

Social Antagonism between Protestants and Catholics (1870s–1880s)

Abstract

Eduard Hüsgen (1848–1912) was the co-founder and long-time chairman of the Augustinus Association for the Benefit of the Catholic Press [*Augustinus-Verein zur Pflege der katholischen Presse*]. In this excerpt from his 1907 biography of Center Party leader Ludwig Windthorst (1812–1891), Hüsgen emphasizes the impact of Protestant-Catholic social antagonisms in Germany's small and medium-sized cities. In 1871, Hüsgen had been dismissed from judicial service in Prussia because of his affiliation with a Center Party newspaper. He was not alone in suffering this sort of discrimination. The *Kulturkampf* ("cultural struggle") of the 1870s and 1880s widened the gap between Protestants and Catholics. Throughout the imperial period, Catholics were significantly under-represented in the ranks of civil servants and in industry, trade, and commerce. Because Catholics tended to live in more rural regions, they were over-represented in agriculture.

Source

That which has been designated as the *Kulturkampf* was the mobilization of confessional opposition to Catholicism, the mustering of state power at higher and lower levels, and the use of all instruments of power that education and property could afford against anything labeled Catholic or even remotely associated with the Catholic Church.

Like a poisonous atmosphere, like a kind of disease, it hovered over our fatherland. Catholic and enemy of the Reich, Catholic and unpatriotic, ultramontane and hostile to the fatherland, follower of the Center Party and opponent of any cultural aspirations—according to common belief, these were equivalent terms. It was a matter of good taste, as it were, to make Catholics aware of their political and social inferiority in the clearest possible way and to deny them equality in public and private life. When people began to feel shame about this situation, they were to remember—as Reichstag representative Hänel said in parliament on January 12, 1882—that “engaging in the *Kulturkampf* was necessary, correct, and patriotic, and even a prerequisite for acceptance into high society. One simply had to exhibit blind determination in following all the demands raised by the government and the Conservatives with respect to church legislation; otherwise, one ran at least the risk of being somewhat disreputable, politically speaking.”^[1] In this context, however, one must not forget that every now and then the Progressives and the National Liberals were even worse than the Conservatives.

The confessional and political differences were so substantial that a gaping rift ran through society, carrying division and discord all the way into the bosom of the family. A Catholic with steadfast convictions was actually regarded as a mere second-class citizen. As a matter of fact, even Catholic men who did not support the Center Party, and who instead preferred the ranks of its political opponents, were not taken seriously and encountered a certain degree of mistrust, unless they distinguished themselves through a particular breed of ruthlessness in the battle against their co-religionists.

Catholics were virtually excluded from social circles and from friendly dealings with non-Catholics, especially in small to medium-sized towns. The political party program and the confessional question even influenced business relations.

In some cities, such as Mönchengladbach and Düsseldorf, so-called black lists were printed and

distributed among liberal party members to exert pressure on “ultramontane” shopkeepers or to encourage liberal customers to boycott them. On top of that, in cases in which political or municipal elections had stirred up emotions even further, it was by no means rare for workers and private employees who had voted for Center Party candidates out of conviction to be dismissed. On September 25, 1882, at a voters’ meeting in Krefeld, [Ludwig] Windthorst said, among other things: “It filled me with deep pain in the past, and again today, when I heard that there have been factory owners here—I hope their kind no longer exists—who threatened their workers’ material well-being, and even dismissed them from work or put them out of work at least for a time, because these workers had freely exercised their right to vote. This I consider an ignominy!”

The majority of parliament even deemed it entirely proper that higher officials examined the voting of indirect and direct lower-ranking public servants of the state during public elections.

These days, it is difficult to imagine just how high and how hot the flames of confessional hatred flared during the campaigns leading up to political and, even worse, municipal elections. For example, when the liberal election committee in Düsseldorf telegraphed the Reich Chancellor with the results of the *Landtag* election, which, thanks to a cunning display of gerrymandering, saw two seats snatched away from the Center Party and handed to the Liberal Party, it sent the following words: “A beautiful constituency has been reconquered for the fatherland.” The files of the election monitoring committee from those days contain truly incredible tales of official and private manipulations of elections.

What lower-level officials in particular took the liberty of doing to Catholics, even in Catholic regions, would be hard to believe today.

[...]

Not even the administration of justice, whose independence had been Prussia’s special pride up to that point, remained completely unaffected by the *Kulturkampf*. On July 15, 1874, the Minister of Justice issued a special decree instructing senior public prosecutors to devote increased attention to Center Party newspapers and to proceed with confiscations and legal action in all cases in which they found the elements of a crime amounting to a punishable offence. Since these authorities were officially inclined to criminalize acts to begin with, one can only imagine the success that such a request must have met with. There was a conspicuous increase in the number of trials initiated against the “ultramontane” press, and the subordinate judicial and police powers were guilty in many cases of obvious violations of the law during confiscations and house searches. Even liberal newspapers admitted that any sort of freedom of the press could be destroyed in this way. In some instances, Center Party newspapers were punished for printing articles that liberal newspapers in the very same town had already printed without incurring any punishment. On February 23, 1875, Reichstag representative Dr. Lieber stated this explicitly in parliament, censuring the course of action taken by the courts in his lively manner. He added that the official newspapers roused tempers in such a way that it was simply astonishing that the words spoken in the Bavarian Second Chamber—“One does not negotiate with the ultramontanes, it is better to smash their heads in!”—had yet to be put into practice; nevertheless, until then these instigations had been allowed to pass freely.

NOTES

[1] *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Reichstages*, 5th legislative period, 1st session, 1881/82, p. 563.

Source: Eduard Hüsgen, *Ludwig Windthorst*. Cologne, 1907, pp. 222–23, 226; original German text

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