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.

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.