

1848

The revolutions of 1848 set Europe ablaze. The flames erupted in Paris on February 22 and soon spread north, south, east, and west. In short order, the fiery revolutions leapt from France into the Caribbean Sea and onto the American mainland.¹

The 1848 revolutions impacted American domestic and foreign policy as they increased the need for agricultural labor in the West Indies, elevated fear of abolition among southern slaveholders, and brought disappointed European revolutionaries to seek new opportunities across the Atlantic.² Importantly, the European revolutions of 1848 resulted in slavery's abolition in both the French and Danish West Indies and served as a striking example of the transnational ties between Europe and the New World.

On February 25, 1848, the French provisional government “declared a republic and also emancipation with indemnity” on the slaveholding

¹ Robert E. May, *Slavery, Race, and Conquest in the Tropics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 61.

² Rebecca Hartkopf Schloss, *Sweet Liberty: The Final Days of Slavery in Martinique* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 152–165. While British anti-slavery debates led to the British Emancipation Act of 1833 (coincidentally the same year the American Anti-Slavery Society was formed), slaveholders in the French and Danish West Indies successfully stalled similar measures through their continued influence on Old World politics. When Danish King Christian VIII, on July 28, 1847, finally decided to abolish slavery, it was with the provision that emancipation would only come to fruition after a twelve-year transition period for enslaved people born before the edict took effect. See Niklas Thode Jensen, Gunvor Simonsen, and Poul Erik Olsen, “Reform Eller Revolution 1803–48 [Reform or Revolution 1803–48],” in *Vestindien: St. Croix, St. Thomas Og St. Jan*, ed. Poul Erik Olsen (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 2017), 270–279. See also Stephen Kantrowitz, *More Than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829–1889* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), 54–58.

islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique, in part due to fears of slave revolts such as the one that led to Haitian independence in 1804.³ As Rebecca Schloss has shown, events in the West Indies soon overtook political decisions on the mainland about the practical transition to free labor.

[O]n May 22 more than twenty thousand enslaved workers crowded the streets of Saint Pierre, Martinique demanding their freedom. Shortly afterward, the island's governor proclaimed emancipation and initiated a new chapter in the complex interplay of race, class, and gender in the French Atlantic.⁴

By July 1848 the French West Indian unrest, and ensuing emancipation, served as partial inspiration for an uprising on the neighboring island of St. Croix in the Danish West Indies (see Figure 1.1).⁵ Thus, Governor



FIGURE 1.1 French depictions of abolition in the West Indies, such as this one by artist François-Auguste Biard, mirrored those in Denmark and underscored the pervasive Old World colonial mindset. Photo by Photo12/Universal Images Group via Getty Images.

³ Schloss, *Sweet Liberty: The Final Days of Slavery in Martinique*, 227. See also Steven Hahn, *A Nation without Borders: The United States and Its World in an Age of Civil Wars, 1830–1910* (New York: Viking, 2016), 14.

⁴ Schloss, *Sweet Liberty: The Final Days of Slavery in Martinique*, 227.

⁵ For a description of the conditions that led to emancipation in the Danish West Indies, see Jensen, Simonsen, and Olsen, “Reform Eller Revolution 1803–48 [Reform or Revolution 1803–48].”

Peter von Scholten concluded that the islands' enslaved population would wait no longer for freedom. A widespread but generally peaceful uprising on St. Croix in July settled the matter.⁶

Von Scholten's emancipation had not been authorized by King Frederik VII, however, and the governor was promptly replaced by councillor of state Peter Hansen, who was tasked with reorganizing labor relations between a planter class who felt betrayed by the Danish government's failure to ensure the twelve-year transition period promised them in 1847 and the newly freed laborers who demanded better work conditions.⁷ From Governor Hansen's perspective, retaining control of the labor force was the main objective, and, following the lead of larger European powers, not least Great Britain and France, Danish officials by the late 1850s looked to amend American colonization policy to augment the islands' labor force.⁸

During the early 1860s, colonization in the United States was legally directed toward Liberia, but – in no small part due to Danish diplomats – the policy was reoriented to also include the Caribbean.⁹ Moreover, slavery's abolition in the Danish and French West Indies sparked fear, as well as jubilation, in the United States.¹⁰ In the immediate aftermath of emancipation in the West Indies, southern slaveholders peered somewhat fearfully toward the Caribbean emancipation initiatives.¹¹ In New York, Frederick Douglass, abolitionist and editor of the *North Star* after his escape from slavery, remarked optimistically in 1848 that the revolution initiated in Europe

⁶ *Ibid.*, 271–281.

