



The Viennese Revolution of 1848

R. John Rath

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Liberalism, in the nineteenth-century sense of the term, came to Austria much later than it came to western Europe, for it was not until the 1840s that the industrial revolution reached the Hapsburg Empire, bringing in its train miserable working conditions and economic upheaval, which created bitter resentment among the working classes and a longing for a Utopia that would cure the ills of mankind.

This new-found liberalism, largely self-contained and uninfluenced by liberal movements outside the empire, centered mainly in the idea of individual freedom and constitutional monarchism. In the end, the revolution failed because the moderates proved too weak to control the radical excesses, and the radicals in growing desperation tried to turn the rebel idea into a democratic and, at the extreme, a republican one. Fear of this extremism finally drove the moderates into the counterrevolutionary camp.

Since the Viennese rebels fought to achieve many of the goals fundamental to democracy, historians have generally tended to idealize the revolutionaries and forget their shortcomings. Professor Rath has sought to evaluate the revolution from the point of view of the political ideologies of 1848 rather than those of the mid-twentieth century. Moreover, he has clearly and objectively stated the case for both the left and the right, pointing out the failures and shortcomings of each.

At its publication, this was the first detailed English-language book on the Viennese Revolution of 1848 in over a hundred years. The author has not confined himself to the bare bones of history. In his descriptions of the times and lively portrayals of the chief actors of the revolution, he has vividly restaged a drama of an ideal that failed.

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