

Chartism

CHARTISM In 1848, when every major European capital, with the exception of Brussels and St. Petersburg, witnessed political ferment and upheaval, the Chartists in Great Britain planned a massive demonstration in London to draw attention to their six fundamentals. Their projected rally was strictly outlawed by the government and the activists eventually resolved that discretion was the better part of valour when the Cabinet summoned the magistrates, the local militia and the reserves to maintain law and order in the capital.

This anticlimactic event, on 10 April 1848, marked the official end of a movement that had its origins in the 1830s when urban working class malcontents disapproved of the results of the somewhat punitive Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 and of the First Reform Bill of 1832 which had enfranchised too small a percentage of British male adults. Led by two largely self-made artisans, William Lovett and Francis Place, the original Chartists drew up their famous Charter for peaceful presentation to Parliament. Their principal demands included equal electoral districts, annual parliaments, payment of MPs, abolition of the property qualifications for the franchise, universal manhood suffrage, and vote by secret ballot.

This People's Charter, first published in 1838, was presented to the House of Commons in 1839, 1842 and 1848. On each occasion, it was ridiculed by the British legislators, despite the fact that it had been signed by hundreds of thousands of law-abiding individuals. The monster petition of 1839 boasted 1,280,000 signatures, collected in more than 500 public meetings held in over 200 towns and villages throughout Great Britain. The petition brought before the House of Commons in 1842 purportedly carried more than 3,000,000 signatures and the one presented in 1848 was said to have been endorsed by more than 5,000,000 citizens. But on each occasion, the petitioners garnered only a handful of votes in the House of Commons and were soundly rebuffed. The movement prejudiced its own cause by forging too many signatures, including those of prominent members of the society who were known to be hostile to it. The Charter, in any case, was not in keeping with the conservative temper of the Victorian bourgeoisie who then dominated the British political system.

The People's Charter was primarily the work of the London Working Men's Association, whose roots went back to the eighteenth century. It gradually found a national following as local Chartist branches steadily emerged in the major urban centres throughout Great Britain. By 1840, there was a vibrant Chartist press involving weekly and monthly publications in such major industrial cities as Birmingham, Bristol, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, Leicester, London and Manchester. Of these journals, *The Northern Star* and *Leeds General Advertiser*, launched by William Hill, Joshua Hobson and Feargus O'Connor in November 1838, proved to be the most important.

The Chartist leaders were mainly skilled artisans who had no experience in organizational matters and the task of establishing a national movement for the amelioration of the workers' lot proved ultimately beyond them. The movement was hindered from the beginning by regional and craft differences and by personality conflicts among its leaders. Such leaders as Thomas Attwood, Henry Hetherington, William Lovett, and Francis Place, preferred to promote moderate reforms by peaceful means while Julian Harney, Bronterre O'Brien, and Feargus O'Connor, among others, seemed to advocate more aggressive strategies.

Chartism, in strictly ideological terms, was by no means a novel movement in British history. It advocated programmes which had been suggested by the Levellers as early as the seventeenth century and which had been promoted in the Georgian era by such radicals as John Wilkes and Christopher Wyville. Its historical significance lies in the fact that it represented a mass upheaval of the British working classes in response to the social and economic problems created (or magnified) by the Industrial Revolution. Previous British radicalisms were dominated by middle and upper class eccentrics and had not generally attracted much sympathy or attention.

As a working class organization, Chartism lacked the necessary support of influential sectors of the British elite. And, lacking the necessary funds, could do little to penetrate that formidable wall of opposition and disdain

which it encountered in parliament and elsewhere. Moreover, the existing system of communications and transportation created substantial difficulties for a national movement. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Chartists operated very often as separate local cells whose activities were almost impossible to be coordinated effectively by the regional leaders.

Yet, despite these limitations, the Chartist movement deserves considerable credit for the manner in which it performed as an extra-parliamentary pressure group for more than a decade. It drew attention to the grievances of the underprivileged and compelled the establishment to discuss, even if unsympathetically for the most part, the worrisome "condition of England" question. While focusing immediately on parliamentary reform, Chartism espoused an ambitious programme of social democracy and called upon the Victorian political leadership to acknowledge the social injustices inherent within the system.

