



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 4. Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany, 1866-1890

Kaiser Wilhelm II's Royal Decree on Reformed School Instruction as a Means to Combat Social Democracy (May 1, 1889)

This Royal Decree [*kaiserlicher Erlaß*] was issued by Kaiser Wilhelm II when he had been German emperor for less than a year. It postulates the political education of elementary school pupils and the inclusion of contemporary political issues in the curriculum. Generally, authorities in Imperial Germany did not want pupils to discuss political issues: they were to study and obey the teachings of the state. The rise of Social Democracy in the preceding two decades, however, had convinced the young Kaiser that socialists were such dangerous public enemies that even the youngest Germans had to be taught to fear them and their “pernicious” teachings. Workers, he suggests here, must learn to trust in the beneficence of the monarch. Note that the decree is issued on May 1st – the day of international socialist solidarity, which was recognized for the first time in 1889 in remembrance of the Haymarket Riot in Chicago on May 4, 1886.

For some time now, I have been preoccupied with the notion of making use of schools and their individual grade levels to counteract the spread of Socialist and Communist thinking. First and foremost, the school will have to lay the groundwork for a healthy view of state and social conditions by cultivating the fear of God and the love of the fatherland. I cannot close myself off from the insight, however, that in a period in which Social Democratic errors and distortions are being spread with increasing zeal, the school will have to make greater efforts to foster the realization of that which is true, which is real, and which is possible in the world. The school must strive to endow youth early on with the conviction that the teachings of Social Democracy not only contradict the holy commandments and Christian ethics, but also prove unfeasible in reality and detrimental to both individual and society alike in their consequences. Its curriculum has to incorporate more modern and contemporary history than it has in the past, and the school must prove that only the authority of the state is capable of defending the family, freedom, and rights of an individual. It must also make young people aware of the manner in which the Prussian kings have striven for the progressive improvement of the living conditions of workers, starting with the legal reforms of Frederick the Great and from the abolition of serfdom up to this day. Furthermore, the school must employ statistical data to prove just how substantially and consistently working-class incomes and living conditions have improved over this century under this monarchical protection.

[. . .]

In particular, the history of the fatherland will also have to examine the history of our social and economic legislation, as well as its development from the beginning of this century up to the sociopolitical legislation of today, in order to show how, since time immemorial, the Prussian monarchs have considered it their special task to provide fatherly state protection to the population that depends on manual labor and to improve the physical and spiritual welfare of this population, and how in the future, too, workers can expect justice and the safeguarding of their occupations only under the protection and care of a king at the helm of a well-organized state. Especially with the adoption of a utilitarian perspective, through an explanation of the relevant practical conditions, it will be possible to familiarize even young people with the fact that an orderly state system under safe monarchical rule is an essential prerequisite for the protection and flourishing of an individual's legal and economic existence; that, on the other hand, the teachings of Social Democracy are practically unfeasible and that, if they were feasible, individual freedom would be subjected to an unbearable coercive force that would extend even into domestic life.

Source: Royal Decree of May 1, 1889, *Europäischer Geschichtskalender* [*European History Calendar*], published by H. Schulthess, 1890, p. 166.

Original German text reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870-1914. Dokumente und Skizzen* [*German Social History 1870-1914. Documents and Sketches*], 3rd edition. Munich: Beck, 1982, pp. 333-34.

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