Key Issues

- What were the short-term causes of the revolutions?
- What projects for political and social reform were put forward in Germany?
- Why did the revolutions collapse so suddenly in the course of 1848–49?

2.1 What role was played by economic factors in making 1848 a ‘year of revolutions’?
2.2 Why did the movement for liberal reform achieve such success in Germany, and then collapse so rapidly?
2.3 In what respects was the crisis in the Austrian Empire more dangerous than in other parts of Europe?
2.4 How was the Austrian government able to re-establish its authority?

Framework of Events

1848
- January: Revolt in Palermo, Sicily
- February: Abdication of Louis Philippe and proclamation of the Second Republic in France
- May: First meeting of the Frankfurt Parliament
- July: Meeting of Constituent Assembly in Vienna
- October: Windischgrätz occupies Vienna

1849
- March: Dissolution of the Austrian Constituent Assembly. Defeat of Piedmontese at Novara
- April: Friedrich Wilhelm IV refuses the offer of the German Crown
- August: Hungarian rebels surrender to Austrian and Russian troops

Overview

In the mid-1840s, the political tensions that beset the governments of Europe were compounded by a complex socio-economic crisis. In many parts of Europe these strains, caused by unemployment and high food prices, provoked angry urban demonstrations that added to the intellectual discontent of the middle classes. A combination of various crises led to a temporary conjunction of opposition interests, united in hostility to the governing classes of these states, but for many different reasons. Faced with a groundswell of revolt apparently as broadly based as the one that had brought down the French monarchy in 1789–92, many European governors saw flight, surrender or compromise as the safest course.

In the early months of 1848, it appeared that the politics of western Europe had been transformed by an upheaval that had no precedent in terms of extent or impact. Within a year, however, it was becoming clear that the liberal and radical
movements of 1848 had brought about relatively little lasting change. In part, this was due to the incoherence of the ‘revolutionary’ groups. The political interests of middle-class liberals rarely coincided with the more fundamental, material requirements of unemployed workers. It had often been possible for liberals in one state to establish common ground with those in neighbouring states in terms of their constitutional demands. Yet, in 1848, this community of political interests was often cancelled out by conflicts between the nationalist demands that often accompanied progressive constitutional ideas. The most important element of all in the failure of the revolutions lay in the enduring strength of the governmental systems that they appeared to have overthrown. The economic crises affected the populations of Europe far more seriously than they affected the regimes. These retained the resources, and in particular the military strength, to survive. Above all, while individuals such as Metternich abandoned their posts, the governing classes, in general, still had the will to survive. In such men as Franz Josef in Austria, they found new leaders, who were largely willing to preserve the political bases of the pre-1848 regimes.

The revolutions did leave behind certain achievements. Prussia retained its constitutions that its rulers could not easily ignore. Feudal obligations were abolished in parts of eastern Europe, never to return. It is tempting to conclude, however, that the main beneficiaries of the 1848 revolutions were, in fact, the governing conservatives. After many years of living in fear of liberal revolt, they had now confronted it and survived. It was they, rather than the liberals, who emerged strengthened by the ‘Year of Revolutions’. The next 60 years of German history were to be dominated by conservative governments, confident in their own power, and confident in their ability to harness and control the forces that once seemed such a threat to them.

It is just possible, however, that the confidence of the conservatives was misplaced in the long term. There can be little doubt that the events of 1848–49 brought profound disappointment for liberals and nationalists across Europe, yet their causes did not perish. Within 20 years, the ambitions of moderate nationalists in Germany had been realised. Conservative leaders – forced to adopt and to adapt the programmes of groups whose ideologies were too popular, and who had too great an economic impetus behind them to be resisted – had unified both states. Hungarian nationalists, also, proved too influential to be ignored by an Imperial regime that had learned few lessons from the events of 1848. In terms of purely political power, European liberals had less cause for satisfaction 20 or 30 years on. Their economic agenda, however, had proved less easy to ignore. Bismarck’s Germany, in the 1870s and the 1880s, provides a prime example of a state embracing many of the economic priorities of the industrial middle classes, even as it strove to exclude them from direct political power. There can be little serious doubt, therefore, that the would-be revolutionaries of 1848 acted prematurely and sought to exploit a ‘revolutionary situation’ that did not really exist. The events of this ‘year of revolutions’, on the other hand, provided a clear indication of the evolutionary direction that European politics were following.
2.1 What role was played by economic factors in making 1848 a ‘year of revolutions’?

