

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 326: The Year of Revolutions: 1848

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On the 27th of January, 1848, Alexei de Tocqueville, French aristocrat and probably best known in the English-speaking world as the author of a groundbreaking study of democracy in America, addressed the Chamber of Deputies in Paris, and I will quote,

As if a gale or revolution were in the air, this gale, no one knows where it springs from, whence it blows, nor believe me whom it will carry with it.

Can you say today that you are certain of tomorrow? Do you know what may happen in France a year from now, or even a month or a day from now? You do not know.

But what you must know is that the tempest is looming on the horizon, that it is coming towards us. So Dominic, momentous words, and as it turns out, prophetic, because that year of 1848 is commemorated as the year of revolutions.

The voice of prophecy, Tom, is often all the more resonant when it's read out in the voice of Chief Inspector Jacques Cluzot as that was.

I thought you were going to say in French the language of diplomacy.

No, I wasn't going to say that. But yes, so we welcome Inspector Cluzot to the podcast for this episode of the 1848 revolutions.

So yeah, 1848 is remembered as the year of revolutions. And yet, of course, the question is, what was it all for and what's it achieve?

Because lots of people listen to this will have a sort of vague idea that 1848 is a bit like 1789 or 1968.

It's one of those dates that conjures up images of barricades and people on the streets.

But it's more like 1968, though, isn't it? Because actually the revolutions fizzle out.

And there's lots of kind of young people rushing around standing on barricades.

Yeah, and then lots of people shooting them.

Yes, basically, basically. And so the standard question about 1848 is why does it fail?

Yes.

Why do the revolutions fail? However, in a groundbreaking study, *Revolutionary Spring Fighting for a New World, 1848, 1849* by the great Christopher Clarke, who is with us on the show.

The Regis Professor of History.

Sir Christopher Clarke, Tom. We're very big on titles.

Professor Sir Christopher Clarke.

And what's more, Tom, I know he's going to speak in a second, but just let me say we're particularly indebted to Christopher joining us because he's Australian.

And like a lot of people, he'll be in mourning because of the very recent passing of day Medina average.

Chris, was that a traumatic moment for you when you learned the news?

It was a sad moment, I have to say. And I mean that, actually.

Oh, my word. I spent nothing less than the Regis Professor of History.

She was a very remarkable lady.

Yeah. And she spoke for us all.

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I have to say, I didn't think that we'd be, we'd be talking about any of Regis, our first topic.

Dominic, can I go back to what I was going to say before you do diverted us?

Yeah, you're always welcome to do that, Tom.

Okay. So the takeaway, I mean, there are lots of takeaways from this book, which is on an absolutely comprehensive scale, because the takeaway that I found particularly intriguing is that you basically say that the whole question of did they succeed or fail?

Is a nonsense question. Towards the end of the book, you say, we don't say of an ocean storm, a solar flare or 16 days of heavy snowfall, that they succeeded or fail.

We simply measure their effects.

Yeah. I think that the problem with asking whether a revolution failed or succeeded is that, I mean, you might argue that, you know, look, we don't say that about 16 days of heavy snowfall, but that's because snow is a natural phenomenon.

Whereas a revolution is a political phenomenon driven by a political intention.

And so we ought to be able to ask the question, was the intention fulfilled?

Is there a match between outcomes and intentions?

And if there is, we can say it was a success.

And if there isn't, we can say it was a failure.

But the problem with that is that a revolution doesn't actually have an intention.

It has thousands of intentions.

This revolution was not planned in advance.

It was very chaotic in the way it unfolded.

A lot of entropy was built into the whole process.

Groups and people kept seceding from the common enterprise.

And so the question, what was the intention driving the revolution has no answer.

There were thousands of potentially conflicting intentions.

And so that makes the question, was it a success or not?

A problematic question because for some it was a huge success.

For others, it was a disastrous failure.

I mean, people died, their lives, there is everything for this revolution.

So it makes more sense, it seems to me, to think of the revolution as a process.

I mean, I like to think of it as a sort of, as a collision chamber at the heart of the 19th century.

Everything fell into this chamber.

It got crushed together with everything else under conditions of extreme density and pressure.

And then these entities showered out the other end of the process into the rest of the 19th century.

But everything was changed.

No one was the same shape, no ideas were bent out of shape.

Some things disappeared, others appeared.

And so that's the way I like to think.

I think we should be thinking about this revolution as a kind of engine of change at the heart of the 19th century.

So if we go back to the very basics, your book starts with a couple of thematic chapters where you're talking about kind of poverty in Europe and the condition of people in the cities and people in the countryside and so on and so forth.

But so Europe in the 1840s.

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So this is the first decade of the life of Queen Victoria.

Railways are beginning to come in.

It's not yet a landscape completely transformed by the telegraph, let's say.

So in some ways it feels, if you're living in a little village somewhere in the middle of Poland, well, what's now Poland or France or something, it probably feels like a very sleepy world.

But in the cities, there's a tremendous sense of velocity, exchange of ideas, new technology.

But Europe in the 1840s, what is it about Europe in the 1840s that makes it?

I mean, it's not an Asian regime.

So what is it that explains the sort of, why is it a revolutionary tinderbox as a word?

I mean, that's a terrible cliché, but you know what I mean?

Well, it's a revolutionary tinderbox for lots of different reasons.

I mean, one is the point you've already mentioned that, you know, a lot of people are under very high levels of social and economic stress.

And this stress isn't a constant.

It sort of pulses.

It comes at some moments and then recedes because this is a system.

It's not that everybody's that there's a generalized shortage of food.

There's plenty of food to go around, but every so often there are disruptions to the food supply, as indeed we're experiencing again today.

That's one of the parallels between then and now.

And these short term disruptions to the food supply can push people in huge numbers over the edge, over the brink of subsistence into real crisis.

