

# GERMAN POLITICAL PARTIES

by Harold Zink\*

Few peoples of the modern world have had as varied experience with political parties as the Germans. Starting out under the Empire with a multi-party system of fairly manageable proportions, a shift was made under the Weimar Republic to one of the most fragmented party arrangements to be found anywhere. This system gave way to a single party under the Third—Reich. In the period since 1945, the West German Federal Republic has developed a party system which although, on the surface, of the multi-party variety actually offers many of the features of the biparty system. In the German Democratic Republic there is theoretically a multi-party set-up, but in practice only a single party is significant.

## Under The Empire

Despite the conservative views of Count Von Bismarck and others in the Empire, some leeway was permitted political parties and a considerable number came into being. Some were primarily local; others had a small following throughout the country. Five parties stood out and were usually considered the major parties. At the right, there was the Conservative party which found its main strength among the great landowners of East Prussia, the agricultural workers, and the civil servants. This party, being interested in maintaining the controlling influence of the Junkers and other propertied groups, vigorously resisted any program of a democratic or indeed a liberal character. It strongly opposed all constitutional or electoral changes. Next to the Conservative party was the Center party, which was founded and developed essentially as a Roman Catholic party. It contained both aristocratic and popular elements and naturally was strongest in the Catholic sections of the country, particularly in Bavaria, Silesia, and the Prussian Rhine Province. Hostile towards socialism, the Center party nevertheless sought to be mildly liberal because of its

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Christian principles and foundation. It prided itself on supporting various liberal programs with a view to attracting the working people among the Catholics who were caught in the struggle between their religious loyalties and their class interests. The Center party often acted with the Conservative party in a so-called "Blue-Black bloc."

Beyond the Center party stood the National Liberals, a party of industrial leaders and managers, with a large middle-class following, particularly in the cities, where the middle class was mainly to be found. The National Liberal party, despite the economic status of its membership, favored political reform. It advocated restriction of clerical influence in government, termination of aristocratic monopoly of civil and military office, abolition of the undemocratic Prussian three-class electoral system, re-apportionment of seats in the Reichstag, and an end of government interference with freedom of voting on the part of imperial and state employees. Further leftward, one found the Radicals, or Progressives, largely middle-class and industrial. This party differed from the National Liberal party chiefly in its insistence upon free trade. It supported a thoroughgoing system of parliamentary government, with responsible ministers both in the Reich and in the states. It also wanted to see the subordination of the military to the civil power.

There was only one party of distinctly liberal character under the Empire—the Social Democratic party. Founded in 1869, this party was largely made up of industrial workingmen. No other party was so effectively organized; no other had so comprehensive and yet so definite a program. Much of this program naturally had to do with economic matters, but it also envisaged sweeping changes of a political nature. There was not a great deal in the governmental systems of either the Empire or the states that commended itself to the Social Democrats. They favored suffrage for both sexes at the age of 20; proportional representation was particularly dear to their hearts. Among other items in their platform were: the popular initiative and referendum, decision by the Reichstag of all matters of war and peace, annual voting of taxes, and "self-government by the people in Empire, state, province, and commune." The left wing of this party was impatient for revolution and had little use for the tedious process of evolutionary or conventional political action. However, the rank and file of the Social Democrats took a more moderate and "revisionist" view that the goal of socialization could, and should, be reached only through political means. They were accordingly insistent upon achieving political democracy as a necessary step or stage.

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## Under The Weimar Republic

Although the end of World War I saw the overthrow of the Empire and the setting up of a republic, the system of political parties remained, to a considerable extent, intact. Two new major parties, the National Socialists and the Communists, appeared on the scene during the Weimar Republic, but the other major party groups continued their activities, though frequently under different names. Many small parties sprang up during this period, encouraged by the new system of proportional representation as well as by the general ferment of the times. This balkanization of political groups was one of the most significant features of the political scene under the Weimar Republic. The manageable multi-party arrangement of the Empire gave way to what sometimes seemed an almost chaotic multi-party system under the Weimar Republic. No one party could begin to control the Reichstag. Under ordinary circumstances coalitions of three or more parties had to be set up in order to form a government. These were frequently most unstable affairs, with no one party strong enough to play a dominant role even in a coalition, to say nothing of the Reichstag. At times there were 20 or so parties represented in the Reichstag, with no party having more than a fourth or so of the seats. It was not strange that there were 20 cabinets during the comparatively brief life of the Weimar Republic, with the average cabinet managing to hold on only some eight months.

