

Chapter 21 Primary Source Activity

When the 1848 rebellions in the German states failed to bring reform, many Germans emigrated to the United States (textbook page 535–536). One was Carl Schurz (1829–1906), who became a well-known journalist, reformer, and political leader in the United States. Schurz helped in the election of Abraham Lincoln as President and also fought in the Civil War. This excerpt from his autobiography tells about his experiences in the student movement in Bonn, Germany. ♦ *As you read, consider why the students were so willing to fight for reforms. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

A Movement for Democracy

The democrats in Bonn, among whom we students played a prominent part, were zealous in demonstrating their determination to support the Constituent Assembly. . . . We believed we could strike a demonstrative blow by stopping the levying of . . . duties [taxes] which were levied at the gates of the city on the food-stuffs brought to the town. We did this in driving the revenue officers from their posts, which pleased the peasants, who were at once ready to bring their products free of duty into the city. This led to conflicts with the police in which, however, we easily had the upper hand.

Now it appeared to us necessary to seize upon the general machinery of the tax department. The next day a committee, of which I was a member, appeared at the city hall to take possession of it. The Burgomaster [mayor]. . . listened quietly . . . but he tried to amuse us with all sorts of evasive talk. . . . Suddenly we noticed a change in the expression of the Burgomaster's face. He seemed to hearken to something going on outside and then, still politely but with a sort of triumphant smile on his lips, he said: "Gentlemen, your answer you will have to receive from somebody else. Do you hear that?" Now we hearkened too and heard a still distant, but



approaching, sound of a military band playing the Prussian national air. The music sounded nearer and nearer in the street leading up from the Rhine. In a few minutes it reached the market place and behind it came the heavy tramp of an infantry column which presently filled a large part of the square in front of the city hall. Our conversation with the

Burgomaster of course came to a sudden end. . . .

In the evening we had a meeting of our democratic committee to consider what was next to be done. The first impulse was to attack the soldiers and if possible to drive them out of the town. This would have been a desperate enterprise, but it was taken seriously in view. After mature consideration, however, we all recognized that a fight in Bonn, even a successful one, could have real importance only as a part of a more general uprising. Cologne was naturally regarded as the capital of the Rhineland and as the central focus for all political movements. . . . We had already received from Cologne a report that feverish excitement prevailed in that city, and that the signal for a general uprising was to be expected from the democratic leaders.

Source: *The Autobiography of Carl Schurz*, ed. Wayne Andrews (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961).

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Questions to Think About

1. What was the first move the students made to show their support for the elected Constituent Assembly? Whom did it benefit?
2. What happened when the democratic students tried to take over the city tax department?
3. **Predicting Consequences** What do you suppose would have happened if the students in Bonn had gone ahead with their uprising against the soldiers?
4. **Activity** Many American cities have large populations of people whose ancestors came from Europe during this period of revolution. Look into your own local history to see if this is true for your area. Then find out what other events in history brought large numbers of people to your city. You can contact your local library and historical society for help.