German ‘Vormärz‘ and the Revolution of 1848

Key terms, people and events

- **Vormärz** – the years between 1815 -1848 leading up to the March Revolution in 1848
- **German Confederation**
- **Frederick William IV of Prussia**
- **Frankfurt Parliament**

Background:

- General disappointment over decisions in Vienna Congress, especially has promises were broken
- Metternich was considered to be the personification of lack of freedom and suppression of nationalism, liberalism and democratic tendencies under severe punishment
- The loosely tied *German Confederation* was used as an instrument to guarantee the legitimacy of the monarchies restore monarchist rule under Austrian dominance
- It was also a buffer against possible future French expansion
- Austria always presided over the Diet and had a total of 17 votes, whereas Prussia, Saxony, Bavaria, Hanover and Württemberg all had only four votes a piece. The other, smaller states had even fewer votes and the free cities had only one vote out of a total of 69. – beginning of Austro-Prussian Dualism
- The German Confederation did not achieve much as decisions had to be unanimous

Liberalism

- While there was a reaction against the influence of France, Napoleon's rule introduced some of the liberalization and political change that the French Revolution had brought about. Some in the German states wanted this process to continue.
- Liberal thinkers promoted the idea of an elected parliament to pass laws and run the country, rather than power held solely by an absolute monarch. They also championed freedom of speech and an end to censorship.
**Suppression under Metternich**

- Austrian State Chancellor, Klemens von Metternich viewed liberalism as an evil force that threatened the power of the aristocracy.
- Nationalistic student societies, called Burschenschaften had grown throughout the German states at the time of the French occupation. Students combined nationalistic ideals with liberal thinking and hence, wanted the removal of the old regime.
- In 1817, an extreme and widespread student society was formed, which promoted violent action in order to achieve their goals. In the same year, an effigy of Metternich was burned by students at the Wartburg Fest
- In 1819, the conservative writer August von Kotzebue was murdered by a liberalist student
- In response to this ‘golden opportunity’ and the growing movement, the German Confederation met at Carlsbad, where Metternich was able to introduce the Carlsbad Decrees in 1819.

- The **Carlsbad Decrees** was a set of reactionary restrictions which allowed states to ban societies and political parties, censor material and forcibly stop the spread of nationalistic ideas.

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<tr>
<th><strong>The Carlsbad Decrees</strong> allowed states to:</th>
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<td>• censor publications</td>
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<td>• disband the Burschenschaften and other political clubs</td>
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<td>• place schools and universities under the control of new supervisors</td>
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<td>• dismiss academics who supported nationalistic and liberal ideas from their posts</td>
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<td>• set up a central investigating commission to root out secret nationalist or liberal groups</td>
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The decrees introduced a system of persecution, oppression and harsh censorship.

The events of this time period led to a new political awakening, politicization and mobilization of the people.
Die 'gute' Presse.

Sussc heilige Censor,
Lassa uns zaum auf derer Spur,
Leite uns an deiner Hand
Kindern gleich, am Gagelband!
Die Gedanken sind frei

Protest songs are not only from the pop era. They existed hundreds of years earlier. How similar is the following song to those we hear nowadays?

Die Gedanken sind frei

(first published on flyers in 1780)
(published in 1842 by August Heinrich Hoffmann von Fallersleben)

Die Gedanken sind frei! Wer kann sie errathen?
Sie fliegen vorbei wie nächtliche Schatten.  
Kein Mensch kann sie wissen, kein Jäger sie schießen
5 es bleibt dabei:
Die Gedanken sind frei!

Ich denke, was ich will und was mich beglücket,
doch alles in der Still und wie es sich schicket.
Mein Wunsch und Begehren

kann niemand verwehren,
es bleibt dabei:
Die Gedanken sind frei!

Sperrt man mich gleich ein im finsteren Kerker,
sind es doch nur vergebliche Werke,
15 denn meine Gedanken
zerreißen die Schranken
und Mauern entzwei:  
Die Gedanken sind frei!

(...)

Thoughts are free! Who can guess them?
They fly along like nightly treasures
No man can know them
No hunter can shoot them
6 With powder and lead
Thoughts are free!

I think about what I want and what makes me happy
But everything quietly, and just how it comes.
To my wish and desire

Nobody can oppose,
It stays this way:
Thoughts are free!

And if they lock me in a dark dungeon
That is something that can be forgiven
15 Cause my thoughts
Tear up the bars
And walls.
Thoughts are free!

