

Württemberg Democrat Ludwig Pfau on German Federalism (1864/1895)

Abstract

Ludwig Pfau (1821–1894) was a poet, journalist, politician, and founder of the satirical magazine *Eulenspiegel*, which he edited from 1848 to 1850. His participation in revolutionary events in Württemberg in 1849 resulted in a twenty-one-year prison sentence for “high treason.” After fleeing to Switzerland to escape the sentence, he went on to France, where he eked out an existence before being pardoned in 1862. Pfau was very popular in his native Württemberg on account of his lifelong struggle against “Caesarism,” militarism, and Prussian arrogance. The essay excerpted below, “Centralization or Federation?” was first published in April 1864. It was republished with significant revisions in 1895. In this essay, Pfau elaborates on the difference between confederation and centralization in Germany. One German state, he argues, should not exert hegemony over the others because it has more bayonets or practices the “rule of the fist.” As a radical democrat, Pfau equates centralization with the worst features of Prussianism, including “blind obedience,” and he attacks his fellow democrats for their willingness to accept “first unity, then freedom.” Pfau suggests that Germany’s history of political disunity has fostered, not hindered, the cause of liberty.

Source

Centralization or Federation?

April 1864.

[...]

The German fragmentation is not limited to the country but extends to the people, and the disunity of minds is the moral obstacle standing in the way of the unity of territories. Absolutist, constitutional, and Socialist currents are splintered by Catholic, Protestant, and philosophical viewpoints in such manifold ways that each party grouping carries within its bosom the most opposing elements. This spiritual fragmentation must be overcome if the material one is to end; the internal unity of the people, however, will not be achieved by concealment and postponement but rather only by disclosure and the conciliation of differences; this alone will be able to exert a beneficial effect on the political development of the nation.

In Germany as everywhere else, the major political question, traced back to its root principle, is this: the divine right of monarchs or sovereignty of the people; authority or self-rule; dogma or reason; force or rule of law; subjugation or freedom. No matter how one may twist and turn it, the same opposition recurs all the time, and, when applied to the structure of the national state, it comes down to centralization or federation. In its essence, the question of German unification does not boil down to monarchy or republic, Austria or Prussia, greater German or small German [*grossdeutsch* or *kleindeutsch*], but to centralization or federation. Anyone who supports the divine right of kings, of authority, of dogma, of force, and of subjugation must logically vote for centralization; on the other hand, anyone who campaigns for sovereignty of the people, for self-rule, for reason, for rule of law, and for freedom must logically strive for federation. For in both cases, one thing is impossible without the others. What human rights are vis-à-vis the community, what freedom of communities is vis-à-vis the individual state, is represented by administrative self-rule of the tribal group vis-à-vis the central

authority of the national state. Without the formation of a proportional number of political centers and focal points of intellectual activity that serve as bases for the creative spirit of the nation and which, by balancing each other, protect the central authority from arbitrary rule, the rational organization of a large state and the free and healthy function of its energies are not possible. The internal activity of the concrete community with its various groups, not some abstract rule of the center acting from the outside, must be the basis of administration. Just as the state is not the end but the means, existing only to guarantee to the individual the exercise of human rights, state unity is also not the rational purpose but only the political means to ensure the independence of the nation with its tribes and communities internally as well as externally. For the ultimate objective of all social institutions is the development of humankind, i.e., the realization of humanity through the rule of the public good—this constitutes, in a word, freedom as the path toward justice.

[...]

The notion of imperial rule carried from the Orient to Rome and disseminated from there across the Occident represents—in addition to the idea of the papacy, its worthy twin—the highly ruinous legacy of revenge that Rome bequeathed to its Germanic vanquishers. Just as the papacy, when stripped down to its pure principles, represents the absolute opposite of reason and the negation of intellectual freedom, emperorship is the absolute opposite of the rule of law and the negation of political freedom. These two fine institutions are mutually dependent and reinforcing: they spell the religious and political worship of idols, universal servitude, and the negation of moral dignity—in a word, the fight against everything that elevates the two-legged mammal to a human and engenders intellect from matter. For just as one does not give moral direction to people by imparting blind belief, one does not do so by imparting blind obedience either; on the contrary, one thereby suppresses the real essence of humanity, free investigation based on reason, and the essential character of morality, free will based on knowledge. This Oriental notion of despotism, which saw humankind chained together politically under the secular rule of an emperor in the same way that it was linked together religiously under the spiritual rule of the pope, has given to that force upon which history relies to carry out state-building a tyrannical character that mocks the natural law of family and tribal formation.

[...]

