



Volume 2. From Absolutism to Napoleon, 1648-1815

Karl Baron vom und zum Stein, Prague Memorandum (Late August 1813)

During the Wars of Liberation, Karl Baron vom und zum Stein (1757-1831) traveled close to the frontlines to regain influence on German affairs. While staying in Prague, Stein addressed this memorandum, dated late August 1813, to both Alexander I (r. 1801-1825) and the Prussian state chancellor, Karl August Baron of Hardenberg (1750-1822). Short of the desirable but impossible option of a Germany unified under a great emperor (as had been the case in the tenth to thirteenth centuries), Stein advocates eliminating the French influence, dissolving the Confederation of the Rhine, and remedying the weakness associated with the “fragmentation of Germany into 36 despotisms.” He favors reestablishing a more powerful [Austrian] emperorship (executive powers to supervise imperial courts, to manage foreign and military affairs as well as finances) and strengthening the Imperial Diet [*Reichstag*], while weakening the power of the estates (e.g. withdrawing the right to make war and transferring it to the emperor and the Diet). While this vision greatly enhances the importance of Austria, Stein also gives Prussia an important role, particularly in the defense of Germany.

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The continuation of the fragmentation of Germany into 36 despotisms is pernicious to civic freedom and to the morality of the nation, and it perpetuates the dominant influence of France over a population of 15 million, to the detriment of both the population itself and the tranquility of the other European powers. If the statesmen at the very pinnacle of German affairs do not use the crisis of the moment to secure the welfare of their fatherland on a long-term basis, if they merely intend to introduce, in an easy and convenient way, a provisional state of affairs whereby the short-term goals of temporary tranquility and a somewhat ameliorated situation are achieved, contemporaries and posterity will rightly accuse them of recklessness, of indifference toward the happiness of the fatherland and will brand them as guilty thereof.

The question of which constitution Germany is to receive as a result of the twenty-year war cannot be evaded in any way. The welfare of its inhabitants, the interest of Europe, the honor and duty of the statesmen who guide the great affairs of the nations demand that one ponder this question with all the seriousness warranted by its magnitude, with the deep thoughtfulness warranted by its sacredness, and [that one] cast aside shallowness, recklessness, and hedonism.

Although the solution to the task must aim at the achievable, it must also aim at what is closest to perfection under this condition.

Desirable, but not feasible, would be a single, independent Germany, like the one our great emperors ruled vigorously and mightily from the tenth to the thirteenth century. The nation would rise as a mighty state, one that contained within itself all the elements of power, of knowledge, and of moderate and lawful freedom. This lovely fate it is not granted; it must seek to attain its internal social development by other means, eliminate the obstacles that stand in its way, create new institutions and constitutions.

Germany moved in the direction of a division into two larger parts, into a northern and a southern part. In the former, Prussia held sway in public affairs, in the latter Austria. Differences in the original tribes of its inhabitants, the Saxons and Franks, in mores, in religion, and in communal institutions prompted and promoted this division, and it could be acted upon at the present moment without difficulties. If it were possible to preserve the unity of the nation, this would undoubtedly convey great advantage in terms of power and internal peace. In this case, it is necessary to strengthen the power of the emperor or the head of the state even more. [ . . . ]

The power of the emperor should be expanded, he should be put in a position to exercise sovereignty; [this can be done] by granting imperial immediacy, once again, to all the members of the Empire who had it in accordance with the *Reichsdeputationsschluß* of 1803, by restricting the states to the borders of that time, for it was the great German states that joined France through neutrality and alliance treaties and withdrew from their obligations toward Germany, *not* the smaller ones, who adhered strictly to the old constitution and expected their salvation to come from this very adherence. [ . . . ]

Moreover, the power of the estates should be weakened, they should be deprived of the right to make war and peace, and this right should be transferred to the emperor and the Reichstag.

The emperor should be given the right of executive power, that is, supervision of the Imperial Courts, their visitation, the direct management of relations with foreign powers, of military affairs, and the Imperial Treasury. He alone should appoint the generals, the general staff, the commissars. In the small states, those, for instance, with fewer than three thousand people, he is directly responsible for organizing the military; in the larger states, he oversees this process. [ . . . ]

If Austria were to receive the Imperial dignity thus strengthened, her power would be significantly increased. It is advisable to entrust it to her in order to bind her interest to Germany and because of the long occupancy and the custom of her people. But Prussia, too, must not be alienated from Germany, it must be given sufficient power to contribute to its defense, without overtaxing its powers and placing its political existence at risk – it must become powerful and independent. In Prussia, the German spirit is freer and purer than in Austria, which is mixed with Slavs and Hungarians, surrounded by Turks and Slavic nations, on whose account Austria's

progress would have certainly been made more difficult, even if its progress had not also been disrupted in the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries by intellectual pressure and intolerance. [ . . . ]

Prussia remains a state that is important to Europe, especially to Germany, on account of its geographic location, the spirit of its inhabitants, its government, the extent of its acquired education. The necessity of its restoration has been recognized by Russia, Austria, and England, but without its internal strengthening, its restoration is of no value and no significant success. Prussia has paid dearly for the political indifference it showed since the Peace of Basel, and it has repurchased with its noblest blood its claim to its old military glory and an honorable place among the nations. [ . . . ]

Source of original German text: *Freiherr vom Stein: Briefe und amtliche Schriften* [Baron vom Stein: *Letters and Official Writings*], vol. 4, edited by Erich Botzenhart, newly published by Walther Hubatsch. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1963, pp. 242 ff.

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