

# German Liberalism Recast: Hermann Baumgarten's *Self-Criticism* (Early October 1866)

## Abstract

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Hermann Baumgarten (1825–1893) was a historian, political publicist, and, after 1872, Professor of History at the Reich University of Straßburg. He was a champion of German liberalism and from 1859 worked in Max Duncker's "Literary Bureau," which the Prussian government used for the dissemination of its propaganda. Beginning in 1861 he also held a teaching post at the Technical University of Karlsruhe. In the autumn of 1866, Baumgarten was struggling with the decision whether to remain loyal to liberal principles or accept Bismarck's military and political successes. In 1866 he published an extended essay that tilted toward the latter and offered "self-criticism" of German liberalism. Baumgarten's essay played an important role in convincing liberal supporters of Bismarck to form the National Liberal Party in 1867. This essay, excerpted below, was completed in Karlsruhe in the first week of October 1866; it first appeared in the *Preußische Jahrbücher* [*Prussian Yearbooks*] and was quickly reprinted in book form.

## Source

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The spring of this year [1866] finally triggered the catastrophe that had been impending for a long time. Everyone knows how things have unfolded since the middle of March. The relationship between Prussia and Austria, between Prussia and the medium-sized German states, was forcing a decision. The domestic situation in Prussia and Germany seemed to be the most unfavorable one in the world for the kind of undertaking Count Bismarck was planning; the European situation, on the other hand, was uncommonly enticing. The constellations that had formed at home, however, made it easy to foresee that public opinion would very strongly resist Prussian political initiatives. As a start, though, many years of experience had shown that public opinion would not be able to hinder a resolute will; furthermore, these very difficulties actually presented certain advantages. The politics of the Conservative Party in Prussia rested on the base of a good understanding with Austria. Prussia only had two paths ahead of it: either leading German affairs together with Austria or seizing German power in spite of Austria. Since the latter path would definitely drive the medium-sized states to side with Austria, taking it would force Prussia to appeal to popular force; it could not shrink back from steps that were more or less revolutionary. Early on, in the 1850s, Count Bismarck had become convinced that harmony with Austria was only possible for a Prussia that resigned itself to remaining what it was: the second, dependent power in Germany and the last in line in Europe. He intended to free Prussia from a situation that was neither particularly worthy nor satisfying; he realized that this could be done only by pursuing the above-mentioned option, and he accepted it, even though it was not easy to harmonize with his originally conservative line.

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Count Bismarck had the courage to dare the great gamble, and he displayed the strength and astuteness that allow statesmen to dare. Almost everything was pointing against him. The Conservatives kept their opposition all the quieter, just to work all the more actively behind the scenes; the Liberals raised a hue and cry about peace, leaving no doubt about popular sentiment. The Prussian people, just like any other educated people living in ordered circumstances, will always be opposed to a war whose absolute necessity is not blatantly evident. The war was regarded as a great calamity not only by the Liberals and Conservatives but also by that rather large group of people for whom partisan points of view are not decisive. The stakes for Prussia in this gamble were incredibly high. The war demanded the greatest

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sacrifices from each individual. It contradicted everything that had been said and sung for years about German unity and fraternity. The comrades from Schleswig, the comrades from Leipzig were supposed to take up arms against each other. Since Prussia was obviously the offensive party, its politics were the target of all the hatefulness of this fratricidal war. The situation quickly assumed such a shape that Austria felt compelled to reach with both hands at an incomparable opportunity to eliminate Prussia for good.

It is far from my intention to scold my fellow liberal party members for not siding decisively with Bismarck's policy from the very start. To have done so would perhaps have required the sort of objectiveness in judgment and knowledge of the situation that one may not demand of the majority of a party. But to see how in May, how even in June, when it had been obvious for some time that a Prussian victory would have to mean the triumph of a liberal and national policy, whereas an Austrian victory would have to represent the destruction of liberal and national hopes, to see how they clung with few exceptions to the anti-Bismarck chorus, along with everything that was reactionary and anti-national in Germany—this was, I admit, one of the saddest things an upright Liberal could experience. They joined in with dynastic particularism; with the small-state bureaucracies that had grown up in comfort and trembled in the face of Prussian discipline and work; with the petty philistinism that would perhaps like to see the number of German residences doubled; with that absolutely pitiful Junkerdom, which, displaying the right instinct in Prussia, hates the revolutionary parvenu; with those ultramontanes whose love for the Habsburg dynasty ought to be sufficient reason to sway any patriot to the opposite sentiment. It was very sad to see how, even then, most representatives of a liberal German policy were still walking arm in arm with their most irreconcilable adversaries. It was a death sentence—with no chance for appeal—for the type of liberalism that had been customary in Germany up to that point. It proved that the party on which the nation had pinned its hope in the past possessed neither the political insight nor the strength that alone suffice to lead a great nation to its salvation.

