



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 the Atlantic World changed ideas about sovereignty. The next unit shows how the Industrial Revolution connected a global market. These transformations in ideology and industry were not simply European phenomena. They were felt across the world, and revolutions erupted as people responded to change.

In the nineteenth century, European empires continued to expand and colonize the world. They brought more of the world into a single economic system. Sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein argues that the year 1848 marks the beginning of a "world revolution."

In 1848, revolutions broke out in about fifty countries from Eastern Europe to South America. The incidents went beyond 1848, and beyond Europe.

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, and there was a military revolt against British rule in India. Why was the mid-nineteenth century so deadly, and how were these distant events connected?

To the Barricades!

You've read about two different ways to explain revolution: ideology and economics. The world revolution of 1848 had economic and political causes. The European revolutions started with bad harvests that caused food shortages, including a disease that destroyed potato crops in 1845.

The food shortages reignited political demands for democracy. The middle class demanded more liberal societies and the working class called for economic justice. Both were also driven by nationalism, 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, riots broke out in February 1848. Merchants, middle-class liberals, and factory workers united against the king, forcing him to step down. The revolutionaries drafted a constitution that extended the right to vote to all men and freed all enslaved people in France's colonies.

But here's the problem with diverse alliances: they're diverse. The middle classes wanted political change, like the right to be represented in government. The working classes wanted economic change, such as reliable jobs, food, and housing.

French socialists, middle-class liberals, and peasants began to disagree. This allowed monarchists and conservatives were able to win elections. After violent protests in June led to government suppression and 10,000 deaths, an election was held. Louis Napoleon promised the middle classes some political rights, but nothing for the workers. He was elected president in December 1848 because of middle-class support. But in the end, he betrayed them too. By 1852, he dissolved the National Assembly, seized power, and declared himself Emperor Napoleon III.

What happened in France happened all over Europe. Nationalistic Hungarians, Germans, and others demanded their own nation-states. Rulers were forced to make some changes, but divisions between middle-class liberals and workers weakened the revolutions. Elites and monarchs were able to exploit these divisions and reassert their power. The rulers gave the middle classes some limited political rights, but were able to create more powerful and centralized governments.



Napoleon III. By Franz Xaver Winterhalter, public domain.



German revolutions in Berlin, 1848. Public domain.

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

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 and the new political, religious, and economic forces that came with it. 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 and led to the death of 20 million people. Peasants had suffered under a failing Qing government as the British-run opium trade drained China of its wealth. Hong Xiuquan attracted followers by promising to end the opium trade. The Qing emperor suppressed the rebellion. The emperor's power was weakened, though, which opened the door to more European control.

In the same era, the British East India Company (EIC) ruled most of India. Their taxes were too high and they disrespected local customs. Most of the EIC's soldiers were Indian, who were treated poorly. In 1857, Indian soldiers rose up against the British in northern India. The British had to use Indian soldiers from other regions to recapture lost territory. After the revolt, the British tightened its control of India.



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

Both the Taiping Rebellion and the 1857 Indian Uprising 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

Some of the same ideas of sovereignty and nationalism that motivated the 1848 revolutionaries also inspired colonial subjects. All these revolutionaries were reacting to poor rulers and economic suffering. But at the same time, the two Asian events were really inspired and led by local religious and philosophical ideas and leaders, rather than European-style liberalism or nationalism.

The one thing these revolutions all have in common is that they failed. The European monarchs, the Qing Dynasty, and British rule in India all survived into the twentieth century. Each of these uprisings ended with European ruling elites in a greater position of power in a stronger centralized nation-state.

Yet the revolutions of 1848 had an international impact. Radicals in different countries joined together. The monarchs of Europe helped each other avoid disaster. When revolutions failed, many European radicals emigrated to America. Hundreds of thousands of German immigrants fought in the Union army during the American Civil War of 1861-1865.

Other struggles rippled across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East after 1865. Between the 1840s and 1870s, the Ottoman Empire was forced to attempt reforms to meet the needs of its own middle class. In West Africa, the American colony of Liberia declared its independence in 1847. In present-day Ghana, middle-class merchants tried to form democratic nations of their own. But, like others in the region, it was shut down by existing rulers and British intervention. The limits of revolution had been reached, at least for a while.

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