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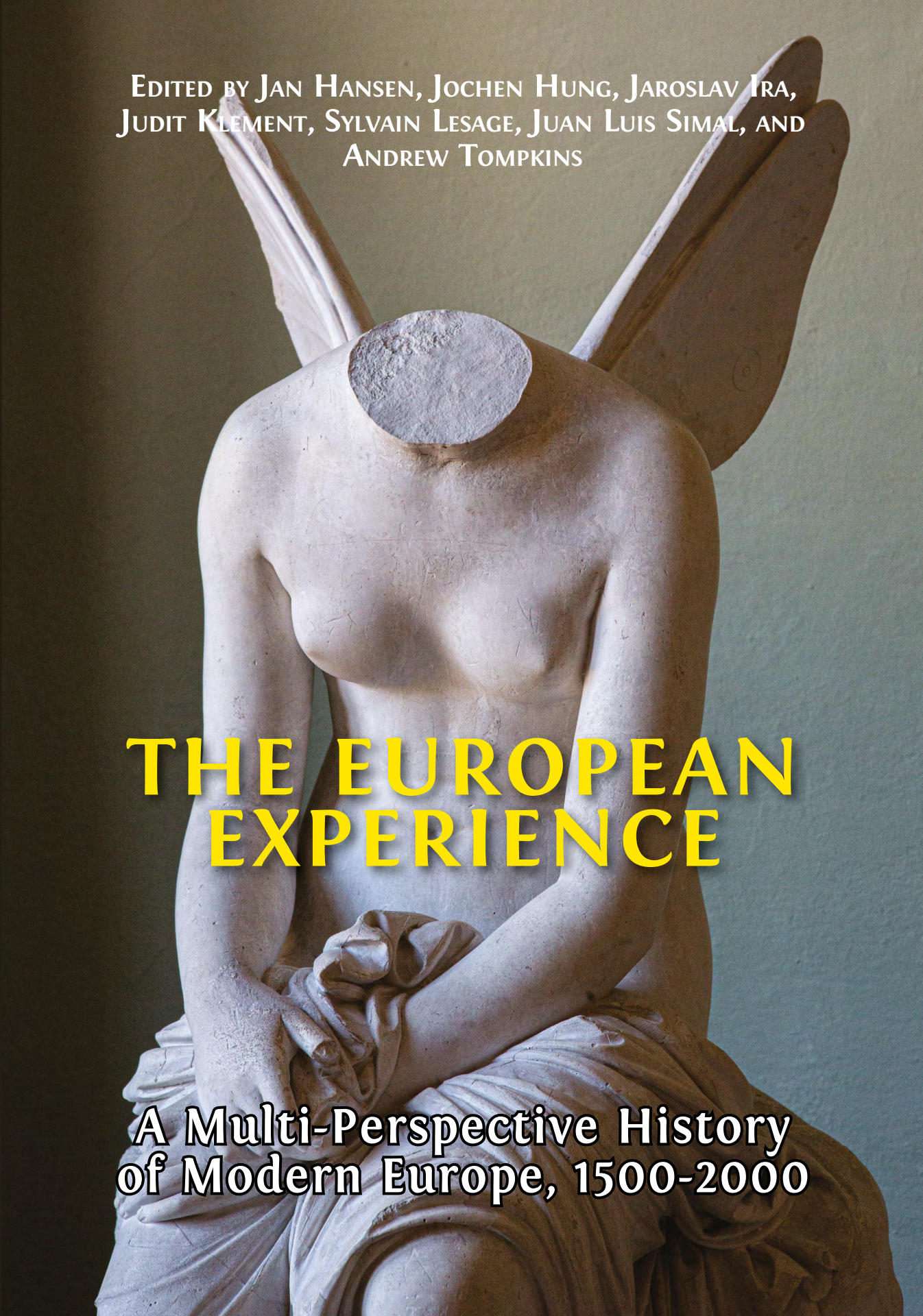

The European Experience

A Multi-Perspective History of Modern Europe, 1500-2000

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3.5.2 Protest and Social Movements in Modern History (ca. 1800–1900)

