

Reactions to the First Attempt on the Life of Kaiser Wilhelm I (Retrospective Account, 1910)

Abstract

In the first part (A) of this document, Christoph von Tiedemann (1836–1907), Chief of the Reich Chancellery in the late 1870s, explains the events of May 11, 1878. On that day, Max Hödel fired shots at, and entirely missed, Kaiser Wilhelm I while he rode in his carriage on Unter den Linden in Berlin. Tiedemann does not mention that later on the day of the attempted assassination, Bismarck sent the following curt telegram from his estate at Friedrichsruh to the Reich State Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Bernhard von Bülow: “Shouldn’t one take the [attempted] assassination as an opportunity for immediate legislation against socialists and the press. Please ask Count [Botho] zu Eulenburg.” In the second part (B), Tiedemann explains that Bismarck is primarily concerned not with successful passage of an Anti-Socialist Law in the Reichstag but with demonstrating that the government is prepared to act against the perceived threat of Social Democracy.

Source

A. Christoph von Tiedemann on the Attempt on Kaiser Wilhelm I’s Life and the Anti-Socialist Law (Retrospective Account, 1910)

The Assassination Attempts of the year 1878 and the Anti-Socialist Law.

I.

In the first half of the year 1878 the Socialist question was at the forefront of political interest. During the elections of the previous year the Social Democratic Party had received almost half a million votes. It had nominated no less than 175 candidates, only twelve of whom were in fact elected, however. But their well-organized, very lively agitation before the elections had shown what instruments of power it had at its disposal, and it gave us pause that the Social Democratic party group in the Reichstag was now able for the first time, with the help of a few signatures from members of the Progressive Party [*Fortschrittspartei*] or the Center Party [*Zentrumspartei*] (and there were open or concealed relations with both), to submit private bills. Hand in hand with this increase in votes came the boom of the Social Democratic press, whose subscription numbers far exceeded 100,000. And at that time especially, this press seemed to have set itself the particular task of preparing the masses for the most extreme revolutionary excesses. According to the familiar prescription of the so-called “Ghent Manifesto,” which Liebknecht expressly agreed with on behalf of the German Social Democratic Party at the International Communist Congress in Ghent (September 9 to 15, 1877), the revolutionary parties without loyalty to any homeland should join hands as brothers in order to “use every political means that can lead to the liberation of all members of the proletariat.” This could only be understood to mean that a fight to the death against the foundations of the monarchical state and bourgeois society was now to begin. I will not even mention the anonymous Social Democratic pamphlets that were proliferating like mushrooms and which included passages such as the following: “that Social Democracy pursue its goals through blood and destruction and not even shy away from murder where it is necessary.”

On what fertile ground such inciting seeds had fallen was proven by Hödel’s assassination attempt. On May 11 at 3:30 in the afternoon Kaiser Wilhelm and his daughter, the Grand Duchess of Baden, returning from a carriage ride, rode along Unter den Linden. Near the Russian embassy building, a young person

suddenly jumped towards the open carriage and fired at the Kaiser from a revolver. The shot missed. The person fired another shot while crossing behind the carriage and then seeking to reach the center of the Linden promenade. Pursued by many people, he ran towards the Brandenburg Gate and was arrested in its vicinity.

News of the assassination attempt spread through the city like a wildfire, causing the greatest agitation and outrage everywhere. I had hurried to the Linden in order to gather further information about the crime and its perpetrator, and I had just sent a longer telegram to Count von Bismarck at Friedrichsruh when, shortly after my return to the office, a Social Democratic agitator was announced as a visitor. He was privy to all his party's secrets and thus could probably be considered one of its actual leaders. He had sought my acquaintance earlier on and had repeatedly supplied me with valuable reports from the Social Democratic camp. The news he brought me that evening were of such an extensive nature and gave such an insight into the wide-ranging plans of the Social Democratic party leadership that I could not help thinking that Hödel's assassination attempt had been just the harbinger of further attacks directly targeting the survival of the monarchy, although my visitor denied this. By the way, the agitator expressly confirmed that Hödel was a member of the Social Democratic Party. I was about to write down this information in order to pass it on to Count von Bismarck when I received a letter by Count Herbert von Bismarck late that evening, requesting me to come to Friedrichsruh. This letter was followed by a second one the next morning, which instructed me to inform the ministers that Count von Bismarck wished them to draft an exceptional law directed against the Social Democrats without delay. The outlines of such a law were sketched in a nutshell. I was able to communicate the contents of this letter to most of the ministers before they made their way to the palace in order to congratulate the Kaiser on his rescue from the assassin's hands. When they had returned, I spoke to Minister von Bülow, who, still filled with the impression the Kaiser's calm, dignified demeanor had made on him, tried to recapitulate his words. I immediately wrote them down and subsequently passed them on to the press. They read as follows:

"This was the third time he had been shot at; he found consolation in the public's sympathy; one must not fail in any way to take such things seriously; during the time when he was a member of the State Ministry he had always pointed out the dangers that must arise from the assertion of subversive trends at the time. His fears had unfortunately been confirmed by the year 1848. Today and to a greater extent it was the government's task to ensure that revolutionary elements do not gain the upper hand. Each minister had to do his share. It was especially important that the people do not lose their religion. To prevent this was the primary task."

The ministers were still feeling the effects of these simple words that went right to the core of the question when they gathered for a confidential meeting that evening to which I had also received an invitation. Everyone agreed that something had to happen. Yet not all ministers found Count von Bismarck's proposal agreeable; notably Friedenthal and Leonhardt had misgivings about an "exceptional law." After a lengthy debate Friedenthal agreed to present the minority's dissenting views personally to Count von Bismarck and to travel to Friedrichsruh for this purpose.

