

Gustav Freytag Describes a Liberal Election Campaign in Erfurt (January 21 and 30, 1867)

Abstract

Gustav Freytag (1816–1895) was one of the most popular German novelists of the second half of the nineteenth century; he was also a journalist, historian, and politician, and the long-time editor of the liberal journal *Die Grenzboten*. In February 1867, he was elected to the North German Reichstag as a representative of the National Liberal Party. He served until 1870. In this exchange with Duke Ernst II of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha (1818–1893)—a patron of the German National Association [*Nationalverein*] and brother to Prince Albert, the husband of Queen Victoria—Freytag describes the election campaign that sent him to the Reichstag, the first one waged under universal male suffrage. As this correspondence suggests, Freytag was clearly uncomfortable with many aspects of mass politics, even though his account has an ironic, humorous touch.

Source

I. Freytag to Duke Ernst II of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha

Leipzig, January 21, 1867

My dear gracious Lord!

I have listed on a piece of paper the names of the persons who will probably be the main representatives of the National Party in the new parliament.^[1] As is always the case, they are the old names of the National Association and the Prussian opposition.

Your Highness will be in the best position to determine the right time for them to convene. If the matter is postponed, more and more of them will commit themselves to voting a certain way by taking up positions too early. Anyone who has already declared his view publicly will feel bound to his promises.

On the other hand, there is hardly any possibility that the invited persons will make a decision on the policies to be adopted as long as they are unfamiliar with the new imperial constitution. Moreover, the draft [of the constitution] in Your Highness's hands is, apart from the risk involved in conveying it to the invited Prussian representatives, not entirely authoritative, because Count Bismarck may deem further concessions—e.g., concerning budgetary rights—appropriate at any moment, and in such a case, will incorporate them without hesitation.

Therefore, it would be of great importance to learn whether Count Bismarck is willing to publish the draft before the opening of the Reichstag, or, respectively, before February 12, the designated election day. If this were the case, then it would seem to me that the period immediately following the announcement of the draft constitution would offer an appropriate date for an invitation [to convene]. If Count Bismarck intends to keep the draft shrouded in mystery, then the soonest possible date for the invitation would be the best.

It would have to be a Sunday so that the Berliners occupied with sessions of the Chamber could come as well.

Things are getting serious now with the elections. And yet this universal suffrage is the most frivolous of

all experiments ever dared by Count Bismarck. No one knows whether he'll be elected or not. And in the years ahead things will become even worse. For in the cities, the election is in the hands of the workers, and in the countryside, it is in the hands of the little people, day laborers, and farmhands.

[...]

Your Highness's

most obedient

Freytag.

II. Freytag to Duke Ernst II of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha

Leipzig, January 30, 1867

My dear gracious Lord!

A general election fever has broken out, and the election candidates' exercises in [prose] style are occupying such an unreasonable amount of space in the press that I am probably taxing my dear Lord's patience if I dare report on this topic.

However, since my dear Highness has shown such gracious interest in my Erfurt candidacy, let me relate the story of a comical trip there. After a number of preliminary negotiations, it appeared that the Conservatives had nominated Count Keller, and that the Liberals had nominated me, along with a Dr. med. [Robert] Lucius,^[2] the lord of a manor, husband of a Frankfurt Souché with a dowry of five million, and son of an old Catholic family in Erfurt. The sovereign people were called upon to decide between us. Without any gratitude for the burdensome situation in which the committee had put me only after I had accepted [the nomination], I traveled from Leipzig to the festival in Erfurt. Welcome by the committee at the train station: we looked at each other curiously, they being alien to me, I being alien to them. March to a large, desolate meeting room, where the voters sat dutifully, smoking and drinking beer. A certain bluish smoke had already settled over the assembly. The committee assumed its position on a raised platform in a large alcove; the candidate received a small chair up there as well. I saw that our platform was the stage of an emptied theater, with the rolled-up curtain still hanging above me. This discovery was not opportune for my rival, since the ghosts of the place were at my service. Mr. Lucius himself was no ordinary person, still young, of a firm and simple character, had lived in England for some time, had sailed around the world on the *Thetis*, fought as a volunteer in the Danish and Bohemian campaigns; I liked him, and at first I thought I'd wait for his speech and then decide in favor of him or myself. His debut as candidate was not good, however. He was too inexperienced in political affairs and uncertain with regard to facts and legal matters, as the inquiries revealed. Moreover, I noticed that the Liberals did not trust him, because they suspected that he wished to become district administrator, make a career, and deceive them.

