



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 3. From Vormärz to Prussian Dominance, 1815-1866

David Hansemann to Prussian Interior Minister Ernst von Bodelschwingh (March 1, 1848)

With revolution spreading in France and about to reach Germany, David Justus Ludwig Hansemann (1790-1864), an Aachen businessman and politician, wrote a letter on March 1, 1848, to Prussian Interior Minister Ernst von Bodelschwingh (1794-1854), in which he described the dramatic consequences of three decades of absolutist rule. Highly critical of dynastic hubris, excessive military spending, and bloated bureaucracy, Hansemann rejected the Metternichean system.

When the Fatherland is in danger, those who love it, however divergent their political views may previously have been, must draw closer together. Here the utmost candor is the primary duty. With this short preface I now turn to Your Excellency so that I might express, as concisely as possible, my views about Prussia's and Germany's situation and about ways to counter looming dangers.

For thirty years, the Continental governments have – with violence, cleverness, and consistency – pursued a system of bondage for the peoples. In one country, this has been achieved by the unvarnished ostentation of the most unrestricted princely power; in others, one has held fast to the principle of Absolutism, but sought to wrap it in somewhat more pleasant forms; in yet other countries, the government has arbitrarily changed a liberal constitution, or one has – by influencing the election of the estates or their composition, or by excluding unpopular members of the estates – twisted and turned it in such a way that one created the majorities one wanted, to the extent that this could be done. And even when these estates expressed their view with large majorities, one has preferred not to regard them as the wishes of the people. One has variously, specifically in German and Italian lands, established principles on the part of the governments, the purpose of which was to give the dynasties more importance than the nations.

The government ministers who have pursued such a policy, I assume, have done so in the honest conviction that they were following a good and reasonable path; but it is high time to realize that one was very much mistaken; it is now urgent to turn back and take a different path. For what results has this policy produced? In Spain and Portugal, a change in the order of succession. In France, the expulsion of a legitimate dynasty, and now also (at least for the time being) the expulsion of a new dynasty, a branch of the older one, and a state of affairs whose future shape is beyond human foresight. In Switzerland, a stronger development of the democratic principle in the republics there. In Italy, in all the lands not completely dependent on

Austria, [there are] constitutional monarchies for now – but after the events in France, it is not at all certain whether this kind of development toward freedom will end matters, and additionally [there is] the liveliest spirit of nationality, linked with the strongest hatred against the Germans, whom one views as oppressors of Italian freedom.

In Germany, [there is] a lack of any trust toward the confederal authority, from whom no development of liberal institutions is expected, not even any protection of the constitutional rights of the individual states, nor any guarantee of German independence abroad. The Confederation's greatest power, Austria, [is] weakened by the undisguised inclination of its Italian subjects toward independence, by the uncertain loyalty of its Polish subjects, and by dissatisfaction in the other territories as well. In most of Germany's medium-sized and smaller states, [it is] in part dissatisfaction, and in part an absence of real confidence in the governments. Prussia, after Austria the largest of the confederal states, [is] in constitutional labor pains and temporarily in possession of a constitution of which this much is clear: that its leading principle should be the unrestrained power of the monarch; a major portion of the Protestant population [has had their] religious convictions violated, so that thousands [are] caught between their conscience and worldly interests; the constitutional-monarchical party, to which (with a variety of nuances) the greater majority of the independent and discerning population belongs, [is] unpopular when it makes no secret of its views; a not insignificant portion of the popular class engaged in manual labor in the Rhine Province [is] not particularly inclined toward the government; Polish subjects – like the Poles in Russia and Austria – longingly anticipate the opportune moment for Poland's restoration. All of the German states [are] bereft of a secure, unified bond, bereft of any kind of institution in which the German nation might be represented, and from which it might expect an impulse and leadership toward the assertion of independence.

Russia: spotting every political confusion in Europe and persistently pursuing its farsighted plans, which are also highly dangerous for Prussia's and Germany's independence. In most countries, the German ones included: during a period of peace lasting over thirty years, the maintenance of a large, costly army, and in relative terms a very costly administration; as a consequence of this: high taxes, which are especially oppressive to the popular classes engaged in manual labor, and which do more than a little among these classes to spread views about social conditions that are completely unfeasible and dangerous for the existence of any governmental society.

This [is] how circumstances have developed, regardless of the consistent policy of bondage. If experience has furnished any lessons, then it has clearly stated that this policy of the people and their princes alike is a pernicious one, and that continuing along this path would be the most dangerous experiment that can ever be carried out. Indeed, doubly dangerous now, where in a country as powerful as France, in such a bellicose nation, the republican party has, for the moment, gained the upper hand. Who now cannot envisage the danger that the wars of previous eras might be revived and turn out badly for Prussia, for Germany; who does not grasp

how weak Austria is in its current condition, so weak that it is completely preoccupied with subduing hostile elements in Italy, even if they receive no support from abroad! There is now great and general anxiety; this is the case chiefly because Germany is in such a dubious position, as a result of the reactionary policy led by Metternich, and as a result of dependence on Russia; and also because it is feared that Germany's princes, instead of using liberty to excite the energies of their peoples, would still rather not abandon that policy and would prefer to rely on Russia's protection. The danger of Prussia's and Germany's situation is heightened even further because, as a result of the principle of bondage and regimentation, the people's practical political reason has not developed sufficiently, so that, for some time, unfeasible and dangerous doctrines are capable of deceiving many, and it is difficult to show what is practicable in its best light. The helplessness of the people is all the more evident because it [the people] does not regard its leaders, the governments, as capable of facing a crisis that they have, to a certain extent, conjured up through their erroneous perception of conditions.

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