

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

Abstract

Bismarck's ability to manipulate political parties and elections by conjuring up a war scare was amply demonstrated in the winter of 1886/87 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 young people, writes Fontane, are not immune to these dangers.

Source

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 the best at riding and dancing, has his parents' consent to do anything he wants. The rest of the world—if it wishes to have any independent opinion at all—is there merely to be scolded, deemed untrustworthy, and in any event, hit up for money. 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 outwardly apparent. At the same time, German young people across the board are becoming dumber, the idiot who strides ahead is followed by all the others, and independence of thought has been replaced by people who idly toast and parrot one another.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*, edited by Kurt Schreinert. Heidelberg, 1954, pp. 70–71; reprinted in Hans Fenske, ed., *Im Bismarckschen Reich 1871–1890*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978, p. 380.

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