Centralization and the divine right of kings prevail in Berlin just as much as they do in Vienna. Moreover, his majesty *Non possumus*,^[1] the king and lord who finds his crown on the altar and behaves as infallibly towards parliament and the people as his ministry behaves irresponsibly, is basically nothing but a pseudo-Protestant pope and a czar from the Uckermark.^[2] At the very moment Prussia became a great military power, it abandoned its Protestant mission, which, in its character, is inseparable from free investigation and federative formation. No less than the old Kaiserdom, however, it assumed a historical mission by forming a new center of power in place of the collapsing Reich governance. Yet just as the old emperors disappeared after the national purpose of their existence was fulfilled, reactionary Prussian rule must also step aside so that the great civilizing power of the nation can occupy its place. For with respect to the internal development of the German Empire, Prussian hegemony is not one iota better than the entire Roman imperial lot.

In every state there is a dual tendency from the periphery toward the center and from the center toward the periphery. At the same time that individual groups pursue independence, the collective force pursues unified effectiveness, and the normal result of this process is the equilibrium of nationalities vis-à-vis the outside and the equilibrium of various groups, or Federation, on the inside. Thus, in Germany, too, a new center began taking shape after the nation had given up treasonous imperial rule; and the appropriate punishment that history imposed on Austria for its crime of the Thirty Years' War was the growth of Prussia and the Seven Years' War, which created a sort of anti-Habsburg emperorship. The military glory and autocratic liberalism of Frederick the Great, as well as the patriotism and bravery of the Prussian

people in the Wars of Liberation, contributed their share to advancing the young great state to the leadership of Germany and to binding the wishes of all patriots striving for national unity to Prussia. It was natural that patriotic sentiment would awaken first in the larger and more powerful state; for the smaller states that lack the awareness of strength also lack the initiative for action. Therefore, in the struggle against foreign countries, in the promotion of national spirit, Prussia has made undisputable contributions to Germany. But just as unity is only one aspect of the political task, status vis-à-vis foreign countries is only one aspect of state existence; and if in war the question of external power precedes all others, then in peacetime the internal questions of national organization and development become all the more important, as the strength and health of the nation and ultimately, its position of power, depend on them. If Prussia is the largest German state, this does not prove by any means that it is also the most competent to accomplish—not only externally but also internally—an assignment whose fortunate solution is much more a question of progressive education than of brute force. If Prussia protected the smaller states, then one must not forget, first and foremost, that the small states created Prussia by defending the German Reformation and fighting the Roman imperium; that Prussia has no internal *raison d'être* but is only a stopgap measure temporarily taking the place of the shattered central authority; and that this new Kaiserdom has an even more anti-German (i.e., centralist) attitude toward any German (i.e., federalist) elements in the small states than the old Holy Roman Empire. Without the dissolution of Prussia into its constituent tribes, the formation of a united, integral, and free Germany will be an impossibility.

Caeterum censeo Borussiam esse delendam—besides, I believe Prussia must be destroyed.[3]

The pursuit of equilibrium, which is the soul of historical development, manifests itself in dual form in the external struggles to demarcate territory between one empire and the other, and in the internal struggles to demarcate rights between the individual and the community, between the community and the tribe, and between the tribe and the nation. The external struggle is based on force, the internal one on justice. Both unfold side by side, they take turns coming to the fore, they blend and separate in the course of history; but neither of the two can reach final completion without the other, for this completion is precisely the balancing of the one by the other, i.e., the agreement of domestic and foreign policy, or the reconciliation of force and rights in the complex of justice: Force must protect rights, and rights must sanction force.

[...]

So mind you! The principle of progress and of morality does not rest with the ruler and the external position of power for which he strives, but with the citizen and the internal development of rights that he effects; the higher, decisive, and redemptive idea is represented not by a unity whose ultimate object is power and domination, but rather by freedom, whose ultimate goal is the rule of right and virtue; and as a logical consequence, it is not the state with the most bayonets that stands at the head of the nation, but rather the one with the highest political development, i.e., the greatest degree of internal freedom. In moral affairs, the important thing is quality, not quantity; and the thought of Prussian hegemony is a reversal of all logic and of all history. Prussia was not the starting point for the political and intellectual development of Germany; Prussia was not the one that protected and cultivated it; on the contrary, the entire Prussian hegemony consists much more in leading the reaction. History reveals this to us, while logic tells us that this new large state, precisely because it took the external mission of military power as its major task, had to become incapable of the internal mission of political progress and lawful state planning by force of necessity. One has seen the rule of sabers break up parliaments and constitutions often enough; but when has one ever seen it create such things in a liberal sense or handle them in honest implementation? *O sancta simplicitas!* — What stunning naïveté! The internal illiberality and unlawfulness of Prussian rule is not capable of leading Germany towards its true national destination.

[...]

