Revolutions of 1848: Crash Course European History #26

Crash Course: European History
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Hi I'm John Green and this is Crash Course European History.

So, there are many candidates for most important year in European history--1492, when permanent links between Afroeurasia and the Americas first formed; 1688, when the Glorious Revolution gave Europe an example of constitutional governments; 1789, when the French Revolution directly challenged monarchy; 1992, when the European Union was founded. But you can sure make a case for 1848, when revolutions swept across Europe in the wake of the upheavals and protest we saw in the last episode.

People in cities were suffering from economic dislocation, many having come from farms where new machinery had made their labor unnecessary. And urban artisans were also under threat because industrialization was automating some of their jobs, Systems of government that had functioned effectively for agrarian, subsistence economies were proving ineffective for this brave new world. In short, automation was changing work and governments weren't functioning particularly well.

The more things change . . . INTRO By the end of 1848, France, the Austrian Empire, Denmark, Hungary, the Italian States, and even Poland would be enmeshed in the greatest wave of revolutions Europe has ever seen. Many Europeans were experiencing the "Hungry Forties," caused once again by bad harvests and especially in Ireland the potato blight, a mold that devastated potato crops in Ireland and elsewhere in Europe.

The problem was made worse by several aspects of what might be called economic modernity—that is, standardization, one-crop agriculture, and more efficient wholesaling of food. In terms of standardization and one-crop agriculture, traditionally Peru had at least 4-5,000 types of potatoes. So if one type contracted a specific blight, there were still several thousand other varieties that might be safe.

But Europe, followed by the United States, was gradually turning toward farms that focused on a single crop, and often a single strain of a crop, for efficiency. Increasingly, imperialists forced this standardization and single crop farming on other parts of the world, raising the chances for disaster. Because of the single strain of potato, blight devastated entire crops.

And this resulted in death from starvation and diseases that invaded the weakened bodies of at least a million Irish farmers and their families. Another million or more emigrated, some to England and others to the United States and Canada (where in both cases, by the way, there were no laws creating a distinction between legal and illegal immigration. People simply moved in.).

And as scarcity deepened in 1846 and 1847, Britain's liberal Whig government stuck to its belief in laissez-faire, meaning that the government should let events play themselves out, and therefore offered the Irish no help at all. The system of usually English landlords requiring payment from Irish peasants to work farmland also worsened the crisis--like, throughout the Irish famine, huge amounts of food were exported from Ireland to England. Even today, the population of Ireland has not recovered from the famine--some eight million people lived on the island in 1840; today, around 6.6 million do.

Meanwhile, on the continent, food riots became common and threats to merchants, and storekeepers, and bakers, and government officials became more menacing and direct. One warning read: "If the grain merchants do not cease to take away grains. . . we will go to your homes and cut your throats and those of the three bakers. . . and burn the whole place down." So, yeah, it was pretty tense--as things tend to be when people are starving. Also, amid all this deprivation and death, anti-slavery and pro-freedom ideas were circulating.

Between 1833-1838, Britain freed slaves across the empire, except in India. A system of slave-like indentured labor did spring up, but the rhetoric in Europe at least, was one of emancipation. In eastern Europe, Moldavia and Wallachia began freeing several hundred thousand enslaved Roma in 1843.

Later, in 1848, France also re-emancipated slaves after their re-enslavement under Napoleon. These events were accompanied by popular abolitionism, and uprisings, and the development of a language of freedom, especially freedom from governmental and structural oppression. And that's really important, because in some ways, its only when we have language for ideas that we're able to share them and talk about them.

And so, developing a language around freedoms, and ideas about human rights allowed us to share those ideas. On the cultural front, women such as French novelist George Sand (which was a pseudonym) and the English Bronte sisters --pictured behind me, looking translucent as always--published best-selling novels that addressed the persecution of women. Sand dressed in men's clothes to get cheaper seats at the theater and for a while led a scandal-ridden life.

The Brontes did quite the opposite, but they still shocked people with their portrayal of women as mad or crazed in domestic confinement. Across Europe, women reformers actively addressed the disproportionate poverty of women, which intensified as price inflation for food made it harder to feed families in the Hungry Forties. Many working women also became more politically active, demonstrating in front of city halls because their meager salaries no longer sufficed to buy high-priced bread.

