

The Party Leadership Responds to Opposition (August 14 – 16, 1915)

Abstract

In an effort to shore up support for the war within their own ranks, the Socialists enacted guidelines for suppressing dissent. The socialist opposition to the war had to contend not only with party officials but also with trade unions, which had gained a foothold in the political system through their war efforts. The party increasingly disciplined recalcitrant editors of socialist newspapers and local officials who broke with party discipline.

Source

In a joint meeting on August 14, 15 and 16, the *parliamentary group* and the *party executive committee* discussed the issue of *war aims*. The MPs *David* and *Bernstein* opened the discussion with prepared remarks. Both suggested guiding principles for the discussion. In *separate votes*, both groups agreed to the following *guiding principles on the question of peace*:

“In safeguarding the national interests and the rights of the German people, and respecting the vital interests of all peoples, German Social Democracy strives for a peace that contains the guarantee of its own durability and leads the states of Europe toward a closer legal, economic, and cultural community. Therefore, we propose the following points to guide the structuring of the peace:

1. Securing the political independence and territorial integrity of the German empire requires the rejection of all enemy war aims that are directed against its territory. This principle applies as well to the demand that Alsace-Lorraine be reincorporated into France, regardless of the form in which the demand is pursued.

2. In order to secure the free economic development of the German people, we demand:

an “open door” policy, that is, the equal right of all to pursue economic activity in all colonial areas, [and] inclusion of the most-favored-nation clause in the peace treaties with all belligerent powers,

promoting economic reconciliation through the removal, to the degree possible, of customs barriers and restrictions on transportation,

coordination and improvement of social-political institutions along the lines envisaged by the Workers’ International.

Freedom of the seas is to be guaranteed by international treaty. To this end, the right of maritime seizure is to be abolished and the internationalization of vital commercial straits is to be enacted.

3. In the interest of German security and economic freedom in the southeast, we reject all the Entente’s war aims that aim to weaken and destroy Austria-Hungary and Turkey.

4. In view of the fact that the annexation of areas with minority populations violates the right of national self-determination and, furthermore, in view of the fact that the domestic unity and strength of the German people would only be weakened and its political relations with other countries durably injured, we are opposed to the annexationist plans of short-sighted politicians. From the standpoint of German

national interest, no less than of justice, we believe that the restoration of Belgian independence is necessary.

5. The frightful suffering and destruction that this war has brought to humanity have won the hearts of millions over to the ideal of a peace that is durably secured by international legal institutions. Achieving this goal must be the highest obligation on all who are called on to help shape the peace. We call, therefore, for the creation of a permanent international court of arbitration, to which all future international conflicts are to be submitted.”

Source: Beschlüsse von SPD-Reichstagsfraktion und -Parteiausschuß. “Leitsätze zur Friedensfrage”. *Sozialdemokratische Partei-Correspondenz*, 10 (September 11, 1915); reprinted in Wolfdieter Bihl, *Deutsche Quellen zur Geschichte des Ersten Weltkrieges*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1991, pp. 134–35.

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