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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.

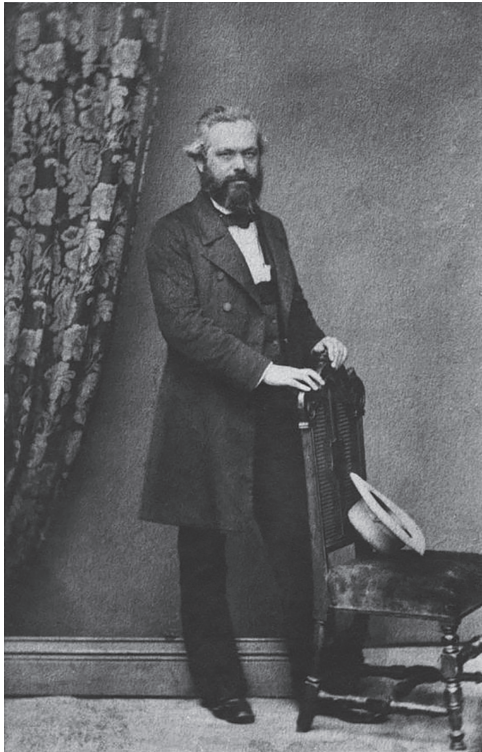
In 1841, Marx was doing a year of compulsory military service for the Prussian Army. He also submitted his final thesis for his Doctor of Philosophy degree (on the difference between the Democritean and Epicurean philosophies of nature). Because the thesis argued for the supremacy of philosophy over 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.



Karl Marx in his thirties, London

CRUSADING JOURNALIST

Marx had begun writing articles for the *Rheinische Zeitung*. He was highly critical of the regional Rhineland government, whose laws and policies (including suppression of a free press) privileged the upper classes over the rest of society. These writings represent Marx's shift from politics and philosophy to economic questions and practical socialism. With academia apparently closed off to him (being Jewish didn't help), he had needed to find other avenues for his ideas. Journalism seemed the best arena to fight injustice.

But the *Rheinische Zeitung* was barely afloat financially, and the owners sought a change of direction to increase subscribers. Marx was given editorial control, and the newspaper's articles became more strident. Reader numbers rose, and the newspaper became one of the most influential in Germany.

The government in Berlin had hoped that Marx's journalistic baby would die on its own. When the opposite happened, the Cabinet (with the King's approval) felt compelled to take action. The newspaper was banned.

This act turned *Rheinische Zeitung* into a cause célèbre for Germany's intellectuals. But thousands of average citizens also signed petitions. Marx became a public figure, and was depicted in a political cartoon as Prometheus tied to a printing press, with an eagle (representing the Prussian state) pecking out his liver.

PARIS AND BRUSSELS

Marx needed to continue agitating and writing without the threat of imprisonment, so he exiled himself to Paris. As Paris was a centre of socialist ideas, the move proved to be a blessing in disguise.

In the French capital he befriended the anarchists Mikhail Bakunin and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Proudhon had in 1840 published *What Is Property?*, which famously concludes that ‘property is theft’. Proudhon called for the nationalization of land and workplaces to be put under the control of peasants and workers.

Marx also began the most important friendship of his life: with Friedrich Engels. The pair had met briefly before in Cologne, but in Paris the relationship deepened. Marx had read Engels’ articles on the terrible conditions of industrial workers in England (where his father owned a textile factory in Manchester). Engels believed that a socialist revolution could only happen through workers taking over the means of production, i.e. factories. It was madness that the producers of goods gained virtually nothing, with all profits going to owners.

Marx and Engels got involved with the League of the Just, a secret society which aimed to overthrow governments. With Arnold Ruge, Marx worked on the publication of the *Deutsch–Französische Jahrbücher* (German–French Yearbooks), which aimed to carry on the ideas in the *Rheinische Zeitung*. In the end only one issue was printed, in February 1844, because it was hard to get copies distributed in Germany. Nevertheless, the journal caught the attention of the French government, and under pressure from Prussian authorities, Marx and Ruge were expelled from Paris.

Marx and his family now moved again, this time to Brussels. Liberal Belgium was then a haven for European progressives, and Marx and Engels joined the underground organization the Communist League. The League was a kind of successor to the League of the Just, and it enabled Marx to maintain contact with his radical friends in Germany.



A younger Engels (aged 20–25)

THE WRITING OF THE *MANIFESTO*

In a Communist League conference in London at the end of 1847, Marx and Engels were asked to write a manifesto for the organization.

