

Theodor Fontane, “Bismarck Is a Despot” (March 12, 1881)

Abstract

Theodor Fontane (1819–1898) was a novelist and the most important Realist writer in Germany. The following text is taken from a letter he wrote to Count Philipp zu Eulenburg-Hertefeld (1847–1921), a diplomat then serving in the German embassy in Paris and later a friend of Kaiser Wilhelm II. In March 1881, Bismarck abruptly forced Philipp’s cousin, Count Botho zu Eulenburg (1831–1912), the Prussian Minister of the Interior (1878–1881), out of office. Here, Fontane tries to rationalize Bismarck’s despotism as a bulwark against parliamentarization.

Source

To Philipp zu Eulenburg

Berlin, March 12, 1881

[...]

The Chancellor [Bismarck] is a despot; but he has the right to be one, indeed, he *must* be one. If he were not a despot, if he were an ideal parliamentarian who allowed his course to be determined by the dumbest thing there is, by parliamentary majorities, then we wouldn’t even have a chancellor yet, and least of all a German Reich. On the other hand, it is certainly true that only dependent characters or figures of the second and third rank can serve under such a despot, and that any free man would be well advised to resign in good time. In doing so, the free man does what is right for him; but the Chancellor *also* does what is right for him in not allowing himself to be swayed in his actions or inaction.

[...]

Source: Theodor Fontane to Philipp zu Eulenburg, March 12, 1881; original German text reprinted in Theodor Fontane, *Werke, Schriften und Briefe*, edited by Walter Keitel and Helmuth Nürnberger, twenty-one volumes in four sections, section IV, *Briefe*, vol. 3, 1879–1889. Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1980, p. 125.

Translation: Erwin Fink

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