And this one of the moments at which this happens is 1846, 47 is a very bad, very cold harvest.

The price of grains shoots up.

And because most of what most poor people eat is bread or grain based food of one kind or another, they can't substitute for it with other foods.

They can't just eat chicken instead or cake as famously Marie Antoinette had once suggested they should do in the context of an earlier revolution.

So they're pushed into a genuine state of emergency.

And that has the effect of bringing people onto the streets.

That means there are a lot of discontented, angry, resentful apprentices, artisans and so on, available in the big cities for a tumult if a tumult should arise.

So that's part of the background.

But there's also the fact that this is a continent which is incubating lots of different political movements.

I mean, one of the fascinating things about the 1830s and 40s in Europe is the extraordinary political biodiversity.

There are several hundred different kinds of socialism.

People talk about socialism, but the term has no fixed meaning.

And Marx is around and he's commenting on things in a sort of very brilliant and modern and polemical and rather one sided way.

But Marxism has not yet dominated this spectrum of socialism.

So an immense diversity of left wing thinking about, you know, how to live a better life, how to create a form of state order which allows humans to flourish and so on and so forth in the broadest

possible sense.

And then there are many liberalisms, the liberals are the people who want to somehow balance, you know, authoritarian structures like absolute monarchy,

of which there are plenty in Europe in the 1830s and 40s with the power of parliaments.

And then there are conservatives who are starting to think about how you preserve what is valuable about the Ancien regime in the face of this tide of change that everyone recognizes as there.

I mean, even Metony speaks of, he says, we must build a dam to contain the flood.

And already in that formulation, we see that, you know, this man who's the kind of elder statesman of the continent, the chancellor or the foreign minister at various points in his career of the Austrian Empire,

even he recognizes that there's this river like flow of change, which you're either going to swim with or try and dam in and stop.

And everybody acknowledges that it's there.

So it's a time when everybody recognizes the potential for conflict and change, but people aren't sure about how this can be achieved.

And the people who are at the top, to my way of thinking, they don't look peculiarly repressive or indeed authoritarian.

So if you take France, for example, King Louis Philippe, he is famously the kind of bourgeois king. Everybody makes fun of him. They say he looks like a pair. He seems like a nice guy.

He's like a sort of middle class Englishman.

He's got Gizzo, who I think is his prime minister, isn't he, who's very civilized, cerebral kind of.

Yeah, he wrote over 70 books.

Yeah. So, you know, if you're casting a film, these are not people who make satisfying repressive villain, top-hatted villains or something.

No, you'd probably choose Tom Hanks to play Louis Philippe, I think, rather than some bad guy. Absolutely.

Yeah.

So what is it they are doing wrong, as it were?

Well, that's a very good question. Actually, Gizzo was not doing a huge amount wrong.

It was actually in many ways quite a successful government, as you say it.

But it was a government that had managed to wind up in a kind of war with the media.

That's one of the problems, that there was this shower, a kind of flood of invective against the monarchy,

which denounced the king as corrupt, as disgusting.

The image of his face as a pair and so on, it sounds rather innocent to me.

It's just, you know, that rather likable fruit.

But in fact, you know, I'm thinking now of a particular cartoon, which is widely reprinted.

I wanted to appear in the early 1840s.

The cartoon, which shows a pair-like object seated on top of a thing called a coque de melasse, a sort of barrel full of molasses.

But you have to remember that molasses was the sort of slang word for excrement in French.

And underneath it is a royal-looking chair.

And this horrible contraption is supposed to be the king, you know, a pear-shaped head and a barrel full of excrement and a nice sort of antique chair.

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And it's being gawked at by a group of French people who are standing around it, looking at it disgustedly.

That's the sort of image of the regime.

And at the same time, there's the problem of who is represented in the representative politics of this monarchy.

It is a constitutional monarchy, and that's one of the weird things.

You know, they've had a revolution in 1830.

They revised the constitution that they got in 1814.

So it is a constitutional, in that sense, a liberal order.

But the constitution enfranchises fewer than 2% of the population.

This is a male franchise only, but it's a tiny, tiny fragment of the wealthiest.

And obviously in France, there is the memory of the Primal Revolution.

There is.

The 1789 Revolution, the memory of the terror, the memory of the Napoleonic regime.

So France is peculiarly associated with revolution.

But the thing about 1848 is that it's not confined to France and that it spreads across...

In fact, I mean, in 1848, it's not initially France where a revolution breaks out, is it?

It's in Sicily.

It is in Sicily.

In fact, I mean, you say the French have this revolution in their minds.

Of course they do.

It's playing like an old film at the backs of their heads, but it's doing that right across Europe.

I mean, Europeans in general, this is something they have in common.

They have a lot in common in this Europe.

Perhaps more even than they do today.

They have common stories and narratives.

And one of these narratives is the narrative of this revolution in France.

If it's sequence of phases, the liberal revolution, followed by the Jacobin terrorist experiment, followed by the directory, followed by Napoleon, they all have that story in their heads.

So they all have that script available.

But that script isn't necessarily a sort of recipe for revolution because the memory of revolution is also an argument against revolution.

Those who remember the Jacobin terror, for example, say, let's not take any risks.

I mean, Giseaux's father was executed when he was five years old.

His father was executed by the guillotine in Nîmes.

And he remembered that, of course, it was a traumatic memory and he remained deeply opposed to the death penalty

and opposed to violent or extremist political experiments of any kind.

So he was a conservative in one way and would fall when the 1848 revolution broke out.

But he was also someone who remembered very vividly the French Revolution,

but he remembered it as a lesson against risking experiments.

So when we get to, let's say, the end of 1847, there'd been bad harvests, there'd been food shortages.

So to give us, I mean, just to remind people about the map of Europe, you have France,

there was no Germany, Germany's fragmented.

There's a kind of German confederation, isn't there?

