1848 revolutions

A series of social upheavals rocked the European continent in 1848. What, if anything, did they achieve?

Events

In 1848 and early 1849, widespread protests became increasingly radical. There were worker protests in France. German liberals set up a 'parliament' in Frankfurt to protest against German fragmentation and the authoritarian princedoms, kingdoms and dukedoms of which it was made up. The first serious cracks appeared in the multi-ethnic Austrian empire as Czechs, Hungarians and Italians sought national representation.

At the extremes of the continent the effects were less dramatic but even here the tremors of revolution were felt. In Britain, the last major outburst of Chartist protest for democratic reform of parliament brought hundreds of thousands onto the street. In Ireland renewed stirrings of Irish nationalism brought Young Ireland into action in the west of the country.

In Russia, the state and army acted as the 'policeman of Europe' when they were called in to restore the threatened rule of the king of Prussia and the Habsburg emperor of Austria. Yet even here the first revolutionary protests resulted in the great writer Dostoevsky and his fellow radicals being subjected to the sadistic charade of a mock execution before they were exiled to Siberia. There were also serious protests in Poland and Galicia.
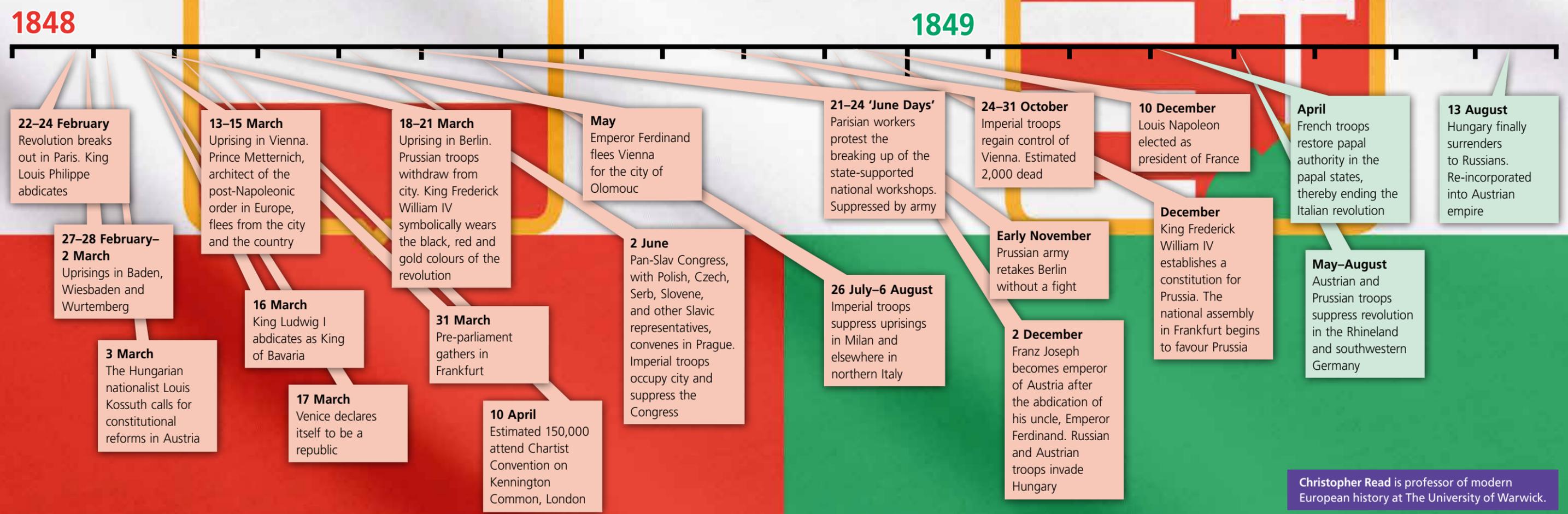
One important radical legacy of 1848 was a brilliant tract by a young, little-known German revolutionary in exile in London. Karl Marx wrote *The Communist Manifesto* on behalf of one of the first international socialist organisations, the International Working Men's Association.

Outcomes

A leading French revolutionary, Pierre-Joseph Prudhomme, bitterly lamented the failure of 1848. 'We have been beaten and humiliated… The fate of European democracy has slipped from our hands.' In fact, there were some successes. In France itself, the monarchy was definitively overthrown, though the replacement 'empire' of Louis Napoleon was scarcely more democratic. Feudal remnants were abolished in Germany and Austria. Reforms affected Denmark, Sweden and many other countries.

Perhaps the main gains were less visible. Nationalism and democracy had taken major strides and, though defeated in 1848, by 1870 Germany and Italy had become united, though not very democratically. Hungary was promoted within the Habsburg, monarchy which became Austria-Hungary in 1867. Czechs, Serbs and others had also whetted their appetites for representation. Even in Russia, serfdom was abolished in 1861. In addition, socialism and working-class politics had announced their arrival across the continent.

Though sometimes described as 'a turning point that failed to turn', the short-term failures of 1848 showed the way ahead for at least the next half century.

1848

22–24 February
Revolution breaks out in Paris. King Louis Philippe abdicates

27–28 February–2 March
Uprisings in Baden, Wiesbaden and Wurtemberg

3 March
The Hungarian nationalist Louis Kossuth calls for constitutional reforms in Austria

13–15 March
Uprising in Vienna. Prince Metternich, architect of the post-Napoleonic order in Europe, flees from the city and the country

16 March
King Ludwig I abdicates as King of Bavaria

17 March
Venice declares itself to be a republic

18–21 March
Uprising in Berlin. Prussian troops withdraw from city. King Frederick William IV symbolically wears the black, red and gold colours of the revolution

31 March
Pre-parliament gathers in Frankfurt

10 April
Estimated 150,000 attend Chartist Convention on Kennington Common, London

May
Emperor Ferdinand flees Vienna for the city of Olomouc

2 June
Pan-Slav Congress, with Polish, Czech, Serb, Slovene, and other Slavic representatives, convenes in Prague. Imperial troops occupy city and suppress the Congress

1849

21–24 'June Days'
Parisian workers protest the breaking up of the state-supported national workshops. Suppressed by army

26 July–6 August
Imperial troops suppress uprisings in Milan and elsewhere in northern Italy

24–31 October
Imperial troops regain control of Vienna. Estimated 2,000 dead

Early November
Prussian army retakes Berlin without a fight

2 December
Franz Joseph becomes emperor of Austria after the abdication of his uncle, Emperor Ferdinand. Russian and Austrian troops invade Hungary

10 December
Louis Napoleon elected as president of France

December
King Frederick William IV establishes a constitution for Prussia. The national assembly in Frankfurt begins to favour Prussia

April
French troops restore papal authority in the papal states, thereby ending the Italian revolution

May–August
Austrian and Prussian troops suppress revolution in the Rhineland and southwestern Germany

13 August
Hungary finally surrenders to Russians. Re-incorporated into Austrian empire

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