

# Putting Radicalism to the Test: German Social Democracy and the 1905 Suffrage Demonstrations in Dresden<sup>1</sup>

CHRISTOPH NONN

---

**Summary:** Throughout the long debate on whether the workers' movement of Imperial Germany was predominantly radical or reformist in nature, little attention has been paid to attitudes at the grass-roots level. It is argued here that during the years of 1905–1906, when all Europe was witnessing turmoil and an intensification of social conflict, the German Social Democratic leadership deliberately put the radicalism of the masses to the test. The Dresden suffrage demonstrations of December 1905 were the first to end in violent clashes between participants and police. However, contrary to what has been written to date on this incident and those similar to it, the great majority of the demonstrators were not militant. But they did exhibit a remarkable readiness to engage in civil disobedience, which the Social Democrats could use to press the party's political aims.

---

## I

Compared to the history of strikes, the history of other forms of social conflict in Germany prior to World War I was long neglected by researchers,<sup>2</sup> even though case studies in this area provide almost ideal opportunities to link "classic" approaches to the history of institutions with new perspectives from a history of mentalities. The study of such exemplary protest actions is a rewarding endeavor in expanding the scope of traditional social history. It considers organizations as well as attitudes, examines the behavior of elites and the "common man" in equal measure, and links the advantages of structural analysis with those of "thick description". This will be demonstrated here by using the example of the two violent confrontations between demonstrators and police during suffrage rallies in Dresden in December 1905. The focus will be aimed

<sup>1</sup> Special thanks to Peter Heil, Simone Lässig, James Retallack and Karsten Rudolph for their helpful criticism of an earlier version of this article.

<sup>2</sup> A purely quantitative review of the period of the German Empire is found in Richard Tilly, "Sozialer Protest als Gegenstand historischer Forschung", *Kapital, Staat und sozialer Protest in der deutschen Industrialisierung* (Göttingen, 1980), pp. 175–196. For different approaches see Thomas Lindenberger, *Straßenpolitik: Zur Sozialgeschichte der öffentlichen Ordnung in Berlin 1900–1914* (Berlin, 1995).

at the controversy over radicalism and the willingness to resort to violence within the environment of the German workers' movement.

Actually, two studies on the Saxon suffrage movement of 1905–1906 were written in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) during the 1950s. They are disappointing not only because the Dresden demonstrations are dealt with fairly briefly, but also because neither study measures up to the standards of scientific research. In one of them, the author recounts the events surrounding the demonstrations as was reported at the time in the Social Democratic *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung* and spices the original material with several fabricated details.<sup>3</sup> The author of the second study uses other sources, primarily the reports submitted by the Dresden chief of police to the Saxon Ministry of Internal Affairs. However, as in the first study, the depiction and interpretation of the evidence are teeming with irresolvable contradictions and crude simplifications so typical for much of GDR historiography. In this vein, the SPD (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands) membership and “the” workers in general are placed on equal footing and depicted as being at the same time extremely disciplined and imbued with radical fervor. All major violent actions, modeled on the first Russian revolution, were prevented solely by the “treason against the working class” committed by “the opportunistic party leadership” in December 1905.<sup>4</sup>

Richard Evans, however, has written an undeniably sophisticated analysis of the suffrage unrest that occurred a short time later, namely in January 1906, in Hamburg.<sup>5</sup> Disturbed by crude, quantified research on protest, he has succeeded in producing a methodologically sound and narratively-polished case study on social protest. Evans differentiates between a peaceful demonstration at the square in front of the town hall of the Hanseatic city, in which the participants only resisted sporadically to the police clearance of the square by force, and the later formation of groups, who plundered the shops in the side streets and engaged the police in outright battles across street barricades. He comes to the conclusion that, in addition to the “respectable working classes”, there were large and growing militant groups among the lower classes. The unrest that occurred in the winter of 1905–1906 therefore appears to be the direct predecessor to the Revolution of 1918, the only unique aspect of which was the emergence of a “revolutionary leadership” – namely by the Independent Social Democrats. By 1905–1906, argues Evans, “the SPD was

<sup>3</sup> Horst Dörner, *Die Kämpfe der Dresdner Arbeiter unter dem Einfluß der Russischen Revolution 1905* (Dresden, 1958), pp. 47–60.

<sup>4</sup> Ursula Herrmann, “Der Kampf der Sozialdemokratie gegen das Dreiklassenwahlrecht in Sachsen in den Jahren 1905/06”, *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, III (1955), pp. 856–883, quotes on pp. 870, 872.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Evans, “‘Red Wednesday’ in Hamburg: Social Democrats, Police and ‘Lumpenproletariat’ in the Suffrage Disturbances of 17 January 1906”, *Rethinking German History* (London, 1987), pp. 248–290.

losing touch with the potential for militancy of the classes which it claimed to represent, militancy which found expression in frequent outbursts of spontaneous collective protest, both political and industrial".<sup>6</sup>

Do the events that occurred in Dresden in December 1905 fit into this interpretation? In order to answer this question, I will first examine the positions and aims of the Social Democratic leadership in the Saxon capital and in Berlin within the context of the general political situation, and I will then analyze the behavior of the demonstrators during the course of events that took place at the rallies on 3 and 16 December.

## II

In the early years following the turn of the century, German domestic politics were characterized by a strengthening of the Social Democrats, on the one hand, and by weakness and discord among its opponents, on the other. In 1903 the elections to the Reichstag brought a record increase in votes for the SPD, especially in Saxony. During the course of the election campaign, which focused chiefly on the debate over the burden that duties and tariffs placed on consumers, the issues of tax and suffrage reform were raised increasingly.<sup>7</sup> Liberals and conservatives became increasingly divided in their opinions on whether the growth of the Social Democratic movement could be countered best by reform or by repression. Membership of the SPD continued to rise rapidly as did that of the free trade unions. An unprecedented wave of strikes swept over Germany. Among the Social Democrats, a debate ensued on the chances of staging demonstrations and political strikes. To some it appeared as if the winds of revolution were beginning to stir.<sup>8</sup>

Events occurring abroad stimulated the imagination. The general strike of the Russian railroad workers, the creation of the soviets in Moscow and St Petersburg, and the guarantee by the czar in October 1905 to grant universal suffrage and a catalog of basic rights played a role in

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 282.

<sup>7</sup> See the most recent general surveys written on this: Thomas Kühne, *Dreiklassenwahlrecht und Wahlkultur in Preußen 1867–1914* (Düsseldorf, 1994), pp. 455–468; Christoph Nonn, *Verbraucherprotest und Parteiensystem im wilhelminischen Deutschland* (Düsseldorf, 1996), chs 3 and 4; on Saxony in particular, see Simone Lässig and Karl Heinrich Pohl (eds), *Sachsen im Umbruch* (forthcoming); Simone Lässig, *Wahlrechtsreformen in Sachsen 1895–1909* (forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> On this, see Joachim Eichler, *Von Köln nach Mannheim: Die Debatten über Maifeier, Massenstreik und das Verhältnis der Freien Gewerkschaften zur deutschen Sozialdemokratie innerhalb der Arbeiterbewegung Deutschlands 1905/06* (Münster, 1992). At a Social Democratic meeting in the Saxon city of Borna on 14 October 1905 it was said that the party and the trade unions needed to work together "in order to reach the ultimate goal of an overthrow, even if it meant risking life and limb": Staatsarchiv Leipzig, Amtshauptmannschaft Borna, no. 3191, f. 109; see also *ibid.*, ff. 100 (5 February 1905) and 102 (19 March 1905).

fostering this atmosphere. And at least the Social Democrats in Dresden were even more impressed by the wave of demonstrations that helped their comrades in Austria-Hungary advance the cause of suffrage reform. Close attention was paid to the success of this movement, which climaxed in a series of major rallies in late November attended by a total of nearly a million people throughout the Danube monarchy. It was estimated that 250,000 demonstrated in Vienna alone.<sup>9</sup>

We know little about the plans and goals of the SPD executive committee in this period. The months between October 1905 and March 1906 must have been full of hectic activity for the Social Democratic elite, a period in which little time was left for reflection and contemplation. For example, the correspondence of August Bebel and Karl Kautsky, which usually provides a great deal of insight into the minds of the leadership, practically ceased. And there are large time gaps in the diary entries of Hermann Molkenbuhr, executive committee secretary.<sup>10</sup> Until August 1905, the leading German Social Democrats remained very skeptical of the emerging debate over a mass or general strike. They called political strikes purely defensive weapons that should only be deployed against political attacks on the right to enter coalitions or on general voting rights for the Reichstag. In mid-August, Molkenbuhr even made fun in his diary of "the daydreaming about the general strike".<sup>11</sup> It was therefore quite a sensation when Bebel announced on 22 September at the Social Democratic congress held in Jena that even the aggressive tactic of strikes should be considered in order to force the introduction of universal, equal and secret suffrage in Prussia, Saxony and elsewhere. A resolution to this effect had been approved by the entire executive committee just prior to the party congress and was supported by the majority of the delegates.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The best general surveys of the events in Austria are found in Vincent J. Knapp, *Austrian Social Democracy 1889–1914* (Washington, 1980), pp. 129–139, and William A. Jenks, *The Austrian Electoral Reform of 1907* (New York, 1950), pp. 40–44. Eichler, *Von Köln nach Mannheim*, pp. 42–58 and 77–92, has been right to reject the myth propagated by GDR historiography and often accepted in the West that the primary cause for the debate on political strikes was the first Russian revolution. Instead, he emphasizes the role of the syndicalist-localist movement led by Raphael Friedeberg. However, in doing so, Eichler fails to see the importance of the events in Austria for sparking interest in a discussion on new roads for Social Democratic tactics and strategy. The evidence of the impact of these events is clearly documented at least in the pages of the *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung*.