Yes, there's a loose confederation of German states called the Deutsche Bund, which consists of 39 sovereign states.

Switzerland is still a very loosely confederated state.

It's not really a state at all.

In fact, the cantons are virtually independent with a very weak government, which moves from one place to another.

There is no Italy.

And North Italy is ruled by Austria.

North Eastern Italy is ruled by Austria.

Lombardy and Venetia are both under Austrian control.

Piedmont is independent and then you have the Papal States and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

Yeah, so that's a crucial thing as well, isn't it?

The Pope is a temporal ruler as well as a spiritual ruler.

The Pope has his own state.

That's another exotic feature of the European people at this time.

And another exotic sort of piece of local color is the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies in the South, which is the bizarrely named amalgam of Sicily, the island, and of the Neapolitan mainland of the south of Italy, south of the Papal States.

So there are lots of states that don't exist anymore.

On the other hand, there is a state that didn't exist and does now, and that's Poland.

Poland is nowhere on the map because in the 18th century it had been partitioned by its three neighboring states, the Prussians, the Austrians, and the Russians.

So there's no Polish state, but there is very much a Polish nation

with a memory of what it was like to inhabit the great Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

And that again is a factor in the revolution because these unhappy Poles

are going to play a very important role in carrying the agenda of revolution from one place to another.

And so, Chris, that is one further element.

So you've talked about the legacy of the French Revolution and the social pressures, but this is also an age of nationalism.

And you have a brilliant description that its effect on the revolutions of 1880 as a whole was like that of heroin on the body and mind of an addict.

So that is something that is enhancing the revolutionary spirit

but also turning it into courses that the powers that be don't recognize.

Absolutely. Nationalism is the most difficult theme for 1848

because after 1848 happened, the memory of 1848 was processed

by the national movements of Italy, Germany, France, and later of Hungary and so on.

And it's still part of the national memory of Hungary

where Viktor Orban never fails to mention the struggles for Hungarian freedom in 1848, always distorting them and turning them obviously to contemporary objectives.

So nationalism is part of what shapes what we remember about 1848.

And so we have to think our way past that lens,

that lensing effect, if you like, and put ourselves in a world where nationalism is present and has a drug-like effect on people, but it's a periodic effect.

People can become extremely excited.

They wear national clothing when they come together and they see everybody else wearing their red caps or their blue cinched jackets or whatever it is, whether they're Croats or Hungarians or Germans wearing national costume.

The effect on people is absolutely overwhelming.

The emotional power of these moments of patriotic feeling is extraordinary.

So in one way it brings people together and it submerges them in a larger collective self.

On the other hand, it also divides them because, you know, the Hungarians, when they rise up against the Austrians, they find themselves dealing with national movements of the Slovaks, the Croats, and the Romanians, people who are minorities within the Kingdom of Hungary who don't wish to be ruled by an independent Hungary or rather be ruled from more distant, more impartial Vienna.

So it's a very complex presence.

And the other interesting thing about nationalism, and nationalism has this peculiar, almost magical effect, that it comes with the illusion that it is old.

So when people experience national feeling, they feel they're inheriting something from the Middle Ages or even before that, something very, very ancient.

Ancient Magyars or whoever it might be.

Ancient Magyars, exactly.

Magyars spreading out in the 11th century across the Danubian plain and so on.

Whereas in fact, these nationalist experiences are very new.

They're created by newspapers and communication networks and the national clothing people wear is mostly an invented retro style that people have come up with in the 19th century.

Like the kilts, Tom.

Invented traditions, exactly.

I mean, on that topic, you have a wonderful quote by Metanik, the kind of the conservatives, conservative, the Austrian Foreign Minister, to Count Reztzky, who's basically the military commander with responsibility for Austrian possessions in North Italy.

And he's writing in August 1847, so just before the explosion, that if the past imposed great efforts on us, it was at least better than the present.

You and I know how to fight against bodies, but against phantoms, material force can achieve nothing.

And today we are fighting phantoms everywhere.

Is he expressing something that is commonly felt by the elites in this period?

That they're aware, of course, of the revolutionary potential

because they have the history of the French Revolution, but that the manifestation of it is something strange, new, that they don't know how to fight, they don't know how to cope with. Yes, and nationalism is a phantom and a terrifying phantom for Metanik because he's a senior politician in a multinational empire. I mean, we would call it multinational now. It's that word then, but it's a commonwealth of ethnicities with, you know, 11 or 12 different major languages and many other dialects beside. So for an empire like that, nationalism is a dissolving poison. It will simply tear the thing apart. And so, you know, he's right to see nationalism as a threat. It's also a threat in another way, and that is that, although it may not voice a principled objection to monarchy, nationalists can also be monarchists. Nevertheless, nationalism proposes implicitly at least that the center of authority, the kind of center of gravity of a population is not its dynasty, but its ethnic substance. And that means the people. So it's a way of taking power from the crown and placing it in the heart of an ethnic group, which is, of course, disturbing to the holders of traditional power in Europe. So to sort of turn to the narrative, I mean, Tom mentioned that the first sort of flash point is actually not in France, but in Sicily and Palermo. I think one of the things that your account of it does quite brilliantly is to show all the contingencies and all the twists and turns. And France is the big, I mean, France is the big one, isn't it? So that starts in the first weeks of 1848, and it's all to do with banquets, the cancellation of political banquets, a very sort of banal trigger you one would think for a continental-wide upsurge of popular and enthusiasm. One could sort of quip and say, you know, only France would rise up in revolution because of a cancelled banquet. But, you know, it's true. The Parisian revolution is important. But, you know, think about that speech by Tocqueville, which is the Tocqueville which Tom cited at the beginning, or Inspector Cluzot cited, that, you know, Tocqueville can make this prophecy because he's been reading the papers, and the papers are full of tumults from all over Europe by the end of January, which is when he speaks, the 27th of January. By the end of January, there's news coming up from the south of Italy,

