FEMALE SUFFRAGE IN LUXEMBOURG

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Historical Context

Luxembourg was never at the forefront of women's emancipation, and yet complete female suffrage was granted at a relatively early stage, in 1919. To explain this paradox is the aim of this essay.

From 1815 to 1890, Luxembourg was ruled by William I, William II, and William III, kings of the United Netherlands (made up of current-day Netherlands, Belgium (until 1830), and Luxembourg). In the revolutionary context of 1848, an impromptu national assembly drew up a separate constitution for Luxembourg, which William II had no choice but to accept. This constitution considered all (male) Luxembourg citizens equal before the law, but rejected universal suffrage in favor of a voting system based on the poll tax. The progressive industrialization of the south of the country brought to the fore a new elite of steel magnates, seeking to defend their interests in parliament, and gave rise to increasing social demands by workers paternalistically protected under Paul Eyschen’s proto-liberal government (1888–1915). The emergent socialist movement demanded better working conditions and better political representation of workers’ interests. The main demands of the Social Democrat Party (SDP), founded in 1902, were the eight-hour work day and universal suffrage. Although constantly at loggerheads, the SDP and the loosely organized Liberal

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1 I would like to thank Renée Wagener and Germaine Goetzinger for helping me to bring the threads of this story together.


3 The SDP (forerunner of the current Luxembourg Socialist Workers’ Party) was the first political party to emerge in 1902. The party’s main constituency was the industrial south, where it sought to defend those who were excluded from the electoral system—miners, steel workers, and factory employees. Since 1905, the party has actively sought to win over the middle classes; Als N. and Philippart R.L., La Chambre des Députés. Histoire et lieux de travail (Luxembourg: 1994) 218.

League (LL)\(^5\)—founded in 1904 by députés who sought to defend their commercial, entrepreneurial, and industrial interests—joined forces in 1908 to oppose the ‘clerical’ right-wing party, the Rechtspartei (RP).\(^6\)

This ‘Left Block’ sought the secularization of the state, in particular the school system.\(^7\) This aroused frustration with the new Catholic monarch, Grand Duchess Marie-Adélaïde, who came to the throne in 1912. Discontent grew when the Grand Duchess refused to nominate a government she disagreed with in 1915, even though this government represented the majority of the parliament. Liberals and Social Democrats felt that an overhaul of the constitution was called for in order to redefine the monarch’s role, curtailing his or her power to obstruct the legislature. World War I and the German occupation of officially neutral Luxembourg, however, put these plans on hold. Meanwhile, inflation soared, food was scarce, and social discontent boiled over. The end of the war did not appease the situation. The Grand Duchess came under severe criticism for not having distanced herself sufficiently from the German occupying forces.

On June 13, 1918, parliament decided to call for a constituent assembly to revise the constitution in order to limit the powers of the crown and amend suffrage rights. The constituent assembly sat from August 17, 1918 to October 17, 1919, a period characterized by political instability and social unrest. On November 10 and 11, 1918, the Circle for Socialist Studies\(^8\) set up a Soviet of Workers and Peasants, following the Russian and German models. An important point of their political agenda, next to the proclamation of the republic, was the introduction of ‘the right to vote of all

\(^5\) The LL (forerunner of the modern day Democratic Party) was founded in 1904, on the initiative of Robert Brasseur, in order to safeguard prerogatives that the elites had obtained in the course of the previous century. Its voters were mainly of the upper and middle bourgeoisie and its alliance with the SDP was directed at their common enemy, the clerical right party; Als and Philippart, *La Chambre des Députés* 218–219.

\(^6\) The RP (forerunner of the current Christian Social People’s Party) was founded in 1914. Its constituencies were mainly the rural northern parts of the country. It vehemently opposed socialist and communist ideologies, and was a strong supporter of the monarchy. Under the influence of social Catholicism, its leaders, Pierre Dupong and Emile Reuter, favored social reforms and the development of a welfare system.


\(^8\) The short-lived Cercle des études socialiste was founded in 1918 by René Stoll. It organized a Workers and Peasants Council in Luxembourg (November 10, 1918) and Esch (November 11, 1918); Eiffes E., *Die revolutionäre Bewegung in Luxemburg 1918–1919* (Luxembourg: 1933) 15–23.