<sup>10</sup> See Karl Kautsky Jr (ed.), *August Bebels Briefwechsel mit Karl Kautsky* (Assen, 1971); Friedrich Adler (ed.), *Victor Adler: Briefwechsel mit August Bebel und Karl Kautsky* (Vienna, 1954); diary of Hermann Molkenbuhr in the Archiv der sozialen Demokratie (AdsD) in Bonn.

<sup>11</sup> Entry dated 17 August 1905, AdsD, Molkenbuhr papers IV. Eichler, *Von Köln nach Mannheim*, p. 152, falsely quotes here "Massenstreik" (mass strike).

<sup>12</sup> *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitages der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands, 17–23 September 1905 in Jena* (Berlin, 1905), pp. 142–143 (text of the

This new course was by no means a signal of a transition by the SPD leadership to "revolutionary positions", as was asserted repeatedly in GDR historiography.<sup>13</sup> At least Bebel, who was at the zenith of his power and prestige and whose influence within the party can hardly be overestimated, clarified unequivocally in a letter to his close friend Victor Adler, chairman of the Austrian Social Democratic party, that he did not agree with those who felt that the political strike would replace completely the legalistic approach practiced by the SPD up to that time.<sup>14</sup> For Bebel, the real arena for political struggle remained the parliaments.

However, the mass strike resolution that passed at the party congress in Jena was not merely a formula for compromise designed exclusively for the purpose of bridging, at least verbally, the enormous gap between the emerging radical left within German Social Democracy and the reformist trade union leadership.<sup>15</sup> If this aspect alone is considered, the SPD inevitably appears to be an internally divided, weak party. Yet it seems fair to assume that the decision to move beyond the earlier, purely defensive concept of political strikes reflects instead a feeling of growing confidence. Despite the poor availability of source material there are indeed indications that the executive committee of the Social Democratic Party hoped the use of strikes or at least the threat of them would bring about political reforms.

This was the gist of the diary entry made by Molkenbuhr on 23 October 1905, in which he described the SPD as in an extremely favorable position and noted that the conservatively dominated Prussian and national governments were close to despair. In a later entry in 1909, Molkenbuhr recalled that he had considered mass strikes to be inevitable in 1905–1906.<sup>16</sup> What seemed more appropriate than to use such strikes as a weapon to advance the long-standing aim of political reform? Bebel must have been thinking along these lines when he drastically criticized a proposal put forth by the reformist Wolfgang Heine that the SPD should distance itself from any action not complying with valid law. Referring to this proposal, Bebel said, "we would not

resolution) and 285–343 (Bebel's speech, ensuing debate and vote); Bebel to Adler, 16 September 1905, *Briefwechsel*, p. 468 (on unanimous vote of executive committee).

<sup>13</sup> Dieter Fricke, "Auf dem Weg nach Mannheim: Zum Verhältnis der sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands und den Freien Gewerkschaften zu Beginn der Epoche des Imperialismus", *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, XXV (1977), p. 445; see also *August Bebel: eine Biographie* (Berlin, 1989), p. 630: the party congress revealed, as stated here, "that Bebel was completely under the spell of the momentum of the revolution in Russia".

<sup>14</sup> Bebel to Adler, 16 September 1905, *Briefwechsel*, p. 468.

<sup>15</sup> This according to Eichler, *Von Köln nach Mannheim*, p. 148, and Hans Mommsen, "The Free Trade Unions and Social Development in Imperial Germany", in Wolfgang Mommsen and Hans-Gerd Husung (eds), *The Development of Trade Unionism in Great Britain and Germany 1880–1914* (London, 1985), p. 379.

<sup>16</sup> AdSD, Molkenbuhr papers IV, diary entry dated 2 August 1909.

get far [. . .] with such scaredy-pants".<sup>17</sup> He wanted at least to use the threat of illegal actions to force conservative governments to make concessions on the suffrage issue, for example. According to sources provided by Wolfgang Heine, there were other members of the SPD executive committee who were even willing to go further, namely Paul Singer. Singer, who shared the duties of party head with Bebel, supposedly wanted to hold suffrage demonstrations despite police bans and the risk of violent confrontations with state security forces.<sup>18</sup>

This strategy of civil disobedience was a gamble with many unknown variables. For one, it was not clear how the conservative forces controlling government, bureaucracy, army and police would react to the holding of banned open air demonstrations or to political strikes. The same uncertainty existed regarding the behavior of the liberals, who were now hesitantly calling for reforms. Would they again – out of fear of unrest – resort to repression and return to their earlier position as the junior partner of the conservatives? Or would they attempt to convince the conservatives that it would be better to democratize the political system in order to defuse the popular protest? Most of all, the radicalism at the grass-roots level of the Social Democratic movement was being put to the test. How far were the "common people" prepared to go? In many respects, Saxony was an ideal laboratory for finding the answers to these questions in 1905.

### III

Since 1896, the kingdom of Saxony had a plutocratic three-class system of franchise like Prussia. Introduced by a coalition of conservatives and liberals, the franchise system had robbed the SPD of the opportunity to establish a significant representation in the kingdom's diet for the foreseeable future. The Saxon Social Democrats blamed the failure to prevent this "franchise robbery" in 1896 on the disinterest of the population. "The masses [. . .] just won't get up in arms," sighed the chairman of the district agitational committee Hermann Fleißner after years of futile efforts. The elections to the diet were not even important enough to the workers "to sacrifice an hour's wages".<sup>19</sup>

A change in this trend appeared to be heralded by the success of the 1903 Reichstag elections, the surprising election of a Social Democratic candidate to the Saxon diet in 1905, and the unusually high participation in the demonstrations against rising food prices in the autumn of the same

<sup>17</sup> "Mit solchen Hosenscheißern [. . .] kämen wir weit": Bebel to Adler, 16 September 1905, *Briefwechsel*, p. 468; see also Wolfgang Heine, "Politischer Massenstreik im gegenwärtigen Deutschland?", *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, IX (1905), pp. 754–760.

<sup>18</sup> Heine to Georg von Vollmar, 27 January 1906, AdsD, Vollmar papers, no. 875 (microfilm).

<sup>19</sup> *Die Neue Zeit*, XXII (1903/1904), 1, p. 143.

year.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the conservative-liberal alliance was disintegrating. In the 1905 elections to the Saxon diet, the liberals ceased their cooperation with the conservatives in maintaining a decade-long cartel of candidates. In addition to differences over economic policy, the cause for this rift was a difference in opinion over whether reform or repression was the best way to handle the SPD. The liberals now even considered repealing the franchise handicap established in 1896. By increasing public pressure, the SPD leaders hoped to push the liberals down the road of progressive reform: "Now it is the people's turn to speak," announced their organ, the *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung*.<sup>21</sup>

At midday on 19 November, Leipzig's city center became the stage for street demonstrations. Throughout all of Saxony, Social Democratic suffrage rallies had taken place that morning indoors. As these ended in Leipzig, the participants streamed into the city center. Led by the SPD Reichstag representative Geyer, they cheered for universal suffrage in front of city hall, the royal district government, and the home of the commanding general. Similar scenes then took place in front of the Russian and Austrian consulates and at various central locations throughout the city. According to estimates made by state authorities, the number of participants in the street demonstrations was somewhere between 20,000 and 30,000 people. The police did not intervene, so as to avoid any "tumult".<sup>22</sup>

On the day following these epoch-making suffrage demonstrations in Leipzig – the first to be held outdoors in Germany since 1849 – the *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung* published an article that was cited by observers at the time and by historians later as the most important evidence supporting the thesis of a widespread "revolutionary" mood at the grass-roots level of the Social Democratic movement. The key statement in this article reads, "that also the Saxon proletarians can speak the same language as Russians or Austrians, when the time comes [daß auch das sächsische Proletariat russisch, österreichisch reden kann, wenn's an der Zeit ist]". Even if one disregards the conditional phrase, which was probably intentionally tacked onto the end to leave the sentence open to various interpretations, it cannot be said in any way that these words indicate radicalism in the workers' movement's grass-roots.<sup>23</sup> After all, the *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung* was the voice of the party leadership for the Social Democrats of Dresden and eastern Saxony, not that of their rank and file.