The Chartists organized lectures, public meetings and national conventions which quite alarmed the local magistrates in an age when public order was almost totally dependent upon the cooperation of the local citizenry. In the main, the Chartist agitation was peaceful, but there were occasional clashes with authority, culminating in the notorious Newport Uprising of 1839. The British authorities dealt firmly with Chartist law-breakers and some of the leaders of the movement, including Lovett and John Frost, were periodically imprisoned on various charges. At the height of Chartist activity during the winter of 1838-39, the government authorized the opening of the correspondence of some of the Chartist leaders, transferred a cavalry regiment from Ireland to Manchester, stripped John Frost of his position as Justice of the Peace, and placed Sir Charles Napier in charge of some 5,000 troops to patrol the north of England. Later in 1839, when the Chartists appeared extraordinarily militant, magistrates were authorized to arrest armed Chartists; Lords Lieutenant were empowered to arm special constables and loyalist groups; and a royal proclamation forbade military drills on the part of private citizens. Following the Newport crisis, some Chartists were transported to Australia and New Zealand.

Neither bourgeois resistance nor governmental hostility, however, could arrest the momentum of Chartism, especially during the period 1838-42. The movement seemed to profit from the economic distress which plagued the nation during these years and was particularly aggressive in Birmingham, Manchester, and Wales. In most of the urban centres, mammoth demonstrations occurred and major conferences were held in London in 1839, 1842, 1845, 1848, and 1851; in Birmingham in 1839 and 1842; in Manchester in 1840, 1842, and 1845; in Leeds in 1841; and in Glasgow in 1839, 1840, and 1842. A national Chartist organization was also established in Scotland in August 1839 and in England and Wales during 1840. In many parts of Great Britain there was open talk of armed rebellion, as some of the more militant Chartists actually contemplated a violent overthrow of the old order.

In the end, sanity prevailed. Even the militant Chartists appreciated the futility of physical force in the face of the full strength of the British army. Gradually, the movement began to disintegrate after 1842, partly as a result of the economic recovery, the emergence and triumph of the rival Anti-Corn Law League, and the breakdown of the Chartist administrative structures. The parliamentary fiascos of 1839 and 1842 had also served to discourage some of the rank and file.

After the dismal failure of the great demonstration in April 1848, Chartism perished as an organized movement. But it left an indelible mark on British history. It helped to arouse within the establishment a certain social conscience that had previously been lacking and to force the Parliament and the tribunals to focus on some of the obvious grievances which the Chartist leaders had just cause to lament. With the solitary exception of annual elections, the famous six Chartist demands were consequently met within five or six decades following the movement's collapse. Chartism also provided many working class individuals with useful political experience, of which they took full advantage when participating in the many reform movements during the later Victorian era.

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Chartism or The Chartist Movement

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The "People's Charter," drafted in 1838 by William Lovett, was at the heart of a radical campaign for parliamentary reform of the inequities remaining after the [Reform Act](#) of 1832. The Chartists' six main demands were:

1. votes for all men;
2. equal electoral districts;
3. abolition of the requirement that Members of Parliament be property owners;
4. payment for M.P.s;
5. annual general elections; and
6. the secret ballot.

The Chartists obtained one and a quarter million signatures and presented the Charter to the House of Commons in 1839, where it was rejected by a vote of 235 to 46. Many of the leaders of the movement, having threatened to call a general strike, were arrested. When demonstrators marched on the prison at Newport, Monmouthshire, demanding the release of their leaders, troops opened fire, killing 24 and wounding 40 more. A second petition with 3 million signatures was rejected in 1842; the rejection of the third petition in 1848 brought an end to the movement.

More important than the movement itself was the unrest it symbolized. The Chartists' demands, at the time, seemed radical; those outside the movement saw the unrest and thought of the [French Revolution](#) and [The Reign of Terror](#). Thomas Carlyle's pamphlet *Chartism* (1839), argued the need for reform by fanning these fears, though he later became increasingly hostile to democratic ideas in works like "[Hudson's Statue](#)". Historians theorize broadly about why this revolutionary movement died out just as the revolutions of 1848 were breaking out all over Europe, but from this distance we can only suppose that the English had a confidence in their government and a sense of optimism about their future possibilities which suggested to them that patience was better than violence; and in fact most of their demands were eventually met — specifically in the [Reform Acts](#) of 1867 and 1884. The threat of unrest surely influenced such otherwise unrelated reforms as the Factory act and the repeal of the [Corn Laws](#). The radicalism that surfaced in the agitation for the Charter and a desire for a [working-class voice in foreign affairs](#) eventually channeled itself into related areas like the Socialist movement.