The traditional forms of European society had been under pressure from economic and demographic changes for some time before 1840. The years between 1845 and 1847, however, formed a particularly severe phase of this crisis. The revolts resulted not from one crisis, but from a conjunction of several. A particularly acute agricultural crisis coincided with a newer kind of crisis, an industrial slump. The infant industrial economies of Europe had less experience of this and it gave special urgency to the political problems of the individual European states.

**Agricultural crisis**

European agriculture entered an acute crisis in 1845. The potato blight of that year had its most dramatic impact in Ireland, where it eventually accounted for the loss of up to a million human lives. The failure of the crop also cut a swathe of hunger and suffering across Germany. The following year, the unusually hot, dry weather caused the failure of the grain harvest. As the failures continued, it became impossible to make good the shortfall from the surplus of the previous harvest. Throughout Europe, there were sudden, steep price rises. In Hamburg the price of wheat rose 51.8% between 1841 and 1847, 70% of that increase occurring in the period 1845–47. In Switzerland, the price of rye doubled in the same two years, and bread prices doubled in the single year 1846/47. Even when imports of foreign grain were feasible, the incomplete state of most European railway systems made its passage to many parts of the continent impossible.

**Industrial crisis**

The years 1845–47 also saw the most severe of the industrial crises that had hit Europe at intervals of roughly ten years since the end of the Napoleonic wars. Partly, this was a crisis of overproduction, in which manufacturers, finding that they had saturated the markets available to them, cut back production and thus created unemployment or wage reductions. In Germany, the amount of spun yarn exported by the member states of the Zollverein fell by 40% in 1844–47. The crisis was aggravated by the impact of factory production, in some parts of Europe, upon older forms of production in other areas. The hostility shown by skilled craftsmen and artisans to factories, mills, railways and their owners, in 1848, clearly indicated what they thought to be the origins of their suffering.

The industrial crisis was closely linked to the agricultural crisis for, in many localities, the need to use government and bankers’ funds to buy large quantities of foreign corn left little or nothing for investment in industry. Bankruptcies multiplied, and business confidence reached a low ebb. The impact of all this upon living conditions was naturally most severe. The coincidence of high food prices with declining wages caused widespread hardship, especially in the towns. Here, three elements of discontent came together: the unemployed and hungry artisans, the peasants fleeing from the rural ills of land-hunger and semi-feudal oppression, and the middle classes with their liberal and nationalist opposition to the existing regimes.

**The relationship between crisis and revolt**

The violence of 1848 did not occur at the height of the European crisis, but
1. What kinds of economic crises occurred in Europe in the years leading up to 1848?

2. Why did the agricultural crisis that affected Europe in 1846–48 have a more serious impact on Germany?

3. What evidence is there to support the claim that ‘social and economic factors, rather than political ones, were responsible for the outbreak of revolution in Germany in 1848’?

2.2 Why did the movement for liberal reform achieve such success in Germany, and then collapse so rapidly?

**The combination of crises in Germany**

The sensational political events in France, in early 1848, impacted upon German states whose economic and political problems were subtly different. The economic crisis in the German towns displayed two distinct characteristics. The first was the material distress that had resulted from the failure of the harvest in the countryside. In 1847, there were bread riots in Stuttgart and in Ulm, and violence in Berlin triggered by the shortage of potatoes. Secondly, German urban revolt was fuelled by the distress of traditional artisans, already under pressure from the growth of mechanised production before the depression of 1846–47 hit them. The early months of 1848 witnessed such acts of ‘Luddism’ as the burning of mills in Dusseldorf, demonstrations by weavers in Chemnitz, and assaults by wagoners in Nassau upon the newly constructed railways. Factory production, too, experienced severe difficulties as investment and demand declined, and there were strikes for higher pay and shorter hours in Berlin, Leipzig and Dresden. The combination of all these economic factors was, in some cases, catastrophic.

We have already seen some of the political tensions that existed in the states of the German Confederation before 1848 (see Chapter 8). Much remained to be done in the German states that had been achieved in France a generation earlier, and historians have delivered some damning verdicts. Agatha Ramm wrote, in *Germany 1789–1919: a Political History* (1968), that Germany before 1848 ‘was a country where to have a political opinion was difficult, to express it almost impossible, and to join with others to promote it, conspiracy punishable by the heaviest prison sentences’. A.J.P. Taylor’s view (*The Course of German History*, 1945) of the personal unfitness of the rulers of many of the German principalities is only slightly exaggerated: ‘Ceaseless inbreeding, power territorially circumscribed, but within those limits limitless, produced mad princes as a normal event; and of the utterly petty princes hardly one was sane.’

