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The seed-plot of history

by [Daniel Johnson](#)

A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of radical Islam. Faced with the sudden emergence of a new revolutionary ideology, the historian is seized by a sense of déjà vu. There are indeed striking parallels between the violent entrance of Islamism onto the world stage in the year 2001, and the rise of communism, which first made its presence felt in the revolutionary year of 1848. As the old order appeared to be collapsing, Marx and Engels published their *Communist Manifesto*. They argued that the proletariat, the new urban class created by the industrial revolution, was destined to supplant the bourgeoisie as the vehicle of political change. Just as liberalism had been the ideology of the bourgeoisie, so communism would be the new ideology of the proletariat. The rise of communism that began in 1848 reached its climax a century later, by which time it had achieved domination over much of the globe, but its decline and fall soon followed, in the equally dramatic revolutionary year of 1989. The heirs of Marx and Engels on the European Left today see Europe's disaffected young Muslims as the new revolutionary class, and Islamism is its ideology.

This is exactly the right time for a new book entitled *1848: Year of Revolution*. The Scottish historian Mike Rapport has written a fine synthesis which makes sense of the confusing multiple narratives of this tumultuous period. Unlike the great Lewis Namier, he does not see 1848 as “the revolution of the intellectuals”: it was, rather, a much broader phenomenon in which intellectuals played an important but ultimately peripheral role. But he agrees with Namier that 1848 was “the seed-plot of history”: the origin of all the movements that dominated the succeeding century: liberalism, nationalism, socialism, conservatism, and many more “-isms” besides.

The cast of characters was unique. Among the “forty-eighters” who took an active part on either side were such larger than life figures as Verdi, Herzen, Garibaldi, and Bismarck. The book is packed with incident. One episode during the counterrevolutionary backlash conveys the flavor of the whole book. When the Russian anarchist Bakunin found himself in Dresden in 1849, he did not even know that a revolution had broken out. Bakunin had been on his way to the railway station when he encountered barricades, turned back, and put himself at the helm of the insurrection. Unable to rely on his own forces, the Saxon King Frederick Augustus called in Prussian troops to suppress the insurrection. Meanwhile his kapellmeister, Richard Wagner, joined the revolution, climbing church towers to ring the bells and carry out reconnaissance. As the Prussians smashed their way through the city, using modern weaponry for which the Saxon workers proved no match, the cigar-puffing Bakunin proposed that city hall be packed with explosives and that the remaining defenders should blow themselves up. This real-life *Götterdämmerung* did not appeal to Wagner nor to anybody else; instead, he and 2,000 of the most fortunate revolutionaries made their escape to Switzerland.

Metternich is usually cast as the villain of 1848: the arch-reactionary whose cynical diplomacy and

sinister network of spies and secret police had suppressed liberty and democracy throughout continental Europe for more than a generation. His overthrow—and that of the regime that had ruled Europe since Napoleon—became inevitable once Lajos Kossuth, the fiery leader of the Hungarian revolution, warned the Habsburg Emperor Ferdinand: “The dynasty must choose between its own welfare and the preservation of a rotten system.” But the fall of the Austrian Chancellor proved to be a mixed blessing. Rapport quotes one of the students at the University of Vienna, whose revolt set off the revolution: “The students gave orders to the professors for the first time. A topsy-turvy world was beginning.” We, who are still living with the consequences of 1968, may have a sneaking sympathy for Melanie Metternich, who watched from the Chancellery windows as the bourgeoisie joined the student radicals, commenting wryly: “All they need is a stand selling sausages to make themselves happy.” It was a sign of the times that the prince and princess fled from Vienna first by horse-drawn fiacre and then by train, the new technology speeding the demise of the old order.

One of the most obvious parallels to be drawn with 1848 is the collapse of communism in 1989. In both cases, a domino effect came into play: the spectacle of one regime’s fall precipitated the next. Even the demands of the revolutionaries were in many cases similar: democracy, civil rights, national independence. The irony, of course, is that the ruling class in 1989 professed communism, the ideology in the name of which Marx and Engels had promulgated their manifesto in 1848. It took another century for communism to be imposed across eastern and central Europe, but they got there in the end—with a vengeance.

As usual, the (in this case provisional) victors got to write the history books. Much of the historiography of the 1848 revolutions has been influenced by Marxism, not least because Marx himself wrote brilliantly and mendaciously about its defeat in France. Perhaps Marx’s most frequently quoted phrase comes from his pamphlet *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: “Hegel says somewhere that all great events and personalities in world history reappear in one fashion or another. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.” The dominant narrative of 1848 suggested that the “bourgeois” revolutions had been insufficiently radical and, consequently, had lost the support of the masses. The peasantry—still the great majority of the population—had been easily won over by the reactionaries who reasserted themselves once the initial revolutionary impetus was spent. And so, the Marxist mythology maintained, the true revolution had been aborted.

If anything, however, the revolutionaries of 1848 failed because their new style of politics was far too radical even for the middle classes, let alone the rest. Socialism was still a new idea in 1848; for all but a tiny minority, however, it already looked like a bad one. It was already clear that—especially when combined with the virulent forms of nationalism that had also emerged during the period since 1789—socialism would inevitably concentrate economic as well as political power in the hands of an oligarchy. The liberty for which large sections of the bourgeoisie risked life and property in 1848 was both political and economic: they wanted a free economy and limited constitutional government, elected by as large a section of society as was compatible with law and order. That was all. There was no large constituency demanding social revolution of the kind envisaged by Marx.

The great heroes of the day were the prophets not of class warfare but of emancipation and independence: Mazzini and Garibaldi in Italy, Kossuth in Hungary, Victor Hugo in France. There were some eminent writers and intellectuals, such as the Russian émigré Alexander Herzen or the German Jew Heinrich Heine, who espoused or flirted with socialist ideas while remaining admirably humane, but it is significant that a Herzen, a Heine, or even a Marx could not have maintained an opulent lifestyle but for the capitalist system. In cities of the scale of Paris, Vienna, and Berlin the wealth generated by the industrial and commercial revolution could support a substantial number of freelance intellectuals—soon to become known as “bohemians”—who could afford the luxury of

despising the moderate, constitutional politics that had hitherto been the preserve of the British and the Americans.

The price exacted by the antics of this continental intelligentsia over the succeeding century proved to be exorbitant. What the Hungarian György Konrád, writing after 1989, called the “Jacobin-Leninist” tradition established and justified itself by reference to 1848 and the “failure” of the bourgeois revolution. It was not the bourgeoisie that had failed Europe, however; it was the utopian concept of revolution itself—the notion that society could be purged of all its imperfections by violence. Take France, for example: since 1789, the French have had five monarchies and five republics; they have groaned under dictatorships of Left and Right; they have steeped themselves, Europe, and the world in bloodshed. But they have still not found a political system that enjoys unquestioned legitimacy.

In 1979, Islamic revolution was exported from Paris to Iran. Now the specter has returned to haunt Europe. Mike Rapport’s excellent chronicle of 1848 reminds us what can go wrong when revolutions fail. In Iran, and throughout the Muslim world, we are watching what can go wrong when revolutions succeed. When will it be Europe’s turn again?

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