Introduction

"Diesem System keinen Mann und keinen Groschen!" ("For this sys-
tem, not one man and not one penny!"). Thus did Wilhelm Liebknecht,
as spokesman for the tiny socialist-workers' faction of the nation, greet
the founding of the Bismarckian Reich in 1871. For many Germans,
including many socialists, this phrase captured the dominant spirit of
the social-democratic movement during the forty-odd years prior to
World War I. And yet in August 1914, much to the shock of interna-
tional socialists and to the surprise of most of German officialdom, the
SPD (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands) delegates to the
Reichstag voted for war credits, and a large part of the movement went
on to back the German war effort. How this came about, how a party and
its affiliates seemingly so hostile to their society came to accept it, is the
subject of this study.

Beyond the specific story of its development, German social democ-
racy provides fascinating material in two areas. It was the first mass,
working-class party in the history of the world, and as such was a
prototype of one of the major features of twentieth-century politics. But
it was also the first large party to try to work out the practical political
implications of the diverse and ambiguous writings of Karl Marx and
Friedrich Engels. At the high point of its international influence—that
is, during the decade or two prior to the First World War—the SPD was
the model for the world socialist movement, not in the sense that the
parties of other nations copied it, but because it seemed to demonstrate
the enormous potential of organizing the industrial working class for
political ends. The major figures of the German party—August Bebel,
Wilhelm Liebknecht, Karl Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, and others—
were to the world's socialists of their day what Lenin and Trotsky, Mao
and Zhou, Castro and Che would be to revolutionists of later genera-
tions.

As the first mass, working-class party, the SPD foreshadowed many

developments now seen as commonplace in such organizations. We are today so familiar with these parties, and with the bureaucracy and stagnation that accompany their increasing size, that it is surprising to realize how recently they came into being. Max Weber and Robert Michels, two founders of contemporary sociology and political science, used the SPD as a model in their analyses of modern politics. From studies by these and other scholars who have looked closely at the SPD, a good deal of insight has been gained into the nature of advanced technological society and its political activities. By 1914 the SPD had fully developed many of the characteristics of and techniques used by later, even larger parties.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the SPD was the scope and size of its activities; it was far more than just a political party that sought to have its candidates elected to office. The party sponsored extensive social, cultural, and educational endeavors; it owned an impressive network of newspapers and publishing houses; it ran insurance programs, burial societies, and travel clubs; and in conjunction with the closely allied trade unions, it sponsored facilities in which itinerant and indigent workers could find shelter and support. On a less formal level there were socialist taverns and cafes, socialist theaters, socialist athletic clubs, and in some heavily industrialized areas, even entire socialist neighborhoods. The world had never before seen anything quite like German social democracy.

The German socialists claimed to represent all the workers of the nation, even though not all the workers joined the party or even voted for its candidates. The SPD had exceptionally close ties with the so-called free trade unions throughout the period under consideration, a factor that was of critical importance in the history of the party. After 1890 the unions had a larger membership than did the party, and this gave the union leaders within the SPD considerable influence. The popular vote of the party, however, always exceeded the size of the trade-union membership, demonstrating the party's wider appeal. Finally, neither the trade unions nor the party, either in membership or votes, ever won the support of the entire working-class population of Imperial Germany; the patterns of and reasons for the socialists' support or lack thereof constitute an interesting aspect of the total picture of the socialist movement.

In some ways the SPD is an even more fascinating subject for the second of the two reasons previously defined—its relationship to Marxism. Marxism is now so clearly identified with Soviet communism that it is easy to forget that they are different things, that communism is a specific form or interpretation of Marxism that derived from the

particular historical circumstances of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Russia. As such communism cannot be Marxism any more than the American republic can claim to be democracy or Methodism Christianity. But because a party that called itself Marxist emerged victorious in the Russian Revolution, and because the Soviet Union has become such a powerful force in twentieth-century world history, the identification of a specific variation with the larger theory is quite widely accepted.

Like Russian communism, the theory of the SPD during the Bismarckian and Wilhelmian periods (1871–1918), as the present study argues, cannot simply be labeled Marxist and left at that. A good many conflicting and sometimes incompatible forces gave rise to and sustained German social democracy, not all of which had much to do with Marxism. Nonetheless, for much of the first fifty years of the SPD and its predecessors, Marxism was the strongest ideological element, with the most fecund minds of the movement probing the works of Marx and Engels for guidance. Marxism was so important in these years as to generate a full-scale effort by Eduard Bernstein to replace it with his own revisionism.

Judgments of the SPD both as a mass and a Marxist party, then, must be made with an eye to the specific conditions within which it developed and operated. For while after the turn of the century the SPD may well have shared many qualities with later mass parties, it also had many features that were unique to its time and place. By the same token the interpretations of Marxism that appeared in the party were not just objective evaluations of the masters' writings, but efforts to apply the ideology to a particular set of circumstances.

For instance, the ambiguous political character of the German state was an important factor in determining the party's development. Even though the Second Reich was autocratic in effect, with the kaiser exercising considerable power in all realms of national policy, a national representative body of sorts existed and was elected by the entire adult male population, which was not true of any other major parliament in Europe at that time. This German body, called the Reichstag, could influence state policy in only limited ways, but the suffrage system nonetheless allowed some measure of popular sentiment.

