

When the German Left United to Expropriate the Princes

In 1926, 14.5 million Germans voted in a referendum to expropriate the toppled royal dynasties' estates. The campaign brought rare unity on the German left — but also met with a reactionary backlash highlighting the dangers to Weimar democracy.



Left-wing revolutionaries in Berlin, 1918. (Photo12 / Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

For some, it was a “decisive struggle between democratic Germany and the resurgent powers from the past.” For others, it was about “the preservation of house and home, nation and empire.” What is undisputed is that the Communist-initiated referendum on the “expropriation of the princes” in 1926 was one of the defining controversies of the Weimar Republic.

The high nobility’s symbolic significance for the Weimar Republic can hardly be overestimated. For national conservatives and, to some extent, liberals, the upper ranks of the aristocracy stood for the “good old days.” The new republic, by contrast, was unstable, with outsized left-wing influence. A dispute over the old dynasties was thus also a struggle to shape the entire political and social order.

The substantial assets held by the deposed princes were also a political factor in their own right, which could be mobilized behind right-wing, anti-republican forces. Often, even state bodies like the judiciary and the administration intervened in the conflict, in the interests of the old order. In this sense, the referendum also shines a light on the wider problems of the Weimar Republic, still burdened with the consequences of the [half-hearted revolution of 1918–20](#).

Toward the Referendum

Before the events of November 1918 stripped the monarchs of their political primacy, the nobility had owned extensive estates, castles, and art treasures for centuries. In 1913, the assets of the Hohenzollern dynasty alone amounted to several hundred million marks. Beside them, twenty-one other kings, grand dukes, dukes, and princes reigned in the German Reich from 1871 onward. The Reich was a federal league of principalities, and the princes in each of these dominions had their own estates.

Such was the state of affairs when the Kaiser was overthrown on November 9, 1918, and Philipp Scheidemann and Karl Liebknecht each proclaimed the republic from two separate balconies. The following day, a new republican government was formed by the two parties of the Left, namely the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the more radical Independent Social Democrats (USPD). The revolutionaries immediately ordered the confiscation of large swathes of princely property.

The question of whether the assets should only be temporarily confiscated and later split between the state and the dynasties, or else expropriated without compensation, sparked a heated debate. While SPD politicians tended to favor the first solution, their USPD colleagues argued for the second. They argued that a purely political revolution without any change to the economic structures would fail to achieve its objectives.

However, the republican constitution that came into force in August 1919 enshrined the right to private property and set high thresholds for expropriation. The opportunity to use the freedom of the revolutionary period for a clear solution to the property question had thus been missed.

The princes and the republic launched several attempts to come to an amicable agreement. However, these “solutions” envisaged that major shares of the estates were to be conceded to the high nobility. The years of dispute were further burdened by a whole avalanche of lawsuits brought by the princely families against the state. It was evident from the judiciary that the conditions for a truly republican order were not yet in place: judges of Weimar Germany hailed from an era when they had been beholden to the dynasties.

Unity in Action?

The unfavorable course of the court proceedings prompted two parliamentary initiatives: in November 1925, both the liberal German Democratic Party (DDP) and the Communist Party (KPD) presented bills in parliament. The DDP’s proposal envisaged giving the individual federal states (*Länder*) the possibility to settle the dispute over assets conclusively by law, without any option for the princes to appeal through the courts. In parliament, the DDP spokesman stressed that this was, after all, a political issue; it was necessary to prevent “world history from being made or amended by the courts after the fact.”

The Communists’ draft, on the other hand, demanded expropriation without compensation. The KPD’s central argument held that one could not leave millions in assets to former princes while at the same time abandoning the victims of a world war that the aristocracy had started.

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The KPD also made a broad-based attempt to trigger a referendum. To this end, it published an open letter to the trade union federations and the SPD, offering an alliance. It also organized a mass rally in Berlin, where several tens of thousands of people demonstrated for expropriation without compensation. Shortly afterward, a committee of various civil society groups was formed to facilitate

broader mobilization, and further committees were formed locally.