(...)

translated by Leonard Cohen


Tasks
1. Summarize the content of the song in your own words.
2. Describe the music and in what way it supports the text.
3. Interpret the song.

- **1932: Hambach Festival**

The Hambach Festival was a German national democratic festival celebrated from 27 May to 30 May 1832 at Hambach Castle in present-day Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany. The event was disguised as a non-political county fair. It was one of the main public demonstrations in support of German unity, freedom and democracy during the Vormärz era.

- The national German colors – black, red and gold - originally derived from the Liberation Wars against Napoleon – it was especially through the Hambach Festival, that these colors were spread as the colors of unity.
Johann August Wirth at the Hambach Festival (May 1832)

In the south German states, political unrest in the wake of the Paris Revolution of 1830, restrictive measures against political expression, and increased tax burdens and tariffs led to large political demonstrations, such as the Hambach Festival of May 27-30, 1832, in which 30,000 people took part.

The country that speaks our language, the country where our hope resides, where our love delights, where our joys thrive, where the secret of all our sympathies and all our longing rests, this beautiful land is being ravaged and plundered, torn and enervated, gagged and disgraced. [...] Germany, great, rich, powerful Germany, should assume first place in the society of European states, yet robbed by traitorous families of aristocrats, it has been struck from the list of European realms and abandoned to mockery from abroad.

Appointed by nature to be the guardian of light, liberty, and international legal order in Europe, German energy is actually being used for the very opposite purpose of suppressing the liberty of every people* and founding an eternal empire of darkness, slavery, and raw force. [...] The cause of the unspeakable suffering of the European nations lies entirely in the fact that the dukes of Austria and the electors of Brandenburg have seized the greater part of Germany for themselves and, under the titles Emperor of Austria and King of Prussia, not only rule their own countries – acquired through the methodical plundering of Germany – and use their powers to suppress the freedom and the popular sovereignty of European nations, but also use their predominance over the smaller countries of Germany to make the powers of those countries serve the system of princely autocracy and despotic force. [...]

As gigantic, therefore, as the power of the absolutist alliance may be, its end will come at the moment in Germany when reason has also attained political victory, i.e. at the moment when public affairs are no longer managed according to the despotic will of an individual, no longer according to the interests of an extended aristocratic family branching out all over Europe, but rather according to the will of society itself and according to the needs of the people. At the moment when German popular sovereignty is assigned its proper right, at that moment the most heartfelt confederation of nations [peoples] is formed, for the people loves, while kings hate, the people defends, where kings persecute, the people grants what it aspires to achieve itself wholeheartedly, and what it holds most dear are freedom, enlightenment, nationality, and popular sovereignty, for a fraternal nation as well: the German people therefore also grants these great, invaluable goods to its brethren in Poland, Hungary, Italy, and Spain. And should all these endless triumphs of the human race, all these unexpected blessings be withheld from the peoples of Europe simply so that a couple of ignorant lads can continue to inherit the role of king?

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* Note: the word “Volk” (plural “Völker”) in this document is sometimes translated as “people” and sometimes as “nation” (plural “nations”) – trans.

1. **Explain the most important issues Wirth is talking about.**
2. **Connect his demands to your knowledge about the Vormärz.**
March Demands

As a result of the discontent of the German citizens in March 1848 leaflets showing their demands were produced and distributed.

Dresden citizens to the government of Saxony:
“freedom of the press”
“freedom of assembly”
“freedom of religious belief”
“trial by jury”

Demands of the peasants and citizens of Hohenzollern-Hechingen:
“reduction of taxes”
“general assembly of citizens”
“removal of all foreign civil servants and officers”

Workers in Cologne to the City council:
“freedom of the press and freedom of speech”
“… universal suffrage and universal eligibility to be elected”
“freedom of assembly”

Mannheim flyer: Demands of the German people
“unconditional freedom of the press”
“trial by jury”
“immediate establishment of a German parliament”
“weapons for the people and right to elect the officers freely”

- Put the demands into categories.
- Who put forward these demands and what are the main demands they have in common?
**The 1848 March Revolution**

**Political turmoil in the 1840s**

Throughout the 1840s many German states were under pressure from nationalist and liberal demonstrators who wanted greater political representation and reform.

In 1840, Frederick William IV became ruler of Prussia. He was unstable and swung between ultra-conservative beliefs and promotion of Liberal ideals.

