

Wartime Distress Experienced by Chemnitz Workers in Summer 1866 (Retrospective Account, 1910)

Abstract

Christian Mengers titled his 1910 autobiography *From the Last Days of the Guild*. In it he documented the itinerant life of skilled workers at a point in time when guild crafts were being gradually (and very unevenly) replaced by factory labor. In this excerpt, he describes the economic crisis that ensued just before, during, and after the Austro-Prussian War in June and July 1866. In this phase of Germany's industrialization, job security was next to non-existent. In Saxony specifically, where Mengers found himself in 1866, the industrializing region in and around Chemnitz—the “German Manchester”—was an important site for labor activism. It was there that August Bebel (1840–1913) and Wilhelm Liebknecht (1826–1900) rallied working-class and lower-middle class recruits and founded the fledging Saxon People's Party [*Sächsische Volkspartei*] in August 1866.

Source

Chemnitz and the War. 1866

[...]

It was an early morning at the end of August 1865 when we arrived at the gates of the large factory town of Chemnitz. At a distance of fifteen minutes from the city itself, we could not see anything; it was completely enveloped in a thick veil of smoke and soot. None of us had ever experienced anything like this. Flakes of soot from the many factory chimneys came swirling down upon us like snow. When the air is still and moist, the black exhaust forms a dense cloud and then falls to earth.

In the past, the greatest amount of work in our profession was available from August until after Christmas. So we got work immediately in the lamp factory of R. Wagner in Chemnitz and were hired at the same time as 25 other metalworkers. It was my intention to be trained especially in lamp manufacturing at this factory, so that perhaps later, if I was lucky, I could either establish this kind of business in my hometown or could serve as a competent foreman in a similar metal goods factory. Unfortunately, these were castles in the air.

My endeavor to expand and perfect my professional skills only served the purpose of their being exploited in service of others, without my ever achieving personal recognition.

Nearly a hundred metalworkers were employed in this lamp factory.

The first 14 days we worked for a salary. The minimum wage for 12-hour working days was 5 thalers per week; those who did not really earn the salary were dismissed immediately after 14 days. These were the recruitment conditions. After this deadline had passed, when we arrived at the salary office with about 30 metalworkers, not only the foreman was present but also our boss, Mr. Wagner. He had looked through the log books where our allotted tasks had been recorded and then made his selection. About 8–10 workers were dismissed as unqualified, while I was one of the “chosen ones.” In addition to the 5 thalers, we received 15 new pennies per week extra in recognition of our diligence. From then on everything was paid as piecework. We applied ourselves wholeheartedly, earned and saved a good deal of money, so that at first I was able to wear nice clothes, put aside a few thalers of travel money, and at Christmas also send home 5 thalers to my parents, who needed money. So I had planned to work longer in this factory

to save a nice bit of cash for the future; but “man thinks, and God directs.” The war of 1866 broke out. Since Saxony did not want to fight with Prussia against Austria, but instead joined Bavaria and Austria against Prussia, Saxony soon fell into enemy hands. The Prussian headquarters were established in Dresden.

It was June, and the war had already claimed its victims. One could feel its sad effects everywhere, but especially in Saxony and Bavaria. Trade and industry lay fallow, thousands of people became unemployed. Hundreds of honest journeymen migrated to free Switzerland to find work there, but this country too was soon overflowing with foreigners; many turned back or were brought across the border. And so it was inevitable that the state highway was swarming with craftsmen of all different professions, who in fact became a plague. Chemnitz, one of the largest factory towns in Germany, had about 80,000 inhabitants during my time there. Of these, at least 6,000 were factory workers: the many spinning mills, weaving mills, and cloth factories employed more than 3,000 people. And then there were the various machine factories with at least as many personnel; the R. Hartmann machine factory alone employed nearly 2,000 people. These large industries had their markets mostly in Austria and the eastern provinces of Prussia, towards Poznan and the Russian border, and towards Hungary and Galicia. These distribution areas were now closed everywhere. Thus civil commotion ensued, almost bordering on revolution, in Saxony and especially in Chemnitz. Hundreds of workers were dismissed. If this war had broken out in winter, I do not like to think of the misery and distress it would have caused in the German fatherland. Moreover, in Prussia and all its allied lands, hatred of Saxons and Bavarians had risen to its highest point, so that as a stranger (hence supposedly a Prussian) one was always exposed to the hostility of thoughtless fanatics.

One day this order came from the magistrate: “All foreigners who are not married and do not have citizenship must leave Chemnitz within 48 hours. Otherwise they will be transported across the border.” In our lamp factory there were a number of people who were not sufficiently trained, who were dismissed right at the beginning of the war. However, there was a core group of younger journeymen who had done well and thrived, and Mr. Wagner wanted to keep them. I belonged to this group. Our married companions were still fully employed for the time being, while we younger workers could only work half days until further notice. There was sincere hope that the war would soon be over and that then, there would be work again for everyone. And so there was a slow time for us, with half days spent in the tumult and confusion of the unemployed; our savings melted away noticeably. This lasted about 14 days until the order came: “All foreigners must leave Chemnitz.” In these 14 days I experienced many interesting adventures. I was young, strong, and interested in everything the war and its consequences had brought about, and so I joined this hustle and bustle of the moment. As I said, all of Saxony was at war. Every day in Chemnitz could be heard, “the Prussians are coming, they want to shell our city!” For half the day until late into the night, the mass of workers surged out to the city gates. This highly excited crowd was armed with clubs and stones, with which they were going to receive the Prussians as soon as they dared to enter the city. This continued each day and the rage of the crowd had grown to the point of madness. Saxony was stripped of all military. Prussia, however, had to concentrate its forces on four or five points and would hardly have been able to quell an uprising in Saxony. [...]

Every evening there was a great gathering of the rebellious crowd in the large market square. Impassioned speeches were given here, and there were often tumultuous scenes. Since not a single Saxon soldier remained in the country and the squad of policemen and guards was no match for the excited crowd, this agitated mass of people had to be calmed by insistent speeches and friendly exhortations from the mayor and the rich factory owners, who did have some success.

[...]

Source: Christian Mengers, *Aus den letzten Tagen der Zunft. Erinnerungen eines alten Handwerkers aus seinen Wanderjahren*. Leipzig: Otto Wigand Verlag, 1910, pp. 59–64; reprinted in Wolfgang Emmerich, ed., *Proletarische Lebensläufe. Autobiographische Dokumente zur Entstehung der Zweiten Kultur in Deutschland*, 2 vols., vol. 1, *Anfänge bis 1914*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1974, pp. 115–17.

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Recommended Citation: Wartime Distress Experienced by Chemnitz Workers in Summer 1866 (Retrospective Account, 1910), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-5064>> [March 23, 2025].