⁷ Vilhelm Birch, "Memorandum," in *Collection 1175. Koloniernes centralbestyrelse kolonialkontoret. 1855–1918 Immigration af arbejdere. Immigration af arbejdere fra Afrika 1855–1859 mm. Box 909* (Copenhagen: Rigsarkivet 1860).

⁸ *Ibid.* See also Sebastian N. Page, *Black Resettlement and the American Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 189–193.

⁹ Secretary, "Monday 18 Augt 1862. Meeting at Governmenthouse According to Invitation of His Excellency." See also Hunter Miller, ed., *Treaties and Other International Acts of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1948).

¹⁰ May, *Slavery, Race, and Conquest in the Tropics*, 61. May notes that it was "unsettling to Cuban planters and southern slave owners that a revolutionary régime in France in 1848 ended slavery in all of France's overseas possessions – including Guadeloupe and Martinique in the West Indies – and that some antislavery northerners vocally supported emancipation in Cuba."

¹¹ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 792–794. According to Howe, news of "an uprising in Paris," one that Americans learned "had broken out – appropriately, they thought – on the twenty-second of February, George Washington's birthday," reached New York on March 18, 1848, where it also became clear that the revolution had led to slavery's abolition in the French West Indies.

flashed “with lightning speed from heart to heart, from land to land,” until it would eventually traverse the entire globe (see Figure 1.2).¹²

Yet by 1851 it was clear that American abolitionists would have to bide their time, as most nations on the European mainland had reverted back to their prerevolution roles in an uneasy equilibrium of monarchical and imperial power balanced mainly between Russia, France, Great Britain, Austria, and the German states.¹³

On the European mainland, underlying social issues and overarching political structures tied population groups together across borders. Uprisings in Frankfurt in 1833, Paris in 1839, and Kraków in 1846



FIGURE 1.2 An 1848 portrait of *North Star* editor Frederick Douglass, who saw great abolitionist potential in the European revolutions. Image by Fotosearch/Stringer/Archive Photos via Getty Images.

¹² Quoted in Benjamin Fagan, “*The North Star* and the Atlantic 1848,” *African American Review* 47, no. 1 (2014): 56.

¹³ As Jonathan Sperber has noted, “In the end, the mid-century revolutions were defeated by soldiers loyal to the monarchical authority to the tsar, the Austrian emperor, the king of Prussia, the king of the Two Sicilies, and the soon to be emperor Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte. Ties of religious and dynastic loyalty, of civilian and military authority, and of reliance on the state for prosperity had proven stronger than the divided and mutually quarreling forces of nationalism, social and economic discontent, and of aspiration towards the realization of popular sovereignty and civic freedom.” See Jonathan Sperber, *The European Revolutions, 1848–1851* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 271.

attested to the widespread political, social, and economic discontent across Europe.¹⁴ In Wolfram Siemann's words, lack of political participation, the urge for national self-determination, a crisis of "pre-industrial craft trades," and failed harvests resulting in famine were key driving forces behind uprisings in the spring of 1848.¹⁵ As a result, revolutionary sentiment among nationalist and politically marginalized groups within Scandinavia, France, Italy, Poland, and Germany sparked uprisings across the continent that simultaneously strengthened and challenged nationalistic ideas within existing borders. In Northern Europe, along Denmark's southern regions, embers that had smoldered for years suddenly burst into flames and led to a civil war within the kingdom that revealed tangible divisions along political, ideological, social, ethnic, national, separatist, and dynastic lines.¹⁶