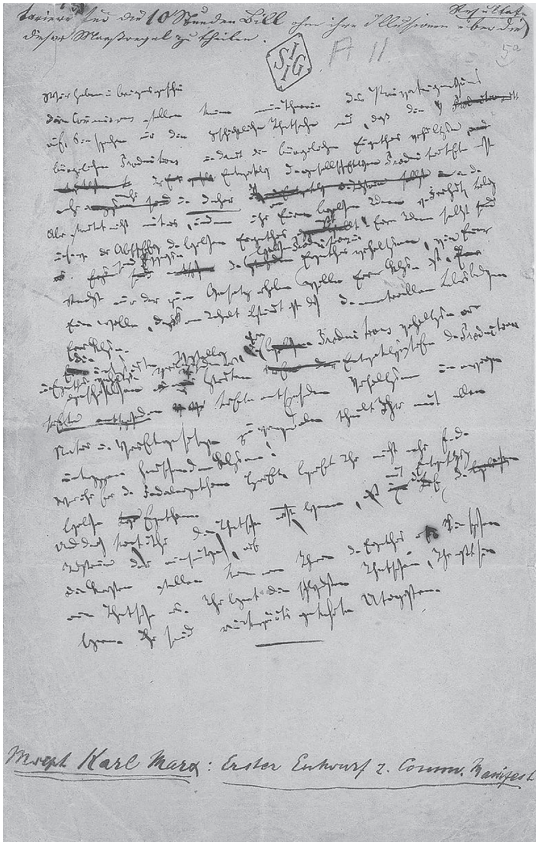
Originally they planned to make it a longish catechism (a set of belief principles laid down as questions and answers), but Engels suggested to Marx (see Appendix A) that it be written in a prose narrative style with a bit of history thrown in to give it more impact.

Engels had earlier in the year written a *Communist Confession of Faith* involving 22 questions and answers (see Appendix B). He had also published his *Principles of Communism*, another catechism (Appendix C).

With these two documents, plus some writings of the Communist League, Marx had a good foundation to work from. He had been having

a busy time in Brussels, giving lectures and attending to his young family (now with three children). With some prodding, he finally submitted *The Communist Manifesto* to the Communist League in early February 1848.

Despite Engels' input, in the end the dramatic tone and style of the *Manifesto* was very much Marx's own, and Engels – always happy to play second fiddle to a man he believed to be great – made sure that people knew it.



Surviving page from the draft of the *Manifesto*

PUBLICATION AND RECEPTION

Although first printed in London, the initial version of the text was in German, and did not credit Marx as author. Published as a pamphlet with the title *Manifest der kommunistischen Partei*, it was quickly serialized in the *Deutsche Londoner Zeitung*, a newspaper for German émigrés.

Reprintings soon followed. A thousand copies made their way to Paris, and the document circulated in Germany. Polish, Danish, and Swedish versions came out. The first English edition would not appear until 1850, when Helen Macfarlane's translation appeared in *The Red Republican*, a short-lived journal of the Chartist movement. Its editor, George Julian Harney, credited Marx as the author for the first time.

Was the *Manifesto* simply a reflection of the revolutionary *zeitgeist* of 1848, or did it have any actual impact on events?

Certainly not in France where, by the time it was published, revolutionary events were already in train. But as Germany broke out into semi-revolution, the *Manifesto* provided a rallying point. By this point Marx had moved back to Cologne, and had a new platform to speak from. He, Engels, and the Communist League had launched *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* at the start of 1848 to replace the old *Rheinische Zeitung*. It championed every kind of revolutionary movement in Europe and an overthrow of the continent's royal ruling houses, from the Habsburgs and Hohenzollerns to the Romanovs.

By May of 1849, the authorities had forced Marx's newspaper to close, and he was forced into exile again – this time to London. It was, again, arguably a blessing in disguise. In 1851, the Prussian police arrested members of the Communist League, and put them on trial in Cologne. The men were convicted, and sentences ranged from three to six years. But by this time, Marx, Jenny, and the children were safely ensconced in a flat in Dean Street in London's Soho. Marx would walk each day to the reading rooms of the British Library, where he was doing the research for the first volume of *Das Kapital*. He earned money by writing articles for the *New York Daily Tribune*. By 1856, the family had moved to a house in nicer Kentish Town, thanks to an inheritance Jenny received.

In 1872, Marx and Engels published a new German edition of the *Manifesto*, with a preface reflecting on the events of the Paris Commune of 1871 (when common people ran the government for two months). Over the years, and after Marx's death in 1884, Engels would add more prefaces, including to Samuel Moore's English translation in 1888, which he also supplied with notes.

Thus, a document that had begun life as a publication of an obscure political sect had now become 'a historical document which we no longer had any right to alter', as Engels put it. It had taken on a life of its own, inspiring and converting the masses across Europe and the world.



Cover of first edition of the *Manifesto*, in German but printed in London