Chartism

Did Britain really come close to a full-scale revolution in 1839? It's an intriguing question, and historians still argue the point. But the truth is that Britain's Chartists talked a good fight - and it was perhaps as well for them that that was as far as it got.

For all their bravado and bluster, their talk of death or glory, there seems little doubt that a national uprising by the Chartists would have been stamped out rapidly and ruthlessly by a government alive to what had happened in France 50 years before, and determined there would be no repeat.

Anyone who doubts that need look only at Newport, Monmouthshire, where the first spark of what might have become a national conflagration was snuffed out as rifle fire routed a poorly-armed and ill-organized mob.

Chartism's roots go back as far as the second half of the 18th century, when radicals first began calling for root-and-branch parliamentary changes.

But it was not until after the first, grudging, Reform Bill of 1832, a betrayal which emancipated their middle-class bosses but left the working class with nothing, that the concept of Chartism began to emerge.

It was in June 1836, that radicals William Lovett and Francis Place founded the London Working Men's Association.

The pair drew up a reform program and, two years later at a meeting in Birmingham, they launched what they called The People's Charter. This called for six changes in the Parliamentary system:

1. Universal Male Suffrage.
2. Annual Parliaments.
3. Vote by ballot.
4. Abolition of the property qualification for Members of Parliament (MPs).
5. Payment of MPs.

The year 1838 was spent carrying the message of Chartism out from London and Birmingham to all parts of the country. On Monday, September 25, the Manchester Political Union sponsored a massive rally at Kersal Moor, Salford. As manufacturers closed their factories for the day, a crowd estimated at 300,000 flocked to the moor accompanied by 20 bands and carrying banners, some of which had been rescued from the field at Peterloo. Among the banner slogans were: "More pigs less parsons," and "For children and wife, we war to the knife."

Sir Charles Napier, commander of the armed forces in the North, rode to the moor to see for himself what was going on, and remarked: "The Government should be prepared to consider the Charter in Parliament. There is no wisdom in letting complaints be rejected and pikes made."

At a torchlight rally in Rochdale on November 7, firebrand Ashton cleric Joseph Raynor Stephens urged listeners to arm themselves for the coming struggle. This was readily done - firearms were, apparently, on open sale in Rochdale market.

Chartism was growing rapidly, due largely to the influence of Irish radical politician Feargus O'Connor. O'Connor, one-time MP for County Cork, had been active on the London radical scene before moving North and founding the radical newspaper Northern Star in Leeds in 1837. During 1838 he toured the country raising the movement's profile with his brilliant oratory.

The idea for a permanent Chartist Convention—some regarded it as an alternative Parliament—was now strong, and the meetings at Kersal Moor and other places were called ostensibly to elect representatives. On February 4th, 1839, the Convention assembled in London and drafted a petition to Parliament. The petition called for the adoption of the six points, with an implied threat of action if it were ignored.

First crack

But here we see the first crack in the edifice. Delegates were unable to agree on what that action should be and as they discussed the possibilities, the movement was splitting into two factions. Moral Force Chartists favored acts
of civil disobedience while the Physical Force faction wanted more direct action. While the differences between the two camps were never clear-cut, they were enough to blur the issue.

The movement was suffering, too, from a glut of leadership and an unavoidable diversification of aims. Pure Chartism—"The Charter, the whole Charter, nothing but the Charter"—was not the only call. The movement, especially in the industrial Midlands and North, became the focal point for many of the other radical causes of the 1830s, such as the 10-hour factory movement, the fight against the new Poor Law and the battle to abolish the Corn Laws.

O'Connor was mainly responsible for the break between the two factions. He mocked Lovett and the moral-force advocates, and his speeches became increasingly vitriolic and rabble-rousing, with talk of "death or glory" and "dying for the cause." This went down well with oppressed Northern workers such as the handloom weavers, many of whom were fellow Irishmen, and he even gave them a date for the start of violence if the petition failed: September 29, 1839.

When the petition was delivered in July, Parliament rejected it out of hand. The same month, demonstrations described by the authorities as "riots" took place in the Bull Ring at Birmingham. The Convention had now moved to the city from London because it felt delegates were in danger of arrest in the capital.

But troops were dispatched by rail and now and throughout the summer, many Chartist leaders were arrested. This emasculated an organization which had been put together rapidly and with little thought about a chain of command.

Meanwhile, another Chartist leader, George Harney, had become a supporter of a plan by a Nantwich man named William Benbow for a "Grand National Holiday" - a general strike.

Sacred Month

Harney persuaded the Chartist Convention to back the "Sacred Month" - actually, it was planned to last six weeks, beginning on August 12. O'Connor argued against it and his Northern Star bellowed: "We believe (this is) a most ill-judged and suicidal act...from which we should emerge only through blood and fire or chains and slavery more dire than any we have yet known."