Beginning at the right, the German National People's party was the heir of the Conservative party under the Empire. With the old Junkers and other propertied classes, together with military, civil service, and middle-class representatives, as loyal members, this party never adjusted itself to the ways of a republic. Its members were sympathetic to authoritarianism, and constituted the center of reaction and opposition to the Weimar Republic. The German National People's party was particularly opposed to the Social Democrats and anything that savored of socialism. Next in order was the German People's party, the descendant of the National Liberal party under the Empire. This party had able leadership in the person of Dr. Stresemann, but it never enjoyed mass support. It included in its ranks many of the business and industrial owners and managers, the Protestant clergy, and a good many middle-class property holders. This party broke with the past sufficiently to recognize the basis of republicanism, but it never gave firm support to the development of democratic political institutions in Germany.

In the middle of the party spectrum was the Center party which emerged more or less unscathed from the fall of the Empire, going so far as to retain its name. Made up of members

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of the Catholic communion who believed in the carrying of religious interests over into the political field, this party was especially strong in Bavaria and the Rhineland. It was genuinely sympathetic to democratic ways and, like the earlier Center party frequently attempted to build up a program which would attract the masses of the industrial workers. All in all, it was the most stable of the parties under the Weimar Republic and usually controlled one fifth or more of the seats in the Reichstag. As a center party the group occupied a particularly commanding position under the system of coalitions that characterized the Weimar Republic. It could join with parties either to the left or the right, depending upon the circumstances. To begin with, it tended to align itself more with the left than the right, but it found no great difficulty in working with parties of the right. This party was a member of every coalition during the period 1919-32. Splitting off from the Center party in 1920, the Bavarian Catholics formed the Catholic People's party. This party favored the restoration of monarchy in Bavaria and was particularly opposed to socialism. By 1924, it began to work in close cooperation with the Center party and increasingly became an affiliate or appendage of that party.

The German Democratic party stood to the left of the center and included in its membership the liberals of the country who opposed socialism. It was the lineal descendant of the old Radical or Progressive party. It was never a very potent force in the Weimar Republic as far as numbers went, though it was fortunate in having some exceptionally astute persons as leaders. This party was generally democratic in sympathies and favored liberal economic policies. It was a member of virtually every coalition during the years 1919-31. During the latter years of the Weimar Republic the German Democratic party lost much of its popular support.

The Social Democratic party came through the disastrous years of World War I with increased prestige and played an outstanding role in the setting up of the Weimar Republic. Though the first president, Ebert, was a Social Democrat, this party actually was a member of coalitions set up to form a government only some three and a half years out of the 14 years following 1918 and on only two occasions could point to its members in the office of chancellor. This party was dedicated to the principles of socialism, but it was far from radical in this support, having little interest in large-scale socialization of industry, nationalization of the land, and that sort of undertaking. Its leaders were, for the most part, trade union members, and its support was largely drawn from the ranks of the industrial workers, with some professional people and small businessmen thrown in for good measure. This party confessed mild support for Marxian ideology, but

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it had little interest in pushing such principles to the extent associated with the Communists. Despite serious internal dissension and a rather narrow outlook, the Social Democratic party often attracted the largest number of votes of any party. It was not until the July elections of 1932 that the Social Democratic party fell below the National Socialists in popular vote.

The Communist party in Germany was a product of the crisis following the collapse of the Empire in World War I. Its daring leaders made a desperate effort to seize control when the Empire fell, but they failed. There are those who believe that they came very near to success and that Germany narrowly missed becoming the center of the international Communist movement. A highly industrialized country, Germany fitted the conditions set up by Karl Marx more nearly than perhaps any other country at the time, certainly far more than did Russia. At any rate the Communist effort to dominate failed, and the Communist party had to content itself with playing a quite ordinary role under the Weimar Republic. Nevertheless, during the last years of the Republic, it is significant to note that Communist strength increased—in the election of 1930 there was a considerable surge forward.

