



## German History in Documents and Images

Volume 4. Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany, 1866-1890

Theodor Fontane to Georg Friedlaender on Self-Seeking Byzantinism as the Hallmark of the Age (April 3, 1887)

Bismarck's ability to manipulate political parties and elections by conjuring up a war scare was amply demonstrated in the winter of 1886-1887 and contributed to the victory of the pro-government "Cartel" parties in the Reichstag elections of February 1887. In the following letter, written a few weeks later, Germany's greatest realist author, Theodor Fontane (1819-1898), complains about the narrowness and pettiness he sees all around him. Fontane has nothing good to say about the arrogance of the typical Prussian officer, the public's appetite for pursuing the latest fashion, or the "deadening Byzantinism" that has grown under Bismarck's long rule. Even German youth, writes Fontane, is not immune to these dangers.

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Berlin

Overall we live in a vigorous, glorious age, and I thank God every day that I not only experienced 1837, when we hit rock bottom, but also 1887; we have emerged from misery, poverty, and police control; well and good. But alongside our new greatness runs a pettiness, a narrowness, and a lack of freedom that were unknown even in the much-maligned period of stagnation and police rule in the 1820s and 1830s. In particular, the military sphere is getting out of hand; it's the spoiled son of the family who, because he is best at riding and dancing, is permitted to do anything he wants with the assent of his parents. The rest of the world – if it wishes to have any independent opinion at all – is there merely to be scolded, deemed untrustworthy, and hit up for money under all circumstances. What applies to the entire age holds even more for this military sphere: glorious as a whole, pathetic on an individual level. In all this, the signs of internal decay are growing; selfishness and ruthless ambition have taken the place of a refined sense of honor and noble charity. And while coarseness and destructive ideas advance in the hearts of men, a deadening Byzantinism, unprecedented among us, is becoming apparent on the outside. At the same time, German youth is expertly becoming dumber, the idiot who strides ahead is followed by all the others, and independence of thought has been replaced by people who idly toast and parrot one another. In the past, things became "the fashion," but whereas one person went along, another did not; now a catchphrase or a mere "slogan" grips the people with the force of an epidemic that can scarcely be evaded by the individual and lasts until a certain part of society has been "decontaminated." But lo and behold, the next epidemic is already there and takes hold of another section of society.

Source: Theodor Fontane, *Briefe an Georg Friedlaender* [*Letters to Georg Friedlaender*], edited by Kurt Schreinert. Heidelberg, 1954, pp. 70-71.

Original German text reprinted in Hans Fenske, ed., *Im Bismarckschen Reich 1871-1890* [*In the Bismarckian Reich 1871-1890*]. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978, p. 380.

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