

THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO
THE POLITICAL CLASSIC
THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

KARL MARX AND FRIEDRICH ENGELS
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY TOM BUTLER-BOWDON

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The Political Classic

KARL MARX
FRIEDRICH ENGELS

With an Introduction by
TOM BUTLER-BOWDON



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AN INTRODUCTION

By Tom Butler-Bowdon

To understand *The Communist Manifesto*, you must understand the year in which it was published.

The revolutions, or 'Spring of Nations' of 1848 saw uprisings across Europe. Populations rose up against the continent's suffocating, corrupt monarchies, and demanded greater freedoms and democracy, including more voting rights and freedom of the press. There was clamour for a shift from feudalism and empire to the modern nation-state or republic.

The movement was also about better conditions and rights for workers. Few demanded genuine economic equality, but the vast chasm between the rich and poor could no longer be tolerated.

The revolutions involved coalitions of reformers, the bourgeoisie, and workers' movements. But because they were rather unorganized and often spontaneous, and had no institutional support, they could not be sustained.

Most of the uprisings had fizzled out by early 1849.

There were some achievements: France transitioned from a constitutional monarchy to a Second Republic (although it was short-lived), the Danish monarchy ended, serfdom was abolished in Austria, and the Netherlands got democracy. But in many places there was renewed censorship and suppression. In Hungary, the uprising was brutally quashed. In Germany, the Prussian government in Berlin put out the flames of nationalism and freedom along with the Federation's 39 states.

As reactionary forces reasserted themselves, intellectuals and reformers were imprisoned or forced into exile. One of these political exiles was Karl Heinrich Marx.

YOUNG PHILOSOPHER

The brilliant 30-year-old had been editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung*, a left-wing newspaper in Cologne, in Germany's Rhineland. Its banning by the authorities had forced him to move to Paris, and then Brussels - where *The Communist Manifesto* was written. We need to go back a few years, though, to understand the context in which the *Manifesto* came into being.

In 1841, Marx was doing a year of compulsory military service for the Prussian Army. He also submitted his final thesis for his Doctor of Philosophy degree (on the difference between the Democritean and Epicurean philosophies of nature). Because the thesis argued for the supremacy of philosophy over theology, Marx's conservative professors at the University of Berlin didn't like it. He had to submit the thesis at another university.

Marx already had some notoriety for being a member of the Young Hegelians, a group of students who called for a society based on reason and freedom. Over time, the group had become radicalized, and was highly critical of the Prussian state. Members believed that the state was not, as the great philosopher G.W.F. Hegel and his followers had argued, 'the fulfilment of history'. Rather, under the new king, Frederick William IV, a further clampdown on political and religious liberties meant that progress and history were being thwarted.

Marx had broken away from the Young Hegelians when he became dissatisfied with Hegel's conception of the world as an idea. No, Marx thought, the world is *physical* and it is

within our power to shape society, economics and politics. In 1845 (in his *Theses on Feuerbach*) Marx had written: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point however is to change it.' Marx also rejected the spiritual foundations of the Prussian state. In the modern world, he thought, the state should exist on the basis of reason alone. It should serve all its citizens, not just a thin layer of aristocrats at the top.

We now take such ideas for granted, but in 1840s Germany they could threaten your job or put you in jail. That did not deter Marx, even though he was engaged to be married (to Jenny von Westphalen, the daughter of a free-thinking aristocrat) and was expected to begin a career and have a family. He had the reputation of being fearless.

