

Hungarian Revolution of 1848: Analyzing Economic, Social, and External Factors Through Historical and Comparative Methods

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Abstract: After the French Revolution and Napoleon's sweep through Europe, the Congress of Vienna restored order and the balance of power through conservatism, restoration of monarchs, and territorial redistribution, resulting in a period of relative peace with no major wars between European countries for several decades. However, societies have not been as tranquil as this seemingly calm outlook; transformations and revolutions continued as people strived for increased political representation and freedom. The revolution of 1848, as a transnational event, successively triggered changes in most European countries. Although the revolution was recognized to ultimately a failure, it still has a profound impact on today's society. Despite being a supranational event, revolutions occur for different reasons in different countries. In Hungary, the main reasons for the revolution were the economic crisis caused by the failure of the grain harvest, Hungarian nationalism and the demands of the nobility, and, inevitably, the influence of revolutions in other regions.

Keywords: Revolution of 1848, European powers, Austrian empire, Hungary.

1. Introduction

In France, the system of constitutional monarchy deteriorated under Louis XVIII's brother Charles X's policies, who was later overthrown in the July Revolution. In England, Chartism led by the working class gained popularity throughout the country; and millions of people signed petitions urging for the right to vote. Similarly, the Austrian Empire had its unresolved problems, the Habsburgs had been in a process of decline. Ferdinand I and even the government headed by Metternich were unable to alleviate the internal pressure coming from the rising nationalism, as well as the unrest within the multinational state.

Under these circumstances, the escalating conflicts erupted in early 1848; as a result, revolutions transcended national boundaries, and almost all major European powers got involved in the next few months [1]. Although it was unsuccessful due to opposition and counterrevolutions, some lasting effects such as the abolition of Serfdom in the Austrian Empire still occurred [2].

Hungary is crucial among all nations appealing for more freedom and autonomy in the revolution. Hungarian resistance and independence ideologies have a long history. They can be traced back to the beginning of the assimilation policies of the Holy Roman Empire, including the forced promotion of the German language and redistribution of land in Hungary carried out by Joseph II in the 18th

century [3]. In 1848, the discontent with the Habsburgs' rule reached its peak when Lajos Kossuth's speeches in Hungary resonated with the Hungarian people, and when Joseph I had no way but to ask Metternich to resign and flee the country [4]. At the end of the revolution, Hungary gained more independence but remained in the shadow of the Habsburgs. However, despite the failure of the revolution, Lajos Kossuth was still highly regarded as a national hero, and the end of serfdom in the Austrian Empire did indeed mark the history of Hungary.

This essay analyzes the three most essential factors of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848, namely internal social, external, and economic factors, and tries to analyze their role in making the revolution happen. Of course, the causes of the Hungarian revolution were complex, and one aspect alone does not explain the occurrence of the whole event.

2. Economic Reasons

Many political revolutions have an economic basis, and the revolution in 1848 is no exception; the poverty caused by rapid population growth and slow economic development was a problem for all regimes, whether conservative, authoritarian, or libera [5]. In the study of the relationship between Economic Crises and the European Revolutions of 1848, Berger and Sponser concluded that although the form is not affected, economic crises trigger and explain the occurrence and the distribution of the revolution to a great extent.

Within these economic crises, crop failures played an important role. They not only affected landowners' incomes but were also directly linked to local food prices and people's living standards, since food expenses accounted for two-thirds or even three-quarters of lower-income household expenses in the mid-19th century.

According to a chronology of events by Jonathan Sperber, the potato crisis of 1845 led to a famine that swept through half of Europe, and by the following year, although the potato harvest had gotten better, the grain harvests were miserable [6]. These two years of poor harvests further contributed to high food prices; Berger and Spoerer's study further implies that the forecast grain price errors were highest in 1947 for most European countries studied (which means, the price of grain has become unprecedented high). Economically, increased grain prices inevitably lead to a reduction in the quantity demanded, and when this reduction reaches below the subsistence level, demand becomes inelastic. For households that are "earning close to the subsistence level," they have to spend more on nutrition, and as a result, are "forced to reduce their rate of saving and run down their financial assets."

Agricultural woes further led to industrial stagnation in the economy. During the second half of 1846 and into 1848, tight financial conditions led to the collapse of many companies. One of the most iconic ones is those in the textile sector. Additionally, railroads, metal, and mining sectors in Germany and France all saw a reduction in investment to varying degrees.

In contrast to grain price shocks, revolutions had a time lag because people facing starvation were first concerned with survival and physical needs; revolutions were not likely to occur until after grain prices had experienced initial relief in 1848. Although the revolution does not immediately follow the grain price fluctuations and the industrial shock, Berger and Spoerer inferred that there are strong correlations between both industrial and grain price shocks and the revolution. Outside of rare cases, such as the Netherlands and Denmark, all states that experienced either industrial or grain price shocks were hit by revolution.

Consistent with the above, as a country where both industrial shock and grain price shock took place, Hungary's actual grain price in 1845-1848 is more than 2 standard deviations away from the forecast price: on top of this, its industrial output experienced negative growth of nearly 5% in 1848. Thus, Hungary was no exception to the revolution.

Reflecting on those events, Karl Marx even interpreted the crisis as a delayed reaction to the failure of the potato and the high price of cotton [7]. Crop production was crucial to the economic well-being of Europe, including Hungary.

