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Friedrich Ebert 1871–1925

A Social Democratic Statesman

Translated by Christine Brocks



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Friedrich Ebert (1871–1925)

Prologue: A Social Democrat becomes Head of State

The date is 11 February, 1919. The place of events: Weimar, in Thuringia. The agenda of the National Assembly (*Nationalversammlung*), the first parliament of the republic, includes the presidential election. It is widely believed that Friedrich Ebert, chairman of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), will win the race and become the new head of state, the first president of the German Reich. After a mere thirty minutes the ballot count confirms what was expected by most. Ebert, who in this key moment of his campaign cuts the figure of an earnest and serious individual, becomes president with 277 out of 379 votes.

Thus, in the figure of Friedrich Ebert, a Social Democrat once vilified in the German Empire (*Kaiserreich*) as “enemy of the Empire” became Germany’s first democratically elected head of state. This spelled out the new constitutional political order of the era: The successor to the Emperor was to be a representative of the socialist labour movement.

This was the pinnacle of the political career for the saddler journeyman from Heidelberg. The Social Democrat explained in his acceptance speech to the delegates what he understood his charge to be: “I intend to and will act as the representative of the whole German nation, and not as the leader of a single party.” This commitment to non-partisanship became the leitmotif of the political career of the first *Reichspräsident*.

Still, Ebert remained strongly committed to his roots and the interests of the labour movement, declaring: “I nonetheless avow to being a son of the working class, brought up in

the socialist tradition of thought, and shall never deny either my origins or my beliefs.” Ebert stood until his death on 28 February 1925, at the age of 54, not only between the poles of state interests and party principles, but also at the head of a widely unpopular republic, one not only disliked by many, but also under constant foreign pressure.

I The Path of a Labour Leader (1871–1905)

1 Childhood, Youth, and Apprenticeship Years

His birthplace was a dwelling of about 50 square meters in the historical city centre of Heidelberg, where he was born into a family of tailors on 4 February 1871. Ebert was the seventh of nine children and spent his rather typical youth in a small craftsman's household. Just a few weeks before that the German Empire (*Kaiserreich*) had been summoned into existence in the French city of Versailles with the proclamation of King Wilhelm I of Prussia as Emperor of the German Empire. No one could have expected that a man with Friedrich Ebert's family background would become Germany's first democratic head of state a mere 48 years after Wilhelm I had been crowned German Emperor. When the *Kaiserreich* was proclaimed on 18 January 1871, the famous Social Democratic leader August Bebel was remanded into custody. Ebert would become the successor of that charismatic head of the Social Democratic Party in 1913.

Friedrich Ebert began his political career during his travels as a journeyman saddler. Not much is known about this period of his life since, as in the case of several other labour leaders with a family background similar to Ebert's, there are very few, if any, sources available from those days. Nothing is known about Ebert's education or about how his childhood and youth influenced his later life. In his family, there were nine children, three of which died in infancy or early-childhood. He and his family lived in a small, three-room flat in the narrow streets of Heidelberg's old town. This was the secure, although cramped, environment in which Ebert grew up. Even though his surroundings were proletarian, his family's home was almost petty bourgeois in character due

to Ebert's father being one of the higher earners in his profession. In his youth, Ebert probably did not experience either dire need or poverty. However, it is very likely that living in a proletarian neighbourhood made him aware of social grievances.

From Easter 1877 until March 1885, Ebert attended primary school with average results. Upon leaving school, he began an apprenticeship as saddler. By the end of 1888, he started his journeyman years as planned, something common for craftsmen at that time. Although Ebert left home for good at the age of seventeen, he remained very much attached to Heidelberg for the rest of his life.

Ebert's political career and social development were closely linked to the rise of the Social Democratic Party in the Wilhelmine Kaiserreich. The young and still small workers' party wanted to achieve freedom, equality, and social justice. Ebert had already come into contact with Social Democratic ideas in his early childhood. However, it was his godfather Wilhelm Strötz, a well-known Social Democrat from Mannheim, who had a crucial impact on him and influenced his turn to the Social Democratic labour movement.

Consequently, the young saddler began his journey of two and a half years in near-by Mannheim, a stronghold of the socialist movement. After several stops in Southern Germany, he travelled north and stayed in Hanover for nearly a year, the longest time he spent in a city during his travels. His journeyman years coincided with the final stage of the Anti-Socialist Laws (1878–1890). At that time, Friedrich Ebert became a member of the saddlers' trade union and the Social Democratic Party. Wherever he stopped during his journey, he took part in building up union organisations and campaigned for the socialist cause. In this role, he felt the full impact of Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's policies aimed at taming the emerging labour movement – an attempt which ultimately failed. He witnessed first-hand how the German



Only four photographs remain of Friedrich Ebert from the time before his marriage at age 23: Here the young saddler at about 20 years of age.

society excluded Social Democrats as “men without a fatherland” (*vaterlandslose Gesellen*). He also experienced the power of solidarity within the labour movement during his

time in Kassel, when he and his colleagues went on strike and ultimately achieved their political demands against their employer. After short stops in Brunswick, Wesel, Barmen, and Quakenbrück, Ebert travelled to Bremen, where he arrived in May 1891. This northern German city was one of the recent strongholds of the labour movement. Here, Ebert stayed for over fourteen years – fourteen years that were to shape him for the rest of his life.

2 From Party Activist to Party Functionary

The time in the Hanseatic city of Bremen was crucial for setting the course of Ebert's political and personal life. When he arrived in Bremen in 1891, he was a bachelor journeyman saddler and an ordinary, if diligent, party-soldier of the socialist labour movement with limited organisational skills. He was also a young agitator who had passed his baptism by fire as a public speaker, who had already gained experience in industrial strikes, and who had witnessed first-hand the solidarity of the socialist movement.

During his time in Bremen, Ebert acquired the political skills necessary for a party activist. By the time he left the Hanseatic city in 1905, he was well-known, even beyond regional borders, as a leading figure in the Social Democratic movement. Ebert then headed to Berlin, where he became a member of the executive committee of the SPD, henceforth playing a significant role in shaping the fate of the largest German political party. Initially, he had worked voluntarily and with great effort for the socialist movement. From 1900, however, he served the party as a professional politician and made a living off of politics, even though he additionally carried on with his work as a volunteer.

Ebert's time in Bremen also brought changes in his private life: In May 1894 he married the twenty-year old factory



Friedrich Ebert (right) with two friends in a studio 1894.

worker Louise Rump. She had been brought up in impoverished circumstances and was involved in the union movement. She was temporarily deputy chairwoman of a small union of woodworkers with only a few hundred members. Little is known about the marriage. Ebert's wife provided him with support; she always remained in the background and grew into the roles she was assigned due to her husband's political career, later gaining respect as the Reich president's