

Conservative Leader Otto von Helldorff Defends Bismarck's Anti-Socialist Legislation (September 16, 1878)

Abstract

In contrast to the National Liberals, who voiced reservations to Bismarck's Anti-Socialist Law, Conservatives were more obliging. In the debate of September 16, 1878, the leader of the German Conservative Party's Reichstag caucus, Otto von Helldorff-Bedra (1833–1908), uses his rhetorical skills to distinguish between workers' legitimate concerns—the “so-called social question,” as he puts it—and the principles of class hatred that allegedly form the foundation of Social Democracy. Identifying the latter with the international Communist League, Helldorff deploys both practical arguments and moral appeals to rally support for repressive legislation that, once passed, remained in effect from 1878 to 1890.

Source

The German character harbors a deeply rooted strain of humanity, a higher type of idealism; but, at the same time, perhaps there is also a tendency to neglect practical considerations. Only this explains how humane efforts to improve the situation of the working class, how all efforts aimed at solving the so-called social question—which all of us have an interest in—can continuously be confused with German Social Democracy, with the international Communist League; these are completely different things. I ask you, are you trying to tell me that this agitation has originated with and was encouraged by people in Germany who have spent their lives working arduously on behalf of the well-being of the people? No! I have to say quite openly that at the cradle of Social Democracy stood the unsatisfied ambition and the hatred of the demagogues. (Absolutely right!) Among all the remarks made by the previous speaker,^[1] one certainly touched me and my friends very deeply: that ultimately, overcoming Social Democracy will only be possible on the basis of religion. But I would also like to say that this was almost the only factual statement that I can endorse. Just like the previous speaker, I am convinced that only a religious view of occupation and work, only a Christian breed of humanity, can overcome Social Democracy; but to draw from that the conclusion that a preventive law such as the one we wish to pass would be ineffective and impossible is, in my opinion, not correct. Pedagogical measures can only become effective if the degenerating agitation is removed beforehand, and that is the ultimate goal and the entire, precisely defined purpose of this law. Of course, Gentlemen, we have to realize that eliminating this degeneration entails a number of requirements in other areas; great tasks still lie ahead of us: Let me just remind you of the questions regarding the vice squad, [those regarding] bars, scandalous theaters, and the muckraking press that so poisons people's minds; these are things that have to be tackled simultaneously. (Hear, hear!) Moreover, we ought not discount the fact that the class hatred upon which Social Democracy largely builds its hope, that the entire hostile positioning of the social classes that developed within the nation, also has a material background and material causes. Who can deny that for a long time our spirit has been controlled by a certain one-sided outlook, a one-sided preference for individualization both in the intellectual and material sphere? We should not be surprised that the time has now come when, in opposition to the one-sidedness of that outlook, the need once again emerges to assert in an appropriate way the interests of the whole. There is a very deep-rooted inner link between our taxation and trade policies and this entire question. We will only be able to eliminate dissatisfaction by reestablishing sound economic conditions. (Bravo! on the right) And more than that, Gentlemen, we have to cultivate above all the area I would like to call social policy. You have heard it said in the debates

about the law governing freedom of occupation, speakers have spelled it out repeatedly: the great task of our time is again the reasonable organization of work, the organization of work for the two-thirds of our German tradesmen who engage in small business, where the mass of tradesmen is essentially educated.

NOTES

[1] Deputy Reichensperger, of the Catholic Center Party—ed.

Source: *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstags*, 4th legislative period, 4th session (September 16, 1878), vol. 1. Berlin, 1878, pp. 36–37. Available online at: https://www.reichstagsprotokolle.de/Blatt3_k4_bsb00018398_00057.html. Original German text reprinted in Hans Fenske, *Im Bismarckschen Reich 1871–1890*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978, pp. 200–2.

Translation: Erwin Fink

Recommended Citation: Conservative Leader Otto von Helldorff Defends Bismarck's Anti-Socialist Legislation (September 16, 1878), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-675>> [May 17, 2024].