Realpolitik and the New Toughness of Mind[1]

The Revolutions of 1848 failed in all of the major states: Germany, Hungary, Italy, France. The "springtime of peoples," as it was called, was followed by chilling blasts of winter. The dreams of half a century, visions of a humane nationalism, aspirations for liberalism without violence, ideals of a peaceful and democratic republican commonwealth, were all exploded. Everywhere the cry had been for constitutional government, but only in a few small states—Denmark, Holland, Belgium, Switzerland, Piedmont—was constitutional liberty more firmly secured by the Revolution of 1848. Everywhere the cry had been for the freedom of nations, to unify national groups or rid them of foreign rule; but nowhere was national liberty more advanced in 1850 than it had been two years before. France obtained universal male suffrage in 1848 and kept it permanently thereafter (except for a brief reversion to a restricted suffrage in 1850-1851); but it did not obtain democracy; it obtained a kind of popular dictatorship under Louis Napoleon Bonaparte. One accomplishment, however, was real enough. The peasantry was emancipated in the German states and the Austrian Empire. Serfdom and manorial restraints were abolished, nor were they reimposed after the failure of the revolution. This was the most fundamental accomplishment of the whole movement. But the peasants, once freed, showed little concern for constitutional or bourgeois ideas. Peasant emancipation, in fact, strengthened the forces of political counterrevolution.

The most immediate and far-reaching consequences of the 1848 revolution, or of their failure, was a new toughness of mind. Idealism and romanticism were discredited in European culture and politics. Revolutionaries became less optimistic; conservatives, more willing to exercise repression. It was not a point of pride to be realistic, emancipated from illusions, willing to face facts as they were. The future, it was thought, would be determined by present realities rather than by imaginings of what ought to be.

In basic philosophy the new mental toughness appeared as materialism, holding that everything mental, spiritual, or ideal was an outgrowth of physical or physiological forces. In literature and the arts it was called realism. Writers and painters broke away from romanticism, which they said colored things out of all relation to the real facts. More and more people came to trust science, not merely for an understanding of nature, but for insights into the true meaning of life and social relations. In religion the movement was toward skepticism, renewing the skeptical trend of the eighteenth century, which had been somewhat interrupted during the intervening period of romanticism.

"Positivism" was another term used to describe the new attitude. It originated with the French philosopher Auguste Comte, who had begun to publish his numerous volumes on *Positive Philosophy* as long ago as 1830 and was still writing in the 1850s. He saw human history as a series of three stages, the theological, the metaphysical, and the scientific. Those who worked for the improvement of society must adopt a strictly scientific outlook, and Comte produced an elaborate classification of the sciences, of which the highest would be the science of society, for which he coined the word "sociology."

In politics the new toughness of mind was called by the Germans *Realpolitik*. This simply meant a "politics of reality." In domestic affairs it meant that people should give up utopian dreams, such as

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[1] Excerpted from R.R. Palmer, Joel Colton, and Lloyd Kramer, *A History of the Modern World*, 9th edition (McGraw Hill, 2002), pp. 495-497, 519.

had caused the debacle of 1848, and content themselves with the blessings of an orderly, honest, hard-working government. For radicals it meant that people should stop imagining that the new society would result from goodness or the love of justice and that social reformers must resort to the methods of politics—power and calculation. In international affairs *Realpolitik* meant that governments should not be guided by ideology, or by any system of "natural" enemies or allies, or by any desire to defend or promote any particular view of the world; but that they should follow their own practical interests, meet facts and situations as they arose, make any alliances that seemed useful, disregard ethical theories and scruples, and use any practical means to achieve their ends. War, which governments since the overthrow of Napoleon had successfully tried to prevent, was accepted in the 1850s as a strategic option that was sometimes needed to achieve a political purpose. It was not especially glorious; it was not an end in itself; it was simply one of the tools of realistic statesmanship. *Realpolitik* was by no means confined to Germany, despite its German name and despite the fact that German chancellor Bismarck became its most famous practitioner.

Bismarck became the classic practitioner of *Realpolitik*. The time came when the Junkers thought him a traitor to his class, when even the king was afraid of him, when he outraged and then mollified the august house of Habsburg, when he made friends with liberals, democrats, and even socialists, and it turn made enemies of them. First he made wars, then he insisted upon peace. Enmities and alliances were to him only matters of passing convenience. The enemy of today might be the friend of tomorrow. Far from planning out a long train of events, then following it step by step to a grand consummation, he seems to have been practical and opportunistic, taking advantage of situations as they emerged and prepared to act in any one of several directions as events might suggest.

<u>Questions for review and discussion:</u>

1. What is the meaning of *Realpolitik*?
2. How was *Realpolitik* a product of its time? What context produced it? How does it relate to other aspects of the age?
3. Come up with examples of Bismarck's use of *Realpolitik* – you will have to think beyond the information that this excerpt provides.