

Aims and objectives

The history of how the Weimar Republic was established and the political agents playing a crucial part in it have always been in the focus of German historiography. Apart from some great works, however Hungarian historiography has never been particularly concerned with the topic of the first democratic German Republic.

My aim here is to describe and to analyze how left wing liberal politicians contributed to the establishment of Weimar Democracy. My research paper focuses on the period of time from the summer of 1917 when the so-called interfactional committee was set up, which can be considered as the forrunner of the Weimar Coalition, to the summer of 1919, when the Weimar Coalition disintegrated and the Weimar Constitution was adopted.

Particular emphasis is laid on the activity and the motives of the Progressive People's Party, which turned into the German Democratic Party after November of 1918. I think a brief review of the role of the Progressive People's Party in the domestic politics during World War I also highlights the antecedents of the formation of the Weimar Coalition. In addition I also examine why the Liberals failed to organise a single political party, and how the German Democratic Party was set up, the outcome of the rivalry within the Party from its very beginning, the results of the first democratic election, the role of the left wing Liberals in the Constituent Assembly and its Constitutional Committee.

Analysing the role of influential left wing liberal politicians in this era, in this research paper an attempt has been made to justify the assumption that the Progressive People's Party and the German Democratic Party significantly contributed to establishing the Weimar Democracy and the role played by the members of these parties in the preparation of the Constituent Assembly was crucial in the democratic set-up of the new Germany.

Methods and references

Launching a wide-range research of the above topic was hindered by the fact that a huge amount of the documents of German archives was destroyed during World War II, and

the what was left was confiscated and taken by the Allies. After reconstructing German archives, in 1952 the Federal Archives was set up in Koblenz, where the politically relevant part of the sources was returned only in the 1960s and 1970s. Since then various collections of sources have been published, although very few studies of sources of the documents related to the German Democratic Party have been made available, but actually they accessible without any constraint these days.

I have made use of documents No. R 45/III related to the German Democratic Party, available in the Federal Archives, which however do not contain the protocols of the sessions held during the Weimar Constituent Assembly, which by all means could have revealed the decision-making mechanism within the Party. I have also made use of the diaries, the political correspondence and speeches of Hartmann Freiherr von Richthofen and the vice-chancellor Friedrich von Payer as well as the collections of sources made available from the documents of the Archives. The Central Provincial Archives, where the papers of the late Conrad Haussman can be found, also provided me with valuable sources.

Various press matters have also served as sources. The official paper of the German Democratic Party „Der Demokrat“ made available information related to the Party's day-to-day activity, whereas „Die Hilfe“, whose editor –in –chief was Friedrich Naumann, aimed at popularising ideas underlying liberal politics underpinned by scholarly research. Out of the national dailies in 1919-19 it was the „Berliner Tageblatt“, the „Frankfurter Zeitung“ and the Vossische Zeitung, which covered and sympathised with the Party. Drawing on the archives of these papers I have found several high-standard papers analysing the events of the era, due to the fact that several relevant German intellectuals committed to left wing liberalism contributed to these papers.

Though memoirs are inevitably subjective and should be treated critically, the diaries and memoirs of politicians having an impact on the formation of the Weimar Republic have also proved to be useful. What I have found especially intriguing were the memoirs of Otto Gessler, Theodor Heuss, Walther Rathenau, Hjalmar Schacht, Eugen Schiffer and Theodor Wolff.

A great deal of publications have also been available to me, which examined the career of relevant personalities, who played a crucial part in setting up the German

Democratic Party, organising its participation in the elections, in the liberal faction of the Constituent Assembly and also in the coalition government or one way or another they had made an important contribution to the Weimar Republic. The monographs devoted to the career of Gertrud Baumer, Wilhelm Heile, Erich Koch-Weser, Friedrich Naumann and Hugo Preuss are particularly outstanding. However it is worthy of note that still the careers of some left wing liberals have not been researched properly.