from Palermo and from Naples, but also from Switzerland.
I mean, Switzerland had already had a civil war in the previous year,
the Sonderbundt Krieg, as it's called in Switzerland,
which creates, you know, a modern constitutional state.
In fact, it creates the Switzerland we have today.
The modern Switzerland today is born in 1848.
So that's already been happening,
and it's widely reported in the press.
The horizons of press reportage are very much European.
They're not, you know, siloed in national or regional or territorial silos.
They're very much looking to the extent of the continent.
And, you know, Tocqueville is drawing on that when he says, you know,
this storm that you see now on the horizon is coming for us.
So the contagiousness of these tumults is already recognizable
by the time the revolution happens in Paris.
And the interesting thing about this year, Dominic mentioned
the contingent sort of happenstance quality of this.
It is on how virtually every one of these uprisings
begins almost kind of by accident.
So the one in Palermo starts when a poster appears,
which simply says, you know, a few days there's going to be a revolution.
Get prepared. Sicilians rise up.
Your moment of freedom has arrived.
Signed Comitato Revolutionario, the Revolutionary Committee.
Now, there was no Revolutionary Committee.
This whole thing was a prank put up by a guy called Bagnasco.
I just thought, I think maybe people will rise up
if I put a, you know, a sheet on a wall.
So he did that.
And sure enough, on the day that the revolution had been announced for,
everybody did turn up to see what was going to happen.
And nothing happened because nothing had been planned,
except that the troops had been doubled and tripled throughout Palermo.
So there are many more troops than usual and inevitably,
you know, a clash broke out between the people and the troops.
And that was the beginning of the revolution.
And something very similar happened in Paris, you know,
shots fired by accident and so on led to a massive upheaval.
La Martin, a French sort of, you know, liberal slash radical politician,
very much involved in the February Revolution.
It said it was almost as if the revolution was engendered
by the curiosity of the crowds that had gathered
to see if a revolution would happen.
Yeah. But also, as if I had to say in the case of Paris,

we were talking about the silent film playing in people's heads, that Louis Philippe doesn't want to be Louis XVI. As soon as the revolution breaks out, it's precisely because he has the memory of 1789 and what happened afterwards. So he's like, OK, I'm out of here. I'm gone. I'm abdicating. He's gone, absolutely. And he actually didn't need to do it. Is that right? Would that be fair? He could have stuck it out, I suppose. I mean, the main problem was that the French police in Paris, the municipal guards and the mobile guards and the National Guard and the army, in fact, had all been preparing for decades for a conspiratorial revolution organised by underground networks. And so they were going to concentrate on the areas of Paris where the trouble was starting and crush it there. And then, you know, the plan was all organised around the idea of a conspiratorily organised and planned revolution. But what actually happened was more like a societal tsunami. The society threw off the regime and decided it didn't fear the forces of order anymore and it didn't respect the government anymore. And that's a really dangerous thing. And there was absolutely nothing that Louis Philippe... I mean, at one point, for example, it was impossible to deploy troops in Paris because the crowds were simply too large. The troops couldn't move through them. So they simply faced a situation that they were not prepared to handle and were incapable of handling. And quite wisely, Louis Philippe decided, well, really, my time's up and it's good. So France is obviously, as Dominic said, the big one. It's the great monarchy. It's got the history of the French Revolution. Narratives of revolution in France are something that people can comprehend and understand. But what then happens is that revolution starts to spread in a cascade effect across Europe. And I don't want to frighten people, because we're going to have a break in a minute. But this is what you say about this process. From the beginning of March 1848, it becomes impossible to trace the revolutions as a linear sequence from one theater of turbulence to the next. We enter the fission phase

in which almost simultaneous detonations
create complex feedback loops.
The narrative bursts its banks.
The historian despairs.
Oh, no.
Oh, no.
So I think we should take a break at this point.
And then when we come back,
perhaps you could express why you despair
and how you triumphantly overcome your despair
and give us a sense of this cascade effect.
Absolutely.
So we'll see you back in a few minutes.
My dear, good, beloved wife,
farewell, live well for the times
as is called eternal, but is not.
Bring up our now only your children to be fine people.
Sell our few possessions with the help of our friends.
God and good people will help you.
Oh, everything I feel runs away in tears.
So I say again, live well, dear wife, farewell.
Thousand, thousand, the last kisses from your Robert.
Written in Vienna on the 9th of November at five in the morning.
Oh, that's six.
It will all be over.
So that Tom Holland is described as one of the most
affecting passages of 19th century German prose
by the readest professor of history
at Cambridge University, Christopher Clark.
And I don't think, Christopher, you've ever heard it read
with such feeling.
Have you?
I'm still, I'm still drawing my eyes.
It's wonderful, isn't it?
And Spectaclusso is joined by Hair Flick.
Tom, that is very cruel.
And I think a lot of listeners will be quite shocked at that remark.
I think they will.
I think they will.
But Dominic, yes.
So tell us who is talking there.
So we were talking about how the story was going to spread.
And this is a guy called Robert Bloom, who is the son of a Cooper,
I believe, and a seamstress or something like that.

I can't remember.

But he had become an apprentice bronze worker
and then was a great autodidact and had become a pamphleteer
and a poet and a radical, a German radical who believed
in a united liberal democratic Germany.

And his trajectory is he becomes one of the faces
of the German Revolution of the Frankfurt Parliament.

And it all ends in tears for him because he's shot in Vienna
having written this beautiful letter so beautifully read.

So his story, Christopher, is the kind of story
of what happens to the revolution in microcosm, isn't it?
High hopes, heady excitement, liberalism, and then bang,
end of story, he's dead.

Yes, yes, it is.

And for me, Robert Bloom is the kind of human face of the revolution
because his story captures so much of that move
from the extreme euphoria of the spring days.

