

August Bebel:
Ein Sozialdemokrat gegen Eroberungskrieg und „Verpreußung“

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On 26 November 1870, August Bebel (1840-1913) rose in the Reichstag of the North German Confederation to criticize the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 and the annexation of the French provinces of Elsaß und Lothringen.¹ He justified his party's refusal to grant the funds needed to carry on the military campaign against France; he pointed to the likelihood of French *revanchisme* if the popular call for annexation were carried out; and he directed his attack not only against members of the upper classes and the bourgeoisie but also against all those he labelled pseudo-patriotic (and stingy) supporters of war.

Also, meine Herren, man hat ja die verschiedensten Gründe für die Annexion geltend gemacht. Man sagt, Elsaß und Lothringen müsse aus *strategischen* Gründen deutsch werden, es müsse aus *nationalen* Gesichtspunkten deutsch werden, weil es seinerzeit zu Deutschland gehört habe, es müsse aus *politischen* Gründen deutsch werden, es müsse womöglich noch aus *volkswirtschaftlichen* Gründen deutsch werden.

On every one of these grounds, Bebel argued, the booty of war was undeserved. The President of the Reichstag intervened a number of times during Bebel's speech to try to silence him as he steered close to the limits of parliamentary propriety, but Bebel continued with his plea for a peace without conquest. "Das *Nationalitätsprinzip* ist meiner Ansicht nach ein durchaus *reaktionäres* Prinzip. [...] Es würden die Völker sich gegenseitig zerfleischen bis an das Ende aller Dinge." Bebel never abandoned this principled stand. In a speech of 25 May 1871 he

¹ *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Reichstags des Norddeutschen Bundes* (hereafter *SBRNB*), I. Legislatur-Periode, II. Außerordentliche Session 1870, Bd. XV, Berlin 1870, S. 9-13, 16 (26 Nov. 1870).

characterized the annexations as a "Verbrechen gegen das Völkerrechte" and a „Schandfleck in der deutschen Geschichte.“²

Both the pre-history and consequences of Bebel's speech illustrate the importance of the historical triad of war, victory, and nation in the evolution of Germany's labour movement – and never more so than in the period 1866-1872.

Although Ferdinand Lassalle's "Offener Antwortsbrief" (1863) to representatives of the working classes in Leipzig led to the founding of the Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiterverein (ADAV), Bebel and his close associate, Wilhelm Liebknecht (1826-1900) pursued a separate line of development. In August 1866, just as the Austro-Prussian War was being wound down, Bebel and Liebknecht founded the Sächsische Volkspartei. One of the party's goals was to resist Prussian hegemony over the emerging Germany, for Prussia epitomized the political system that seemed most likely to prevent workers from winning the rights and freedoms they aspired to. In his maiden speech in the Reichstag, Bebel declared that Prussia was uninterested in leading the way to a unified Germany: instead it pursued "ein spezifisch *Preußisches* Interesse [...], die Stärkung der Hohenzollernschen Hausmacht."³ Three years later, at a congress in Eisenach, Bebel co-founded the Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei (SDAP). Its goals were outlined in a pamphlet, *Unsere Ziele* (1870), which he wrote while sitting in a Saxon jail, convicted of circulating subversive literature. At this time, Bebel and Liebknecht were traveling almost constantly to deliver their message to the growing numbers of party faithful, supplementing the spoken word with an expanding press and wide-ranging efforts to provide the movement with a firm organizational basis in local Arbeitervereine. Liebknecht in particular was adamant in denouncing the North German Reichstag, which he labelled the "Feigenblatt des Absolutismus."

A few days after war with France brought Prussia and the south-German states together in a common cause, Bebel and Liebknecht took the greatest gamble in the early history of the deutsche Arbeiterbewegung. They refused to vote for the 120-Millionen-Thaler Kriegsanleihe that Bismarck demanded from the Reichstag. The war with France, they charged, was a dynastic

² August Bebel, *Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften* (hereafter *ARuS*), Bd. 1, Berlin 1970, S. 150.

³ *SBRNB* 1867, Bd. 1, Berlin 1867, S. 678 (10 Apr. 1867).

