

The US and the 1848 Revolutions

In 1848, the United States and Europe were in extremely different places both politically and socially. In that year America successfully defeated Mexican forces in its two-year long war with Mexico. On the other hand, in 1848 Europe had a tumultuous year of sweeping revolutions. The various uprisings that broke out throughout Europe were led by tenuous and temporary coalitions, which comprised reformers, the middle class, and the working class. Many Americans viewed the 1848 Revolutions as a reflection of American influence abroad and hoped that the European revolutionaries would be able to similarly overthrow monarchical rule in favor of a free republic.

The 1848 Revolutions mark the only European-wide collapse of traditional monarchical and aristocratic rule to date. However, within a year the revolutions ultimately collapsed and were quelled by reactionary forces. In all, tens of thousands of people were killed during the 1848 Revolutions and even more were driven into exile. A couple of successful reforms survived the 1848 Revolutions including the abolition of serfdom in both Austria and Hungary as well as the elimination of an absolute monarch in Denmark.

The 1848 Revolutions

The wave of political upheavals in Europe originated in France in February of 1848. Almost overnight revolutions sprung up throughout parts of Europe and Latin America. In total, there were over 50 countries that participated in, or were affected by, the 1848 Revolutions. The major areas of revolutionary struggle were in France, Germany, Poland, Denmark, Italy, and the Austrian Empire. Russia, Great Britain, Spain, Sweden, and Portugal were indirectly affected by the revolutions taking place around them, but they did not actually experience revolution within their own borders. Although all of the revolutions shared a similar ideological background, there was no concerted effort or central coordination between the revolutions in the various countries.

Scholars generally cite five primary factors that were involved in all of the 1848 Revolutions:

1. A sweeping dissatisfaction with the existing political leadership
2. A call for increased participation in government and the demand for democracy
3. The rapid growth of nationalism
4. The frustrations and demands of the working class
5. The reactionary forces that comprised the aristocracy, the army, and the peasantry

American Reaction to European Revolutions

A majority of Americans supported the revolutions in Europe and drew a connection between those revolutions and the American Revolutionary War. Some Americans favored an active support of the 1848 Revolutions and wanted to send military assistance to aid the revolutionary cause. Recent veterans from the Mexican-

American along with newly arrived immigrants from Ireland and the German states assembled volunteers, arms, and funds to be sent to Europe to support the revolutionary armies. Politically there was a faction of northern journalists and Democratic politicians who comprised the “young America” movement and wanted the US to adopt an active and somewhat aggressive policy in favor of the 1848 Revolutions. They advocated sending troops to the revolutionary movements in Germany and Hungary. Furthermore, they wanted to sever diplomatic ties with the autocratic governments in Prussia and Austria.

Parades, banquets, and fundraisers in the United States also reflected support for the 1848 Revolutions. Religious institutions, particularly Protestant churches, endorsed the revolutionary cause in Europe as well. Protestant ministers and clergymen applauded the ousting of Pope Pius IX and hoped that this would signal the beginning of the collapse of the Catholic Church. Furthermore, America’s commercial interests favored economic reform in Europe so that American exports could have better access to open markets throughout Europe.

Although nearly all Americans supported the revolutionary efforts in Europe, some of this support was symbolic at best. In the political arena, Whigs and southern Democrats in Congress tended to oppose any active support for the revolutions. American businessmen sought to take advantage of the unstable economic environment in Europe in the hopes that European traders and financiers would invest in American stocks and bonds.

The most substantial opposition to the 1848 Revolutions came from pro-slavery advocates who feared the social reforms taking place in Europe and its colonies. The 1848 Revolutions saw the abolition of serfdom in central Europe as well as the abolition of slavery in France’s West Indian colonies.

Overall Impact of 1848 Revolutions on the United States

Ultimately, the United States provided minimal support or intervention in the 1848 Revolutions. However, the uprisings in Europe considerably influenced American politics and culture. Reform movements throughout the United States including women’s rights, labor movements, and the abolition movement saw commonalities between the troubles facing Europeans and Americans. Advocates for these movements pointed to the episodes in Europe as a way to open up discussion for the changes that they felt needed to take place in America. American reform movements perceived the events in Europe as a cautionary example of what could occur in the United States if drastic measures were not taken to right these social wrongs.

In addition to having an ideological impact on the US, the 1848 Revolutions brought a number of European revolutionary refugees to American soil. Some of these immigrants permanently settled in the US, while others immigrated to America short-term in order to raise support for their revolutionary cause. Lajos Kossuth, the Hungarian leader, was the most famous European revolutionary to come to the United States to fundraise for his cause.

The 1848 Revolutions also affected Americans living in Europe during that time. During the revolutions, Ralph Waldo Emerson had given a lecture tour throughout Great

Britain. He witnessed the revolutions and uprisings in the German states as well as the abdication of Louis Philippe in France. His time spent in Europe during the 1848 Revolutions influenced his work on race and slavery and his abolitionist views on American politics during the 1850s and 1860s.

After the failed 1848 Revolutions, most Americans wondered if Europe would ever be capable of establishing free republics throughout the continent. Americans felt empowered that their revolution had successfully overthrown monarchical rule and created a thriving republic. The majority of Americans did not believe that the violence and infighting that took place in Europe could ever occur in the US. However, a number of the driving issues that plagued Europe also proved to be divisive enough to erupt in civil war just over a decade later.

Lesson Summary:

- The 1848 Revolutions in Europe reflected the dissatisfaction throughout Europe of the oppressive nature of aristocratic and monarchical rule.
- In the United States, reaction to the 1848 Revolutions was overwhelmingly supportive. Many Americans viewed the struggles in Europe as akin to their own struggles with England a century earlier.
- While many Americans felt that the United States was immune to the kind of fighting that took place throughout Europe, in a little over a decade the US would face one of the bloodiest civil wars in Western history.