

The European Uprisings of 1848 Reverberate in Today's Arab Spring
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Americans are accustomed to thinking that our 1776 revolution was the model for all others. This may account for the wacky optimism of Western journalists cheering on the street demonstrations in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. They assumed these demonstrations would truly give rise to American style democracy. They now see that this is not so.

Those of us who were less enthusiastic can justify our pessimism by noting what's going on in Libya (revenge and lawlessness) and in Syria, a sectarian war. Until now, the Syrian government was doing the killing, but arms are now pouring in from Sunni Arab neighbors and revenge is in the works.

In the American Revolution, it was sheer luck that we prevailed over the mighty British military. Although the British signed the documents that ended the conflict, they were not yet finished with us. They returned in 1813 to try again. Once more, they lost, and the ramifications of this loss rumbled across the rest of Europe.

Historian Robert Kagan, author of *Dangerous Nation*, wrote how hostile European powers were to the success of the American Independence. They were dead set on stamping out like revolts in their own societies. Kagan also notes that from our beginnings, we hoped to sell our form of republic to the rest of the world. We have never stopped doing so.

The old order in Europe was aristocratic. Kings reigned, empires emerged (Russian, Austro-Hungarian, British) and people were expected to know their place. The wealth of these empires rested on peasant labor (as it had for millennia) and in some, such as Britain, growing industrialization was producing urban working classes, great wealth in trade, and empires around the world to rule.

Although there were movements toward parliaments (something the British had long enjoyed), the disparity between the rich and the poor was not addressed. The poor knew that if they protested, they would be crushed; they had a thousand years of experience with failed peasant revolts.

But something new was emerging. With the growth of rich cities, young men with educations and positions in middle management (in government and business) began to chafe for a more just society. The Protestant Reformation, the fruit of the religious wars, also took a position about social justice. In the 17th century, the British managed to transform their monarchy into a constitutional one, with power in the Parliament.

The rest of Europe's great powers were not as prudent. France had a bloody revolution in 1789, one so violent and frightening that the other European powers attempted to reverse it. Although they failed, France's revolution died anyway as Napoleon established a new empire. It took fifty more years before France really had a republic.

By 1848, all of continental Europe (minus Britain) was in turmoil. People took to the streets to protest how they were governed. Communes emerged everywhere. A thoroughly frightened aristocracy recognized that they must crush this movement lest they wind up like the French aristocrats had during the French Revolution. They ferociously put down the revolts and delayed serious reform for decades.

The Russian Empire, far more backward than those of Western Europe, crushed any flicker of revolt until they themselves were toppled at the end of World War I. The Russians had a revolution as ugly and violent as the French had a century earlier. Mexico had the next violent revolution, and then China in 1949 had an even more bloody revolution than their French and Russian predecessors.

Revolutions never bring what people had hoped and always have the same trajectories. They never lead to American style democracy because none of their customary institutions resembled ours. We were very lucky that our revolt was against Britain, whose values were much like our own. Revolts against Russia (both Tsarist and Communist) or the Nazis or Japanese during World War II could not succeed because these imperial powers were ruthless and totalitarian. Human rights were not in their cultures.

The Arab revolt is already melting down. Their history and institutions, unfortunately, guarantee this result.

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