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# Chartism

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Various source media, British Library Newspapers



In May 1838 the People's Charter was published by the London Working Men's Association. It petitioned for the just representation of all Britons in the House of Commons, with its soon-to-be familiar "Six Points" being: universal suffrage, annual elections for Parliament, equal electoral districts, secret ballot, payment of MPs, and the abolition of property qualifications for MPs. Radical proposals for the time, this document would become the rallying cry of a popular, vast, working-class movement which, over the next decade, would petition the British government on three occasions—in 1839, 1842 and 1848—for the adoption of the Charter's Six Points. However, on all three occasions, not only was this Chartist movement rebuffed, but it also met with great government repression. Following its final unsuccessful effort in 1848, the movement experienced a slow decline and death. The quick growth, popularity and demise of this popular working-class movement raises a number of interesting questions: what were the causes of Chartism, who joined the movement, why did it fail to achieve any of its goals and what was its overall significance to British history? Finally, with twelve Chartist newspapers being reproduced in this collection, what role did newspapers play in the movement?

### Causes of Chartism

Chartism was both a political reaction to a series of setbacks suffered by the working classes during the 1830s, and a response to economic hardship. Chartism was only a mass movement in times of depression, with peaks of activity coinciding with troughs in the economy. However, it was more than just a 'knife and fork' question, with not all the active centres of

Chartism being in depressed areas. Instead, there was an important political dimension to the growth and popularity of Chartism. In 1832 the Reform Act had extended the vote to members of the propertied middle classes. Since working-class leaders had been campaigning with the middle classes for a wider franchise, they consequently felt betrayed by the resulting Act, which essentially excluded the working classes. Moreover, the subsequent actions of the ensuing Whig government—including the 1834 New Poor Law, the transportation of the Tolpuddle martyrs (leaders of a union of agricultural labourers), the institution of borough and county police, and the war on the unstamped press—served to further confirm, in the eyes of the working classes, the government as a powerful, malevolent machine dedicated to repressing Britain's workers. The solution that was put forward—and that became popular—was to try to change the basis of political representation, as it was the unrepresentative political system that allowed the middle classes and the aristocracy to suppress the working classes; only when every man had the vote, it was argued, would the British parliament operate with equality and justice. It was thus that a large proportion of the working classes in Britain during the late 1830s and 1840s sought to remedy their social and economic grievances through an essentially political movement.

### First Phase (1836-40)

The Chartist movement brought together a number of existing causes, organisations and grievances that had been gaining force through the early and mid 1830s. The government's repressive measures during these years had led to a revival of working- and middle-class

radicalism, particularly in London and Birmingham, which was fed by the proliferation of cheap, illegal, unstamped, radical newspapers, such as Henry Hetherington's *Poor Man's Guardian*. Moreover, in northern England, the campaign against the New Poor Law had turned into a great popular movement in 1836 and 1837. In May 1838 members of the London Working Men's Association (which had been formed in 1836) published the People's Charter, which embodied the agenda many radical reformers had been putting forward for the past few years. The Charter proved to be an effective rallying point, and was quickly adopted by many radical organisations. Anti-Poor Law agitation in the North swiftly transformed into Chartism and, by the autumn of that year, a popular movement had been formed. A strategy had likewise been decided on: there would be a national petition and the formation of an elected National Convention, both of which would put pressure on the government to accept the radical reforms. The National Convention assembled in London in February 1839, and a petition was organised which ultimately collected 1.28 million signatures. However, on 12 July, by an overwhelming vote of 235 to 46, a motion to even consider the Chartist petition was rejected by the House of Commons. With this failure and the collapse of the Convention, some Chartists started planning risings, there having already been a riot at a Chartist gathering in Birmingham in early July. Only one rising occurred: on the night of 3-4 November, more than 7,000 colliers and ironworkers marched on the town of Newport in South Wales; they were met by soldiers and more than twenty people were killed in the ensuing battle. Arrests followed, and between June 1839 and June 1840, more than 500 Chartists, including most of the movement's leaders, were imprisoned.

## Second Phase (1840-42)

Following these arrests, there was a pause in activity. In July 1840 the National Charter Association (NCA) was formed in Manchester to coordinate future Chartist activities, with Feargus O'Connor at the helm. With his Chartist newspaper (*The Northern Star*), organisational skills, spellbinding oratory and sheer force of personality, he would go on to dominate the movement after 1840, enormously popular among Chartism's rank-and-file. In 1842, in the midst of a severe industrial depression, Chartism revived and membership of the NCA rose to 50,000, with 400 branches. A second National Convention was organised by the NCA. It presented a second petition to Parliament with about 3.32 million signatures, which was again refused a hearing on 2 May by 287 votes to 49. This was followed in July and August by a series of strikes that swept across the industrial districts of Britain and involved up to half a million workers. While the strikes had not been organised by Chartists—although many participated—it was the Chartists who received the blame and a wave of arrests followed.

## Third Phase (1843-48)

The failure of the second petition and the subsequent repression was followed by another lull in Chartist activities. O'Connor tried to divert Chartism to new channels, launching a Land Plan in 1845 that aimed to return labourers to the land. Around 70,000 subscribed, although only 250 people eventually received land. The scheme was criticised by O'Connor's rivals as a sideshow that diverted the movement from its main goals, and it eventually wound up in 1851.

