

Founding Manifesto of the Protestant League (1887); Statistics on Membership (1887–1913)

Abstract

The Protestant League [*Evangelischer Bund*] was an anti-Catholic propaganda organization that first became active after the *Kulturkampf* (“cultural struggle”) between the Prussian state and the Catholic Church began to wind down. The league’s manifesto, dated January 15, 1887, declares the fight against ultramontanism—the Vatican’s dominance over the Catholic Church in Germany—as one of its aims. The nineteenth-century champions of papal authority were known as “ultramontanes” because, from the perspective of northern Europeans, Rome lies *ultra montes*, or beyond the Alps. Another expressed aim is strengthening and unifying the Protestant Church—a goal apparently shared by hundreds of thousands of members in the Wilhelmine era.

Source

Protestant League for the Safeguarding of German-Protestant Interests

To Our Co-Religionists in all of Germany!

The German Protestant Church and, with it, our German fatherland are facing serious threats. The so-called *Kulturkampf* and the form of its settlement have increased the power of Romanism to the extreme. It is pursuing its objectives actively and with tenacious persistence by utilizing all those currents that run counter to German nature. The concessions that it wrested from the German governments only provide it with new means of attack. Even the greater moderation and peaceableness it has currently adopted for show help it gain further advantages. Protestantism has suffered the greatest losses at precisely those moments when the Catholic hierarchy succeeded in maintaining peace with state authorities.

We are not afraid of the enemy. The Lord Jesus Christ, the sole head of the church, is at the helm. His word of liberating and saving truth is our sword and shield, and our belief in him is the victory that has conquered the world! — We also know this very well: to confront the lurking dangers, the most urgent priority is for each confessor of the Gospel to take, in accordance with his own individual means and calling, the cultivation and protection of the Protestant faith and way of life as his driving concern. We highly regard that which has been achieved along these lines thus far (partly in the way of building, partly in the way of defense) by individual men who know how to wield the weapons of the mind and by associations, too. If we thought that this would suffice, however, we would be underestimating the danger and misjudging our duty.

When compared with the powerful unity of Rome, German-Protestant Christendom is sadly fragmented. The regional churches into which German-Protestant Christendom is divided are bound together so loosely and, incidentally, closed off to each other in such a way that the common Protestant consciousness is withering away.

Even more detrimental is the partisan strife that exhausts the finest powers and paralyzes the beneficial positive development of German Protestantism. While we remain split over internal church matters, the enemy that seeks to destroy us advances unstopably. — In this, it has dangerous allies within our own camp. The false conceptions of parity and tolerance that prevail within numerous and influential circles provide it with welcome assistance. Moreover, the enemy’s road to power is being paved by the materialism to which entire strata of our society have sunken; religious indifferentism is scarcely less

harmful.

A situation like this calls for great goals and comprehensive methods! All those who have a heart for our church, all those who are imbued with the conviction that only faithfulness to the word of God and the ultimate victory of Protestant truth can enable our nation in the future to fulfill its calling in world history have to unite in common work and for a common struggle!

In consideration of this, and filled with this spirit, on October 5 of this year, Protestant men of diverse occupations from all parts of Germany joined hands to call on their co-religionists to form a Protestant League, whose purpose is the safeguarding of German-Protestant interests.

The program of this league is as follows: The Protestant League professes its faith in Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, as the sole mediator of salvation, and in the principles of the Reformation.

The task of the League is twofold. In the struggle against the growing influence of Rome, it intends to protect Protestant interests in all realms, opposing any impairment of these interests in word and writing; however, it also intends to reach out to any aspiration on behalf of true Catholicism and Christian freedom in the bosom of the Catholic Church. — On the other hand, it also wishes to strengthen the Protestant-Christian common consciousness in the face of the indifferentism and materialism of our time, cultivate peace within the church in the face of paralyzing partisan discord, and revive and enhance interrelations between members of individual regional churches.

Each individual member of the League commits himself to playing a part in the fulfillment of this task.

For the purpose of common action, the League, under the direction of a central board as well as an additional committee, and subdivided into state [*Land*] churches or regional branch associations, will organize throughout all of Protestant Germany. — The board will be assisted by a committee representing Protestant interests in the press. — General meetings will provide an opportunity for all national members to come together for a personal exchange of ideas and to pass resolutions significant to the entire body. — The costs of the League will be covered partly by regular dues and partly by special donations.

Dear Protestant co-religionists and national comrades! The *Kulturkampf* is drawing to a close. But the struggle against Rome will continue: It will last “as long as there is a heretic left in the country,” or, as we believe, until the truth of the Gospel has marched to victory throughout all of Germany. The Protestant people have to start this battle with concerted and sustained force.

At the outset, vigorous resistance is our foremost priority. We must expose every detail of the undermining work of the Jesuit spirit and its agents. We must bring to light falsifications of history, the suspicions cast upon our church, the crippling of our church’s rights, especially the behavior of Roman clergy in the matter of mixed marriages and the education of children resulting from these marriages, and, not least, accommodations of Roman presumption that stem from flawed conceptions of parity, as well as any disavowal of the Protestant faith. Accommodating attitudes must be fought systematically, and disavowals must be made public regardless of the person involved.