As I indicated, I do not wish to discuss the question of whether it was necessary right from the start for the National Liberal Party to seize the opportunity finally to fight the inevitable conflict with Austria, or whether it could have held to its earlier intention of organizing German affairs in a peaceful way by means of liberal opinion. I will admit that, at the time, a series of weighty arguments could be raised against Bismarck's policy. In early May, however, this issue ceased to be important. At that point, the issue was no longer whether the war was desirable, but only which side one should take in a war that had become unavoidable. I will admit that this decision, too, would have involved considerable difficulties in March, at a time when one could say that, in the conflict, Prussia was only pursuing objectives that the party would have to reject. But what had happened on the Prussian side after the April 9th motion to convene a [national] parliament precluded the further possibility of such claims. Now anyone willing to see had to realize that the imminent conflict would not only decide whether Prussia or Austria would become the leading power in Germany; it would also show that Prussia, by having forced this decision, would be compelled by the irresistible force of the situation to call upon the strength of the nation, and to use this strength on its behalf against the closely allied phalanx of interests based on [maintaining] the fragmentation and servitude of the nation. Even if Prussian policy took this turn despite the vigorous opposition of liberalism and the inherent compulsion of liberalism in Prussia to seek as much support as possible from the conservative camp, all it took was a simple political calculation to see that this policy would position itself openly on the foundation of a liberal program as soon the Liberals finally stopped making such a move impossible. The lamentations of the *Rundschaer*,<sup>[1]</sup> on the one hand, and the most outspoken declarations by the Bismarckian organs, on the other, made this equation clear even to an unpracticed eye, that is, if that eye were willing to see at all.

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It is sad to say that the most powerful parliamentary faction of Prussian liberalism, the Progressive Party, completely refused to tackle this pressing duty. Its position left it guilty of adding to the confusion of

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Prussia's friends in the small states. In the most decisive moment we have experienced in 50 years, it induced idle passivity in some and even drove others to active participation on behalf of Austria. Moreover, not only the Progressive Party but also left-wing centrists followed such an incomprehensible policy; only the majority of the moderate Liberals took the position to which duty and prudence directed every liberal-minded patriot. In those days around the middle of May, I gave vent to the worries of my heart in a leaflet<sup>[2]</sup> dedicated to the North German Liberals, and the arguments therein definitely applied to Prussia two or three times over. I will do without the satisfaction of reporting how this call to Prussia from the south was rejected in the Prussian capital by some. At that time, it took some courage to give outspoken expression to one's dissent from the vast majority of the party.

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This was the situation on June 14. Three weeks later, the entire German world had changed fundamentally. Austria was prostrate. The middle-sized German states had revealed themselves to be simple small states without any independent capability. Prussia towered above this puniness of particularism like a giant bursting with power. It had shattered the boastful Austria within eight days. And not only did it stand as a healthy power alongside one diseased in all its limbs, it also stood as a highly civilized power alongside a much more barbarian one. The "German brothers" in Austria took on the job of thoroughly curing the south German [i.e., pro-Austrian] enthusiasts. What shameless lies in their press, what mindless brutality in their field dispensaries, in their military hospitals, in captivity, what disloyalty against the allies, what servility vis-à-vis the foreign imperator! Now the greater Germans in Bavaria and Swabia had lived to see what this Habsburg glory was really all about; now even the blind saw that the Habsburg dynasty had poisoned Austria to the very core, almost to the extent that it had poisoned Spain once upon a time, and that the brotherly phrases of the German Austrians were nothing but a blatant snare for the dupes in the Reich. All the participants in the great alliance for the punishment of Prussia revealed themselves to be small and poor beyond all expectation—poor in ideas, knowledge, and genuine enthusiasm alike, small on the battlefield and in the cabinet. Furthermore, against all expectation, the much-maligned Prussia stood there great and rich, great in all capabilities, rich in all power. The astonished world did not know what it ought to admire more about this state—the singular organization of its military force or the moral dedication of its population; the incomparable health of its economy or the soundness of its people's education; the greatness of its victory or the modesty of its news reports of its victories; the bravery of its young soldiers or the dutifulness of its very aged king. Everything, everything in this state, this state that people had come to regard for years as the certain prize of the revolution, revealed itself as possessing magnificent authenticity, and the more one began to examine the mysterious phenomenon, the more things one found that were worth admiring. This people in arms rushed ahead with irresistible force on an unprecedented path of victory and nevertheless remained a people of peace—a people who remained wholly unaffected by the intoxication of martial glory, who demanded the resumption of quiet work, and who almost did more grieving for the soldiers killed in action than rejoicing over victory. It developed an incomparable gallantry in a fight it had kept at bay with utmost effort for a long time. It put its entire strength at the disposal of a government against which it had fought the most embittered struggle for four years.