Frederick William encouraged free thinking and academics dismissed from other German universities were allowed to teach in Prussia. Censorship was relaxed and Liberals appointed to government positions.

However, demands for an elected parliament were refused and by the mid-1840s, Prussia had begun to suppress nationalistic ideas. A United Diet of the Prussian Estates was dissolved after it demanded a written constitution and free elections. Prussia’s King Frederick William IV, as many other German monarchs feared they would lose power and influence if German states were united.

In 1847 the Prussian king was forced to call a United Diet of the Prussian Estates to help him solve the financing of a new railway. The Diet demanded a written constitution and free elections, as well as a united German Parliament. The Diet was dissolved as a result.

**The 1848 Revolution**

In early 1848, revolution spread across Europe. In France, the monarchy was overthrown, and in Austria, Chancellor Metternich was forced to flee and resign.

Much of the discontent came from the lower classes. The growth of industry and towns and cities led to increased organization and political awareness among workers. They were driven by a desire to end economic hardship and social problems e.g. the misery of the Silesian weavers, who in 1844 ventured an uprising against exploitation and wage decreases, and thereby drew attention to the grievances originated in the context of industrialization.
There was also a push from the liberals and nationalists for political change. They demanded a Prussian constitution and the creation of a united Germany.

In March 1848, violent rioting with many casualties began in Berlin, as the 1848 revolution fever crossed from France into Prussia. Frederick William IV, King of Prussia and quickly mobilized the disciplined Prussian army to forcefully suppress the revolution e.g. at the Schlossplatz and Gendarmenmarkt (‘Gegen Demokraten helfen nur Soldaten’). Shots were accidentally fired by the troops and the situation instantly escalated. Demonstrators immediately set up barricades and serious fighting began.

The King was later shocked by the bloodshed and surprised everyone by taking a liberal stance. He rode through Berlin with the black-red-gold armband and bowed and showed respect to the 183 men who had died during the battles to show support for the revolutionary demands followed by a speech (‘An mein Volk und an die deutsche Nation’) that promised German unity and the election of a Prussian parliament. The following day, however, he wrote to his brother "Die Reichsfarben musste ich gestern freiwillig aufstecken, um alles zu retten. Ist der Wurf gelungen, … so lege ich sie wieder ab." Fredrick Wilhelm’s actual goal, was to overthrow the revolution and the re-establish the pre-revolutionary monarchy. Deciding that the experiment in democratic government had gone on long enough, Frederick William IV changed his mind and dissolved the Prussian Assembly.
Das Missverständniss.

Menschen schlägt sich. Der eine reicht eine kugel zu. Der andre sieht dass sich eine kugel bewegt und schreit. Im übrigen versteht man nicht, was gesagt wird.

Entwurf: Wilhelm Busch. Aus „Kleiner Mann, was machst du denn da?“ 1868.
The Frankfurt Parliament

The National Assembly meets in Frankfurt

Imagine what important issues had to be resolved when the first German parliament came together in 1848.

On 18 May 1848 the National Assembly opened its session in St Paul’s Church in Frankfurt amid a wave of enthusiasm and high expectations. Including some substitutes, there were 831 members, all of them men mostly from the liberal and educated middle class. Civil servants, professors and lawyers played the main role – thus the parliament was soon called a “professors parliament” (“Professorenparlament”).

The National Assembly saw the tentative beginning of political parties. About 400 delegates can be identified by their political preferences. The groups did not have names like the parties in our time that would make it possible to identify their main political beliefs. They were known by the places where they met – usually inns in and around Frankfurt.

Under the chairmanship of the liberal politician Heinrich von Gagern, the assembly started to discuss the creation of a constitution for a unified Germany.

Apart from a discussion about civil rights, the assembly had to decide on whether Germany should become a hereditary monarchy, have an elected monarch or even become a republic. Equally important was the question of whether Austria was to be included in a “Greater Germany” (“Großdeutsch Lösung”) or to exclude Austria in a “Little Germany” (“Kleindeutsch Lösung”), in which case Prussia would have become the leading German power. The third important question referred to the organisation of the state. Should it be a federation of independent states or should the delegates vote for a strong central government?

