



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 4. Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany, 1866-1890

Retrospective Judgment of a District Governor on the Failure of the Anti-Socialist Law (1925)

This excerpt is drawn from the 1925 memoirs of Baron Hans Hermann von Berlepsch (1843-1926), the former Prussian Minister of Trade and Industry (1890-1896). Before assuming this post, Berlepsch had served as district governor in Düsseldorf from 1884 to 1889. In that capacity, he had counseled restraint on the part of the state when a wave of strikes broke out among mine workers in 1889. Instead of calling in troops, which elsewhere provoked miners and caused bloodshed, Berlepsch chose to rely on the local police, who were familiar with the strikers. In this passage, he describes the effects of the Anti-Socialist Law on the working class. In his view, state repression was entirely counter-productive.

For twelve years [1878-1890] the government adhered to this belief; but anyone with an opportunity to observe the effects of the Anti-Socialist Law firsthand, in industrial centers like those so numerous in the Düsseldorf district, soon arrived at a completely different opinion. The observer noticed how heavily the oppression, particularly the expulsions, affected the mood of the workers, their views of justice, and the state's care for the underprivileged; how [socialist] doctrine, though ridiculed, was spread secretly, instead of publicly, by word of mouth, from workshop to workshop, at the pub and in the comfort of the workers' own homes. He discovered that forcible means failed completely, that they might address external symptoms but could never eradicate underlying convictions. Ultimately, the only thing achieved was a hundredfold increase in the bitterness found in working-class circles, a saintly aura of martyrdom around the head of every false tribune who was persecuted, and a hundredfold strengthening of conviction that the existing political and social situation was reprehensible and intolerable. One had dammed the waters instead of making them disappear, and when the floodgates were opened they swept through the land with ten times the strength.

Source: Hans Hermann Freiherr von Berlepsch, *Sozialpolitische Erfahrungen und Erinnerungen* [*Sociopolitical Experiences and Recollections*]. Munich-Gladbach, 1925, pp. 21-22.

Original German text reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter, ed., *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich 1871-1914. Ein historisches Lesebuch* [*The German Kaiserreich 1871-1914: A Historical Reader*], 5th ed. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992, pp. 242-43.

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