

A black and white portrait of August Bebel, an elderly man with a full white beard and mustache, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. His right hand is partially visible, resting near his chest, with a ring on his ring finger.

I.B. TAURIS

Social  
Democracy  
and the  
Founding  
of the  
Labour  
Movement

# AUGUST BEBEL

Jürgen  
Schmidt



JÜRGEN SCHMIDT is a Research Associate in History at the International Research Center 'Work and Human Lifecycle in Global History' (re:work) at the Humboldt University, Berlin and at The Institute for the History and Future of Work. He was previously a Research Fellow at the Social Science Research Centre (WZB), Berlin and holds a PhD from the Free University, Berlin. He is the author of *Brüder, Bürger und Genossen. Die deutsche Arbeiterbewegung zwischen Klassenbewegung und Bürgergesellschaft 1830–1870*; *Arbeiter in der Moderne. Arbeitsbedingungen, Lebenswelten, Organisationen und Zivilgesellschaft. Bürgerschaftliches Engagement von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*.

Jürgen Schmidt's outstanding biography of *August Bebel* brings to life the man dubbed "the emperor of the German working class". His remarkable influence on the pathway of the German Social Democratic Party in Imperial Germany is contextualized with wonderful clarity and great attention to detail. The account of a remarkable life of one of Germany's most important politicians is always nuanced and differentiated and manages to assemble a comprehensive account of a leading European socialist, feminist, trade unionist, labour intellectual and organizer.'

*Stefan Berger, Professor for History & Director of the Institute for Social Movements, University of Bochum*

'August Bebel was one of the great democratic people's tribunes of Europe's "long nineteenth-century" and one of the founders of the modern labour movement. "The alternative Kaiser" of the German workers, he led the democratic opposition to Bismarck and the governments of Kaiser Wilhelm II, until his death on the eve of World War I. He led German Social Democracy from a small federation of artisans' associations to Europe's first million-strong mass party.

Despite this, Bebel's life story is not as well-known as it should be among English-speaking students of German history. Jürgen Schmidt's book should change this. It draws on the author's well-established expertise in this field and is up-to-date with the latest scholarship while remaining readable for the non-specialist. It is written in a lively and accessible manner. This is a Bebel biography for the twenty-first century, unencumbered by the doctrinal arguments that dogged some of the older literature in this field during the Cold War, ably contextualized, and with an eye to Bebel's relevance for an understanding of the trajectory of German democracy down to the present. Schmidt provides a fresh and lucidly written examination of Bebel's personality and his role as a party leader and politician that speaks directly to our contemporary concerns about the business of politics.'

*Andrew G. Bonnell, Associate Professor in History,  
University of Queensland*

'This remarkably concise and readable account introduces readers to August Bebel and the Social Democratic movement he led. Jürgen Schmidt draws upon his previous studies of Germany's working-class milieu to shed light on the life and times of a man who remains an enigma more than one hundred years after his death.'

*James Retallack, Professor of History and German Studies,  
University of Toronto*

# AUGUST BEBEL

Social Democracy and the Founding of  
the Labour Movement

JÜRGEN SCHMIDT

Translated by Christine Brocks

**I.B. TAURIS**

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*Für meinen Vater  
Werner Schmidt  
in dankbarer Erinnerung*



# Contents

<i>List of Plates</i>	ix
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xi
<i>Preface and Acknowledgements</i>	xiii
<b>Introduction</b>	1
<b>1. On the Edge of the Lower Class: Poor and Yet Privileged</b>	9
<b>2. Artisan and Entrepreneur: A Success Story</b>	17
<b>3. The Path into Politics: ‘Who is That Man with Such an Appearance?’</b>	29
<b>4. A Life for Politics: ‘Taking the Bull by the Horns’</b>	51
1867–1872: Bebel develops his talents	54
1872–1884/9: The dangerous member of the Reichstag	73
<b>5. Family, Friends and Everyday Life: The Private Side to Bebel</b>	91
<b>6. Politics as a Vocation: ‘One is No More than a Hackney’</b>	109
<b>7. Politics until Death: Battles of Words and War Prophecy</b>	129
<b>8. ‘Anti-Emperor of the Masses’: Worshipping a Hero?</b>	147
<b>Epilogue</b>	157

<i>Chronology</i>	167
<i>Dramatis Personae</i>	175
<i>Glossary of Associations and Parties at Local, National and International Level</i>	185
<i>Notes</i>	191
<i>Sources and Literature</i>	207
<i>Index</i>	217

# List of Plates

**Plate 1** Deutschordenshof in Wetzlar, Bebel's school (Städtische Sammlungen Wetzlar).

**Plate 2** Bebel's journeyman's piece and signet ring (Deutsches Historisches Museum Berlin).

**Plate 3** One of the earliest photos of Bebel (AdsD, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn, FA 026047).