During his speech, a thundering, angry knock could occasionally be heard at a small door leading from our stage to the foyer. When it was opened, a throng of contrary-minded voters barged into the hallowed space of the [nominating] committee and threateningly arrayed themselves behind us in a semi-circle, like the choir in an ancient tragedy; these were unkempt journeymen from Krackrügge's^[3] band and red-bearded, insolent Lassalleans. One of them immediately began asking the candidate shameless questions and, accompanied by the cheers and shouts of an excited gallery, annoyed the committee to such an extent that I thought the entire action would end just like the third act of the *Afrikanerin*.^[4] Finally, the audience took a vote, deciding that this candidate could step down and that the second fencer had to wield his sword.

In the knowledge that I was wearing a black dress-coat and gray trousers—that is, the right mix of respectability and familiarity—I began to stir my punch, with feeling, adding well-proven lines from *der Grenzbote*, along with profound observations about fate and the human condition. This pleased the lads [...]. Coarseness carried the day, Lucius's star fell, and with a loud cry and the shaking of hands all around I was proclaimed the chosen one. A sculptor requested that I model for him, a court photographer also asked for sittings, the publisher of the *Thüringische Zeitung* declared that his wife had just given birth and that I should serve as the child's godfather, a peasant from Windisch-Holzhausen regaled me with a short speech and expressed the wish to own a copy of *Soll und Haben*—he could buy one, of course, but would prefer that I present it to him as a gift. And the old theater curtain dangled happily above us.

The next day, [...] I obliged the sculptor, sat for the photographer, attended a baptismal breakfast with the new father, and sent the book to the peasant, while my committee proceeded with the valor of lions.

The constituency that is supposed to elect me consists of all the small patches of Prussian cloth that were sewn onto Thuringia and Franconia. Suhl and Schleusingen; then Ziegenrück and Ranis in a little-known wilderness to which, as one hears, only mountain trails lead; followed by Gefell and other enclaves adjacent to Bavaria, and finally Wandersleben. From all sides come demands from my voters that I visit them and provide them with an evening's entertainment, and the correspondence with influential lawyers and innkeepers is becoming enormous. Oh, this universal suffrage ruins a man's character: for fifty years I didn't give popularity a second thought, and now I send a bouquet of flowers to a woman in childbed without knowing whether she had a boy or a girl, and I shake the hands of a hundred dear friends whose names I don't know and never will know. Fie, Bismarck, that was no master stroke! And in the end, they'll probably vote for someone else anyway.

[...]

Your Highness's
most obedient
Freytag.

NOTES

[1] The Reichstag of the North German Confederation—trans.

[2] Freytag's rival, Robert Lucius (1835–1914), was a friend of Bismarck, who helped him join the hereditary nobility with the title Baron Robert Lucius von Ballhausen in 1888. By that time Lucius had long been a leading Free Conservative parliamentarian, sitting in the Reichstag from 1870 until 1881. He served as Prussian Minister of Agriculture from 1879 to 1890 and was appointed to the Prussian House of Lords [*Herrenhaus*] in 1895—ed.

[3] Goswin Krackrügge (born 1803), a revolutionary from 1848—ed.

[4] An opera by Giacomo Meyerbeer—trans.

Source: Gustav Freytag to Duke Ernst of Coburg, Leipzig, letters of January 21, 1867 (Part I) and January 30, 1867 (Part II); reprinted in *Gustav Freytag und Herzog Ernst von Coburg im Briefwechsel 1853 bis 1893*, ed. Eduard Tempelтей. Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1904, pp. 212–17.

Translation: James Retallack and Erwin Fink

Recommended Citation: Gustav Freytag Describes a Liberal Election Campaign in Erfurt (January 21 and 30, 1867), published in: German History in Documents and Images,
<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-1854>> [May 17, 2024].