The social democratic movement gradually emerged throughout Northern Europe during the latter half of the nineteenth century and involved frequent exchanges of ideas across borders. In the Scandinavian countries, postponed industrialization contributed to a relatively late development of social democratic parties and trade unions, and it was the German Social Democrats who became the main source of ideological inspiration for the budding labour movement.

Within two generations, social democracy in the Scandinavian countries developed from small political sects on the fringes of societies still dominated by class privilege to mass movements well on their way to becoming established parties of government. In some countries, such as Germany and Australia, the social democrats managed to become their country’s largest political parties during the first few years of the twentieth century. In Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, social democrats rapidly followed suit within the span of a decade after 1914. The years of the First World War also brought social democrats into government for the first time in Sweden and Denmark, as junior partners in cabinets headed by liberals or radicals. In Norway, on the other hand, the old parties united in order to keep the labour movement firmly in opposition.

During this period, reformist social democrats and revolutionary Marxists tended to coalesce around the same political parties and trade unions. But the First World War soon intensified tensions between revolutionaries and social democrats, and a split between these very different political outlooks had become all but inevitable. In the next chapter, we will discuss this divide between revolutionary communists and reformist social democrats in the wake of the Russian Revolution. To the social democratic movement, the separation would prove, in the longer run, to be a liberating event that enabled a clarification of ideological and
political outlooks in the period between the two World Wars. Before this crossroads created by war and revolution, however, the social democratic movement had already experienced six eventful and formative decades. It is to this development that we now turn.

**Forerunners**

Like liberalism and conservatism, the socialist tradition grew out of a vast clash of political ideas at the close of the eighteenth century, a period marked above all by revolutions and their aftermath in France and North America. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, several radical groups emerged across Europe, and from the 1820s, these groups were increasingly referred to as manifestations of a new brand of political activism called socialism. Until 1860, however, ‘socialism’ was used as an almost all-encompassing term to describe radical movements of all types, and it is only with great difficulty that one can see any sort of continuity between these movements and the social democratic labour movement which developed in the ensuing decades.1

Still, there is reason to more closely examine a few of these associations, since they inspired movements on the left that would follow. The most important one among these was the Chartist movement in Britain. The Chartists formed the first organized labour movement in Europe, gathering significant numbers around the People’s Charter of 1838, which demanded the extension of suffrage to all male adults. Prominent leaders in the movement also called for a more equitable distribution of income and better living conditions for the working classes. The very first trade unions and consumers’ cooperative societies also emerged in the hinterland of the Chartist movement, as a way of bolstering the fight for these demands.2

When tens of thousands of Chartists gathered for a meeting in Kennington Park on the southern outskirts of London in 1848, however, the government feared that a revolution was on its way, and the meeting was brutally struck down by the police. From then onwards, Chartism went into rapid decline, and waned until the movement vanished completely during the 1850s. The last National Convention of the Chartist movement was held in 1858, but the memory of Chartism went on to become a large part of the founding myths of the labour movement in Britain – the beginning of a long struggle towards real political power for the working classes.3

At the same time, 1848 was also a year of failed revolutions in France and Germany, accompanied by unrest and political convulsions.