**Plate 4** August Bebel's family, with his wife Julie and his daughter Frieda (AdsD, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn, FA 026066).

**Plate 5** House search during the years of the Anti-Socialist Laws (1878–90) (AdsD, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn, FB 002461).

**Plate 6** Louise Kautsky (AdsD, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn, 6/FOTA063989).

**Plate 7** Wilhelm Liebknecht (AdsD, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn, FA 020580).

**Plate 8** Jean Jaurès (AdsD, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn, FA 007050).

**Plate 9** Bebel's bestseller *Die Frau und der Sozialismus* (*Woman and Socialism*) (Rotpunktverlag Zürich).

**Plate 10** Remembrance plate of the Gotha unification party conference in 1875 (AdsD, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn, FB 002571).

**Plate 11** August Bebel with his family, friends and party comrades in a Zurich beer garden (AdsD, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn, 6/CARD000166).

**Plate 12** Social Democratic Party school in Berlin, 1908 (AdsD, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn, FA 037472).

**Plate 13** August Bebel as pioneer of free suffrage in Prussia (AdsD, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn, FA 006995).

**Plate 14** Eduard Bernstein and Karl Kautsky, around 1900 (AdsD, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn, FA 005504).

**Plate 15** Paul Singer, August Bebel and Wilhelm Pfannkuch in a hackney coach (Wikimedia Commons).

**Plate 16** August Bebel at the Reichstag (AdsD, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn, FA 108638).

**Plate 17** Bebel's villa in Küsnacht at Lake Zurich (Rotpunktverlag, Zürich).

**Plate 18** August Bebel in his last years (AdsD, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn, FA 004050).

**Plate 19** August Bebel's funeral on 17 August 1913 (AdsD, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn, FB 002583).

## List of Abbreviations

ADAV	Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiterverein/General German Workers' Association
AdsD	Archiv der sozialen Demokratie
DtVP	Deutsche Volkspartei/German People's Party
GDR	German Democratic Republic
IWMA	International Working Men's Association
KPD	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands/Communist Party of Germany
SAP	Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei/Socialist Workers' Party
SDAP	Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands/Social Democratic Workers' Party
SED	Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands/Socialist Unity Party of Germany
SFIO	Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière/French Section of the Workers' International
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands/Social Democratic Party of Germany
SVP	Sächsische Volkspartei/Saxon People's Party
VDAV/ Vereinstag/	Vereinstag deutscher Arbeitervereine/Congress of German Workers' Associations
Verband	Verband deutscher Arbeitervereine/Union of German Workers' Association



## Preface and Acknowledgements

August Bebel was one of the towering figures of late nineteenth-century European socialism and a leading politician of Imperial Germany from its founding in 1871 right up to its last peacetime year. Detailing his political activism and his struggle for the emancipation of the German working class illuminates an often-neglected aspect of politics during this time. The biography situates August Bebel – and with him the German Social Democratic Party – at the interface of class history and the expanding framework of collective citizenship and civil society. Thus, the book challenges existing notions of Imperial Germany as a society of ‘deferential subjects’, and demonstrates the power of democracy during this period. In addition, it can be read as a lively panorama of society and politics in late nineteenth-century Germany.

The political work of Bebel and the labour movement combined the fight for social justice with a commitment to civil society, that is, the self-activation of citizens for progressive aims. Bebel’s vision of a ‘great collapse’ or breakdown has parallels to today’s discussions of the crisis of capitalism. However, his answers and solutions to the problems of capitalism remain time-dependent and have to be seen in the context of his belief in progress and in building a socialist society. Analyzing Bebel within the framework of civil societal engagement and class relations offers new insight into the life of a central figure in the politics of Imperial Germany. The book offers a fresh interpretation of Bebel’s personal life, political activism and German social democracy at the turn of the century.

