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# REICHSTAG AND REPRESSION

## IMPERIAL GERMANY 1890-1914

Why, despite its size, was the German SPD unable to mount an effective challenge to the Imperial Regime, even voting for war credits in 1914?



The period 1890-1914 in German history is generally studied more in relation to foreign affairs than domestic policy, with historians concentrating on the events which led to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, and the extent of German responsibility. However, domestic affairs under Kaiser Wilhelm II (1888-1918) also had great significance for the present and future evolution of German politics and society. This article will discuss the tensions and conflicts within Germany under Wilhelm II, with special emphasis on the rising challenge of the Socialist movement and the response to it from the ruling classes. It will seek to explain why a serious challenge to the existing order failed to materialise, and why the Socialists, supposedly the party of international peace and brotherhood, voted for war credits in 1914 and readily agreed to the wartime political truce.

### POLITICS UNDER WILHELM II

Before we can discuss the course of events under Wilhelm II it is necessary to under-

stand the complex political and constitutional system in Imperial Germany. Essentially, Germany was an absolutist state in which the emperor possessed supreme power. He appointed the chancellor and all other government officials, and could dismiss them at will. Some pretence of democracy was provided by the Reichstag, elected by universal manhood suffrage, but this was severely restricted, since the chancellor and other ministers were responsible not to the Reichstag but to the emperor, and the Reichstag possessed little power of decision-making over the Budget. Officially, Germany had a federal system in which the individual states, such as Bavaria, Baden and Saxony, had a large degree of autonomy. Their views were represented at Federal level in the Bundesrat, which consisted of delegates appointed by the governments of each individual state according to population. In practice, this meant that Prussia, with 17 out of 45 members of the Bundesrat, dominated proceedings, since only 14 votes were needed to veto any measure. This Prussian hegemony was consolidated by the fact that the Emperor was also King of

Germany saw rapid industrialisation after 1871.

Prussia, that Prussia made up two-thirds of Germany, including virtually the whole of the north and east of the country, and by the iniquitous three-class system of franchise in Prussia which ensured the dominance of the Junker aristocracy. The Junkers derived their wealth and power from their large landholdings in eastern Prussia, which contained significant minorities of Poles. Consequently the Junkers occupied the dominant position in the army, government and bureaucracy of Germany.

### EFFECTS OF INDUSTRIALISATION

Rapid industrialisation after the 1871 unification helped transform Germany into one of the world's foremost industrial powers by the turn of the century. It also led to the growth of a new class of industrialists, businessmen and commercial interests. In contrast to other countries such as Britain, where the

bourgeoisie became involved in the struggle for greater political liberalism, in Germany the bourgeoisie were won over by the achievement of unification and admitted to a share in government by the traditional Junker agricultural interests. They thus became a bastion of the state rather than a source of opposition to it. This outlook was no doubt reinforced by the rise in working-class consciousness and the associated Socialist movement from the 1870s onwards.

The unified Social Democratic Party (SPD) had only been founded in 1875, yet the 12 years of anti-socialist persecution under Bismarck turned the party from a small group into the political mass party of the German worker, winning 19.7% of the vote and 35 seats at the 1890 election. Besides repression, Bismarck had tried social welfare measures, yet the workers recognised that they owed these concessions to the strength of the Socialist movement and continued to vote for it. In desperation, Bismarck in 1890 proposed the overthrow of the constitution, limiting the franchise and driving the SPD completely out of existence. Wilhelm II, who believed he could win over the Socialists by means of judicious concessions, was not willing to take the risk, and consequently Bismarck resigned in March 1890. Barraclough comments on the scheme: 'It was a counsel of desperation, involving serious danger of revolution and civil war, and the new emperor, Wilhelm II, was not prepared to imperil his dynasty in such a gamble.'

