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"Red Kingdom" or Conservative Stronghold? Saxony in Late Imperial Germany

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The latest research on Saxon history between 1890 and 1918 has called into question many prevailing assumptions about the trajectories of political change in the kingdom, without quite overturning them.[1] In this essay I consider three inter-related themes that run through older and newer assessments of Saxony's divided political culture, posing each of them as a question. First, can one still speak of a fundamental "polarization" between the socialist and antisocialist camps over these three decades? Second, what developments suggest continuities or discontinuities across the historical divide of November 1918? And third, is Saxony's political culture best understood in terms of its uniqueness, its typicality, or something else?

"Suffrage Robbery" and Election Battles

Under the leadership of Friedrich Ferdinand von Beust from 1849 to 1866, Saxony's political culture was uncongenial to liberalism. After fighting with Austria on the losing side in 1866, Saxony embarked on a brief liberal era over the next decade. Its Landtag reformed itself with a new Wahlrecht in 1868, which differed from universal manhood suffrage mainly because of an enfranchisement threshold of three Marks in annual taxes. Despite this relatively liberal suffrage, the Saxon government had already turned away from liberalism in the late 1870s before Bismarck did so at the Reich level, and Conservative ascendancy in the lower house prevailed through the 1880s. However, with each passing year, more low-income Saxons became eligible to vote in Landtag elections. Voter turn-out also increased rapidly. The SPD's *caucus* in the Landtag grew from five members in 1887 to fifteen in early 1896. In the same period the Saxon SPD registered steady gains in Reichstag elections and in some cities (most notably Leipzig). By November 1895 these developments had led Conservatives, National Liberals, and the left-liberal Progressives to fear for the future of their

[1] The relevant literature is cited in the German version of this essay. Interested readers can consult James Retallack, *Red Saxony: Election Battles and the Spectre of Democracy in Germany, 1860-1918* (Oxford, 2017), or the bibliography found in its Online Supplement: http://redsaxony.utoronto.ca/ (last accessed 20.2.2019).

parliamentary Kartell. They therefore asked the government to prepare a suffrage reform bill that would prevent a future "flood" of SPD deputies into the Landtag's lower chamber. Steered through the Landtag with immodest haste by the leader of the Conservative Party, *Geheimer Hofrat* Dr. Paul Mehnert, a new three-class suffrage was passed into law on 28 March 1896. The new law was immediately labeled "Mehnert's law," and this "suffrage robbery" grabbed headlines across the Reich. In December 1896 *Vorwärts* charged that Saxony had become the "testing ground of reaction." Since one-third of Landtag deputies stood for election every two years, the fifteen SPD deputies gradually disappeared until none was left in 1901.

Soon national attention was once again focused on Saxony. The Reichstag elections of June 1903 produced socialist victories in twenty-two of twenty-three Saxon constituencies, with SPD candidates winning fifty-nine percent of the popular vote. The epithet "Red Saxony" was born overnight. Extreme antagonism between Social Democrats and Conservatives threw Saxon politics into a crisis that lasted six years. In December 1905, workers took to the streets of Leipzig, Dresden, and other cities demanding reform of "Mehnert's Law." Police sabers hacked at demonstrators' skulls. Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow in Berlin, and Mehnert in Dresden, pressured Saxony's government leader to make no concessions, and the SPD's leaders backed down. The "parties of order" then struck back in the Reichstag elections of January 1907. A chauvinist government campaign, centered on colonial and anti-socialist themes, reduced Saxon SPD seats in the Reichstag from twenty-two to eight, won with less than forty-nine percent of the vote.

Over the next two years, the "parties of order" devised a new suffrage for Saxon Landtag elections, which they saw as a relief valve to dissipate pressure generated by the SPD's massive growth in the kingdom (party membership rose from about 30,000 in 1902 to almost 150,000 in 1912, compared to about 20,000 members of Conservative State Association). Passed in January 1909 and tested only once the following October, this suffrage supplemented a voter's "basic" ballot with up to three supplementary ballots awarded according to income, property ownership, and age. Although more equitable than Saxony's three-class suffrage of 1896-1909, the plural suffrage still seriously disadvantaged Socialist candidates. In the Landtag elections of October 1909, roughly fifty-four percent of all voters supported socialists at the polls. But because the vast majority of them had only one ballot to cast, socialist candidates won only about thirty-nine percent of all ballots and only twenty-five of ninety-one seats in the new Landtag. From 1909 to 1918, no further crises matched the drama of earlier years. Landtag elections were scheduled only every six years, which dampened political excitement, but the enemies of socialism in Saxony never made their peace with new circumstances: some grumbled that "democracy" now tainted both Germany's national parliament and Saxony's Landtag.

