



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 4: Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany, 1866-1890
A Working-Class Youth in the Harz Region on the Expiry of the Anti-Socialist Law
(September 30, 1890)

After twelve years of repression by the authorities, the expiry of the Anti-Socialist Law at midnight on September 30, 1890, constituted a momentous event for Social Democrats. (It had been known since January 1890 that the law would expire on that date because the Reichstag had refused to extend it.) This passage is drawn from the recollections of August Winnig, who as a youth had witnessed the countdown in a small-town tavern in the Harz mountain region of central Germany. The account conveys the weighty symbolism and high emotion with which long-suffering Socialists marked the occasion. The attending policemen now lacked the legal authority to intervene in the celebrations; as Winnig's laconic final remark seems to suggest, they no longer even served as objects of ridicule or hate.

The "Bunte Lamm" was located in the center of town and was just an ordinary pub. Therefore, the celebration had to take place in the lounge, which was quite large, though, and could accommodate more than 100 people. When we arrived, the room was already filled with men. In one corner (from whose vantage point one could survey the entire lounge, with all its nooks and crannies) stood a small table covered with a white tablecloth. The other tables were bare. Hanging from the wall behind the table was a large red flag with an inscription affixed to it. Made of gold paper, it read: "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity." The flag was flanked by two pictures that also had red flags painted on them. One of the pictures showed a man setting his foot on an animal [statue] that had obviously tumbled from the pedestal next to it; he was wearing a red sash and holding a red flag in his hand. The other picture depicted a woman in white, also holding a red flag; below that was a long aphorism that I could not read. In the opposite corner was a large wall clock; on its face, a star made of gold covered the number twelve; next to the clock was a kitchen lamp whose light was obviously meant to illuminate the clock, but which did so only inadequately. [. . .]

Two police constables entered the lounge and went to the set table next to which Lambert Schmitt was seated. They talked to him and had him show them a document. Upon seeing it they fell silent and took a seat near the table.

After that, Lambert Schmitt rang a small bell and said that the evening of entertainment would now begin. People should feel free for the time being to chat among themselves, as the main thing could not be uttered until after midnight. These words prompted a small cheer and numerous shouts. [. . .]

In the course of singing and telling stories the hand of the clock edged forward, and soon the midnight hour was approaching. The closer the moment came, the quieter the room turned and the more frequently the men glanced at the wall clock or their pocket watches. At last, the hand of the clock had almost reached the gleaming star that covered the twelve. The faces had long since turned toward the table where Lambert Schmitt was seated. He was staring at the clock.

Suddenly he got up. On the table in front of him he had a small piece of paper; he glanced at it once more and then began to speak. He mentioned the friends in attendance by name, and he said the hour that everyone had anticipated for so long had arrived. With the ringing of the bell at midnight a ruling system that had put the working class in chains was collapsing. It had brought great misfortune to the few faithful followers, and it had often seemed that the spirit of liberty would be crushed; but in the end brute force had been vanquished. Yet how could it have been otherwise? The first Christians had also been persecuted, ostracized, and killed, but no one was able to kill their spirit, which remained alive and went on to conquer the world.

The longer Lambert Smith spoke, the more one noticed that speaking became difficult for him, and people at our table quietly wondered what the matter was with him today. Soon his words only trickled slowly from his bearded mouth; he looked around as if looking for help, then fell silent, and sat down.

However, the crowd that had gathered knew Lambert well and realized that he had simply been overcome by emotion. The long arm of the law had dealt with him severely as well; for a long time he had been hunted until he found a place to stay in our town, and here the strains and privations had been difficult to bear.

Now the time was served, as it were, and one could understand that this ailing man, overwhelmed by emotion, lost command of the language that he usually mastered so well.

But at the very moment when stunned silence gripped the entire gathering, the old wall clock began to buzz and sounded twelve rattling strokes. At this moment every single person stopped speaking – apart from the sounds of the clock, the room was quiet, and the air was filled only with the heavy breathing of so many people.

When the strokes had faded away, the entire crowd rose up and all at once jubilation broke out; its concerted sound roared through the room like a single, long, deep cry. People at the tables shook hands, many hugged one another, a hotchpotch of shouts rang through the air, and everyone's eyes sparkled. I stood behind my brother, squeezed his arm, and my heart pounded quickly. A group of people crowded around Lambert Schmitt, who now smiled and shook the many hands held out toward him.

Only the two police constables sat unmoved at their table; they had put on their helmets and they had no idea what was happening right in front of their eyes.

Source: August Winnig, *Frührot. Ein Buch von Heimat und Jugend* [*Early Dawn: A Book About Home and Youth*]. Stuttgart and Berlin, 1924, pp. 188-94.

Original German text reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and Jürgen Kocka, eds, *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870-1914. Dokumente und Skizzen* [*German Social History 1870-1914. Documents and Sketches*], 3rd ed. Munich: Beck, 1982, pp. 401-03.

Translation: Erwin Fink