A lot of people made it possible for my biography of August Bebel, which was first published in 2013 in German, to reach an English-speaking audience. I would like to thank Sarah Wendle from Rotpunktverlag in Zurich and Joanna Godfrey and Sophie Campbell from I.B.Tauris for their cooperation in bringing the book on its way. Christine Brocks translated the book carefully, with great skill and in-depth-knowledge of Imperial Germany. Benjamin Ziemann supported me in writing the book proposal. The translation and the publication received decisive financial support from the International Research Center 'Work and Human Lifecycle in Global History' (Internationales Geisteswissenschaftliches Kolleg 'Arbeit und Lebenslauf in globalgeschichtlicher Perspektive', re:work) at Humboldt University Berlin. Thanks to Felicitas Hentschke and Andreas Eckert for this subsidy. The Institute for the History and Future of Work (Institut für die Geschichte und Zukunft der Arbeit, IGZA) financially supported the publication as well. Anja Kruke and Petra Giertz from the Archive of Social Democracy at the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (Archiv der sozialen Demokratie der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung) helped me with the copyrights for most of the pictures for the English version. Colleagues of the re:work-team discussed possible book titles and cover pictures with me. Jürgen Kocka, Julia Tischler, Georg Weinmann, Amira Schmidt and Petra Struve-Schmidt read parts of the German manuscript and gave additional advice. Aloys Winterling shared his experiences of the 'biography' genre. Again, I want to express my gratitude to Petra, Amira, Celina and Leon for providing the possibility for activities beyond writing books.

# Introduction

'Bed sheets, whites, clothing, furniture and household items' were on the inventory list when a mother's household in Wetzlar was dissolved in 1853. She had passed away at the age of 49. Relatives took care of her child, an orphan boy. When he died 60 years later, he left his widowed daughter and only grandchild about 300,000 marks in private assets – 200-fold the annual salary of a high-earning skilled worker at the time. However, this financial success is not a 'from dishwasher to millionaire' story but the career of a *zoon politikon*, a 'political animal': the orphan boy was August Bebel, the leading figure in social democracy and the socialist labour movement in Imperial Germany. His testamentary disposition from 30 April 1913 was not about the financial assets listed in the will, but about the manuscript of his memoirs *Aus meinem Leben* (My Life). He had already published two volumes of autobiography. The third and last one was to be released unedited and as a fragment, as if he were not able to finish it. This volume appeared on the book market in early 1914. Being only a fragment, it covered no more than the period until the 1880s.<sup>1</sup>

The fact that he portrayed only this small part of his life was to some extent due to his increasing health problems during his last years. But beyond that it also reflects his effort to write not only his memoirs but a 'true' history of social democracy. 'Whenever possible I have used letters, notes, articles etc. in order to verify my account and the opinions and thoughts I am referring to.' In so doing, Bebel

followed the programme of 'scientification' to which the party had dedicated itself early on – believing that rationality, science and facts help explain and change the world.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, this approach allows a first characterization of August Bebel. The workers' leader was not interested in a quick and nicely told anecdote. Instead, he presented himself as an accurate, disciplined, well-organized and extremely well-prepared memoir writer. However, it would be nothing more than kitchen-sink psychology to trace this trait back to his family background as the son of a Prussian non-commissioned officer and the stepson of a workhouse warden. More generally, it is an example of how a social movement in Imperial Germany was striving for political participation, emancipation and recognition.

August Bebel's life is inextricably linked to the rise of social democracy and the labour movement. When the previously banned workers' associations were re-established in the 1860s, Bebel was one of the first to join and quickly moved up within these organizations. He underwent imprisonment for his political beliefs and travelled throughout the German single states as a tireless election campaigner. He contributed to party programmes and bridged the growing divide between different camps within the Social Democratic Party in late Imperial Germany. Thus, a biography of August Bebel is also inevitably an introduction to the history of the German labour movement during the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

One day in February 1890, the factory worker Moritz Bromme learned that Bebel was to give a speech in the Saxon town of Meerane that night. The end of the 1878 Anti-Socialist Laws that had banned all social democratic organizations was in the offing; these had been Reich Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's major – albeit unsuccessful – tool to prevent the rise of social democracy in Germany. Bromme left work, went to the slippers factory where his father worked, met up with him and some of his colleagues and 'shortly after 4 p.m. we were marching off towards Meerane [...]. We wanted to hear Bebel.' Bebel electrified the workers. He rather enjoyed the personality cult that had grown around him and that motivated him.

