The West German Social Democrats, 1969-1982

Profile of a Party in Power

Gerard Braunthal

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Preface

This is a study of the West German Social Democratic Party (SPD)
from 1969 to 1982, a period of thirteen years in which it governed the
Federal Republic as the senior member of coalition cabinets. During this
time the party held the chancellorship, first under Willy Brandt and then
under Helmut Schmidt, and played an important role during four successive
legislative periods. In 1982, its coalition with the small neoliberal Free
Democratic Party (FDP) fell apart, leading to the sudden but not
unexpected end of its rule. Although thirteen years in power, preceded by
three years (1966-1969) as the junior coalition partner of the conservative
Christian Democratic Union and its Bavarian ally, the Christian Social
Union (CDU/CSU), seems like a short time when compared with the reigns
of the Social Democrats in Scandinavia, it is a record of longevity for the
SPD, which governed only briefly during the Weimar period and was in
perpetual opposition during the Empire period.

Innumerable volumes have been published on the SPD since its official
birth in 1875. The present volume seeks to fill one gap by providing a
survey of the party during its recent years of governance. [1] This survey
has two major themes: one, new social and economic forces within the
nation, reflecting changes in the external environment, had a major and
often unsettling effect on the party during its period in power; two, the
party's role within the political system and its influence on domestic and
foreign policies were limited. Before turning to these themes, it is
important to note that the SPD has been one of the most powerful parties
in Western Europe and in the social democratic world because of the size
of its vote and membership support. The number of its members (matched
only by the Swedish party) and its vote in national elections exceed by far
that of any other social democratic party. [2] Its organization has been the
model of the modern mass party. Moreover, from 1969 to 1982 the SPD was
the governing party in a state with significant strength in Europe and
internationally. Foreign policy decisions made by a Social Democratic
chancellor reflected to some extent the views of his party, although he
operated under a number of constraints, including the coalition with the
FDP.

To understand the SPD's recent governing role, let us look at the
historical context within which the party system developed in Germany.
The authoritarian state of the Empire era provided only limited scope for
parties to function; during the Weimar era the democratic parties were
derided by their many opponents who remained safely ensconced within the

bureaucratic, military, and judicial establishments. Only since 1949 have the parties received constitutional and statutory recognition. Article 21 of the Basic Law states that "the parties shall participate in forming the political will of the people." [3] The Party Law of 1967 provides for some state financing of parties and recognizes their right to engage in political education and influence political developments.

As a result of this recognition, some specialists on Germany have labeled the Federal Republic a "party state" (comparable to "party government" in Britain), in which two major parties and one minor party have played a key role in the establishment of the state; have popular mandates to carry out policies; have penetrated the administration (leading to substantial political patronage), the mass media, and education; and have mediated between government authorities and the citizenry. [4] Political scientist Kurt Sontheimer claims: "In fact, all political decisions in the Federal Republic are made by the parties and their representatives. There are no political decisions of importance in the German democracy which have not been brought to the parties, prepared by them and finally taken by them. This does not mean that other social groups have no power but that they have to realize their power within the party state." [5] Samuel Eldersveld, too, in a pioneering study on American party politics, argues that "party is king," and that parties are central to a democratic political system and provide the moving force for the governmental process. [6]

Other specialists disagree about the role of parties in political systems. Anthony King questions the centrality of parties in government decision making, although acknowledging that parties are the vehicle for leadership recruitment into government positions once they gain control of the executive branch. [7] Alessandro Pizzorno sees the necessity of parties but contends that given their lack of ideological differentiation, they provide citizens at election time with only an illusion of choice. [8] By focusing on the SPD during its period of rule, this study, in one of its themes, attempts to answer these questions: How important are parties in democratic political systems and do parties matter in government decision making? [9]

A related question must be asked: Are the parties able to cope with the increasingly intractable economic problems faced by all advanced industrial countries, or are other political forces, ranging from bureaucrats to interest group leaders, making the crucial decisions? In writing about the United States in 1980, William J. Keefe implies the latter: "The American party system is in serious trouble. Its loss of vitality appears both in government and in the electorate. Voters ignore parties, politicians dismiss them, and activists bypass them." [10] Does his observation apply to the Federal Republic as well?