The next morning Friedenthal and I met in our train compartment. Once we had arrived in Friedrichsruh, we had breakfast with the Count, and on this occasion the question of a special anti-socialist law was discussed in great detail. Friedenthal claimed that it would not be possible to obtain the approval of the Reichstag for an exceptional law and that it was therefore more appropriate to include the necessary sanctions against Social Democratic riots (as the common phrase went) "in the framework of general law." Meanwhile the Count insisted on his view that one could only effectively rip into the heart of Social Democracy if one were authorized to go beyond the barriers erected by the constitution in exaggerated provisions for the protection of the individual and the parties as formulated in the so-called basic rights. The state was in a situation of self-defense against Social Democracy. In self-defense one must not be squeamish in choosing one's means, however. *A corsaire corsaire et demi!*

As usual in a dispute with the Count, Friedenthal eventually got the short end of the stick. He dropped his objections and upon his departure that evening promised to work towards expediting the matter if possible.

The legislative machinery now worked full steam ahead. On May 15 around nine o'clock in the evening the new minister of the interior, Count Botho Eulenburg, arrived at Friedrichsruh with the finished draft of the Anti-Socialist Law in his briefcase, and once he had obtained the Count's approval of its individual clauses, he returned to Berlin on the night train barely three hours later. The Bundesrat approved the draft two days later, the Reichstag received it already on May 20.

The fate of this first anti-socialist law is well-known. It was dispatched just as promptly as it was conceived, and in fact one cannot say that it was treated unjustly. The individual stipulations revealed too clearly the haste that had been required, and notably § 1 with its malleable stipulations ("Pamphlets and associations that pursue the goals of Social Democracy can be banned by the Bundesrat") positively provoked criticism. It was expressed notably by Bennigsen in a relentless manner. The "goals" of Social Democracy, he explained, also included entirely legitimate efforts such as the protection of workers' rights and their wishes regarding the state's social policy, the municipalities, etc. § 1 could be applied even to the most serious scholarly disquisitions. The Bundesrat was a thoroughly unsuitable authority for the position and role of ruling on bans that the draft ascribed to it since it only assembles for part of the year and was bound by the instructions of the state governments, and nor was the Reichstag suited as a controlling and reviewing body.

As much as one could acknowledge the justification of these objections to the draft's details, one had to intensely regret that Bennigsen sought to refuse the Reich government any extraordinary power in the fight against Social Democracy for doctrinaire reasons and that he evoked the specter of dictatorship. After the National Liberal party group had unanimously declared against an exceptional law two days earlier, it wasn't surprising that the Reichstag flatly rejected the draft with an overwhelming majority (241 to 57 votes). Immediately afterwards the Reichstag went into recess.

I was astonished at the equanimity with which Count von Bismarck reacted to this parliamentary defeat. While he usually did not hold back with Faustian expressions in order to vent his displeasure when the Reichstag interfered with his plans, this time he limited himself to a few humorous remarks on the unfortunate ministers who had been tasked with defending the failed draft. I will refrain from speculating whether he would have remained as imperturbable had he stood in the breach himself during this fight. Apparently, he believed that the fruit was not yet ripe enough to be shaken from the tree by force and that one had to give public opinion time to prepare itself for further, more drastic measures. At any rate, there was not the least mention of dissolving the Reichstag in response to its harsh rejection of the draft.

[...]

Source: Christoph von Tiedemann, *Sechs Jahre Chef der Reichskanzlei unter dem Fürsten Bismarck*. Second edition. Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1910, pp. 259–65.

B. Christoph von Tiedemann to Prussian Minister of State Karl von Hofmann (May 19, 1878)

Friedrichsruh, May 19, 1878

Your Excellency, the Reich Chancellor would be very grateful if, when arguing in favor of the draft law, you would keep in mind the following aspects with regard to the defense against Social Democratic riots:

1. It was not Hödel's assassination attempt that created the need for this draft law. Already during discussions on the Criminal Code, specifically regarding the introduction of the so-called "rubber clause"

[*Kautschuk-Paragraph*], the Reich government had pointed out the consequences that arise for the security of the state and society under our current law if activities such as those of Social Democracy take root in the life of our people. Since then the need has always existed in the eyes of the government. Hödel's assassination attempt can only serve as new evidence for the correctness of this opinion, it has only confirmed but not prompted it, and it offers an opportunity to make another attempt [at passing the law] without constituting its basis.

2. The important thing is not to submit a law that is certain to be passed by the Reichstag, but that the government do its duty and free itself from responsibility for a lack of corrective measures. We must prevent the Bundesrat from being accused of inaction in the face of the Social Democratic Party's rioting. If the Reichstag rejects the current draft, it thereby relieves the confederated governments of the responsibility for further Social Democratic riots; it will bear responsibility itself. Should the government fail to present a draft, it might later be accused of a lack of initiative to fight political danger in this case.

3. Therefore the draft should not be viewed as a vote of confidence for the Reich government or a cabinet question. All it is intended to do is to cover the government's responsibility for future events and to induce the Reichstag to take a stand.

Source: Otto von Bismarck, *Gesammelte Werke*, Neue Friedrichsruher Ausgabe, Abteilung III, Band 3, *Schriften 1877–1878*, ed. Michael Epkenhans and Erik Lommatzsch. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2008, Nr. 406, p. 475.

Translation: Insa Kummer

Recommended Citation: Reactions to the First Attempt on the Life of Kaiser Wilhelm I (Retrospective Account, 1910), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-5096>> [July 10, 2025].