Finally, attention has to be paid to the National Socialist German Workers' party which does not fit easily into a classification of parties from right to left. This party started out in a very small way during the early years of the Weimar Republic. Despite its *putsch* in 1923, it was not taken very seriously by most observers until 1928 or even later. With the severe depression which hit Germany in 1929 and during the succeeding years, the National Socialist made a great effort to push forward. In the election of 1930, they achieved their first considerable success, electing 107 members of the Reichstag. Thereafter until 1933 the National Socialists appeared prominently on the scene outside of the government, but they ordinarily refused to assume any responsibility within the government unless on their own terms.

### Under The Third Ricch

Hitler was appointed to the chancellorship on January 30, 1933, under a coalition known as the "National Concentration." To begin with, his National Socialist German Workers' party recognized other political parties and indeed shared the responsibility for the government with the Nationalists. However, it was only a few months until other parties were banned and the National Socialists alone permitted legally to carry on activities. A law of July 14, 1933, outlawed any political parties other than the National Socialists. A law of December 20, 1934

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unified the party and the state; a law effective in September 1934 made the party swastika the official flag of the German Reich. Consequently under Hitler political parties other than the Nazis were compelled to cease activities and even to disband. The Communists went underground and maintained an organization of this character throughout the years until 1945. The Nazis built up an enormous organization paralleling the government which they employed to determine public policy and to control the state apparatus. They also sought to penetrate every nook and cranny of German life—business, education, religion, the home, the arts, and various social organizations—in order to bring every aspect of German national life under their control. They confiscated and otherwise gained possession of enormous amounts of property which they used for their own purposes.

### Under The Allied Occupation

It was unanimously agreed by the Allies that the National Socialist party should be dissolved and its vast properties taken over at the conclusion of World War II. The attitudes of the several Allies as regards the revival or recognition of other political parties varied. The Russians favored immediate acceptance of political parties, particularly the Communist party which was ready to transform its underground setup into an aboveground organization at once. The United States, fearing a Communist revival, preferred to proceed more slowly, taking a single step at a time. The Potsdam Conference, held in the summer of 1945 shortly after the German surrender, approved the Russian position, authorizing political activity of a non-fascist variety immediately. Under this decision political parties were able to proceed in all the zones of the occupation, but various national requirements actually prevented any uniform development. The Russians gave generous support to the Communist forces in their zone, permitting them a full measure of leeway. The other Allies regarded the Communist party with suspicion and in varying degrees attempted to limit its activities. In the American Zone an effort was made to keep all party activity under strict control to begin with by authorizing parties to function only on a local and then a state-wide basis. This attempt largely failed and parties very shortly were carrying on their activities throughout the national zone and even beyond. If the Communist party was not welcomed by the United States, Britain, and France, it was given recognition, even to the extent of being permitted to nominate representatives on editorial boards of newspapers during the early years of the occupation.

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### Under The West German Federal Republic

When the West German Federal Republic was established in the autumn of 1949, the pattern of political parties had in general been set. Aside from banning neo-Nazi groups and later the Communist party, the West German Federal Republic continued in a general way the party system as it existed. But it contributed several significant developments. By providing in the Electoral Laws of 1953 and 1957 that no party could participate in the proportional representation provision unless it had polled at least 5 per cent of the national vote or had elected one member (later three) of the Bundestag by majority vote in a district, it placed a severe limitation on the proliferation of parties, so familiar under the Weimar Republic. Perhaps even more important was the apparently growing tendency to follow a course which approached the biparty system. No attempt was made to discard the multi-party pattern, but two of the parties under the West German Federal Republic, the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats, developed such strength that they more or less shared the field between them, leaving the other parties to shrivel or survive as minor political groups. In the election held in 1949 the Christian Democrats were able to control just short of a majority in the Bundestag, and the coalition which was set up to form a government was like that of the proverbial lion and mice. In the election of 1953, the Christian Democrats actually won a bare majority of the seats in the Bundestag, but they continued the coalition because they required a working majority and also, to some degree perhaps, for sentimental reasons. In the election of 1957 the Christian Democrats received a majority of the popular vote, a feat no other party had ever achieved under a democratic system in Germany, and well over half of the seats in the Bundestag. A coalition was revived in 1961 but it was a stable affair, with the Christian Democrats' party so strong that they could enforce their own desires in large measure.