Despite his personal resistance to democratic reform, King Christian VIII had prepared an eventual transition from absolutism to constitutional monarchy before his death on January 20, 1848. This political move toward at least nominal democracy based on a moderately liberal constitution was accepted by the new king, Frederik VII, in the so-called January rescript of January 28, 1848, the commitment to which was strengthened and reiterated after a sizable but peaceful demonstration by an estimated 20,000 people in Copenhagen on March 21, 1848.¹⁷

In Sweden and Norway, the European revolutions fueled protests in Stockholm and a popular Norwegian movement led by revolutionary Marcus Thrane, but the relatively well-functioning political system in

¹⁴ Morten Nordhagen Ottosen, "Folkenes Vår: De Europeiske Revolusjonene 1848–1851 [The People's Spring: The European Revolutions 1848–1851]," in *Demokratiet: Historien Og Ideerne*, ed. Raino Malnes and Dag Einar Thorsen, pp. 218–233 (Oslo: Dreyers Forlag, 2014), 222.

¹⁵ Wolfram Siemann, *The German Revolution of 1848–49*, trans. Christiane Banerji (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 45–46.

¹⁶ Michael Bregnsbo, "Danmark 1848 – Systemskifte Og Borgerkrig [Denmark 1848 – Political Change and Civil War]," *Fortid og Nutid* (1998): 255–257, 66. As Bregnsbo notes, the succession of Danish monarchs between 1665 and 1834 held absolute legislative, executive, and judicial power. See also Rasmus Glenthøj, *1864: Sonner Af De Slagne* [1864: Descendants of the Defeated] (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 2014), 176–179.

¹⁷ Bregnsbo, "Danmark 1848 – Systemskifte Og Borgerkrig [Denmark 1848 – Political Change and Civil War]," 262–268. See also Hans Vammen, "Anmeldelse Af Betænkninger Fra Christian VIII's Tid Om Styrelsen Af Det Danske Monarki [Review of Deliberations from Christian VIII's Reign on Ruling the Danish Monarchy]," *Historisk Tidsskrift* 13, no. 2 (1975): 365–366.

Norway (based on the Eidsvoll Constitution of 1814), coupled with an eventual crackdown by the authorities on Thrane “for conspiracy against the state” in July 1851, prevented the movement, which at its height attracted close to 30,000 followers, from gaining even wider traction during these years.¹⁸

Despite the largely peaceful political responses to grassroots dissent, King Frederik VII’s decision to move toward constitutional monarchy left a power vacuum within the Danish kingdom. Danish- and German-speaking nationalists both seized this European revolutionary moment, hoping to shape the Danish kingdom’s future according to their own interests.¹⁹

On Denmark’s southern border, the key point of contention was the status of Schleswig and Holstein.²⁰ Since the so-called Ribe Treaty of 1460, the duchies Schleswig and Holstein had been united, based on an understanding that they would remain forever undivided (“up ewig Ungedeelt”).²¹ Hereafter, the Danish monarch became the Count of Holstein and also incorporated the duchy of Schleswig under Danish rule.

The rise of nationalist sentiment among Danish speakers throughout the 1840s, concretized in a political faction called “nationalliberale” (national liberals), led to calls for the consolidation of the Danish

¹⁸ Ottosen, “Folkenes Vår: De Europeiske Revolusjonene 1848–1851 [The People’s Spring: The European Revolutions 1848–1851],” 230. By 1850, the population in Norway was approximately 1.4 million, in Sweden 3.5 million, and in Denmark 1.4 million. See Åke Holmberg, *Skandinavismen i Sverige, Vid 1800-Talets Mitt* [Scandinavianism in Sweden, by the Middle of the 1800s] (Göteborg: Elanders, 1946), 46; Torben Grøngaard Jeppesen, *Danske i USA 1850–2000. En Demografisk, Social Og Kulturgeografisk Undersøgelse Af De Danske Immigranter Og Deres Efterkommere* [Danes in the United States 1850–2000. A Demographic, Social and Cultural Geographic Study of The Danish Immigrants and Their Descendants] (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2005), 67. Marcus Thrane emigrated to the United States in 1863 and became a newspaper editor in Chicago after the American Civil War. See Theodore C. Blegen, *Norwegian Migration to America 1825–1860* (Northfield, MN: The Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1931), 323–328. Also Jørn Brøndal, *Ethnic Leadership and Midwestern Politics: Scandinavian Americans and the Progressive Movement in Wisconsin, 1890–1914* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 17, 109–111.