Thus the socialists were confronted with a situation in which they could appeal for popular support, demonstrate their growing strength, and practice in a limited way the principle of power to the people that they preached. All these factors tended to reinforce those within the party who urged an anti-Marxist, reformist approach. On the other hand, the distribution of representation worked against the socialists

everywhere; as early as 1890, the SPD was the largest vote-getting party in the nation, but its Reichstag delegation was not the largest until after the 1912 election. Furthermore, the Reichstag had little real power even with a large socialist delegation. Both these features of Imperial Germany's political system helped keep alive within the party a spirit of revolutionary fervor.

Another feature of German society before 1914 made its socialist movement larger and more comprehensive than similar movements in other industrially advanced nations of Europe. This was the pariah status imposed upon socialists by official policy and widely accepted by nonworker portions of the nation. Socialists were not welcome in most voluntary associations in Imperial Germany, a fact that goes a long way in explaining why the SPD had its fingers in so many pies. Socialists were often specifically excluded from semiofficial organizations like veterans' associations, and they were legally prohibited from serving in the judiciary and the massive civil service. In court the testimony of socialists and workers usually counted for less than that of nonsocialists and nonworkers, and laws and punishments were frequently administered in a manner that blatantly discriminated against socialists and their sympathizers (the antisocialist law of 1878–1890 being only the most obvious example). Rather than restricting the growth of socialism in Germany, these actions and attitudes created a powerful sense of camaraderie among those to whom the party appealed.

Of course socialists were not wholeheartedly and warmly accepted by official circles and the upper classes anywhere in Europe during these years. But in Germany the official persecution and legal discrimination were greater than anywhere outside of Russia. The present study argues that this, more than any other single factor, accounts for the tremendous growth of social democracy in Germany once massive industrialization began after the end of the Franco-Prussian War. Had the leaders of the new state had the sense and foresight to integrate the workers and socialists more fully into the nation, the socialist propaganda about the state as class enemy would not have been as well received, and reformist forces within the movement would have gained the upper hand sooner and more openly. As it was, official persecution created a heroic spirit that won the SPD ever more followers and preserved a radical tradition well beyond the point it could have been sustained by other objective factors.

Economic development, political traditions and institutions, popular acceptance and official hostility, and the personalities of the major figures all determined the development of German social democracy. Obviously any understanding of a socialist movement is predicated to a

great extent on a basic knowledge of the society within which it operated; this knowledge has largely been assumed in the work that follows. In agreement with recent developments in the historiography of Imperial Germany, my assumption is that internal social, economic, and political conditions are of primary importance to understanding the character of the nation, and that foreign policy followed from these internal determinants. Those readers requiring more background in general German history should consult the works of Fritz Fischer, e.g., *World Power or Decline* (New York, 1974); Hans-Jürgen Pühle, *Agrarisches Interessenpolitik und preussischer Konservatismus* (Hanover, 1966); Hans Ulrich Wehler, e.g., *Das deutsche Kaiserreich 1871–1918* (Göttingen, 1973); and others who have emphasized this line of argument.

German social democracy during these years is rather neglected in English-language works on the history of Western socialism and Marxism, and it is in part the intention of the present study to rectify this situation. While several excellent studies, most notably those by Schorske and Lidtke, have focused on the prewar SPD in the context of Germany history, only George Lichtheim's *Marxism: An Historical and Critical Study* (New York, 1961) has placed the party squarely in the center of the history of Marxism. The following more detailed summary of the German party reinforces and amplifies Lichtheim's thesis by laying out more clearly the factors that limited and conditioned the development of Marxism in one advanced industrial society. Marx thought such an environment would be the one in which communism, as he called his own theories, would most firmly take hold. Understanding why it did not sheds light on both Imperial Germany and Marxism.

Despite the hostility and vituperation aroused by social democracy in its own time, the perspective of the twentieth century reveals these years as a time of promise in the history of working-class socialism, as a time when social-economic justice and political democracy seemed to be compatible. This book posits that the failure of the German social-democratic movement to achieve its espoused goals derived from both internal flaws, some of which the party had little control over, and external pressures, most of which the party could not have influenced in any way short of forceful revolutionary action. Whether or not such action was a viable alternative for the SPD before 1914 is an endlessly debatable question, the answer to which readers will have to decide for themselves.

This study is intended primarily for American undergraduate and graduate students as a general introduction to the origins and development of German social democracy during the first five decades of its

existence. It aims to provide an overview of the most important aspects of the movement's history prior to the First World War and a summary of recent work of German and Anglo-American scholars in the field. It draws heavily on previously published work, particularly that of German academics in the past ten years, but also uses primary sources—especially party protocols, the correspondence of leading figures, and the party press—to try to give as complete a picture as possible of the character of German social democracy.

The first chapter is chronological, dealing with the succession of events that brought the party to the end of the twelve-year rule of the antisocialist law in 1890. The next five chapters are topical treatments of the major aspects of the movement's development from that time to the outbreak of war in 1914. This organizational scheme necessarily introduces some redundancy, which I have attempted to keep to a minimum. But recent scholarly work on German social democracy has provided such a wealth of detail on various aspects of the movement that the topical treatment of the five central chapters is the most efficacious way of presenting this material. The concluding chapter and the "Suggestions for Further Reading" provide interested students with guidelines for additional study. In addition, of course, the suggestions outline the major sources used for each chapter.