<sup>20</sup> See Dörner, *Der Kampf der Dresdner Arbeiter*, pp. 34–35.

<sup>21</sup> "Das Volk hat nun das Wort": *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung* (SAZ), 28 November 1905; see also the issues of 17 and 23 November and 2 December.

<sup>22</sup> See the reports in SAZ, 20 November 1905; Sächsisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden (HStAD), Kreishauptmannschaft Leipzig, no. 253, ff. 7–8; HStAD, Innenministerium, no. 10993, f. 243; *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, 20 November.

<sup>23</sup> As is argued in Herrmann, "Der Kampf der Sozialdemokratie gegen das Dreiklassenwahlrecht in Sachsen", p. 859, and Dörner, *Der Kampf der Dresdner Arbeiter*, p. 47.

Yet it is obvious that SPD leaders were willing to use “new” means to intensify public pressure. An article appearing on 20 November included the statement “that the mass strike is possible”, an assertion that could be read many times in the pages of the paper throughout that autumn. The chairman of the Saxon Social Democrats, Georg Gradnauer, even believed that in the event of a political strike, the working class could count even on the silent approval of liberal entrepreneurs, who were disgruntled with conservative politics in the diet.<sup>24</sup> In the days following the street demonstrations in Leipzig, speakers at SPD rallies in Dresden also called for holding open air demonstrations.

But here the state security forces proved less tolerant. After all, Dresden was the political center of Saxony in two respects: both the royal residency and the seat of the state diet were located there. As police chief Koettig assured the Ministry of Internal Affairs, he was not willing “to tolerate agitation spilling into the streets”. However, his sources indicated that the local SPD leaders were intending to have their followers do just that. Not only were police informers reporting similar observations from party rallies,<sup>25</sup> but the *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung* also printed the following statement on 25 November: “Let us wait to see what the diet will say, yet at the same time, let us prepare to gather again in the streets and at rallies to demonstrate vigorously anew.” Two days later, Minister President Metzsch rejected suffrage reform in parliament. The conservative faction in parliament supported his decision, while the liberal representatives remained indecisive.

At this point, the Social Democratic party journal was conspicuously careful not to draw any concrete conclusions from this development. Yet in the days that followed, it reported extensively on the mass demonstration that took place in the streets of Vienna on 28 November and on the ensuing guarantee by the Austrian government that suffrage would be democratized. Concurrently, a call went out again for protest rallies to be held throughout all of Saxony the following Sunday, 3 December. Police Chief Koettig thus summoned the members of the Social Democratic agitational committee for eastern Saxony to police headquarters. He first told them that “he has not been petty in his attitude or actions against Social Democracy, as he has shown during his tenure in office”. However, he would not tolerate illegal open air demonstrations and would be “determined to repress” them. Because those summoned, including Fleißner, were “known to be very influential in the labor movement, he urged them to take notice of this and to exert their influence in order to prevent street demonstrations if such were planned”.

The Social Democrats, however, were not about to accept this offer of a “gentlemen’s agreement”, presented in such a confidential, ingratiat-

<sup>24</sup> *Die Neue Zeit*, XXIV (1905/1906), 1, p. 364.

<sup>25</sup> Report dated 3 December 1905, HStAD, Innenministerium, no. 11043, f. 17.



ing tone. They had already spent an entire day “racking their brains” in order to word a reply which was both cool and careful. They expressed first “their surprise over this notice, since there could be no talk of an organized street demonstration. It would be the business of individual associations and persons to call for any type of Social Democratic meeting. They refused to be held responsible for anything that happened before or after such meetings. Whereas they would accept the information just presented to them for their own personal reference, they were not obligated to the police for anything. In any case, Social Democrats in Dresden had shown that they were not considering organizing anything at all illegal.”<sup>26</sup> The opening and closing remarks of this statement reassured the police chief to the point that, as he subsequently stated, he no longer deemed it necessary to ban all meetings as had been originally intended. Yet, in fact, the Social Democratic leaders had washed their hands of all guilt should the approaching rallies erupt into street demonstrations. It would be wrong to conclude from their statement at police headquarters that they rejected the idea of street demonstrations.<sup>27</sup> Had they then advocated open air demonstrations, they could have counted on being detained on the spot. More likely their behavior reveals that the Social Democrats had long been planning to have street demonstrations follow the indoor meetings.

At their party congress the following year, the leaders of the Saxon Social Democrats even confirmed publicly that they indeed had organized the open air demonstrations.<sup>28</sup> The motives for their denial of involvement immediately before and after 3 December are obvious. They wanted, first and foremost, to avoid criminal prosecution and, second, to prevent an immediate ban of officially organized indoor meetings, as had already been imposed in Leipzig following the events of 19 November. In addition, the SPD leaders probably hoped that by depicting the street demonstrations following their rallies as spontaneous protest by the “people”, the impact of this action would be greater on the government and the diet. Therefore, in its editorial and commentary published on 4 December, the *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung* referred to the street demonstrations as a “movement born spontaneously from the innermost heart of the masses”. The paper stressed just as strongly that not one of the speakers at the indoor rallies had called for street demonstrations. Not one word was written about the content of those speeches, however.

<sup>26</sup> This account is based on the extensive description of the meeting published in the *SAZ* on 2 December 1905, to which Police Chief Koettig also refers in his brief report, dated 3 December, to the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

<sup>27</sup> Although Herrmann, who only quotes the last phrase of the statement, does argue this; “Der Kampf der Sozialdemokratie gegen das Dreiklassenwahlrecht in Sachsen”, p. 862.

<sup>28</sup> *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen der Landesversammlung der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Sachsens* (Dresden, 1906), p. 58.

The resolution of the agitational committee that was passed in all of the meetings contained the following sentence: "The people do not appear to be willing to let the matter rest with tedious protests, all of which have gone unheeded so far."<sup>29</sup> This was a barely concealed call to action that placed the responsibility of things to come on the shoulders of the anonymous masses while it exonerated its authors. Evidently, the wording did not receive unanimous support from the Social Democratic leadership. One of the seven people addressing the rallies, Julius Fräßdorf – a man known to be on the far right wing of the Saxon party leadership – considered street demonstrations to be too dangerous and "tedious protests" sufficient. Anyone who ventured out to Cotta, a community located on the far west side of Dresden, at noon on 3 December to hear Fräßdorf speak, was urged by him "to go home quietly".<sup>30</sup> And this is precisely what his audience did, in contrast to the participants of the other six rallies.

At these meetings, the speakers cleverly disguised their calls for street demonstrations while adroitly teetering on the edge of illegality. Fleißner for example was reported as saying that "with regard to the events in Austria, he fully trusted the working class of Dresden to do the right thing at the right moment if it did not want to sacrifice its reputation as the avant-garde of Germany's modern working class".<sup>31</sup> Gradnauer reported on 6 December on the speakers' tactics. In his words, they

urgently called attention to the warnings issued by police headquarters that the police would intervene ruthlessly against street marches. But the working masses understood that it was the job of the leaders to warn and their job to throw these warnings to the wind. As the author of these lines stood before one of the rallies calling for levelheadedness and advising against the use of violence, he was answered with general approval. Yet when he pointed out that the

<sup>29</sup> The following is the entire text as it appeared in the *SAZ* on 4 December 1905: "In the name of the entire people of Saxony, the meeting proclaims that the recent rejection of suffrage reform, which the public has so urgently demanded, by the Saxon government and the majority of the second chamber of parliament constitutes an incomprehensible disregard of the people's will; that the bitterness, especially of working class people, has reached its peak; and that the Saxon government and parliament are solely responsible for the consequences arising from this indignation. The people do not appear to be willing to let the matter rest with tedious protests, all of which have gone unheeded so far. The threat of police repression of suffrage demonstrations is not considered by the meeting to be an appropriate measure to placate the people. All that can help and reassure are immediate election reform and free suffrage as demanded by Social Democracy. This reform is being demanded again with utmost urgency and implacability."

