

Matthias Erzberger's Death (1921)

Abstract

During the Reichstag session of September 27, 1921, President Friedrich Ebert held a speech to honor members of parliament and the government who had recently passed away. Among those he remembered on this occasion was Matthias Erzberger, who had been assassinated a month earlier, on August 26, by two members of the "Organisation Consul" (O.C.), an ultra-nationalist and antisemitic terrorist organization. Erzberger, a member of the Catholic Center Party [Zentrumspartei] and minister of finance from 1919 to 1920, had been a central figure in the founding of the Weimar Republic. After Germany's defeat during the First World War, he led the delegation which signed the Armistice of November 11, 1918. This thankless yet necessary task and his efforts to persuade Germans to accept the provisions of the Versailles Treaty for the time being made him the target of right-wing propaganda and denunciations. As Ebert notes in his speech, Erzberger's murder was a direct result of this extremist defamation.

Source

President: I officially open the first session of the Reichstag after the summer break.

Ladies and gentlemen! Since we last parted, death

(the assembly rises)

has reaped a bountiful and painful harvest among the members of this assembly, particularly among the faction of the German Center Party.

Dr. Hitze, a prelate, professor and senior figure in Germany's parliaments, closed his eyes forever on July 20. He was first elected to the Prussian parliament in 1882 and from 1884 onward served as a member in the German Reichstag and the National Assembly. During this long period, he was involved in sundry aspects of social policy and contributed to the advancement of the entire corpus of German social legislation. In the last few months before our parting, he played an active role in the committee's discussions. Professor Hitze's name will be eternally preserved in the documents that record the deliberations on German social policy and his memory will live on for many years to come.

He had not been long in his grave when the deaths of the leaders of the Center Party opened fresh wounds among the members of the Center Party's faction in the Reichstag: Karl **Trimborn**, privy councilor and former state secretary, who died on July 25, and Eduard **Burlage**, co-member of the party's executive committee and judge at the Supreme Court of the German Reich, who passed away less than a month later, on August 19. For decades these two leading parliamentarians—highly honored and respected by all groups in this assembly—made an outstanding contribution to the work of the Reichstag; Mr. Trimborn from 1896, Mr. Burlage, with interruptions, from 1903. We were particularly fond of Mr. Trimborn's endearing traits, his boundless cheerfulness and fine sense of humor, which proved a boon in many critical situations. But he also attempted to be accommodating and conciliatory as a party leader. I remain grateful to the deceased for lending a hand and advising me with great kindness and understanding when I, as chairman of this assembly, did not yet have a full grasp of the scope of my duties.

We all remember Mr. Burlage as one of our most loyal colleagues, who always stayed until the end of

both important and less important sessions and thus came to epitomize a parliamentary devotion to duty.

But what stunned us even more than these bitter losses was the news of the malicious assassination of our colleague Matthias **Erzberger**, the former Reich minister of finance, on August 26. His murder sparked a new wave of violent rioting in our country as it was not the isolated act of a blind fanatic or an eccentric idealist, but a coldblooded attack by dispatched murderers. What is perhaps even worse is the fact that before the crime was committed, there were those who openly called for it, and afterward, approved, justified and excused it. They condoned a crime by murderers who claimed that they had done a service for their Fatherland but who did not have the courage to stand up and take responsibility, who hid, fled and thus showed that they themselves did not wish to make a sacrifice for their Fatherland. They failed to see that here was an officer's uniform stained with murderer's blood by those who once held it in such high regard. They failed to see that, in full view of foreign nations, members of the army, previously subjected to heavy attacks, were publicly disparaged. Our fallen colleague Erzberger certainly fought in the most heated battles and sometimes wielded a lethal sword, but few have served the parliament and the country as he did. In the process he may have made mistakes—only those who shun responsibility are immune to such errors. But the men who took their fight against him from the political sphere into the personal sphere contributed to the intellectual confusion to which he fell victim. I therefore repeat what I said at his quiet grave in Biberach: "May history grant to him what many of his contemporaries denied him! May it restore to his name what could no longer be restored in his life!"

I have passed on the Reichstag's condolences to the devastated Mrs. Erzberger and the relatives of the other deceased men, and I have laid a wreath on Erzberger's bier.

In addition, Paul **Reihaus**, who was a member of the Reichstag from 1893 to 1906 and then again from 1912, died on September 5. He last worked with great enthusiasm on legislation for the compensation of war damages.

I take note for the record that the members of the Reichstag have risen from their seats in honor of their deceased colleagues.

But gentlemen, I am not yet done listing the losses that we have suffered. On September 21, the terrible news spread through Germany that a horrible **disaster**, still not fully explained, had claimed the lives of hundreds of German workers and employees **near Ludwigshafen**. Hundreds of women and children have lost their loved ones and their providers, and many others their health, homes and belongings. With profound grief the German Reichstag stands at the graves of these victims and expresses its most heartfelt condolences to the surviving relatives. It pledges to help ease the pain that can be eased by fellow human beings. All the parties in this assembly are united by their sympathy for the affected people and their readiness to help the relatives. – I take note for the record that the members of the Reichstag have risen from their seats to honor these victims as well.

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