war of conquest. They hedged their bet slightly, arguing in a statement of 21 July 1870: "Die [...] abverlangten Geldmittel können wir *nicht bewilligen*, weil dies ein Vertrauensvotum für die preußische Regierung wäre, die durch ihr Vorgehen im Jahre 1866 den gegenwärtigen Krieg vorbereitet hat. Ebenso wenig können wir die geforderten Geldmittel *verweigern*, denn es könnte dies als Billigung der frevelhaften und verbrecherischen Politik Bonapartes [Kaiser Napoleon III] aufgefaßt werden."⁴ The ADAV and the Central Committee of the SDAP in Braunschweig criticized Bebel and Liebknecht for this "plague on both your houses" stance: they believed Bismarck's lie that Germany was fighting a defensive war against the Erbfeind. From northern Germany, Lassalleans traveled to Saxony to disavow and agitate against Bebel's and Liebknecht's antiwar stance: on one occasion, they hurled stones through the windows of Liebknecht's house, terrifying Liebknecht's wife Natalie and their infant son inside.⁵ However, when Bismarck continued the war against France even after the decisive defeat of French forces at the Battle of Sedan (1-2 September 1870), and after the Braunschweig Committee had been hauled in chains to the Festung Boyen in Ostpreußen, Bebel, Marx, and other socialists again found themselves in agreement: a war of conquest and Prussia's ascendancy could not possibly be in the interest of workers. From 21 September onward, every issue of *Der Volksstaat* included the demand, "Ein billiger Friede mit der französischen Republik! Keine Annexionen, Bestrafung Bonapartes und seiner Mitschuldigen!"

Bebel and Liebknecht also attacked the constitutional arrangements that were worked out in the last months of 1870, leading to the declaration of the German Reich and the crowning of Prussian King Wilhelm II als Deutscher Kaiser in the Hall of Mirrors of the Versailles Palace on 18 January 1871. On 6 December 1870, Bebel rejected Bismarck's draft constitution, using deliberately provocative language to condemn the Reichstag's limited powers and to argue that the Einigungskriege had not been worth the cost:

Erst wenn das Volk einsieht, daß es von seinen Regierungen, von seinen Fürsten nichts zu hoffen hat, daß jeder Krieg, der geführt wird, immer nur gegen sein Interesse geführt wird, erst wenn es eingesehen, daß die 3 Kriege, die seit 10 Jahren in Deutschland

⁴ "Motiviertes Votum," *Der Volksstaat* (Leipzig), Nr. 59, 23 July 1870, S. 4.

⁵ August Bebel, "Alte Erinnerungen," *Vorwärts* (Berlin), Nr. 114, 1. Beilage, 19 May 1910, S. 1.

geführt worden sind, nur uns jedesmal in freiheitlicher Beziehung zurückgebracht haben, dann wird es besser werden [...].⁶

In a Reichstag speech three days later, Liebknecht declared that the passendste Ort für die Krönung des modernen Kaisers would be the Gendarmenmarkt in Berlin, "denn dieses Kaiserthum kann in der That nur durch den Gensdarmen [sic] aufrecht erhalten werden."⁷ These courageous speeches were applauded by workers' representatives inside and outside Germany, and by Friedrich Engels, who wrote an den Spanischen Föderalrat der Internationalen Arbeiterassoziation: "[...] die Opposition, die unsere Freunde Bebel und Liebknecht dort gegen den Eroberungskrieg organisieren konnten, hat im Interesse unserer internationalen Propaganda mächtiger gewirkt, als jahrelange Propaganda durch die Presse und Versammlungen es vermocht haben."⁸

By now Bismarck and other German authorities had reached the limit of their patience. One-sidedly deciding that parliamentary immunity as a Mitglied des Reichstags did not protect Bebel once the session ended, what Liebknecht called their "Galgenzeit" came to an end. In his memoirs Bebel reported what happened next: "Am 17. Dezember [1870] morgens arbeitete ich in meiner Werkstatt, als plötzlich meine Frau totenbleich hereinstürzte und mir mitteilte, daß ober in unserer Wohnung ein Polizeibeamter sei, ... aber auch einen Soldaten in kriegsmäßiger Ausrüstung." Once Bebel had landed in the Bezirksgerichtsgefängnis, his future became more uncertain and his situation more miserable. His Untersuchungshaft – and that of his co-defendants, Liebknecht and the *Volksstaat*'s second editor, Adolf Hepner – was expected to last at least until the summer of 1871 because the authorities needed to gather evidence from Braunschweig to secure a conviction of Landesverrat. "Der Winter 1870/71 war wohl der strengste, den wir in vielen Jahrzehnten hatten," reported Bebel: "Ich fror hundemäßig." And his cell "wimmelte von Ungeziefer."⁹

⁶ *SBRNB*, 1. Leg.-Per., II. Außero. Session 1870, Bd. XV, Berlin 1870, S. 91.

⁷ Ebd., S. 152-154 (9 Dez. 1870).

⁸ Letter of 12 February 1871, *Marx-Engels-Werke*, Bd. 17, Berlin 1972, S. 288.

⁹ Bebel, *Aus meinem Leben* (= *ARuS*, Bd. 6), Berlin 1983, S. 328, 330.

On 21 March 1871, the first parliamentary session of the newly-unified Reich opened. Because an Antrag auf Freilassung Bebels als Reichstagsabgeordneter had been tabled, the government released Bebel from prison on 28 March, one day before the Antrag was to be debated, um einen Eklat zu vermeiden. Bebel rushed to Berlin and spoke for his party on 3 April during debate on the Reich constitution. He mainly repeated his criticisms from 6 December 1870, against the große Machtkonzentration im Reich and the lack of constitutionally-enshrined freedoms. On 14 April, Bebel was one of only fourteen Reichstag deputies to vote against the constitution.

