

General Overview of the Situation of the Social Democratic and Revolutionary Movements by the Berlin Political Police (January 12, 1882)

Abstract

The Reichstag debates that led to passage of the Anti-Socialist Law of 1878–1890 were not even complete when plans were launched, in July 1878, to form a network of spies across Germany, to establish a central clearing house for information on the Social Democratic and anarchist movements at home and abroad (a kind of FBI and CIA rolled into one), and to issue periodic reports on these “dangers.” The central figures behind this initiative were Prussian Minister of the Interior Count Botho zu Eulenburg (1831–1912) and Berlin Police President Guido von Madai (1810–1892). From 1878 to 1884, twice per year (and less often thereafter), the Berlin political police compiled information from their spies and from regional or local police forces into an “overview” of the socialist and anarchist movements. In 1880 these overviews were sent to a circle of 140 leading officials and police directors inside and outside Germany. Eventually, the recipients included Prussian county counselors (*Landräte*), but they generally received only excerpts, lest a complete overview fall into the hands of Social Democrats. The report of January 12, 1882, is reproduced here, without a subsequent section (about the same length as this one) that addressed “subversion” in England, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Russia, America, and other foreign countries

Source

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Agitation was carried out in every possible way. Party leaders traveled throughout the summer to encourage and advise and also received deputies from the constituencies or met with them in a neutral place. Confidants from neighboring districts contacted each other for mutual support; in Mittweida in the Kingdom of Saxony, delegates from all the constituencies of the kingdom once gathered to the strength of 60 men.

In order to carry the agitation to the masses, joint excursions and festivities were arranged, to which several unsuspecting associations had to lend their names, and larger secret meetings were also held, from the number of which only the one which took place near Fürth at the beginning of October which 400 persons attended may be highlighted here.

After the attempt to organize public party meetings by using some person not yet known to the authorities as a socialist as a front man had failed, they fell back on the means of getting attention already familiar from earlier times. They crowded the meetings of other parties and awaited an opportunity to take the floor and, after a few colorless phrases, proclaimed quite unexpectedly the name of the socialist candidate. Although this behavior, wherever it was applied, especially in Berlin, Magdeburg, Ottensen and some towns in Bavaria, resulted in the immediate dissolution of the meeting in question, the purpose was already achieved by the naming of the candidate.

Furthermore, election leaflets of all kinds were written with great zeal and prepared for printing. The printing of the leaflets and the ballots was carried out almost without exception in Germany itself, namely in Leipzig, Nuremberg, Berlin, Magdeburg, Brunswick, Breslau, Dresden, etc., while Zurich was given as the place of printing to mislead the authorities.

On the instructions of the party leadership, the distribution of the leaflets was postponed until the last days before the elections in order to keep the impression as fresh as possible, but then it was undertaken with great energy and skill. In Dresden, for example, about 300 men distributed 40,000 copies in a few evening hours.[1] In Altona, women and girls were used who hid the leaves in their bosoms and thus had to protect them against premature discovery, while in Breslau children carried them in botanist's containers to the distributors.

While such preparations were carried out almost everywhere in the same way, the special organization of the election agitation was left to the individual election committees and, where such committees were not specially elected, to shop stewards, who had to adapt them to the local conditions. In Berlin, for example, this included the production of metal stencils to paint the names of the candidates on fences, house doors, sidewalks, and the like, and in this way to make them known to as many comrades as possible, as well as the painting of a four-sided figure with the inscription "Vote" to recommend the candidate Viereck.

Every effort was also made to raise money. The foundation was formed by the largest share of the 12,000 marks that Fritzsche and Viereck had brought with them from America. In addition, there were voluntary donations from wealthy party comrades, among whom Höchberg, as always, distinguished himself by giving about 10,000 marks, as well as the proceeds from festivities, raffles and house collections.

In addition, the support of the expelled and their families was reduced to the bare minimum in order to make the sums thus saved available for election purposes. The party leadership was also not afraid to ask members of other parties for contributions under the pretext that these were to be used for support purposes, and to accept funds that were offered to them voluntarily. Only recently it was stated in the Reichstag that in this way the Progress Party [*Fortschrittspartei*] had made significant contributions. In addition, letters were sent to hundreds of private persons of all classes, on whose charity they believed to be able to count. In the event that the necessary funds were not raised through these means, it was envisaged that the amount of the tax waiver for the months of July, August and September[2] would be levied by the party and the subscription to the "Sozialdemokrat" ["Social Democrat"] would be discontinued for a certain period of time. However, these extreme measures were not necessary. The collected funds, if they were not used on the spot, were delivered to Bebel and distributed by him to the individual constituencies as needed.