<sup>30</sup> HStAD, Innenministerium, no. 11042, f. 22. It is not true, as Herrmann argues, that other speakers did the same; "Der Kampf der Sozialdemokratie gegen das Dreiklassenwahlrecht in Sachsen", p. 862.

<sup>31</sup> Report in the *Dresdner Anzeiger* (DA) from 4 December 1905; as well as the police report of 3 December 1905, HStAD, Innenministerium, no. 10443, ff. 2, 17.

people of a civilized country should not be denied its right to its own city streets, he was answered with the jubilant roar from the crowd of a thousand.<sup>32</sup>

#### IV

If the Dresden police chief had any doubts before noon on 3 December that the Social Democrats were planning coordinated street demonstrations, these doubts must have been completely dashed by what happened following the conclusion of the indoor meetings at noon. Instead of dispersing outside the meeting halls and going for strolls to popular excursion places in the city's outlying areas as they would have done on any other Sunday, the participants closed ranks and marched the most direct route toward the heart of the city. The police forces, which had been placed on alert as a precaution, quickly attempted to block off all access to the city center.

Coming from all directions simultaneously, the marchers all apparently intended to gather first at the Altmarkt. The behavior of the demonstrators after this indicates that they had then planned to proceed to the Schloßplatz, in order to protest against the existing suffrage in front of the royal palace and the diet. The police chief noted in his report to the internal affairs ministry that "in light of the well-executed march on the city center, it can be assumed with near certainty that a type of watchword was given from the central authority, even if the workers' leaders would have been careful enough to have used less well-known comrades".<sup>33</sup>

What little information there is about the departure of each group from the various meeting places reinforces the impression that this was indeed a planned action, in which the groups would meet in the city center. Just over half a kilometer west from Zwinger, two Social Democratic rallies had taken place not far from one another. As the meeting held in the Volkshaus (People's Hall) in Ritzenbergstraße ended, several people in the middle of the crowd yelled, "Everyone to Schützenplatz!" That was where the second meeting was being held in a hall called the Trianon, and the crowd from the Volkshaus meeting waited in the square for the other session to end. A police informer reported hearing one participant say to another: "They should be coming soon." Once the rally in the Trianon ended, both groups marched together toward the city center. In the east, in what was known as the Blumensäle (Flower Halls), many began to cry out at the end of Gradnauer's speech,

<sup>32</sup> *Die Neue Zeit*, XXIV (1905/1906), 1, pp. 363–364. Here Herrmann also quotes only one phrase from the statement taken out of context, which distorts the real message; "Der Kampf der Sozialdemokratie gegen das Dreiklassenwahlrecht in Sachsen", p. 862.

<sup>33</sup> HStAD, Innenministerium, no. 10443, ff. 19–20.

“Off to the Altmarkt!”<sup>34</sup> Participants from the indoor meetings, both in the community of Löbtau south-west of town, where Fleißner spoke, and from the dance hall in the new town north of the Elbe river, headed toward the city. Only those listening to Fräsdorf in Cotta apparently followed his advice and went home. From Pieschen, a place on the other side of the Elbe quite a distance north-west of Dresden, the participants from the meeting held there began their march on the city without a word being uttered.<sup>35</sup>

Taken together, the meeting places could hold nearly 15,000 people, and on this day they were bursting. Many people arrived too late to find a place inside the halls, so they waited in front of the doors or in pubs nearby. Once the rallies were over, these people joined the marching demonstrators. Since the groups could not meet at the Altmarkt as planned because of police barriers, it was difficult to guess the number of participants and the police report did not even include an estimate. The Social Democratic press spoke of up to 80,000 people, which is probably an exaggerated figure. Other newspapers reported figures between 25,000 and 40,000. Compared to the population of Dresden, which equaled half a million in 1905, these figures did not represent an overwhelmingly large crowd. However, it should not be overlooked that women apparently did not take part in the demonstration, or only in very small numbers. At least there was no mention made of women attending these rallies, unlike those that had taken place indoors on 18 November, and the *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung* at one point in its account even referred explicitly to the “closed ranks of men”. Perhaps the absence of women can be explained by the fear of violent confrontation with the police. It would then be a further indication that the demonstrations had been planned long beforehand.

Since children and the elderly can be excluded from the potential pool of demonstrators – like women – then somewhere between a sixth and a quarter of the adult male population of Dresden, depending on the estimate involved, heeded the SPD’s call to take to the streets on 3 December 1905. At first glance, it thus appears as if the SPD significantly missed its mark in claiming to protest the existing suffrage laws “in the name of the entire people of Saxony”.<sup>36</sup> Compared to the number of voters who had turned out for the last elections to the national parliament, a total of between 25,000 and 40,000 demonstrators also does not seem particularly large. After all, nearly 84,000 Dresden voters had cast their ballots for the SPD in 1903.<sup>37</sup> However, the Social Democratic party leaders themselves repeatedly mentioned that the police

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, ff. 17, 19.

<sup>35</sup> As reported in the *SAZ*.

<sup>36</sup> As was stated in the text of the resolution, see note 29.

<sup>37</sup> Dieter Fricke, *Handbuch der Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* (Berlin, 1987), p. 729.

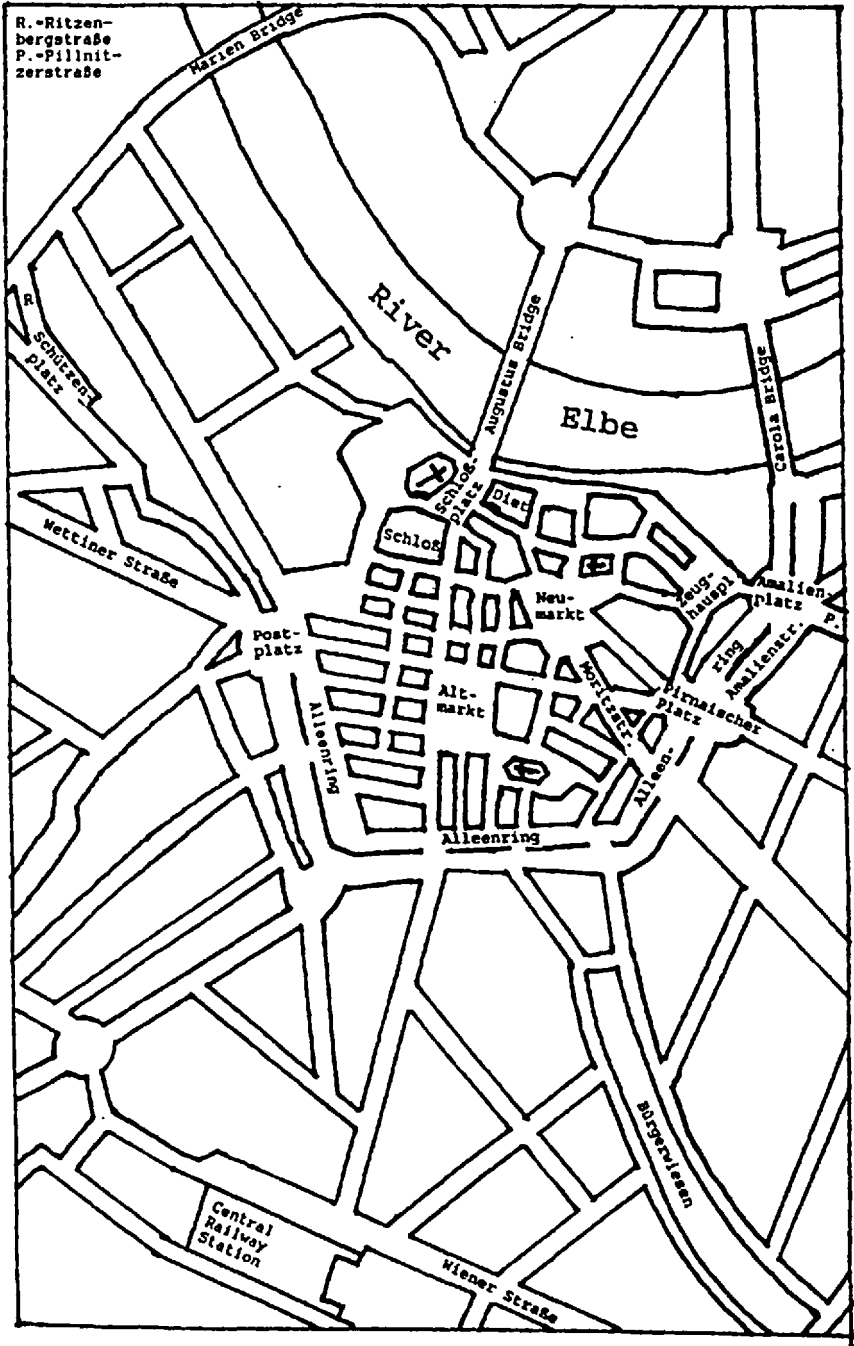


Figure 1. Dresden inner city street plan (simplified)  
Source: O.H. Richter, *Die Stadt Dresden, 1871-1902* (Dresden, 1903)

chief had threatened to use any means necessary to repress street demonstrations. The triumphant tone expressed in the party press the next morning to report on the large number of participants that came despite these threats indicates that the leaders had wanted to test how many and how dedicated the hard-core party supporters were. Seen in this light, it was indeed quite an accomplishment for the SPD to mobilize two to three times as many people as it had members in the Saxon capital.<sup>38</sup> Since violent confrontations with the police could not be ruled out, it took a good measure of courage to take part in the demonstration. Soon these people were forced to show just how much courage was needed, since the police chief made good on his threat to be relentless in his repression of the street demonstrations.<sup>39</sup>