Hey, so quick question about the Bronte sisters painting behind me. Who is this spectral figure in the middle who has been erased from the painting? Is that their weird brother who was an opiate addict?

What was his name? Bromwell? Stan says his name was Branwell. which might be even worse.

Update! We just found out that Branwell Bronte painted that painting, and he painted himself in with his sisters, but then he painted himself out, which is so sad! Oh!

The self-hatred! Now I feel really bad making fun of you, person who's been dead for 150 years. OK, let's move on.

So, when we last visited Italy, there was no such thing as Italy. Its territory was parceled out among the Spanish Bourbons to the south, the Austrian Habsburgs to the north, and the papacy in the center, among several other stakeholders. But when audiences at the operas of composer Giuseppe Verdi heard his rousing choruses celebrating freedom and triumph over adversity, they rose to their feet cheering, and made Verdi a symbol of a unified Italy free from foreign domination.

And in the fall of 1847, women in Messina Sicily did more than cheer; they tore down royal insignia and in January 1848 they took to the streets, beginning a brief revolution that took place in many parts of the peninsula. These women supported Giuseppe Mazzini, who wanted national unification and a republican form of government. Others favored a government headed by the pope, and still others wanted a monarchy.

In the end, this disunity allowed for the revolutions to be defeated as Austrians, French, and other military forces were sent in to stop it. In fact, disunity of revolutions leading to failure will become something of a theme. Let's go to the Thought Bubble. 1.

In February 1848, myriad interests came together to spark revolution in Paris and then in other French cities. 2. Upper-class reformers objected to the cronyism, limited voting rights, and censorship. 3. But in contrast, the prime minister, historian François Guizot, thought Louis-Philippe's government was just right. 4.

The crowds sent him and the king into exile. 5. Those crowds were backed by the upper-class reformers, but they were fueled by discontented workers, the unemployed, and struggling artisans 6. —all affected by rising food prices as well as uncertain conditions of employment. 7. A socialist different from the ones we've already talked about, Louis Blanc, was attuned to the needs of workers and the poor in Paris. 8.

He convinced the new provisional government to set up national workshops to create jobs for unemployed men. 9. Women successfully demanded that workshops be established for them too and unsuccessfully nominated George Sand—"male by virtue of virility, female by divine intuition"--as a representative to the National Assembly." 10. As spring progressed, a new national assembly, composed of less than ten percent workers, 11. shut down the workshops and formed a new national police force composed of men from the countryside, 12. who had little patience for city people and their city problems. 13.

In June, tens of thousands of workers rose up and fought the national police for several days, 14. until the bodies were piled high and the workers defeated. 15. Now a republic, France held elections based on universal male suffrage, 16. which the nephew of Napoleon, Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, won handily, 17. due to the support of peasants in the countryside. 18. Lest you think the rural-urban divide is anything new.

Thanks Thought Bubble. So, just as these revolutions started, a new socialist duo, German lawyer and journalist Karl Marx and Manchester textile mill owner Friedrich Engels, issued The Communist Manifesto. Its famous opening—"A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of communism" used the word communism instead of socialism based on the idea that society would soon revert to a traditional "community" of like-minded people.

Marx and Engels believed that class struggle was going to erupt and wash away upper-class oppression, and that the proletariat would seize the means of production--that is, factories and land and everything else would be shared by everyone, rather than owned by the few. And for the moment, that was pretty much it for "Marxist" socialism. But over the next half century, however, it would, of course, take a firmer theoretical shape and infuse workers' programs for change across the globe, and become tremendously influential.

And while initially, few people paid attention to the Marxist ideas of class struggle, but some kind of struggle was certainly happening: The revolutions erupting across central and eastern Europe featured--depending on who you were--calls for the creation of constitutionally directed government structures, an end to serf-like oppression and censorship, restoration of aristocratic privileges, and yes, even democracy. In short, people wanted more power, and also greater rights and protection of those rights. And of course, then as now, ideas were not limited by borders.

Like, news of the revolution in France sent Berlin's activists into the streets, pushing for an array of changes but mostly for the unification of the German states. King Frederick William IV, who was forced to witness the carnage on Berlin's streets, summoned a congress to meet at Frankfurt to plan for reform and unification. The meeting was dominated by the princes of the several dozen individual states, and it progressed slowly as the princes debated whether to include Austria in this unification project until the Prussian king, on being offered the crown of a constitutional monarchy refused to accept "a crown from the gutter." So instead, he would get no crown at all, and the German states would remain disunited.

