

falling away. Compared to even 50 years earlier, people were living longer and in better health; more people were literate and more were formally educated; an influential, commercial, middle class had arisen; technological advances allowed more profitable use of land and resources; industrialization was luring more people to city centers; many countries had colonies or trading partners in other parts of the world; monarchies and leaders still spoke of 'divine right' but increasingly groups were forming to draw attention to the needs of the 'common man.' While many citizens were still disenfranchised, the will of the populous was being addressed by elected and appointed officials. In England, Parliament had real legislative power. The Bahá'í writings tell us that when the Manifestation appears, a fresh wave of energy accelerates the growth of God's Plan for His creatures. The Báb's announcement came at a time when western European countries were coalescing from a collection of squabbling, warring principalities into true nations. The timeline below illustrates some of the changes that took place beginning with the Báb's Declaration in 1844. Of course, the process had begun much earlier, but it is the rapid acceleration toward the modern western European states with which we are familiar that caught my attention.

This is a very skeletal timeline covering, in general, only 1844-1871 highlighting the rise of the nation states. The Promised Day Is Come gives a full account of what befell each of the recipients of Bahá'u'lláh's messages.

1844 The Báb declares His Mission

Napoleon III writes 'The Extinction of Poverty'

1846 Pius IX is elected pope because it is felt he is the liberal candidate

1848-49 Marx and Engels write "The Manifesto of the Communist Party"

Pius IX flees popular uprising in Rome; Roman Republic proclaimed

Constitutions are granted to the Italian States

Revolution in Paris; Second Republic is proclaimed

Uprising in Vienna; Hungary and Czech autonomy demanded

Uprising in Berlin; Frederick Wilhelm IV grants constitutions to German States

Hungary claims independence from Austria

Austria gains a Constitution

Serfs are freed in Austria

France suppresses the Roman Republic and restores Pius IX

1850 Prussian attempt to unify German States halted by Austrian treaty of war;

Germanic Confederation established

Cavour, Prime Minister of Sardinia, promotes anti-clerical legislation

1852 Napoleon III names himself Emperor of France

1856 National Society created to work for Italian unity

1858 War with Austria secretly planned by Napoleon III and Cavour

1859 Peace of Villafranca between France and Austria

Between the 1860s and 1880s a number of societies of workers were formed to better conditions and increase their social/political power. Many of these societies acquired legal status between 1870 and 1900.

1860 Garibaldi invades Italy

1861 Proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy under Vittorio Emmanuele II

1861 Russian serfs freed

1862 Bismarck becomes first minister of Prussia

1863 Bahá'u'lláh declares His Mission

1864 Pius IX writes 'Syllabus of Errors'

1866 Austria defeated in Seven Weeks' War

1867 Marx writes "Das Kapital"

First women are admitted to the University of Zurich

New Parliament with limited powers for all Germany set up by the German States

Garibaldi's invasion of Papal States halted by papal and French forces

Austro-Hungarian Empire formed

1868 Bahá'u'lláh arrives in Holy Land

1869 Second Tablet to Napoleon III sent -- followed by Tablets to the other Rulers

1870 Franco-Prussian War declared

Withdrawal of the French garrison from Rome allows Italian troops to enter the city. After a plebiscite, Rome becomes capital of Italy

All German States unite to defeat France

1871 German Empire inaugurated at Versailles

Law of Guarantees defines relationship between Italy and the Papal States; income

and independence are assured the pope and extra territoriality granted the Vatican State

Bahá'u'lláh's letters to the rulers came at a crucial time in this process. Clearly, the old order of the day was giving way to a new, more egalitarian structure. Bahá'u'lláh warns the rulers that they must be aware of their responsibilities before God. They must turn toward God and His Manifestation for guidance; otherwise, they will be swept away along with the outmoded traditions and systems they represent. On one level, He may have had some hope the monarchs would heed His call. Of those to whom He wrote, all but Wilhelm I had shown some signs of liberality of thought. Thumbnail sketches from encyclopedia accounts seem to indicate that these rulers were, to a certain extent, in tune with their time.

Pope Pius IX originally favored unification of the Italian States. He was elected pope because it was felt he was a liberal choice; however, continued threats to papal power caused him to become much more conservative. In 1864 he wrote "Syllabus of Errors" in which he condemned what he believed were errors of modern thought -- liberalism, rationalism, communism and socialism. By 1870 Italy had absorbed all the Papal States except the Vatican, the Lateran palaces and the papal villa at Castel Gandolfo. The pope shut himself inside the Vatican and considered himself a prisoner.