On their way to the city center, the marching groups of demonstrators soon ran up against small contingents of police, which either retreated or let the demonstrators pass. On the west side of the city, the groups from the Volkshaus and the Trianon met those who had attended the Löbtau rally in Wettinerstraße. Yet once they arrived at Postplatz, their way to the Altmarkt was blocked by the entire regiment of mounted gendarmerie and a larger detachment of the civic guard. The demonstrators then turned south in the direction of the Alleenring, an avenue that encircled the city center, and attempted to reach the heart of the city through the side streets. These too were blocked. At about the same time, the people who had been attending the rally in the Blumensäle arrived from the east via Amalienplatz until they reached the Neumarkt, where they were surrounded by police. After a part of the group failed in its attempt to break through to the diet, located on Schloßplatz, the gendarmerie opened up a passageway through Moritzstraße, allowing these demonstrators also to retreat south to the Alleenring.

The police had not been forced to use their weapons during the confrontation with demonstrators either at the Neumarkt or at Postplatz. But they did in the north of Dresden. The marchers from Pieschen and the new town had to cross the Elbe in order to reach the city center. The two groups met at the Augustus Bridge.<sup>40</sup> A contingent of gendarm-

<sup>38</sup> According to *ibid.*, p. 314, the number of SPD members in the three Dresden Reichstag electoral districts in 1905 equaled 12,855.

<sup>39</sup> The following is based primarily on the eyewitness accounts published in the *SAZ* and *DA* on 4 December 1905 and on the report of the police chief to the minister of internal affairs on 3 December, HStAD, Innenministerium, no. 11043, ff. 17–20. All three sources concur basically, and sometimes they supplement each other; differences in these accounts will be indicated. The accounts appearing in other papers on 4 December only contained additional details on the climate. The content of later newspaper reports is mostly worthless for reconstructing the course of events since these reports are chiefly personal recollections exhibiting obvious tendencies toward myth-building.

<sup>40</sup> Just before these two groups met, there had been a confrontation at the Marien Bridge between the marchers from Pieschen and the gendarmerie. According to the account

erie was posted at the bridgehead on the new town side north of the river, but allowed a small part of the crowd to push it aside.<sup>41</sup> The demonstrators streamed across the 400-meter-long bridge toward the facades of the parliament building, the court church, and the palace. Schloßplatz, which lay directly at the foot of the bridge, was the central neural point for the city center. Another unit of gendarmes was posted there. According to the detailed account given in the police report, this unit,

under the command of a police officer, faced the crowd and brought it to a standstill. Several demands to go back were ignored; after about two minutes, the call suddenly rang out, "Break through! Forwards!" The crowd grabbed several policemen, pushed them aside and attempted to break through the police cordon with force. In this instant, the police officer gave [. . .] the order to draw swords and use force. Once swords were drawn, several persons from the crowd attacked with sticks and fists. Jeering was heard, such as "bloodhounds", "throw the dogs in the Elbe", "Cossacks". Yet they succeeded in pushing the crowd little by little back over the bridge.

It is striking that the crowd hesitated before storming the police cordon, especially since this crowd consisted of the more militant minority of the demonstrators who had already broken through the barriers on the new town side of the bridge moments before, leaving the majority behind them. Yet things were different now. It could be anticipated that the gendarmes on the other side would probably draw their arms in order to prevent a breakthrough, since the medical corps were waiting on Schloßplatz just behind the police cordon on the bridgehead.<sup>42</sup> With their goal in sight, several demonstrators decided nevertheless to test the waters. Since the crowd reacted with cries of "Cossacks!" once the police had barred their swords, as the *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung* confirmed in its significantly shorter account,<sup>43</sup> the demonstrators were obviously viewing the situation as a replay of events in Russia. Yet their subsequent behavior shows that most of them were not willing to battle with security forces.

appearing in the SAZ, 400 demonstrators broke through the police barrier; however, the police report states that "their attempt to cross the Marien Bridge was thwarted, upon which they moved on toward the Augustus Bridge". Both sources concurred that no blood was spilled at the confrontations here. It is possible that the police report failed to mention the breakthrough of the 400 demonstrators because the number involved seemed insignificant compared to the entire crowd of 4–5,000 – as estimated by the SAZ – and because this group was then stopped at Postplatz. It is also possible that the police wanted to prevent the crowd from proceeding along the north side of the river bank at all and that a small group of demonstrators did break through the barriers while the rest took a detour to the Augustus Bridge.

<sup>41</sup> According to the police report, the "main contingent" was detained on the new town side of the bridge.

<sup>42</sup> See DA, 4 December 1905.

<sup>43</sup> This is repeated nearly word for word by Dörrer, *Der Kampf der Dresdner Arbeiter*, p. 52.

A “terrible jostling” then occurred in the middle of the bridge during which several people were knocked out<sup>44</sup> as the front rows of the demonstrators attempted to turn round while the back rows could not yet see what was going on. In the front rows, the people probably used walking canes to protect themselves from the threatening blades of the police swords. It seems very unrealistic to assume that the demonstrators still attempted to forcibly break through the police cordon once the officers had drawn their swords, as the police report contends. The *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung* was not the only newspaper emphatically to deny this contention by the police. The morning after the events, the liberal *Dresdner Zeitung*, which was an unpartisan observer of the conflict, also summarized its eyewitness reports as follows:

Although there were some incidents of violence and boorishness, which comes as no surprise at such a mass demonstration, in general it should be stressed that the manifestants [. . .] everywhere maintained order and limited themselves to passive resistance.

These statements also seem to be supported by the subsequent behavior of the demonstrators at the Augustus Bridge. Once the demonstrators had turned back from the old town bridgehead, the commanding officer ordered his men to sheathe their swords. According to the police report, “this immediately prompted cries from the crowd to charge again”. However, these few voices were not echoed. “All that occurred were the catcalls, a second charge did not follow.” Once the police had shown its resolve to use any means necessary in order to prevent a demonstration from taking place on Schloßplatz, the crowd gave up, with the exception of a few individuals. It returned to the new town side of the river and proceeded to the Carola Bridge, only to discover that it was also blocked. The gendarmes here were not forced to resort to arms. The demonstrators merely shouted insults and then dispersed.

In the meantime, several hundred demonstrators on the other bank of the Elbe river had succeeded by one o'clock in reaching the Altmarkt by hopping on streetcars before transportation broke down completely because of the shifting of the crowds along the Alleenring. Perhaps some of the police forming the cordons in the streets leading into the old town were therefore withdrawn. In any case, other small groups of demonstrators forced their way from the Alleenring to the city center shortly afterwards and via the Altmarkt they reached Schloßplatz. The police posted there were pushed to the periphery of the square by the masses.<sup>45</sup> Police demands for dispersal were drowned out by the sound of the socialist march being sung by demonstrators. Then the police

<sup>44</sup> *Dresdner Montagszeitung*, 4 December 1905.

<sup>45</sup> According to the police report this happened “among general howling and yelling”, “among the singing of social democratic freedom songs as well as cries of ‘revolution’ and ‘Down with the police!’”; *DA* and *SAZ* only report cheers for equal suffrage.



drew their swords. According to the police report, the security forces succeeded “in pushing back the crowd shortly thereafter and in clearing the square”, as they had previously cleared the Augustus Bridge. The *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung* confirmed these statements while adding that the people “could not retreat fast enough”.