And yet, the old man is more than an effect-seeking and confident speaker; it's not oratory that makes him stand out: he is riding a

wave of trust. August Bebel is more than just a member of the Reichstag and party leader with a dictatorial attitude, no, he is in fact the people's chosen one, president of an invisible German republic, the Anti-emperor of the masses,

wrote the well-known socialist, pacifist journalist and later Nobel peace laureate Carl von Ossietzky in 1927 on Bebel's performances in late Imperial Germany in the *Weltbühne*, a weekly magazine and forum for leftists, liberals and intellectuals.

However, it were not only Bebel's skills as a public speaker that were pivotal at these meetings. Early German social democracy before the Anti-Socialist Laws practised and lived direct democratic rules and continued this tradition successfully after 1890 by founding a network of associations and clubs from the bottom up. This also shows the labour movement's orientation towards building a civil society.<sup>4</sup> The rise of August Bebel and the labour movement is an example not only of the fight for social justice and the strange expectation of capitalism's collapse, but of the emergence of a future socialist society and the workers' political integration into state and society of Imperial Germany. Equally important is that the social movement of workers, artisans and intellectuals was based on a commitment to civic values, particularly during the foundation stage. They no longer wanted to be patronized from 'above' but sought participation, claiming their right as citizens. 'Doctors and professors as leaders are usually good for nothing', Bebel wrote in a letter in 1868 in which he discussed the leadership of workers' associations.<sup>5</sup>

Just seven years earlier, in February 1861, when he joined the *Gewerbliche Bildungsverein* (Industrial Educational Association) in Leipzig – founded in 1861, later reorganized and called *Arbeiterbildungsverein* or Workers' Educational Association – Bebel had seen things rather differently. His change of mind was a result of what Gustav Mayer, historian of the labour movement and Bebel's contemporary, had called the 'separation of proletariat from bourgeois democracy'. This 'separation' between political liberalism and social democracy also impeded the cooperation between both political camps in Imperial Germany's political system. When in the run-off ballot for the 1887 Reichstag elections the SPD, contrary to

expectations, was not supported by the left-liberal Freisinnige Partei ('Freethinking' or Radical Party), Bebel wrote to his wife that because of this attitude the election campaign had turned into 'pure class struggle' and destroyed 'every illusion for the future. This is necessary even though it might hurt some people.' Hence, for a long time historians considered that Bebel too refused to cooperate with other parties in the political system. 'Not one man, not one penny for this system', he said in a debate on the military budget in 1887. Yet this was his opinion as party leader. Particularly after the turn of the century, the social democrats were looking for allies at constituency level and targeted new voters by demanding affordable food in their election campaigns.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the lack of political allies in general, German social democracy went from one election victory to another, in particular after the fall of the Anti-Socialist Laws. The 'sweet poison of electoral success' substituted for the concept of an active political revolution the 'symbolic revolution of gained constituencies'. These electoral victories were linked to an effective professionalization of politics. August Bebel's life exemplifies this development. His way into politics, his decision to live *for* politics and his transformation from a successful artisan entrepreneur in the 1880s into a professional politician shape and structure this biography.<sup>7</sup> Although Bebel did not precisely fit into Max Weber's typology of a professional politician who either lived 'for' or 'from' politics, he came very close. He was passionately committed to the 'cause' of socialism and the labour movement and let nothing distract him from his course, even though the bourgeois world would not accept 'what he has to offer'. His political beliefs were based on his interpretation of Imperial Germany as a class society, and he knew that he had a continuously growing party and movement behind him. Bebel stood for the whole range of political work: networking, giving speeches, organizing conferences, investing party funds in stocks with a good return, preparing and conducting election campaigns, outlining political goals and ideas. His main work *Die Frau und der Sozialismus* (Woman and Socialism) would become something like a workers' bible. Already before Bebel's death the book was published in 52 editions, contributing substantially to his wealth and financial independence.