The defense, however, must be supported by an offensive attack. Everyone shall get to know the true character and ultimate goals of Romanism, which is increasingly becoming a slave to Jesuitism. In calling for such a struggle, we are well aware of the obligations we must fulfill vis-à-vis our Catholic fellow citizens to prevent the rift of denominational opposition from deepening and widening more and more. Wherever Christian dispositions emerge [among our Catholic fellow citizens] and are active in their midst, there we wish to preserve the bond of the existing religious and moral community and seek to strengthen the love for our common fatherland. No less, though, do we wish to dutifully and conscientiously do our share to open their eyes to the danger threatening themselves first and foremost,

that is, the subjugation of any trace of free thinking, even the last little bit, under an alien yoke. And wherever a conscience bound in truth has already voiced protest, we intend to lend a helping hand to give fresh courage to the weak, the disdained, and the persecuted, and to provide as much protection as we can.

We view healing our own inner wounds as our foremost task. — All our strength and loving zeal must be directed towards making our Protestant people as a whole mindful of the blessings of the Reformation, of the pure Gospel by God's grace in Christ, of the universal priesthood, of liberation from the bonds of superstition, of freedom of belief and conscience. Our people must also remember to spread the following conviction within the broadest circles: that just as Germany's current strength and greatness is based on the Reformation, so its future depends on the preservation of that inheritance and, ultimately, on the complete triumph of the Gospel. Sharpening Protestant self-confidence along these lines and awakening the Protestant sense of community in the face of external and internal division will be the aim. All this will ensure that our people will be armed and prepared when God's hour comes.

In tackling this work, we are by no means reckoning with great successes at the outset. It will require continuous and tireless effort. The main thing, above all, is not to grow weary. At first, we will encounter prejudices as well: therefore, we wish to proceed toward the ultimate goal step by step. In particular, only when the new undertaking has achieved consolidation and immunity to the suspicion that it represents a new partisan project shall general meetings of the League assume the form of German-Protestant church congresses that will address the existential questions posed to the Protestant Church by our times, serve personal communication between proponents of different views, and, at the same time, also help pave the way for closer contact between German regional churches.

Nevertheless, we are full of confidence that this exhortation to unanimity—which, after all, is not really being raised by us, but rather is being sent out in the same way to everyone on account of the jeopardy in which Protestant Christianity currently finds itself—will indeed be heard on all sides. We are not underestimating the kind of innermost questions that may still lead this person or the other to pursue different paths. But the gravity of the hour demands that we put this aside in favor of our foremost and most sacred duty—namely, firmly uniting for the protection and defense of our fatherland and the German Protestant Church.

Dearest co-religionists and national comrades! For this reason, do not ask who is calling you. In the end, we may rest happily assured that our nation has been assigned its calling in world history by none other than the invisible Lord of the Church himself and by God. Do not allow people to say of us one day: This generation has won, on bloody battlefields, victories of outward power beyond compare and unprecedented successes as well but missed the call to rise up against the archenemy of its spiritual life; accompanied by rapturous rejoicing, it celebrated the 400th anniversary of its great religious hero but withdrew from the duty to manfully defend the achievements of the Reformation, lingering instead in petty beliefs and intellectual lethargy! Gather around the banner of the Gospel and of the Protestantism born of the earnestness of German-Christian conscience. All the signs of the times indicate the advent of a decisive battle. There stands a will, dominating and exorcizing everyone who has put himself in the place of God—and here the flock of free men of faith and the Lord in their midst! So let us take on the fight, and He, who possesses all the power in heaven and on earth, will lead us to victory!

The Provisional Board.

Dr. Bärwinkel, Pastor in Erfurt.

Doctor of Divinity Beyschlag, Professor in Halle.

Doctor of Divinity Fricke, Professor in Leipzig.

Goebel, Consistorial Councilor in Halle.

Doctor of Divinity Kawerau, Professor in Kiel.

Lenschner, Consistorial Councilor in Merseburg, Provisional Secretary.
Doctor of Divinity Lipsius, Professor in Jena.
Doctor of Divinity Niemann, Consistorial Councilor in Münster.
Doctor of Divinity Nippold, Professor in Jena.
Doctor of Divinity Riehm, Professor in Halle.
Government Privy Councilor v. Voß in Halle.
Doctor of Divinity Warneck, Pastor in Rothenschirmbach.
Count v. Wintzingerode-Bodenstein, Provisional Chairman.
Witte, Professor and ecclesiastic Inspector in Schulpforte.

Source: Evangelischer Bund zur Wahrung der deutsch-protestantischen Interessen, “An unsere Glaubensgenossen in ganz Deutschland!” Archiv des Konfessionskundlichen Instituts des Evangelischen Bundes, Bensheim, p. 500.9.125, Evangelischer Bund, Reichsgeschäftsstelle. Republished with permission.

Statistics on Protestant League Membership

Year	Membership
1887	10,000
1888	37,000
1889	60,430
1891	82,978
1902	156,000
1906	328,322
1910	400,593
1912	485,753
1913	510,000

Source: Herbert Gottwald, “Evangelischer Bund zur Wahrung der deutsch-protestantischen Interessen (EB) 1886–1945,” in Dieter Fricke et al., eds., *Lexikon zur Parteiengeschichte 1789–1945*, 4 vols. Leipzig, 1983–1986, vol. 2, pp. 580–87, here p. 581. Republished with permission.

Translation: Erwin Fink

Recommended Citation: Founding Manifesto of the Protestant League (1887); Statistics on Membership (1887–1913), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-1792>> [June 16, 2026].