Claire Barillé, Kevin Lenk, Colin Reid, and Erika Szívós

Introduction

While much of Europe during the nineteenth century was ruled by absolute or constitutional monarchs, no part of the continent was immune from the legacy of the French Revolution of 1789. The revolution gave form to ideas such as popular sovereignty, nationalism, and liberalism. It popularised the idea of the 'people' as a legitimate (and, indeed, sovereign) political grouping and challenged traditional assumptions about the ability of monarchical and aristocratic regimes to provide good governance for all. Social movements sprang up throughout the continent during the nineteenth century to agitate for inclusion in the political nation and the expansion of (political) rights. These often internationally entangled movements could take manifold shapes: some called for an expansion of voting rights, others for women's rights and suffrage, others for the abolition of slavery and the improvement of labour rights and conditions. And since they all faced modernising states, they were all compelled to reinvent themselves in the ways they protested, especially in asking themselves the question of whether violence was an acceptable means to their political ends—and if so, to what extent?

Voting Rights

In the nineteenth century the right to vote became a key marker of citizenship. Nineteenth-century Europe was an extensive patchwork of different forms of political regime, from the democratic structures of the Second and Third Republics in France, to the constitutional monarchies of the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, and the absolutism of Tsarist Russia. But a common feature across the continent was that the electorate was often a small minority of the adult population. Just under three percent of the population of the United

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Kingdom had the vote before 1832. While some countries, such as France, Switzerland, and Denmark, adopted universal manhood suffrage in the wake of the 1848 Revolutions, this was in most cases a sudden leap forward: France, for example, had a much smaller electorate than Britain until 1848.

There was, therefore, a considerable number of people formally excluded from the political process. Campaigns for franchise reform aimed to win inclusion into the political nation. This was an 'old' radicalism, drawing on ideas of political representation, democracy, and popular sovereignty—as opposed to the 'new' radicalism of socialism, which was primarily concerned with a critique of capitalism. Many social movements were middle class in character, vehicles for bourgeois frustration at the aristocratic hold over the levers of power throughout Europe, although some of the most notable contributions were made by working-class individuals and movements.

The argument for 'inclusion' in the political nation as a voter and thus a full citizen was articulated by many social movements. In Ireland during the 1820s, mass mobilisation and political protest were pioneered by the Catholic Association, which campaigned for the removal of all political prohibitions on Catholics, including the right to sit in parliament. The withholding of this right, Association members argued, deprived a majority of the Irish population of a voice in the sovereign assembly of the United Kingdom. After intense pressure, and fearful of creating a revolutionary situation in Ireland, the British government passed the Catholic Emancipation Act in 1829.

Other social movements focussed more intently on suffrage. The working-class Chartist movement in the United Kingdom campaigned for universal male suffrage and other radical parliamentary reforms. Its first historian, R.G. Gammage, a former member of the movement, stressed the moral, social, and economic transformation that inclusion in the franchise promised. In 1854, he argued that the masses contrasted their financial hardship to the opulent conditions of "the enfranchised classes", reasoning that "exclusion from political power is the cause of our social anomalies". This was a powerful non-socialist radical critique: only by allowing the working class to be able to choose their own political representatives could economic justice be established. The logic was that the progressive transformation of society would follow the widening of the franchise.

In other countries, the spark for democratising the franchise came from more middle-class sources. The driver of the 1848 Revolution in France was the pursuit of wider suffrage, which united radical republicans and moderate Orléanists, both of whom were firmly bourgeois. It was a decidedly non-parliamentary activity—the reform banquets of 1847–1848—that popularised and energised the reform campaign. Much like the Chartists, the French reformers envisioned universal suffrage as the path to political inclusion and greater social harmony.

Indeed, the impact of the French Revolution of 1848 inspired uprisings elsewhere in Europe, many of which were based on expanding the franchise. As the century unfolded, political elites throughout Europe made their peace with increased suffrage as the price of stability and enhanced legitimacy: even Bismarck was reconciled to the need for universal suffrage to elect the newly established Reichstag in 1867, believing in the inherent conservatism of public opinion. Protests in Britain reached their zenith in 1866, when a reform meeting in London led to a riot; the following year, responding to this 'pressure from without', the government awarded suffrage to a section of the working class. As more of the population gained inclusion into the political nation, protests notably scaled down—that is, at least until campaigns for female suffrage, violent and peaceful, gained traction throughout Europe in the opening decade of the twentieth century.

Women's Movements

In nineteenth-century Europe, the situation of women differed significantly from that of men. Although the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789) declared the equality of all men and stated that every citizen should be entitled to the same rights, women were considered as merely passive citizens and denied civil and political rights.