### CAPRIVI AND THE NEW COURSE

Unfortunately for Wilhelm II, the four years of greater liberalism under General Leo von Caprivi, Bismarck's successor as Imperial Chancellor, did not do anything to improve the political situation in Germany. Not only did Caprivi's policies fail to stem the rise of the Socialist opposition, they also aroused the hostility of the traditional agrarian interests and reinforced their determination not to give up any of their power, and influence. They particularly objected to the lowering of tariff duties in 1892 which harmed their economic interests, as well as the introduction of a progressive income tax in Prussia, more conciliatory policies towards the Poles in the eastern provinces, and concessions to the Reichstag over the period of military service. The Caprivi period made it clear that nothing could be

done in Germany without the consent of the Prussian ruling class, but equally clear that the growth of support for socialism could not be stemmed by tinkering within the absolutist system. Increasing polarisation between the Emperor and a growing majority of his subjects seemed to be the certain result.

The failure of concessions to win over the working class under Caprivi made Wilhelm II fall back on a policy of repression, similar to the one he had rejected from Bismarck in 1890. In the years before 1900, the emperor made repeated attempts to get a repressive measure passed by the Reichstag, but without success. This was partly due to the reluctance of the new Chancellor, Hohenlohe (1894-1900), to be associated with any measure to undermine the constitution, but also because of the Reichstag's natural reluctance to pass a law restricting the franchise for its own elections. Although acutely conscious of its limited position in the political system, the Reichstag deputies had no wish to reduce what influence they did have by narrowing the basis on which they were elected. Exasperated by the failure to pass any anti-socialist measure, the emperor resorted to ever more violent denunciations of the Socialists as 'enemies of the state', stating on one infamous occasion that 'I would castrate all Socialists if I had my way'.

### CHARACTER OF THE SOCIALIST MOVEMENT

The intense hostility shown towards the Socialists by the ruling class was even more unfortunate considering the essential moderation of the movement in Wilhelmine Germany. The years of repression had not inspired the leaders with any new revolutionary fervour or encouraged them to begin plotting the overthrow of existing society. August Bebel, the SPD leader, considered it enough to reiterate the party's faith in Marxism, as was done in the 1891 Erfurt Programme, without making ill-considered attempts to implement it. Thus, although remaining officially committed to revolutionary doctrines, the SPD gradually developed a more revisionist tone in practice. This tendency was reinforced by the rise of the free Trade Unions (see Figure 1), who had originally been regarded by the SPD leaders merely as a 'recruiting ground' for socialist agitation. However, as they became stronger and more successful in winning concessions from the employers, they became more influential within the socialist movement. Naturally,

they were more concerned with immediate, practical gains than with long-term revolutionary goals, and by 1906 they were strong enough to force the SPD to finally abandon its periodic agitation for a political mass strike as a weapon against the state.

The comparative docility of the German working class can be further explained by the relatively good standard of living which they enjoyed before 1914. Real wages, for example, rose by 100% between 1885 and 1910, average wages increasing by 37.5% between 1895 and 1907, whilst the cost of living rose by only 22% during the same period. The German worker could therefore be comparatively satisfied with his lot, and confident that his Trade Unions could continue to win concessions from his employers. The SPD vote continued to increase, eventually reaching 4.25m votes in 1914, their main support coming from the large industrial centres of Berlin, Leipzig, Hamburg, Cologne as well as Schleswig-Holstein, Saxony, Silesia, Rhineland and Northern Bavaria.