If activists bypass parties or form new ones, the claim of West German parties (SPD and CDU/CSU) that they have increasingly assumed the characteristics of "catch-all" or people's parties with a large and diverse membership and voting base must be reexamined. How successful has the SPD been in gaining the support of and integrating diverse social groups within the framework of moderate pluralism? Why has the SPD been unable to capture more than 50 percent of the vote in any national election, unlike the British Labour and Scandinavian Social Democratic parties, which have often been more successful in their integrative and aggregative functions? [11]

In seeking answers to these questions, the political milieu in which the

SPD operates must be considered. In the early decades of the Federal Republic, parties were numerous (ten were represented in the first Bundestag in 1949), but from 1961 on, only the SPD, CDU/CSU, and FDP obtained enough votes to gain parliamentary seats. Despite receiving more than 50 percent of the vote in one election, the CDU/CSU always chose to form a coalition cabinet, as did the SPD when its votes exceeded 40 percent, normally the minimum needed to form a coalition government. Hence the West German party system fits into what Giovanni Sartori calls, in his typology of political parties, a bipolar alignment of alternative coalitions. [12] In this spectrum of parties, the SPD lies slightly to the left of center, the FDP in the center, the CDU slightly to the right of center, and the CSU to the right, with each party's field of gravity overlapping those of its neighbors.

These parties operate within a stable political system reflecting changed socioeconomic conditions in which antisystem parties on both left and right have remained weak. Such stability reflects the relative homogeneity of the population; decreasing national, religious, and social-class cleavages (except for foreign workers and their families); and the continuing decline of blue-collar and rise of white-collar workers— typical characteristics of states moving into a postindustrial or advanced industrial stage. [13] The result has been a moderate level of interparty competition in which ideological schisms are increasingly less visible. Yet because they have not vanished entirely, Sigmund Neumann's observation, made in 1956, of the importance of party doctrine and choice still held true to some extent in the 1970s. He wrote that parties remain "brokers of ideas, constantly clarifying, systematizing and expounding the party's doctrine. They maximize the voters' education in the competitive scheme of at least a two party system and sharpen his free choice." [14]

One central theme of this study is that social and economic forces produced significant changes in the SPD, often with destabilizing effects, just when the party was assuming a major governing role in 1969. Such forces will always affect many institutions in a polity, but in this instance the SPD was the primary organization subject to important changes. These tend to occur cyclically—the SPD (and other socialist parties), after all, emerged during the nineteenth century in response to the social and economic consequences of the industrial revolution. [15] External and historical forces produce not only changes but also constraints. As Jean Blondel notes: "Social and economic forces constrain parties; so do individuals, habits of thought, images, associations, in short the various aspects of the political culture of the country." [16]

In West Germany, the SPD and other major organizations were buffeted by change emanating primarily from youth rebelling against establishment politics, an emergency decree that could restrict civil liberties, the Vietnam war, the rise of a neo-Nazi movement, the hierarchies of ossified universities, and the materialistic aspirations of a bourgeois society. Such protests from an important neo-Marxist segment of society were bound to create a new political subculture that would inevitably conflict with the country's traditional reliance on technology and economic growth. Anthony Giddens' observation on conflict is surely appropriate to the strife-torn SPD of the 1970s: "Conflict is the irremediable fact of the human condition, the inescapable source of much that is creative, as well as destructive, in human society." [17]

The tradition-laden SPD, especially, could not escape this dramatic youth rebellion that represented perhaps the first major societal conflict

and challenge to the system since the founding of the Federal Republic two decades earlier. The party responded with a strong attempt to integrate the youth, who had gathered forces in an extraparliamentary opposition, into its organization. It succeeded in this effort—but at heavy cost.

I argue in the chapters to follow that the integration of the New Left affected both positively and negatively the party's internal developments and its external relations. The New Left challenged the party's oligarchical organization and caused significant changes in the membership's socio-economic base, leadership, and left-right factional cleavages; an increase in intraparty democracy (challenging the iron law of oligarchy propounded by Robert Michels), and the activation of its constituent organizations. [18] The left, mirroring the ideological ferment of the 1970s, revived the dormant ideological debates within the SPD that in their wake caused friction with a more pragmatic leadership.

The party not only acted as a magnet to the left in the late 1960s and early 1970s but also courted workers, salaried employees, civil servants, and other groups for membership and voting support in the frequent national, state, and local elections. By the late 1970s, however, some of the SPD's attraction had worn off as parties were confronted by the new divisive issues of ecology, nuclear energy, and national defense. By then, increasing numbers of people, especially the young, had become disenchanted with the parties' seeming inability to cope with the major crises that have shaken the advanced industrial states. When a portion of the population begins to challenge the legitimacy of the party system, the parties must question their integrative role in policymaking. Thus, once again, the SPD was not spared the external developments that produced new divisions—not always left versus right—within its organization.

