Unit 6

Mehr wissen: über die Paulskirche

The first democratic German parliament and the problems it faced

On 18 May 1848 the German National Assembly, the first democratically-elected parliament in German history, met for the first time in St Paul’s Church in Frankfurt. A few weeks before, a wave of largely bloodless revolutions had swept through the individual German states. Frightened rulers had overnight conceded things they had resisted for decades: representative government, freedom of the press, and freedom of association. Now the aim was to draw up a similarly democratic constitution for a united Germany. The Assembly delivered, and cannot be blamed for the failure to establish a state along those lines. The constitution it agreed was accepted by the majority of the 36 German states, but rejected by Prussia and some others, including important states such as Bavaria and Saxony. Austria had already withdrawn its deputies, and Prussia then did the same. The much diminished Assembly moved to Stuttgart and was closed down by soldiers on 18 June 1849. The Assembly’s task had been complicated by two issues which were to define the course of German history during the nineteenth century and beyond.

1 Where was Germany and who were the Germans?

There was as yet no German nation state. Indeed, there was no agreement on where the boundaries of one should be. The existing constitutional framework was a loose federation called the **Deutscher Bund**. The two largest states represented in the Assembly had many non-German subjects: Poles, Dutch and Danes in Prussia; and more Poles, as well as Czechs, Hungarians, Italians, Slovenes, Croats, and Romanians in the multi-ethnic Austrian Empire, where German-speakers were in the minority. The very existence of the Austrian Empire was threatened by the revolutions and associated reforms; in fact, the Austrian Emperor and court had fled to Innsbruck on 17 May, the day before the Assembly opened, leaving Vienna in the hands of a Committee of Public Safety. Already, the democratic movement in Bohemia had split into Czech and German factions (the population of the capital, Prague, was predominantly German-speaking), and the Czech leaders had called upon deputies from Bohemia and neighbouring Moravia to boycott the National Assembly in favour of a Congress in Prague in June. (Most of them followed the appeal, but the Congress was overtaken by an armed uprising, which was put down with great ferocity.)

A Frankfurt church’s role in the history of German democracy.

The Italian territories of the Empire were also in revolt, and the Hungarian nationalists had exploited the crisis to obtain a separate government in Budapest, immediately embarking on a programme of Magyarisation, to the outrage of the other peoples of Hungary, especially the Croats. Members of the Frankfurt Assembly were divided between those favouring the inclusion of Austria (**Großdeutschland**), often because they wanted to dilute the influence of Prussia, and those favouring a Germany without Austria (**Kleindeutschland**). The majority voted in the end for **Kleindeutschland**, the only realistic option; it had become clear that Austria’s presence was an anomaly. This matter was eventually brutally resolved by Bismarck in 1866, when he provoked a war with Austria and, as the penalty for its defeat, effectively expelled it from Germany, leaving the way open to a Prussian-dominated unified Germany. In fact, at this point Prussia also annexed the territory of the Kingdom of Hanover, Austria’s main ally in Northern Germany, and thus became even larger and more disproportionately dominant.

2 Who was to rule and in whose name?

While some wanted a republic, a majority in the Assembly favoured a hereditary constitutional monarchy, and voted for the King of Prussia in that role. However, when a parliamentary delegation went to see him and offered him the title of ‘Emperor of the Germans’, Frederick William IV declined. Despite having apparently embraced the liberal programme in the face of demonstrations on the streets of Berlin in March, he was not prepared to recognise the Assembly’s right to make such an appointment, just as he was not prepared to dissolve Prussia into a truly federal Germany In 1871 Bismarck was to resolve both these objections. After the stunning defeat of France, he had the new united Germany proclaimed in the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles, not by representatives of the people but by the rulers of its states. The King of Prussia was declared Emperor, and Bismarck himself became both Chancellor of Germany and Prime Minister of Prussia.

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