I mean, the revolution, the narrative is complicated,
but it's not that complicated.

There's a spring, there's a summer,
and there's a kind of autumn and winter.

And the spring is all about everybody is out on the streets,
perhaps on barricades, but perhaps simply marching
or taking part in demonstrations.

There's an extraordinary sense of euphoria,
and I'm thinking here of one account from Berlin,
from a young radical law student who says,
my heart was beating so hard,

I felt it was going to blow a hole in my chest.

I had to get out of my room.

So he goes out of his sort of student gigs,
finds himself on the street amongst thousands of people,
and he says, I felt I could hear everyone else's hearts beating.

This experience, and there's endless testimony to this,
this was an experience of submersion in the collective self
of euphoria, collective euphoria,
which people remembered for the rest of their lives.

So that's how the revolution starts.

Then in the summer comes the kind of breakdown of unity,
the fractious disagreements between different bits of the revolution.

And Robert Bloom, who's part of that spring moment
and travels to the Frankfurt Parliament,
first to the pre-parliament and then to the parliament itself in May,
is full of high hopes for what's going to happen,

this massive work of transformation,
which he sees is about to take place.
And he joins the parliament, takes part in its business,
and in the summer he watches the project of the revolution
start to fray, to come apart.
And by the autumn he's exhausted by it
and decides to go to Vienna
to bring sort of fraternal greetings to the Viennese parliament.
But unfortunately, just as he arrives,
the city is surrounded by the Austrian armies
and the revolution is crushed in Austria.
A very violent process which results in hundreds of dead
and Bloom is arrested.
And although he pleads parliamentary immunity,
he says, I'm a member of the Frankfurt Parliament,
I have immunity, they say, yeah, whatever,
and execute him, as you say, on the 9th of November.
And there's a song about this,
which tells the story of his walk to the place where he was executed.
And in the course of this song,
the point is made, the observation is made,
which we have from several sources,
that one of the officers commanding the firing squad
noticed a tear rolling down his face
and sort of patted him on the shoulder and said,
you know, kind of Saga, Bloom,
he says, no, for we were something like that.
You know, don't worry, old chap,
it'll all be over like in a jiffy, right?
I don't know if anybody would be comforted
by these words in a situation like that, but there you are.
And Bloom turns to this man
and pulls himself up to his full height,
which is about five foot four,
and says, this tear is not the tear
of the parliamentary deputy, Robert Bloom.
It's the tear of the father and the husband.
So in other words, he insists on his right
to experience a private emotion
in the middle of this public event.
And that tells us something about what a revolution is like
in mid-19th century Europe.
It means bringing people out of their private lives
into public roles, which they've never had before.

I mean, people had to discover their public selves,
but they brought their private selves with them
into this new public work of revolutionary activism.
And he articulates that in this song,
and there's a wonderful moment in this song
where it says,
The tear for one's wife and children does not dishonour a man.
That is the ethics, if you like, of a middle-class revolution.
I want to go to the barricades after that.
Tom is very moved by that.
That was so stirring.
That's the best song we've ever had on the podcast, isn't it?
We don't really do singing.
I mean, we should have more singing.
I think the last one was Diamond's Your Girl's Best Friend.
Yes, you sang that, but Chris's singing was,
I think it's fair to say, in a very, very different league.
I'm happy to see that.
So Christopher, the people who are in the revolution,
are they mainly people like Robert Bloom?
Are they high-minded, idealistic, young?
Well, Dominic, isn't the archetype of that
is a guy called Friedrich Hecker?
Is that right?
Who kind of legal student from Heidelberg,
who is, I mean, much more than Bloom,
seems to be the prototype for Che Guevara,
and the idea of revolutionary is romantic,
has a famous beard that everyone copies.
So can you just tell us about him?
Because he seemed a very romantic fit,
I mean, romantic in every sense of the word.
Yeah, I mean, Hecker's a fascinating figure,
because Bloom and Hecker had been very close,
and they'd collaborated and published in the same journals,
and they were part of this radical network
that existed in Germany in the 1840s.
But Hecker decides that he's had enough of the parliament.
Parliaments are slow, they're talkative,
it's just talk, talk, talk.
And this is the great point of contrast, isn't it,
between those who want to constitutions and those who want...
That's right, exactly.
And it's a little bit like, you know,

it's also a kind of confusion
or a contrast in political timing.
So, you know, on the one hand, parliaments are slow,
they're ponderous, they're a little bit boring.
I mean, sadly, I mean,
it's just a fact about parliaments,
they're supposed to be boring, and they should be.
But they're full of procedural details,
and people have to take their time,
have to wait their time to talk,
and they mustn't speak longer than a certain time, and so on.
So it's very rule-bound,
whereas Hecker wants to break away from all that
and go for direct action.
So he sets up this kind of armed insurrection in Barton,
which goes horribly, horribly wrong.
He wastes a lot of people's lives,
doesn't achieve anything.
Eventually, he takes another shot at it in the following year,
but then flees to First of Switzerland
and then to the United States,
where he later, by the way, plays a role as a commander
in the Union Army.
So a lot of these people have very interesting, you know,
afterlives after this moment of 1848.
But, you know, for Bloom and Hecker,
this is a kind of parting of the ways.
You know, Hecker represents that violent
revolution by direct action,
which Bloom believes is doomed to fail,
and in fact, the fate of Hecker's escapade
shows that Bloom is right.
And on the other hand, Bloom remains faithful
to the Parliament, to this process of discursive
debate of discussion,
even though he knows, which is hard for a man of the left,
he knows that in 1848,
the process of election is unlikely
to produce a radical majority.
You have to work from a minority position
and argue for, you know,
for pragmatic agreements on particular policies.
And that's what Bloom decides to do.
So he becomes part of that complicated business