Due to the availability of the documents the number of the comprehensive works have increased considerably, although the number of publications on particular issues is also huge. The comprehensive works by Gyula Tokody and Lajos Kerekes in Hungarian, whereas the fully comprehensive works by Karl Dietrich Bracher, Erich Eyck, Eberhard Kolb, Diether Langewiesche and Gerhard A. Ritter have been essential to me.

While analysing the politics of the German Democratic party, I have drawn on the research by Lothar Albertin and Hartmut Schustereit. Albertin focused on the two liberal parties, whereas Schustereit has made a comparative analysis of the left wing Liberals and the majority Social Democrats. Moreover I have also benefited from the work of Regina Gottschalk, which focused on left wing Liberals since 1917 during the transition from Monarchy into Republic. What made the work of Ludwig Luckemeyer special was the fact that he managed to interview party members still alive at the time of researching his paper and these interviews added a lot to the atmosphere of the era.

While analysing the role of the German Democratic Party in the Weimar Constitution, primarily I have drawn on the research of Ernst Portner and Gerhard Schulz, whose works provided me with an overview of the immense efforts the left wing Liberals put into the Constitutional Assembly.

Conclusions

The Progressive People's Party was committed to entering the war as early as 1912-13, when the Party approved and voted all the Bills submitted to Parliament to increase military power. The Party's official position was also supported by influential economic circles close to the Party and some of the outstanding left wing members of the scientific and

cultural elite. According to them only further economic growth could make Germany into a significant European power, and to carry out the German cultural mission was be feasible only for a nation-state which turned into a world-power.

When World War I broke out, the Progressive People's Party supported the efforts of the head of government to create national unity, the so-called Burgfrieden. The Party adopted the programme of the government, which intended to speed up the political emancipation of the Social Democratic Party (SPD). As a result the SPD representing the interests of the working class could act as a partner of equal rights. The Progressive People's Party managed to win the left wing liberal Hirsch-Dunkersche Trade Union leaders over to the endorsement of the programme of the Chancellor.

The parliamentary faction of the Progressive People's Party was not willing to give up all its rights and definitely defied all these attempts of the Chancellor. Although the faction members strongly criticised the Chancellor several times, still they were the reliable supporters of the government's programme called Burgfrieden, from the beginning of the war. In line with it, they demanded to get rid of the Prussian system of vote with property qualifications and to introduce measures to increase the power of Parliament.

Regarding the aims of the war, the Party identified with the official position of the German government, namely the 'principle of realistic guarantees', which also implied annexation demands, but never identified totally with the excesses of expansionism in German domestic politics. The economic and cultural circles closely attached to the Party considerably exceeded the modest demands of the Party.

The failure of the war and the internal tensions mounting urged the Progressive People's Party to join the peace initiative of the Christian People's Party in July of 1917, which aimed to declare the intention to put an end to war as soon as possible and also to make peace in which German interests are also taken into consideration. The aim in domestic policy was to show that certain issues in domestic and foreign politics could urge some parliamentary parties to overcome their conflicts. The cooperation coming from the peace initiative, called interfactional committee comprising the factions of the Christian People's Party, the Progressive People's Party and the faction of the majority Social Democratic Party set the aim

in domestic policy to increase the role of Parliament against the executive power i.e the restructuring of the division of power.

The cooperation within the interfactional committee was not free tensions, moreover in January of 1918 chances were that it might as well have ceased to exist. The first considerable results were seen in the first days of November 1917, when the first time in the history of German constitutionalism the incoming Chancellor had conciliatory talks with the most influential parties of Parliament.

In October of 1918 it was seen as another achievement that the interfactional committee and particularly the Progressive People's Party had an impact on the course of events when Prince Max von Baden was appointed Chancellor. Left wing Liberals were also members of the coalition government, however the fact that the new government's scope for action was rather limited made the achievement of the interfactional committee also questionable. The Progressive People's Party actively took part in outlining the constitutional reforms announced in October of 1918, which as a matter of fact were in line with the Party's constitutional reform platform.