¹⁹ Bregnsbo, “Danmark 1848 – Systemskifte Og Borgerkrig [Denmark 1848 – Political Change and Civil War],” 262. The spring of 1848 was characterized by unrest within the Danish Kingdom exemplified by strikes among smallholders and agricultural workers, but legislation benefiting the lower strata of Danish society in March 1848 alleviated some of the tension in the Danish-speaking regions.

²⁰ Siemann, *The German Revolution of 1848–49*, 46. ²¹ *Ibid.*, 46–47.

kingdom more clearly along cultural and linguistic lines, by dividing Schleswig from German-speaking Holstein along Ejderen, a river running east–west toward the important seaport of Kiel.²² Conversely, the population within the Danish kingdom’s borders who identified as German took the revolution in France as a touchstone for their own nationalist claims. On March 18, 1848, less than a month after the revolution’s outbreak in Paris, German-speaking residents of Schleswig-Holstein demanded that the duchies remain undivided with the aim to break away from Denmark. The Danish king dismissed the German-speaking Schleswig-Holsteiners’ petition and instead made statements about incorporating Schleswig without Holstein directly under Danish rule. The irreconcilable positions led to German separatists seizing a Danish fortress in Schleswig-Holstein on March 24, 1848, and forming a “provisional state government.”²³

This civil war, now known as the First Schleswig War, lasted from 1848 to 1850.²⁴ In accordance with the threshold principle, the national liberals feared that Denmark would become a mini-state, if it lost part of Schleswig and all of Holstein, and therefore started to explore Scandinavian alliances.²⁵ Pan-Scandinavian sentiment was especially strong among the younger Scandinavian intelligentsia, in spite of the relatively modest 387 Swedes and Norwegians (several of whom would eventually end up in the American Civil War) who volunteered to fight against German separatists.²⁶ The spirit of

²² Glenthøj, “Pan-Scandinavism and the Threshold Principle?,” in *A History of the European Restorations: Governments, States and Monarchy*, edited by Michael Broers and Ambrogio Caiani, pp. 245–255 (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 10–11.

²³ Siemann, *The German Revolution of 1848–49*, 60.

²⁴ For Danish nationalists, grassroots political organizing, enthusiasm for military enlistment, and popular songs such as “Dengang jeg drog afsted” (When I Set Out), emphasizing the importance of the king, the Fatherland, the flag (called Dannebrog) and the Danish language, reflected increased national awareness. See Inge Adriansen and Jens Ole Christensen, *Forste Slesvigske Krig 1848–1851: Forhistorie, Forlob Og Følger [First Schleswig War 1848–1851: Causes, Course, and Consequences]* (Sønderborg: Sønderborg Slot, 2015), 25.

²⁵ Glenthøj, “Pan-Scandinavism and the Threshold Principle?,” 10–11. Even with Schleswig and Holstein, Denmark’s territorial size, excluding the colonial “possession” of Greenland, was less than 1 percent of the United States in 1850. See Jeppesen, *Danske i USA 1850–2000. En Demografisk, Social Og Kulturgeografisk Undersøgelse Af De Danske Immigranter Og Deres Efterkommere* [Danes in the United States 1850–2000: A Demographic, Social and Cultural Geographic Study of The Danish Immigrants and Their Descendants], 67.

