Your notes

GCSE History: revision notes

The revolutions of 1848

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Why 1848? Liberalism, nationalism and hard times

- After Napoleon's defeat, the Congress of Vienna (1815) restored kings and emperors. Austria's chancellor, **Metternich**, used censorship, secret police and the army to crush new ideas.
- **Liberalism**: the educated middle classes wanted **constitutions**, elected parliaments, a free press and equality before the law. **Nationalism**: people who shared a language and culture, such as Italians, Germans, Hungarians and Czechs, should rule themselves in their own nation.
- Hard times lit the fuse: bad harvests and potato blight in 1845–47 pushed up food prices, and an economic slump in 1846–47 threw many out of work. Hungry workers in the growing cities joined middle-class protests.
- Revolution spread fast, as news of one rising encouraged the next: more than 50 broke out across Europe in 1848.

The revolutions in France, Italy, Germany and the Austrian Empire

- France: when the government banned political banquets, Paris rose in February 1848. King Louis-Philippe abdicated and the Second Republic was declared, with votes for all men. National Workshops gave jobs to the unemployed, but when the new assembly closed them, workers rose in the **June Days**, crushed by General Cavaignac with thousands killed. In December, Louis Napoleon was elected president; he seized power in 1851 and became Emperor Napoleon III in 1852.
- Italy: the first rising was in Sicily in January 1848. Rulers in Naples, Piedmont (the Statuto), Tuscany and the Papal States granted **constitutions**. Milan drove out the Austrians in the Five Days, and Venice declared a republic under Daniele Manin. Charles Albert of Piedmont declared war on Austria but lost at Custoza (1848) and Novara (1849). Mazzini's Roman Republic, defended by Garibaldi, was crushed by French troops in 1849.

- Germany: risings broke out in the German states in March. In Berlin, after street fighting, King Frederick William IV promised a **constitution**. An elected **Frankfurt Parliament** met in May 1848 to unite Germany, but it had no army. In 1849 it offered the crown of Germany to Frederick William, who refused it, and the Parliament broke up.
- Austrian Empire: Vienna rose in March and **Metternich** fled. Hungary, led by Kossuth, won its own government through the April Laws. Peasants were freed from forced labour for their lords. Austrian armies retook Prague (June) and Vienna (October). The new emperor, Franz Joseph, crushed Hungary in 1849 with help from the Russian army.

Why most revolutions failed, and what changed

- Divisions: middle-class liberals feared the radical workers and peasants, and turned back to the rulers for order after the **June Days**. Nationalities also fought each other: Croats helped Austria against the Hungarians.
- Armies stayed loyal to the rulers, and the old powers helped each other: Austria in Italy, Russia in Hungary, France in Rome. Austria forced Prussia to give up its own plan for Germany at Olmütz (1850).
- Peasants, once freed from forced labour, lost interest in revolution, and the revolutionaries had little experience of power.
- What changed: serfdom was ended in the Austrian Empire, France kept votes for all men, Piedmont kept its **constitution** and Prussia had a parliament. Leaders learned that ideals alone could not unite a nation: it needed armies and diplomacy, as Cavour and Bismarck later showed.

Key terms

Liberalism	Belief in constitutions, elected parliaments, free speech and the rights of the individual.
Nationalism	Belief that people who share a language and culture should rule themselves in their own nation.
Constitution	A set of rules that limits a ruler's power and sets out how a country is governed.
Frankfurt Parliament	The elected assembly of 1848–49 that tried and failed to unite Germany.
June Days	The workers' rising in Paris in June 1848, crushed by the army.
Metternich	Austria's chancellor until 1848 and the symbol of the conservative order.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. Who was Austria's chancellor until he fled in March 1848?

Your notes

2. Which of these helped cause the revolutions of 1848?
3. What did liberals want?
4. Which French king abdicated in February 1848?
5. What were the June Days of 1848?
6. Who was elected President of France in December 1848?
7. Where did Piedmont lose battles to Austria in 1848 and 1849?
8. What did Frederick William IV do in 1849?

Answers

1. Metternich
2. Bad harvests and rising food prices in 1845–47
3. Constitutions, elected parliaments and a free press
4. Louis-Philippe
5. A workers' rising in Paris, crushed by the army
6. Louis Napoleon
7. Custoza and Novara
8. He refused the crown offered by the Frankfurt Parliament

What to do next

Practise 11 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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