



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918
Opposition within the SPD (June 19, 1915)

Although the early days of fighting were accompanied by the impression of popular unity, the consensus in favor of the war was fragile from the start, vulnerable to pressures from both the right and the left. The Socialists' decision to support the war in 1914 was by no means unanimous. And by 1915, prominent Socialists had begun to express serious reservations. Within the ranks of the SPD, supporters of the war clashed with opponents of it, causing the party to split in 1917. Here, Eduard Bernstein, Karl Kautsky, and Hugo Haase appeal to their SPD colleagues to oppose the government's and certain conservatives' aggressive annexationist plans.

Leipzig, June 19, 1915

The Order of the Day

The hour of decision has arrived. German Social Democracy confronts a question that is of the greatest importance to the destiny of the German people and the future of the civilized world.

During the past few weeks, prominent personalities and influential groups have been giving voice to demands – if anything in even more radical form – for which certain sectors of the press, as well as organizations to which no particular importance had been attached, have systematically stirred up support. Programs are being drawn up that put the stamp of a *war of conquest* on the present war. It is still fresh in everyone's memory that the President of the Prussian House of Lords, Wedel-Piesdorf, declared during the session on March 15, 1915: Germany is now the victor:

“And if we desired nothing more than to repel the attack by our enemies, I believe that it would not be at all difficult to obtain peace quickly. However, Germany cannot be satisfied with such a peace. After the frightful sacrifices that we have borne in men and material, we must demand more. We can sheathe our sword only once Germany has obtained guarantees that our neighbors will not again attack us in similar fashion.”

During the session of the Reichstag on May 29, 1915, Count von Westarp, the spokesman of the Conservative Party, and Schiffer, the spokesman of the National Liberal Party, *bluntly announced annexationist demands*. Westarp appealed to a declaration by the *German Chancellor* a day earlier, to the effect that Germany must establish all possible “*real guarantees and assurances*” that none of its enemies, “whether alone or in combination,” dare undertake another armed assault. The federal government has not repudiated this interpretation of the Chancellor's words.

It has further become known that *six large economic associations*, led by the big-business Central League of German Industrialists and the militant agrarian organization, the Agrarian League, both of which have determined the direction of German policy so often in the past, presented a petition to the Chancellor on May 20, 1915, in which they demanded that *Germany obtain a great colonial empire, a sufficient indemnity, and annexations in Europe*, which, in the west alone, would force more than ten million people – over seven million Belgians and more than three million Frenchmen – under German rule. How they envisage this tyranny is clear from a sentence in the petition that specifies that government and administration in the annexed countries be so arranged that “the inhabitants have no influence on the destiny of the German Empire.” In other words, these forcefully annexed peoples are to be deprived of their *political rights* and kept impotent. The petition also demands that all possessions that secure economic and social influence “be transferred into German hands” – in the west this means ownership in particular of all great industrial enterprises, and in the east it means ownership of medium and large landed estates.

But there is more. Within the last few days, one of the German princes, the *King of Bavaria*, demanded, during a speech in Fürth, the extension of our boundaries in the west, “which would secure for south and west Germany *more favorable access to the sea.*”

German Social Democracy must ask itself whether it can reconcile all these public statements with the principles and obligations that devolve upon it as the *custodian of the material and moral interests of the German working classes* – whether, when it comes to continuing the war, it can stand on the side of those whose views are in sharpest contradiction to the principles that our parliamentary group enunciated on August 4, 1914, when, citing the Socialist International, it condemned *all wars of conquest*. This principle would be branded a lie were German Social Democracy to respond to these declarations from those in power simply by mouthing pieties about its desire for peace. We have learned only too well that such pronouncements receive not the slightest attention.

What many among us have feared is becoming increasingly evident: *German Social Democracy is being permitted to vote for war appropriations*, but it is being coldly ignored as decisions are being made that have tremendous consequences for the future of our people.

Dare we permit this state of affairs to continue, which deprives us of the possibility of asserting the power of the German working class on behalf of a policy that, as we are fervently convinced on the basis of historical experience, the interest of the German nation, and, along with it, the interest of all the warring nations demands?

Enormous are the sacrifices that this war has already brought to the nations that have been swept into it – sacrifices that multiply daily. History has never seen a war that has remotely had such murderous effects. The cruelty of barbaric ages, coupled with the most refined means that civilization offers, is snatching away the flower of the nations. No less unprecedented are material sacrifices that the war is snatching away. Large areas are being devastated, and sums of money that would not have been spent in a year for cultural purposes are being expended weekly during this war on the killing of human beings and the annihilation of the foundations of future welfare. *All warring countries face bankruptcy if the war is prolonged.*

An ever-growing longing for peace is asserting itself among broad sectors of our population and among the peoples with which the German Empire is at war. While rulers are afraid to respond to this longing for peace, thousands and thousands look to Social Democracy, which they were

accustomed to regard as the *party of peace*, and they expect from it now the liberating word and corresponding action.

Now that the *plans of conquest* are obvious to the world, Social Democracy is free to assert its opposition in emphatic terms, and the current situation makes this freedom an obligation. The proletariat surely expects that just as in 1870, when in a similar situation all Social Democrats, irrespective of their differences of opinion, rallied to unanimous action at the outbreak of war, *Social Democracy will stand together today*.

We know that *peace terms* that are forced by one warring country on another bring no real peace; instead, they mean only new armaments with the specter of new war. A genuine and lasting peace is possible only upon the *basis of a free agreement*. It is not possible for Social Democracy in only one country to create this basis. However, every individual party can, to the extent that its position and strength allow, contribute to creating such a foundation.

The present state of affairs moves German Social Democracy to undertake a decisive step toward this goal. It today faces the choice of taking this step or dealing a mortal blow to the confidence that it has until now enjoyed among the German people and the whole world as the *champion of international peace*.

We have no doubt that our party will draw the proper conclusions for our party's position within the parliament and without. Along with the finest traditions of Social Democracy, *the future of our people is at stake – its welfare and freedom*. Even if our party lacks the power to make the decisions, we nevertheless face the obligation to take the initiative in pushing policy forward in the direction that we have recognized as proper.

Eduard Bernstein
Hugo Haase
Karl Kautsky

Source: Eugen Prager, *Geschichte der USPD: Entstehung und Entwicklung der Unabhängigen Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands* [*History of the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD): The Formation and Development of the USDP*]. Berlin, 1921, pp. 72-74.

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