

Revolutions of 1848 Secondary Sources

Essential Question: Is there just one way to view the past?
Topic Question: How do we interpret the revolutions of 1848?

SOURCE 1:*

The European Revolutions, 1848-1851
From Jonathan Sperber, *The European Revolutions, 1848-1851*, 1994, pp. 1-2

The revolutions of 1848 have been at the center of historical debate for a long time. To some, 1848 represents the end of the system set up by the Congress of Vienna; to others, it represents the great battle between the forces of liberalism and conservatism; and to still others, it represents the point at which liberalism, nationalism, socialism, and Romanticism met. Perhaps the most persistent historiographical tradition views 1848 as a point at which history made a “wrong” turn. Aspects of this historical debate are summarized in the following selection by Jonathan Sperber.

The European revolutions of 1848 have not always received the kindest treatment at the hands of historians. Gentle mockery, open sarcasm and hostile contempt have frequently set the tone for narrative and evaluation. More favorable treatments of the period have not been much of an improvement, since their poetic interpretations have subtly downgraded the revolutions as serious political movements, not to be compared to the real business of 1789 and 1917. We might point to three major interpretive traditions.

One is characterized by its description of 1848 as the “romantic revolution.” Historians writing along these lines apostrophize the barricade fighting born from a combination of youthful enthusiasm and romantic poetry; they evoke a revolution reaching its climax in the brief euphoria of liberation in March 1848, the “springtime of the peoples” as the contemporary German phrase described it. In this version, attention is often focused on the romantically heroic deeds of individual great figures: Lajos Kossuth travelling from village to village in the Hungarian plain, to rally the peasants against the invading Habsburg armies; Giuseppe Garibaldi leading the improvised armies of the Roman Republic against the French expeditionary force; Daniele Manin single handedly rallying the Venetians to fight the Austrians against terrible odds. It was all great and glorious, but primarily in gesture and pathos—whether it really accomplished anything is quite another matter.

* Sources 1 and 2 with the italicized commentary come from Dennis Sherman, *Western Civilization: Sources, Images and Interpretations*, 4th edition / From the Renaissance to the Present, 2004, pp. 161-162.

Rather darker is another version of the 1848 revolutions, that views them primarily as farce, a revolution made by revolutionaries who were at best incompetent dilettantes, at worse cowards and blowhards who stole away from the scene when the going got rough. This version features the story of the Parisian revolutionary observing from his window a demonstrating crowd go by, springing up from his chair, and rushing out, proclaiming, “I am their leader; I must follow them.” Another typical victim of retrospective contempt is the Frankfurt National Assembly, the all-German parliament. Historians have had their fun with the “professors’ parliament,” mocking its lengthy debates about whether Germany should be a *Bundesstaat* [federation] or a *Staatenbund* [confederation], noting how, after a year of deliberation, the deputies voted to name the King of Prussia emperor, only to discover that he had no interest in the post.

The third and probably most substantial of the historians’ version of 1848 directs attention to the failure of the revolutions of that year to establish new regimes, pointing out that after a shorter or longer—and usually shorter—interval, the authorities overthrown at the onset of the revolution returned to power. Historians working in this tradition contrast the failed revolutions of the mid-nineteenth century with the more successful ones in 1789 and 1917, and offer a variety of explanations for their differences.

SOURCE 2:*

The Revolutions of 1848
From John Weiss, *Conservatism in Europe*, 1977, p. 56

The scholarly debate over the revolutions of 1848 continues, but in recent years several historians have suggested a new interpretation. The following selection is an example of this new trend.

The revolutions of 1848 were the last in Europe, excluding those caused by defeat in war. Their suppression also marked the last triumph of the semi-feudal varieties of conservatism discussed previously. It is misleading to label these revolutions liberal, as is usually done. The revolutions were started and maintained by artisans and peasants who were either fighting to maintain some elements of the traditional order, or whose status had been dislocated by the

intrusion of liberal commercial capitalism. It is true that liberals assumed leadership once the outbreaks had started, but they wanted reform, not revolution. Moreover, the liberals did not represent the middle class as a whole, but only the politically aware professional groups—lawyers, civil servants, educators and students. There was no mass following for liberal reforms in Europe, and the middle classes in general had no clearly perceived class enemy blocking their social mobility as in 1789. Consequently they were much more wary of the potential for social upheaval from below.

The liberal leaders of the revolutions were isolated from their own class and, as it turned out, had little to offer the artisans and peasants in revolt that could not as easily have been granted by conservatives. Only in Hungary and Italy, where nationalism incited mass risings against the Austrians, were the revolutions truly violent and sweeping. Elsewhere, we find only urban revolts accompanied by sporadic peasant uprisings. Excluding France, frightened conservative elites were never overthrown; they merely made paper concessions and withdrew temporarily until the weakness of the revolutionaries was evident,

whereupon they returned in force. East of France traditionalists could still dominate the forms of social upheaval characteristic of pre-industrial society. In 1848 the industrial proletariat played almost no role whatsoever, and the outbreaks had familiar traditional causes: 1846 and 1847 were the years of the most terrible crop failures of nineteenth-century Europe, from which stemmed famine, inflation, shrinking markets and unemployment.

QUESTIONS:

1. Summarize the 4 different interpretations of the revolutions of 1848 described in these 2 sources (3 interpretations in Source 1, 1 interpretation in Source 2).
2. Which of these interpretations is supported by the other readings you have done (namely the textbook)? Provide 1 additional piece of evidence for each of the 4 interpretations you can (it is fine if you cannot find additional evidence for all of the interpretations; you do not need to do outside research).