After the events of the Revolution in November, the left wing Liberals temporarily went on the defensive. Then in the same months talks were initiated to turn the two Liberal parties into a single party. One of the concomitants of the history of German liberalism is the fact that the ideas of liberalism were never represented by a single party. This disagreement can be traced back to the attempts to unite the Reich, and this division between the two Parties was final after 1867. Several talks were initiated to unite the two parties but it turned out soon, that the intentions of principle were actually hard to be turned into actions, since the underlying principles of the two Parties were rather different.

According to the right wing Liberals the guarantee of Rechtsstaat lies in the unrestricted evolvement of the idea of freedom and also in doing away with obstacles to individuals' success. In contrast left wing Liberals rather put an emphasis on what was overlapping in liberalism and Social Democracy and they envisaged the new party set up relying on the broadest support of society. Moreover in their view one of the main tasks of the would-be party was to fulfill the role of the mediator. Furthermore neither in theory nor in

everyday politics they did not believe that the gap between being committed to democracy and the individual's desire for freedom was impossible to bridge.

After the talks aiming at unification failed the German Democratic Party was set up on 20th November 1918. Then the Progressive People's Party requested the party branch organisations to join and the Party was dissolved. However those who played a crucial part in setting up the Party were soon pushed into the background and were replaced by persons belonging to the leadership of the Progressive People's Party on the one hand and by the ones who financially contributed to strengthen the Party on the other.

The Party was satisfied by the fact that the Council of Delegates called elections 19 January 1919 and the new election-law was put in effect. The move to proportional electoral system was in line with the ideas of the left wing Liberals, but they considered the decrease of age limit too early. As the Party had not supported the political emancipation of women, giving the right of vote to women temporarily put the Party in a difficult situation. It is noteworthy that the Party did not resent the transition to list, because in case of a Party with so many outstanding individuals, being on lists of candidates did not seem to be particularly advantageous.

In most constituencies putting up candidates took place as before, i.e the national leadership of the Party provided only recommendations. During the elections the German Democratic Party highlighted rather what made Party different from both the Social Democratic Party and bourgeois parties and attempted to win over the masses between them. During the elections the Party did not have a systematic political programme, their ideas were publicised through calls for elections and brochures.

One of the keys to the successful election campaign is the proper financial asset. In this respect the Party could rely on the Kuratorium für den Wiederaufbau des deutschen Wirtschaftslebens which consisted in the big entrepreneurs of Berlin and its environs under the leadership of Carl Friedrich von Siemens. The fact that some of the financial supporters became members of the leadership of the Party, can be seen as the first move toward economic dependence.

In the election held 19 January 1919 behind the Social Democratic Party and the Christian People's Party, the German Democratic Party gaining 18.5 percent of the votes had 75 seats in the National Assembly. The election results and the former cooperation of the three Parties resulted in the Weimar Coalition which had a convenient majority of 78 percent in the National Assembly of Weimar.

One of the principle tasks of the National Assembly was to adopt the supreme law of the land to settle the relations between Germany and the foreign powers. The draft of the Weimar Constitution was drawn up by one of the founding members of the German Democratic Party Hugo Preuss, whose scholarly and political achievement made him the right person to outline the new democratic constitution.

In his concept he argued for a decentralised state of unity. He also made an attempt to alter the internal boundaries of the Reich, but the member states so much opposed it that he had to give it up. Likewise he also had to retreat when it came to draw up the pattern of legislative power. However his concept on the executive power implying the ideas of the direct election of the head of state and the Reich government bearing responsibility to the Parliament was actually approved by the National Assembly. In the constitutional committee of the National Assembly several left wing Liberal representatives' achievement was outstanding. The Party managed to settle the differences between the coalition members several times.

The Versailles Peace Treaty following World War I divided the coalition government. The German Democratic Party considered the terms of the Peace Treaty unacceptable and left the government. The majority of the members of the parliamentary faction did not approve the Treaty what they called a dictate.

Publications

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