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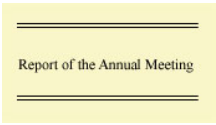

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THE EUROPEAN BACKGROUND OF THE 1840's

By EDGAR MCINNIS

It is a truism to describe the outstanding characteristics of the Europe of the 1840's as a feeling of political unrest. Under the apparent stability of the existing structure lay a sense of precariousness, of imminent changes, which made it difficult for governments to slumber with that tranquillity which attends a good conscience. Men of all sorts and conditions, from Metternich to Marx, were awaiting with varied emotions a new assault upon the old order, and loudly expressing their hope or their dread that when change did come, it would come with all the violence of revolution.

Yet the forces actually preparing an armed overthrow must have seemed, to a cool observer, so weak as to be almost negligible. Even on the eve of the outbreak, according to one German commentator of the time, many people were talking of the approach of a great revolution but few actually believed in it. Throughout the decade there were disturbances of various sorts in Silesia and Switzerland, in Galicia and the Papal States; but the spirit of violence was probably less threatening and less spontaneous than during the twenties and thirties. And when revolution actually swept the continent in 1848, its strength lay, not in the plotters and planners, but in the passivity of the moderate middle class. That class, without actively desiring the overthrow of existing institutions, had reached a point of disgust which left it with neither incentive nor desire to defend those institutions in their hour of peril. It was in this attitude that the real danger to the old order was to be found.

What Lamartine wrote of France was, in fact, true of all western Europe. "The nation was calm upon the surface, but disturbed beneath. There was, as it were, a sort of remorse in its prosperity which did not permit its quiet enjoyment." The remorse was fully justified. There was a shallowness to this assumed prosperity which failed to hide the growing misery beneath. And when economic distress at last erupted in violence, the uneasy moderates were in no state to make a stand against the radicals who at once directed the outbreak to political ends.

Thus the central fact in the 1840's was less the increasing distress of the proletariat than the growing restlessness of the *bourgeoisie*. This was a phenomenon which affected the whole of Europe. The evolution of a genuine European culture by the eighteenth century had paved the way for the spread of general political ideas. The growing solidarity of the European economy in the generation after 1815 had made inevitable an attempt to translate these ideas into action.

By 1840, however, their application was becoming distinctly selective. The broad principles enunciated by Locke and Montesquieu and Rousseau were still the basis of European liberalism. But the programmes which the various liberal groups were evolving showed a certain caution about accepting their full implications. The separation of powers was declining from the position of a dogma to that of a commendable belief. The social contract was being hedged about with qualifying clauses. And when it came to the Declaration of the Rights of Man, the tone of the moderates was so subdued as to be almost inaudible.

One gets the impression that these general ideas, useful though they might be in dialectic, were ceasing to carry complete conviction. There was

more doubt about the desirability of their universal application, and more caution in appealing to the sanction of God and Nature on behalf of specific demands. Instead there appears a growing desire for certain limited concessions on the basis of practical necessity, and for a limited political readjustment in the interests of a particular class.

The immediate desire of these groups was the destruction of outworn barriers. The desire grew in urgency as the industrial revolution spread from England to the continent. But even where machine industry was still a negligible factor, as in Hungary, the spirit of discontent was none the less rampant. Wherever the elements of feudalism or of privilege survived, they confronted forces vociferously demanding their abolition. The ideals of free contract and laissez-faire were making headway in the agrarian as well as in the manufacturing and commercial middle class. To the industrialists who sought a wider market, the investors who craved a bigger field for better dividends, the railway promoters who chafed against existing political barriers, were added the middle-class landowners to whom the privileges of the agrarian magnates represented nothing but an incubus. A Kossuth had little in common with even a Széchényi except a common dislike of Vienna.

This spirit of discontent, vague in its objectives at the outset, gradually rallied to a programme which was primarily nationalist in its implications. It embodied two paramount and inter-connected desires: to broaden political boundaries in the interests of wider economic activities, and to break up certain of the existing political units in an effort to shake off the domination of hostile or reactionary elements. The manifestations differed widely, but their roots were largely the same, whether in the unslaked desire of France for the natural frontiers or the Magyar demand for an autonomy amounting to independence. In a land such as Italy the two aims operated simultaneously as the nationalists sought to eliminate both the local barriers behind which reaction sheltered and the Austrian predominance which embodied a rule alien not only racially but economically. Both the unitary and the disruptive aspects of nationalism had essentially the same aim—the liberty for a growing middle class to pursue its interests with adequate scope and free from the shackles of the opposing interests which at the moment commanded political power.

