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History 133a - Source Exploration Summary

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Rock the Cradle: Speakers and Cultural Importance of the Hambach Festival

Johann August Wirth’s German Wikipedia page indicates that he was a failed lawyer-turned-independent journalist, always politically charged and perpetually bogged down by oppressive censorship laws. Born in 1798, he became a strong advocate for a German free press in the early 19th century, arguing that “The Free Press is the bulwark of the people against the tyranny of the rulers."

German expatriate memoirs provide important information about the nature of the festival. Gustave Koerner, a participant who later gained prominence in the United States as a founding member of the Grand Old Party, describes the Hambach festival in his memoir, published posthumously in 1909. Koerner lauds Wirth as a “real journalist...a man of genius, an idealist; his language, written or spoken, was most impressive and fiery, but always chaste and noble.”[[1]](#footnote-0) Wirth was one of a list of speakers that included fellow Hambach organizer Philipp Jakob Siebenpfeiffer, along with individuals credited as Scharpff and Henry Breuggemann. The last of these Koerner calls “the most eloquent...the representative of the German youth, which, in spite of criminal persecutions, he asserted had kept the idea of the liberty and unity of the Vaterland alive.”[[2]](#footnote-1) A search of Google Books for “Breuggemann” and “Hambach” reveals the following:

“Karl Heinrich Breuggemann, who had studied law at Bonn and Heidelberg, was actually sentenced to death for his leadership of the Hambach Festival; but cooler heads prevailed, and his sentence was first commuted to life in prison before he was released after eight years.”[[3]](#footnote-2)

A great deal was written about the Hambach Festival in its immediate wake. Early interest appears to have peaked in about 1836. By 1870, the event was already included in some German history texts, such as Volume 3 of Wolfgang Menzel’s *The History of Germany: From the Earliest Period to the Present Time.[[4]](#footnote-3)* Hambach participantes like Gustave Louis Maurice Strauss were including the festival in their memoirs as early as 1883.[[5]](#footnote-4) Clearly, both participants and observers recognized the festival’s significance for German history very early on. All of these texts indicate Wirth’s centrality to the festival.

Searching “Hambach” on Google Ngrams yields some of these publications in both languages. One English text from 1841, *The New Tablet of Memory; or, Chronicle of Remarkable Events*, describes the festival, and importantly, its close historical aftermath: “There was considerable political agitation in a public meeting convoked at Hambach, Rhenish Bavaria, in consequence of the suppression of some journals by the government, at which 20,000 persons were present.” As the book’s description shifts to the years following the Hambach festival, the festival’s importance as a catalyzing event in German history becomes clear:

“In May 18, 1833, at the anniversary of the festival, which had been celebrated at Hambach in the preceding year, considerable disturbances took place. To disperse the mob, whose appearance threatened more serious consequences, the troops were compelled to use their arms, when one of the rioters was killed and several wounded.”[[6]](#footnote-5)

This information contributes to a better understanding of how the public interpreted Wirth’s and others’ speeches. The festival clearly had immediate consequences for the people’s political self-awareness. This text also includes some brief information about the consequences for those who helped organize the important 1832 festival:

“Dr. Liebenpfeiffer [sic], one of the distinguished Republican orators of the Hambach Festival in 1832, along with some of his comrades, were brought to trial at Landau...he was sentenced to two years’ imprisonment, and to pay the expenses of the trial, but he escaped to France.”

We see the establishment’s response to the Hambach festival reflected in Siebenpfeiffer’s fate.

In German texts, there is a less severe resurgence in the popularity of the “Hambach Festival” term in the 1870s, with an additional visible spike during the WWI years. We can see another increase in frequency plateau from 1929 - 1935 (approximately 100 years after the gathering took place), and around the collapse of the Berlin Wall. The Hambach Festival celebrated its 150th Anniversary in 1982.

These spikes correspond with several important events from 20th century German history: Unification, WWI, the rise of the Nazi party (with its intensely nationalistic fervor), and the end of the Cold War. All of this goes to show the significance of the Hambach Festival as a source of nationalistic pride and identity. It corroborates the Festival’s identification as the “Cradle of German Democracy,” as Lutz Frisch and Dieter Schiffman wrote. Their text, *The Hambach Festival: Cradle of German Democracy*, synthesizes a lot of existing scholarship. Some of the texts they cite were published as far back as 1972, whereas others were published as recently as 2012. Frisch, Schiffman, and Swann’s wide-ranging perspective draws from studies of Bavarian history in specific, from cornelia Foerster’s 1980s publications, from histories of German protest movements and from biographies of the Hambach speakers. The authors’ emphasis on relatively contemporary histories speaks to something important about the Hambach festival: In German culture, from its initial delivery to the present, Wirth’s speech continues to clearly represent an important moment in German national history. It is perhaps comparable to some of the radical speeches delivered in the years leading up to the American Revolution; names like Patrick Henry and John Adams come to mind.

The Hambach Festival represented an opportunity for a small, activism-minded group of liberal bourgeois journalists to voice their grievances with the governments of the time period, using the power of widespread publishing to reach a large audience. This had the dual effect of popularizing their ideas and grabbing the establishment’s attention, for better or for worse. Johann August Wirth and Philipp Jakob Siebenpfeiffer played to notions of popular democracy that they inherited from the French occupiers, intending to fully modernize and unify a new German state. Its importance to the German national identity is visible in its resurgence throughout the 20th century.

1. Gustave Philipp Koerner, *Memoirs of Gustave Koerner* (Torch Press, 1909), 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Ibid., 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Olson, Richard G. *Science and Scientism in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008). 317. This appears to be a textbook, but as only a limited preview is available on Google Books, Olson’s sources are difficult to discern. He cites something by an author named Rohr, titled *Origins of Social Liberalism in Germany*. From here, it is simply a matter of deciding how deeply to follow the secondary source rabbit hole. Inevitably, further research into Breugemann’s and others’ lives will turn up texts written in German that I cannot read. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Wolfgang Menzel, *The History of Germany: From the Earliest Period to the Present Time, Volume 3* (H.G. Bohn, 1870). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Gustave Louis Maurice Strauss, *Reminiscences of an Old Bohemian.* (Tinsley Brothers, 1883), 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Esquire Thomas Bartlett, *The New Tablet of Memory; or, Chronicle of Remarkable Events with the Dates of Inventions and Discoveries in the Arts and Sciences; and Biographical Notices, Etc. [With Plates.]* (Thomas Kelly, 1841), 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)