3. Social Reasons

National sentiments in Hungary arose out of the attempts of the Habsburg to centralize power. Beginning with Joseph I at the end of the 18th century, the Habsburgs pursued a number of radical policies of assimilation towards Hungary, which included the promotion of the German language and the division of territories by bypassing the Hungarian nobility. Although these policies were resisted by the Hungarian aristocracy and ordinary citizens and ended by the French Revolution, the Austrian Empire under the Vienna system once again attempted to centralize power after Napoleon's defeat. Francis II therefore shut the Hungarian Diet and began direct rule over Hungary in 1812; however, this did not stop the growing nationalism in Hungary. The Hungarian Diet was reconvened in 1825, as a result of the war in northern Italy; even though the Diet did not play a decisive role in the process of Hungarian national independence, it still pushed for the promotion of the Hungarian language.

However, the promotion of the Hungarian language alone was neither enough to ventilate national sentiment nor to start a revolution. In *The Decline and Fall of the Habsburg Empire 1815-1918*, Alan Sked even argued that it was difficult for Hungary to produce a Revolutionary Spirit under the Habsburg monarchy. Although it is a consensus that the Hungarian aristocracies mostly contributed to the revolution, they themselves were not even aiming for such revolutionary purposes, Sked pointed out that their original purpose was to restore the “powers of the Hungarian constitution” rather than to seek more political freedom or even independence more radically, as Lombardy-Venetia had done. In order to do so, they even cooperated with Metternich During the 1840s for reforms [8].

In a certain sense, the aim of the Hungarian aristocracy to restore the Hungarian constitution also explains the limited political success of the Hungarian parliament before 1847 and thus proves the limitations of explaining the causes of the revolution only on the level of Hungarian nationalism as well as of the aristocracy. Therefore, other variables, such as the political organization of the Austrian Empire must be taken into consideration.

Decades of war had made the rulers of the Austrian Empire fearful of all social change, and thus Franz I shunned all attempts that might have caused major transformations in society. However, underneath this extremely conservative regime was a society of rapid economic growth. When the Austrian Empire embraced peace after more than 20 years of war, agriculture, crafts, and trade all developed greatly compared to the previous period. However, economic development inevitably brought new social problems, and there was little doubt that the rigid bureaucracy of the empire was an obstacle to prosperity. The middle class and the nobility ameliorated this problem by forming civic associations. Although this was labeled by Metternich as a “plague,” because of its potential to destabilize the existing order, in fact, for most of the occasions, the empire tolerated and even encouraged these behaviors.

However, civic associations were not a solution to the problem of institutional rigidity; despite being a civil society, the excessive respect for legal procedures was criticized anonymously by many, even by high-ranking officials in pamphlets published abroad. As a result, some scholars have even ventured to suggest that the Austrian bureaucracy may even have been a trigger for revolution [9].

4. External Factors

The first two factors alone might not have led to a revolution because there was still a missing trigger for a revolution, and that trigger was external - the Revolution in Italy and the February Revolution in France.

Similar to the one that happened in Hungary, the Italian Revolution also had an important economic factor. Europe's rapid economic and commercial growth after 1820, discussed in chapter 4, reinforced the demand for national independence, these factors explain why widespread anti-Austrian feelings agitated the rich part of Italy [10]. In January, revolts starting from Palermo and Sicily gradually spread to rest parts of Italy. As a result of the Italian Revolution, the Habsburg dynasty is forced to give up absolute monarchy in the Two Sicilies [11].

Yet, it is important to mention that external factors themselves do not solely contribute to the occurrence of the Hungarian Revolution. On this point, Alan Sked criticized the assumption that revolutions were bound to break out in the Austrian Empire only because revolutions in other European countries occurred.

5. Discussion

Crop production, policies implemented by the Austrian Empire, and external events all played an important role in triggering the revolution, and by intertwining and interacting with each other, there is also a very deep connection between these three causes. Therefore, instead of treating them as three independent and sonneteered factors, it is better to say that it was the interweaving and coincidence of these three factors that created the Hungarian revolution. It is worth noting, however, that these three factors do not represent all of the possible causes, and many of the potential factors have been overlooked.

As an example, politically, the death of Franz II and the inauguration of the mentally and physically sick Ferdinand I created a huge power vacuum, which even led to a further increase in the incompetence of the Austrian government in terms of facing economic challenges, strikes, or riots. In addition, his reign caused more stagnation in politics which led to increased people's dissatisfaction with the ruling class.

While these factors many times cannot be considered important causes of revolutions, the very fact that they occurred at this time allowed them to fuel potential revolutions [12].

6. Conclusion

Crop production, policies implemented by the Austrian Empire, and external events all played an important role in triggering the revolution, and by intertwining and interacting with each other, there is also a very deep connection between these three causes. Therefore, instead of treating them as three independent and sonneteered factors, it is better to say that it was the interweaving and coincidence of these three factors that created the Hungarian revolution. It is worth noting, however, that these three factors do not represent all of the possible causes, and many of the potential factors have been overlooked. As an example, politically, the death of Franz II and the inauguration of the mentally and physically sick Ferdinand I created a huge power vacuum, which even led to a further increase in the incompetence of the Austrian government in terms of facing economic challenges, strikes, or riots. In addition, his reign caused more stagnation in politics which led to increased people's dissatisfaction with the ruling class. While these factors many times cannot be considered important causes of revolutions, the very fact that they occurred at this time allowed them to fuel potential revolutions.

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