### BULOW'S CHANCELLORSHIP (1900-09)

However muted the threat from the Socialist movement was, the growing strength of the SPD continued to alarm the ruling classes in German society. Since concession and repression had both failed to prevent this, Bernhard von Bulow, who became Chancellor in 1900, attempted to pursue an alternative policy to combat the threat from the left. This entailed promoting a union of agrarian and industrial interests, based on recognition and satisfaction of their mutual economic desires, which would be strong enough to dominate the Reichstag and broaden the basis of support for the regime. But this strategy, like previous ones, had its problems, notably the incompatibility of the different parties within the bloc. The Conservatives, party of the Prussian Junkers, along with the industrialist and commercial-backed free Conservatives and National Liberals were natural supporters of the government, but in order to ensure a majority in the Reichstag, Bulow had to include either the Catholic Centre Party or the Left Liberal Progressive Party. The former were almost exclusively concerned with protecting the interest of Catholicism and were ambivalent on most other issues, including the question of whether Germany should have a parliamentary system of government. There was constant friction between the centre and the almost totally Protestant Conservatives, firstly over the new tariff law of 1902 which raised duties so high as to exclude Russian grain, thus benefiting the Junker landlords, and subsequently over new tax proposals to combat the growing financial problem caused by military spending. The final straw came when Mathias Erzeberger, a Centre Party deputy, attacked German colonial administration at the time of the First Moroccan crisis. Bulow broke with the Centre Party, and created a new bloc including Progressives. This bloc won a handsome majority (21 out of 397 seats) at the 1907 election, but only at the price of the permanent opposition of the Centre. Nor were his dealings with Progressives

Table 1: Reichstag election results 1890-1912 (thousands).

	1898		1903		1907		1912	
	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats
SPD	2107	56	3011	81	3259	43	4250	110
Centre	1455	102	1985	100	2180	105	1997	91
Progressive	863	49	872	26	1234	49	1497	42
Nat. Libs	971	46	1317	51	1631	54	1663	45
Free Cons	344	23	333	21	472	24	367	14
Conservatives	859	56	949	54	1060	60	1126	43
Minorities	471	34	559	32	651	29	706	33
Others	1256	31	579	22	787	33	602	19

Source: Berghahn, V.R. (1982) *Modern Germany*, Cambridge University Press.

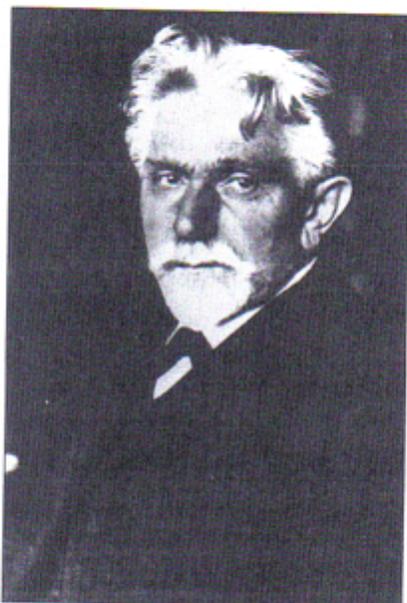
any easier, since they demanded concessions, such as an end to the three-class system of voting in Prussia, as the price of their support. Further friction was caused by the continued problem of raising new taxes to deal with financial problems, with the Progressives calling for new taxes on land; this was anathema to the agrarian Conservatives. Thus by the time of his fall in 1909, Bulow if anything had made the situation worse rather than better, since the centre and progressive parties were now firmly in the opposition camp, and the latter was slowly moving towards limited collaboration with the Socialists.

### 'DAILY TELEGRAPH' AFFAIR

The fundamental weakness of the opposition when presented with opportunities to undermine the existing social and political system was illustrated by the *Daily Telegraph* affair in 1908. The furore which resulted from publication of Wilhelm II's intemperate comments on foreign affairs created near unanimity in the Reichstag, with even the normally loyal Conservatives joining the condemnation of the Emperor's actions. Consequently, Wilhelm II was forced to issue a statement in which he promised to 'respect his constitutional obligations' and to act with greater reserve in future. This seemed a prime moment for the Socialist and Liberal groups to build on this implied restriction of the emperor's powers and to press for moves towards a fully responsible, democratic government. Unfortunately, as Craig remarks, 'the affair turned out to be just one more of those lost opportunities that marked the course of Germany's constitutional history'. Two main reasons can be discerned for this: firstly Reichstag deputies, unlike their counterparts in Britain and France, were novices in the art of using their budgetary powers for political purposes. More significantly, German political parties were largely economic interest groups, and it was therefore difficult for them to unite as a parliamentary body on an important issue.

