

August Bebel Criticizes the Franco-Prussian War and the Annexation of Alsace-Lorraine (November 26, 1870)

Abstract

The Social Democrats, who were pacifists on principle and opponents of the annexation of foreign territory, rejected Bismarck's plans to incorporate Alsace-Lorraine during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71. In this speech before the North German Reichstag, SPD leader August Bebel (1840–1913) justifies his party's refusal to grant the funds needed to carry on the military campaign against France. He points to the likelihood of French *revanchisme* if the popular call for annexation is carried out, and he extends his attack to liberals, members of the upper classes and the bourgeoisie, and all those he labels pseudo-patriotic (and stingy) supporters of war. Interventions by the Speaker of the House indicate how close Bebel steered to the limits of parliamentary propriety in making his impassioned plea for a peace without conquest. Subsequent events, including the arrest and imprisonment of Bebel and his party comrade Wilhelm Liebknecht on sedition charges, proved that he was not forgiven for this principled stance.

Source

Deputy Bebel: Well, Gentlemen, people really have put forth the most diverse reasons for the annexation [of the French territories of Alsace and Lorraine]. They have argued that Alsace-Lorraine must become German for *strategic* reasons, that it must become German from a *national* point of view because in the past it belonged to Germany, that it must become German for *political* reasons and perhaps even for *economic* reasons. The press, to the extent that it has had an opportunity to express its opinion, has published sufficient arguments opposing this view. Commentators have emphasized—and I believe quite rightly so—that just as France failed during the current war to prevent the invasion of German troops, despite Alsace-Lorraine, despite her possession of Strasbourg and Metz, the reverse also applies: that one day it will be impossible to prevent a French invasion of Germany, provided that there is a particular constellation of circumstances and that conditions are perhaps more favorable than they were for France just now.

Gentlemen, the most recent address from the king to parliament states that one should by no means believe that the current peace treaty can guarantee peace with France for a lengthy period of time. It states that the French nation, filled with and guided by feelings of revenge, will muster everything to recommence the battle; that it will muster all means possible—perhaps not on its own, but in alliance with other powers—to re-conquer what it had to relinquish today. Well, if we are facing such a prospect, prudence naturally demands that we do not unnecessarily offend our enemies and goad them to revenge.

(Great agitation, laughter.)

It is necessary to refrain from anything that might help drive France to extremes and, instead, to leave France today with what has been hers for centuries. This is all the more important because, after all, with the exception of a few dozen people, the entire population of Alsace-Lorraine is clearly opposed to this annexation. Undoubtedly, the entire population has not the least desire to join this German state under the Hohenzollern dynasty, and from my perspective the will of the people is decisive in this matter. The right to self-determination is the primary foundation upon which our decision must be based, and if we trample this right to self-determination, if today we take whatever we want without exception, then we

are giving up our own right to self-determination in turn. In that case, we will also have to put up with others taking pieces of our own country when the opportunity arises (great merriment). The same reasons you are now advancing in favor of the annexation may one day be used *against* us. In my opinion, the *principle of nationality* is a thoroughly *reactionary* principle. You will admit that if we were to apply the principle of nationality in its pure form in Europe, there would be no end in sight to war; the peoples' mission would always and exclusively be to make war, to work only to make war possible. On the basis of the principle of nationality we would have to cede Poland, return northern Schleswig, get rid of South Tyrol and Trento, and relinquish many Slavic-speaking regions; on the other hand, we would have to annex parts of Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Belgium. As I have already mentioned, according to the principle of nationality, we would not be able to get out of war. The peoples would tear each other apart until the end of time. Nationality means but little; in my view, it has merely a secondary importance for the political life of a state. The highest and most fundamental idea in the political life of a state must be the internal satisfaction of peoples through their institutions, their right to self-determination. Two countries in the world offer the clearest proof of this: Switzerland and America. In Switzerland you find Italians, Frenchmen, and Germans living quietly side by side; nowhere are they asked to become Italians, Frenchmen, or Germans. In the great republic across the ocean you will find the same constellation; Englishmen, Frenchmen, and Germans live quietly and peacefully side by side and get along.

(Shouts on the right: *Sonderbundskrieg!*^[1])

That war was not a national war but a war of freedom against lack of freedom, and it was directed squarely against *your* party—a necessity.

(Shouting: That's enough!)

The Speaker of the Reichstag: I would like to remind you once again of the need to exercise self-restraint during your remarks.

Deputy Bebel: But I believe, Honorable Speaker, that I have not yet overstepped that self-restraint.

So in my opinion, Gentlemen, Germany will not benefit from carrying out the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine. On the contrary, it will do much to contribute to prolonging hostility between two of the noblest nations; for the fact that the French nation is just as noble a nation as the German one has been confirmed again by the king's last address to parliament. One should note, though, Gentlemen, that the official press, having launched the most vicious attacks at the start of the war against Louis Bonaparte (an arch-rascal and the greatest criminal on any European throne), then defended him only a few weeks later, after he had been toppled, and attempted to substantiate the sole responsibility of the French nation and naturally poured all imaginable angry filth onto the French people. Allegedly there can be no worse, more demoralized, more corrupt people than the French—and the previous speaker has just proclaimed this from the Reichstag rostrum—even though, as I have just mentioned, in his speech to parliament the king grants the French nation the fullest recognition and calls it an honorable nation. Gentlemen, I have not the least doubt that this tactic, which recently echoed again in the king's last address to parliament, is quite certainly a calculated one; those responsible tell themselves now, just as they told themselves in 1866 when they set out to Bohemia, that it is extremely important to sow dissatisfaction and discord among this conglomerate of nationalities accommodated by Austria. In those days, the Prussian king issued a proclamation to the “great and brave nation of Bohemia”: the idea was to incite the Bohemian people against the imperial state of Austria; and as for Hungary, the Hungarian Legion under the well-known Klapka^[2] was mustered in order to turn the Hungarian people against the imperial state of Austria as well.