The expropriation slogan was particularly popular with the grassroots of the SPD and the trade unions — so much so that the Social Democrats threw their weight behind the initiative. Yet at the same time, they emphasized their independence, and did not join the committee. Still, the different actors agreed on a common draft legislation text, which was an important prerequisite for launching the petition for a referendum: the draft demanded expropriation of all former ruling princes' assets for the common good — without compensation.

Despite mutual animosities between Communists and Social Democrats, there now emerged a “unity of action at a distance”: the respective parties organized separate campaigns toward the common goal of expropriating the princes. In the coming weeks, the SPD held over twelve thousand meetings and distributed 35 million leaflets. The KPD, for its part, systematically deployed street theater and agitprop groups for the first time. Alongside these organizations, numerous public figures pleaded for expropriation, including Albert Einstein, Käthe Kollwitz, and Heinrich Zille.

As a first step toward any referendum, the Weimar constitution and the plebiscite law provided for a petition [*Volksbegehren*]. An actual, binding referendum would only be held if 10 percent of eligible voters (just under 4 million people) expressed their support in this first stage and parliament then rejected the proposed bill. The problem with this procedure was that supporters had to put their name on lists that made their stance public in advance. Some wrote drastic comments in these official documents before returning them. In one case, for instance, someone wrote that “[we] firmly refuse to tolerate any such harassment in the future” — in another, the sender declared that he had “also used the list to wipe my ass.” Such reactions testified to the fact that the bureaucracy was not politically neutral, but plainly leaned conservative.

Indeed, because registration was public, landowners, especially in the countryside, exerted massive pressure on their employees to prevent them from taking part, threatening them with dismissal. Such efforts were accompanied by a massive campaign launched by the opponents of expropriation.

The monarchist-conservative German National People's Party (DNVP) wrote that the endeavor was but a prelude to expropriating “church, landed property, industry, banks, and finally all and any private property.” Considerable sums poured in from industrialist circles to finance the countercampaign. The churches also sided with the opponents of expropriation, even invoking the seventh commandment — prohibition of theft.

Tooth and Nail

Despite all opposition, the petition proved a resounding success. Over 12.5 million votes were cast in favor. This was not only three times more than required, but about 2 million votes more than the SPD and KPD had together received in the last parliamentary election. In other words, numerous voters of bourgeois parties had expressed their support for expropriation.

Meanwhile, parliamentary consultations on the DDP's legislation draft had continued. However, the bill's fate was essentially sealed when President Paul von Hindenburg — a former army commander and staunch monarchist — expressed the view that the proposed law had the character of a constitutional amendment. The national government agreed with this assessment. In practice, this meant that two-thirds of parliament would have had to support the bill.

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Now all that was left was the draft legislation proposed by the referendum campaign. On this issue, too, the government — again in agreement with Hindenburg — stressed that the suggested law would effectively amend the constitution. On May 6, 1926, parliament rejected the bill, opening up the path

for a referendum. The next hurdle was enormous, however: due to its constitution-altering character, the bill now required the approval of about 20 million citizens.

Supporters and opponents alike ran their campaigns with great intensity, which brought enormous polarization. The central arguments had not changed since the beginning of the debate. Social Democrats emphasized that the referendum would work in favor of the republic and contrasted high payments to the princely houses with the meager incomes of pensioners, the invalid, and the unemployed. The KPD put things in even sharper tones, proclaiming that “the hatred against the crowned robbers is class hatred against capitalism and its slaveholder system.”

Picking up on such statements, the anti-republican right tried to appeal to bourgeois fears of further-reaching measures, presenting mirror images of the Communists’ arguments. Unsurprisingly, the aristocratic associations pleaded against expropriation, invoking Christian moral law. Not all Protestant representatives stooped to quite such dramatic comparisons as the reactionary Bruno Doehring, Wilhelm II’s former court preacher: according to him, the referendum was the modern equivalent of the popular masses calling on Pontius Pilate to crucify Jesus. Nevertheless, the official Protestant regional churches insisted that expropriation “contradict[ed] the clear and unambiguous principles of the Gospel.”