This study also examines the SPD's relations with the other two segments of the Social Democratic triad—its parliamentary group and the SPD-led government. Questions must be posed about the effect of the change in the party's profile on the parliamentary group's factional struggles and—to return to the second theme of this study—on selected domestic and foreign policies of the government. At the pinnacle of power as a member of the governing coalition, to what extent was the party able to transform its policy planks into government policy and leave its imprint on the country's development? Given systemic, institutional, and political constraints and the conservative viewpoint of many key SPD leaders, did the party produce more social democracy or socialism in the Federal Republic? Or was it restricted to making gradual reforms within the neocapitalist system by planting a few more grains of social welfare in the country's soil? Even though the SPD shared in governmental power, did its cleavage-ridden organization or the general decline of parties signify that its importance had diminished vis-à-vis the government?

These questions indicate that a party cannot operate autonomously, but interacts constantly with other forces impinging on its freedom of action. The types of constraints need to be assessed in order to determine the nature and extent of reforms. One newspaper, surveying the SPD and social democratic parties in other countries, noted aptly: "What do social democrats do for an encore after 100 years of pioneering social reforms? They are still adept at outmaneuvering the West's communist parties. But with voters burdened by the welfare state's tax bill and the West's economic slowdown, some of the bloom has worn off the previously accepted appeal of social democracy." [19] If the social democrats are in a

cul-de-sac, can they in the long run become a powerful third force between capitalism and communism? A positive answer to that question may depend on the SPD. In 1975, Chancellor Bruno Kreisky of Austria told the SPD delegates at their convention that the "strength of social democracy in Europe and the world depends to a great extent on how strong social democracy is in Germany." [20]

Thus, my intention in this examination of the SPD from 1969 to 1982 is to provide a general (but certainly not all-inclusive) view of a major party in Western Europe in an unsettled period during which storm clouds keep reemerging on the horizon. I abandoned the original plan of surveying the party from 1969 to 1980 (marking the end of three successive legislative periods during which the SPD was in power) when the SPD-led government fell prematurely in 1982—just after the manuscript was completed. Because it then seemed appropriate to cover the SPD's entire reign, I have made additions for the period from 1980 to 1982. Needless to say, the new coverage is not as extensive as that for the 1969-1980 period.

NOTES

1. For bibliographies, see Hans-Josef Steinberg, Die deutsche sozialistische Arbeiterbewegung bis 1914: Eine bibliographische Einführung (Frankfurt/M.: Campus, 1945); Kurt Klotzbach, Bibliographie zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung, 1914-1945 (2d ed., Bonn-Bad Godesberg: Neue Gesellschaft, 1974); Klaus Günther and Kurt Thomas Schmitz, SPD, KPD/DKP, DGB in den Westzonen und in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1945-1973: Eine Bibliographie (Bonn: Neue Gesellschaft, 1976). For citations to individual volumes for Empire, Weimar, and Federal Republic periods, see notes in chapter 1.

2. For a 1975 tabulation of membership and voting support for parties in the Socialist International, see Werner Kowalski and Johannes Glasneck, Die Sozialistische Internationale: Ihre Geschichte und Politik (Berlin: VEB Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1977), p. 299.

3. Hans Lechner and Klaus Hülshoff, Parlament und Regierung (2d ed., Munich and Berlin: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1958), p. 8. See also Kenneth H.F. Dyson, Party, State and Bureaucracy in Western Germany (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1977).

4. Among them is Gerhard Leibholz. See, for instance, his Strukturprobleme der modernen Demokratie (3d ed., Karlsruhe: C. F. Müller, 1967). For commentaries, see Peter Haungs, "Die Bundesrepublik—ein Parteienstaat: Kritische Anmerkungen zu einem wissenschaftlichen Mythos," Zeitschrift für Parlamentsfragen, IV, No. 4 (Dec. 1973), 502-524; Dyson, "The Ambiguous Politics of Western Germany: Politicization in a 'State' Society," European Journal of Political Research, VII, No. 4 (1979), 375-396.

5. Kurt Sontheimer, The Government and Politics of West Germany (New York: Praeger, 1973), p. 95.

6. Samuel J. Eldersveld, Political Parties: A Behavioral Analysis (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964), p. 21.