The assembly was confronted with serious setbacks right from the start. The National Assembly in Frankfurt had no territory, no army no police force and no civil servants and the governments of the separate states were still in power. While the assembly was discussing the future of Germany, Denmark wanted to annex Schleswig-Holstein with its mostly German population. Prussia went to war but soon agreed to a peace treaty and to give up Schleswig-Holstein to Denmark in order to prevent further bloodshed. The National Assembly voted against the peace treaty. The assembly wanted to create a Germany for all Germans. But as they did not have an army the assembly had to accept the peace treaty. This event seriously undermined the reputation of the National Assembly with many Germans.

Text: Irene Kremer

Annotations
1 substitutes: Ersatzmitglieder – 2 tentative: not definite or certain – 3 federation of independent states: Bundesstaat

Tasks
1. Give a short summary of the setup of the National Assembly. Which aspects might cause a problem as far as the acceptance of the National Assembly by the public is concerned?
2. Name the points of discussion and their importance in your view.
3. Explain why the National Assembly was not very powerful from the very beginning.
In 1849, the Frankfurt Assembly offered Germany to Frederick William IV. Though he coveted the territory, Frederick William knew that an acceptance would lead to war with Austria and make him into a constitutional monarch, neither of which he desired. He refused the crown saying he would not accept a crown from the gutter, an imaginary ring of dirt, or a dog collar as it was not offered from the princes (legitimacy).

### The Frankfurt Parliament of 1848

After widespread revolts, not only across the 39 states but also across many other European nations such as France, a Parliament was called to discuss reforms and attempt to draft a constitution for a unified Germany. This was seen as being the best way of stopping the political unrest.

- The constitution was completed in March 1849. This would unite the German states as a German Empire headed by a German Emperor.
- Government would be provided by an elected parliament that represented the populations of all 39 states.
- This new German Empire would replace the existing Bund.
- The Crown was offered to Prussia's Frederick William IV.

The Frankfurt Parliament and the attempt to unify Germany through political reform failed.

- Frederick William refused to accept the crown because it had not been offered by the other German Princes, stating that he would not "accept a crown from the gutter".
- Due to this the new parliament was dissolved and the revolution had failed
- By late 1849, the movement for political reform had lost its impetus and the German Princes and the Austrian Emperor were able to regain control of politics in their territories.
- Although the Frankfurt Assembly did not accomplish their goal of German unification, their failed constitution worked as a model for future acts and constitutions in Germany. Germany also eventually unified
Andere Zeiten -
Am 22. März 1848: Hut ab!

Andere Stilren
Am 25. Februar 1849: Hüte ab!

Zwischen mir und mein Vater soll sich kein Blatt Papier drängen!
Frederick William IV refuses the crown of Germany

The Prussian King’s refusal to accept the imperial crown signalled the failure of the constitution adopted by the National Assembly.

In December 1848, the king declared in a letter to ambassador Bunsen in London:

"A legitimate king by divine right, indeed the King of Prussia, who may not be blessed with the oldest but with the noblest crown, stolen from no-one, is now expected to accept such an imaginary coronet of mud and clay ... Let me tell you bluntly: should the crown of the German nation which, a thousand years old, has rested now for 42 years, ever be conferred again, then it shall be my me and my peers; and woe betide anyone who arrogates to himself a right to which he is not entitled."


Frederick William IV: To my people
Charlottenburg, 15 May 1849

"I was not able to submit a favourable supply to the offer of a crown by the German National Assembly because that body does not have the right, without the consent of the German governments, to bestow the crown they offered me, and because, in addition, they tendered the crown under the condition that I would accept a constitution which could not be reconciled with the rights and safety of the German states."

Source caricature: "Das Volk ist mir zum Kotzen" Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin.

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Annotations

1 divine right: Gottesgnadentum – 2 coronet of mud and clay: ein Reif aus Dreck und Lehm – 3 to confer: to give an official title, honour, or advantage to so. – 4 woe betide: informal: Gott behüte – 5 to arrogate: sich etwas anmaßen

Tasks

1. Summarize the core message of the two sources and the cartoon in no more than two sentences each.

2. Study what the King Frederick William said in private and in public. Then write a short speech in a moderate tone he might have given to the delegation of the National Assembly offering him the crown of a united Germany.
Wanting to maintain the power they held within the loose confederation of the Bund, the leaders of the small German states staunchly opposed revolution. Furthermore, Prussia and Austria, who combined to dominate Germany, liked a weak Germany, primarily because they feared the possibility of a united, powerful Germany on their borders.

