

Ludwig Bamberger on Hopes for Parliamentary Government under Kaiser Friedrich III (March 31, 1888)

Abstract

Ludwig Bamberger (1823–1899) was a jurist, banker, publicist, and liberal politician. As a result of his role in the revolutionary events of 1848/49 he spent many years in exile: in Switzerland, London, Holland, and Paris. An amnesty granted in 1866 enabled him to return to Germany, where he supported Bismarck's course. He was a member of the Reichstag from 1871 to 1893, initially serving as a National Liberal, then as a representative of the Liberal Union [*Liberale Vereinigung*], and after 1884 as a member of the German Radical Party [*Freisinnige Partei*]. The text below is an excerpt from an article Bamberger contributed to the liberal journal *Die Nation* in March 1888. It discusses the relationship between the emperor and the Reichstag. Kaiser [Emperor] Wilhelm I had died on March 9 and was succeeded by his son, who took the title Kaiser Friedrich III. Bamberger was one of the new monarch's close advisers, and he shared the hope of other left-liberals that Friedrich's reign would introduce liberal reforms and democratization. But Bismarck's long history of dominating Wilhelm I, in combination with Bamberger's knowledge of the new Kaiser's terminal cancer, left him justly skeptical about Friedrich's ability to carry out such reforms. Friedrich's reign lasted only 99 days: he was succeeded by Kaiser Wilhelm II on June 15, 1888.

Source

German Kaiserdom and the German parliament were born on the same day, and they are children of a single thought.

[...]

Therefore, nothing would be more wrong than to introduce the notion of a division, or even a contradiction, between these two living pillars of the German state system in its highest order. No one is more imperially minded than the person who is vigorously disposed towards the dignity of the Reichstag, and, likewise, an emperorship that were to deny the Reichstag its fullest rights would fail to appreciate the roots of its own power.

For this reason, the decree in which Kaiser Friedrich brought the maintenance of his own prerogatives together with those of the Reichstag also met with a warm and cheerful reception from the ranks of freedom lovers.^[1]

[...]

This is precisely the right time to remind oneself that the imperial succession that has just taken place is something new and unprecedented for the German Empire [*Reich*]. King Wilhelm I had become emperor only after he had been King of Prussia for a number of years. As a mature man and heir to the throne in Prussia, he had gone through all the friction and changes that left behind such bitter animosity and alienation between the Prussian crown and the imperial idea. Only as a man of 74 years, did he accept—not without hesitation and reservations and only after carefully obtaining the assent of the other German rulers—the imperial crown, thus fulfilling the nation's desire.

The son has had an entirely different experience. He ascends the throne as emperor and king at the same time. As crown prince of the German Reich, he had 17 years to settle into the future prospect of ascending the imperial throne that was his father's. There is an incredible difference between this

experience and that of the King (and previously the Prince) of Prussia, who first became Kaiser in the twilight of a rich and varied life.

[...]

It is a peculiar thing—this thing that one would have to call monarchical devotion to the German Kaiser. At some point in the past, when someone appealed to this sentiment in the Reichstag with some political purpose in mind, the Swabian Democrat Payer responded in his typically witty and biting way by declaring the appeal a serious affront to the loyalty he felt to the ancestral sovereign lord of Württemberg, since his loyal heart was devoted to the latter, both as a matter of nature and of law. Actually, a solidly imperialistic heart can no longer be an equally good Württembergian or—as observation shows—Prussian heart. Three hearts and one beat—that is too much to ask for. Consequently, it takes a bit of republicanism to be imperially disposed; it requires pinching something off the state dynasty and transferring it to the imperial head. Hence, a Liberal is more likely than a non-Liberal to have a solidly imperial attitude. There is something inherently republican about every federation, even one consisting of monarchs. The Reich of the allied German governments is a republic of crowned heads, at the top of which stands the Kaiser, known as *primus inter pares*.^[2] The more one thinks in a solidly imperial way, the more one must desire to see this priority become a reality, to become a truly monarchical leadership above all others, not among equals. In order to be solidly pro-imperial one has to forfeit part of his attachment to his own particular local region. Conversely, it follows that zealous state monarchists take a dubious attitude toward the Reich.

Thus, one can rightly say that the best Liberals are also the best imperialists. But of course, this attitude has not grown from any mystical sentimentality. It is the product of political consideration, but one that has been handed down so firmly and is so irrefutably correct that it has itself become part of the emotional makeup. In 1870, anyone who desired the rebirth of Germany as a great and free nation was only capable of understanding that idea under the auspices of Kaiser and Reichstag.

And hence, over the brief course of years, a monarchical cult, powerful and brimming with life, has arisen among the people. It is driven by a curious force, despite the fact that this emperorship did not establish itself in keeping with monarchical traditions, which are, in our history, based on election. Our children grow up in the political religion of imperial rule, in reverence for the person of the Kaiser—and something akin to religion always has to be involved when a particular form of existence is implanted in the realm of reality. Man does not live on the bread of reason alone; the wine of imagination has its proper place too.

Why has the Reichstag had such a difficult time, and why has it failed to keep abreast with Kaiserdom? Precisely because what nourishes feeling does not benefit the Reichstag nearly as much as it does imperial rule. And yet, as little as one can sing the praises of its position, one thing has been accomplished nonetheless: the Reichstag gets most of the publicity and therefore has a much bigger share of the public's ear than the individual state parliaments [*Landtage*], even those in the bigger states. What it lacks above all is the laurels of victories won. Imperial rule and the Reichstag emerged from the same origin and with the same legitimation from the victorious war of nations—nevertheless, it was still the hero in the camp and in arms, not the ruler in council and in the peace of laws, who was the victor. The former was left with the glory, whereas the people's representation remained in the shadows of history. If the parliament of 1848 had survived, it could have developed (thanks to an emergence more wrested than granted) something of the natural strength of its particular ground on its own. However, the fact that it was incapable of standing its ground was precisely due to the victory from which it had resulted, a victory won too easily.

Instead of a natural but weak ground, it is a legitimate but therefore strong ground from which the people's representation arose in 1871. Yet it was not born in the military camp. Casting off the consequences of its origins is not easy; it has become increasingly difficult as all of Europe has been

turning more into a military camp.

NOTES

[1] A reference to the decree to the Reich Chancellor dated March 12, 1888: “In the Reich, the constitutional rights of all allied German governments are to be respected just as conscientiously as those of the Reichstag; however, both are required to show the same respect for the rights of the Kaiser.” (See *Briefe, Reden und Erlasse des Kaisers und Königs Friedrich III.*, collected and annotated by G. Schuster. Berlin, 1906, p. 341.) [Footnote adapted from Gerhard A. Ritter, ed., *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich 1871–1914. Ein historisches Lesebuch*, 5th ed. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992, pp. 254.]

[2] First among equals—trans.

Source: Ludwig Bamberger, *Die Nation*, March 31, 1888, in Ludwig Bamberger, *Gesammelte Schriften*. Berlin, 1897, vol. 5, pp. 189–95; original German text reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter, ed., *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich 1871–1914. Ein historisches Lesebuch*, 5th ed. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992, pp. 253–56.

Translation: Erwin Fink

Recommended Citation: Ludwig Bamberger on Hopes for Parliamentary Government under Kaiser Friedrich III (March 31, 1888), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-1838>> [May 17, 2024].