As in the case of the petition, the referendum vote was dogged by interference from local authorities and threats against agricultural workers. In order to win, referenda on legislation deemed to have a constitution-altering character required not only a majority of those voting, but also a turnout of 50 percent of eligible voters. This meant that abstentions had the same effect as no votes.

Opponents of expropriation took strategic advantage of this rule by calling for a boycott of the referendum. In the countryside and in small towns, where social control was particularly strong, participating in the vote effectively meant publicly declaring yourself a supporter of expropriation. Some municipalities even organized free beer festivals to dissuade voters from casting their ballots.

When the ballots were counted after June 20, 1926, it was clear the referendum had failed: 15.6 million citizens had taken part in the vote, of whom just under 14.5 million had voted yes — or, in the drastic words of the former Kaiser from his Dutch exile: “So there are 14 million bastards in Germany.” For the referendum to succeed, 19.9 million yes votes would have been required.

Between Cooperation and Rivalry

The division of the labor movement into Social Democratic and Communist camps was one of the central strains on the Weimar Republic. It not only obstructed a genuine, thorough, and consistent new beginning in its hour of birth, i.e. in the revolution of 1918–20, it must also be regarded as one of the causes of its downfall in 1933.

The SPD was considerably larger than the KPD. Of all parties, Social Democracy consistently received most of the votes until 1930 and worked closely with the trade unions. For these reasons, and because of its central role in the founding of the republic, the SPD was basically *the* party of the Weimar Republic — yet at the same time, it found itself on the opposition benches more often than in government.

This points to the classic dilemma of Social Democracy: on the one hand, it was still essentially a workers’ party in the 1920s — one whose supporters pushed for tangible improvements, especially in social policy. This “brand essence” was mainly upheld by its left wing. On the other hand, many functionaries felt a sense of political responsibility toward the Weimar state, and the right wing of the party stressed that no reforms could be implemented without cooperation with the bourgeois parties. As a result, the SPD constantly vacillated between participation in government and a left-wing oppositional stance. During the referendum campaign, the party found itself in the same dilemma —

after all, joining the Weimar government remained a real possibility.

The KPD, meanwhile, was faced with its own quagmire. It represented the radical wing of the workers' movement that had emerged as a split from the Social Democrats in the period of war and revolution. The party's sharp differences with the SPD over its political truce with the ruling class during World War I and then the battles of 1918 to 1923 — [some of which were fought out with arms](#) — had left many KPD members with intense bitterness. Moreover, after the end of the tumultuous early period, the prospects for a revolutionary party were anything but favorable. Was the KPD to hibernate as an ultra-left cadre party until the expected next revolutionary wave arrived, or else raise its profile in the here and now, winning partial gains in alliances with other left-wing forces?

What both workers' parties had in common, then, was the problem of reconciling political principles with the demands of day-to-day politics — this was a major factor determining their actions with respect to the referendum issue. If nothing else, their agreement on a joint bill for the referendum campaign showed that constructive cooperation was entirely possible. Two years later, after their success in the 1928 parliamentary elections, the Social Democrats entered a grand coalition and also provided the German chancellor. The KPD, in turn, abandoned its calls for a united front and pursued an [ultra-left line of increasing self-isolation](#).

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Was there, in principle, any possibility of a left-wing coalition? While it is true that the relevant parties never had a parliamentary majority, such a purely mathematical assessment does not take possible political dynamics into account. The high level of support for the referendum, which went far beyond the Left's immediate constituency, shows that the Left was perfectly able to tap into middle-class voter groups when it had an attractive program — it had even received votes from right-wing voters.

Potential leverage points in 1925–26 included mounting unemployment, ongoing coup plots from Right, and the treatment of middle-class victims of inflation, whose compensation was far worse than that provided to the high nobility. The issue of compensation for the princes had also highlighted the need for a comprehensive democratization of the administration and the judiciary. These points were all potentially relatable to considerable sections of the middle classes.

Yet there were also major obstacles to such a radically democratic, left-wing reform program. President Hindenburg had made it clear that he was not prepared to act as a neutral entity standing above the parties. On the contrary, he repeatedly intervened in the disputes and backed the princes. What's more, agreement on the question of expropriation did not automatically imply any permanent commitment of these voters to the left. The middle classes especially later defected to the Right — especially the Nazis. After all, the right-wing opposition had also proven itself capable of launching its own effective campaigns.