7. Anthony King, "Political Parties in Western Democracies," Polity, II (Winter 1969), 118.

8. Alessandro Pizzorno, "Interests and Parties in Pluralism," Organizing Interests in Western Europe: Pluralism, Corporatism and the Transformation of Politics, ed. Suzanne Berger (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 274-275.

9. Richard Rose, Do Parties Make a Difference? (Chatham, N.J.: Chatham House Publishers, 1980).

10. William J. Keefe, Parties, Politics, and Public Policy in America (3d ed., New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980), p. iii.

11. Francis G. Castles, The Social Democratic Image of Society: A Study of the Achievements and Origins of Scandinavian Social Democracy in Comparative Perspective (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 10.

12. Giovanni Sartori, Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 179.

13. See Otto Kirchheimer, "Germany: The Vanishing Opposition," Political Oppositions in Western Democracies, ed. Robert A. Dahl (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 237-259; Gerhard Loewenberg, "The Remaking of the German Party System," Polity, I, No. 1 (1968), 87-113.

14. Sigmund Neumann, Modern Political Parties (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 396.

15. On the theme of change, see Frank L. Wilson, The French Democratic Left, 1963-1969: Toward a Modern Party System (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1971), p. 4 ff.

16. Jean Blondel, Political Parties: A Genuine Case for Discontent (London: Wildwood House, 1978), p. 25.

17. Anthony Giddens, The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 238.

18. Robert Michels, Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy (New York: Collier Books, 1962). Reprint of Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens in der modernen Demokratie (Leipzig: W. Klinkhardt, 1911).

19. Christian Science Monitor, Apr. 17, 1979.

20. Vorwärts, Nov. 20, 1975.

Abbreviations

AfA	Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Arbeitnehmerfragen (Association of Workers)
AfB	Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Sozialdemokraten im Bildungsbereich (Association for Social Democrats in the Educational Sector)
AGS	Arbeitsgemeinschaft Selbständige (Association of Self-Employed)
APO	Ausserparlamentarische Opposition (Extraparliamentary Opposition)
ASF	Arbeitsgemeinschaft Sozialdemokratischer Frauen (Association of Social Democratic Women)
CDU/CSU	Christlich-Demokratische Union/Christlich-Soziale Union (Christian Democratic Union—Christian Social Union)
DAG	Deutsche Angestellten-Gewerkschaft (German Salaried Employees Union)
DBB	Deutscher Beamtenbund (German Federation of Civil Servants)
DGB	Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (German Trade Union Federation)
EC	European Community
FDP	Freie Demokratische Partei (Free Democratic Party)
GEW	Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft (Union of Teachers and Scientists)
Jusos	Jungsozialisten in der SPD (Young Socialists in the SPD)
KPD	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Communist Party of Germany)
MBFR	Mutual Balanced Force Reductions
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OR '85	Orientation Framework for 1985
ÖTV	Gewerkschaft Öffentliche Dienste, Transport und Verkehr (Public Service and Transport Workers Union)
PSF	Parti Socialiste Français (French Socialist Party)
SDS	Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund (German Socialist Student Federation)
SED	Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Socialist Unity Party of Germany
SHB	Sozialdemokratischer Hochschulbund (Social Democratic University League)
SI	Socialist International
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany)
USPD	Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany)

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1
Historical Overview

A survey of the Social Democratic Party from 1969 to 1982 must be preceded by an account of its development since its inception in the middle of the nineteenth century. Only then can one gain the necessary perspective to understand the roots of contemporary problems facing the party. Its ideological schisms, its factional cleavages, its leadership struggles, its difficult relationship with an SPD-led government—these problems have their antecedents or parallels in the past. If current difficulties seem to be of major proportions, a look back will show that the party has always been faced by problems and yet sooner or later was able to surmount them—only to be faced by new ones. But despite such difficulties, occurring regardless of whether it was in political opposition or in power, the SPD has shown remarkable longevity as an organization dedicated to the betterment of the less privileged classes in German society.

The plight of exploited factory workers and their families in the aftermath of the nineteenth century industrial revolution precipitated the rise of socialist parties and trade unions throughout Europe. Such organizations sought to recruit workers who had to work long hours at low wages in sweatshop conditions and to live in miserable slums, in poor health, with a bleak future. In 1848, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published the Communist Manifesto providing doctrinal support to the growing urban proletariat becoming increasingly restive against the exploiting entrepreneurial class.