of Parliament, which Hecker rejects.
But it's Hecker who ends up
shaping the kind of memory of what it means
to be a revolutionary, because he styles,
you mentioned Che Guevara before,
he's a very vain man,
he wears a broad-brimmed hat and a long beard,
which comes to be known as a Hecker Bart,
a Hecker beard, a red sash,
baggy trousers tucked into
piratical boots, and so on.
So he becomes a kind of sexy
avatar of revolution,
which people find disturbing
and yet also perversely attractive.
And there are lots of cartoons
and caricatures of him.
And the interesting thing about him is,
even when he's being caricatured,
he still kind of has a certain, you know,
raw appeal.
A sort of very basic question.
So these revolutions in Germany,
I mean, Germany tends to end up,
I mean, the German speakers often tend to dominate
in 1848, because you've got what's going on in Germany,
and then you've got what's going on with Austria,
and the revolt in Hungary against Austria, and so on.
But in Germany specifically,
are we able to say what they want?
So it's because it's there, you've got a real
combination of socialism, radicalism, liberalism,
and nationalism, the idea of a Germany.
So is there ever a sort of common,
really a common program in Germany,
or is it too
confused and chaotic for that?
Well, it's all happening so fast
that there's not much time to establish
a common program. That's one of the difficulties.
And there are lots of tensions
between different objectives.
So people may share, you know,
many radicals like Bloom, for example,

believed in parliaments. They thought, we do need a parliament. We need the people to be represented through a process of election, and so on. We can't just make it up as we go along. On the other hand, they also wanted a social transformation. They wanted the imbalance between labour and capital to be re-balanced, so that the poorest strata of society would be better seen to. There would be a stronger position to bargain, for example, for improvement in their conditions. And so they were in favour of various forms of trade unions, or even of state intervention in the economy to support the working classes, this kind of thing. But of course, the liberals were what we would today call thatcherites. They wanted deregulation. They wanted the state to pull back out of the economy. As far as they were concerned, the private character of the economic relationships between people was an almost sacred conviction. And they said, the state has no business interfering in the relationship between an employer and an employee. This is a form of tyranny. And these are arguments which have not gone away, incidentally. I mean, they're sharpened by 1848, but they have not left the world. They're still very much at the centre of our politics, which is another reason for taking an interest in this very tumultuous episode. So there are many different, you know, agendas maturing in that respect, trying to balance social and political reforms. And at the same time, there's this question of the nation because there is no nation's German nation state. There are 39 different states that a German parliament does form and this is a remarkable thing. It doesn't happen in Italy, but in Germany a parliament forms to resolve

the future character of
a nation that does not exist.
I mean, that is an extraordinary state of affairs.
Of course, there is no parliamentary
building to put this parliament in.
So it's put in a church, the St. Paul's Church
of Frankfurt, a beautiful round
18th century church, a very fine
building, and it's decorated with
the red, black and gold tricolor of the
German Revolution. And it's there to discuss
the affairs of the German nation, of a
German nation state that does not yet exist.
So what happens?
What happens is people come up
with endless proposals and
disagreements. It's very difficult to get agreements
on anything. And of course, it's a little bit
like the EU today. While this imaginary
Germany is sort of trying to make decisions
about its future, that the individual
territorial states, Prussia, Saxony,
Bavaria, Wurttemberg, all the rest
of the 39 of them, have not gone
away. And they're still making decisions.
In fact, Prussia very much
takes the initiative again by the
early autumn of 1848 and
starts doing deals over issues which
are of great importance to
the German national movement.
And that is one of the things that leads
to the collapse of public esteem
for and trust in and belief
in the parliament at Frankfurt is the fact
that Prussia seems to be in a position
to defend the interests of the
German nation better than
the Frankfurt parliament is. After all, the
Frankfurt parliament has no army. It has a
tiny sort of shrunken bureaucracy, but
it has no means of projecting power
or of making people do what it wants
them to. So under the

pressure of all that sort of powerlessness,
it starts to fray
and it starts to wane
as a presence in people's minds.
Just before we come to the backlash,
can I ask a question that I know a lot of British
reviewers have already commented on? Why
not Britain? So in other words,
now you will say, you might
say, well, there's a big chartist meeting
in Kennington or whatever, but I mean
the truth of the matter is
1848 is not a date to conjure
within Britain and Britain does look in that
regard like
a bit of an exception. Now, is that
too strong or are you going to? No, it's not
too strong. It's true. I mean, Britain,
there is no revolution on the British
mainland or in Ireland, which is where
a tumult had also been expected. I mean
Ireland was seen as the most tumultuous
part of the United Kingdom
and that is a very interesting and important
fact. It's interesting in this connection
to read the Sydney Morning Herald
down in Australia where I come from. I come from
Sydney and it's still going strong, the
Sydney Morning Herald, but anyway, in the context
of 1848, they had to wait a long time
to get the news. I mean, it was months and months
and months before the news reached
Sydney, but when they commented on this,
they said, why have things been so
quiet in the motherland,
meaning Britain, whereas France and
Germany and Italy and so on have experienced
these sanguinary revolutions
and the good burgers of the Sydney Morning
Herald conclude, well, the reason is
because when you have colonies, you can take
all your trouble makers and
expose them out to the Scourts of
Empire, to the outskirts of empire. In other

words, here in Sydney, so we're getting all the trouble makers, the Sons of Free London, you know, anybody who's sort of drawn the attention of the police in Ireland winds up in Australia on some kind of transportation charge. So we end up, as it were, bearing the consequence. That's not really the reason, surely? It's part of the reason. There are several reasons. One is, I mean, that Ireland obviously was coming to the end of an absolute, the unexampled demographic shock in the form of the Irish famine. Because even then, you quote this astonishing thing that the Prussians are sending inspectors to Ireland to see how you repress a revolution. Well, this is another part of the story. See, there are multiple reasons for this. One is, it really is true that the British have been quite good at selecting key trouble makers and moving them out of the zone of trouble, mainly through transportation, partly to Australia and partly to South Africa, to the Cape Colony. And in fact, that practice leads to movements in both those places against the further transportation of convicts. So it's partly that. It's partly the famine in Ireland, which obviously areas which are suffering from very serious hunger of that kind. We see it elsewhere in Europe as well. Don't become active during the revolution because people are just too depleted. And then finally it's the fact that Britain is the most robustly policed country in Europe by a very large margin. And the Prussians recognize this. And that's why they send in the summer of 1840 they send a fact finding group to London in the first instance, but then to Dublin to Cork and other locations to find out what are the British getting