The political party setup under the West German Federal Republic did not represent a complete break with the pre-Hitler days, but for various reasons much was new. The Communist party, as noted above, survived the Hitler era and the war fairly well and was in a position almost immediately to carry on in the open. The Social Democratic party had suffered grievously under Hitler. Only remnants remained when the end of the Nationalist Socialist regime came, and there were so weak and unorganized that it required some time before a viable Social Democratic party again operated. The remaining parties were for the most part new, although in certain instances they could trace some relationship to earlier parties.

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Unlike the days of the Empire and the Weimar Republic, there had been no extreme rightist party under the West German Federal Republic. It is true that various attempts have been made to found such parties. The Socialist Reich party, which came into prominence in Lower Saxony in 1951, might well have become a party of distinctly rightist character; certainly it included many reactionary elements and espoused fascist doctrines. But it was banned by the government in 1952. The German party with its strength mainly in Lower Saxony has been the best example of a rightist party under the West German Federal Republic. Including in its membership very conservative landowners and farmers, it tenaciously adhered to the conservatism of the past. Never strong, it elected only a handful of its members to seats in the Reichstag in 1953 and was apprehensive lest it lose all of its representation in 1957, but it finally won 17 seats. However, in 1961 it disappeared from the Bundestag. Also on the right, though more difficult to classify than the German party, has been the All German *Bloc*, formerly the Refugee or B.H.E. party. This party sought to bring together the many millions of expellees and refugees who have come to West Germany. Its program has generally been vague and it has followed a policy of expediency. The All German *Bloc* at one time enjoyed rather spectacular success in Schleswig-Holstein, but its general record has been far from striking. It polled 5.9 per cent of the votes in 1953 and 4.6 per cent in 1957. A fusion with the German party drew only 2.8 per cent of the votes in the 1961 election. Its representation in the Bundestag has never exceeded modest proportions and in 1957 and 1961 it disappeared completely from that body. Another rightist group is the Bavarian party which, as its name suggests, maintains an organization only in Bavaria and supports a program of "Bavaria for Bavarians." Starting out with a considerable measure of support, this party has languished rather than grown. With only a handful of seats in the Bundestag in 1953, it displayed much nervousness as the elections of 1957 approached lest it lose its parliamentary representation entirely, and ended up with no seats.

Slightly right of center is the Christian Democratic Union which since 1949 has been the strongest of all parties in the West German Federal Republic. Under the able and in large measure dominating leadership of Dr. Konrad Adenauer this party has been closely identified with the early years of the West German Federal Republic. It is a new party, though its roots are sometimes traced back to the pre-Hitler Center party. The Christian Democrats, as their name implies, brings a religious slant to the political scene. The members are drawn, for the most part, from the Catholic churches, but an effort has been made to attract Protestants also—with

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the tradition that one of the two leading positions in the party shall be held by a Protestant. While this party represents a religious approach to public affairs, it should not be assumed that it is a tool of the Catholic church or of churches in general. Its leaders and members are sympathetic to religion; yet the control of the party is by no means with the clergy. It resembles the Popular Republican Movement in the Fourth Republic of France in many respects. Drawing its membership from those who regard the church and state as mutual supporting forces rather than as separate elements, the Christian Democratic party attempts to support programs acceptable to diverse elements, including the middle-class businessman, the agricultural worker, and the industrial worker.