In my view, the remark made by the king of Prussia in his speech to parliament on July 17 was also

calculated to interfere with any potential cohesion and agreement between the French people and the French government by attempting to separate the people and their government in the most un-monarchical way; and at this moment, the same principle is being applied to stir up discord and create tension between the people and the republican government holding power. Therefore, the king's latest speech to parliament makes an artificial distinction between the people and the government by stating: You, the people, are indeed innocent, and so far only a small circle of people at the helm of national affairs is to blame for all of the misery that has befallen you. Yet surely this will be futile. There is no denying that the sacrifices France is making are enormous, that for years and years the most beautiful parts of the country have been ruined, that millions of people have been materially ruined for life. And yet, since it was thought necessary to emphasize the French misfortune arising from this war, I would have regarded it as appropriate for the royal address to parliament to have also mentioned the misfortune already inflicted—and still to be inflicted—on the German people by this war. For, Gentlemen, who could deny that the sacrifices that the German people also made in this war—and have to make on a daily basis—are quite equal to those imposed on the French people; that the German people, too, have had to make huge sacrifices; that hundreds of thousands have been robbed of their livelihood; that hundreds of thousands were crippled; that thousands upon thousands lost their lives; and that therefore, in light of the tremendous sacrifices the German people have made, they are entitled to demand that peace is finally made and that a situation that will end this mass slaughter is created at last? On the other hand, Gentlemen, when I hear and see that 4,000 or more newspapers have been trying incessantly for months to incite the German people's patriotism and willingness to make sacrifices, and then when I consider what the allied German governments have deemed appropriate to set down in the demand for war credits that stands before us, I really have to confess that the truth of it is: much ado about nothing. Gentlemen, it was above all German liberalism as the representative of the German upper classes, the bourgeoisie, that championed this war with particular partiality, with the greatest enthusiasm; it was German liberalism that declared itself prepared to make every possible sacrifice. And, Gentlemen, what is the actual result insofar as it can be ascertained in material terms? Four months ago, you granted a loan valued at 120 million; of the 100 million subsequently issued for subscription, barely 68 million were actually covered, and more than 50,000 subscribers participated in this. — So you see, Gentlemen, the patriotism that has spread in the newspapers, in the municipal and rural councils, in the state legislatures, was in reality very minimal when it came to any actual willingness to make sacrifices, especially among those trumpeting patriotism. Gentlemen, within a few days, the French bourgeoisie subscribed for the entire loan of 750 million that Napoleon issued—you have barely raised 68 million. Of course, the governments have to admit that they provided either no favorable news from the theater of war or no news at all.

Gentlemen, would the wallets of the patriotically minded have been opened more eagerly if there had been unfavorable news? Oh no, good heavens, no, these people would have kept an even lower profile, things would have unfolded even more sadly, and what clearly emerges here is that there is a big difference between talk and action and that, in this respect, we have absolutely no cause to look down on the French people. Well, Gentlemen, this evidence should also help us avoid either plunging into new sacrifices or prolonging sacrifices indefinitely. These are sacrifices, after all, that can only be made here in such a way that those who always charge ahead in their patriotism—at least when it comes to words—first bide their time to see whether their pockets will be lined with the right percentages.

(General disapproval, hissing; shout: Shame on you! Out! Get him out of here!)

Speaker of the Reichstag: Does the speaker have no sensibility at all (whatever low or high value he may attach to nationality) for the fact that he has the nerve to abuse our people in their very representative body?!

(General round of Bravo. Great noise. Shouting: Get him out of here!)

Let me repeat to you, Herr Bebel, that if you have the audacity to continue in this way, I will take responsibility before this house to cut you short.

(General bravo.)

Now you know where you stand, after I have exercised unprecedented consideration and leniency towards you, for the *very reason* that there are so few of you [socialists] here!

Deputy Bebel: Gentlemen, I would think that at least the Reichstag is not in a state of war, and I simply wish to say to the Speaker that he has completely misunderstood me if he thinks that I intended to characterize the entire nation with what I said about the loan. I realize that the overwhelming majority of the people are not in a position to subscribe to a war loan, which requires 100 thalers as the minimum sum. Therefore, you may infer that my remarks can only apply to the higher, propertied classes in Germany, and that these classes have offered a poor testimonial to their patriotism through their conduct in the loan issue. My remarks did not refer to the common people—let me be clear—but to the propertied class, the bourgeoisie, on whose shoulders rests the primary duty.

As for the rest, Gentlemen, I'll abstain from any further remarks. — (Quite right!) Yes, Gentlemen, I can well imagine that this pleases you; the motion that the member of the Reichstag [Wilhelm] Liebknecht and I have introduced contains in its statement of reasons—in even greater detail—the position we feel obliged to adopt in this matter. We are demanding nothing more and nothing less than a rejection of the financial allocations needed to continue the war. We are not expecting you to agree; to ask that of you would be foolishness on our part (Merriment.)—we are clearly stating that in our view the only correct path is to reject the war credit; we also believe that it is necessary to direct a request to the Chancellor of the North German Confederation to work as quickly as possible towards concluding a peace with the French nation that stipulates a renunciation of all annexation plans.

NOTES

[1] The *Sonderbundskrieg* was a civil war declared by conservative Catholic Swiss cantons against liberal-radical cantons in 1847. The liberal-radical cantons prevailed—trans.

[2] General György Klapka (1820–1892)—ed.

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Translation: Erwin Fink

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