O'Connor himself insisted: "there are men earning 15/-, 20/-, 25/- and 30/- a week. I ask, will those men be likely, in a body, to keep the Sacred Holiday? I say not; and, if not, who will be sacrificed? The answer is easy. The most determined, resolute and oppressed." Strange words, from a man who had already named his own date for the start of an uprising.

In the event, nothing came of the general strike. Harney and Benbow were arrested and charged with sedition as they toured the country trying to drum up support among the masses.

The Convention, realizing that their bluff was about to be called, left it to the workers to decide what to do and shut up shop, and the Sacred Month was consigned to history. So, too, was O'Connor's September 29th date, and that looked like the end of the first great Chartist surge - until Newport.

This incident had begun in May, when Henry Vincent was arrested for making seditious speeches. At Monmouth Assizes in August, he was gaoled for a year, angering Welsh Chartists who began to resort to violence.

Newport's Chartist delegate and former JP John Frost condemned the outbreaks, calling instead for a protest meeting and a march on Newport, where Vincent's release would be demanded.

The authorities clearly viewed this as a test of their resolve, and not without reason - Frost and his fellow organizers Zephaniah Williams and William Jones had assembled between 6,000 and 7,000 miners and ironworkers, and they hoped that their march would signal the beginning of a general Welsh insurrection. There was talk of other towns being captured, and even the declaration of a new republic.

The authorities knew about this, and their answer was to arrest more Chartists and incarcerate them in Newport's Westgate Hotel, where they were guarded by a troop of 28 soldiers.

As Frost's marchers arrived, the soldiers were ordered to fire into the crowd. They killed 20 men and wounded 50 more. Frost and other leaders were convicted of high treason and ordered to be hanged, drawn and quartered. However, even the Government of Lord Melbourne quailed at the thought of what might happen should the punishment be carried out
and, on February 1 1840, the sentences were commuted to transportation.

**Fervor fades**

Even before this, there had been more talk of an uprising, particularly in Yorkshire. However, attempts to stir workers to action failed in Sheffield, Dewsbury and Bradford while O'Connor, listening to his head rather than his heart, refused to lead a general revolt. As Chartist fervor began to fade in the spring of 1840, the authorities saw their chance, moving in to arrest and imprison large numbers of leaders, including O'Connor.

There was a revival of Chartist activity in 1841 after O'Connor was released from York gaol, and a new Convention and a fresh petition were organized. The petition claimed 3.3 million signatures but was rejected as lightly as the first when it was handed over in May 1842.

Claims that the Chartist were behind the Plug Plot strikes in August don't hold much water. Chartists, in fact, were taken by surprise by the strikes, even though, in many places, their own members were directly involved. But once they were under way, Chartism quickly took a hand and gave its official backing.

The high point of Chartism had already passed, however, and as the strike disintegrated the movement's leaders began to look for new outlets for their energies. Fragmentation followed, with such bizarre concepts as Temperance Chartism and Christian Chartist emerging.

There was to be one final outburst of Chartist activity, and that followed O'Connor's election to Parliament as the first - and only - Chartist MP in 1847. All Europe was in revolutionary ferment at this time, and a new downturn in the British economy in 1848 was the signal for action.

A huge mob roamed the streets of London for three days, threatening Buckingham Palace. In Manchester, police fought a pitched battle with a massive crowd as they tried to storm the hated workhouse, then rampaged about the city for three days, fighting the law wherever they could find it. Chartism was reborn as crowds packed meetings all over the country, and when a new petition was launched, thousands fought to sign it.

Matters came to a head in April when, once again, Chartist leadership and conviction were found wanting. The plan was for a huge meeting on Kennington Common in South London to precede a march on Parliament, where the petition, said by O'Connor to contain more than five million signatures, was to be presented.

Alarmed, the police banned the procession and called up thousands of specials. The military prepared to intervene if the Chartists attempted to cross the Thames bridges - but it was all unnecessary. O'Connor told the crowd to disperse and the petition traveled to Parliament alone in three taxi cabs. By early afternoon Queen Victoria, who had fled the capital for Osborne House on the Isle of Wight, was informed that the crisis had evaporated.

Part of the original plan had been to launch an elected National Assembly if the petition failed. This would call on the Queen to dissolve Parliament and would sit until the Charter became law.

The assembly gathered on May 1st, but as the country seethed - rioters clashed with police in Bradford, workers drilled on the Yorkshire Moors and 80,000 Londoners marched silently through the streets of the capital - the Chartists talked, dithered, and got nowhere. Finally, the assembly dissolved itself, claiming it did not have enough mass support.

Chartism was dead.

**SOURCE:** adapted from: http://www.cottontimes.co.uk/charto.htm