Napoleon III wrote "The Extinction of Poverty" in 1844; this treatise proposed the government act to end poverty and suffering. In 1848 he was elected President of France but instead of working to end suffering and poverty, he spent the next four years consolidating power. He named himself Emperor in 1852. He was a dictator surrounded by dishonest men. The legislature and the press had no power or authority. After 1860, in an attempt to increase his popularity and power, he began to move in the direction of a liberal empire, but by then people had begun to demand a democracy. His policy unraveled as he entered into a number of unfortunate political alliances, skirmishes, and deceitful dealings which led, finally, to his defeat in 1870 by the Germans. Two days after his surrender, the revolutionists overthrew the empire. He died an exile in England in 1873.

Alexander II was called the Czar liberator because he freed the Russian serfs in 1861. He also carried out judicial reforms, especially in the courts, and improved the financial administration. In addition, he ended censorship, permitted provincial representative assemblies, and promoted industrialization and railroad building. Alexander fought and defeated the Turks. Nevertheless, vigorous revolutionary leaders demanded further reforms and greater political and social power. In 1881 Alexander II was assassinated. He was followed by Alexander III who was much more autocratic and repressive.

Franz Joseph was a popular ruler but also believed in military force. After Austria was defeated in the Seven Week's War of 1866, he adopted a much more liberal attitude allowing Hungarians equal rights which eventually led to the formation of the Austro-Hungarian empire in 1867.

Victoria I was the most successful of the monarchs in that she saw the best interests of her subjects were the best interests of herself. When she became Queen, the English people had very little respect for the throne because the previous Kings had been profligate and unconcerned with the welfare of their subjects. Victoria proved to be hard-working and caring, but she realized her role was as a symbol of national tradition and pride. The real power in Britain, then as now, resided in the Parliament.

Wilhelm I opposed constitutional reform and supported the policies of his Prime Minister, Bismarck, who united Germany through ruthless political and military tactics. Bismarck once declared that the great problems of his time would be solved through "blood and iron" not speeches and resolutions.

By virtue of their positions and power, the rulers addressed by Bahá'u'lláh could have implemented great changes among their people and promulgated God's Plan through the whole world. Had they been prepared to turn to Bahá'u'lláh, God's Messenger for this day, they would have learned at His feet how to build the future world civilization. They would have been part of the solution to man's lack of true spirituality and separation from God rather than encouragers of disunity and disintegration. When the Kitáb-i-Aqdas appeared, they would have welcomed the guidance as a means of bringing about a peaceful union of their countries, their colonies, and the world -- a means of creating the Kingdom of God on earth for which they had been taught to pray in 'The Lord's Prayer.' But they rejected the Lord of the Age and utterly misunderstood His Message, so mankind is still struggling toward its goal of unity. The rulers of Bahá'u'lláh's day preoccupied themselves with earthly power. They could not suppress their egos, selfish desires, and thirst for personal power. Like Esau in the Old Testament, they bartered away their inheritance for a cup of stew.

What is the implication for those us who live in 1998? The world is now at another critical juncture. In the 19th century separate, small, political entities came together to build the modern nations of the world. In this day, the nations are moving ever closer to the promised world commonwealth. I believe one lesson to be learned from the mistakes of those kings and rulers who were addressed by Bahá'u'lláh is that we must firmly put aside our own egos, material considerations and desires to concentrate on the spiritual and material needs of all mankind.

Another lesson is that the leaders of thought will need the assistance of those who have the Message of God for this day. Our leaders may have difficulty disassociating themselves from the selfish desire for individual power. Unlike the kings and rulers in the 19th century, our leaders do not have the bounty of receiving the Word from the Manifestation Himself. Only Bahá'ís, the followers of Bahá'u'lláh, have the Message of God for this day. If we learn from the lessons of the past, Bahá'ís must realize our grave responsibility to accomplish what those who had material power failed to do in the past -- we must assist in the birth of God's Kingdom on Earth.

"In these days, the most important of all things is the guidance of the nations and peoples of the world. Teaching the Cause is of utmost importance for it is the head corner-stone of the foundation itself."
Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p.10

"Every Bahá'í, however humble or inarticulate, must become intent on fulfilling his role as a bearer of the Divine Message. Indeed, how can a true believer remain silent while around us men cry out in anguish for truth, love and unity to descend upon this world?"
Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, p. 154

"The Message of Bahá'u'lláh is God's guidance for mankind to overcome the difficulties of this age of transition and move forward into the next stage of its evolution, and human beings have the right to hear it.... The slowness of the response of the world has caused and is causing great suffering; hence the historical pressure upon Bahá'ís to exert every effort to teach the Faith for the sake of their fellowmen."
Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1968, p. 514

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