

Policy Position

Back to the future: What we can learn from the European revolutions of 1848

20 May 2023

#1848

#Paulskirche

#EuropeanRevolutions

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For Germany, the memory of 1848 and the Paulskirche is largely a national affair. It's about dealing with its own history, about becoming a modern state, and about the volatile relationship between democracy and the nation-state. In short, it's about Germany dealing with itself. While this is important, it ignores a critical perspective: Europe. In this policy position, Johannes Lindner argues that democracy must function supranationally.

The revolution of 1848 was a profoundly European event. More importantly, it took place at a time when the quest for civil liberties and self-determination was not yet confined to the national frame. Of course, national unity played an important role, especially for populations that did not have their own nation-state. However, the link between democracy and the nation-state as it appears self-evident to us today had not yet been established.

As early as the 1830s, the Italian freedom fighter and journalist Giuseppe Mazzini dreamed of overcoming feudalism and of a "rule by the people" in a democratic Europe. His "Young Europe" was a collective revolutionary movement that united individual national groups in Italy, Germany, and Poland, and later also in Spain, France, and Switzerland. Although this initiative was not all that successful as a political force, the European framework remained present: Many of the revolutionaries across Europe in 1848 knew one other, read the same texts, and shared similar goals.

The commemoration of 1848 should be an occasion to revive the European perspective on democratic self-determination. Considering the impossibility of tackling the climate crisis, geo-economic competition, and lasting peace at the level of the nation-state, real self-determination in the sense of the 1848 revolution is today only possible with a strong Europe. At the same time, Europe can only be strong if European democracy works at the supranational level. But what does that mean concretely?

A good starting point for this question is offered by the newly-published book *Revolutionary Spring - Fighting for a New World 1848-49* by Cambridge historian Christopher Clark. German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier

mentioned him several times in his commemorative speech at the Paulskirche on May 18, 2023. Clark had already shaped an earlier debate on remembrance with respect to the outbreak of the First World War in his book *The Sleepwalkers*. In addition to his important contribution in describing the revolution as a European phenomenon of continental proportions, three points can be drawn from Clark's account of the years 1848-49 which are of great relevance for Europe today: nationalism as a drug, state particularism as an impediment, and the modernisation of state structures as a principle of success.

Lessons for the present

Firstly: Nationalism in 1848-49 acted (almost) like a drug that further mobilised and swept the population along in a fervour, but that also incited populations against one another and obscured the focus on political ideas. The quest for national unity often became more important than the struggle for civil liberties. At best, national emancipation and democracy were held in equal terms, thus laying the foundation for constrictions with respect to supranational democracy.

For Europe today, this means that political solutions can only be found without this constriction to the nation-state and the obfuscation by national narratives. Nation-states cannot tackle problems such as the fight against climate change or securing peace in Europe on their own. The demands on intergovernmental cooperation have changed: Common rules and agreements are no longer possible without political enforcement and financial solidarity.

Moreover, Europe as a continent no longer has the automatic right to occupy a central position in the world. Without unity and overcoming national urges to go it alone, the countries of Europe, as well as the European Union as a whole, are doomed to irrelevance. And yet nationalist pseudo-solutions from Orbán to Meloni to Le Pen are in high demand. However, in the present as in the past, these carry high costs and ultimately do not achieve their goals.

Secondly: The institutional inertia of the various petty princes and kings was – particularly in Germany – an important reason why the 1848 revolution in any cases did not lead to the political upheavals that many had hoped for. In addition to disagreements between advocates of the revolution and between the various political currents, it was the fragmentation between individual states and the self-preservation instincts of their rulers that ultimately signed the revolution's death warrant. At the same time, the emergence of public discourse and the growing relevance of parliaments and elections could not be stopped in the medium term – even if, as indicated, they were then realised in close interaction with the framework of the nation-state.

A European Union that relies on the foresight of national leaders and the legitimacy of national parliaments is inherently weak. To put it bluntly, just as the princes of yesteryear cannot be blamed for wanting to hold onto their power, the national politicians of today cannot be faulted for primarily representing national interests and wanting to be re-elected at the national level. It is simply unrealistic to expect them to act in the European interest on their own accord. In an EU with more than 30 member states expected in the future, this will be even less the case.

Those who aim to strengthen Europe as a political actor must bear this in mind. It would be helpful, indeed urgently necessary, to extend majority decisions in the Council, as this prevents national vetoes. But this alone is not enough. The goal must be to organise the aggregate political preferences of citizens not predominantly via national positions, but rather on a pan-European basis. There is no way around European parties and a strengthening of the European Parliament as a place of direct representation of European citizens and transnational discourse.

Modernisation through upheaval

Connected to this is a third point which at first glance may seem like a contradiction to the second: In most European states, the revolution of 1848 triggered a lasting push for modernisation. The modern state as an administrative apparatus and level for a new range of political activity as we know it today emerged in the years following the turmoil.

Carrying this through to the present day, it seems that in addition to an expansion of the European discourse, it is also time for a modernisation of the European executive. European solutions need their own source of European legitimacy. This can arise both from the direct or indirect participation of citizens in decision-making processes and from the results of political action.

The latter could be achieved in particular by further strengthening the European Commission as the nucleus of supranational government. The Commission has long since ceased to be just a "high authority", and this should be made not only more visible but also more firmly anchored in the democratic process. As a political executive, the EU Commission should stand for a clear agenda – for which it needs to have a structural majority in the Parliament above all, but also in the Council – and against which it should be assessed. Measures such as the Spitzenkandidat principle, the election of the Commission President by the Parliament and European party families, are already moving in this direction. A smaller Commission with a strong President and more-interlinked Directorates-General would be an important further step towards increasing the quality of European decisions.

This is not about centralisation through the back door or centralisation by sledgehammer. The nation-state will remain an important level of political action. Instead, it is a matter of creating the preconditions that allow for supranational solutions to be democratically fought for and effectively implemented when the will of the European majority is in favour. Citizens must have the opportunity to express their approval or rejection of the policies of the current Commission in elections. The European elections – which will next take place in June 2024 – would be the central venue in this respect, yet they still do not fulfil this role sufficiently.

In closing, it is worth looking again at Clark's book: In his concluding reflections, he speaks of the possibility of a coming revolution, which he considers to be a realistic response to the "polycrises" we face today. He is driven by the thought that the revolutionaries of 1848 would likely recognise themselves in us and our challenges.

This text was first published as an [Op-Ed in German in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung](#) on 20 May 2023.

Gefördert durch:



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