



# The World Revolution of 1848

*By Bennett Sherry*

In the middle of the nineteenth century, dozens of conflicts erupted across a world that had been connected by colonialism and industrialization. Coincidence? Not so much.



## The Flood: World Revolution and World Crisis

You've read about how the revolutions in the Atlantic World changed ideas about sovereignty and the nation-state. The next unit shows how the Industrial Revolution connected a global market. These transformations in ideology and industry were not simply European phenomena. They were felt across the world, and revolutions erupted as people responded to change.

In the nineteenth century, the expansion of European empires brought more of the world into a single economic system and under the political system of European colonialism. The sociologist, Immanuel Wallerstein, has argued that the year 1848 marks the beginning of a "world revolution." Other scholars, like the historian C.A. Bayly, call it the "world crisis of the mid-nineteenth century."

Whatever you call it, something big started in 1848. Anthropologist David Graeber notes that 1848 "saw revolutions break out almost simultaneously in fifty countries, from Wallachia to Brazil." But the crises went beyond 1848, and beyond Europe. Historians Michael Geyer and Charles Bright call the years 1840-1880 "a period of extraordinary violence," with 177 different conflicts.

Let's look at the years from 1848 to 1857. That's when dozens of revolutions in Europe reshaped politics and ended European serfdom. A civil war in China would be history's deadliest ever, and there was a military revolt against British rule in India. Why was the mid-nineteenth century so deadly, and how were these distant events connected?

### To the Barricades!

You've read about two different ways to explain revolution: ideology and economics. Like the Atlantic revolutions, the world revolution of 1848 had economic and political causes. The European revolutions in 1848 started with bad luck, in the form of bad harvests.



*Revolutionaries man the barricades in Paris.* By Horace Vernet, public domain.

## The World Revolution of 1848

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In 1845, a fungus devastated European potato crops. Millions starved. Poor wheat and rye harvests in 1846 made matters worse. Food shortages reignited political demands for democracy. These middle-class demands for political liberalism were joined by new calls for economic justice from factory workers. Both these groups were animated by a rising force: nationalism.

In France, food shortages and industrialization united a diverse coalition against the king. In February 1848, revolts broke out across France. Merchants, middle-class liberals, and factory workers stood next to each other atop barricades in the streets, forcing the king to step down. The revolutionaries drafted a constitution that freed all enslaved people in France's colonies and extended the right to vote to all men.

But here's the problem with diverse coalitions: they're diverse. The middle classes wanted *political change*—like the right to be represented in government. The working classes wanted *economic change*—such as reliable jobs, food and housing. When and if the government granted rights to the middle classes, middle-class liberals often abandoned their working-class allies. Working-class revolutionaries called for republican governments and socialism—proposals that the middle class found too radical.

In France, disagreements between socialists, middle-class liberals, and peasants meant that monarchists and conservatives were able to win elections. After violent protests in June led to government suppression and 10,000 deaths, an election was held. Louis Napoleon promised the middle classes law and order and some political rights, but nothing for the workers. He was elected president in December 1848, thanks to middle class votes. But in the end, he betrayed even them. By 1852, he dissolved the National Assembly, seized power, and declared himself Emperor Napoleon III.

What happened in France happened all over Europe. Dreams of democracy and nationalism had people shouting for new nations. Nationalist fervor inspired Hungarians, Germans, and others to demand their own nation-states. In the Austrian Empire and in Germany, revolutions broke out against the status quo. These movements forced rulers to agree to some changes, such as the end of serfdom in the Austrian Empire. But in each case, divisions between middle-class liberals and radical workers weakened the revolutions. Elites and monarchs exploited these divisions to reassert authority. In each case, the nation-states of Europe emerged more powerful and centralized, although the middle classes gained some limited political rights.



*Napoleon III. By Franz Xaver Winterhalter, public domain.*



*German revolutions in Berlin, 1848. Public domain.*

With the liberal middle classes supporting the government, a kind of order had been restored. The powerful states of western Europe went on to cement their power for the next century. They did this in part by uniting nationalism and industrial technology to spread European colonies across Africa and Asia.

