spring of 1878, the powder-keg that was Europe was finally set aflame in Paris. At this time there were protests and rallies for wider suffrage, and this campaign was to end with a grand banquet in Paris. To supress this campaign the king outlawed the banquet. This caused demonstrations and violent protest in Paris which resulted in the King fleeing the city. A provisional republican government was installed but because of the background of economic instability, the people demanded that the republican government become permanent. In fact, social-fiscal policy dominated the politics of what would be called the Second Republic. Economic uncertainty continued, pushing workers and artisans to storm the National Assembly and demand the right to and the security of labour. The republican government tasked notable socialist Louis Blanc with drafting an act that would guarantee the right to work for all French citizens. It was clear that although the revolution of 1878 was influenced by the French revolution, the issues being raised were different, as the social question was no longer of ruling, but of working. While the new socialist ideals were very popular in Paris, the rate at which the country was changing outpaced public opinion elsewhere and as a result the radical revolutionary government was voted out and a more conservative government put in its place. The pent up unsatisfaction with the French government after the Vienna convention allowed for swift, unwavering action, as can be seen in the Spring revolution. While it took months during the French revolution to instate a proper republic, the French did so during 1848 in a mere matter of days. Though, similarly to the French revolution, the revolutionaries of 1848 were deeply split by faction and could not sustain their momentum for long, eventually electing Napoléon’s nephew as president and reinstating the French empire, with the now Napoléon III as its emperor.

The counterpart to France’s socialist question was that of the German Confederation’s nationalist one. Once news of the Spring revolution from Paris reached Germany and the Hapsburg Empire, cities within them similarly exploded. Revolts sprang up in major cities across the German Confederation in rapid succession. It is clear that if not for the French revolution and the subsequent repression of its ideas, this vast wave of revolution would not have been so popular or powerful. The most fervent of these uprisings was in Hungary where they desired a Hungarian state with its own national identity away from the influence of the Hapsburgs. Hungary’s King declared it’s own National Diet which still held the Hapsburg emperor as its nominal head of state but proclaimed itself largely autonomous and would spearhead its own foreign policy. Despite Hungary achieving partial nationalistic freedom, there where still other nationalities within Hungary that wanted the same, and fractured the burgeoning state as a result. Croatia even went as far as to declare its own National Assembly within the newly autonomous Hungary. The Hungarian State was eventually put down by the Hapsburgs, with help from Russia; but the nationalist sentiment remained strong so that eventually the Hapsburgs conceded, and fromed a dual-monarchy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Given the events transpired it should be clear to see that the French revolution largely inspired the revolutions of 1848. Furthermore, the proceeding repression of its ideas only strengthened its grip on the hearts and minds of Europeans. In contrast to the French however, the problems concerning these revolutionaries — both in France and abroad — were more nuanced than just for the right to governance. In France, the social question of labour pressed heavily on the minds of those workers and artisans who had been so devastated by bad harvest and economic downturn. While these factors were also present in the German lands, the question of national identity is what pushed them over the brink to revolution. The French revolution influenced but not dictated the mid-century revolutions. The prospect of self governance was still an important hallmark of revolution but, the question of labour or national identity took precedence as their respective clarion calls.