Such aims were not necessarily revolutionary. They could in theory be attained through a change in policy on the part of existing governments. But just because of this, the restlessness of the 1840's was increased by the unwillingness or impotence of governments to serve these ends. The old crusading zeal against liberalism might have declined in many quarters, though Bomba of Naples or Ernst Augustus of Hanover still kept alive the spirit of the Carlsbad decrees. But though a sovereign might on occasion be prepared to make individual concessions, a constitutional régime on the model of the English monarchy or the French Charter held little appeal to the average ruler. After all, there was nothing in it for him. It meant handing over the real power, which he at present exercised, to people who offered no compensation whatever for such a surrender. Few monarchs were humble enough to believe that the merchants or lawyers or professors who aspired to rule could really do a better job. And to a belief in his own hereditary talents it was tempting for a sovereign to add a conviction of a divinely imposed duty which made any abdication of responsibility little less than sacrilege.

So it was easy enough for the conservative forces, also facing the prospect of loss without compensation, to dissuade the rulers from any programme of fundamental change. In consequence, the initial gestures of a Pius IX or a Frederick William IV only stimulated new discontent by their inadequacy. They proved that, however much the rulers might protest their desire for readjustment, they were still in the final test the instruments of the old order, offering at least a passive resistance to the forces of change. Whenever their timid concessions were hailed with enthusiasm as the prelude to greater things, they rushed back in panic into the arms of the diehards. When a government did embark with determination upon a course of reform, as in Switzerland, the reactionaries leaped to arms against it. Even in France, where the *bourgeois* monarchy in theory represented a triumph over the old régime, its lethargy under Guizot made it almost worthless to all but a small section of the class it was meant to serve. The *bourgeoisie* sought in government an active instrument; it found instead a passive and irritating obstruction.

It was circumstances such as these that made nationalism an almost inevitable ally of liberalism throughout Europe. To the restricted groups which desired liberal institutions as ends in themselves was added a growing number of those who, indifferent to liberalism as such, were none the less forced to adopt it as the only instrument by which their ultimate aims could be attained. There was little hope so long as government remained an instrument controlled by their opponents. They must get control into their own hands, and political reforms in a liberal direction offered the most promising avenue toward that goal.

There was also one definite economic interest which reinforced this tendency. The economic man as producer or trader might be largely indifferent to the actual form of government. But the economic man as taxpayer was showing a steadily growing exasperation. Confidence in the wisdom and honesty of governments is a plant of slow growth in a taxpayer's bosom. The suspicion that his money is being snatched from him with wanton levity is only equalled by the conviction that it is uniformly squandered by spendthrifts for the benefit of wastrels. Nurturing this resentment in his breast, the taxpayer of the period was further enraged by the baffling realization that he could do nothing about it. He had no way of bringing adequate pressure to bear on a politically irresponsible régime; and to add insult to injury, he was forced in many cases to gaze with helpless envy upon privileged groups still exempt from sacrifice. The desire to eliminate exemptions; the desire to control the levying of taxation; the desire to say how the fruits of taxation should be spent—these mainsprings of democracy animated both the Magyar squire and the Rhineland trader, and made them critics if not actual opponents of existing governments.

This opposition might have been more active had it not been for doubts about the proletariat. "The pernicious ferment and discontent of communism", upon which Keller commented in 1843, however little extensive in reality, was enough of a spectre to deter the substantial middle class from too radical political demands. And even if they had little real fear of a socialist revolution, they had equally little sympathy with real social reform. The laissez-faire spirit and the taxpayer interest united to provoke resistance, not only to privilege on the one hand, but to the proletariat on the other.

Actually, however, such working-class movement as existed was a danger only under the most exceptional circumstances. No labour movement with anything like the coherence of Chartism arose on the continent during this period; no prophet's message went home as did that of Robert Owen to a section of the English working class. More and more the workers were tending to concentrate on their own particular problems to the exclusion of broader social and political questions. Where the proletariat took to arms, as in Lyons or Silesia, it was usually on behalf of neither a doctrine nor a programme, but in a desperate effort to break through the misery that was crushing them and force their oppressors—more accessible than the Almighty—to heed their prayer for their daily bread. Such efforts were as sporadic as they were ineffectual, and those who took part were wholly inadequate as instruments for the achievement of that social transformation dreamed of by the revolutionary leaders.

