

History 342: Germany since 1871 (McCole)

Reading questions for documents on German Social Democracy

The three documents on the Social Democrats that we're reading will give you a solid overview of the debates going on among contemporary German socialists as their movement grew rapidly during the Wilhelmine period. The "Erfurt Program" of 1891 sets the stage, by spelling out the party's official position after the lapse of the Anti-Socialist Laws. Against that background, Eduard Bernstein's and Rosa Luxemburg's pieces propose very different responses to the changes taking place after 1890. Read these three documents and summarize the main points of the debate between "revisionists" and "radicals" within the Social Democratic Party.

"The Erfurt Program" (1891)

1. What are the driving forces of history? In what direction is capitalist society headed? What will happen to the various social classes as history moves forward? How are classes defined, anyway?
2. What's the solution to the problems created by capitalism? What's the revolutionary aspect of this solution?
3. Who should be included in the struggle for change, and why?
4. What's the role of "political struggle" in the socialist movement? What were its most prominent demands? (Make a list.) How radical do these sound?
5. How would you describe the balance struck this program strikes between revolution and reform as strategies for the SPD?

Bernstein, "The Immediate Tasks of Social Democracy" (1899)

1. What is the role of "democratic institutions or traditions" in the development of the workers' movement, according to Bernstein?
2. As Bernstein sees it, what are some of the changes that have been taking place since Marx's time? In particular, what will happen to the "national" character of the German workers' movement in the future?
3. What are some of the things a pragmatic and realistic Social Democracy will do that were not envisioned in the Erfurt program? Why does he characterize it as a "democratic-socialist reform party?"

Luxemburg, “Social Reform or Revolution?” (1899)

1. Does Luxemburg agree with Bernstein that the Social Democrats face a choice between reform and revolution? Why or why not?
2. Why does the “final socialist goal” remain so important to her?
3. How does Luxemburg diagnose the emergence of the reformist position? Who or what are the “petty bourgeois elements” she mentions? Why does this explanation imply that the revisionists must be wrong?