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Yet still we were buried in a confusing tangle of conflicting forces, one whose resolution could be conceived by countless shades of partisanship on the basis of subjective tendency, local interests, and an incalculable variety of sympathies and antipathies. For our bad political habits, this was the most dangerous situation of all. To be sure, we had merged into several large groups. These party formations, however, were based on highly questionable deceptions. The National Association [*Nationalverein*], supposedly so well-disciplined, incorporated opposing factions that might well subordinate themselves to the empty phrases of resolutions unanimously passed; but had these factions ever been in a position to operate in the context of political reality, rather than just on paper, they would have dispersed their

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fellow association members in all directions. The “small German” [*kleindeutsch*] patriot cherished a different heartfelt opinion in Hanover than in Brunswick, a different one in Hamburg than in Bremen, a different one in the Electorate of Hesse than in Hesse-Darmstadt; and the best “greater Germans” [*Grossdeutschen*], as dear as they held the “whole of Germany” to their bosom, imagined the practical solution of their fine program in rather different terms, depending on whether they lived in the west or the east of the Black Forest, west or east of the Lech River.

The core of our German fantasies was particularism: it was bred in the bone and lived still. We hoped to become Germans one day, but we were really Hanoverians, Badenese, and Bavarians. The overwhelming mass of the population thought as narrowly as that. And even those who were sincerely aware of their Germanness, who deemed it a serious matter of the heart to oppose the indignity of the present with their utmost strength, were nevertheless bound through the force of real circumstances to the small special body politic to which each belonged. They paid taxes to it; they obeyed and served it. Where was the great whole for which they reached out longingly? Up in the skies! It was alive in their fantasy, in their dreams. They could sing its praises, give it thundering applause, and be enthusiastic about it; but they could do little or nothing for it. If an apolitical past pervaded by religious, literary, and private interests had accustomed us to confusing the simplest political questions with our theories and doctrines, then it was inevitable that the most complicated question of all—the German one—would cause a truly Babylonian confusion of tongues among us.

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Now we were relieved of all this anguished distress in one fell swoop. Today, doubts about what might be possible in Germany have been removed, not just from the thinking people but also from the vast majority of the nation. The existing German power is glaringly obvious to them. They have seen and felt its feats, and after the prolonged misery of our powerlessness, these feats have such irresistible force that within months the mentality of the Germans has undergone changes that we dared not expect decades ago. All the unsolvable problems that we struggled with for 18 years have suddenly vanished from our view, and there is just one remaining problem—admittedly, one that will still require plenty of work—but we may be hopeful for its solution, since our actual circumstances are now focusing all thoughts and aspirations on the same point in the very same way that they used to tear them asunder in the past. The only issue now is how the small states can forge a healthy relationship with an undeniably dominant Prussia. That Prussia is the German power—whereas the remaining states are nothing but weak fragments that can only secure their own survival through close, honest association with the former—is a fact that the even most obstinate Swabian Democrat can only fool himself into doubting. However, the agreeable simplicity of our situation, the good fortune finally to feel firm, secure ground underneath our feet, will surely repress a good many of our bad political habits before long, and our politics will finally benefit from the robust health we are thankful to enjoy in many other spheres of life. The windbags who have amply filled the breadth of the political stage until now will no longer make their fortune in the brisk, clear air in which we are currently moving. After we have seen what action means on the grandest scale, we will no longer delight in having our ears tickled with pompous talk. Since the work of the political amateurs has failed so thoroughly, we will now demand that all the seriousness and manly diligence that we have long taken for granted in other areas will be proven in the great state system through which we have entered world affairs. After experience has made clear that the nobility comprises an indispensable part of a monarchical state, and after we have seen that these much-maligned Junkers know how to fight and die for the fatherland in spite of the best Liberal, we will limit our bourgeois conceitedness a bit and be content with maintaining an honorable position beside the aristocracy. We believed that we turned the German world around from the ground up with our agitation: Well, we were well on our way to making ourselves irrelevant; I think we will take this experience to heart. In the face of the greatest experiences our eyes have ever beheld, we became cognizant of the frailty of even those hypotheses we once regarded as rock solid, and upon which we have built our

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national and liberal politics in recent years. Almost all of the elements of our political system have been proven erroneous by the facts.