With popular revolutions breaking out across Europe and economic distress returning to Britain in 1848, Chartism revived for the last time, returning to mass demonstrations and petitioning. During this final phase, Chartism attracted substantial support from recent Irish immigrants, who had fled Ireland's potato famine. Riots, born of economic distress but blamed on the Chartists, broke out in London, Manchester and Glasgow in March. A third elected Convention met on 4 April. On 10 April a peaceful mass rally was held on Kennington Common in London (plans for which had so alarmed the government that 85,000 special constables had been drafted in) and the petition was presented to parliament; containing a purported six million signatures (although it was later found to contain fewer than two million "real" signatures) it was again rejected. This rejection was followed by serious protests in London, Manchester, Liverpool and Bradford, which were—worryingly for the government—fuelled by links with revolutionaries in Ireland, France and Italy. Arrests quickly followed and Chartism subsequently fell into decline. Lingering on for a further decade, it was never again a mass movement.

### Who Were the Chartists?

In identifying who joined the Chartist movement, there are three important factors to consider: locality, class and gender. The heartland of Chartism in England was the textile districts of Yorkshire and Lancashire, with other strong centres in the Midlands, London and the North East. In Scotland, Chartism was particularly strong in the area around Glasgow. Chartism was also more popular in medium-sized, single-industry towns

and depressed industrial villages, rather than major provincial centres, and it floundered in purely agricultural areas. The movement appealed primarily to domestic outworkers (such as handloom weavers) threatened by mechanized production, rather than factory operatives who enjoyed a somewhat higher standard of living. Indeed, Chartism was primarily a working-class movement, although not all the leaders were working-class. While it was not an outright expression of class politics, as the working class was far too fragmented during this period, it was certainly pervaded by a sense of class. Finally, while Chartism was primarily a male movement, many women were also involved—particularly during the early years.

### Chartist Culture

Alongside the mass meetings, Chartism's rank-and-file members also enjoyed a vibrant, localised associational culture. Local groups typically met weekly (usually on Sunday) in their own hall or a hired room; meetings often incorporated readings from *The Northern Star*, lectures and discussions. Fellowship at chapels or mechanics' institutes was also integral to Chartism, with such activities as concerts, dances and sports teams. Some Chartists also became involved in the provision of education, setting up evening and Sunday schools. Consequently, people often joined Chartist associations for reasons that had little to do with politics—for example, to find companionship or a sense of purpose. Chartism was thus very much associated with the world of working-class leisure, with a multitude of activities organised by and for working people.

## Keeping the Movement Together

There were a number of elements that held such a diverse movement as Chartism together, providing what often seemed to be very localised activity with a national framework and purpose. First, the movement had a handful of national leaders who spoke across the country in vast, open-air meetings, carrying forth the Chartist message and raising enthusiasm for the movement. These touring leaders were supplemented and directed by formal organisations. In 1838 and 1839 the movement was coordinated to some extent by local working men's associations. With the widespread arrests of the movement's leaders in 1839 and 1840, the NCA was founded to give the movement a permanent organisation; along with the NCA, several other organisations, such as the Universal Suffrage Central Committee for Scotland, were also founded. Finally, Chartism was held together by its press, which disseminated its message across Britain. Many Chartist groups and leaders had their own periodicals or newspapers, as did many regions. For example, the North East had *The Northern Liberator*, Scotland's Central Committee had its *Chartist Circular*, and James Bronterre O'Brien (a prominent leader) edited several newspapers including *The Southern Star*. However, by far the most successful, influential and widely-read Chartist newspaper was *The Northern Star*. Started in Leeds by Feargus O'Connor in 1837 and selling up to 50,000 copies per week by 1839, it became the acknowledged organ of the Chartist movement. It provided the movement with an essential means of communication, national unity, continuity and organisation, and also assisted O'Connor's rise to the top of the Chartist leadership.

## Why Did Chartism Fail to Achieve Its Goals?

Historians have posited a number of reasons for the ultimate failure of Chartism. First, despite the best efforts of some and the existence of *The Northern Star*, the movement was ultimately quite divided, both regionally and within its leadership. Chartists agreed on the Charter, but there were many differences within the movement regarding aims and strategy. For example, Chartists were very divided over the use of physical force to achieve the Charter and whether to form an alliance with the middle-class radicals. Second, there was little parliamentary or solid middle-class support. Instead, Parliament was determined not only to reject the Chartist petitions, but also to repress the movement through force and imprisonment. This repression was critical in weakening the movement and repeated failures sapped the movement's momentum. Finally, it has been argued that reforming legislation during the 1840s—including the Factory Acts and the repeal of the Corn Laws—served to morally rehabilitate the State, thus undermining the belief (central to Chartism) that the State was systematically corrupt and hostile to the welfare of working people, and that only a reformed parliament could improve the condition of the working class.

## Chartism's Importance

While it failed to achieve its goals, this should not obscure Chartism's wider importance as a popular nineteenth-century working-class movement. It roused a mass of working men and women, allowing them to assert their right to be seen as full citizens. Moreover, while the Charter was not implemented, the movement nevertheless had a significant political impact, putting

with immediacy the 'Condition of England Question' on the political agenda during the 1840s. Finally, it should be mentioned that some Chartists would live to see the achievement of some of their goals, as, within three-quarters of a century, five of Chartism's Six Points (the exception being annual elections to Parliament) would ultimately be enacted—albeit at different times and under different auspices.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A term commonly used in the Chartist literature. It used to be believed that most working-class people who joined Chartism joined due to hard economic times, motivated by hunger. Hence, a 'knife and fork' question.

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