## The Taiping Rebellion and the Great Revolt of 1857

Revolution was not limited to Europe. After 1848, similar conflicts erupted around the world. Two events shaped the mid-century crisis in Asia. The Taiping Rebellion in China and the 1857 Indian Uprising were global events. Asian conflicts during this period, especially in China and India, were responding in part to the expansion of European colonialism and the new political, religious, and economic forces that came with it. But were these rebellions connected to events in Europe, or were they something different?

The Taiping Rebellion (1851–1864), led by Hong Xiuquan against the Qing dynasty, killed 20 million people. This was a period of economic turmoil for China. Peasants suffered under a failing Qing government, while much of China's wealth was drained by the international opium trade run by the British. After meeting European missionaries, Hong Xiuquan started a rebellion that combined elements of Christian and Buddhist religion. He promised to end the opium trade and create a better life for peasants, many of whom quickly followed him. By 1853, the rebels declared the city of Nanjing the capital of the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace. Ten years later, one of history's bloodiest wars ended with the Qing emperor suppressing the rebellion. The emperor's power was weakened, though, which opened the door to more European intervention.



*A scene from the Taiping Rebellion. By Wu Youru, public domain.*

In the same era, the British East India Company (EIC), which ruled most of India in 1857, overtaxed the population and disrespected local customs. Most of the EIC's soldiers were Indian. The EIC employed 232,000 Indian soldiers, while only 45,000 were British. The company treated them poorly, and in 1857, Indian soldiers rose up against the British in northern India. The conflict was brutal, and the British had to use Indian soldiers from other regions to recapture lost territory. After the revolt, British control of India tightened. The last Mughal emperor was exiled, and the rule of the EIC in India came to an end, replaced by direct rule from the British government in London.

Both the Taiping Rebellion and the 1857 Indian Uprising were responses to European colonialism and to the spread of ideologies. In China, the empire was recovering from defeat in the First Opium War in 1842, forcing the emperor to open Chinese ports to free trade and give Hong Kong to the British. In India, 150 years of British control became too much to bear. Some scholars call the Taiping Rebellion a nationalist uprising and say the 1857 uprising started the Indian national independence movement. But are they correct?



*The EIC punished many revolutionaries by tying them to the barrels of cannons. By Illustrated Times, public domain.*

## Ripples and Countercurrents

Some of the same ideas of sovereignty and nationalism that motivated the 1848 revolutionaries also inspired colonial subjects. Like the working poor and liberal middle classes of Europe, these Asian revolutionaries were reacting to being ruled, poorly, by distant rulers and to economic suffering. And European ideas and events did have an impact in India and China, whose ports and cities were closely linked to Europe! But at the same time, these two events were really inspired and led by local religious and philosophical ideas and leaders, rather than European-style liberalism or nationalism.

If the revolutions of 1848, the Taiping Rebellion in China, and the 1857 Indian Uprising all share one thing in common, it is this: they failed. In Europe, monarchs survived the revolutions and shared power with liberal nationalists for a century. The Qing Dynasty, though weakened, survived until the twentieth century. British rule in India only ended after World War II. Each of these uprisings ended with European ruling elites in a stronger position of power with a stronger centralized nation-state.

Yet the revolutions of 1848 had an international impact. In particular, radical Germans, Italians, and Poles all joined each other on the barricades in solidarity. The monarchs of Europe helped each other avoid disaster. The Russian tsar intervened to save the Austrian emperor from losing Hungary. When revolutions failed, many European radicals emigrated to America. Hundreds of thousands of German immigrants fought in the Union army during the American Civil War.

Other struggles rippled across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East after 1865. Between the 1840s and 1870s, the Ottoman Empire was forced to attempt reforms to meet the needs of its own middle class. In West Africa, the American colony of Liberia declared its independence in 1847. A little further along the African coast, middle class merchants tried to create “liberal”-style democratic nations of their own. The Fante Confederation of 1868-1871 (in today’s Ghana) was one of these movements. But like others in the region, it was shut down by existing rulers and British intervention. The limits of revolution had been reached, at least for a while.

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