The politician Bebel was at the same time a father and husband. The letters from prison were written by the husband who assured his wife Julie of his love and was aware of what he put her through. His political rise and success were partly owing to her support. Politics and private life were intertwined in many ways. He observed his only daughter's education and development with great and continuous interest, even sent her presents from jail and received letters from her on a regular basis. When a court case against him in Elberfeld dragged on over the Christmas holidays in 1890, he complained bitterly in a letter to Friedrich Engels: 'This is the eighth time during our marriage of 23 years that Christmas is ruined.'<sup>8</sup> And yet, he could not imagine quitting politics. There would have been other options, for instance to emigrate to the United States. But that country scared him more than it seemed to welcome him as a new home. During the period of the Anti-Socialist Laws he could have gone into temporary exile in Switzerland, yet he did not take this opportunity. Instead he stayed and persevered for his goals, confident that the political and economic system would not survive and the better society for which he fought would follow. It was only in his later years and after paying visits to his daughter and son-in-law in Zurich that the Swiss city became, at least to a certain degree, a retreat for him.

It is often speculated how Bebel would have reacted to the outbreak of World War I and the social democratic parliamentary group in the Reichstag approving the war credits, had he still been alive. One line of interpretation suggests that Bebel, who was highly regarded within the Socialist International, would have prevented the breakdown of international workers' solidarity and never agreed to a compromise with the Imperial government.<sup>9</sup> According to this view, his speech against the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine during the Franco-German war of 1870/1 indicates that Bebel would have opposed the 'national hatred' (*Nationalitätenhaß*), as he called excessive nationalism. Contrary to this, other scholars have suggested that Bebel, the politician, felt increasingly obliged to Imperial Germany and would have called for unconditional defence of the fatherland. The fact that Bebel was prepared to welcome the prospect of a war against tsarist Russia is evidence for these scholars and their interpretation.<sup>10</sup>

Counterfactual historiography – imagining what might have been under different circumstances – can be a useful tool to fathom the scope of historical agents when seen as a puzzle game. And yet, Bebel died a year before the fatal decisions in summer 1914; he was no longer able to interfere. His biography has to take this simple yet fundamental fact into account, all the more so since recent research has identified the multiplicity of factors that impacted on the ‘great seminal catastrophe of the twentieth century’. Among them, the decision of the German Reichstag was an important but nevertheless circumstantial contribution to the outbreak of the war. It is the fundamental task of a biographer to draw the life trajectory of its protagonist as it happened *and* draft intersections where this course of life could have changed in alternative directions. However, it is incompatible with such a purpose to refer to remarks tied to specific situations and jump to conclusions based on imaginary decisions, which lie beyond the death of the person in question.

The decision not to employ the tool of counterfactual historiography in this biography reflects a certain methodological approach. A second methodological problem of biographical research should also be mentioned here. Social democrats who wrote their memoirs or autobiographies always emphasized in their introductory comments that their lives had a representative meaning in a *pars pro toto* sense: the individual achievement was understood as part of the masses. Wilhelm Bock, who similarly to Bebel made his way up from journeyman to vice president of the Saxe-Coburg-Gotha diet (1903–7) thanks to the labour movement, stated: ‘My commitment, the willingness to make sacrifices and the unabated eagerness to advocate, support and defend socialism corresponded with the devotion of the masses of class-conscious workers; among them I was only a single person.’ The individual was and is bound into structures constituting a frame of reference that shapes individual actions, attitudes and developments. This was all the more true for the socialist labour movement and the Social Democratic Party of Imperial Germany. Both characterized by the ‘principle of collective leadership’ and a decision-making process involving adversarial discussions. Within the party August Bebel was recognized and

accepted as the leading figure; nevertheless, the SPD was always headed by two chairmen.<sup>11</sup>