²⁶ Rasmus Glenthøj and Morten Nordhagen Ottesen, *Union Eller Undergang: Kampen for Et Forenet Skandinavien [Union or Ruin: The Struggle for a United Scandinavia]*

pan-Scandinavianism, however, was concretized at the political level when Sweden, prompted by King Oscar, sent 4,500 troops to defend Denmark's monarchical rule against the German-speaking rebels, with the promise of up to 15,000 troops in all if the Danish mainland were to be invaded (safeguarded by the provision that Sweden would then have to be part of a broader international coalition led by Great Britain and Russia).²⁷

Yet the pan-Scandinavian enthusiasm proved to have notable diplomatic (and nationalist) limitations when confronted with the complexity of high-level European politics. In just one of numerous factors complicating the First Schleswig War, Denmark and Sweden had been on opposite sides for parts of the Napoleonic Wars, and the peace conference of 1814 in Kiel forced Denmark to cede Norway (which had been part of the Danish Kingdom since 1380) to Sweden.²⁸

Thus, despite several ambitious attempts, a pan-Scandinavian state incorporating northern Schleswig but excising the German-speaking regions found little concrete backing among more experienced Scandinavian power brokers, not least Danish conservative leaders who

(Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 2021), 228–230. Among the Norwegian and Swedish volunteers who later served in the Civil War were Ole Balling and Hans Mattson. See O. P. Hansen Balling, *Erindringer Fra Et Langt Liv* [Memories from a Long Life] (Kristiania: S. & Jul Sørensens Bogtrykkeri, 1905), 28–35; see also Mattson, *Reminiscences: The Story of an Emigrant* (Saint Paul, MN: D. D. Merrill Company, 1891), 11–12.

²⁷ Glenthøj, *1864: Sønner Af De Slagne* [1864: Descendants of the Defeated], 206–09. See also Adriansen and Christensen, *Første Slesvigske Krig 1848–1851: Forhistorie, Forløb Og Følger* [First Schleswig War 1848–1851: Causes, Course, and Consequences], 19. See also Sven Dalhoff-Nielsen, *Nordiske Frivillige* [Nordic Volunteers] (Graagsten: Nordisk Institut, 1944), 33. See also “Af Et Brev Fra Frivillig Og Underofficer Hansen Balling [From a Letter by Volunteer and Junior Officer Hansen Balling],” *Den Norske Rigstidende*, June 14, 1848. The Danish navy, including conscripts, numbered 22,413, and the standing army numbered 24,282 but could be augmented by citizens who were eligible to be called into service as part of the reserve until the age of forty-five. Counting the Swedish contingent held in reserve, the Danish army was augmented by more than 10 percent by troops from Sweden and Norway. See Generalstaben [General Staff], *Den Dansk-Tydske Krig i Aarene 1848–1850* [The Danish-German War between 1848 and 1850] (Copenhagen: J. H. Schultz's Bogtrykkeri, 1867), 41–42; Klaus Bjørn, *1848: Borgerkrig Og Revolution* [1848: Civil War and Revolution] (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1998), 194–195.

²⁸ Rasmus Glenthøj, “Adskillelsen: Hvorfor Danmark Og Norge Blev Skilt i 1814 [The Partition: Why Denmark and Norway Were Separated in 1814],” in *Mellem Brødre: Dansk-Norsk Samliv i 600 År* [Between Brothers: Danish-Norwegian Coexistence over 600 Years], edited by Rasmus Glenthøj, pp. 92–107 (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 2016), 92.

insisted on keeping the entire state together to maintain the territory and population already under Danish rule.²⁹

Additionally, there was a strong sense among Europe's great powers, especially Great Britain and Russia, that German control of the important Schleswig harbor of Kiel was undesirable as it would help German *Grossstaatenbildung*.³⁰ Consequently, Russia and Great Britain worked actively to curtail the armed conflict and protect Danish territorial sovereignty in the name of stability (as opposed to revolution or disruption of the international trade). Thus, through the great powers' intervention, the pre-1848 borders were eventually reestablished.³¹

Across Europe, the lack of revolutionary result caused thousands of disappointed "Forty-Eighters" to seek freedom and liberty elsewhere – and many in the United States.³² Even in Scandinavia, where the 1848 revolutions had prompted King Frederik VII to sign *grundloven* (the Constitution), the effect for people with little economic or political power was negligible. Consequently, a steady emigration from Scandinavia started picking up speed, especially from rural areas.

