# German Federal Act (June 8, 1815)

## Abstract

The general agreement between the German states on the founding of the German Confederation was first signed by thirty-five individual states and four free cities (Lübeck, Hamburg, Bremen, and Frankfurt) on June 8, 1815, during the Congress of Vienna. Soon thereafter, Baden, Württemberg, and Hesse-Homburg joined as well. The inclusion of the German Confederation in the Final Act of the Congress of Vienna of July 9, 1815, meant that the Confederation was recognized under international law. The Confederation remained in place throughout the Revolution of 1848–49 and officially ended with the peace treaty signed by Prussia and Austria on August 23, 1866.

## Source

In the name of the Most Holy and Indivisible Trinity:

The sovereign princes and free cities of Germany, animated by the common desire to carry into effect Article VI of the Peace of Paris of May 30, 1814, and convinced of the advantages which would result for the security and independence of Germany and for the repose and equilibrium of Europe from a firm and lasting union, have agreed to unite themselves in perpetual confederation, and have for this purpose invested their envoys and deputies at the Congress of Vienna with full powers.

(There follow the names of the plenipotentiaries)

In accordance with this resolution, the aforementioned plenipotentiaries, after properly accrediting their plenary powers, have agreed upon the following articles:

### I. General Provisions

Art. 1. The sovereign princes and free cites of Germany, including Their Majesties the Emperor of Austria and the Kings of Prussia, Denmark, and the Netherlands; to wit, The Emperor of Austria and the King of Prussia, both acting on behalf of all their possessions formerly belonging to the German Empire,
the King of Denmark on behalf of Holstein, the King of the Netherlands on behalf of the Grand Duchy of Luxemburg,
unite in a perpetual union, which shall be called the German Confederation.

Art. 2. Its aim shall be to maintain the external and internal security of Germany and the independence and inviolability of the individual German states.

Art. 3. All federal members have, as such, equal rights. They all engage alike to maintain inviolate the Federal Act.

Art. 4. The affairs of the Confederation shall be managed by a Federal Assembly [*Bundesversammlung*], in which all members of the union shall vote through their plenipotentiaries, either individually or collectively, in the following manner, without prejudice to their rank.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1) | Austria | 1 vote |
| 2) | Prussia | 1 vote |
| 3) | Bavaria | 1 vote |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 4) | Saxony | 1 vote |
| 5) | Hanover | 1 vote |
| 6) | Württemberg | 1 vote |
| 7) | Baden | 1 vote |
| 8) | Electoral Hesse | 1 vote |
| 9) | Grand Duchy of Hesse | 1 vote |
| 10) | Denmark on behalf of Holstein | 1 vote |
| 11) | Netherlands on behalf of the Grand Duchy of Luxemburg | 1 vote |
| 12) | The Grand Ducal and Ducal Houses of Saxony | 1 vote |
| 13) | Brunswick [Braunschweig] and Nassau | 1 vote |
| 14) | Mecklenburg-Schwerin and Mecklenburg-Strelitz | 1 vote |
| 15) | Holstein-Oldenburg, Anhalt, and Schwarzburg | 1 vote |
| 16) | Hohenzollern, Lichtenstein, Reuss, Schaumburg-Lippe, Lippe, and Waldeck | 1 vote |
| 17) | The free cities of Lübeck, Frankfurt, Bremen, and Hamburg | 1 vote |
| 18) | Total | 17 votes |

Art. 5. Austria shall preside in the Federal Assembly. Each member of the union has the right to make and support propositions, and the presiding state is bound within a determined period to bring them under deliberation.

[…]

Art. 9. The Federal Assembly shall have its seat in Frankfurt am Main. The opening meeting is fixed for September 1, 1815.

Art. 10. The first order of business for the Federal Assembly after its opening will be drawing up the Basic Laws of the Confederation and [composing] its organic institutions with respect to its foreign, military, and domestic relations.

Art. 11. All members of the Confederation pledge themselves to protect Germany as a whole, as well as every single confederated state, against attack, and mutually guarantee their entire possessions, insofar as those are included within the Confederation.
When war is declared on the Confederation, no member shall negotiate separately with the enemy, or conclude an armistice or make peace.
The members of the Confederation reserve for themselves the right to form alliances of all kinds. The pledge themselves, however, to contract no engagement which shall be directed against the safety of the Confederation or that of any individual state within the nation.
The members of the Confederation pledge themselves likewise not to make war among themselves under any pretense, or to follow up their contentions with force, but to submit these to the Federal Assembly. It shall devolve upon this body to attempt arbitration by means of a committee. Should this fail and a judicial decision become necessary, the same shall be effected through a well-organized court of arbitration, to the decision of which the conflicting parties shall forthwith submit.