Virtually an integral part of the Christian Democratic party, though active as it is in Bavaria somewhat more conservative in character, is the Christian Social Union. For all practical purposes, the Christian Social Union is the Christian Democratic party in Bavaria, since the latter does not attempt to compete in that state. Except in matters of peculiar interest to Bavaria, the Christian Social Union presents a united front with the Christian Democratic party.

The Center party has been mainly confined to the state of North Rhine Westphalia, though some effort has been made to expand its field. It might be assumed that this party is the descendant of the party by the same name under the Empire and the Weimar Republic. Actually such an assumption is not well-founded. In so far as the old Center party has a descendant in the West German Federal Republic, it is the Christian Democratic party. The Center party is further to the left than the earlier party of the same name. It is made up of what might be called the left-wing elements of the former Center party. Its members are drawn largely from the industrial workers who are Catholics. Its platform is similar to that of the Social Democrats in many respects. With only two seats in the Bundestag elected in 1953, it disappeared from that body in 1957 and 1961.

Another party which originally stood near the center, but in 1961 was further to the right is the Free Democratic party which prior to 1948 was known as the Liberal Democratic party. The members of this party come from the ranks of those who see no basis for a tieup between church and state but otherwise would agree in many instances with the Christian Democrats. Here one finds business and professional men and well-to-do farmers. This party has been particularly strong in Wurttemberg-Baden and in certain sections of the northern part of the West German Federal Republic. It was a member of the coalition which the Christian Democrats orga-

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nized in 1949 and continued in such an arrangement after the election of 1953. However, in 1956, serious internal dissension led to the decision to withdraw from the coalition. Some 17 members of the Free Democrats in the Bundestag who held positions in the government and were especially close to Dr. Adenauer withdrew from the main wing of the party and established their own party, the Free People's party, in 1957. This group combined with the German party prior to the 1957 election. This split in the Free Democratic party was obviously a severe blow to the party, but nevertheless it won 41 seats in the Bundestag in 1957. In the 1961 election the FDP presented a united front and swung to a more nationalistic position on the right. It won 66 seats in the Bundestag and its popular vote went up sharply. After the election it finally agreed to a coalition with the Christian Democrats but on distinctly more favourable terms than earlier.

To the left of the center stands the second of the major parties under the West German Federal Republic: the Social Democratic party. This party which was founded under the Empire came down to the Weimar Republic, managed to survive Hitler, and again takes a very active role in public affairs. Its program compares fairly closely with that of the Labor party in Britain and commands wide support, particularly among the industrial workers. It is perhaps less interested, at least for the moment, than the British Labor party in nationalization and has concentrated its attention on representation of the workers on the boards of directors of business concerns. Although Dr. Kurt Schumacher, the first leader of the Social Democrats after World War II was an able man with keen intellect, the party has felt handicapped in the face of the notable leadership furnished the Christian Democrats by Dr. Adenauer. The Social Democrats elected a strong group to the Bundestag in both 1949 and 1953 and in the following years constituted a vigorous opposition to the coalition set up under Dr. Adenauer. In 1957, they increased their proportion of the popular vote from 28.8 per cent to 31.8 per cent and jumped from 151 to 169 seats in the Bundestag. In 1961 they further increased their vote to 36.3 per cent and elected 190 members of the Bundestag.

In addition to the political groups specifically listed above, there has been a myriad of smaller organizations, many of the fly-by-night variety. It has not been uncommon to find a hundred or even more such groups active in a given area in an election. Some are so small that they can hardly be perceived; others are local in character. Many are extremist in nature, bringing together for the moment elements of the old National Socialist party or some other ultra-nationalistic group. These political groups indicate the ferment which currently characterizes

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West Germany. What their influence may be is difficult to say. Under the rules set up to limit the representation of splinter parties, they do not clutter up the chamber of the Bundestag or indeed even invade the precincts of such a body at all. Consequently their formal position is insignificant. But they cannot be dismissed. It is conceivable that out of these a significant ultranationalist or fascist party might be constructed in the future if a serious depression or some other catastrophe hits Germany.

