

# Reichstag Speech by Wilhelm Liebknecht (January 15, 1886)

## Abstract

Wilhelm Liebknecht (1826–1900) was a leading socialist politician and a principle founder of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). As a member of the Reichstag, he spoke out against the deportation of Poles from the Prussian borderlands. He feared a possible counter-reaction against Germans abroad, among other consequences.

## Source

[...]

Deputy Liebknecht: Gentlemen, the very fact that we are delivering monologues here is extremely revealing. It shows us what emotions prevail in the hearts of the gentlemen who now lead Germany's government, and what respect the German representatives grant to these emotions.

I do not believe that complications with respect to international law are imminent as a result of these expulsions—at least not immediately; nevertheless, reprisals have already begun, and more substantial reprisals are yet to come. I had the opportunity to receive detailed information from Russia about the situation of the Germans there. As matters stand, a German there can no longer get any kind of job, and most Germans who were employed when the expulsions began have either lost their jobs already or will lose them in the near future. As a result of this measure, which may or may not have been occasioned by the Russian government for law-enforcement reasons, such bitterness against the Germans has been engendered in the public that very soon Germans will no longer be able to live in Russia anymore.

You have already learned how things are in Austria from the hearings of the Imperial Council [*Reichsrat*] several months ago. The Austrian government has behaved with apparent tolerance toward the Prussian government; but the *Slavic flood* that threatens the German element in Austria has substantially increased as a result of these expulsions, and especially in the land of the Czechs, in Bohemia, hatred against Germans has been mightily inflamed, and this measure has amounted to tossing another log on the fire, to feed the flames and make them grow. And if we look farther abroad, where your attention is also directed—Mr. Speaker is completely right about this—you encounter the terrible effects of these measures. If you read the English, if you read the French or the American press—not the organs hostile to Germany; indeed, those that were most friendly to our nation—if you consider in the English press papers such as *The Herald* or *The Saturday Review*, papers that took every opportunity to support Germany, the condemnation of this measure is universal and is expressed in the strongest conceivable language.

In these critiques it is not always possible to draw a clear dividing line between Germany's rulers and the German people. The judgment is, in any case, partially directed at our people. The German people is also being made responsible. In England it is said, if there were a healthy public opinion in Germany then how could such horrors take place? Germany has an imperial parliament [*Reichstag*]; the parliament represents the people and is not powerless—why does the Reichstag not protest? Why does the German people stand by and do nothing? In short, in foreign countries the German people are believed to share the blame, and hatred against Germans has been aroused throughout the world. Reprisals have begun in Russia—first merely private reprisals, although these are

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bad enough and harm our interests severely; in Austria we have German-hounding and Germans are expelled; in France they have gone so far—of course not on the democratic side, but on the chauvinistic side—as to propose a law that would tax foreigners. And understandably, the idea for this has been prompted by these mass deportations from Germany. Further measures against foreigners in France have been promised by Mr. Dörroulsde and his associates—that is, by the chauvinists, who take particular pleasure in these deeds of the Prussian government because they add grist to their mill.

I thought the Prussian government would consider that Germany—to return to the subject of reprisals, which have already begun—is in the most unfavorable situation. The German people are the ones who go abroad the most. If you compare the number of Germans abroad with the number of foreigners in Germany, you will find that Germans abroad are ten times more numerous. When universal reprisals are enacted—and this is inevitable in the long term—we will have ten times more people suffering under them than foreign countries will. And have the most extreme consequences been taken into account? Do we want all Germans abroad to be chased back to Germany? Do we want the national purification process to be enacted so consistently that all foreigners are sent out of Germany and all Germans abroad are sent back to Germany? Is this the Prussian government's ultimate goal? This might be a goal; but, to all you gentlemen who are pursuing such a policy, I would like to remind you of a famous statement of Heinrich Heine's on emigration. With respect to the fact that emigration from Germany is substantial while the French remain in their country, Heine remarked: "The difference between the German and the Frenchman is that when the situation at home becomes intolerable to the German, he does not direct his hatred against the government but instead makes his retreat and goes abroad; whereas when the situation at home becomes intolerable to the Frenchman, he directs his hatred against the government, starts a revolution and thereby seeks to create more comfortable conditions." Indeed, gentlemen, if you prevent Germans from going abroad—and through such facts this is what is being brought about, and you intend this to happen straightaway—if you close the doors through which emigration occurs, or at least make the doors very small, then you also must be prepared for the consequences that present themselves in Heine's observation. We will make absolutely no complaint if through your policies you bring about such consequences; but we must protest against the measure of the expulsion of Poles in the *name of humanity and in the interest of the honor of our fatherland*. The consequences of this measure show themselves in two respects: *materially*, in the reprisals that have already begun, and *morally*, *through the damage to our good reputation in the civilized world*. The honor of Germany is at stake here, and it falls to the Reichstag to defend it. We have presented a resolution to parliament that expresses disapproval for the measure and that simultaneously repels the familiar attempt to block discussion of the interpellation as not within the Reichstag's jurisdiction.

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Source: *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Reichstags*. Berlin: Norddeutsche Buchdruckerei, November 1885–January 1886, pp. 539–40. Available online at: [http://www.reichstagsprotokolle.de/Blatt3\\_k6\\_bsboooi8456\\_00569.html](http://www.reichstagsprotokolle.de/Blatt3_k6_bsboooi8456_00569.html)

Translation: Elizabeth Tucker

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