As the industrial revolution gained momentum in Germany, Ferdinand Lassalle, formerly a liberal leader who had turned socialist but not Marxist, founded in May 1863 the General German Workers' Association (Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiterverein). Workers joined it who in earlier decades would have formed secret local political associations, officially disguised as being devoted to education and recreation in order to circumvent decrees prohibiting the formation of radical groups. The new organization, representing the beginning of the social democratic movement, sought first to extend the limited suffrage and then to build socialism by creating a network of producers' cooperatives that would eventually supplant capitalist enterprises. With the death of Lassalle in 1864, Jean Baptiste von Schweitzer became president. By 1875, he was instrumental in tripling the association's membership to over 16,000. But he had to compete with a new rival organization, the Social Democratic Workers Party (Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei), founded at Eisenach in

August 1869 by two Marxist leaders, August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht. The new party supported the program of the short-lived International Workers Association, calling on workers in all countries to unite in a class struggle against the bourgeoisie and eliminate the capitalist states. Yet for Germany it opted for evolutionary rather than revolutionary change to gain its objective of economic and social justice within a socialist state.

BIRTH OF THE PARTY

The two rival organizations fought each other bitterly over such issues as centralization of state power but soon realized that their schism only benefited the hostile business and political elites. In May 1875, at a conference in Gotha, they merged forces and founded the Socialist Workers' Party of Germany (in 1891, renamed the Social Democratic Party of Germany—Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands). [1] Gotha Conference delegates adopted unanimously a Marxist program drafted primarily by Liebknecht, which, according to a critical Marx, made some concessions to Lassalle's reformist theories. [2]

Three years after Gotha, Chancellor Bismarck, heading the unified Reich, launched his antisocialist campaign. His first move was to outlaw the party as a national organization by forbidding it to meet or to distribute its literature. On the other hand, its candidates were allowed to stand for election to the Reichstag (the lower house of Parliament) and its deputies were permitted to retain their seats. The outlawed party maintained a flourishing underground existence, not affected by Bismarck's preemptive introduction in 1881 of pioneering social welfare measures. By 1890, when the antisocialist legislation expired, the party was able to capture 20 percent of the vote for Reichstag candidates.

The period of repression radicalized many party adherents, who became increasingly dissatisfied with unsuccessful parliamentary means of achieving their objectives. In 1891 (one year after Bismarck's ouster from the chancellorship), Erfurt party convention delegates adopted a program, drafted by Karl Kautsky and Eduard Bernstein, that blended Marxism and reformism. In the Marxist section, it noted the growth of monopolies, the increasing exploitation of the workers, and the gradual proletarianization of the middle class, as a consequence of which, workers would intensify the class struggle during mounting economic crises, seize political power, and then transform capitalist private property into public ownership. In the reformist section, the program dealt with goals to be achieved within the existing capitalist order—among them, a progressive income tax, an eight-hour day, universal suffrage, proportional representation for Reichstag elections, referendums and recall of deputies, and equal rights for women. [3]

The programmatic mix of orthodox Marxism and reformism, designed to please different party groups, did not just reflect the 1891 scene but was included in party programs throughout the Empire, Weimar, and early Federal Republic eras. In its day-to-day actions around the turn of the century, however, the party moved increasingly toward reformism. In analyzing the Erfurt program, Bertrand Russell in 1896 predicted accurately: ". . . it seems indubitable that, if the party has a future of power at all, it must purchase power by a practical, if not a theoretical abandonment of some portions of Marx's doctrines. His influence is now almost omnipotent, but this omnipotence must, sooner or later, be

conquered by practical necessity, if the Party is not to remain forever a struggling minority." [4]

The party's reformist wing was strengthened at the time by the emergence of a socialist trade union movement. (As in other European countries trade union federations were split along ideological lines; in Germany liberal and Christian unions were the chief, but weaker, competitors of the socialist unions.) A fraternal linkage did not emerge immediately between the twin pillars of the labor movement. The weak unions, not formed until the 1860s and not centrally organized until 1890, were at first subsidiary to the party, but by 1890 they were strong enough to claim equality—a relationship formalized in the Mannheim Agreement of 1906. Formalization aside, the unions' numbers had already given them de facto veto power over SPD decisions inimical to their interests. Union leaders were more concerned with reforms to gain immediate benefits for their members than in Marxist theory; hence they had a moderating, conservative influence on the party.

