

The Prussian Army and Domestic Unrest (April 30, 1907)

Abstract

The Social Democratic Party (SPD) had been legalized in 1890 and was well represented in the Reichstag by the early twentieth century. Still, the Wilhelmine state vigilantly monitored any potential challenge to the socioeconomic and political order. Working-class social organizations, from singing groups to athletic clubs, were closely watched by the police for all “political” tendencies. In the following document, a senior military official directs commanders and field officers to combat all strikes and signs of rebellion in the industrial workplace with brutal force. The classified decree calls for the suppression of the media and the immediate execution of suspected ring leaders as well as anyone found armed.

Source

From the Classified Decree of the Commanding General of the VII. Battalion Baron Moritz Ferdinand von Bissing on the Conduct of Troops in Instances of “Domestic Unrest”

On the basis of historical studies, the High General Staff has summarized those lessons and experiences that can be of significance for the conduct of the military during insurgencies and street fighting.

I bring them herewith to the attention of the commanders, including the field officers.

In the face of demonstrations, the police are generally sufficient enough to maintain order. The military *may not* be used for the sole purpose of strengthening the police. Regarding the relationship of the military to the police, in case the military should be called upon to support a civilian authority, the provision governing the use of weapons (11.2) leaves nothing open to question.

If the use of a weapon becomes necessary in a given situation, then the warning that, according to law, must be repeated three times must also be pronounced so clearly that even persons standing at some distance will be able to understand it. The warning must also be given in a manner that leaves no doubt as to the fact that the inevitable consequence – even of merely persisting in a state of passive resistance – is the use of a weapon.

If the necessity to use firearms presents itself, then it is wrong for the military at first to aim their weapons over the heads of their targets, even if the crowd in question appears to be unarmed. It is much better for the military to demonstrate right away its firm resolve to the insurgent elements, and thus to nip their revolutionary longings in the bud.

In the case of a real insurgency it will have to be anticipated that the insurgents will be well organized; already, the social-democratic associations and unions that exist everywhere are, to a certain degree, the first step towards such a well-organized insurgency. [...]

As soon as the police can no longer control the movement of the masses and these crowds assume a threatening attitude towards the organs of security and order, the moment has arrived to declare a *state of siege* over the rebelling district (Law Concerning the State of Siege from June 4, 1851).

With this measure, the right to exercise power with unlimited authority in all administrative affairs with respect to the police and the courts is simultaneously transferred to the *military* leader charged with the

supreme command and the restoration of order. The police are then subject to his command, and, on account of their knowledge of the local geography and population, they are in a position to render especially important service. [...]

Simultaneous to the pronouncement of the state of siege, the first measures to be taken are the suppression of all publications encouraging rebellious tendencies and the arrest of their editors, in addition to the general arrest of all persons known as leaders or agitators, paying no heed to the immunity of members of parliament. [...]

All meetings will be outlawed, and all attempts to break the law must be nipped in the bud right at the beginning of any rebellious movements. [...]

Under no circumstances should commanders at any level enter into negotiations with the insurgents; there is only one condition: "Unconditional Surrender." Portions of the city that have been restored to order should be carefully searched. Those taken into custody should be removed immediately, that is, if they are not brought before a court-martial on the spot.

All the ringleaders and anyone who is caught with a weapon will face a death sentence. The full severity of the law is to be applied without mercy.

Source: Aus dem geheimen Erlaß des Kommandierenden Generals des VII. Armeekorps Moritz Ferdinand Freiherr von Bissing über das Verhalten der Truppen "bei inneren Unruhe" (April 30, 1907), in Dieter Fricke, "Zur Rolle des Militarismus nach innen in Deutschland vor dem ersten Weltkrieg"; in *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, vol. 6 (1958), pp. 1302ff; reprinted in Willibald Gutsche, *Herrschaftsmethoden des deutschen Imperialismus 1897/8 bis 1917*. East Berlin, 1977, pp. 115–16.

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