Additionally, decisions to emigrate were likely accelerated among the German-speaking population in Schleswig and Holstein by the Danish government's determination to impose strict language requirements and banish revolutionary leaders such as Hans Reimer Claussen and Theodore

²⁹ Glenthøj, "Pan-Scandinavism and the Threshold Principle?," 9–13.

³⁰ Great Britain and Russia, in 1721 and 1773 respectively, had guaranteed the Danish king's right to Schleswig. For a discussion of the converging British, Russian, and Austrian interests in the peace negotiations that eventually prevented a partition along lines of ethnicity, culture, and language in Schleswig and Holstein, see Bjørn, *1848: Borgerkrig Og Revolution* [1848: Civil War and Revolution], 123–134, 95, 249–251.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 123–134, 92–94. For a timeline over major events in the First Schleswig War, see Adriansen and Christensen, *Forste Slesvigske Krig 1848–1851: Forhistorie, Forløb Og Følger* [First Schleswig War 1848–1851: Causes, Course, and Consequences], 42–43. German-speaking troops won a battle around the town of Schleswig on April 23 and subsequently were ordered north across the border between Schleswig and the Danish mainland of Jutland. By August 26, 1848, in no small part due to international pressure, Prussia accepted a seven-month ceasefire, buying the Danish government precious time to find an acceptable domestic solution to the crisis so closely tied to events outside the kingdom's realm. See Glenthøj, *1864: Sønner Af De Slagne* [1864: Descendants of the Defeated], 204–209.

³² Andrew Zimmermann, "From the Rhine to the Mississippi," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 5, no. 1 (2015): 9. Zimmermann notes about the failed revolution in Baden that "Those who survived the Prussian siege soon joined their comrades in Switzerland, where more than eleven thousand German refugees fled after the revolution."

Olshausen, both of whom eventually ended up in America.³³ When Claussen arrived in Davenport, Iowa, he apparently found a welcoming community of a “large number of his closest countrymen, the Schleswig-Holsteiners.”³⁴

Other German-speaking subjects living within Danish borders struck out for Wisconsin, as was the case for August Hauer, who arrived with his family in what became New Denmark (and who, according to one account, “was a mortal enemy” of everything associated with the Danish state for decades afterward).³⁵

The exact number of German-speaking Forty-Eighters who emigrated for political reasons after the First Schleswig War is difficult to ascertain, but the legacy of the 1848 revolutions in terms of political rights, economic opportunity, and abolition of slavery continued to impact American and Scandinavian society in the years afterward.³⁶

Whether settling in Iowa, Wisconsin, Illinois, or Minnesota – or, for a few, even Missouri, Louisiana, or Texas – the German, Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian Forty-Eighters who emigrated in the wake of the revolutions generally found some common ground in their interpretation of equality and liberty. Despite Old World divisions, these Northern European immigrants’ experience with class divisions would continue to shape their engagement with issues of social mobility and equality in America. At the very center of such discussions was the importance of owning land.³⁷

³³ Thomas P. Christensen, “A German Forty-Eighter in Iowa,” *Annals of Iowa* 26, no. 4 (1945): 247.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Fritz W. Rasmussen, “Den 17. Mandag [November],” in *Fritz William Rasmussen Papers. Diaries, 1856–1876. Green Bay Mss 4. Box 8* (Wisconsin Historical Society, 1862).

³⁶ Zimmermann, “From the Rhine to the Mississippi,” 4.

³⁷ Gunlög Fur, “Indians and Immigrants – Entangled Histories,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 33, no. 3 (2014): 55–76, 61. In her study of Scandinavians’ entangled histories with Native Americans in the Midwest, Fur notes on the importance of land that “concurrent histories begin there, and the significance of land cannot be overstated.”