## II. Special Regulations

In addition to the points determined in the previous articles, which address the establishment of a Confederation, the federal members have agreed to the following items in the regulations included in the subsequent articles, each of which shall be as important as those listed above.

[…]

Art. 13. Estates constitutions will occur in all German states.

Art. 14. In order to provide a uniformly permanent legal situation, in accordance with current conditions in all federal states, for the Imperial Estates [*Reichsständen*] and members of the Reich [*Reichs-Angehörigen*] that became subject to sovereign authority in the year 1806 and thereafter, the federal states agree to the effect:

a) That from now on these princely houses and earldoms be considered no less than part of the high nobility in Germany, and that they continue to enjoy the right to the same rank imparted by the term previously associated with them;
b) the heads of these houses are the lords of the first estate in the state to which they belong; – They and their families comprise the most privileged class in the same, especially with respect to taxation;
c) altogether, with respect to their persons, families, and possessions, all those rights and advantages that originate from their property and its undisturbed enjoyment, and which are not subject to the authority of the state or its higher governmental rights, should be promised to them or remain with them. Among the above-mentioned rights are especially and particularly:
1) the unrestricted freedom to take up residence in any state belonging to or living in peace with the Confederation;
2) in accordance with the principles of the former German constitution, existing family contracts will remain intact, and the princely houses and earldoms will be assured the authority to issue binding decrees concerning their family and property. These will, however, have to be submitted to the sovereign and brought before the highest offices in the land for the purpose of general information and compliance. All previous ordinances to the contrary should no longer apply to future cases;
3) privileged legal venue and exemption from all military obligation for themselves and their families;
4) the maintenance of civil and criminal justice in the first instance and, where the estate is large enough, in the second instance, of forest jurisdiction, the local police, and supervision over church and school matters, and also over charitable foundations. This, however, must occur in accordance with the regulations of state laws, to which they remain subject, just as they do to the military constitution and the supervision of governments over these jurisdictions.
For a closer definition of the above-mentioned authorizations, both generally and with respect to all remaining points, the Royal Bavarian Ordinance from the year 1807 will be the basis and the norm in order to further justify and establish a legal status congruent in all of the German federal states for the princes, counts, and lords under sovereign authority. The former imperial nobility is assured the rights cited in Sub N. 1 and 2: share of wealth in peerage, patrimony, forest jurisdiction, local police, church patronage, and privileged legal venue. These rights will, however, only be practiced in accordance with the regulations of state laws.
In the provinces ceded by Germany through the Peace of Lunéville of February 9, 1801, but which are now reunited therewith, the application of the above basic principles to the former high imperial nobility shall be limited as special conditions there make necessary.

[…]

Art. 16. The diversity of Christian confessions cannot justify any discrepancies in the enjoyment of civic and political rights in the lands and territories of the German Confederation.
The Federal Assembly will deliberate on how to improve, in the most concurrent manner possible, the civic status of adherents to the Jewish faith, and how, with special regard to the same, the enjoyment of civic rights could be obtained and secured in exchange for the assumption of full civic duties in the federal states; yet adherents to this faith will retain rights already granted to them by the individual federal states.

[…]

Source of English translation: the first portion of the text (up to Article 11) was adapted from James Harvey Robinson and Charles A. Beard, *Readings in Modern European History*, vol. 2, *Europe since the Congress of Vienna*. Ginn & Company: Boston, New York, Chicago, London, 1909, pp. 16–20. The remainder of the text was translated from the following German source by Jeremiah Riemer.

Source of original German text: Deutsche Bundesakte (8. Juni 1815), in Karl Bindung, *Deutsche Staatsgrundgesetze*, no. III, p. 19 ff; reprinted in Ernst Rudolf Huber, ed., *Deutsche Verfassungsdokumente, 1803–1850,* vol. 1, *Dokumente zur deutschen Verfassungsgeschichte*. 3rd ed., rev. and enl. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1978, pp. 84–90.

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