

Prince Clemens von Metternich to Friedrich Gentz (June 17, 1819)

Abstract

In the following letter of June 17, 1819, Austrian Chancellor [Prince Clemens von Metternich](#) (1773–1859) responds to a letter from his private secretary [Friedrich Gentz](#). In his letter of June 3, 1819, Gentz had reported on efforts to put constitutional limitations on the authoritarian rule of the European monarchies. Metternich decisively rejected those efforts and advocated for the European monarchies to coordinate to strengthen their power.

Source

I thank you for your very interesting report from the third of this month. I share entirely the views of Adam Müller, and in sharing them, I find myself emboldened in the course I have taken.

That the student shenanigans are waning or directing themselves at something other than politics is not at all surprising to me. That is in the nature of things. The university student, in and of himself, is a child, and the fraternity [*Burschenschaft*] an impractical puppet show. And I have never—to this you are a witness—spoken about students but have focused my attention entirely on the professors. Now, there is hardly a more ill-suited conspirator than a professor, either alone or as part of a group. One only conspires substantially against things and not against propositions. Admittedly, the latter can grow powerful, but this will never be the case if they leave the sphere of theology. Where they are political, they must be backed by deeds, and the deed is the overthrowing of established institutions and the execution of “ôtez vous de là que me m'y mette.”^[1] Scholars and professors do not know how to conduct this sort of business; lawyers, as a group, are better at it. I am acquainted with almost no scholar who knows the value of property, whereas the lawyer caste is constantly meddling in the property of others. Besides, professors are almost without exception theoreticians, whereas there is nothing more practical than lawyers.

Therefore, I have never feared that the revolution might be begotten at the universities, but I am certain that an entire generation of revolutionaries would develop there if no limits were placed on this dreadful malady [*Übel*]. I hope that the worst symptoms of the university malady will be prevented, and perhaps governments' disciplinary measures will contribute less to this than the fatigue of the students, the dottiness of the professors, and the different direction that studies will take—and all this of its own accord. This feeling, however, will never stop me from the progress I am making from above, and the only disciplinary measures that strike me as possible have already been taken.

When we get together, I can give you much reassuring information about the course of affairs, which am not able to relay to you at a distance without an immense correspondence, and which even under those circumstances would have to remain extremely shallow and incomplete.

The greatest, and therefore the most urgent problem today is the press. I am all the more pleased to tell you about the corresponding disciplinary measures that I intend to propose at the Carlsbad Conference, as I would like to have your unreserved opinion about my basic ideas, and I would like you to be in position to actively assist me in Carlsbad, where the business must begin without delay in order to be carried out immediately.

My proposals, briefly, are as follows:

All German princely courts shall agree on disciplinary measures which seem necessary to them for the preservation of public peace and in the pure sense of mutual support, which is the basis of the German Confederation.

They proceed from the basic concept of the federal system, namely that Germany consists of sovereign states that have reached an understanding about mutual protection and assistance, and although they are administratively separate from each other, they appear as a collective power to foreign countries.

The internal tranquility of the Confederation can be endangered and even broken by material encroachments of one German state upon the sovereign rights of another. But it can also be disturbed by the moral influence of one government on others, or by the machinations of some party. If this party is supported by a German state—or even if it only finds refuge in one of them—it may find the means, under cover of this refuge, to apply rebellious pressure on other neighboring states from within that one state, and thus the internal peace of the Confederation is disturbed, and the prince who permits this mischief in his country is guilty of a felony against the Confederation.

All German governments have come to the conclusion that the press today serves a party that undermines all existing governments. The spirit of nationalism that has spread across all of Germany means that it does not rest within the power of the individual states to protect their borders from the larger malady; if this truth holds for individual governments, it holds no less for all German governments, inasmuch as a Single German state—even the smallest among them—might want to exclude itself from common disciplinary measures for the perseveration of general peace.

The Confederation reserves right to call on each individual part to fulfill its common obligations. If any individual part should not be prepared to do this, then the Confederation has the right to force it to do so.

It follows from the federal system, moreover, that everything that is possible in the individual sovereign and European states cannot always be possible in the sovereign German federal states.

Thus, for example, France and England can certainly permit freedom of the press and even establish the principle that this freedom constitutes an indispensable condition for a purely representative system.

In France and in England, laws can be made that restrict the abuse of the press in relationship to the constitution of both states.

Yet I doubt that the one or the other of these states would view it as a basic tenet of freedom of the press to tolerate all works that might be systematically forged and distributed up to the point of generating a rebellion in the one or the other state by a party opposed to the constitution. In this case, the English government would surely lodge a complaint with the French (and vice versa) for tolerating foreign agitators against a friendly state; should the government that is the object of the complaint not provide assistance, then the one lodging the complaint would have the unconditional right to declare war against it and, accordingly, obtain assistance and justice for itself, or at least suspend contact between the two states.

These means of assistance, which are grounded in international law, are not applicable in Germany. Therefore, those issues that can be addressed by European powers by way of force, and what can be reserved for it, must be regulated by preventative laws in the German Confederation.

[...]

NOTES

[1] “Get out of there so I can take your place,” a cynical take on the motive of the revolutionaries—trans.

Source: Clemens Wentzel Lothar von Metternich, *Aus Metternich's nachgelassenen Papieren*, vol. 3, edited by Richard von Metternich-Winneburg. Vienna: Wilhelm Braumüller, 1880–84, pp. 250–53.

Translation: Jeremiah Riemer

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