In the intervening months, the political situation had changed dramatically. A preliminary peace with France had been signed, Reichstag elections on 3 April 1871 had been held – sending only Bebel and one other SDAP deputy to the national parliament – and the Commune had seized control of Paris. On 25 May, Bebel again spoke in the Reichstag. By that time, the counter-revolutionary terror against Communards was in full swing, unleashed by the French government using prisoners-of-war released by Bismarck. A telegram from Paris had just arrived, reporting that anti-Communard troops had reached the centre of Paris, and this moved Bebel to deliver an impassioned speech against what he saw as the hateful combination of Krieg, Sieg, und Nation. The derisive laughter that greeted Bebel's portrayal of the situation belies the fact that for years afterward, enemies of the German labor movement cited this speech as evidence that Social Democrats were fully committed to the violent overthrow of the established order. Certainly Bebel's words contributed to that fateful misappraisal:

Meine Herren, und wenn auch im Augenblick Paris unterdrückt ist, dann erinnere ich Sie daran, daß der Kampf in Paris nur ein kleines Vorpostengefecht ist, daß die Hauptsache in Europa uns noch bevorsteht und daß ehe wenige Jahrzehnte vergehen, der Schlachtenruf des Pariser Proletariats „Krieg den Palästen, Friede den Hütten, Tod der Not und dem Müßiggange!“ der Schlachtruf des gesamten europäischen Proletariats werden wird. (Heiterkeit.)¹⁰

¹⁰ *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstags (SBDR)*, 1. Leg.-Per., I. Session 1871, Bd. 2, Berlin 1871, S. 921 (25 May 1871).

Seven years later, during debate on the Sozialistengesetz in 1878, Bismarck claimed that Bebel's speech of 25 May 1871 had opened his eyes: "jener Anruf der Kommune war ein Lichtstrahl [...], und von diesem Augenblick an habe ich in den sozialdemokratischen Elementen eine Feind erkannt, gegen den der Staat, die Gesellschaft sich im Stande der Nothwehr befindet."¹¹

Many of the intervening years had seen Bebel serving more time in prison for his anti-war stance in 1870 and for other alleged offences against the nation (or against Bismarck personally). Bebel, Liebknecht, and Hepner were tried vor den Schranken des Schwurgerichts zu Leipzig from 11-26 March 1872. The formal charge against the trio was that they had made "Vorbereitung zum Hochverrat." Their crime was to have linked opposition to Germany's annexation of Alsace and Lorraine with support for the struggle of the Communards in Paris. This two-week trial was relatively long by the standards of the day, and the prosecution was forced to make its case mainly by citing allegedly treasonous phrases from the writings of the two principal defendants. This served the purposes of Bebel and Liebknecht well, for it entered into the official court proceedings – and thus the public record – large swaths of Social Democratic writing. On 26 March 1872, Bebel and Liebknecht were each sentenced to a two-year prison term under Festungshaft in Schloß Hubertusburg in Saxony. Thus the SDAP's highest-profile speakers were removed from active politics in the new Reich – an outcome for which the Gerichtspräsident und Staatsanwalt mit Orden honoriert wurden.

On 8 July 1872, Bebel entered prison, where he joined Liebknecht, who was already incarcerated. Because Bebel had in the meantime also been sentenced to nine months of prison wegen Majestätsbeleidigung bei Versammlungsreden and been stripped of his Reichstagsmandat, his imprisonment in Hubertusburg was followed, with brief interruptions, with further time behind bars auf der Festung Königstein und im Landesgefängnis Zwickau. From these he emerged finally on 1 April 1875 – Bismarck's sixtieth birthday. Of the Kaiserreich's first half-decade, Bebel spent more than three years under lock and key.

Beginning in 1866, Bebel had done his utmost to demonstrate that the historical process leading to German unification was characterized by the exercise of Gewalt – Gewalt against Prussia's

¹¹ *SBDR*, 4. Leg.-Per., I. Session 1878, Bd. 1, Berlin 1878, S. 70 (17 Sept. 1878).

enemies, against "true" federalism, against the rights and freedoms of the German people, and against the fledgling labor movement, both in Germany and abroad. In his view, Germany's blutige Geburt was a tragedy, and whether on the Schlachtfelder von Königgrätz und Sedan oder im Plenarsaal des Reichstags, it was also the opposite of a Befreiungskrieg. Die Akzeptanz von Krieg und Gewalt als Mittel zum Zweck, as Bebel rightly predicted, was to have far-reaching ramifications not only for the Kaiserreich's military and diplomatic entanglements but also for its political culture. The years 1866-1872 left a fateful legacy that was borne by Social Democrats, their enemies, and all Germans.