

Protest against the State of Emergency Constitution (May 28, 1968)

Abstract

Hans Magnus Enzensberger's speech reflects the growing political activism of many writers. Drawing parallels to the failed Revolution of 1848–49 and sharply criticizing the government, Enzensberger calls on his audience to fight the emergency laws.

Source

This gathering, my many dear and familiar faces, has one flaw. It is being held in front of the camera but behind closed doors. The vanguard in the fight against the emergency laws is standing outside. They were not given tickets. Apparently, we are to remain among ourselves. Apparently, they want to treat us like a horde of intellectual princes. Apparently, the organizers think we are prominent. Apparently, a distinction is supposed to be made here between the so-called pressure of the street and the kind of protest that eases the conscience of those in the orchestra seats.

This closed society is the ghostly caricature of another gathering of notables. In 1848, a few hundred bourgeois professors, writers, and lawyers gathered in Frankfurt's Paulskirche. There wasn't a single student or worker among them.

You know how that story ended. In the fall of '48, these gentlemen summoned the army and had soldiers shoot at ordinary people right outside the doors of the Paulskirche. Then they joined forces with the Prussian reaction. That didn't help them much; for in the end the soldiers rewarded them by dispersing them with drawn sabers.

This is an instructive story. Its moral was exquisitely formulated by the federal chancellor of the time, Friedrich Wilhelm IV. He said, and he has been correct to this day, "Only soldiers help against democrats."

That is, in a historical nutshell, the essence of the State of Emergency Laws. And why is it that first the police, then the federal border police, and then the military are used to defend against democrats? Because the rule of a tiny minority, the rule of capital, can no longer be upheld by any other means. That is why the ailing parliament dispossesses itself; that is why the system openly proclaims the end of its legitimacy. And that is why it is no use for the dear, familiar cultural celebrities to remain among themselves and proclaim what cultural celebrities are in the business of proclaiming, namely, their misgivings. The State of Emergency Constitution will not respect orchestra seats. It will disperse gatherings like this one with tear gas when the time comes. The capitalists and the party leaders and the union bosses who govern us will not listen to us. They will play deaf and dumb, just like De Gaulle and Pompidou, until we, together with the students and the workers, take to the streets and express ourselves a little more clearly. On the streets there are no celebrities anymore, and we don't need an admission ticket for a strike.

The moral is clear: misgivings are not enough, suspicion is not enough, protest is not enough. Our goal has to be this: let us finally create French conditions in Germany, too.

Source: Hans Magnus Enzensberger in Bernhard Pollmann, ed., *Lesebuch zur deutschen Geschichte*, vol. 3, *Vom deutschen Reich bis zur Gegenwart*. Dortmund, 1984, pp. 253–54.

Translation: Jeremiah Riemer

Recommended Citation: Protest against the State of Emergency Constitution (May 28, 1968), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-228>> [September 13, 2024].