Inequalities affecting girls and women were systemic and institutionalised. Girls in most European countries, for the most part of the nineteenth century, could not attend the same types of schools (except for elementary schools) as boys and, with some exceptions, they could not study at universities until the 1890s. Throughout the nineteenth century, there were countless occupations which women could not pursue. Once a woman married, she was subjected to her husband's legal, financial, and personal authority. The lack of voting rights affected all women, irrespective of their social standing.

As early as the 1790s, basic inequalities were addressed by outstanding women such as the French author Olympe de Gouges (1748–1793) and the English writer Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797). Later, women's movements sought to remedy the most fundamental inequalities coded into the social order. Associations played a crucial role in the articulation of emancipatory demands regarding women's education, legal status, employment opportunities, and political participation. Women's rights groups, initially at least, recruited primarily middle- and upper middle-class membership. Working-class women's organisations were formed at a later stage; by the 1880s, they were usually associated with workers' parties. Bourgeois and socialist feminist groups often pursued different agendas. However by the late nineteenth century, the struggle for the vote became a common denominator of all women's movements.

In nineteenth-century European societies a relatively large number of women (primarily singles and widows) were property owners or had businesses of their own, even while their economic independence was limited by the legal system. Across Europe, millions of women became breadwinners by the second half of the century, although frequently out of necessity rather than choice. Besides the female workforce employed in various trades, domestic service, industry, and agriculture, a growing number of middle-class women appeared in white-collar occupations (clerks, teachers, journalists, etc.), thanks to the improving standards of girls' education and the new fields of study to which women had access by the 1860s and 1870s.

Women's universal exclusion from political rights was increasingly considered an anomaly in the light of their growing tax obligations, qualifications, and aptitude in their chosen professions. The idea of female suffrage was discussed more and more frequently in the press and in pamphlets. It was advocated by activist organisations, the members of which were often called suffragists or suffragettes. Women's demands for political representation received support from certain liberal-minded male contemporaries such as John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), the political philosopher and member of the British Parliament, who published *The Subjection of Women* in 1869.

By the eve of the First World War, universal suffrage—including voting rights for all adult women—seemed like an increasingly realistic goal in most European countries. The first to introduce unlimited female suffrage (including the right to be elected) was Finland in 1906. In most European states however, women had to wait until the end of the First World War to gain active and passive voting rights.

Abolitionist Movements: The Abolition of Serfdom

In Western Europe, the disappearance of serfdom and manorialism was a gradual process which had already started in the late Middle Ages and ended no later than the eighteenth century. In Central and Eastern Europe, however, serfdom continued to exist, prevailing in the Habsburg Empire, Prussia, and Russia at least up until the early nineteenth century. There, the abolishment of serfdom occurred within relatively short periods during the nineteenth century and was regulated from above by laws and decrees.

In Prussia, serfdom was abolished in the whole kingdom in 1807 as part of a much broader set of reforms, although the regulation of details—such as the services which peasants owed their landlords and the conditions on which they could become owners of their plots—took several more years. In other German states, the elimination of serfdom was decreed between 1804 and 1808.

In the Habsburg Monarchy, after a long process involving various reform concepts such as peasants' voluntary redemption of their plots, serfdom was abolished first by the Hungarian Parliament and later by the Imperial Diet during the revolutionary year of 1848. After the suppression of the revolutions, this process was finalised by the Imperial Patent issued by Emperor Franz Joseph I (r. 1848–1916) in March 1850. Abolition was thus a top-down measure in the Habsburg Empire too, albeit prompted by the same societal and political demands that had fuelled the revolutions of 1848. In the Russian Empire, serfdom was abolished in 1861 under the reign of Tsar Alexander II (r. 1855–1881).

The Abolition of Slavery

Fig. 1: *Illustrated London News*, "Rebecca Riots" (1843), Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:RebeccaRiots_(cropped).gif. In this series of protests between 1839–1843, tenant farmers objected to the tolls charged by rich businessmen for use of the main roads. The "Rebecca Riots," named after a symbolic passage in the bible where Rebecca declares the need to repossess the gates of their enemies, famously featured a group of men disguised as women. These men called themselves "Rebecca and her daughters."

