

Socialists on Trial for Treason (1872)

Abstract

In the autumn of 1870, public opposition to the war against France was voiced in the Reichstag by August Bebel (1840–1913) and Wilhelm Liebknecht (1826–1900). Bebel would later go on to express support for the Paris Commune in a speech to the Reichstag on May 25, 1871. As a result, these two Social Democratic leaders—together with Adolf Hepner (1846–1923), an assistant at the Socialist *Volksstaat*—were tried before the Court of Assizes in Leipzig from March 11–26, 1872. The formal charge against the trio was that they had made “preparations for high treason.” Actually, their speeches and the fledgling party they represented threatened neither Bismarck’s policy nor public peace at that time. But their sin was to have linked opposition to Germany’s annexation of Alsace and Lorraine with support for the struggle of the Communards in Paris: that linkage greatly increased workers’ respect for these Social Democratic parliamentarians while damning them, in the eyes of most middle- and upper-class Germans, as dangerous revolutionaries who endorsed terror and the wanton destruction of property. This two-week trial was relatively long by the standards of the day, and the prosecution was forced to make its case mainly by citing allegedly treasonous phrases from the writings of the two principal defendants (the case against Hepner was abandoned along the way). Both aspects only heightened the trial’s political impact, as did the court’s decision—unwarranted on constitutional grounds—to strip Bebel of his Reichstag mandate (he later won a by-election). On March 26, 1872, Bebel and Liebknecht were each sentenced to a two-year prison term under “honorable custody” in the Hubertusburg Castle in Saxony. On July 8, 1872, Bebel entered prison, where he joined Liebknecht, who was already incarcerated. This contemporary woodcut shows Liebknecht addressing the court; Hepner has turned to speak to Bebel.

Source



Source: Jury trial against the leaders of the Social Democrats in Leipzig. From left in the dock: Wilhelm Liebknecht, Hepner and August Bebel. Wood engraving (1872).
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