### INCREASING TENSION 1909-14

The period following the collapse of the Bulow bloc in 1909 saw a marked leftward shift in German politics, forcing the new Chancellor, Bethmann-Hollweg, to rely increasingly on non-parliamentary forces such as the courts, bureaucracy and the army. This leftward shift was accentuated by the alienation of the Centre and the Progressive Parties, and emphasised by the great advance of the Socialists in the 1912 election. These election results created virtual panic in the traditional ruling groups, who now more than ever refused to make any concessions to the growing opposition forces. Even Bethmann-Hollweg's attempt at a minor reform of the Prussian franchise aroused the implacable opposition of the Conservatives, leading the Chancellor to complain exasperatedly that 'the stubborn opposition of the Junker to any change had further inflamed an issue that he had hoped to alleviate'. There were, however,

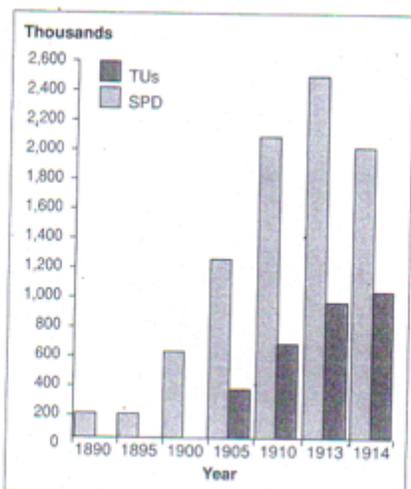


August Bebel, the SPD leader.

signs that the SPD had not been emboldened to challenge the government by its new accretion of strength. The Army Bill of 1913, providing for huge increases in manpower, managed to pass the Reichstag, and the SPD even voted for a new property tax that was clearly designed to pay for the army increases. Such action provided a foretaste of their support for the war two years later.

The controversy over the Zabern Affair (1913), like that over the *Daily Telegraph* interview five years earlier, did not constitute a real threat to the established system, since once again there was no attempt by the Reichstag to enforce its no confidence vote (by 293 votes to 54) on the chancellor. But while the government was able to ride out the storm, it was clear to them that tensions between the absolutist, monarchical system and the aspirations for a greater involvement in decision-making were becoming more acute, notwithstanding the continued moderation

Figure 1: Trade Union and SPD membership (1890-1914).



of the SPD. Having exhausted virtually all expedients to crush the opposition, there seemed only one way left to undermine them: victory in a great patriotic war.

### THE 'BURGFRIEDEN'

The decision of the SPD to join with the other parties in voting for war credits and proclaiming a political truce, the *Burgfrieden*, for the duration of the war, surprised many contemporary observers, considering the party had traditionally opposed all military spending. In explaining the decision, Pinson suggests that 'the socialists were engulfed by the same patriotic storm that swept the entire country'. On the other hand, there is plentiful evidence of nationalist views within the SPD prior to 1914, Bebel having commented in 1897 that 'a good comrade who knows only German is more use than an incompetent Polish-speaking one'. Furthermore, there had also been previous reference to the need to support the government if war broke out with Russia, 'for a Russian victory means the defeat of social democracy'.

The domestic history of Germany under Wilhelm II is dominated by the unresolved conflict between the traditional, absolutist order symbolised by the Emperor himself, and the rising forces of democracy and socialism represented in the Reichstag. None of the strategies employed to retard the growth of the opposition, repressions, concessions, or alliance between agrarian and industrial interests, managed to prevent the continued growth of the left before 1914. Yet in the end, the empire never came under any serious threat from its opponents, partly due to its success in forging a working partnership with the new industrial magnates, but in large measure due to the timidity and ineffectiveness of the Liberals and Socialists. Part of the explanation for this can be found in an article written by Max Weber in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1917:

Bismarck left behind him ... a nation without any political education, far below the level which, in this respect, it had reached 20 years earlier ... a nation accustomed to submit ... to anything which was decided for it.

This sad fact conditioned German politics not only up to 1914, but for many years beyond as well.

### FURTHER READING

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