

Carl Schurz on Becoming a Supporter of Republican Government during the Revolution of 1848 (Retrospective Account, 1913)

Abstract

Like many persecuted revolutionaries, the politician and journalist Carl Schurz (1829–1906) emigrated from Germany to America, where he established a career as a lawyer. An opponent of slavery, he joined the Republican Party and served as a general in the Civil War. From 1869 to 1875, he represented Missouri in the U.S. Senate. In the following excerpt from *The Reminiscences of Carl Schurz* (1913), Schurz explains how, during the Revolution of 1848–49, he came to support the republican form of government.

Source

THE political horizon which after the revolution in March looked so glorious soon began to darken. In South Germany, where the opinion had gained ground that the revolution should not have “stood still before the thrones,” a republican uprising took place under the leadership of the brilliant and impetuous [Friedrich] Hecker, which, however, was speedily suppressed by force of arms. In the country at large such attempts at first found little sympathy. The bulk of the liberal element did not desire anything beyond the establishment of national unity and a constitutional monarchy “on a broad democratic basis.” But republican sentiment gradually spread and was intensified as the “reaction” assumed a more and more threatening shape.

The National Parliament at Frankfurt elected in the spring, which represented the sovereignty of the German people in the large sense and was to give to the united German nation a national government, counted among its members a great many men illustrious in the fields not so much of politics as of science and literature. It soon showed a dangerous tendency of squandering in brilliant but more or less fruitless debate much of the time which was sorely needed for prompt and decisive action if the legitimate results of the revolution against hostile forces were to be secured.

But our eyes were turned still more anxiously upon Berlin. Prussia was by far the strongest of the purely German states. The Austrian empire was a conglomeration of different nationalities – German, Magyar, Slav and Italian. The German element, to which the dynasty and the political capital belonged, had so far been the predominant one. It was the most advanced in civilization and wealth, although inferior in numbers. But the Slavs, the Magyars and the Italians, stimulated by the revolutionary movements of 1848, were striving for national autonomy, and although Austria had held the foremost place in the later periods of the ancient German Empire, and then after the Napoleonic wars in the German Confederacy, it seemed problematic whether her large non-German interests would permit her now to play a leading part in the political unification of Germany under a constitutional government. In fact, it turned out subsequently that the mutual jealousies of the different races enabled the Austrian central government to subjugate to despotic rule one by the other, despite the hopeful beginnings of the revolution, and that the non-German interests of Austria and those of the dynasty were predominant in her policy. But Prussia, except a comparatively small Polish district, was a purely German country, and by far the strongest among the German states in point of numbers, of general education, of economic activity and especially of military power. It was, therefore, generally felt that the attitude of Prussia would be decisive in determining the fate of the revolution.

For a while the Prussian king, Frederick William IV., seemed to be pleased with the role of leader in the national movement which the revolution had made him assume. His volatile nature seemed to be warmed by a new enthusiasm. He took walks on the streets and talked freely with the people. He spoke of constitutional principles of government to be introduced as a matter of course. He loudly praised the noble generosity which the people of Berlin had manifested toward him in the hours of stress. He ordered the army to wear the black-red-gold cockade together with the Prussian. On the parade-ground at Potsdam, he declared to the sulking officers of the guards "that he felt himself perfectly safe, free and happy among the citizens of Berlin; that all the concessions made by him had been made of his own free will and according to his own convictions, and that nobody should dare to question this." But when the Prussian constituent assembly met in Berlin and began to pass laws, and to design constitutional provisions, and to interfere with the conduct of the government in the spirit of the revolution, the king's mind gradually opened itself to other influences, and those influences gained access to him and surrounded him all the more readily after he removed his residence from Berlin to his palace at Potsdam, a little town preponderantly inhabited by courtiers and soldiers and other dependents of the government. Thus the king's immediate contact with the people ceased, his conferences with the newly appointed liberal ministers were confined to short formal "audiences," and voices appealing to old sympathies, prepossessions and partialities were constantly the nearest to his ear.

There was the army, traditionally the pet of the Hohenzollerns, smarting under the "disgrace" of its withdrawal from Berlin after the street-battle, and pining for revenge and the restoration of its prestige. There was the court nobility, whose business it always had been to exalt and flatter the royal person. There was the landed aristocracy, the "Junker" element, whose feudal privileges were theoretically denied by the revolutionary spirit and practically invaded by the legislative action of the representatives of the people, and who artfully goaded the king's pride. There was the old bureaucracy, the power of which had been broken by the revolution, although its personnel had been but little changed, and which sought to recover its former sway. There was the "old Prussian" spirit, which resented any national aspirations that might encroach upon the importance and self-appreciation of specific Prussiandom, and which still had strength in the country immediately surrounding Berlin and in some of the eastern provinces. All these forces, which in a general term were popularly called "the reaction," worked together to divert the king from the course he had ostensibly taken immediately after the revolution of March, with the hope of using him for the largest possible restoration of the old order of things – well knowing that if they controlled him they would, through him, control the army, and with it a tremendous, perhaps decisive, force in the conflicts to come. And this "reaction" was greatly strengthened by the cunning exploitation of some street excesses that happened in Berlin – excesses which in a free country like England might, indeed, have brought forth some vigorous measures of repression by the police, but would certainly not have induced anybody to call the practicability of civil freedom or of the constitutional principles of government into question. But these occurrences were used in Prussia with considerable effect to frighten the timid men of the bourgeoisie with the specter of general anarchy, and to persuade the king that, after all, the restoration of unrestrained royal power was necessary for the maintenance of law and order.

On the other hand, the visible development of the reaction had the effect of producing among many of those who stood earnestly for national unity and constitutional government a state of mind more open to radical tendencies. The rapid progress of these developments was clearly perceptible in my own surroundings. Our democratic club was composed in almost equal parts of students and citizens, among whom there were many of excellent character, of some fortune and good standing, and of moderate views, while a few others had worked themselves into a state of mind resembling that of the terrorists in the French Revolution. Kinkel was the recognized leader of the club, and I soon became a member of the executive committee. At first the establishment of a constitutional monarchy with universal suffrage and well-secured civil rights would have been quite satisfactory to us. But the reaction, the threatened rise of which we were observing, gradually made many of us believe that there was no safety for popular liberty

except in a republic. From this belief there was only one step to the further conclusion that in a republic, and only in a republic, all evils of the social body could be cured and the solution of all the political problems be possible. The idealism which saw in the republican citizen the highest embodiment of human dignity we had imbibed from the study of classic antiquity; and the history of the French Revolution satisfied us that a republic could be created in Germany and could maintain its existence in the European system of states. In that history we found striking examples of the possibility of accomplishing the seemingly impossible, if only the whole energy existing in a great nation were awakened and directed with unflinching boldness. Most of us, indeed, recoiled from the wild excesses which had stained with streams of innocent blood the national uprising in France during the Reign of Terror; but we hoped to stir up the national energies without such terrorism. At any rate, the history of the French Revolution furnished to us models in plenty that mightily excited our imagination. How dangerously seductive such a play of the imagination is we were, of course, then unaware.

[...]

Source: Carl Schurz, *The Reminiscences of Carl Schurz*. 3 vols. New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1913, vol. 1, pp. 133d–37.

Recommended Citation: Carl Schurz on Becoming a Supporter of Republican Government during the Revolution of 1848 (Retrospective Account, 1913), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-vormaerz-to-prussian-dominance-1815-1866/ghdi:document-254>> [July 08, 2025].