In Prussia, in particular, the solidarity of the governing classes appeared to be weakened by an unusual development. The mainstay of Prussian conservatism, the landowning Junker class, found itself in an unaccustomed position in the years immediately before 1848. Their desire for the construction of an eastern railway (*Ostbahn*), linking their agricultural estates in East Prussia with markets in the major cities, had temporarily
placed them in the unusual position of supporting the decision to summon
an assembly which alone could grant the necessary funds. Strange and
perturbed as the political scene in Prussia seemed in 1846–47, and real as
the economic distress was it must be stressed that no genuine govern-
mental crisis existed. The administration was soundly organised and in
many cases, in economic matters for instance, it was pursuing far-sighted
and logical policies. The finances of the state were sound, far sounder than
those of the Austrian Empire. The army was well trained, well equipped
and loyal. In the context of the improving harvests and falling food prices
in 1848, it was likely to take more than a temporary loss of nerve on the
part of the government to achieve any permanent revolution in Prussia.

The first wave of reforms

In the German states, as in much of central Europe, the news of the
February revolution in Paris was the trigger that turned long-term resent-
ment into political confrontation. ‘It is impossible,’ declared a leading
Berlin newspaper, ‘to describe the amazement, the terror, the confusion
aroused here by the latest reports from Paris crowding on each other
almost hourly.’ And if the political society of Prussia’s capital seemed
shaken, what hope was there for such minor entities as Mecklenburg-
Strelitz?

By the second week of March, the leaders of most German states had
despaired of surviving where the King of the French had perished. Instead,
they began the wholesale granting of constitutional demands. In Bavaria,
King Ludwig abdicated and his successor, Maximilian II, accepted the prin-
ciples of a constitutional assembly, as well as ministerial responsibility, a jury
system and a free press (9 March). In Baden, all feudal obligations were abol-
ished (10 March) and, in Württemberg, the king renounced his hunting
rights. Even Prussia could not escape. At first, Friedrich Wilhelm seemed to
preserve his political position by ordering his troops not to fire upon demon-
strating crowds, and by putting his name to the usual list of concessions. An
outbreak of street fighting on 18 March broke his nerve and he sought to
save himself by ordering the withdrawal of the army from Berlin. As a virtual
prisoner of his people, he then appointed a liberal ministry led by Rhineland
businessmen, Ludolf Camphausen and David Hansemann.

The Frankfurt Parliament

Liberal reforms were only one of the elements in what seemed a remark-
able victory for the insurgents. On the face of it, the most spectacular
concession of the rulers of Prussia, Bavaria, Baden and Württemberg was
their agreement to participate in the organisation of a German national
parliament, a vehicle for the unification of the nation. At the height of the
liberal success, the first steps towards such a body were already being
taken. A group of enthusiasts, mainly academics and predominantly from
the southern states, resolved at a meeting in Heidelberg (5 March) to
summon a preliminary parliament (Vorparlament) which would, in turn,
supervise elections to a German representative assembly. Thus this
assembly had its origins, not in the exercise of any state’s power, but in the
absence of power, in a vacuum characteristic of March 1848. The
Vorparlament, in its five-day session, decided that elections should be by
universal male suffrage and proportional representation, with one dele-
gate for every 50,000 Germans.

The assembly that finally gathered in St Paul’s Church in Frankfurt (18
May) was predominantly elected by those middle classes preoccupied with
constitutions and parliaments. It was a classic illustration of Lewis
Namier’s description of 1848 as ‘the revolution of the intellectuals’. Of 830
delegates who sat there at one time or another, 275 were state officials, 66 were lawyers, 50 were university professors and another 50 were schoolmasters. Only one came from a truly peasant background, and only four from the artisan classes. Relatively united in social origins and in their view of the Germany that they did not want, they were to discover, like most revolutionaries, that the construction of a new state and society is a much more difficult process.

The failure of the Frankfurt Parliament

Historians have dealt more harshly with the German liberals who dominated the Frankfurt Parliament than with any comparable group in the 19th century. Historians of the Left have followed Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in condemning them for not taking violent action to overthrow existing power structures. In the decades immediately following unification, such ‘Prussian’ historians as Treitschke blamed them for their opposition to Germany’s ‘best hope’, the Prussian monarchy. Foreign commentators, such as Lewis Namier and A.J.P. Taylor, have seen them as ideological frauds, pretending to favour democratic reform, but ultimately interested only in German power. Indeed, the failure of the Frankfurt Parliament was almost total, not because it failed to use its opportunities, but because the opportunities of 1848 were illusory.

The first set of difficulties faced by the Frankfurt delegates concerned the eventual nature of the state that they hoped to create. What would be the constitutional framework of the united Germany? The majority of deputies felt it was of great importance to recruit the princes as supporters of a monarchical Germany, rather than risk the radical politics that accompanied republicanism. Two other issues followed from this.