Movements for the abolition of slavery mostly emerged in European states that possessed colonies outside Europe, as well as in former colonies which became independent states during the modern period. Principles of the Enlightenment, with their emphasis on universal human rights, had already made slavery an aberration in the eyes of several contemporaries in the late eighteenth century. In the British Empire, the abolitionist movement began with a legal precedent. In the case of *Somerset vs Stewart* in 1772, the court's decision to free a slave declared that "on English soil" there is no legal basis to force a person into

slavery. Although the decision of the judge did not explicitly mention slavery in the overseas British colonies, it opened the way for broader interpretations and effectively launched the anti-slavery movement. Finally, the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 put an end to slavery in most parts of the British Empire. The 1833 Act made the ownership of slaves illegal, while former owners of slaves were financially compensated.

Internationalism

One of the characteristics of the nineteenth century was the internationalisation of revolutions and protest movements, often around the issue of nationalities or democratic representation. Perceptible from the beginning of the century and more intensely from the 1820s onwards, the nationalities movement was based on the revolutionary principle of the 'right of peoples to self-determination'. It led to national or liberal attempts at insurrection, culminating in the revolutions of 1830. Multiple circulations—of people, ideas, know-how—and a transnational mobilisation process were at the heart of these attempts.

These movements were mostly driven by a cosmopolitan elite and point to the discrepancy between the aspirations of the liberal elites and the other groups involved in the revolutionary process (the disappointment of the Philhellenes with the Greek people, or the conflicts that arose from the July 1830 Revolution, for example).

From the 1830s onwards, insurrectionary political movements began to broaden their popular base, often in the clear image of the democratic inspiration that we can find at work in Mazzini's 'Young Italy' movement. The process of extending the political participation of the working classes can also be seen in revolts motivated by economic, social, and political issues (the Swing Riots in 1830 in England, the Rebecca Riots in Wales in 1839 and 1842–1843, and the revolt of the *canuts* in Lyon in 1831 and 1834).

The simultaneity of the revolutionary movements during the nineteenth century is remarkable and suggests a dense circulation of information in a context of growing internationalisation. Most of the time, these were popular uprisings with a strong national idea to which democratic or liberal demands were added. The revolts of 1848 initially produced forms of power that took these expectations into account, but they were quickly suppressed.

The emergence of the labour movement is another example of the growing internationalisation of a movement that flourished throughout the industrialised countries. The idea of a popular international organisation, which originated in the circles of political emigration, had given rise to various endeavours in the wake of the revolutions of 1830 and 1848. This aspiration, however, would not be realised until the founding of the First International

Workingmen's Association (often known as the First International) in 1864, which claimed twenty-one British, nine Frenchmen, ten Germans, six Italians, two Poles and two Swiss in its committee. Numerous sections of the First International then developed in Belgium, France, Italy and Germany, and later in the Netherlands, Denmark, Switzerland and Austria. With several hundred thousand members, the International was run by a General Council based in London and convened annual congresses. It was represented in each country by a national bureau and seemed destined to play a considerable role in the structuring of European socialism in each country. But the quarrel between the followers of Marx and Bakunin soon led to its dislocation in 1876. In 1889, the various socialist movements reconstituted a Second International which, in 1896, declared the exclusion of the anarchists but did not manage to impose real ideological cohesion on the various national sections.

However, the anarchist movement continued to operate in almost all European countries. Until 1900, terrorist action—"propaganda by deed"—prevailed. Reduced to small minority groups, the anarchists isolated themselves from the workers' movement. The 1890s were marked by numerous individual attacks, primarily on sovereigns and heads of state (President Sadi Carnot of the French Republic in 1894, Empress Elisabeth of Austria in 1898, King Humbert I of Italy in 1900). In the last years of the nineteenth century, they gave up clandestine action and tried to reconnect with the masses through revolutionary syndicalism.

Violence

Protesters during the nineteenth century employed a variety of violent means to draw attention to their causes or even to reach their goals. Strikes and labour disputes all over Europe would often turn violent, if not deadly. When rapid industrialisation changed economic relations, British textile workers, known as the Luddites, expressed their protest by destroying the machines they associated with their declining economic circumstances. Intense riots to protest the increasing prices of everyday consumer goods were also a common occurrence. For example, when on 1 April 1873 local public houses in the German town of Frankfurt am Main raised the prices for beer by 12.5 percent, enraged citizens gathered and systematically attacked breweries and pubs throughout the town. The local police were unable to curb the 'Frankfurt beer riots' and the army was deployed, resulting in twenty deaths. Beer prices were subsequently lowered again.