Most of these were leaders without an army. A scattered handful of discontented and often eccentric *bourgeois* thinkers, they were a strange conglomeration with little coherence of doctrine and even less compatibility of temperament. French radicals, German socialists, Polish and Italian liberals, dreaming in exile each of his own utopia, they wandered uneasily from refuge to refuge, and their cries from the wilderness seldom reached the ears of a receptive audience. Mazzini with a definite organization at his command was an outstanding exception; but even Young Italy after 1840 was notable less for its danger to the existing order than for the stimulus it gave to the rise of a definite moderate movement in opposition to Mazzini's methods and creed.

Such a movement was characteristic of western Europe generally. The period saw the consolidation of the forces of the centre through their combined exasperation with, and distrust of, the forces of the left. They wanted changes; but they did not want socialism, and they seldom desired even republicanism. Above all, they had no faith in revolution as a method and no desire to see it tried. They stood for property and intelligence. They favoured moderation and harmony. Their aim was less to destroy than to convert existing governments, and to persuade them to adopt such changes of policy as, without changing the external forms of institutions, would alter their actual working sufficiently to make them acceptable to the substantial *bourgeoisie*.

To this extent the moderates were the opponents of the radicals. But such opposition was not severe enough to make the centre a reliable support for the old order against the forces of revolution. The moderates did not want revolution, but neither were they very desperately afraid of it. They would not overthrow the rulers themselves, but they would do little to prevent such overthrow. They were ready for change; and if change could not be brought about by moderate pressure, they were prepared to contemplate using and controlling such changes as might be achieved by more drastic means. They might prefer to work on Louis Philippe; but if Louis Philippe failed to react satisfactorily, they were equally prepared to try their hand on Louis Blanc.

It was this tacit neutrality of the moderates, rather than any strength in themselves, that made the forces of the left a potential danger. They might not have an army of their own. But if an army should spring up, they were on hand, ready to provide it with leadership and with objectives. And the forces of the right who would do battle with them had recruited

few elements during the past generation to replace the vanished boys of the old brigade. By 1840 Waterloo was beginning to seem a long way off, even to men of middle age; and the conviction that change must come had begun to invade the troubled spirit of even Metternich himself. That was hardly the temper for a triumphant assault upon the barricades.

So the moderates stood by while the barricades went up. The economic desperation of the working class reached a point in 1848 where violence seemed the only remedy left. A section of the professional class, and especially the embryo group represented by the university students, at once seized the opportunity to rally to the movement. It was the workers and students who fought the real battle; but they looked for leadership to the intellectuals whose accession turned a blind economic protest into a political revolution. Italy and Germany and the Austrian dominions were ready for the spark, and France provided it; and the revolution swept to ephemeral triumph over an old order that collapsed at the first stroke in humiliating impotence.

This collapse was the more striking because the machine of government was still apparently intact. Above all, the troops were loyal. In some cases—notably in Lombardy—they were for the moment inadequate to check the popular fury. In Hungary their loyalty was to Pesth rather than to Vienna. But in such capitals as Paris and Berlin they were both ready and able to act, and to act effectively. And it is indicative of the low estate of the princes that in so few cases did they dare appeal at once to the *ultimo ratio* of their kind. It was not alone a tender humanitarianism that moved Louis Philippe and Frederick William IV to hold their hands. Behind their sincere desire to avoid bloodshed lay a paralyzing moral uncertainty born of a consciousness that their paternal benevolence had been repudiated by the people over whom they ruled.

Yet this in its turn reveals the weakness of the revolution. If the old order was lacking in active support, the new régimes could count on little more positive backing. It was the centre—passive, cautious, undependable —which held the balance of power. And when the centre began to feel that the profit from the revolution was likely to be overshadowed by its dangers, their growing uneasiness made it possible for the old order to recover its confidence and take up the weapons which still lay ready at its command.

"We had to learn by experience", wrote Unruh in retrospect, "that it is actual reforms in the existing State, and especially in its organization, which are most effective in achieving a logical progress with as few sudden transitions and experiments as possible." That was the conclusion of a moderate confirming his preconceptions. The radicals drew far different lessons from the events of 1848; but the very fact that they were so different put the radicals out of the picture. Moderates and governments had now learned their need of each other, and the way was paved for readjustment by co-operation. It was Cavour and Bismarck, not Mazzini or Marx, who established the ascendancy of the new order and effected a transformation which reconciled the centre and the right. With that consummation the *bourgeoisie* were ranged on the side of the party of resistance. Their passivity had made possible the temporary success of the revolution in 1848. That passivity was now over; and with actual gains to defend, the middle class became the barrier against which the forces of revolution would beat for a century to come.