

Christoph Kuhl:
Carl Trimborn 1854–1921.
Eine politische Biographie,
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The son of an upper middle-class Cologne family and a graduate of law school, the important Center Party politician Carl Trimborn represented his party in the Reichstag and also in the Prussian House of Representatives from 1896. In addition, he served on the Cologne City Council and was very active in party politics. As chairman of the Center Party in the Rhine Province from 1894-1920, Trimborn worked above all toward extending the party's organization, which he saw as the critical factor for guaranteeing electoral success in the long term. During World War I, Trimborn served in the German civil administration in occupied Belgium. From November 1919, he was chairman of the Center Party's parliamentary group in the Reichstag and, from 1920, also first chairman of the party's national organization. Using Carl Trimborn's personal papers – which were kept in the Historical Archive of the city of Cologne until the building's collapse in March 2009 and are comprehensively utilized for the first time here – as its foundation, this study examines the factors that influenced Trimborn's career, how he positioned himself in the Center Party's internal conflicts, and what limitations restricted his room for political maneuver.

In the course of his investigation, the author clearly demonstrates that Trimborn considered balancing the different interests of the relevant social groups (especially small and medium-sized business owners, agriculture, and industrial workers) the guiding principle of his political efforts. In social policy, which until 1914 represented his main field of endeavor as a parliamentarian, he was consequently committed to keep any one of these groups from gaining too much advantage at the expense of the others. Internally as well, Trimborn attempted, wherever possible, to attain a balanced position between the left wing of the party, with its connections to the Christian labor unions, and the right wing, which had close ties to agricultural and business interest groups. The quality that best characterized his actions was the ability to reach compromises, which was often held against him by political opponents who preferred to operate with maximum demands. Trimborn's compromise-seeking nature at first appeared to be counterproductive to his career even within the party. In 1909, his attempt to gain the chairmanship of the Center Party's parliamentary group in the Reichstag

foundered on the rocks of that contingent's right wing, which considered him too far to the left, on account of his pronounced social policy profile.

Not until the turbulent time of upheaval in 1917 and 1918 did it become apparent that this had been a miscalculation. In the debate about parliamentarization, Trimborn took up a cautious position, in concert with the party's right wing. He spoke out against the idea that the Reich leadership should be completely dependent on the consent of a majority in parliament. He was also initially skeptical about the Social Democrats' participation in government. Despite his unpleasant personal experiences with the SPD, which since 1896 had attacked him fiercely and polemically in the struggle over his Cologne Reichstag seat, Trimborn nevertheless demonstrated a sense of political reality during the upheavals of late 1918 by defending the unavoidable cooperation with the Social Democrats against critics within his own party.

As a parliamentarian in the Weimar Republic, he considered it his greatest task to keep the Center Party open to alignments and coalitions, both to the right and to the left. Trimborn's most important success was managing, in difficult situations, to »balance competing forces with a deft hand,« in the words of his Westphalian friend Carl Herold. In particular, it was in part thanks to Trimborn that the Center Party was able to secure success beyond the political sea change of 1918. His greatest political failure proved to be his conviction that industrial workers could be weaned from their attachment to social democracy through state social policies and the agitation of Christian labor unions, which turned out to be erroneous.

Although he does not rank among the outstanding leaders of German political Catholicism, such as Windthorst or Adenauer, Carl Trimborn's contribution to the stability of the party landscape in Germany should be highly rated.