Once hostilities broke out in August 1914, Landtag deputies postponed the elections scheduled for 1915 until after the war. In 1917 and 1918, Majority Socialists and the Independent Socialists repeatedly proposed the introduction of universal manhood suffrage for Landtag elections.

Each time, however, the government argued that reform in Dresden could not move more quickly than events in Berlin. The Saxon government and the non-socialist parties agreed that no new Landtag suffrage could be enacted if it delivered parliament into the hands of the "reds." This paralysis continued until the last three weeks of the war, when a National Liberal parliamentarian became leader of Saxony's state ministry. At that time, dyed-in-the-wool Conservatives, including Paul Mehnert, elbowed their way onto the *Staatsrat* and other inner councils of government.

This brief outline of Saxony's political development from 1890 to 1918 would seem to suggest, first, that the polarization between Social Democrats and their enemies took precedence over every other political development and never faded from view. Anti-democratic encumbrances from the Bismarckian age were reinforced by Saxon burghers who saw meaningful reform as only a threat, not an opportunity. Second—still according to this interpretation—Saxony's political culture was too un-modern to survive in the twentieth century. For one fleeting moment in 1903, socialists and democrats saw "Red Saxony" as the best of all possible worlds; but to millions of other Saxons it represented a worst-case scenario. Third, it appears unprofitable to compare Saxony's woeful history against regional, national, or international yardsticks. In an age characterized by "the fundamental democratization of politics" (Karl Mannheim), Saxons were uniquely determined to reject a rational, "modern" response to new challenges. If other Germans became adept at "practicing democracy," Saxons not only failed the test—they did so in spectacular fashion.

Regional and Local Perspectives

Despite unimpeachable evidence that Saxony's political culture was characterized by a fundamental antagonism between friends and foes of the authoritarian state, there are many reasons not to portray either Social Democracy or its enemies as a monolith. This cautionary note reflects a development in the historiography of Imperial Germany over the past thirty years, away from "optimistic" or "pessimistic" appraisals of the Kaiserreich and away from the idea that agrarians and industrialists, as a *Bündnis der Eliten*, blocked all efforts at reform in the direction of liberal democracy. As David Blackbourn noted long ago, to speak of the authoritarian state in the singular is to start on the wrong foot. Recent research has turned up significant differences of opinion among Saxony's monarchs, their courtiers, their government leaders, and their state ministers; among middle- and lower-ranking civil servants (*Kreis*- and *Amtshauptmänner*) and local police directors; and among municipal assemblymen, counselors, and mayors. Even among the latter group, few generalizations hold for the entire kingdom: municipal politics in Dresden were dominated by a loose coalition of Conservatives, antisemites, and Mittelständler, whereas Leipzig was the bastion of (National) Liberal counselors and administrators. In the parties and in the Landtag too, any political polarization was undercut by the divergent views of politicians who sat in the upper and lower chambers of Saxony's Landtag, back-benchers in the various caucuses, and rank-and-file party members. On the Social Democratic side,

support for radical policies and potentially violent action could be found among hardliners in Leipzig but might be disavowed in quieter corners of the kingdom. National Liberals in Dresden were more timid than those in Leipzig, whereas, conversely, Conservatives in the state capital hued to the extreme forms of anti-socialism and antisemitism.

The lack of a Catholic Center Party in Protestant Saxony is rightly cited as an important factor conditioning the shape of electoral and parliamentary coalitions, pitting the Left more directly against the Right in Saxony than in most other parts of the Reich. The persistent weakness of Saxony's left-liberal parties had a similar effect, but in less clear-cut fashion. The same can be said of the independent antisemitic parties, who reached the peak of their influence in 1893, when they gained over 90,000 Reichstag votes (almost sixteen percent) and sent six deputies to Berlin. Over time, and especially after 1903, left liberals and antisemites became more firmly ensconced among the "state-supporting parties"; yet at every election, one or both of them „stole" seats from Conservatives and National Liberals. When they did so, they were defamed by government ministers as well as by the leaders of the Kartell parties for having failed to recognize the socialist danger.