In the two hours that followed, police and smaller groups of demonstrators played cat-and-mouse in the streets and squares of the old town. Most of the thousands gathered that day, who had not succeeded in reaching the city center, spent their time on the Bürgerwiesen located south of the city cheering for equal suffrage. Finally the cry reverberated throughout the crowd to “march on Minister Metzsch!”. A rally in front of the home of the hated minister, who had announced in parliament shortly before that the government would not yield in the matter of suffrage reform, seemed like an appropriate substitute for the thwarted demonstration at Schloßplatz. The crowd began to move toward Metzsch’s villa near the central train station. On Wienerstraße, a large police unit started to chase the crowd, causing the demonstrators to break into a run. They stopped in front of the villa, but immediately continued to move on before the sword-brandishing police could catch up with them.

After this, the crowd began to diminish noticeably. Part of it turned northward again. Finally, a group of hard-core demonstrators numbering between “well over a thousand”<sup>46</sup> and “three thousand”<sup>47</sup> headed toward the city center again and reached Pirnaischer Platz on the Alleenring by 1.45 p.m. This time they attempted forcibly to break through the police cordon here in order to gain access to the city center.<sup>48</sup> As the commanding officer ordered his troops to draw their swords, the attempted breakthrough quickly turned into a hasty retreat. In order to save themselves from sword blows, many demonstrators climbed on top of the numerous streetcars that were standing there because the commotion had prevented them from proceeding along the Alleenring. The police eventually pulled back, their commanding officer ordered the crowd three times to disperse. Finally, the crowd broke up.

The situation on Pirnaischer Platz repeated what had occurred both at Augustus Bridge and at Schloßplatz; people began to leave following the initial use of police force. In all three cases, those who even attempted to break through the police cordons represented a militant minority of demonstrators numbering several hundred at Schloßplatz, approximately the same at Augustus Bridge, and as many as 3,000 at Pirnaischer Platz. Most of the 25,000 demonstrators, by contrast,

<sup>46</sup> This is the estimate given by the *DA*.

<sup>47</sup> This was reported by the *SAZ*.

<sup>48</sup> According to the police report, the demonstrators acted “with sticks raised high into the air”, whereas the *DA* only said they acted “while loudly singing the workers’ Marseillaise”.

followed the strategy of avoiding confrontation. Instead of attempting to break through the barricades, they spread themselves out along the Alleering. As the opportunity arose, small groups would slip through breaks in the barricades, assemble at a square chanting their demands for equal suffrage, and then disappear in the narrow side streets of the old town once the police arrived, only to re-emerge at one of the many other squares. This game of cat-and-mouse continued until 3.30 in the afternoon, three and a half hours after the beginning of the street demonstrations.

## V

The events of 3 December remained the talk of the town for days in Dresden. Liberal press and parliamentary party criticized the Social Democrats for threatening to escalate their suffrage campaign through demonstrations and even mass strikes. Yet unlike the conservatives, the liberals also criticized the police for using armed force and now announced unequivocal support for suffrage reform as a means of defusing the situation.<sup>49</sup> On 14 December, Minister President Metzsch declared in parliament that his government was perhaps willing to support a reform initiative if the SPD would forgo the street demonstrations and threats of a political strike.

Because the party did indeed distance itself from demonstrations and strikes, even though the government's declaration was rather vague, most of the Social Democratic leaders were accused of "opportunism". Yet, in reality, what happened in the diet could not have been the primary cause for the SPD stance. Most of the party's leadership had already rejected the idea of political strikes and additional public demonstrations beforehand, almost a week before Metzsch's speech, in the period shortly after the demonstration. On 8 December, it could be read in the *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung* that a mass strike was a weapon to be used only with a great deal of careful, long-term preparation, if ever. At the same time, Fleißner unequivocally reassured the mayor, who was deeply concerned about the Christmas business of the city's small retailers, that "the Social Democrats in Dresden currently are not thinking about organizing street demonstrations".<sup>50</sup>

Apparently, the direct consequences of the demonstrations of 3 December satisfied most of the Social Democratic leaders just as the course of events that day had disturbed them. On the one hand, an alarming amount of blood had been spilled at Schloßplatz, Augustus Bridge and Pirnaischer Platz because of the unyielding position taken

<sup>49</sup> See *Dresdner Zeitung*, *Dresdner Neueste Nachrichten* and *Leipziger Tageblatt*; SAZ, 15 December 1905.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 8 December 1905.

by the police. On the other hand, the great mass of demonstrators had shown no revolutionary militancy but a considerable amount of civil courage, thereby prompting the wavering liberals finally to advocate the long-sought suffrage reform more indisputably than ever before. Thus, the real goal appeared to have been reached, making any further "Austrian-" or even "Russiantalk" unnecessary, if not even contraproductive in light of the criticism leveled by the liberals. When Metzsch then signaled that the government was perhaps ready to make some concessions – which did actually lead to a reform in 1909 that earned the SPD about a third of the mandates in the Saxon diet – this development only further convinced most Social Democratic leaders that the strategy they had been favoring was the right one.

Suffrage rallies were announced again for 16 December. But whereas before the rallies on 3 December the *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung* had only published the warning of the police chief against holding open air demonstrations and the ambiguous answer of the agitational committee to this warning, this time the paper emphasized "that street demonstrations were not to take place – not because the police and government have forbidden them, but because we consider them unsuitable for the time being".<sup>51</sup> The speakers reiterated this position at the meetings held on the sixteenth, and as a precautionary measure, these meetings did not even start until nine o'clock in the evening. Instead of implicitly calling for action, five of the seven people addressing these meetings explicitly advised against holding street demonstrations. In Löbtau, the speaker was somewhat ambivalent in calling on his audience to "continue the struggle". However, he nevertheless emphasized that any further action could be taken only with "calm and prudence", because the party was willing to give the government a year to prepare suffrage reform. Only Edmund Fischer, who was speaking in the Blumensäle, clearly deviated from the position held by most of the leadership. His remarks sparked such a fire of indignation over police actions during the 3 December demonstrations that the police officer supervising the meeting threatened to break it up. Fischer exclaimed at one point, "We want to achieve our goal within the realm of legality, and if this is denied us, we have no other choice but to enter the realm of illegality."<sup>52</sup> While two weeks before the decision to hold street demonstrations had found majority but not unanimous support within the Social

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 December 1905.

<sup>52</sup> See the accounts published in the *SAZ* and the *DA* on 18 December 1905. Fischer was considered a right-winger in the party. However, in a letter to Wolfgang Heine, dated 17 January 1909 (Bundesarchiv Potsdam, Heine papers, no. 1, ff. 37–41), he stressed always to have been in favor of demonstrations. Just how little revisionist and reformist attitudes excluded support for "radical" tactics has already been exemplified by the cases of Eduard Bernstein and Ludwig Frank in Susan Tegel, "Reformist Social Democrats, the Mass Strike and the Prussian Suffrage 1913", *European History Quarterly*, XVII (1987), pp. 307–344.

Democratic leadership, apparently the same was now true for the decision not to hold any.

A small portion of the audience also did not want to go home once the meetings adjourned at eleven o'clock on the sixteenth.<sup>53</sup> Whereas the crowds quickly dispersed at most of the meeting places,<sup>54</sup> the audience in Löbtau lingered outside the meeting hall for a while despite the darkness and the rainy weather; they sang and cheered for equal suffrage. At the request of the local party leaders and on order of the police, this crowd also finally began to disperse. At the Trianon, where Gradnauer had been speaking that evening, there were objections from the crowd to his appeal not to demonstrate. After the rally, a crowd of people marched off in the direction of the city center just as demonstrators had done two weeks before. Unlike the 3 December march, however, this group lacked any strong leadership. "At Postplatz some called out, 'go left to the palace!' while others cried, 'go right to Metzsch!' The crowd seemed at first to waver."<sup>55</sup> In the end, it split into two. The group marching toward Schloßplatz found the entry to the square barricaded by police, so it turned around and followed the other group on its march to the villa of Minister Metzsch.

Near the Blumensäle, another group of about four hundred people gathered and also marched off in the direction of the city center.<sup>56</sup> At first, these marchers were able to cross the Alleenring unimpeded. Not until they reached the police headquarters on Zeughausplatz were they pitted against the police. According to the police report, "individual police officers, who were violently assaulted, were forced to protect themselves by drawing their swords". The demonstrators were forced back across the Alleenring. There "they positioned themselves in groups on the corners of Pillnitzer and Amalienstraße and yelled curses and obscenities at the police forming a cordon across Amalienplatz".<sup>57</sup> Next they moved south along the Alleenring without being stopped by the police until they finally met the group from the Trianon in Wienerstraße.

