

## 1848: a European Revolution? International Ideas and National Memories of 1848

**Review Number:**

422

**Publish date:**

Tuesday, 1 June, 2004

**Editor:**

Axel Körner

**ISBN:**

1403920346

**Date of Publication:**

2003

**Price:**

£17.99

**Pages:**

232pp.

**Publisher:**

Macmillan

**Place of Publication:**

Basingstoke

**Reviewer:**

William Fortescue

In February 1998 the Centre for European Research at University College London and the German Historical Institute in London organised a conference on the changing meanings of 1848. This conference was held to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the 1848 revolutions. Those giving papers at the conference were either British or German academics, apart from the late Jan Havránek (formerly Professor of Modern Czechoslovak History at the Charles University, Prague) and Simonetta Soldani (Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Florence). The contributions were first published in hardcover by Palgrave Macmillan in 2000; with a few minor alterations, they have now been republished in paperback by the same publishers.

According to the preface of the paperback edition, the special focus of the contributions is on 'the revolutions' European dimension and on the commemorations of 1848 during the past 150 years' (p. ix). Axel Körner stresses both these themes in his 'Introduction'. He argues that the revolutionary movements of 1848–49 occurred in many parts of Europe but that they were subsequently commemorated as events of national, rather than of European, history. The various revolutions in Europe of 1848–49 were connected in many ways, and countries that did not experience revolutions themselves, such as the Netherlands, Sweden, Russia and Spain, were nevertheless influenced by the events. Many contemporaries were aware of the European dimension of the 1848 revolutions, but subsequently national perspectives dominated, partly because the events of 1848–49 became subsumed into the histories of national liberation and unification. However, 'the political primacy of European integration during the 1990s has changed this long-lasting concentration on the national perspective' (p. 20).

The extent to which the 1848 revolutions were connected and comparable is explored by John Breuilly. He sees connections through the impact of the February 1848 revolution in France on other European states, the widespread, though mistaken, assumption that a republican France would launch wars of national liberation, and the common pattern of many of the popular insurrections of March 1848. Breuilly maintains, however, that these connections became less obvious after April 1848 as 'the revolutions entered unknown territory' (p. 35). Features shared by the 1848 revolutions included the prominent role played by the artisanal labour movement; the importance of the Roman Catholic Church in the conservative reaction; the eruption of popular and democratic forms of political expression such as publications, public speeches, clubs, demonstrations and elections; and the subsequent decline and repression of democratic movements in cities and in rural areas.

Exploring 'Cultural reflections of and on 1848', Martin Swales surveys works of literature and concludes that 'the recurring issue' is 'the role of the middle classes, of the ethical and political sensibilities of the bourgeois mentality' (p. 62). Gabriella Hauch reminds readers that 'the revolution of 1848 was not only a man's business' (p. 64). In several European cities, women formed women's clubs and associations, published petitions, pamphlets and newspapers, supported and participated in street-fighting, and generally tried to participate in politics and enter the public sphere. Nowhere, however, did they make any significant gains. Instead, women involved in political and revolutionary activity were everywhere singled out for ridicule and, if captured as suspected insurgents, for humiliating treatment. Popular French songs are examined by Körner for the light that they shed on French working-class attitudes to European countries other than France. The conclusion is that Europe in the popular mentality was associated with conflict: between monarchical coalitions and republican or Napoleonic France, and between the Europe of Metternich and Radetzky and the Europe of free peoples struggling for liberation.

In the Grand Duchy of Baden, considered by Sabine Freitag, republicanism and German national unification were the crucial political issues. Economic and social problems, the influence of neighbouring France and Switzerland, and even of the distant United States of America, and intellectual inspiration from classical and more recent literature all helped to promote republicanism in Baden. However, the perceived threat of French aggression, the primacy given to the goal of German unification and to political reform at a national level rather than at a state level, and the problems that emerged in 1848 over Posen and Schleswig weakened the republican movement in Baden. Nor were Bavaria and Württemberg, let alone Prussia, prepared to tolerate a republic in Baden.

As is well known, ethnic Germans welcomed, but Czechs opposed, the proposal that representatives of Bohemia should sit in the Frankfurt Parliament. The resulting conflict, according to Jan Havránek, marked the starting point of Bohemia's modern political life. Havránek then surveys how Czech historians have treated the events of 1848–49 in Bohemia. Unsurprisingly, their interpretations have reflected the preoccupations and political realities of their times.

Three contributions are concerned with commemorations of 1848 within national contexts. Simonetta Soldani concludes that in Italy there is now little interest in the events of 1848–49. Very few Italian scholars

have recently published on the revolutionary and nationalist movements of 1848–49 in Italy, and the Italian 150th anniversary commemorations were remarkably muted. Part of the explanation for this comparative neglect may be that 1848–49 posed, but did not resolve, issues relating to national independence, civil war and class conflict. Conservative and Catholic politics and fears of popular revolts and of the Left, meant that in 1898 and 1948 the 50th and centennial anniversaries were similarly muted.

France, according to Rebecca Spang, is almost obsessed with remembering, with anniversaries, and with a consciousness of its national heritage. However, a key intellectual contribution to this phenomenon, Pierre Nora's *Les lieux de mémoire* (7 vols, Paris, 1984–93), scarcely considers the French Revolution of 1848. According to Marx, Tocqueville and several other historians, the memory of 1789 influenced the history of 1848. However, Marx and Tocqueville believed, respectively, that 1789 represented tragedy or reality, while 1789 represented farce or play-acting.

Finally, Jam Merk returns to Baden and surveys how the events of 1848–49 (in Baden) have been commemorated there in monuments and interpreted in historical writing. After 1871 the German imperial authorities restricted monuments commemorating 1848–49 to listing the names of those who had died. Historical studies of Baden in 1848–49 tended to be unsympathetic to the revolution until the 1920s and from 1948. In a divided Germany, unsurprisingly the role in 1848–49 of liberalism and parliamentary democracy tended to be emphasised in West Germany, whereas in the German Democratic Republic the workers' movement was stressed. The 1998 commemorations in Baden were numerous, well-attended and emphasised liberalism, democracy and the European dimension.

The 'Conclusion' by Reinhart Koselleck asks how European was the revolution of 1848–49. While states on the periphery of Europe, such as Spain, Britain, Sweden and Russia, were not directly involved, elsewhere much of Europe experienced movements which shared certain common characteristics: common economic and social factors, similar rural problems, a shared agenda of constitutional reform, a pattern of national fragmentation. Altogether, Europe in 1848–49 'for the first and last time started off and underwent a shared revolution. All subsequent revolutions were the result of nationalistic inter-state wars' (p. 221).

It is obviously the case that the various revolutionary and nationalist movements that occurred in Europe in 1848–49 constitute, at least in part, a European phenomenon. However, this is not a new idea; and, arguably, the European theme should have been explored in this volume with more regard to such topics as urbanisation and the role of cities in the revolutions of February and March 1848, and the 'European' factors which help to explain the eventual triumph of reaction. The emphasis on commemoration and memory clearly reflects currents in historiography. The conclusion, unsurprisingly, is that today's politics and the current political climate enormously influence how historical events are commemorated and remembered. Arguably, this also applies to the publication under review.

#### **Other reviews:**

[2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/422#comment-0>

#### **Links**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2088>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>