Violent riots were not perceived as a generally unacceptable assault on the established social order. Although often crushed by force, protestors deemed riots a functional tool to coerce political or economic authorities to make

concessions. Furthermore, authorities had developed patterns of behaviour to negotiate with rioters. Political riots were to a certain extent a tool for political negotiation.

Though violent political protest was far more common than it is today, nineteenth-century Europe saw an overall decline in political violence; instances decreased notably in all European states, with the exception of Italy. On the one hand, this was the result of the increasing power of the state, and its more sophisticated means to curb violent protest. On the other hand, the increasing influence of constitutional activism, the rule of law, modernised bureaucracy, and more widespread education opened up non-violent channels to handle political and social conflict.

Although there was a general decline in political violence during the century, this period also saw the birth of terrorism as a political strategy. Of course, political assassinations can be traced back to antiquity. Yet around the time of the French Revolution, a fundamental change in the use of deadly political violence against rulers or other persons in positions of power occurred. While pre-modern assassinations usually aimed at disposing of and punishing the targeted individual as an individual within the existing political framework, modern terrorism worked differently. It aimed to use the emotional and political shockwaves of the individual killing to attack the dominant political regime and inspire its overthrow. Rather than a mere act of killing, modern terrorism became a form of violent political communication. Terrorists hoped that through their violence they would provoke an overreaction by the regime, which in turn would intensify public disgust toward it, while drawing public sympathies to the insurrectionary cause. They also intended to publicly highlight the vulnerability of the regime and thus inspire further attacks or even open revolt.

The birth of modern terrorism was deeply rooted in three larger historical developments during the long nineteenth century. First, terrorists drew on the still radiant promises and ideals of the French and American Revolutions. These promises upheld that liberty and equality could be obtained within democratically organised nation-states and that this goal could be reached by force if necessary. Second, terrorist acts were primarily media events. The revolution of media and transport during the nineteenth century made it possible for news, stories and even images of violent acts to travel quickly through Europe, enhancing and expanding their intended political impact, and inspiring imitators. Third, the increased capability of modern European states to secure the monopoly on violence inspired the strategy behind terrorism. With the state's growing ability to curb violent unrest—and the general public's decreasing willingness to solve conflict by violent means—radical oppositions saw the likelihood of overthrowing regimes through open revolt

dramatically reduced. In turn, they resorted to the strategy of terrorism, aimed at achieving maximal political and psychological impact without the need for extensive military means. Terrorism was a strategy of those who could not hope to prevail in direct violent confrontation with the state.

Conclusion

Protest and social movements across nineteenth-century Europe took many forms—from riot to revolution—and were integrated in campaigns for numerous causes. People across the continent mobilised for inclusion in the franchise, women's equality, or the abolition of slavery. Many movements were organised to give an expression to the increasingly powerful impulse of public opinion, with the ambition of lobbying governments to legislate and correct perceived wrongs. By the 1860s, and the emergence of the First International, the politics of protest embraced a transnational approach, which underpinned the emergence of socialism as an internationalist idea. Violence was a dynamic associated with various protests and movements, ranging from riots to terrorist campaigns. Violent action could be popular and spontaneous, or organised and secretive.

Many social groups were met with resistance from the state, and this often dictated the form of protest deemed appropriate. Yet, a compelling aspect of the development of the state in nineteenth-century Europe was its uncanny ability to subsume the aims of radicals over time. The Chartists campaigned for the 'People's Charter', six goals relating to radical parliamentary reform. While these aspirations were derided by conservative opinion during the heyday of Chartism in the 1830s and 1840s, five of the six had been implemented by the British state by 1918. A similar story can be found across Europe, especially relating to women's rights. Thus, the success of protest groups should not, perhaps, be judged solely within their own lifespans. The foundations of the modern liberal and democratic state, as well as the concept of transnational social activism, owe much to campaigners in the nineteenth century.

Discussion questions

1. In which ways were the social movements of nineteenth-century Europe gendered?
2. What was the role of international cooperation in social movements in modern Europe?
3. In which ways did the social movements of the nineteenth century shape the political landscape of contemporary Europe?

Suggested reading

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