



Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918

Reich Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow's "New Year's Eve Letter" (December 31, 1906)

Anticipating the coming Reichstag elections, Reich Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow (1849-1929) outlines the coalitions that could result and warns the "bourgeois parties" against aligning with the Social Democrats. Although the Social Democrats had discarded the idea of a socialist revolution, aiming instead to work for social justice through the parliamentary system, most political leaders were still opposed to them gaining power of any kind.

[...]

In Germany there is no unified liberal party that has demonstrated the clear will and the ability to engage in positive politics. This is not the moment to review past mistakes, opportunities that have been missed. In any case, internal discord, negative doctrinarism, an overstatement of principles, and an underestimation of what can be achieved in practical terms have prevented Liberalism from exerting the desired influence on the business of the government. It has only been within the past decade that some things have changed in this regard. I am thinking of Eugen Richter's struggle against Social Democracy, of the progressive vanquishing of the Manchester doctrine, and especially of the growing understanding for great national questions. A good deal still needs to be learned: moderation, a proper sense of proportion and an eye for what is close at hand, a sense of both historical continuity and real needs.

I do not believe by any means that out of the elections there will emerge a large, suitable liberal party that could then take the place of the Center Party. But it is perfectly possible that the parties of the Right, the National Liberal Party, and the liberal [*freisinnig*] groups further to the Left could, with a purposeful strategy in the election campaign, gain enough ground to form a majority on a case-by-case basis. I do not regard the strong opposition that has hitherto existed between the parties of the Right and those of the bourgeois Left on economic questions as an insurmountable obstacle. The absolutely necessary protection of agriculture has been guaranteed for a decade in the new trade agreements, and many a liberal man has admitted in private that their effect has not been unfavorable to urban interests, either. In any case, the enemies of the trade agreements must admit that trade and industry are enjoying a continued upswing.

On the other hand, there is already a good bridge leading across the waters of separation. The conservative parties and the National Liberals have been reliable on all great questions concerning the welfare of the nation, its unity, its position of power. The nation mattered more to them than the party. That is their distinction; they will stand their ground on it. The greater the willingness on the Left to satisfy the great national needs for colonial possessions, for the army and the navy, the broader and more solid this bridge can become.

Herein lies another, highly important area for common concerns and work by all elements of the nation. Contrary to the idea that unfortunately still prevails in some liberal heads, that the threat of reaction in the Reich is from the Right and must be fought against side-by-side with Social Democracy, I am firmly convinced that the real reaction or the real threat of a reaction lies with Social Democracy. Not only are its dreams of a communist future hostile to civilization, [but] brutal coercion is the means to their realization. – Any reactionary sentiment found anywhere in Germany gains strength and legitimacy through the Socialist undermining of the concepts of authority [*Obrigkeif*], property, religion, and Fatherland. Drunk on slogans, the crazed, petty bourgeois leveler Robespierre was followed by the sword of Bonaparte. He had to come to liberate the French people from the reign of terror of the Jacobins and communists.

The vote of December 13* was a blow to the allied governments and the national honor. I work with every party that respects the great national concerns [*Gesichtspunkte*]. Where these concerns are disregarded, friendship ends. No one in Germany wants rule by a single person. But the great majority of the German people want rule by parliament even less.

Moreover, though there is no state that has done more for the present and future of the workers, for their material and spiritual needs, than the German Reich, though the German workers are the best-educated in the world, there are millions who deliberately or passively support a party that wants to refashion the state and society from the ground up. The German people must free themselves from this kind of pressure. The liberal city dweller and [liberal] farmer are no less part of this than their conservative counterparts.

No matter how different the situations in the various electoral districts may be, the parties that stood by the side of the government on December 13 kept in mind from the outset what united them back then: the battle for the honor and good of the nation against Social Democrats, Poles, Guelphs, and the Center Party.

I put the Social Democrats first, because every defeat for Social Democracy is a warning to its blind haughtiness, a strengthening of the confidence in the calm progress of our inner development, and a solidification of our position on the outside, and because this would at the same time make it more difficult for a bourgeois party, with the help of the Social Democratic Party, to take a dominant position over the other bourgeois parties.

Source: Eduard von Liebert, *Aus einem bewegten Leben: Erinnerungen* [*Memories of an Eventful Life*]. Munich, 1925, pp. 180-81.

Original German text reprinted in Ernst Rudolf Huber, *Dokumente zur deutschen Verfassungsgeschichte* [*Documents on German Constitutional History*] . 2 volumes. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1961. Volume 2, pp. 436-38.

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* Rejection of the government's motion concerning funding for the military action in German South-West Africa. Information provided in Ernst Rudolf Huber, *Dokumente zur deutschen Verfassungsgeschichte* [*Documents on German Constitutional History*]. 2 volumes. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1961. Volume 2, p. 437.