The narrow-heartedness of small states [*Kleinstaaterei*] has indeed caused our national standing to wither relative to [non-German lands]; on the other hand, it is to particularism alone that we owe the modest degree of rights and freedoms that we possess; to it alone that we owe our liberation from the Roman intellectual yoke and the rich blossoming of our literature and the sciences. This intellectual property is what makes us a nation, not the marvelous military forces of the Prussian king. Despite all of this Enlightenment fuss in Berlin, Prussia has never truly fostered intellectual development because this can only happen through freedom; Prussia has impeded, if possible, the progress of the smaller states and suppressed their demands for liberty by dragging the rest of Germany behind it on the path of reaction, following Russia's tow rope. That Prussia existed on a low cultural plane, even in the middle of the nineteenth century, was demonstrated by the atrocities it committed in Baden, atrocities of which no other German state except Austria would be capable. If the *Gothaers*^[4] in all their innate servility rejoiced at the accession of the prince of Prussia to the throne, then we have forgotten neither the cannon salvos of Berlin nor the bullets of the fusillade^[5] at Rastatt.

Thus, the medium-sized and small states are the starting points and bases of German culture, and only with their help can a successful reorganization of Germany come about. Therefore, the first condition for a healthy popular policy is the abandonment of Prussian hegemony, which is a true national calamity and was entirely condemned by the history of the years 1848 and 1849. After all these experiences, it is incomprehensible that there are still non-Prussians who are able to defend such a ruinous policy. The Prussians themselves have to renounce it; they themselves have to relinquish their hegemony if they ever wish to reach freedom. For this hegemony means exhausting the people's strength to produce a stepped-up military force that is capable of swallowing everything; it means the rule of sabers, the arbitrariness of police, and the breach of law at home; in a word, it means centralization. As long as the Prussians do not renounce their Prussianness and declare their support for federation, they are not ready for freedom.

[...]

"If we only achieve unity, freedom will eventually come about." One has to hear this absurd phrase every day. If the people who say such things would stop playing with their terms like boys with pebbles—without asking where they come from and what they consist of—they would have to reverse the sentence and say, "if we only achieve freedom, we will have unity as well." On the very day the German states become free, nothing will prevent them from calling a parliament and realizing their unity. How, by contrast, is freedom supposed to develop from a unity established by force? And what value would there be in such a settlement, one that would constantly lead to new disagreements until this unity of despotism were eliminated so that freedom could take the place of unity? One has to fight precisely the false unity that lacks structure, and is therefore no unity at all, in order to win true unity that incorporates the multitudes; and if liberty requires unification to continue existing in the face of the other powers, then this is still no reason to purchase the external position of power at the price of ruining the internal welfare. Unity is nothing but a means to an end; the end is always freedom. However, nothing is more foolish and harmful under any circumstances than turning the means into an end, and in political life, there is no error more dreadful than paying for unity with freedom.

[...]

The program of the People's Party—[advocating a] coalition and parliament of the medium-sized states—has been called a *Trias* (triad) and its implementation has been declared impossible. However, the coalition of medium-sized states is not that *Trias* begot by professorial arrogance and princely servitude in the defiled bed of the Revolution: It is not an ultimate goal but only a beginning; not a purpose but a means; it only aims to be an initial core around which the remaining tribes may gather. And when it comes to possibility, is a German parliament—i.e., a representative body of the people that maintains Germanic governance instead of obeying a Prussian one—really possible under the auspices of

Prussia? How do the dear hegemonists actually conceive of their monarchical Prussian German unity? Open Junker rule and disguised law of the jungle! A league of medium-sized states is supposedly impossible without dependence on foreign countries? Does one believe that the foreign countries will stand idly by while Prussia annexes territories to its heart's content? Or that Austria would not want to have a share from its hostile brother? Do these latecomers from a different period not understand that, on the contrary, any national change by means of princely power will bring in its wake inevitable European conflicts, and that there is only one majesty against which the foreign countries do not dare to intervene, namely Its Majesty the People that orders Its highest house itself in the name of Its national sovereignty? We ought to work toward Prussia finally understanding its mission, people tell us. Brilliant logic this is! Thus they deny us the right to constitute ourselves against the will of Prussia; but they expect of us the power to determine Prussia's policy! People do not want to believe that as small states we are capable of developing our political life independently of the great powers, now that we still have our arms and hands free; and they would have us believe that we will wrest this development from the Prussian supreme authority once we have been tied and muzzled by it! Truly: one gets the impression of being in a madhouse.