right. And how can we the Prussians get better at policing our own population. Indeed, they do introduce various changes to Prussian policing on the back of what they find out about British policing. So it's a combination of all those different things. And also the fact that Britain is able to keep the price of staple goods down fairly low during 1848 by dismantling the tariff protections of Britain's outlying colonies, places like Jamaica and or by reducing the fiscal burden of places like Ceylon for example. And as a result of that of those measures, those sort of counter if you'd like prophylactic counter-revolutionary measures, you see unrest breakout on several of those peripheral locations. Ceylon has a massive uprising against the British the structures of British rule in 1848-49. There are peoples in Jamaica and unrest along many other parts of the periphery of the British Empire. So one could say there's a British 1848 just not in Britain. You tell the extraordinary story of British repression of revolution in the Ionian islands in Greece. So Corfu and so on. That's a fascinating story because it's a little scatter of seven tiny islands and the one that's particularly important in 1849 is Kefalonia. And on that island there is a sort of rural uprising which is put down with exemplary by the British authorities. And I think it's quite an interesting example because

when I was at school
we were told the answer to that question
why wasn't there a revolution in Britain
was that Britain was already so liberal
that people's desire for reform
was already satiated thanks to the
Glorious Reform Act of 1832 and so on
and the Chartists were okay, well
they were
a movement for reform not for revolution
and your Chartist was a sensible kind
of fellow who would rather go home and have tea with his wife
than set fire to someone else's house
and this kind of thing. And so those are
the arguments that were made
and there was the liberality of British institutions
that say Britain from revolution
but on the Ionian islands
we don't see too much liberality, what we see
is a lot of flogging and hanging
and in fact there's a
kind of Europe wide
scandal over how the British
handled this uprising in Kefalonia.
And so that's an interesting example
of when you actually do see
British authorities facing
a local tumult of the kind
that broke out across the continent
they behave more or less as the Austrians
and the Germans and the Prussians
and other European states too.
But is there no element of truth
to the traditional story that you were taught?
I think there is an element of truth
and the element of truth and it connects
that argument about liberality
with the argument about policing
and that is that when the
mass meeting on Kennington Common took place
that Dominic referred to
there's no mass meeting of charters
I mean it was very alarming at the time
people were worried about what would happen

in fact Metonich who was on his way out of Europe
fleeing to Britain stopped in Rotterdam
for a few days because they were waiting
out the news of what was
It rained very heavily didn't it?
The rain stopped play basically
which is never a health
but in addition
80,000 special constables turned up
including Gladstone
the future Napoleon III
who'd signed up as a special constable
was hoping to get his hands on some charters
and give them a right drubbing
never got the chance to do that
but there's a commentary by a Tory
at the time called Sibthorpe
who says that by God
if only those special constables
had a chance to get stuck into those charters
they would have given them such a hiding
as no man ever received
and I think he wasn't wrong
what's special about Britain
is that it's part of its own society
counter-revolutionary forces
on a scale which
we don't see anywhere else in Europe
that Gazor can't summon up
80,000 special constables
wielding clubs
because these people are volunteers
they're not even paid
they want to get stuck in
so there's a sense in which you have
a sufficiently large
stakeholder element
in the society
and the defence
of the current political order
against those who would challenge it
I'm talking about counter-revolutionary
it's a huge canvas to try and cover
in just under an hour

but when we get to the late summer autumn
there is this backlash
do you think that was
the Austrians sending in the troops
the French turned to
the guy who becomes Napoleon III
and so on and so forth
do you think ultimately that was inevitable
but do you think
that was always likely to happen
that the forces of reaction
were always too strong
and that the Robert Blooms of this world
were never really going to get what they wanted
that's a really interesting question
was it always going to happen that way
some of these outcomes are profoundly surprising
the fact that someone
like Napoleon III
he's not Napoleon III yet
but the fact that the man who will become
Emperor Napoleon III
President of the Republic in December
1848 which is one of the deathblows
to the revolutionary movement in Paris
in France as a whole
that's actually a very unexpected and rather
odd outcome because
in the 1830s and 40s he'd been a figure of ridicule
so he kind of comes from nowhere
from left fields a bit like Trump
in fact in many ways he is a Trumpian kind of character
so that was
there's nothing inevitable about that
what seemed at the time to be unlikely
was the rapid success of the revolutions
if you like sequences of very unlikely
events
it's unlikeliness following unlikeliness
and so nothing in a way about any of this
was particularly likely
but nevertheless in retrospect
obviously it becomes
clear that the forces of the Ancien

regime which is not really
the right term for them but the forces of order
that had been challenged
by the revolution they had cards up
their sleeves more cards up their sleeves
and perhaps they seemed to
when the revolution was initially in the full flush
of its success they had loyal armed forces
that was one of the most important things
and another sort of
a thing that I think they didn't know themselves
was they had the support of a surprisingly
large part of the population
it seemed during the revolution
that the liberals
and the radicals are absolutely making the running
all the newspapers all the pamphlets
all the posters all the public
manifestations were for revolution
in one form or another
but what emerged as the revolution began to wane
was a sort of backlash
of popular conservatism
that no one had really known was there
and this is one of the great sort of discoveries
for the conservatives
that you know perhaps it's us
this is what they're saying you know perhaps we're the ones
who really know the little people
the revolutions were living in a bubble
in an urban bubble
people like each other
so this is your 1968 parallel right
1968 ends with the election of Richard Nixon
of Vietnam continues and all these kinds of things
and you know when president de Gaulle
calls out the people of France
and actually there are more of them than they are
of the people throwing cobblestones
of the police right it's the same story
but in a way isn't it even more primal
than that that perhaps you we think
of 1848 as the revolutionary
year but it's also the year that gives