The fact that Saxon Progressives drew much of their support from members of the new *Mittelstand*, and that antisemites did so from members of the old *Mittelstand*, points to two related points: it complicates the notion of a polarized political culture, and it demonstrates the insufficiency of all previous models used by political scientists, sociologists, and historians to explain the development of the German party system from the 1860s to the 1930s. Neither the political „cleavages" envisioned by Stein Rokkan, nor the socio-economic „milieus" posited by M. Rainer Lepsius, nor the notion of opposing „camps" discerned by Karl Rohe, adequately describes the confused, shifting orientation of political parties in Saxony or the social, economic, or cultural circumstances and outlooks of their members. Historians now stress the „gray zones" in the middle of Saxony's political spectrum, and the delicate layering of wealth, status, and influence in the middle ranks of the social scale—from the *Mittelstand* to the *Bildungs-, Beamten-,* and *Wirtschaftsbürgertum*. These are the places we should look for new evidence of political conflict in the kingdom's evolving political culture. The SPD was not the only party whose fortunes could change dramatically by the capture or loss of fellow-travelers. When the Conservatives charged that the unreliable antisemites had „stolen" six seats from them in 1893, this was only one of many recriminations among parties determined to find new recruits in the middle of the social and political spectrums.

Rhetorical flourishes about the "red spectre" all too often evaporated under the impact of momentary crisis, cynical calculation, and personal ambition. Local elites might choose to engage the enemy on one front and refuse on another. They pursued ill-defined goals with limited resources, and often they broke off the battle before they achieved their ultimate goal. All this can be seen only when the anti-socialist intentions of Imperial elites are considered together with the actual implementation of their plans, particularly at the local and regional levels. James J. Sheehan understood this when he

wrote that „a great deal of the political activity that goes on at the national level is designed to simplify issues, to clarify alignments, to reduce politics to a set of binary choices. … But … in the worlds of local politics, choices are frequently more fluid, alliances more uncertain, combinations more complex." For this reason, the historian must make a special effort to view political choices as contemporaries saw them: not as clear alternatives but as confused options, not as national politics writ small but as reflections of autonomous rules and traditions. From this perspective, the anti-socialist campaign in Imperial Germany emerges not as a kind of grand strategy drawn up before battle, but as tactical warfare constantly being adjusted to changing circumstances. Far from substantiating the view from „on high," the observer in the trenches sees confused armies advancing to exploit fleeting opportunities and retreating in the face of poor generalship and logistical constraints.

Outside the ranks of Social Democracy, those generals—party leaders and state ministers—increasingly blamed the Reichstag's universal manhood suffrage for the unseemly („American") and unpredictable consequences of this electoral free-for-all. As a result, unequal suffrage laws to the Landtag and to municipal assemblies were preserved or initiated in a desperate attempt to keep the most corrosive effects of modern mass politics out of state and municipal parliaments. This phenomenon was not exclusive to Saxony, but there it had a particularly pronounced effect: discriminatory suffrage laws were explicitly designed to keep one party from achieving „hegemony" over Saxony's representative institutions. This was a sham argument. The "parties of order" always wanted to keep the SPD *far* below the threshold of a simple majority. When a new plural suffrage for Landtag elections was being debated in 1908-09, the Director of the Royal Saxon Statistical Office undertook meticulous calculations to ensure that Social Democrats would win no more than about fifteen (of ninety-one) Landtag seats at the next election. When twenty-five SPD deputies were actually elected, due to faulty estimates about how many working-class Saxons would receive supplementary ballots, the result was months of hand-wringing among civil servants and mutual recriminations among the „parties of order." These reactions continued when Social Democrats rebounded from their setback in 1907 and, in the Reichstag elections of January 1912, won fifty-five percent of the popular vote in Saxony and nineteen of the twenty-three available Reichstag seats. What did *not* happen? At no point did the Saxon government show any willingness to abide by the decision of the voters—one of democracy's central tenets. In short, to cite the polarization of Saxony political culture is only the first step to discovering its true nature and dynamism.

Continuity or Discontinuity?

The question of continuity can be addressed more briefly, though it, too, has undergone scrutiny recently. As Thomas Nipperdey famously wrote in his critique of Hans-Ulrich Wehler's 1973 *Kaiserreich* book—which had stated the classic *Sonderweg* thesis in postulating a straight line from

the failed bourgeois revolutions of 1848 to the Nazi seizure of power in 1933—there are many continuities. David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley echoed this thought: the question about continuity, they wrote, is not *whether* but *what kind*. The starting point of an alleged Saxon *Sonderweg* seems to be uncontroversial. The appearance of a working-class movement in the 1860s can be considered as especially significant historically because liberals had not—or not yet—put their imprint on the German constitution or the national parliament. However, this was not a Saxon peculiarity. As Lothar Schücking explained in *Die Reaktion in der inneren Verwaltung Preussens*, the situation was not much different in Prussia or after the turn of the century: „We could be more liberal if we had no Social Democrats." As historians, if we choose one end-point for an alleged continuity and not another, we tend to draw certain conclusions, and not others, about the speed of political change, its trajectory, and the possibility that things might have turned out differently. Hypotheses about how well Germans were „practicing democracy" retain or lose their explanatory power for Saxon history depending on which real or imagined turning-points are chosen. After the suffrage reform and Landtag elections of 1909, Saxon politics did not become more democratic but they became quieter, characterized by grumbling, not outrage, about remaining roadblocks to ministerial responsibility, equitable suffrages, and good governance. Things changed dramatically in summer 1914 when exclusionary practices and state-led chicanery against the labour movement had to be put on hold in the interest of a "domestic truce" and a successful war effort. Discontinuities across 1914 are incontrovertible and should not be downplayed.