Only from this perspective, which highlights that leading figures were perceived as part of the social democratic movement, can one comprehend why August Bebel's ambivalent and contradictory personality was widely accepted within the Social Democratic Party. The shrewd capitalist investor and workers' leader, the internationalist who was committed to the well-being of the nation, the advocate of a 'male feminism' (Anne Lopes/Gary Roth), the politician who was keen on practical political reform but averse to ideological revisionism, the social critic who looked forward to the collapse of the bourgeois capitalist system but still lived in a middle-class neighbourhood, the man torn between private life and political career – these ambivalences paralleled the social situation of the labour movement and working class in Imperial Germany between integration and exclusion. This made Bebel and his personality comprehensible for those who were part of this social milieu. He epitomized norms and was a role model for the labour movement, yet he was far from being a plain and one-dimensional representative figure of German social democracy.<sup>12</sup> It is precisely the diversity and complexity of his personality that makes his life intriguing. The ambivalences of his character were also a result of his ambition to climb the social ladder and to gain education, of his eagerness to neither make mistakes nor show any weakness in order to avoid providing his enemies with a target. Bebel and the workers of the socialist labour movement strove for social respect and political participation but did not want to be part of the bourgeois capitalist society that created inequality and injustice.



## CHAPTER 1

# On the Edge of the Lower Class: Poor and Yet Privileged

Life could have been over before it had even begun. In the 1840s, 200 out of 1,000 infants in German cities died during their first year of life. In some poor working-class neighbourhoods, only 60 per cent of children survived their first birthday. Johann and Wilhelmine Bebel (née Simon) also lost their baby daughter shortly after birth. That August Bebel, born on 22 February 1840 in Deutz, today an inner-city part of Cologne, survived infancy was no matter of course at that time. Deutz, located on the right-hand side of the Rhine opposite Cologne, was one of the growing industrial small-towns with a particularly high infant mortality rate. Between 1840 and 1857, the population of Deutz doubled from 2,800 to 5,600. When Deutz was incorporated into the city of Cologne in 1888, the population had reached 17,600.<sup>1</sup>

Since his father was a non-commissioned officer of the Prussian Army, August Bebel was not born in one of the working-class neighbourhoods but in the fortifications of Deutz. Johann Bebel, together with his twin brother Ferdinand, had joined the military in 1828 in Poznan. They came from a family of coopers based in the Prussian commercial border town of Ostrowo (Ostrów Wielkopolski), but making barrels and buckets was not a profitable enough craft to feed the family, so the sons decided to enter military service. The Bebel twins were not an exceptional case; almost every fourth soldier of the Prussian Army in the pre-'March' era, the time

preceding the 1848 revolution, was a volunteer. When revolutionary unrest occurred throughout Europe in 1830, riots shook the Polish territories occupied by Russia. The insurgents demanded Polish independence and dethroned the Russian Tsar as king of Poland. At this stage 'Prussia thought it appropriate to withdraw its regiments from the province of Poznan'. Some army units were redeployed at the western border of Prussia. That is how Johann Bebel got to Mayence in the province Rhenish Hesse, today the capital of Rhineland-Palatinate in the southwest of Germany. Here he met his wife-to-be, Wilhelmine Simon. When his unit was relocated to Poznan, Johann Bebel decided to stay in the Rhine region 'in consideration of his bride'. He could join an infantry regiment based in Cologne, which made the decision even easier, all the more so since his brother too chose not to return to Poznan.<sup>2</sup>

Johann and Wilhelmine were 22 and 26 years of age respectively when they met in 1830 in Mayence. They did not get married for another eight years. We do not know for sure why the couple waited that long after Johann's move to the new regiment in Cologne. They may have wanted to wait for a promotion, which transpired when Johann became a non-commissioned officer. Wilhelmine presumably hoped to save some of her wages as a maid for the couple's future household. Even though she came from 'a long-established, petty bourgeois and not at all poverty-stricken family' in Wetzlar, Hesse, she could not expect her parents to provide for her.<sup>3</sup>

As one of seven children of a Wetzlar baker and farmer, Wilhelmine could not hope for a substantial inheritance. Around 1800, the Simons had been among the most highly taxed families in the Hesse town, but they soon faced economic decline.<sup>4</sup> As a girl she could not learn a trade and work in her father's business. Thus she became a domestic maid, as did many girls at that time, and moved to Frankfurt. Regional migration was quite common during the period before the revolution of 1848. People followed clear migration strategies and did not move to random places out of sheer love of adventure. Common migratory routes developed. Migrants received information and tip-offs from friends and relatives, and moved in stages from one town to the next in order to explore their options. That way it was easier to deal with the change of residence. This was