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Whether we look at the crown, the ministers, the nobles, and the military, or at the deputies, the magistrates, and the newspapers—they all have become different; they all have learned great things. And the power of this learning does not only lie in the conceptions of the mind but also in the stirrings of the heart. Not only do they think differently, they feel differently as well. Three months ago, the call “Party or fatherland?” elicited the wild response “Party!” from everyone far and wide. Today, they all give precedence to the fatherland.

Truly, under these circumstances, it has become a pleasure to work for public interests. Up to now, it was a tough, sad duty that was only undertaken as a matter of obligation: Now the most wonderful reward is beckoning, and in fact, now we only have to accomplish one task, namely to overcome certain prejudices, dismiss certain weaknesses that have clung to us in an unhappy past. As soon as German liberalism stands up for the great facts it acknowledges, exhibiting complete dedication and persistence despite secondary reservations, there can be no doubt that the next decade will bring us the German state that has become as compelling a necessity for our scholarship, arts, and morality as it has for our political development and national position of power. Only we can stand in the way of this salutary process; only we would be able to push ourselves backward into the old misery.

As I conclude these reflections, I am confronted anew with the old reservation that held me back from this treatise for so long, that checked my pen so often during work—the question of whether the kind of self-criticism I am daring should not be based on a better personal calling than the one I claim for myself. Really, I would much rather have done without a burden that is perhaps too heavy for my shoulders. However, since time is running short and no one else lent a hand, I felt I had to heed my conscientious conviction more than any personal considerations. I have the feeling of having fulfilled a heavy, thankless, but necessary duty. I am prepared to be censured by many, perhaps severely attacked by some, and I intend to bear the trouble associated with the work gladly if only it brings some benefit to the fatherland and the party to which it is dedicated. No one, I believe, will think me capable of the conceitedness of deeming the subject exhausted in any way by my discussion: I wanted nothing other than to ask for serious self-examination, to give impetus to a discussion that we must not spare ourselves; and if more far-sighted men would wish to find a worthier solution to the task I felt obliged to put on the agenda, then nothing would make me happier.

There may be no lack of those who will accuse me of treason against the party, when in fact I am only operating out of loyal dedication to it. If liberalism did not mean a great deal to me—well, I would not have invested so much in it. I am firmly convinced that a satisfactory solution to our political tasks will succeed only if liberalism ceases to constitute mainly the opposition; if it reaches the point of fulfilling certain incredibly important concerns of the nation in governing activity of its own; if we get a beneficial and fresh alteration of liberal and conservative governments. *Liberalism must become capable of governing.* I cannot help anyone who perceives a degeneration of liberal greatness in doing smaller things as a government instead of demanding unlimited things as an opposition. But no one can dare to label as a renunciation of liberalism the demand that liberalism should finally become a force realizing its ideas on its own. It is far from my intention to draw a line beyond which it ought not to extend this power: As far as its power actually extends, it should exercise it with vigor; I only wish it would stop depriving itself of any real power by indulging in illusions regarding the scale of its own strength.

## NOTES

[1] *Rundschaer* is a reference to the group of Conservatives around Ludwig von Gerlach, who wrote

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weekly political commentaries [*Rundschaue*n] in the main Conservative newspaper, the *Neue Preussische (Kreuz-) Zeitung*—ed.

[2] Entitled *Partei oder Vaterland?* [*Party or Fatherland?*]—trans.

Source: Hermann Baumgarten, “Der deutsche Liberalismus. Eine Selbstkritik,” in *Preußische Jahrbücher*, vol. 18 (November–December 1866): pp. 455–515, 575–629; original German text reprinted in Hermann Baumgarten, *Der deutsche Liberalismus. Eine Selbstkritik*, edited and introduced by Adolf M. Birke. Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1974, pp. 23–150, here pp. 132–49.

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