birth perhaps to conservatism
as a political force in the way that we would
understand it now absolutely that's
the complexity of 1848 that revolution
and counterrevolution are born
twins in the same bed
that's the weird thing about 1848
it's a fascinating thing but of course
counterrevolution you know
conservatism is not the same as reaction
there are reactionaries who are saying
you know we've got to unmake this revolution
we've got to turn the clock of history
back but they are in a small minority
and they all fail
whereas the conservatives who are going to
shape the future are conservatives
who've learned from the revolution
being the classic. Bismarck is a classic example
a man of brilliant
intellect who immediately sees
this revolution cannot be
undone it's a new point of departure
we've got to live with it and anyone who tries
to resuscitate the pre-revolutionary past
is a fool and throughout
his life he recognized that
1848 was the sort of pivotal moment
in his own career it was the enabling
moment that without it he could never
have become the person that he became
because it was the revolution that allowed
him to enter public life and because
it unleashes the power of nationalism right
because it creates the idea of the nation
as the main vehicle
for kind of popular idealism and aspirations
and crowds and modernity
nationalism is modern
after 1848 isn't it? Well that's right
although Bismarck sees very clearly that
nationalism is going to have to be a managed force
it'll have to be managed by a media
which is itself carefully

managed and overseen and that's the great lesson of 1848 that nationalism kind of as a free-floating potential in European society is not going to achieve very much but nationalism when it's yoked to state power will achieve enormous amounts and that's what happens after 1848 So lots of the more radical constitutions and so on get repealed and to that extent we could perhaps talk of the ambitions and hopes of the more radical revolutionaries failing but one of the things that struck me in the book was that actually there are a number of constitutions in Europe that are still kind of basically current today that do reach back to 1848 so you mentioned Switzerland has reached back to 1847 but the Netherlands and I thought the most interesting one was Denmark which had been the kind of absolute monarchy and then becomes a kind of model liberal democracy and that constitution stays in place after 1848 Absolutely to this day the Danes still celebrate the day of the promulgation of that constitution during basic law so it's you know just one of many examples of constitutions that still survive today, I mean the Swiss constitution of 1848, it's not until 1848 they actually promulgate it is still in force with many amendments and so on the Dutch constitution the revised Dutch constitution of 1849 which comes about as a result of the 1848 revolutions those revisions are still in place you know in many ways the Italians too the Italian constitution winds up being the Piedmontese constitution the Piedmontese constitution is issued

in March 1848, the Statuto Albertino
and it's two survives
and bits of its language are still present
in today's Italian constitution
and so are bits of the German constitution
of 1848, they're still present
in the Grundgesetz
of today's German Federal Republic
so a huge amount of what was achieved
in the course of these revolutions
did stand
the test of time
and did survive
We haven't really got time to touch it
but we have to argue that modern contemporary Catholicism
dates back to this time as well
Well that's another fascinating story
the Catholic Church
we don't have time for that
but it has to completely remake itself
and it does in the aftermath of 1848
and most of what we think of as the Catholic Church
is actually born in that moment
and your last lines so you basically say
we're not supposed to see ourselves when we look back in the past
I mean I think Tom and I would completely agree with that
however, intriguingly
you think the revolutionaries of 1848
could see themselves
in us so the resonances between
then and now you find very striking
I find them very striking
and I wanted to say two things with that
closing comment one is that the resonances
are there and the more you think about them
the more they are
and the more persuasive they seem
and the second thing is
that those people were smart
it's easy to think
of people in the past as crackpots
with flawed schemes and so on
their schemes don't come off
but actually they were incredibly

thoughtful and intelligent people
they were at least as smart as us
they were thinking about the future
so they were thinking about us
I mean even though they didn't know us individually
sadly for them but nevertheless
they were thinking about the future
and they were doing that in a very interesting
adventurous and intellectually
resourceful way
and that's one of the real fascinations
of this revolution
a wild experimental laboratory
and that's why
I think it repays our attention today
and that's why the book
really is an attempt to refute a comment
made by a very beloved teacher
actually a history teacher at school
who announced that when we were doing 1848
he said to us boys
the 1848 revolutions are complicated
and they're a failure
I remember thinking
I remember thinking that's a very
unattractive combination
and the book is really
a document to my discovery
of how wrong that is
it's not entirely wrong, they are complicated
but they're not a failure
and they're very very interesting
Well the book is Revolutionary Spring
Fighting for a New World 1848
to 1849, it's a huge book
but enormously readable
I can't recommend it enough, Tom you enjoyed reading it didn't you?
I really did
as my Twitter followers will know I
quoted vast chunks of it
So Christopher thank you so much for joining us
thank you for
enduring Tom's shocking French accent
in the first half

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And Dominic's, I mean appalling
German accent
Christopher agreed that you were very harsh on it
I was deeply moved by both performances
Thank you
Wow, you did a bit of singing yourself
which is always
good on the rest of this history
Do you have a
revolutionary song from 1848 that you could take us out with?
Well yes, there's a nice one
that the poet Freilichkart did
in the form of a translation
of Robbie Burns' song
for all that, a man's a man for all that
He translated it into
really beautiful German
and it's really one of the loveliest songs of 1848
Take it away
Thank you very much
Goodbye everyone
Goodbye
Thanks for listening to the Rest is History
For bonus episodes
early access
ad-free listening
and access to our chat community
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