



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 7. Nazi Germany, 1933-1945

Speech by the Social Democrat Otto Wels against the Passage of the “Enabling Act”
(March 23, 1933)

By the time Hitler proposed the “Enabling Act,” the National Socialists had virtually smashed the Communist opposition. Many Social Democratic delegates were in “protective custody,” and the Center Party had already announced its support of the measure. Nonetheless, on March 23, 1933, the day the vote was taken in the Reichstag, there were still plenty of SA men on hand at the Kroll Opera House to intimidate potential opponents and those who were on the fence. Only the Social Democratic delegates – at least those who were not in custody – voted against the law that became the legal basis for Hitler’s dictatorship. But before the Reichstag relinquished its legislative authority, SPD Chairman Otto Wels (1873-1939) spoke out once more in support of the democratic ideals of the Weimar Republic.

Ladies and gentlemen! We Social Democrats agree with the foreign policy demand raised by the Reich Chancellor of equal treatment for Germany, [and do so] all the more emphatically since we have always fundamentally championed it. In this context, I may be permitted the personal remark that I was the first German who stood up to the untruth of Germany’s guilt for the outbreak of the world war before an international forum, at the Bern Conference on February 3, 1919. Never was a principle of our party able to or did in fact prevent us from representing the just demands of the German nation to the other peoples of the world.

The day before yesterday, as well, the Reich Chancellor made a statement in Potsdam to which we subscribe. It says: “From the lunacy of the theory of eternal winners and losers came the madness of reparations and, in their wake, the catastrophe of the world economy.” This statement is true for foreign politics; it is no less true for domestic politics. Here, too, the theory of eternal winners and losers is, as the Reich Chancellor says, lunacy.

But the words of the Reich Chancellor remind us of others that were spoken in the National Assembly on July 23, 1919. At that time it was said: “We are defenseless; defenseless but not without honor. To be sure, the enemies are after our honor, there is no doubt. However, that this attempt at defamation will one day redound back upon the instigators, that it is not our honor that is being destroyed by this global catastrophe, that is our belief to the last breath.”

(Interjection from the National Socialists: Who said that?)

This appears in a declaration that a social democratic-led government issued at the time in the name of the German people before the whole world, four hours before the truce expired, in order to prevent the enemies from marching further. – That declaration is a valuable supplement to the statement by the Reich Chancellor.

A dictated peace is followed by few blessings, least of all at home. A real national community cannot be based on it. Its first prerequisite is equal law. The government may protect itself against raw excesses of polemics; it may rigorously prevent incitements to acts of violence and acts of violence in and of themselves. This may happen, if it is done toward all sides evenly and impartially, and if one foregoes treating defeated opponents as though they were proscribed. Freedom and life can be taken from us, but not our honor.

After the persecutions that the Social Democratic Party has suffered recently, no one will reasonably demand or expect that it vote for the Enabling Act proposed here. The elections of March 5 have given the governing parties the majority and thus the possibility of governing in strict adherence to the words and meaning of the constitution. Where such a possibility exists, there is also an obligation to take it. Criticism is salutary and necessary. Never before, since there has been a German Reichstag, has the control of public affairs by the elected representatives of the people been eliminated to such an extent as is happening now, and is supposed to happen even more through the new Enabling Act. Such omnipotence of the government must have all the more serious repercussions inasmuch as the press, too, lacks any freedom of expression.

Ladies and gentlemen! The situation that prevails in Germany today is often described in glaring colors. But as always in such cases, there is no lack of exaggeration. As far as my party is concerned, I declare here: we have neither asked for intervention in Paris, nor moved millions to Prague, nor spread exaggerated news abroad. It would be easier to stand up to such exaggerations if the kind of reporting that separates truth from falsehood were possible at home. It would be even better if we could attest in good conscience that full protection in justice has been restored for all. That, gentlemen, is up to you.

The gentlemen of the National Socialist party call the movement they have unleashed a national revolution, not a National Socialist one. So far, the relationship of their revolution to socialism has been limited to the attempt to destroy the social democratic movement, which for more than two generations has been the bearer of socialist ideas and will remain so. If the gentlemen of the National Socialist Party wanted to perform socialist acts, they would not need an Enabling Law. They would be assured of an overwhelming majority in this house. Every motion submitted by them in the interest of workers, farmers, white-collar employees, civil servants, or the middle class could expect to be approved, if not unanimously, then certainly with an enormous majority.

And yet, they first want to eliminate the Reichstag in order to continue their revolution. But the destruction of that which exists does not make a revolution. The people are expecting positive accomplishments. They are waiting for effective measures against the terrible economic misery

that exists not only in Germany but in the whole world. We Social Democrats bore the responsibility in the most difficult of times and for that we had stones cast at us. Our accomplishments for the reconstruction of the state and the economy, for the liberation of occupied territories, will stand the test of history. We have established equal justice for all and a social labor law. We have helped to create a Germany in which the path to leadership of the state is open not only to princes and barons, but also to men from the working class. You cannot back away from that without relinquishing your own leader. The attempt to turn back the wheel of history will be futile. We Social Democrats know that one cannot undo the facts of power politics with mere legal protests. We see the power-political fact of your present rule. But the people's sense of justice is also a political power, and we shall not cease to appeal to this sense of justice.

The Weimar Constitution is not a socialist constitution. But we stand by the principles enshrined in, the principles of a state based on the rule of law, of equal rights, of social justice. In this historic hour, we German Social Democrats solemnly pledge ourselves to the principles of humanity and justice, of freedom and socialism. No Enabling Act gives you the power to destroy ideas that are eternal and indestructible. After all, you yourselves have professed your adherence to Socialism. The Socialist Law has not destroyed social democracy. German social democracy will draw new strength also from the latest persecutions.

We greet the persecuted and the oppressed. We greet our friends in the Reich. Your steadfastness and loyalty deserve admiration. The courage of your convictions and your unbroken optimism guarantee a brighter future.

Source of original German text: Otto Wels's Speech against the Passage of the Enabling Act (March 23, 1933), in Paul Meier-Benneckenstein, ed., *Dokumente der deutschen Politik*, Volume 1: *Die Nationalsozialistische Revolution 1933*, edited by Axel Friedrichs. Berlin, 1935, pp. 36-38.

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