Party reformists strengthened their case for working within the existing capitalist system by pointing to striking gains made by the SPD in successive Reichstag elections. In 1893, 1.8 million voters cast their ballots for the SPD, but one decade later the total had risen to 3 million (an increase from 23.3 to 32 percent of the total vote). As a result of its sizable Reichstag group, the party sought through legislation to improve the workers' economic and social conditions.

These reformist policies were based on the writings of Eduard Bernstein, whose Marxist views were moderated by exposure to the British Fabians while in London exile in the late eighties. On his return to Germany, he called on the SPD "to find the courage to free itself from a phraseology which is indeed outdated; and to appear as what it really is today—a democratic, socialist reform party." [5] He noted that some of Marx's predictions were not accurate: The working class was improving economically, rather than becoming impoverished, and increasing its political power; the middle class was growing rather than shrinking; major economic crises had not occurred; and the capitalist system was well entrenched. Hence it was important for the party to press for gradual economic and political reforms which eventually would lead to socialism.

Bernstein presented his views at a number of party conventions, but the reformist wing could not convince its critics in the radical and centrist wings of the soundness of its position, except for its opposition at the 1906 convention to the call for political strikes for political purposes. The emergent radical wing, led by Karl Liebknecht (the son of Wilhelm Liebknecht) and Rosa Luxemburg, gained many adherents among SPD members as a result of radicalization among the unorganized urban proletariat, minor political strikes, an economic recession, and the Russian Revolution of 1905. The two leaders, holding fast to orthodox Marxist doctrine, considered the situation ripe for a general strike and other revolutionary tactics. But with no more than one-third support at the 1906 convention, the radicals, like the reformists, could not gain a majority for their position.

A centrist wing, led by Bebel and Kautsky, was initially sympathetic to the radicals, because the party, it argued, could rob the workers of their faith in and enthusiasm for a socialist future. But after 1903, still using Marxist rhetoric, the centrists increasingly sided with the reformists in their demand for parliamentary and other reforms.

The fratricidal disputes over theory and tactics did not preclude a

further swift rise in the party's membership support. By 1914, it numbered over 1 million (twice as many as in 1907) and had a circulation of 1.4 million subscribers for its 90 newspapers; diverse holdings worth more than 20 million marks in capital assets; and a thriving network of youth, women's, sports, adult education, and other ancillary groups. In the 1912 Reichstag election, it received more than 4.2 million votes (nearly 35 percent of the total). Its bloc of 110 deputies was the largest in the 396-member Reichstag. [6]

In the face of political opposition from the Imperial regime and the solidly established capitalist elite, the party's growth to become the best organized in the Western world was remarkable. The explanation lay in a dedicated corps of officials and loyal members whose worlds revolved around their own organizations. At odds with the prevailing cultural norms, they had no choice but to form a distinct subculture that provided a home for their diverse activities.

The SPD organization, a model for many other European socialist parties, consisted of a hierarchical structure of national, regional, and local organs. Policymaking was centered in the party executive, whose members were elected indirectly by the local organizations. A large bureaucracy blossomed to schedule meetings, enroll members, engage in political agitation, and organize campaigns and educational and cultural activities.

When World War I erupted, party leaders abruptly abandoned their pledge to promote international peace and working class solidarity and to fight nationalism; they supported the war effort instead. In defense of their prowar position, they claimed that their members might not support them otherwise and that the war could lead to the overthrow of the reactionary czarist regime in Russia. In reality, they had become more cautious, afraid that government leaders would crush their organization. Although on August 3, 1914, left-wing leaders voted against the new policy in a Reichstag group meeting, on the next day, bowing to party discipline, they voted for war credits in the Reichstag plenary session. [7]

In March 1916, the dissident leaders broke with the party and established their own parliamentary group. One year later (April 1917), they formed the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), consisting of a number of ideologically disparate wings held together by their opposition to the war. Among the radical groups were the Spartacists, led by Liebknecht and Luxemburg, demanding mass action and revolution as means of stopping the war. The bulk of the USPD consisted of former SPD left-centrists led by Hugo Haase and Kautsky, along with a few reformist intellectuals, such as Bernstein, who wanted the German government to drop its annexationist war aims. The USPD succeeded in capturing control of a number of SPD organizations in Berlin, Leipzig, Halle, and other cities.

In 1917 and 1918, under USPD and left-wing union initiatives, an increasing number of war-weary and hungry workers, dissatisfied by the SPD prowar stance and angry at the government's failure to make democratic reforms, staged widespread strikes. By November 1918 the strikes, added to military defeats, contributed to the downfall of the Imperial regime.