All of this confusion, however, originates with the famous unanimity of that *Gothaer* comedian-politics and megalomania that only counts bayonets and collects supporters, regardless of whether the bayonets are fighting for or against Germanness, regardless of whether the supporters are for or against popular government. For this reason, above all, clarity must be introduced into the political state of affairs, and this is possible only by means of a rational differentiation of parties. For the moment, the National Association [*Nationalverein*] may be more or less lowering its Prussian flag, but this does not change the fact that its founders and leaders, the *Gothaers*, are the adherents of hegemony, whereas the South German Democrats, who joined mostly with the intention of being agitational, are the ones being led on. Anyone who is for Prussia is necessarily a centralist, thus a reactionary; anyone who is a Democrat can only be a federalist, thus opposed to Prussia. For the time being, only one group corresponds to the reality of the political relationship of great powers and small states, just as it does to the reality of the political opposition between centralization and federation, and that group is a party consisting of Prussia, Austria, and the medium-sized states. The People's Party is by necessity the party of the medium-sized states, i.e., a federalist party; it has to be entirely clear about this and complete its separation from this ambiguous mass of parties as quickly as possible. "Prussia is the largest German state; Prussia is the most powerful German state! Prussian hegemony! Prussian annexation! Prussian unity!" This senseless clamor of coarse political materialism must finally come to an end, at least in the People's Party. Yes, all ye who are deaf and blind: there is a higher law than the law of the jungle according to which the larger devours the smaller. We have to face Prussia as political equals if we wish to reach a successful unity with it; for only one path leads to unity and that is freedom. Strive for freedom above all and everything else will come to you naturally.

Yet how are we supposed to strive for freedom if not through the efforts of each in his own state and through his struggle with his direct enemies; and how are we supposed to strive for unity if not by coping with the individual state authorities that ought to form the confederation? So this means, above all, constitutional struggle with the local governments in order to establish the will of the people; a coalition between those tribes that recognize the will of the people as their supreme law; and a parliament for those states in which the rule of law has gained supremacy. This represents the only practical path for a national policy that is not merely consistent but is also liberal and intends not to betray the Germans living in Austria. For only such a process can secure the survival of the nation and be cosmopolitan at the same time. The peoples display solidarity; others suffer on account of our conditions just as much as we suffer on account of theirs, and they are, consciously or unconsciously, the allies of our freedom. One does not pull freedom out of a hat as one does an imperial crown, however. Likewise, it will not materialize for those who twiddle their thumbs.

[...]

Whatever may come, our efforts constitute preparatory work for the future. History is our providence, the rule of law our pope, and free will our emperor. Reason alone is a product of God's grace, and it is more powerful than all the princes in the world; its will shall be done, and its kingdom shall come to us—Amen.

When we wrote these words 30 years ago, the hegemonists were more than a little infuriated by the sharpness of our Latin motto, although any decent man understood that it was to be taken *cum grano salis*, with a grain of salt, and not in the sense of Cato's destruction of Carthage. It was merely meant to give vivid expression to the correct insight that the development of a liberal Germany would not be possible without the elimination of Prussian despotism; it demanded, albeit with more pugnacious words, the very thing that Friedrich Wilhelm IV promised (but naturally reneged upon) on March 21, 1848, when he said, while parading with the German flag: "Prussia will henceforth be merged into Germany."^[6] And today—when the nation has not heeded the warning voice of federalist democracy; when the argument of bayonets has proven right for the time being; and [when the nation] has not, as we predicted, brought German freedom, but has still taken away what little liberty Bavaria, Swabia, Baden, and Hesse once enjoyed, continuing the traditional absolutist rape of rights and justice—today, we once again write the old aphorism on the old plinth of the new Reich:

"Ceterum censeo Borussiam esse delendam."

This means: "Prussia must be absorbed into Germany."^[7]

NOTES

[1] "We cannot," i.e., the formula of refusal used by the Roman Curia vis-à-vis the secular state—trans.

[2] A northerly region of the Prussian province Brandenburg—trans.

[3] This is a variation on the comment made by the ancient Roman politician Cato regarding Carthage. Cato concluded each of his Senate speeches with these words—trans.

[4] Supporters of the hereditary emperorship in Germany, forerunners of the National Liberals—trans.

[5] Reference to the revolutionaries summarily executed by Prussian troops under then Crown Prince Wilhelm in 1849—trans.

[6] "Preußen geht fortan in Deutschland auf"—ed.

[7] "Preußen muß in Deutschland aufgehen"—ed.

Source: Ludwig Pfau, "Centralisation und Föderation," *Der Beobachter*, April 23/29, 1864; edited and republished as "Centralisation oder Föderation?" in Ludwig Pfau, *Politisches und Polemisches aus den nachgelassenen Schriften*. Stuttgart: Dr. Foerster & Cie, 1895, pp. 151–74.

Translation: Erwin Fink

Recommended Citation: Württemberg Democrat Ludwig Pfau on German Federalism (1864/1895),

published in: German History in Documents and Images,
<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-1822>> [May 15, 2024].