<sup>53</sup> The following is also based on the articles appearing in the *SAZ* and the *DA* on 18 December, as well as on the police report of 21 December 1905 (HStAD, Innenministerium, no. 11043, ff. 72–74).

<sup>54</sup> I am not familiar with any source material supporting Herrmann's contention that "following the meetings in the new town, there were protest marches that were halted by police on the bridges crossing the Elbe"; "Der Kampf der Sozialdemokratie gegen das Dreiklassenwahlrecht in Sachsen", p. 873.

<sup>55</sup> *DA*, 18 December 1905.

<sup>56</sup> There is no evidence that this group marched "singing the Socialist March with fists held high", as Dörrer describes: *Der Kampf der Dresdner Arbeiter*, p. 59.

<sup>57</sup> The crowd was calling out names like "bloodhounds" and "Cossacks", *SAZ*, 18 December 1905. It reflects the manner in which Dörrer handles his sources when he describes the events by stating that "the workers did not think about giving up one inch to the police" and had gathered "again and again" on the corners of the square to hold "rallies": *Der Kampf der Dresdner Arbeiter*, pp. 59–60.

There the bloodiest confrontation of all took place about midnight in front of the villa of Minister Metzsch. Nearly a hundred police, fifteen mounted officers among them, had posted themselves in front of the villa in anticipation of the demonstrators' arrival. One Social Democrat attempted in vain to turn the crowd back.<sup>58</sup> The crowd moved toward the police cordon "cheering, yelling, singing revolutionary songs, [. . .] and at last, when they were about seventy steps from the gendarmerie, crying out 'Forward, let them have it!' ('Vorwärts drauf!') while running". At this moment the mounted police charged "onto the roadway in a gallop", brandishing their swords, "and first managed to clear the roadway while the demonstrators gathered on the sidewalks and continued to resist the police energetically from there. Calls from all sides, 'bloodhounds', 'Cossacks' [. . .] erupted from the crowd, several mounted police were stormed, and it was attempted to hit them with sticks." Demonstrators broke off the tips of iron fences surrounding the villas lining the street and slung them at the gendarmes. A shot rang out, the bullet piercing the cheek of one of the riders. Two further shots were fired, but no one was hurt. In panic, the crowd swept back. Not much less in panic, the police chased after the people, hitting them. Left behind on the cobblestones were caps, hats and bloodstains. At the train viaduct close to the central railway station and on the Bürgerwiesen groups of demonstrators gathered anew. From the lawns they threw stones at the police, who drew their swords and cleared the area. Until two in the morning there were isolated clashes. This was then followed by the silence after the storm.<sup>59</sup>

A reporter for the *Dresdner Anzeiger* summarized the events perceptively when he wrote that "the number of participants was far fewer" in the demonstrations taking place in the night of 16–17 December than it had been two weeks earlier, although the second time around the unrest was "much more serious in nature".<sup>60</sup> The number of people taken into custody alone by the police supports this. Whereas on 3 December only six people had been arrested or detained, of which four were released shortly thereafter,<sup>61</sup> two weeks later the number was

<sup>58</sup> And not "several functionaries ordered to do so", as Dörrer maintains: *Der Kampf der Dresdner Arbeiter*, p. 60.

<sup>59</sup> This depiction is based primarily on the police report. For one, it coincides with the account published in the *DA*, whose reporter was standing behind the police cordon. For another, the account appearing in the *SAZ* contains clearly falsified claims. For example, the list of wounded (HStAD, Innenministerium, no. 11043, ff. 82–83) contradicts the claim that all of the victims were wounded in the back. Instead, there were just as many wounds on hands, faces and heads. However, the *SAZ* gives a vivid picture of the atmosphere during the mass panic. It is quoted extensively by Dörrer, whose account in every other respect is full of omissions and mistakes as usual: *Der Kampf der Dresdner Arbeiter*, pp. 60–61.

<sup>60</sup> *DA*, 18 December 1905.

<sup>61</sup> HStAD, Innenministerium, no. 11043, f. 20.

thirty-one, of which twenty-two were placed on trial. Only one of the accused was acquitted. The others were all sentenced to up to two years in prison for inciting to riot.<sup>62</sup>

The police claimed that “many outsiders”<sup>63</sup> were among the demonstrators, but this is not substantiated either by the list of those arrested or by the personal data that could be collected from nineteen of the wounded.<sup>64</sup> All of them lived in Dresden or the immediate vicinity. Not one of them was a woman.<sup>65</sup> Of the roughly fifty documented cases of arrest or injury, most of the people involved were organized neither in trade unions nor in political parties. One notorious exception was a 21-year-old metalworker, who was arrested during the demonstration for making “incessant threats such as ‘knife the dogs’” and on whom was later found a razor-sharp dagger.<sup>66</sup> He was a member of both a trade union and the SPD. One of those detained was also a trade unionist, and two of the wounded were also Social Democrats. In all four cases these people were merely members of the rank and file. Known leaders or activists of the workers’ movement were “not noticed” by police in the crowd of demonstrators.

Whereas the police chief appeared convinced that there were “quite a few people of younger years” among the demonstrators,<sup>67</sup> the information on those arrested and injured substantiates this only in part. Fourteen of the fifty people accounted for were younger than twenty-five. Twenty-two of them were between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four, eleven between thirty-five and forty-four, and three older than forty-five. This makes the average age just under thirty; the average age of those taken temporarily into custody for disturbing the peace was significantly lower than this, while that of those injured was somewhat greater. The oldest was a 63-year-old cigar worker, the youngest an 18-year-old typesetter. Taken together, the occupations of the fifty documented demonstrators covered a broad spectrum, although the metalworkers were represented very strongly. Many of the men just listed “worker” as their occupation – these were probably unskilled laborers. Among those arrested were also three salespeople and even a head office clerk who, however, was not convicted.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Indices, *ibid.*, ff. 78–81.

<sup>63</sup> Report, *ibid.*, f. 74.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, ff. 82–83.

<sup>65</sup> The SAZ assertion, propagated by Dörrer, that many of the wounded were women therefore appears unlikely: *Der Kampf der Dresdner Arbeiter*, p. 60.

<sup>66</sup> Police report, HStAD, Innenministerium, no. 11043, f. 74.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Detained for disturbing the peace were 5 metalworkers, a stove fitter, a typesetter, a blacksmith and a worker (the last two were tried and sentenced); arrested were 5 workers, 3 metalworkers, 3 salespeople, a blacksmith, a plumber, a mechanic, a mason, a coachman, a typesetter, a cigar worker, a messenger, a cabinet maker (acquitted), a tailor and a head office clerk (both not sentenced); injured were 3 workers, 3 metalworkers, 3

Just how well these data reflect the composition of the great mass of demonstrators is an open question, for we are talking here about only a minute fraction of the participants. Even the police chief did not rule out the possibility that several of those injured were people "who had been pulled into the throng although they had no intention to demonstrate".<sup>69</sup> In the days that followed the demonstration, many citizens sent letters to their newspapers complaining that they had landed unintentionally in the demonstration procession while on their way home from restaurants and pubs on that Saturday evening.

For this reason if no other, estimates of the number of demonstrators need to be taken with a grain of salt. In addition, the numbers appear to grow the further in time and distance one gets from the event. The account published on 19 December in the Social Democratic party organ *Vorwärts* in Berlin spoke of 4,000 people. The final report of the Dresden police chief, dated two days later, referred to "several thousand persons".<sup>70</sup> The first edition of the *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung* to appear after the demonstrations, on 18 December, estimated the number of those participating in the wildcat demonstrations to be about 1,000 from the Trianon and an additional 400 from the Blumensäle. In an article appearing the same day, the *Dresdner Anzeiger* reported at one point that "several thousand" people were in the streets. Despite these differences, all newspaper accounts did concur that the street demonstrations followed only the rallies at the Trianon and the Blumensäle. Each of the meeting halls could hold about 2,000 people. These crowds were augmented by another source of potential demonstrators, namely the "hundreds" of those who found no room in the halls and lingered outside. But both the *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung* and the *Dresdner Anzeiger* reported that only "about four hundred" and "several hundreds", respectively, marched toward the city center from the Blumensäle and that only part of the audience at the Trianon headed in the same direction.<sup>71</sup> For this reason, the total number of demonstrators could hardly have exceeded 2,000 once the two processions met in front of the villa of Minister Metzsch in Wienerstraße.<sup>72</sup> This corresponds roughly with the total size of the crowd that had battled with police two weeks before on the Augustus Bridge and in Pirnaischer and Schloßplatz.