Finally, attention must be given to the Communist party which started out in 1945 with high hopes and with the blessing and support of the Russians. In the first elections of the Bundestag this party was quite active, but it managed to elect only 10 members to that body. Despite its resources and early promise, this party was heavily handicapped in operating under the West German Federal Republic. Raids on its headquarters in Dusseldorf indicated its dependence on Moscow and its lack of genuine loyalty to the West German Federal Republic. This, together with the observations and experience arising out of the situation in East Germany, turned public opinion in West Germany strongly against the Communist party. Even those with some ideological sympathy for the Communists found it hard to support the Communist party in the West German Federal Republic. In the election which took place in 1953 the Communist party did not succeed in placing a single representative in the Bundestag. Later it was denied formal recognition as a party after the authorities had called on the Federal Constitutional Court for advice as to whether such a step would be legal. It consequently was driven underground and now operates behind the scenes.

### **Under The German Democratic Republic**

It might be supposed that the Russians would have stipulated that only the Communist party could operate in the German Democratic Republic. However, for various reasons they preferred to follow a different course. They started out in 1945 by recognizing all non-fascist parties in their zone, priding themselves on being more liberal in this respect than the United States. Shortly they decided to arrange a short-gun marriage between the Communist party and the Social Democratic party, bestowing the name of Socialist Unity party on the new organization. Such an arrangement was rejected in West Germany and in the western sectors of Berlin, but the Russians could obviously do about as they pleased in their own zone. Except in name, the Socialist Unity party can hardly be distinguished from the Communist party elsewhere. However, it has

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never been given a complete monopoly in eastern Germany. The Free Democrats and the Christian Democrats operate after a fashion in the Democratic Republic. But, they are severely discriminated against by the Russians and by the officials of the Democratic Republic while the Socialist Unity party is given hearty encouragement and numerous favors. The barriers placed in the path of the non-Communist parties have become increasingly numerous and the Socialist Unity party has become for most purposes the single party of the Democratic Republic.

### Concluding Comments

The political parties in the West German Federal Republic have developed a considerable measure of stability and maturity. Both the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats have built up effective organizations which cover the entirety of West Germany. These two parties have so overshadowed other political groups that they seem in the eyes of many to constitute a biparty system. Certainly each is strong enough to organize a coalition which will display a large measure of cohesiveness, with policy largely determined by the senior partner. When an election occurs, both of these big parties campaign vigorously. Indeed most devices familiar in other democratic countries including television, meetings of divers kinds, display advertising, personal canvassing, and speaking tours by leading candidates, are employed by these organizations in Germany. And certain instrumentalities, for example, trucks which show an array of film strips in broad daylight, may be unique.

At the same time there are certain characteristics which occasion concern in some quarters. The high degree of personal leadership, especially in the Christian Democratic party, has worried a good many people. Dr. Konrad Adenauer has been so dominant a figure in both the party and the government that other party leaders have been overshadowed. It has been alleged that the individual members of the party in the Bundestag hardly count at all, since even the people in their districts more or less ignore them. There is a high degree of discipline and even regimentation within the party ranks. Members of the parties in the Bundestag are instructed by the party leaders how to vote and what position to take even in the committees. Granted that there must be a considerable measure of integration under a parliamentary type of government, it seems to some that the major parties in the West German Federal Republic have gone beyond the point of necessity.

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Finally, one notes at least one important difference between parties in West Germany and such countries as the United States and Britain. In these latter countries there has developed a considerable measure of mutual respect and understanding among the parties for one another. Politics has come to be regarded as a sort of game, with the representatives of the parties the players. Good sportsmanship requires the ability to play fairly and to be a good loser. The relations between members of opposing parties are frequently cordial and indeed it is not unusual for personal friendships to flourish across the gulf that separates parties. In the West German Federal Republic, however, lines are sharply drawn between parties, and there is little crossing them. Members of one party tend to regard those of another with suspicion. There is little mingling in the lobbies of the Bundestag, in the restaurants, or outside. To what extent this results from the relative lack of political experience and to what extent it arises out of German character, it is difficult to say. There seems to be evidence that the sharp lines are being broken down to some degree.

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Nothing is politically right which is morally wrong

*Daniel O'Connell*

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