By 1918 at the latest, the Saxon state and the "parties of order" that supported it had utterly lost their ability to govern and forfeited their legitimacy in the eyes of the masses—*so* utterly that it seems unwise to stress similarities between the practices of government, administration, and parliamentary representation before and after 9 November 1918. Even the existence of anti-socialist, anti-liberal, and antisemitic habits of mind among certain sectors of the Saxon bourgeoisie, while clearly evident on both sides of the November Revolution, look very different in the monarchical state and in the republic. When Social Democrats took power in Dresden, the *Volksgemeinschaft* of Nazi dreams still lay far over the horizon, beyond peace-making in 1919, hyper-inflation in 1923, the Great Depression after 1929, and the Nazis' electoral breakthrough.

Rather than suggesting that Saxons were successfully „practicing democracy" before 1918 or that they bequeathed a robust democratic culture to the Weimar Republic, historians should look elsewhere for continuities. Long ago, Shulamit Volkov coined the term „cultural code" to explain how antisemitism permeated and bound together radical, moderate, and other segments of the German Right in the Kaiserreich. Scholars could take up this concept more ambitiously and use it to reassess Saxony's political culture from the 1860s to 1918. From beginning to end of this era, the enemies of democracy did their utmost to establish affinitive relationships between democracy and socialism, democracy and liberalism, democracy and the Jews. The polarization of Saxony's political culture forced the authoritarian state and the „parties of order" either to overcome one crisis of legitimacy

after another, or, as in the mid-1890s, to manufacture such a crisis to deal a blow to the „party of bloody revolution" before it was too late. With unpredictable results, groups advocating reform and retrenchment fought for the upper hand. They did so not only to marginalize certain groups socially (as with insincere forms of *Mittelstandspolitik*), not only to disadvantage them economically (as with protective tariffs), not only to disarm them politically (as with regressive suffrage reform), but also to protect their own idea of *Deutschtum* culturally. In the latter case particularly, the growing power of radical antisemitism and radical nationalism from the 1890s onward put Saxony in the vanguard in the larger campaign against liberty, equality, and fraternity.

When powerful groups within Saxony's bourgeoisie began to see democracy as un-German, they diminished respect for the principles of political fairness. Later, in the hands of more ruthless politicians, this cultural code could be turned against anyone deemed to be an outsider in the racial state. The Nazis succeeded—at least in part—where other German anti-democrats had failed. The success of their anti-Marxist and anti-Communist rhetoric, which conjured up the unbridgeable divide between a „red" and a „brown" Germany, can legitimately be considered against the backdrop of Conservatives' anti-socialist rhetoric before 1918. Because leading statesmen so often found it impossible in the Kaiserreich to traverse the gray area between mutually antagonistic political groups, their available room to maneuver shrank and they sought to solve crises through appeals to the political extremes, not the centre.

Saxony's divided political culture was not typical of other federal states, let alone the German Reich as a whole. But it was not unique either. Context matters, and so does geography. The Saxon case is illuminating because it does not fit the north-south or east-west paradigms of German historiography. Time and again we can read in the historical record clear warnings from anti-democrats in Saxony that the willingness of south-German parties and governments to accept Social Democracy as a legitimate partner in the business of government was an existential threat. After decades of pressure from their northern neighbor to throw off a characteristic Saxon „laxity" and fall into line with Prussian traditions of authority, many Saxons came to see their kingdom as a crucial bulwark against liberal, democratic pressures moving northward from Baden, Württemberg, and Bavaria and threatening the rest of Germany. Saxon Conservatives signaled to Berlin that their kingdom had a special mission: if it made any concession to Social Democracy, Prussia and the rest of the Reich would pay the price.

