

Andreas Fahrmeir, Revolutionen und Reformen. Europa 1789–1850, München (C. H. Beck) 2010, 304 S. (C. H. Beck Geschichte Europas), ISBN 978-3-406-59986-6, EUR 14,95.

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Tim Blanning, Cambridge

Andreas Fahrmeir's history of the first half of the »long nineteenth century« begins with a disdainful Arthur Young travelling through France at the beginning of 1790 and ends with London's Great Exhibition of 1851. The contrasting fortunes of France and Great Britain exemplify the contrasting concepts of the title. While the former experienced at least eleven contested regime changes – 1789, 1792, 1793, 1794, 1799, 1814, 1815 (twice), 1830, 1848 and 1850 – the British political system endured, albeit modified by reforms. Moreover, revolutionary-Napoleonic France was responsible for numerous revolutions from above elsewhere, uprooting old regimes and creating satellite states right across the continent, from the Batavian Republic to the Grand Duchy of Warsaw. Old Europe was not restored in 1815. With the Holy Roman Empire gone for good, the Low Countries combined in a single kingdom, Poland expunged from the map once again and the Habsburg Empire much more of an Italian and Balkan power than in the past, quite a new order had emerged. The shallow roots of the new creations ensured their future fragility.

Fahrmeir is rightly sceptical about pan-European explanations for the disturbances which erupted periodically. He has no time for the »Atlantic Revolution« thesis propagated by Jacques Godechot and Robert Palmer in the 1950s, which has enjoyed a surprisingly long life, despite its obvious Cold War provenance. So he heads his excellent chapter on the French Revolution simply: »Revolution in One Country«. At the other end of the period, he finds that the »Revolutions of 1848« had little in common, not even in terms of chronological coincidence. When did they begin? he asks: in Cracow in 1846 (as Karl Marx asserted), in Switzerland in 1847, in Sicily in January 1848, or in Paris in February 1848? The rising in Munich against Ludwig I and his allegedly Spanish mistress »Lola Montez« (in reality she was Eliza Gilbert from Limerick) began on 7 February 1848, the revolution in Paris not until two weeks later. Every attempted revolution had its own origin and its own objective – or, rather, origins and objectives in the plural, for each one was riven by conflicting groups.

One thing the revolutions of 1848 did have in common was the way in which they ended. Only in France did the regime's monopoly of legitimate force collapse completely (as it had done in 1789) and only in France was there a change of regime. In one of the many nice touches which makes this book such a pleasure to read, Fahrmeir tells us that Louis Philippe fled from France wearing a false beard, helped on his way by the British consul at Le Havre who had to dip into his own pocket to buy a ferry ticket for the destitute ex-king. Elsewhere, the establishments' teeth were shaken until they rattled but did not fall out. Once Field Marshal Radetzky had withdrawn his troops from riot-torn Milan to the safety of the

Quadrilateral and purged any unreliable units, the counter-revolution could go on the offensive. His victory at Custoza on 24 July 1848 marked the beginning of the »melancholy, long, withdrawing roar« of faith in revolutionary change. Outside France, where the defection of the largely middle-class National Guard was decisive, armies still consisted mainly of peasants commanded by nobles, neither group having much sympathy with urban revolutionaries.

Between the dramatic events at either end of the period, there was plenty happening – the Decembrist rising in Russia in 1825, the Greek War of Liberation, the revolutions of 1830 across Europe, Catholic Emancipation and the Great Reform Act in Great Britain, the Irish Famine, and the various campaigns to abolish slavery in the colonies – just to mention some of the more obvious. Fahrmeir does justice to them all, displaying an impressive command of the best recent literature in several languages. As he makes clear from the start, this is very much a political history. Given the limited space at his disposal – fewer than three hundred modest-sized pages – this could hardly be otherwise. He does deal with economic developments such as industrialisation, cultural movements such as romanticism and social changes such as the expansion of the bourgeoisie, but only in so far as they affected politics. So Byron, for example, makes an appearance not as a poet but as a supporter of Greek independence. Indeed we are told that he was a »media star« who exploited the issue for a »Comebackversuch«, to use Fahrmeir's unlovely bilingual composite. This is a rare lapse of taste in what is mainly lucid, jargon-free, readable prose.

There are many histories of this period available, the most venerable being Eric Hobsbawm's »Age of Revolution«, first published fifty years ago but still in print (and also available in German translation). Fahrmeir's book moves to the head of the field by virtue of its concision, clarity, penetration and rejection of grand narrative. It is also entertaining. There are few pages not enlivened by arresting insights and information – that Madrid was the only European capital that could not be reached by water, for example, or that the increasingly pious Alexander I always laid a place at his dinner table for Jesus Christ. There is much more besides in this richly informative and stimulating book.