Did the Center of the World just open? Is there a gutter crown in there? I don't know if this gutter crown is for children, or if I just have an exceptionally large head, but regardless, if there is one lesson from 19th century Europe, it's that royals should take a gutter crown and be grateful for it.

You know what's fun? Being the Queen of England, or of the Netherlands. You know what's not fun?

Being the king of Germany. Because there is no king. OK.

Let's turn our attention to Poland. So, already in 1846, Polish nationalists from the upper-classes in the Galician city of Cracow, hoped to lead a revolt against Austrian rule. but, peasants in the region refused to join them because Austrian rule was the peasants' only hope for gaining freedom from the payments and service that they owed aristocratic landowners. What's that?

Stan says I have to take off the gutter crown. So, we like to think of revolutions as being neatly for freedoms or against them, but here we have an example of it being much more complicated. Because if you're in like, the upper classes in Poland, or a working person in a city, freedom might look like freedom from Austrian oppression.

But if your a peasant, freedom looks like freedom from feudalism. So during that revolution, peasants rose up and slaughtered several thousand from the land-holding Polish nobility. You can see how Marx came to believe class struggle was inevitable.

The same fragmentation appeared in March 1848 when an uprising broke out in cities across the Austrian empire. Remember Prince Metternich, architect of conservative reforms in Central Europe? By 1848 he was so unpopular that disliking him managed to unite the disparate interests of various classes and ethnic identities in the empire.

Middle-class reformers wanted constitutional rule; aristocrats wanted more power than they had with Metternich's imperial bureaucracy running things, workers wanted both political and economic reforms, and peasants, of course, wanted an end to the last oppressive vestiges of feudalism. And in the face of temporary enthusiasm on all sides, Metternich fled the country in disguise. Later Emperor Ferdinand stepped down in favor of his nephew, Francis Joseph, whose nephew Francis--or Franz--Ferdinand would go on to be a rather famous assassination victim.

Good God was there a rich person in central Europe not named Frederick or Francis or William or Louis or William-Louis or Frederick-William-Louis or Francis-Frederick-William-Louis? At any rate, with the common enemy of Metternich gone, the common purpose soon disappeared as well. Peasants across the empire were, as they had been in 1846, not terribly interested in the push for noble and middle-class rights.

They retreated from the fight once the imperial government abolished all traditional dues and obligations to the nobility. And as for the liberals and aristocrats—in Austria and across most of Europe—they weren't thrilled with the idea of giving workers the right to vote. They believed that workers did not have a big picture perspective and instead were concerned with food, shelter, and taxes.

As one privileged Austrian deputy put it: "we should prevent only those individuals from voting who live from a daily wage or who

enjoy contributions from a charitable institution—in short, those who are not independent." And many singled out Jewish people as being especially unworthy of rights. And just as the revolutions of 1848 paved the way for both reforms and conflicts in the 20th century, this exclusion of Jewish people from political participation and legal protection of rights was a harbinger of what was to come. Much of that anti-Semitism was focused in Eastern and Central Europe, but really it was everywhere.

Ultimately, in Austria, as elsewhere, once the rebels were disunited, they were easier to defeat, and they were crushed in Vienna, Prague and other cities, and then in 1849, Tsar Nicholas I sent 300,000 troops to finish off the Hungarians for his Austrian ally. Around a hundred thousand people were killed across the Austrian empire in the revolutions of 1848 and thousands were killed elsewhere, not to mention the destruction of property that accompanied what were often massacres. Guarantees of rights were also rolled back and some participants were executed, or imprisoned, or sent into exile.

And it's normal to wonder whether history is only the story of death and destruction and whether the outcomes were worth it. But consider the Austrian peasants who demanded and ultimately received an end to centuries of serfdom. Imagine knowing that you and your children and your children's children will be forced to live on and work the same land, owing an endless debt to the same aristocratic family that you'll never be able to repay.

Now imagine the end of that cycle. Imagine being part of the first generation of people in living memory who could leave. Was the revolution worth it?

Perhaps for those families, it was. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next time.