

David Hansemann to Prussian Interior Minister Ernst von Bodelschwingh (March 1, 1848)

Abstract

With revolution spreading in France and about to reach Germany, [David Justus Ludwig Hansemann](#) (1790–1864), an Aachen businessman and politician, wrote a letter to Prussian Interior Minister Ernst von Bodelschwingh, in which he clearly articulated the consequences of three decades of absolutist rule. Highly critical of dynastic hubris, excessive military spending, and bloated bureaucracy, Hansemann rejected the Metternichean system.

Source

When the fatherland is in danger, those who love it, however divergent their political views may have been hitherto, must draw closer together. Here, the most unapologetic candor is the first order of duty. With this short preface, I now turn to Your Excellency so that I might express, as concisely as possible, my views about Prussia's and Germany's situation and about ways to counter looming dangers.

For thirty years, the continental governments have—with force, cleverness, and consistency—pursued a system of bondage of the peoples. In one country, this has been achieved by an unvarnished display of the most unlimited princely power; in others, one has held fast to the principle of absolutism but tried to wrap it in somewhat more palatable forms; in yet other countries, the government has arbitrarily changed a liberal constitution, or one has—by influencing the election of the estates or their composition, or by excluding unpopular members of the estates—twisted and turned it in such a way that one created the majorities one wanted, to the extent that this was possible. And even when these estates expressed their view with large majorities, one has preferred not to regard them as the wishes of the people. One has variously, specifically in German and Italian lands, established principles on the part of the governments, the purpose of which was to give dynasties more significance than the people.

The government ministers who have pursued such a policy, I assume, have done so in the honest conviction that they were following a good and reasonable path; but it is high time to realize that one was very much mistaken; it is now urgent to turn back and take a different path. For what results has this policy produced? In Spain and Portugal, a change in the order of succession. In France, the expulsion of a legitimate dynasty, and now also, at least for the time being, the expulsion of a new dynasty, a branch of the older one, and a state of affairs whose future shape is beyond human foresight. In Switzerland, a stronger formation of the democratic principle in the republics there. In Italy, in all the lands not completely dependent on Austria, there are constitutional monarchies for now—but after the events in France, it is not at all certain whether this kind of development toward freedom will end matters, and additionally there is the liveliest spirit of nationalism, linked with the strongest hatred of the Germans, whom one views as oppressors of Italian freedom.

In Germany, there is a lack of any trust toward the federal authority, from which no development of liberal institutions is expected, not even any protection of the constitutional rights of the individual states, nor any guarantee of German independence abroad. The Confederation's greatest power, Austria, is weakened by the undisguised inclination of its Italian subjects toward independence, by the uncertain loyalty of its Polish subjects, and by the discontent prevailing in the other territories as well. In most of Germany's medium-sized and smaller states, there is partly discontent and partly no real confidence in the governments. Prussia, after Austria the largest of the federal states, is in constitutional labor pains

and for the time being in possession of a constitution about which this much is clear: its supreme principle is to be the unrestrained power of the monarch; a major portion of the Protestant population has had its religious convictions violated, so that thousands are caught between their conscience and secular interests; the constitutional-monarchical party, to which, in a variety of nuances, the greater majority of the independent and discerning population belongs, is unpopular when it makes its views clear; a not insignificant portion of the manual laboring class of the people in the Rhine province is not particularly inclined toward the government; Polish subjects—like the Poles in Russia and Austria—eagerly await the opportune moment for Poland's restoration. All of the German states are bereft of a secure, unified bond, bereft of any kind of institution in which the German nation might be represented, and from which it might expect an impulse and leadership toward the assertion of independence.

Russia: sensing every political confusion in Europe and persistently pursuing its farsighted plans, which are also highly dangerous for Prussia's and Germany's independence. In most countries, the German ones included: during a period of peace lasting over thirty years, the maintenance of a large, costly army, and in relative terms a very costly administration; as a consequence of this: high taxes, which are especially oppressive to the classes engaged in manual labor, and which do more than a little among these classes to spread views about social conditions that are completely unfeasible and dangerous for the existence of any governmental society.

Such are the circumstances as they have developed, notwithstanding the consistent policy of bondage. If experience has furnished any lessons, then it has clearly shown that this policy is pernicious to the people and their princes alike, and that continuing along this path would be the most dangerous experiment that could ever be carried out. Indeed, doubly dangerous now, where in a country as powerful as France, in such a bellicose nation, the republican party has, for the moment, gained the upper hand. Who now cannot envisage the danger that the wars of former times might be renewed and turn out badly for Prussia, for Germany; who does not grasp how weak Austria is in its current condition, so weak that it is completely preoccupied with subduing hostile elements in Italy, even if they receive no support from abroad! There is now great and general anxiety; this is the case chiefly because Germany is in such a dubious position, as a result of the reactionary policy led by Metternich, and as a result of dependence on Russia; and also because it is feared that Germany's princes, instead of using liberty to excite the energies of their peoples, would still rather not abandon that [reactionary] policy and would prefer to rely on Russia's protection. The danger of Prussia's and Germany's situation is heightened even further because, as a result of the principle of bondage and regimentation, the people's practical political reason has not developed sufficiently, so that, for some time, unfeasible and dangerous doctrines are capable of deceiving many, and it is difficult to show what is practicable in its best light. The helplessness of the people is all the more evident because it [the people] does not regard its leaders, the governments, as capable of facing a crisis that they have, to a certain extent, conjured up through their erroneous perception of conditions.

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Source: GStA PK, VI. HA Familienarchive und Nachlässe, Nachlass Hansemann, Nr. 14: Gemeinnützige Unternehmungen, 1847 bis 1848, Bl. 104r-106v (Hansemann an Minister v. Bodelschwingh in Berlin, Aachen, den 01. März 1848 [Abschrift]); reprinted in *Rheinische Briefe und Akten zur Geschichte der politischen Bewegung 1830–1850*, compiled and edited by Joseph Hansen, vol. II.1, January 1846–April 1848. Publikationen der Gesellschaft für rheinische Geschichtskunde XXXVI, vol. 2.1, 1942, pp. 477–80.

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