



The failure of the German revolutions 1848-49

This is a transcript of the “failure of the German revolution 1848-49” podcast from www.mrallsophistory.com

Our last podcast finished by looking at the range of social, political and economic causes of the 1848 Revolutions in the German States. The popular protests that erupted through Europe after the overthrow of King Louis Philippe in France led to other European rulers panicking. The revolution in Austria achieved the promise of a constitution and the resignation of Metternich, while monarchs in the other German states promised a range of reforms. In the crucial state of Prussia the King began a series of liberal reforms including the appointment of new ministers and providing an election for a Prussian Assembly. Most significantly, the German states all sent representatives to a new National Assembly in Frankfurt that subsequently became known as the Frankfurt Parliament. Events moved so swiftly that to most observers it looked as if liberalism had bloomed in Germany.

This wasn't the case. The rulers of the German states had been forced to make liberal concessions in order to preserve their power, not because they necessarily believed in them. Indeed, it wasn't long before they had the opportunity to reestablish their authority. The summer of 1848 witnessed an economic revival that led to a decline in popular protest. The reduced number of protests provided Austria with the opportunity to use its military to restore order in Bohemia and Italy. By October the Austrian forces had occupied Vienna and began a violent clampdown that left over 2,000 protesters dead by the end of November. News of the Austrian counter-revolution prompted Friedrich Wilhelm IV in Prussia to follow their lead. He dismissed his liberal ministers, dissolved the parliament, and ordered his troops to occupy Berlin. The counter-revolution was swift and effective. By the spring of 1849, the monarchs of the German states had regained their control. The Frankfurt Parliament's attempt to unify the German states under the leadership of the Prussia king collapsed when, in March 1849, Friedrich Wilhelm IV rejected the constitution and the offer of the crown of a united Germany. He sneered that it was being offered 'by the grace of butchers and bakers' – a damning reference to the predominantly middle-class make-up of Parliament – and a clear sign that he didn't believe they had the right to choose a king. He did, after all, believe in Divine Right and thus thought that only God may choose a ruler.

The reestablishment of monarchical rule effectively brought the revolutions to a close as the Frankfurt Parliament collapsed, having made little progress towards German unification. Whitfield argues in his textbook, *Germany 1848-1914*, that “The outcome of the events in Germany in 1848-9 was determined in Vienna and Berlin, not in Frankfurt.” His view is that the actions of the Frankfurt Parliament had absolutely no effect on the revolutions. The elected representatives had, after all, spent the first five months of the Parliament's existence debating the 'Fundamental Rights of the German People' rather than actively engaging with the act of law making and government.



Whitfield's view is representative of the modernist interpretation of the German revolutions. Whereas he argues that the actions of the Frankfurt Parliament had little impact on the outcome of the revolutions, previous historians found fault with the elected representatives. Eric Eyck in 1950 referred to the Frankfurt Parliament as a 'lawyers parliament'. He argues that they were too intellectual – more willing to spend time discussing the big ideas and ideals rather than implementing them.

Karl Marx wrote a scathing attack of the revolutionaries shortly after the events. Unsurprisingly – this is Karl Marx, after all – he blamed the Frankfurt Parliament for failing to build a strong base of popular support. AJP Taylor, an English historian shared this view, stating in his 1961 book *The Course of German History* that it was the 'divorce between the revolutionaries and the people that determined the happenings of 1848'.

The membership of the Parliament supports this. Of the roughly 440 representatives who made up the assembly, there was only one peasant and four *Handwerker*. The vast majority of the German population at the time were peasants, yet the bulk of the parliament were middle-class intellectuals with little in common with the people they were supposed to represent. They were happy for the mass public protests to put pressure on the princes to grant concessions, but had concerns over how much power the lower classes should be given. The middle-class were, after all, property owners and street fighting could be expensive because of the possible damage to property. Indeed, while the more radical members of the Frankfurt Parliament wanted the abolition of hereditary monarchy and a wide franchise (in other words, giving everyone the right to vote) most of the representatives wanted a constitutional monarchy with a restricted franchise in order to restrict the rights of the workers. Furthermore, the parliament actively rejected calls by factory workers to introduce legislation to improve working conditions; they refused to listen to *Handwerker* appeals for help against the introduction of new machinery; they gave no assistance to peasants who asked for the abolition of feudal dues or assistance in acquiring their own land from the aristocratic landowners.

It's therefore understandable that a number of historians have pointed towards the Frankfurt Parliament's failure to work with the mass of the population as a key reason for the failure of the revolutions. However, if Whitfield and other more recent historians are to be believed, the actions of the Frankfurt Parliament were irrelevant in determining the outcome of the revolutions. However, while they argue that the clampdown in the capitals of Vienna and Berlin were responsible for causing the failure of the revolutions, the rulers did not simply turn back the clock and try to forget that the events of 1848 had ever happened. In 1922 G M Trevelyan claimed that "1848 was the turning point at which modern history failed to turn", but if we consider the changes introduced by the rulers of Germany in the years immediately following the revolutions I find it difficult to agree. Indeed, following in the tradition of enlightened absolutism, Friedrich Wilhelm IV wanted reform that maintained the King's right to rule but introduced certain individual rights into Prussian law. This can most clearly be demonstrated by the granting of the Prussian Constitution. It wasn't a liberal constitution by any stretch



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of the imagination, but it was certainly better than not having one at all. Friedrich Wilhelm also took note of the complaints by the lower classes that had not been addressed by the Frankfurt Parliament. By reintroducing the Guild system in February 1849 the King appeased the *Handworkers*, while for the peasants he abolished feudal dues.

These changes in Prussia coincided with a period of immense industrial expansion and, fortuitously for the Prussians, a series of international challenges to Austria's power. In the next podcast I'll be looking at these issues and how the changing relationship between Austria and Prussia laid the groundwork for the unification of Germany.