The World Revolution of 1848

By Bennett Sherry

In the middle of the nineteenth century, dozens of conflicts erupted across a world that had been connected by colonialism and industrialization. Coincidence? Not so much.

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The Flood: World Revolution and World Crisis

You've read about how the revolutions in Europe and America changed ideas about sovereignty. The next unit discusses the Industrial Revolution. These revolutions related to ideas and industry were felt across the world. Revolutions erupted as people responded to change.

In the nineteenth century, European empires grew larger and colonized more of the world. The middle of the century saw revolutions in about fifty countries around the world.

Let's look at the years from 1848 to 1857. That's when dozens of revolutions in Europe reshaped politics. History's deadliest civil war took place in China. There was a military revolt against British rule in India. Why was there so much conflict and how were these distant events connected?

To the Barricades!

You've read about two different ways to explain revolution: ideology and economics. Like the Atlantic revolutions, the world revolution of 1848 had economic and political causes.

The European revolutions in 1848 started with food shortages. People rebelled against their governments and made demands for democracy. The middle class demanded more liberalized societies and the working class called for economic justice. Both were also driven by nationalism, which is the belief that a group of people from the same culture have the right to their own self-governing country.

Revolutionaries man the barricades in Paris. By Horace Vernet, public domain.

In France, there were riots across the country in response to food shortages. Different classes united against the king and forced him to step down.

But here's the problem with diverse alliances: they're diverse. Different types of people have different needs and ideas. The revolutionaries were unable to remain united after the revolution. Four years later, the new French president declared himself emperor and the revolutionaries lost most of what they had fought for.

What happened in France happened all over Europe, in places like Germany and Austria-Hungary. People joined together in nationalist rebellions. There were still divisions between the middle class and working class, however. The elites were able to gain the support of the middle class by granting some limited political rights. They were then able to retake control of the country with even more power than before.

The powerful states of Western Europe went on to cement their power for the next century. They did this in part by spreading European colonies across Africa and Asia.

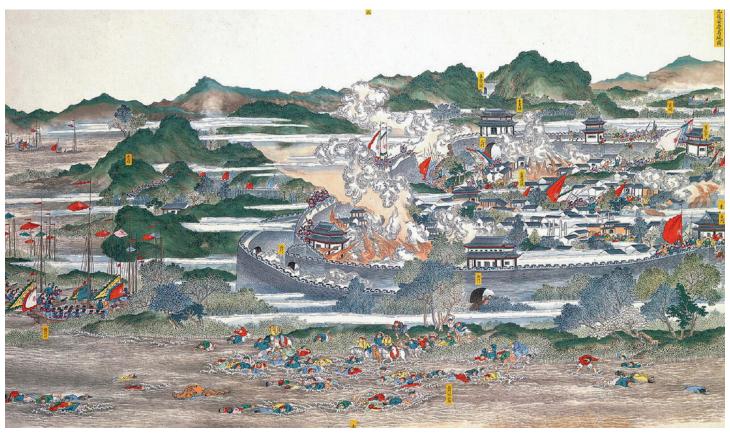*Napoleon III. By Franz Xaver Winterhalter*, *public domain.*

German revolutions in Berlin, 1848. Public domain.

The Taiping Rebellion and the Great Revolt of 1857

Revolution was not limited to Europe. There were two major events in Asia at this time: the Taiping Rebellion in China and the 1857 Indian Uprising in India. These conflicts were in response to European colonialism. But were these rebellions connected to events in Europe, or were they something different?

The Taiping Rebellion (1851–1864) was led by Hong Xiuquan against the Qing dynasty. It resulted in 20 million deaths. The British controlled the trade of opium in China, which drained the country of its wealth. Chinese peasants suffered and Hong Xiuquan gained their support by promising to end the opium trade. The Qing emperor suppressed the rebellion. The emperor's power was weakened by this war. This led to even greater involvement of Europeans in China.

A scene from the Taiping Rebellion. By Wu Youru, public domain.

In the same era, the British East India Company (EIC) ruled most of India. It overtaxed the population and disrespected local customs. The EIC had its own military made up mostly of Indian soldiers. In 1857, the soldiers rose up against the British in northern India. The British had to use Indian soldiers from other regions to recapture lost territory. They brutally put down the revolt and the British tightened its control of India.

Both conflicts were responses to European colonialism and to the spread of ideologies. Some scholars call the Taiping Rebellion a nationalist uprising and say the 1857 uprising started the Indian national independence movement. But are they correct?

The EIC punished many revolutionaries by tying them to the barrels of cannons. By Illustrated Times, public domain.

Ripples and Countercurrents

The revolutions in Asia had some of the same motivations as the 1848 revolutions in Europe. These Asian revolutionaries were reacting to being ruled poorly and to economic suffering. But these events were really inspired by local ideas and leaders rather than European-style liberalism or nationalism.

The thing these revolutions all have in common is that they failed. The governments they rebelled against survived into the twentieth century. Each of these uprisings ended with European ruling elites in a stronger position of power.

Other struggles occurred across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East after 1865. Most were shut down by existing rulers. The limits of revolution had been reached, at least for a while.

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