Either way, one essential precondition for any viable left alliance would have been cooperation based on mutual trust — something neither the SPD nor the KPD were prepared to invest. While there was potential for a consistently left-wing reform policy, entrenched divisions between Social Democrats and Communists prevented it from ever being realized. In this sense, it is fair to speak of a missed opportunity — not only for the political left, but for the Weimar Republic as a whole.

A Hundred-Year Dispute

The matter was not closed when the referendum on the expropriation of the princes failed. Since both parliamentary initiatives had been unsuccessful, the problem now ended up before the courts again. Negotiations with the former dynasties were once again opened. In the end, the settlement reached between the state and the Hohenzollerns looked much more reasonable than the earlier draft

compromises. Evidently, the referendum had indirectly strengthened the state's negotiating position.

But disputes have continued even into more recent times. After 1945, big landowners in the territories of what soon became the [German Democratic Republic](#) (GDR) were expropriated as part of a land reform. This also applied to the former dynasties, notably the house of Hohenzollern, and after Germany reunification in 1989–90 it began demanding compensation.

However, the 1994 Compensation Act provided that anyone who had “substantially aided and abetted the National Socialist or Communist systems” was not entitled to compensation. Hence when the long confidential negotiations between the Hohenzollerns, on the one hand, and the federal states of Brandenburg and Berlin and the German government, on the other, finally became public knowledge in 2019, major controversy ensued.

The main point of contention, as stipulated by the Compensation Act, is whether the Hohenzollerns — in particular the former Crown Prince Wilhelm — actively supported Nazism. He had frequently communicated directly with leading Nazis in the final stages of the Weimar Republic, and in the 1932 election he publicly campaigned for Hitler as presidential candidate. That same year, he advocated the lifting of the ban on the Nazis' stormtrooper divisions, the SA.

On March 21, 1933, he made a very effective public appearance alongside Hitler and Hindenburg as part of the transfer of power, just before the infamous “Enabling Act.” His clearly anti-republican stance is also well-documented. He sought the restoration of the monarchy and wanted an authoritarian transformation of the state based on the Italian Fascist model.

Even so, historians have taken divergent views on these facts. Scholars with more conservative leanings have expressed doubts about the Crown Prince's actual political significance as well as his intentions to help bring Hitler to power. Left-leaning researchers, by contrast, tend to highlight his enormous symbolic weight and Nazi-friendly public appearances.

Overall, it is safe to say that the Crown Prince had not intended to bring about the Third Reich. He was but one of many actors contributing to the process of power transfer. However, his personal contacts and above all his symbolic role as former successor to the throne lent him considerable political significance. He repeatedly used this influence to the Nazis' advantage, which is why he can indeed be considered partly responsible for the disastrous developments that followed.

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In an interview, the historian Stephan Malinowski referred to the present claims of the Hohenzollerns as “jaw-dropping exorbitance.” He and numerous other researchers and journalists were put under legal pressure by the Hohenzollern family not to repeat their assessments in public. The historian Martin Sabrow described this procedure as an attack on “the freedom of science,” while in the news magazine *Der Spiegel*, Klaus Wiegrefe accurately characterized the debate as presently the “most important historical-political conflict in the country.”

Today's specific issue is not the same as that in the Weimar Republic. Yet some of the arguments remain strikingly similar: whereas one side argues that dynastic claims are incompatible with a republican political order, the other side invokes the imperative to protect private property.

As current polls show, the general population overwhelmingly rejects the Hohenzollerns' claims. In the run-up to the 2019 Brandenburg state elections, left-wing party Die Linke launched a people's initiative against compensation. Sections of the Green Party joined this call. While pending court cases are currently suspended, negotiations for an amicable solution continue. The outcome remains uncertain.

So, even after over a century of republican constitutional governance, the issue of princely estates has not been resolved. In that sense, the long shadow of the monarchy is still looming over Germany.