- Which of Germany’s royal houses should predominate?
- What should be the relationship of the Parliament with the older authorities within Germany?

Conservatives preferred to see the constitutional decisions of the Parliament implemented by the princes in their individual states, while more radical spirits wished to see princely authority overridden by that of the Parliament.

In June, under the influence of its president, Heinrich von Gagern, the Parliament took the decision to claim executive power, superior to that of any state or to that of the Federal Diet. They also decided to entrust the leadership of Germany to the greatest of the German families, the Habsburgs, in the person of the Archduke John. The Parliament was thus moving towards a ‘Greater Germany’ (Grossdeutschland), which included all German speakers, rather than a ‘Lesser Germany’ (Kleindeutschland), which excluded the Germans of the Habsburg territories. That ambition was to be thwarted by the recovery of Habsburg authority in the Austrian Empire, in October and November 1848.

The challenge of non-German nationalism

A second set of problems arose from the fundamental weakness of the Frankfurt Parliament, its total lack of material power. Lacking an army of its own, it was bound to depend upon the goodwill of the major German princes for the most basic functions of government, such as the collection of taxes. Like other constitutional bodies set up in 1848, this assembly was only, ultimately, able to survive if the regimes that it sought to replace voluntarily handed over their power.

In particular, the Parliament faced two challenges that it was powerless to
resolve. Firstly, various nationalities had laid claim to territories seen by the Parliament as part of the Fatherland. In March 1848, Denmark occupied Schleswig and Holstein. This was closely followed by Frant?žek Palacky's declaration that Bohemia belonged to the Czech nation, and by a rising by Polish nationalists in Posen. The initial sympathy of the assembly for the aspirations of other nationalists evaporated when those aspirations seemed to threaten German power. Seeing no other alternative to the diminution of Germany, the assembly applauded many of the selfish acts of their erstwhile enemies. The victory of the Austrian army in Prague, and the suppression of the Poles by the Prussian army both received widespread approval. When foreign pressure forced the Prussian army, in action against the Danes, to accept a disadvantageous armistice (August 1848), the assembly, for all its harsh words, could only confirm its impotence by accepting the settlement.

The challenge of working-class radicalism

The other challenge came from the undeveloped and incoherent working-class movement. In the last months of 1848, German workers' organisations were beginning to react to the failure of the Frankfurt Parliament to solve working-class problems. While the Frankfurt liberals devoted themselves to the abstract task of drawing up a constitution, separate and independent workers' assemblies met in Hamburg and in Frankfurt itself, making economic demands against the middle-class interests of the delegates in St Paul's Church. They requested the limitation of factory production, restrictions upon free economic and industrial growth, and the protection of the privileges of the old artisan guilds. When barricades went up in Frankfurt (18 September) and disturbances followed in Baden, Hesse-Cassel and Saxony, the Parliament's only recourse was to use Prussian and Austrian troops once more.

The recovery of Prussia

The emergence of the national issue and the growing fear of working-class violence were two of the factors that paved the way for the triumph of conservatism in Germany. The third factor was the steady recovery of nerve by the King of Prussia. By August, Prussia's own parliament had demonstrated its radicalism by seeking to abolish the feudal, legal and financial privileges of the Junker class. This had brought the Junkers into open opposition to the liberals. Encouraged by their support and by increasing evidence of the reliability of the army, Friedrich Wilhelm dismissed his liberal ministers and ordered his troops back into Berlin. In December, he first banished and then dissolved the Prussian parliament. The anti-nationalist stance of the Austrian Habsburgs in March 1849 gave the Frankfurt assembly little alternative but to offer the crown of Germany to the only other German powerful enough to wear it. Friedrich Wilhelm's refusal to 'pick up a crown from the gutter' sealed Frankfurt's failure.

Much has been written about the Prussian king's motives. Certainly, his distaste for constitutional monarchy was genuine, but there is also evidence that he harboured a deeply traditional belief in Austria's divinely ordained leadership of Germany and its princes. With the withdrawal of Prussian and Austrian delegates from Frankfurt, the Parliament was already a shell when it moved to Stuttgart to await its dispersal by Prussian troops (June 1849). Although permanent agrarian reforms survived from the events of 1848–49, the liberal, constitutional revolution had achieved nothing. Indeed, we may even accept the judgement of A.J.P. Taylor that there was, in no realistic sense, a political revolution of any kind in Germany in 1848. 'There was merely a vacuum in which the liberals postured until the vacuum was filled.'

1. What were the main aims of German liberals in 1848?
2. To what extent would you agree with the judgement that German liberals failed in 1848 because their aims were unrealistic, and because the existing German governments were strong and healthy?