

A narrative against war and nationalism? German social democracy and the 1913 commemorations of the Battle of the Nations

Christian Koller

The 100th anniversary of the 'Battle of the Nations' at Leipzig was celebrated in Germany with great pomp. The nationalistic euphoria reached its peak on 18 October with the inauguration of the Monument to the Battle of the Nations. Left-wing liberals and social democrats criticised the festivities, which were also used as an opportunity to promote a costly armament proposal. On 19 October, the SPD held 34 events under the motto 'Battle of the Nations and Deceit of the Nations' in the Berlin area alone. The paper examines the extent to which these reactions represented a counter-narrative to the dominant nationalist and militarist discourses. How did social democrats interpret the anti-Napoleonic wars and the 'liberation' achieved in them? What stance did they take towards the German nation in particular and nationalism in general? And was the criticism of the festivities commemorating the Battle of the Nations motivated by a fundamentalist pacifist rejection of all war, or simply by opposition to the militarism of the time, rapid armament and chauvinist war rhetoric? Overall, the paper aims to investigate whether the social democratic responses to the commemorations of the Battle of the Nations reflected the spirit of the 1912 Basel Congress, or whether they also pointed forward to the approval of war loans by the SPD members of the Reichstag in August 1914.