

**1848: Year of Revolution.** By Mike Rapport. New York: Basic Books, 2009. 461 pages. \$29.95. **Reviewed by Major Kevin Scott,** Instructor, International History Division, US Military Academy.

As “a right royal mess” is how Mike Rapport describes the epoch-changing events of 1848. In *1848: Year of Revolution*, Rapport has shouldered the complicated task of explaining that mess as it spread across the European continent. He has created a readable general history that, although it presents no new arguments, provides a strong chronological narrative that contextualizes the events of that year in each major European state. This book is useful for both the amateur historian and the instructor looking for a survey of the period.

Rapport begins by stating that the events of 1848 were a response to the two major European revolutions that began in the late eighteenth century: the French and the Industrial. These momentous changes forced European leaders to seek responses to two basic challenges. Politically, they had to decide how to rule populations that had been exposed to new ideas of equality and nationalism. Socially, they had to contend with disruptions and increasing inequality caused by the increasing industrialization of their societies. Rapport’s central argument is that the revolutionary movements of 1848 were a continent-wide experience that had a mixed effect on society. The revolutionary movements of 1848 ultimately failed to break the hold of Europe’s conservative regimes, but they did give the middle and working classes a public space, or at least the memory of it, where they could actively participate in politics and society.

The book is broken into six chapters and focuses on the revolutionary events in France, Prussia, the northern Italian states, and the Hapsburg Empire. Rapport also discusses England and Russia to explain how the ideas of this period affected these states and why they avoided open revolt. The first two chapters introduce European society from the French Revolution and lead the reader through the beginning of the events of 1848. Rapport gives a detailed background of the Europe created by the Congress of Vienna in the wake of Napoleon’s defeat. He deftly shows how the political and economic tensions brought about by monarchies fighting to keep the status quo left many segments of society primed for change.

The author demonstrates that, although there were significant regional variations, the revolution of 1848 was a Europe-wide phenomenon. He points out how revolutionaries in every state went through similar stages from the beginning of the revolts through their ultimate failure. His analysis of why the Liberals failed in 1848 draws on themes familiar to students of the era: the creation of ethnic nationalism that failed to protect the rights of all citizens; left-wing activism that created a wedge between the revolutionary groups; and the failure of the early revolutionaries to remove conservatives from state institutions, especially the armed forces. Rapport does not view 1848 as a complete failure for the Liberals, however. He argues that because conservatives were forced to deal with Liberal issues such as constitutionalism, civic nationalism, and civil rights for the rest of the nineteenth century, the revolution had some positive long-term results. This eventually allowed for increasing political participation, even if politics were still controlled by conservative elites. Although unsuccessful in creating sustainable Liberal regimes, the revolutions changed Europe and ultimately contributed to a freer and more open society.

Students of European history will have seen the bulk of Rapport’s conclusions in well-worn classics. Like Sir Lewis Namier in *1848: The Revolution of the Intellectuals*, Rapport views the primacy of nationalism in the Liberal revolutionary program as a means to challenge the dynastic justification of conservative rule. He also

asserts, however, that Liberal nationalism was not only a means to attack conservative government but also an ideology to subdue the working class, an argument that traces back to Priscilla Robertson's renowned *Revolutions of 1848*. Professor Rapport's general tenor is very similar to Jonathan Sperber's *The European Revolutions, 1848-1851*. In addition to agreeing on the function of nationalism, both authors effectively contextualize the revolutions of 1848 as extensions of the social agitation of the early 1840s. The difference lies in the books' organization. Whereas Sperber's work is thematic, Rapport aims to address each development chronologically and provides a vivid general history of the period. Because this is his goal, Rapport relies on well-known material rather than new sources.

Professor Rapport tells the story of people who attempted to transform their societies by establishing new, more participatory governments. This account is relevant to military leaders as they ponder how to more effectively support the young democratic republics in Iraq and Afghanistan. As *1848: Year of Revolution* demonstrates, change is difficult to manage, especially as groups within society struggle to achieve their own goals and protect their own interests. Rapport also points out that even though adjacent states experience similar societal changes, each area has unique differences that must be accounted for when creating national governments. This book is simultaneously a cautionary tale about short-term societal dislocations caused in such situations and an optimistic view of the power of unshackled Liberal ideology.