Now it is most important to compare this crowd with the total number of demonstrators. It must not be forgotten that there were at least another 25,000 people who assembled on 3 December to demonstrate

construction workers, 3 cabinet makers, 2 gentleman's servants, a garden assistant, a shoemaker, a furniture polisher, and a glassmaker.

<sup>69</sup> HStAD, Innenministerium, no. 11043, f. 74.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 73.

<sup>71</sup> According to the SAZ roughly half of the audience marched; according to the DA, "the greater half".

<sup>72</sup> See also Lässig, *Wahlrechtsreformen in Sachsen*.

non-violently for equal suffrage. Seen this way, the radical militants who clashed with police were only a small minority.

## VI

In recounting the events surrounding the Dresden suffrage demonstrations of December 1905, there thus appears to be little to substantiate the assumption that a radical grass-roots and a reformist Social Democratic leadership were opposing one another in the Saxon capital. The events preceding and during the demonstration on 3 December leave almost no doubt that the demonstration had been approved and most likely organized by the local agitational committee. Apparently the leadership in Dresden, as well as the party's executive committee in Berlin, viewed illegal street demonstrations as an opportunity to test the radicalism of the grass-roots with respect to the feasibility of political strikes. If the Social Democrats at first denied organizing the demonstration outdoors then it was for a good reason; they wanted to avoid legal prosecution.

As the majority of Dresden's Social Democratic leadership then switched to opposing a continuation of illegal actions such as street demonstrations and political strikes, the reason was not only that they wanted to give the government time to fulfill its reform promises. The party's leaders had actually come to this decision several days before the government issued its proclamation in the Saxon diet; the decision was a result of the conclusions drawn from the events of the 3 December demonstrations. This day had shown, for one, that the security forces were not bluffing when they threatened to prevent the outlawed demonstration in the center of political power by any means. A continuation of street demonstrations thus had become a very risky business, while the new stance of the liberals meant that a major aim had already been achieved. For another it had become obvious that the demonstrators exhibited a significant amount of civil courage, but shrank from using armed violence for the most part. These revelations opened up new roads of action, but they also eliminated the option of effectively using a political mass strike as a means of pressuring the government. Since such a strike would have meant involving public arenas like the transportation sector, in light of the government's reaction it was no longer conceivable without violence on a large scale, and in light of the crowd's behavior it would then have been without success. On 8 December, the Berlin SPD executive committee in a secret session agreed that a political mass strike was "currently unfeasible". The Dresden party leadership announced the same statement in the *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung*.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>73</sup> See the memorandum from the Berlin police headquarters dated 13 December 1905, and cited by Leo Stern, *Die Auswirkungen der ersten russischen Revolution von 1905–1907 auf Deutschland* (Berlin, 1956), vol. 2, p. 148. Reflections on the motive for this decision can be found in a letter by August Bebel, dated 16 March 1906 (to Max Quarck,



From this point on, the majority of the Social Democratic elite in Dresden advised against continuing street demonstrations, which were usually mentioned in the same breath with the mass strike. And most of the party's constituency agreed. Just a small militant minority, of which only a small fraction belonged to the organized workers' movement, still sought confrontation with the police. There were no massive differences between the leaders and their followers, and the Saxon party leadership also did not steer "the rest of the movement onto a 'peaceful,' 'legal' course against the will of the workers".<sup>74</sup> This would not have been possible anyway because the SPD was neither a Leninist-like cadre party nor a reflection of the authoritarian Wilhelminian society in which it existed. Earlier in 1905, following grass-roots pressure, Dresden Social Democrats had in fact made a step toward further democratization of their organization by abolishing the *Interne*, an informal group of leaders that had originated during the party's persecution under the Socialist Laws and had planned many party issues internally and doctored resolutions then presented to the membership.<sup>75</sup> Now it was precisely the behavior of the party's constituency during the suffrage demonstrations on 3 December that showed the Social Democratic elite of the Saxon metropolis that it had no choice but to abandon all experimentation with radical and revolutionary tactics and to concentrate on a reformist course.

To what degree can these attained insights into radicalism, reformism and the relationship between grass-roots and elite in Dresden be generalized? For one, they shed new light on the events of the Hamburg suffrage demonstration of 17 January 1906, which Richard Evans has described. Although many of Evans' observations are accurate and valuable, closer scrutiny raises serious doubts about his central thesis on the existence of a large and growing "potential for militancy" at the grass-roots level, with which the party elite was losing touch increasingly. His account of the events pertaining to the demonstration indicates that the situation in the Hanseatic city actually was not considerably different from that in the Saxon metropolis. In Hamburg as in Dresden, it was the middle level of SPD activists that apparently organized and supervised the mass demonstrations taking place in the streets of the city

AdsD, NL Quarck, no. 5) in which he states that Austria is no model for the suffrage struggle in Germany since the Austrian state is much weaker, and in a diary entry by Molkenbuhr, dated 10 March 1906, on the same topic (AdsD, Molkenbuhr papers IV), the "masses" had shown "that actually they do not want any violence". Also of interest is the police protocol of a discussion in the local SPD organization in Zwickau from 6 December 1905 (HStAD, Polizeipräsidium Zwickau, no. 1305), in which the local party elite discussed the Dresden "suffrage battle" in connection with the issue of a mass strike and concluded that a great deal of preparation would still be necessary for such a strike to be successful.

<sup>74</sup> This is the central thesis of Herrmann, "Der Kampf der Sozialdemokratie gegen das Dreiklassenwahlrecht in Sachsen"; quote in *ibid.*, p. 876.

<sup>75</sup> See Georg Lange, "Das Ende der Dresdner *Interne*," *Sächsische Zeitung*, 22 May 1954.

center. If the top functionaries who addressed the indoor rallies preceding the demonstrations kept a comparatively low profile, then this may be attributable less to divisions within the party than to the attempt to protect the heads of the organization from legal prosecution.<sup>76</sup>

When examined closely, it also becomes clear that the number of demonstrators in Hamburg who sought confrontation with state security forces was infinitesimal compared to the masses of non-violent demonstrators. Almost all of the 30,000 or more people estimated to have attended the rally there dispersed when the police began to clear the city center by force on the evening of 17 January. Only several hundred of them remained to plunder and battle with police in the hours just before midnight.<sup>77</sup> Therefore, neither the Dresden nor the Hamburg suffrage demonstrations confirm the view held by radicals like Rosa Luxemburg, who in late 1906 claimed to be convinced that “the vast masses have made colossal progress in changing their consciousness during the past year” toward accepting aggressively revolutionary activity.<sup>78</sup>

This of course does not mean that the Social Democratic movement had made its peace with the state of Wilhelminian Germany,<sup>79</sup> nor does it invalidate altogether Richard Evans’ point that there are elements of continuity between the restless winter of 1905–1906 and the Revolution of 1918–1919.<sup>80</sup> Even though the SPD out of tactical considerations claimed to be pursuing a legalistic course, the party was willing to call for civil disobedience against the bans and the valid law of a state bent on denying political equality to a majority of its populace. And, indeed, the masses of demonstrators neither in Dresden nor in Hamburg were comprised of “law-abiding Germans”. By participating in the banned suffrage marches, these Germans clearly showed their desire to have encrusted political structures reformed. They also revealed a considerable amount of civil courage. And it is worth more than a passing thought to consider whether the non-violent protest exhibited by so many did not contribute at least as greatly to the coming about of lasting change as did the armed struggle of a small minority. In this regard, the Dresden suffrage demonstrations of December 1905 are connected perhaps not only with the end of Imperial Germany, but also with Germany’s most recent history.

<sup>76</sup> Evans, “‘Red Wednesday’ in Hamburg”, pp. 257–259, at least does not cite a single case in which a speaker went beyond making alibi calls for “peaceful” and “calm” behavior to advise explicitly against street demonstrations. It is also very improbable that the activists from each part of the city planned and organized such demonstrations without the knowledge and approval of the top party leadership in Hamburg.

<sup>77</sup> Evans, “‘Red Wednesday’ in Hamburg”, pp. 257, 260–264, especially 278.

<sup>78</sup> Luxemburg to Clara Zetkin after 16 December 1906, *Rosa Luxemburg: Gesammelte Briefe* (Berlin, 1983), vol. 2, p. 277. Characteristically enough, she was not so sure about “the vast masses” just a few months before (Luxemburg to Stadhagen, 26 August 1906, *ibid.*, p. 269).

<sup>79</sup> As Dieter Groh is suggesting with the term “negative integration”.

<sup>80</sup> Evans, “‘Red Wednesday’ in Hamburg”, pp. 279–281.