The bourgeois origins and habitus of Paul Mehnert and most of his Conservative colleagues suggests another reason why the Saxon case is compelling. Compared to most other regional wings of their party, Conservatives in Saxony—and especially their deputies in the lower house of the Landtag—were much more bourgeois and less aristocratic, much more urban and less rural, much better integrated into business and professional circles and less beholden to agrarian interests. Hence the Saxon case offers historians an opportunity to examine the forward-looking, *bourgeois* face of German authoritarianism. On the one hand, it bears out what Blackbourn and Eley wrote about the

German bourgeoisie, namely, that historians should never have expected that it would dedicate itself to the realization of liberal democratic ideals. On the other hand, it extends another postulate of the post-Sonderweg paradigm. Rather than asserting bourgeois hegemony in just the social, economic, and cultural realms, historians can use the Saxon example to suggest that the German bourgeoisie had considerably more influence in the political realm, too, than we once imagined.

Extrapolating from the Saxon experience to the rest of the Reich is a tricky business, of course, but that is not our proper goal anyway. Saxony's atypical economic and social development cannot be denied. That still leaves open lessons to be learned from the peculiar salience of suffrage battles in the kingdom, the unusual temperature (offering more heat than light) of Reichstag and Landtag elections, and the constantly shifting push-pull relations among different political groups allied with the Conservatives: smaller parties, economic interest groups, nationalist pressure groups, and other voluntary associations. That Saxony transformed its Landtag suffrage three times (1868, 1896, 1909) reflected the fact that fairness issues were unsettled, „up for grabs," throughout the Imperial era. The parallelism with different choices facing politicians in the Weimar Republic between 1928 and 1933 is not exact. But in that latter era, the political tactics that Germans at the time believed could and should be deployed in an all-out assault on Marxism did not have to invented from scratch. Well before the 1920s they had been conceived and tested as alternatives to an unloved democratic outcome.

Red Kingdom or Conservative Stronghold?

If Saxony in the late *Kaiserreich* was, indeed, a *„Hort"* of conservatism, it was a *Hort* in more than one sense, and yet not in others. The connotation of „refuge" or „shelter" is not quite right, for it implies that Saxony was a kind of political backwater, a place to which Conservatives might retreat (or already had retreated) when their backs were against the wall in other parts of the Reich. This idea would tend to depict Saxony and Saxon political culture as „unmodern," which is exactly wrong. Social Democrats complained that the Saxon Landtag in the 1880s was „antediluvian," despite its relatively liberal suffrage after 1868, and that deputies of the other parties had the „most laughable" conception of what Social Democrats actually wanted. However, after the shock of two more suffrage reform in 1896 and 1909 and decades of harassment, Social Democrats no longer doubted that their enemies had learned the art of hard-headed politics and had embraced, however reluctantly, the opportunities that modern mass politics offered to anti-socialist parties. The connotation of „*Hort*" as „bulwark" or „stronghold" is more apt. With every victory they scored over socialists, liberals, and the advocates of Jewish rights, Paul Mehnert and his colleagues could claim with more bravura, even arrogance, that they successfully held aloft the flame of Conservatism—against all odds, even in Germany's most industrial, urbanized state.

Lastly, a *Hort* can be a hotbed or a haven. In this sense, Saxony's political development seems both to illuminate and to encumber later German history. Because every political party in Saxony besides the Social Democrats found it easy to cooperate in defense of the principle of authority over democracy, Saxony provided fertile ground for what George Mosse once called „the interlocking directorate of the Right." From the 1880s onward it was home to some of Germany's most radical nationalist groups: racialist antisemites, Pan-Germans, white-collar workers, Mittelständler, student fraternities, and anti-feminists. Theodor Fritsch, regarded by the Nazis as one of their movement's pioneers, is only the most prominent among those individuals who sought the „trick" to political success—the novel tactic that would transform a small fringe group or a conspiratorial league into a *movement*. After 1900, Fritsch joined forces with Mehnert and other Conservatives and soon led the powerful Sächsische Mittelstand Union. His activities on behalf of racial antisemitism and chauvinist nationalism continued under the cloak of Conservative *Mittelstandspolitik* up to the First World War and then, in other guises, into the 1930s.

These brief remarks have tried to suggest that historians should not over-emphasize the degree of political polarization in Saxony before 1918, should not accept continuities across the November Revolution unquestioningly, and should not see Saxony as either paradigmatic of developments elsewhere in Germany or wholly divorced from them. In the final analysis, nonetheless, the decades-long struggles for power between Social Democrats in Saxony and their enemies held ramifications that extended far into the twentieth century. Anti-socialism was only one element of a larger campaign to hold democracy at bay. In a kingdom with such a weak liberal movement and with far fewer Jews than the national average, an anti-socialist crusade was the most potent weapon in the hands of bourgeois Conservatives who also sought anti-liberal, anti-democratic, and antisemitic goals. Before 1914, those Conservatives believed—not unreasonably—that they still held a strong hand with which to play the game of modern mass politics. They might have done so for years to come.