The results of the elections have generally been commensurate with the effort put into them.[3] The fact that the Social Democrats won more seats than they had previously held is not due to them alone, as the failure in the first round of elections proves, but is largely due to the opposing parties, whose mutual hatred was so great that they preferred the election of a Social Democrat to that of another opponent. This was most evident in Breslau, where the conservatives, and in Hanau, where the Progress Party apparently voted for the socialist candidate in the runoff. The event in Hanau is all the more remarkable because a few weeks earlier Frohme[4] had uttered very violent outbursts against the Progress Party in an open letter. An explanation for this peculiar behavior can only be found in the often emphasized and apparently insurmountable sympathy which the Progress Party cherishes for Social Democracy and believes it must express without regard to the circumstances. The "Social Democrat" is therefore not entirely wrong when it writes in its issue of November 17 that the picture of disunion among its opponents is the greatest triumph of Social Democracy. The latter was soon declared the greatest evil and soon the lesser one; one only endeavored to capture their votes and at the same time add one's own to them.

However, the elections proved that the party is still as strong as it was in 1878.

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The party is therefore quite satisfied with the outcome of the elections, openly expresses its joy about it and attaches to it all kinds of hopes for the future. The “Social Democrat” even thinks that the elections have made the law of October 21, 1878, as absurd as possible and exclaims triumphantly: “The rulers are terrified, they feel that their glory is coming to an end. Therefore, make way, you rich and powerful of this earth, make way for the poor and oppressed; we do not fear your threats, we do not follow your enticements, we make demands now.”^[5]

However, this confidence in victory is not entirely justified. The law of October 21, 1878, has by no means remained without effect. It is clear that penal provisions can neither overturn real convictions nor prevent them from taking root. But this is not at all the purpose of the law, and it is therefore not proven by the fact that despite its existence the number of Social Democrats has remained at about the same level as before. The main purpose of the law is only to counteract the frivolous public agitation of the masses and to make room for calm deliberation by eliminating the agitation of the leaders, and this has generally been achieved.

Through careful observation of the situation and strict application of the penal provisions, however, it was also possible to make secret agitation considerably more difficult, to disturb the organization of the party, at least in some of the main places, by removing the most high profile personalities, and even here and there to completely suppress the desire for further participation in the movement. For this reason, Hartmann, the Kapell brothers and some others, various Hamburg socialists, for example, withdrew; despondency was also the cause of Vahlteich’s emigration,^[6] and inevitably these examples will inspire imitation in the course of time. Apart from these obvious effects of the law, which, however, could only be achieved by the application of the greatest attention on the part of the appointed authorities, and only under this condition can an expansion be hoped for in the future, certain further indications suggest that an improvement of the conditions is not out of the realm of the possible for other reasons either.

Although the “Social Democrat” has solemnly declared that the party does not make pacts with its enemies,^[7] nevertheless, compromise negotiations between Social Democrats and other parties have been initiated several times during the election period, either by the former itself or, if the suggestion came from elsewhere, they were not immediately rejected.

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The direction in which these beginnings will develop will depend in the main on whether Bebel will retain and be able to exploit the dominating influence which he, as the most intellectually significant and energetic leader, has regained on the party for some time. If this is the case, it is impossible to imagine Social Democracy giving in, for Bebel himself, as already noted earlier, is absolutely averse to any compromise.

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NOTES

^[1] Cf. Bebel, *Leben*, p. 768f.

^[2] By the law of February 18, 1881, the so-called class tax had been eliminated for annual incomes below 1,200 marks.

^[3] In the Reichstag elections on October 27, 1881, 311961 votes were cast for Social Democratic candidates, or 6.1% [...].

^[4] Karl Franz Egon Frohme (1850–1933), mechanical engineer, writer, member of the General German Workers' Association since 1868, after the Unification Congress of 1875 one of the leading opportunists of orthodox Lassalleanism, under the Anti-Socialist Act delegate to party congresses in 1880 and 1883; member of the German Reichstag, 1881–1918. [...]

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- [5] Non-verbatim quotation from the article “Unser der Sieg trotz alledem!” In: *Der Sozialdemokrat*, November 3, 1881.
- [6] Julius Vahlteich had to emigrate because he had lost his livelihood due to the Anti-Socialist Law.
- [7] Cf. *Der Sozialdemokrat*, February 6, 1881, and October 13, 1881.

Source: Berlin police chief [Guido] von Madai, “General Overview of the Situation of the Social Democratic and Revolutionary Movement,” January 12, 1882; Brandenburgische Landeshauptarchiv Potsdam, Pr. Br. Rep. 30 Berlin C Polizeipräsidium Tit. 94 Lit. S No. 1255 vol. 1, pp. 278–99 R; reprinted in Dieter Fricke and Rudolf Knaack, eds, *Dokumente aus geheimen Archiven. Overviews of the Berlin Political Police on the General Situation of the Social Democratic and Anarchist Movements 1878–1913*. vol. 1, 1878–1889. Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1983, pp. 109–15.

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Recommended Citation: General Overview of the Situation of the Social Democratic and Revolutionary Movements by the Berlin Political Police (January 12, 1882), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-5099>> [July 08, 2025].