

Kulturkampf

The Culture War against the Catholic Church in Germany

Kulturkampf (German for “culture struggle”) was the name given to a period in German history (1871 to approximately 1887) where the German chancellor Otto von Bismarck sought to subject the Roman Catholic Church in Germany to state controls and governance. Priests and bishops who resisted this attack on religious freedom were arrested or removed from their positions. Persecution was most intense in Prussia, which covered two thirds of the land area of Germany, had two thirds of the population, and practically all the industry. By the height of this persecution, all of the Prussian bishops were removed from their sees,¹ either by imprisonment or exile, a quarter of the parishes had no priest, half the monks and nuns had left Prussia, a third of the monasteries and convents were closed, 1800 parish priests were imprisoned or exiled, and thousands of laypeople were imprisoned for helping the priests.² During this period many Catholic Germans and some religious congregations came to America to escape religious persecution. One such example for our local area of Covington, KY, is the teaching congregation of the Sisters of Notre Dame, who came to America after they were expelled from Prussia.

When Otto von Bismarck came to power, Germany was just a collection of states; when he left office, Germany was a united nation. He was the German statesman responsible for the unification of numerous German states into a powerful German empire under Prussian leadership. Bismarck, a popular national hero, was appointed 1st Chancellor, when Wilhelm I was crowned emperor in 1871 of the newly united Germany (the “2nd Reich”). Bismarck was a staunch Protestant and never fully trusted the loyalty of the Roman Catholics within his newly created German Empire. He saw Catholic influence as a threat to German unity. The First Vatican Council’s proclamation of 1870 concerning papal infallibility only increased his distrust.



Otto von Bismarck

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Anti-Catholicism was a powerful intellectual force of the time that was led by the liberal intellectuals who eventually became a vital part of Bismarck’s coalition. These liberals sought to remove Christian faith from the public square in general and from education in particular. Conservatives in Prussia sought to preserve the Protestant character of the state of Prussia against Catholic influence. Since the early decades of the nineteenth

century Catholic found themselves politically powerless and left in the background economically and socially. “Their Catholic consciousness was therefore much weakened; no longer proud of their religion, they ceased to profess it openly and freely.” As early as 1860, German liberals had some limited success in establishing government control over Catholic institutions and property, and in removing Catholic influence from education, where they sought to “introduce the spirit of ‘free science’ even into the education of the clergy.”

“But about the middle of the nineteenth century a change came over the Catholics of Germany, and they awoke to a fresh sense of the power and beauty of their religion.” The pontificate of Pope Pius IX rejuvenated Catholics throughout the world. In 1864, Pope Pius IX condemned the errors of Liberalism in his Syllabus of Errors. In 1870 the Catholic Centre party (Zentrum) was founded in Germany to defend the interests of Catholics against the predominance of Protestant Prussia and the attacks of the liberals within the new Reich. Bismarck was alarmed at the formation of a party that opposed his policies and seemed to give its allegiance to Rome, and not to the Reich.

The main conflict began in July 1871, when Bismarck, supported by the liberals, abolished the Roman Catholic bureau in the Prussian Ministry of Culture (*i.e.*, ministry of education and ecclesiastical affairs) and in November forbade priests from voicing political opinions from the pulpit. In March 1872 all religious schools in Prussia became subject to state inspection and were placed under government control. In June all religious teachers were excluded from state schools, and the Jesuit religious order (along with other religious teaching congregations) was banned from Germany. The Jesuits remained banned from Germany until 1917. In December of 1872 diplomatic relations with the Vatican were severed.

In 1872 Adalbert Falk was made Prussian minister of culture and education. “Falk aimed to make the Catholic bishops independent of Rome, the clergy independent of the bishops, and both dependent on the State.” In effect, he tried to create a Catholic Church in Germany that would be under the control of the

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state and not of the Vatican. In May 1873, he secured the passing of the “May Laws.” Under the May Laws:

- The state was given control over education, including religious schools and religious education.
- The State was given control over clergy formation, laying down required subjects and criteria for ordination and instituting a state qualifying examination.
- Appointments of Bishops were made subject to civil authorities.
- Disciplinary authority over the Church was given to state agencies.

Fines were imposed and forcibly collected and the jails began to fill with Catholic priests and bishops. “Shortly after the promulgation of the new May Laws the Ministry saw to it that all the Prussian sees were vacated.”

Upon the issuing of the May Laws, the bishops of Prussia “issued a common pastoral letter in which they made known to the faithful the reasons why all must offer to these laws a passive but unanimous resistance. On 26 May they declared to the Prussian Ministry that they would not co-operate for the execution of the Falk Laws.” Fines were imposed and forcibly collected and the jails began to fill with Catholic priests and bishops. “Shortly after the promulgation of the new May Laws the Ministry saw to it that all the Prussian sees were vacated.”

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The giving over of the responsibility for the training and appointment of clergy to the state resulted in the closing of nearly half of the seminaries in Prussia by 1878. This translated into fewer seminarians and more parishes without priests, so that in many places half the parishes stood vacant, leaving Catholics without regular spiritual care.

Priests who sought to circumvent the May Laws were subject to fines, arrest and imprisonment, and 210 people were convicted of such crimes in the first four months of 1875.

The climax of the struggle came in 1875 with the passing of the following laws:

- All monasteries in Prussia were closed;
- All members of religious orders, except those who cared for the sick, were expelled from Prussian territory;
- All property of the Church was confiscated and turned over to lay trustees;
- Priests who criticized the state or its policies from the pulpit faced criminal charges (this “Pulpit Law” remained on the books until 1953);
- The right to confer marriage was taken away from the clergy and given to the state. Dioceses that failed to comply with state regulations were cut off from state aid, and noncompliant clergy were exiled.

Nearly all German bishops, clergy, and laymen rejected the legality of the new laws, and were defiant in the face of heavier and heavier penalties and imprisonments imposed by Bismarck's government. By 1876, all the Prussian bishops were imprisoned or in exile, and a third of the Catholic parishes were without a priest. In the face of systematic defiance, the Bismarck government increased the penalties and its attacks, and was challenged in 1875 when a papal encyclical declared the whole ecclesiastical

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legislation of Prussia was invalid, and threatened to excommunicate any Catholic who obeyed. There was no violence, but the Catholics mobilized their support, set up numerous civic organizations, raised money to pay fines, and rallied behind their church and the Centre Party. The government set up a rival Old Catholic Church, but it attracted only a few thousand members. Bismarck realized his Kulturkampf was a failure when secular and socialist elements began using the opportunity to attack all religion. In the long run, the most significant result was the mobilization of the Catholic voters, and their insistence on protecting their church. In the elections of 1874, the Centre party doubled its popular vote, became the second-largest party in the national parliament, and remained a powerful force for the next 60 years. It became difficult for Bismarck to form a government without their support. By 1887, when Pope Leo XIII declared the conflict over, most of the anti-Catholic legislation had been repealed or reduced in severity. The struggle had the consequence of assuring state control over education and public marriage records, but it also alienated a generation of Roman Catholics from German national life.

Kulturkampf shows us an example of what the persecution of the Church looks like. This scenario has been repeated over and over in different countries throughout history. By studying history we can be better prepared for persecution of the Church when it happens in our own country. You can read more at: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08703b.htm>.

¹ Catholic Encyclopedia, as found online at: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08703b.htm>. All quotes in this article are from this source unless otherwise noted.

² Helmstadter, Richard J., [Freedom and religion in the nineteenth century](#), p. 19, Stanford Univ. Press 1997