*Thus, all the deliberation of the Frankfurt Assembly resulted in nothing. Germany remained fragmented after 1848, and the small rulers of the various small German states came back to power.*

*The revolutions achieved short-lived change. However, by 1850 this had been reversed.*

,,Wat heulst 'n kleener Hampelmann?“

,,Ick habe Ihr ’n Kleenen ’ne Krone jeschnitzt, nu will er se nich!“

Pay attention to symbolism!
**Großdeutschland or Kleindeutschland**

After the failure of the Frankfurt Parliament, debate continued on the best way to unite Germany. Prussia put forward a plan to unify the German states under Prussian control. The question was whether a united Germany should contain Austria (Großdeutschland - Greater Germany) or leave it out (Kleindeutschland - Lesser Germany):

- Prussia argued for exclusion of their rival, Austria
- Austria refused to agree with the Prussian plan - it would eliminate their influence in German affairs
- Austria persuaded the Bund's Federal Diet to threaten sanctions against Prussia.
- In 1850, with Russia supporting Austria, the Prussians backed down.

Another attempt at a unified Germany had failed. By late 1849, the German Princes and the Austrian Emperor were able to reassert military control of their territories and impose their political will over their subjects.

**The Collapse of the 1848-1849 Revolution**

The Revolutions of 1848 achieved the potential for political change in the German states. However, by 1850 these hopes had been dashed. Prussia was once again subservient to Austria.

Frederick William of Prussia was still determined to increase the power of his state over the rest of the German lands.

He organized a union of German leaders, many of whom were coerced to join. The proposal was that Prussia would have control over foreign policy and military matters for all member states.

A parliament for the Erfurt Union met in Erfurt for a little over a month in spring, 1850.

The union began to break down when it became clear that many of the German princes decided to support Austria. The Austrians were able to resurrect the German Confederation, which met in Frankfurt in 1850.

Rebellion in Hesse-Cassel, a Prussian ally, saw the end of Prussian domination over the German states. When the Elector appealed to the Confederation for help, there was debate whether the Austrians should send aid, or allow Prussia to help.
The Punctuation of Olmutz

The problem over what to do in Hesse-Cassel almost brought Austria and Prussia to war. However, it was clear to the Prussians that they were not strong enough to compete with Austrian military might.

Austrian and Prussian delegates met at Olmutz in November, 1850, in order to rectify the situation. The agreement reached was a humiliation for Prussia:

- the Erfurt Union was abolished
- the Confederation was officially re-established
- Prussia was not to challenge Austrian leadership
- the Confederation was to solve the problem in Hesse-Cassel

Prussia had been brought under control. Austria continued to oppose unification of the German states.
Reasons for the failure of the 1848 Revolution

- Divisions between radicals and liberals weakened the revolution
- Divisions between großdeutsche Lösung and kleindeutsche Lösung
- Revolution is carried mainly by intellectuals – Frankfurt Assembly failed to include broad lower-class
- There were no consistent or uniform procedures or actions taken
- Lack of parliamentarian experience and tradition
- The Frankfurt Parliament took too long to draft a constitution which led to losing the momentum and gave the monarchy time to stabilize
- The European Powers saw German unification as a threat
- Due to the strong fragmentation of Germany, it lacked a strong center of the revolution compared to Paris, Vienna
- There was no solution that would please a majority

Bismarck on solving the German question:

“nicht durch Reden und Majoritätsbeschlüsse werden die großen Fragen der Zeit entschieden – das ist der große Fehler von 1848 und 1849 gewesen –, sondern durch Eisen und Blut.“

According to Bismarck, "The great questions of the day would not be settled by means of speeches and majority decisions, which was the greatest mistake in 1848 and 1849, but by iron and blood."

In many ways, the Frankfurt Assembly can be seen as indicative of the larger context of 1848. Just as the Frankfurt Assembly was dominated by various minor squabbles, the 1848 revolutions were filled with many nationalist groups, all of whom had different visions of the future of Europe. Further, just as the Frankfurt Assembly disappeared with a whimper, turned down by the man it had selected as ruler of a unified Germany, so too did the revolutions of 1848 generally lead to little change: France was ruled by an Emperor, Austria was more autocratic than ever, and Germany remained a patchwork of minor states. But the ideas animating the revolutions did not die with the revolutions themselves. Though the Frankfurt assembly ended in a sort of wounded embarrassment, the desire to unify Germany remained strong, as did nationalism everywhere. The year of revolutions yielded little result, but in the following years the nationalist impulse to unify would take on greater proportions, and the years between 1848 and 1871 could easily be termed an age of unification.