

Ludwig Bamberger on the Extension of the Anti-Socialist Law (1884)

Abstract

In April and May 1884, fear of a Reichstag dissolution threw German left liberals into the grotesque situation of opposing the extension of the Anti-Socialist Law on principle but secretly working towards passage of the government bill. In the following excerpt from his diary, Ludwig Bamberger (1823–1899) describes the German Radical Party's "odd maneuvering" to achieve this goal. Bamberger's diary conveys the complicated personal dynamics within a hybrid party that had been founded barely a month earlier. The fusion of the Liberal Union with the German Progressive Party in March 1884 had been engineered by Eugen Richter (1838–1906) and Albert Hänel (1833–1918) partly to reverse German liberalism's leftward drift since 1878/79, and this aim, too, can be discerned in the maneuverings described here. Although Bamberger writes of Richter's "innocent candor" and "naïve reversal," he does not believe Richter to be innocent or naïve at all; he is the consummate Machiavellian.

Source

(April). Odd maneuvering when it comes to the renewal of the Anti-Socialist Law. Bismarck is suggesting it with pathos, but in reality he would like to have it rejected so that he may dissolve the Reichstag. We reject it with pathos but would really like to have it accepted, in order to avoid a dissolution. The meetings of the committee on which I sit witness the craziest maneuverings of them all. [Ludwig] Windthorst^[1] suggests modifications that would weaken the law and that we would have to vote for, but the government rejects everything, simply to be able to reject. So eventually we reject it as well, in order to confront Windthorst and his followers with an unmodified bill that the Center either has to reject or accept without modifications, and we count on the latter eventuality. This leads to the most learned sort of chess game during each vote. We send one of our party members away in order to remain in the minority during the final vote. Thus, the law would have been passed in the committee with a majority of one vote, had Windthorst not ordered [August] Reichensperger, who had already raised his hand, to put it down again so that the vote was tied and the law rejected accordingly.

Now not a soul has any idea how things will turn out in the plenary session in four days (Thursday). Windthorst, who seemed all along to wish for the passage of the law, now appears to work against it. By telegram he summons workers to come and vote against it (afterwards doubtful again). No one has a clue what he is really up to. Has he perhaps struck an agreement with the Conservatives (or with Bismarck himself?) to defeat the bill as they wish, in order to be rewarded afterwards?

We are in the worst situation of all because, in addition to the struggle with Bismarck, we also have a home-grown conflict in our own new caucus: the battle with Eugen Richter. He is playing the same game that Bismarck played with us, only in the opposite direction. He hopes that as many deputies as necessary will vote to pass the bill; but he acts as though this were a crime. He is the one who is most terrified of the dissolution ([Eduard] Lasker always told me that at the moment of truth no one showed more fear than Richter), but he curses anyone who wants to help avoid it. His broader calculation includes winning the votes of Social Democratic supporters in the run-off elections. During meetings of the committee he always keeps a watchful eye to see whether the Social Democratic members of the Reichstag are in attendance. [...]

On Tuesday, after the main committee vote on the Anti-Socialist Law, we are holding an executive

meeting of the caucus to discuss party strategy for the plenary session. When [Max von] Forckenbeck declared that he was going to vote for the bill with an explanatory statement and [Albert] Hänel paraphrased this, Eugen Richter remained seated, quiet and introverted. We continued talking for a while, without him stirring at all. Finally, after an embarrassed pause, he gets up and leaves the room without saying a word.

People speculate that he is deeply dissatisfied and is planning something wicked. Hänel, [Heinrich] Rickert, [Franz von] Stauffenberg, and I go to the “Kaiserhof” and rack our brains, quite downcast over what he might be up to. Hänel, in particular, is afraid of some *coup de tête*^[2] and his suspicions infect the others. The caucus meeting is set for the following morning (Friday).

On that morning (Friday) Richter already looks a lot tamer.

I ask him what his silence has meant: diplomacy or protest?

He replies: In all the excitement he had just wished to avoid any hasty or overwrought statement. Now, however, he already speaks much more moderately, and by general agreement we decide to reschedule the party meeting to next Wednesday evening (the evening before the second reading in the Reichstag plenary session). By that time, he also promises me to show his cards in front of all our members, thereby indicating how he will behave in the parliamentary party meeting. The whole matter seems to have de-escalated.

On Monday, May 5th, we—that is, Richter, Stauffenberg, Rickert, [Adolf] Hoffmann, and [Karl] Baumbach—get together again for consultations, and now Richter coolly gets out a piece of paper with probability calculations about how many votes our parliamentary party would have to provide for the bill to pass. He thinks that 25 are needed, and he now explains with the most innocent candor that, because some deputies wish to abstain from the vote, it would be much better if they simply voted in favor. In a word, there was now no one else promoting passage of the bill as eagerly as Richter, and just to be on the safe side he takes precautions that a number of those who intended to (or had to) vote against the bill would be sent away and all aye-voters sent for. Such a naïve reversal—from the comedy of indignation to effort in the opposite direction—has probably never been witnessed before. Stauffenberg and I just stared at each other as if under a spell.

Finally, Richter had [Hugo] Hermes convince quite a few faithful followers, who wanted to come, to stay home instead, and he even arranged, once again, to send away the stout [Louis] Schwarz from Württemberg, even though he was already in the building—buffoonery without parallel. This shows how useful the merger was. Had we remained separate, we would have had to pay the price and he would have hummed a triumphal song at the head of his party about the poor sinners who had saved him from the embarrassment of a parliamentary dissolution. But one needs such antibodies to resist Bismarckian policy.

As we made our way home, Stauffenberg repeated over and over again: “That was a spectacle worth writing down.”

NOTES

^[1] Leader of the Catholic Center Party—ed.

^[2] Here, a hot-headed outburst or ill-considered gambit—ed.

Source: Ernst Feder, ed., *Bismarcks großes Spiel. Die geheimen Tagebücher Ludwig Bambergers*. Frankfurt am Main: Societäts-Verlag, 1932, pp. 290–94; original German text reprinted in Gerhard A.

Ritter, ed., *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich 1871–1914. Ein historisches Lesebuch*, 5th ed. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992, pp. 112–14.

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