

A WAR OF LIBERATION

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A War of liberation by Anonymous

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ANONYMOUS

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OUR victory is certain; I declare it with the profoundest conviction, here in exile, and precisely when monarchical reaction appears most insolently secure. What matters the triumph of an hour? What matters it that by concentrating all your means of action, availing yourselves of every artifice, turning to your account those prejudices and jealousies of race which yet for a while endure, and spreading distrust, egotism and corruption, you have repulsed our forces and restored the former order of things? Can you restore men's faith in it, or think you can long maintain it by brute force alone, now that all faith in it is extinct? . . . Threatened and undermined on every side, can you hold all Europe for ever in a state of siege?

There can be few finer examples of courage and faith in politics than this prophecy of ultimate victory in the hour of overwhelming defeat. It was written by Mazzini* in 1849, the year which witnessed the collapse of the great attempt of 1848 to free the peoples of Europe from the network of mediæval despotism re-imposed on them by the settlement of 1814-15.

That attempt had seemed at the outset to have

* *Life and Writings of Mazzini*, vol. v, pp. 269-271.

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achieved a most wonderful and complete success. From Paris revolution had run like an electric current through Italy, Austria and Germany. The Italians had united under the leadership of the constitutional king of Piedmont to drive the Austrians from Lombardy and Venetia. Throughout the congeries of German States reforms had been hastily conceded and their representatives had gathered at Frankfort to frame a constitution which would unite Germany on a basis of parliamentary government. Berlin itself had risen and even the Hohenzollern had bowed to the storm. Frederick William IV, yielding to both the democratic and the national movements, had granted a constitution and declared that Prussia would be absorbed in Germany—"Preussen geht in Deutschland auf." In Vienna, meanwhile, Metternich had fallen; the Liberals had assumed control of the government; and the scattered nationalities of the Austrian Empire had asserted the principle of autonomy. The Magyars had proclaimed the independence of Hungary; the Tchecks had declared for the reconstruction of the kingdom of Bohemia; and the Slovenes and Southern Slavs had demanded similar kingdoms of their own. It had even been suggested that the Germans of Austria should join in the proposed union of Germany and the Hapsburg realm be re-fashioned as a group of autonomous national states under the constitutional government of the Emperor.

And then the whole of this fabric of dreams so suddenly created had as suddenly collapsed. Long after the event Bismarck declared that even in the "March days" of 1848 the political position from his point of

view had never been "unfavourable," since the real "barometer" of the situation was not "the noise of parliaments great and small" but "the attitude of the troops";* and his retrospect was accurate enough. Nationality is a weapon which, as the later history of Europe was repeatedly to prove, Despotism as well as Liberty can use; and by skilfully playing on the national antipathies of Slav and Magyar, German and Italian, the Austrian reactionaries succeeded in mastering by force of arms the centres of resistance to the re-establishment of the old régime. The Italians were driven from the Austrian provinces. Prague and Vienna were bombarded and reduced. And Kossuth and the Magyars were crushed with the assistance of an overwhelming Russian army. In Germany the issue was similarly decided. Obeying its war-lord without considering his cause (as Bismarck loved to boast †) the Prussian army suppressed the revolution in Berlin and helped to suppress it in Saxony and other German States. Finally, the democratic parliament at Frankfort, after wasting precious months in an academic debate on the rights of man, faded out of existence.

Thus 1849 had completely cancelled 1848. Absolutism, as Palmerston regretfully admitted, was once more in the ascendant; and even Mazzini's sanguine

* Bismarck's *Reflections and Reminiscences*, vol. 1, pp. 66, 67.

† In his speech in the Prussian Diet on December 3, 1850, Bismarck said: "As we are all aware, the Prussian people has risen unanimsly at the summons of its King. It has risen full of confiding obedience; it has risen to fight, like its forefathers, the battles of the King of Prussia, before it knew—mark this well, gentlemen—before it knew what was to be fought for in these battles; that perhaps no one who joined the Landwehr knew."—*Reflections and Reminiscences*, vol. 1, p. 78.

spirit might have wavered if he could have foreseen how long that ascendancy would be maintained. Nearly seventy years were to pass before the hopes and passions of 1848 were once more set alight throughout Europe, before the vision of Europe as "one great emancipated land" came once more within the range of actuality. This time it was the forces of absolutism, not the forces of freedom, which brought the old issue to another open trial of strength; they themselves abandoned the passive "stage of siege" and delivered a direct assault; and they found their old opponents, not indeed as wary and well prepared as they should have been, but as strong as ever in faith and resolution. So the struggle which began as a war of domination became a war of liberation; and as a war of liberation it will end.

I. ABSOLUTISM IN THE ASCENDANT.

THE strength and durability of the reaction were mainly due to one man's work. The convulsion of 1848 found Bismarck just at the outset of his career; and the political faith which was to inspire it to the end was never more clearly stated than in the famous sentence of his speech in the Prussian Assembly on March 22, 1849:

The strife of principles which during this year has shaken Europe to its foundations is one in which no compromise is possible. They rest on opposite bases. The one draws its law from what is called the will of the people, in truth, however, from the law of the strongest on the barricades. The other rests on authority created by God, on

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authority by the grace of God. . . . The decision on these principles will not come by parliamentary debate, not by majorities of eleven votes; sooner or later the God who directs the battle will cast his iron dice.

It was with this simple creed of government by divine right bestowed by the God of Battles—or, in plain words, hereditary military despotism—that Bismarck confronted the task before him when, thirteen years later, he was appointed President of the Prussian Ministry. Thenceforward, till his retirement in 1890, he was mainly occupied with three great problems—the government of Prussia, the union of Germany, and the balance of power in Europe. It is worth noting, very briefly, how faithfully in his successive handling of these problems he observed that simple creed.

At the moment he took office the new spirit of democracy was still alive in Prussia. During the interval since 1849, when the King had “conceded” what is still the Prussian constitution, the Liberal majority in the Assembly had been striving to maintain at least a semblance of parliamentary government by asserting their claim to control expenditure. This claim William I was determined never to admit; and when in 1862 it seemed no longer possible to resist the force of public opinion, backed as it was by the sympathy of the Crown Prince, he drafted and even signed an act of abdication. But at the last moment he changed his mind, sent for Bismarck, and, on hearing that he was willing to undertake the government, tore up the act. Thus Bismarck started his long term of power with a definite mission to uphold the King against his people. The question, as he candidly explained to the