

Karl August Baron von Hardenberg, “On the Reorganization of the Prussian State” (September 12, 1807)

Abstract

Karl August Baron von Hardenberg (1750–1822), who was influential in the Prussian government before its crushing defeat by Napoleon in 1806–07, became chief minister in 1810 and leader of the reform party until his death in office in 1822. This “Riga Memorial,” which also reflected the ideas of Hardenberg’s reform-minded friends, famously advocated “democratic principles in monarchical government.” Class-bound privileges in access to official appointments and landed property had to end. Legal subjection of the peasantry had to cease. According to Hardenberg, the creation of a parliamentary “national representation” was desirable. The artisan guild-system had to fall; “national character” had to overshadow provincialism; and “the mass of the people” had to engage in the country’s military defense. In Hardenberg’s mind, free market (“laissez faire”) economic policies were needed; the same could be said for religious tolerance, restrained censorship, and the reorganization of local administration, including elements of self-administration.

Source

On the Reorganization of the Prussian State, composed at the request of His Majesty the King [Frederick William III]

I. *General considerations.*

[...] The French Revolution, of which the current wars are the continuation, gave the French an entirely new impetus with its bloodshed and storms. All the dormant powers were awakened, the miserable and the weak, outdated prejudices and failings were destroyed – admittedly, along with much that was good. France’s neighbors and the conquered were swept away by the current. [...]

The delusion that one could most effectively counter the revolution by clinging to the old, and by strictly following the principles asserted in doing so, played a special part in promoting the revolution and in giving the revolution its constantly expanding form. The force of these principles is so great, they are so generally recognized and widespread, that the state which does not adopt them must either look to its downfall or to their forced adoption. [...]

A revolution in the good sense, then, leading straight to the great purpose of the ennoblement of mankind, through the wisdom of government and not through violent impulses from within or without – that is the goal of our guiding principle. Democratic principles within a monarchical government: this seems to me the appropriate form for the current *Zeitgeist*. We must leave pure democracy to the year 2440, if it is made for humans at all. [...]

II. *External conditions.*

[...] Autonomy and independence are now empty phrases.

How shall we get there again?

How do we avoid complete dependency? [...]

As far as I can see, Prussia should follow these principles:

1. Above all else, it must gather the strength to bring its domestic affairs into good order in all respects and to coordinate them in a planned fashion; also, it must arm itself for battle once again without delay, to the extent that the means allow, especially for defense. War can return quickly, and it probably will, and therefore preparation is urgently necessary. The obstacles herein are evident and great, but one must not be deterred, one must be unceasingly active and push forward as far as one can, for everything depends on this.

2. One must not nurture the delusion that one can remain neutral, and one must beware of establishing and announcing a system of neutrality. It does not accord with Prussia's geographical location; it has done a great deal of harm, and is in no way applicable under the current circumstances. Only a large and strong state with a favorable geographical situation can assert neutrality and avoid the entanglements that put an end to it. [...]

III. *Basic constitution of domestic affairs.*

[...] Let us not shrink from what he [Altenstein] called for as the main principle, the highest possible degree of freedom and equality. – Not the lawless and rightly denounced principles: those that needed the bloody monstrosities of the French Revolution as a cover for their crimes, or those that, with fanatical rage, seized not the *true principles*, but *those possible in the developed social condition*, but *only those* that accord with the wise laws of a monarchical state and do not restrict the natural freedom and equality of the citizens more than the stage of their culture and their own welfare demand. [...]

1. The nobility.

[...]

a) Every position in the state, without exception, should be open, not to this or that caste, but to people of merit and ability from all estates. Every post shall be the object of general emulation, and no one, no matter how small or insignificant, should ever have his ambition killed by the thought: you can never achieve that, despite the most heightened zeal, despite your greatest efforts to make yourself qualified. Let no power be impeded in its striving for good! [...]

b) The sole prerogative of the nobility to possess the so-called knightly estates is, as Herr von Altenstein correctly spelled out, so harmful and so little suited to our times and forms that the abolition of this prerogative is entirely necessary, as is the abolition of all other prerogatives which the laws have hitherto accorded only to the nobleman as an estate owner.

[...]

d) With the goal of attaining freedom from dues, various important observations arise. Here, too, complete equality should exist for many reasons. [...]

2. The citizens' estate.

The citizens' estate gains from the opening up of access to all posts, trades, and jobs, and in turn it must, for its part, also relinquish everything that previously excluded other estates.

3. The farming estate.

The most numerous and most important estate in the state, though one that has hitherto been most neglected and oppressed, the farming estate, must necessarily become a preeminent object of the state's attention. The abolition of hereditary bondage must be carried out thoroughly and immediately

by law. Likewise, the laws according to which the peasant is prevented from leaving the peasants' estate should be repealed. The military constitution will not suffer from this, provided that the right regulations are adopted in it. In addition, it should be easier for the peasant to obtain property, whether this pertains to new acquisitions or the purchase of the rights of the manorial lord. It is not necessary to abolish the system of villeinage. Oftentimes it is not only not a burden, but actually more favorable to the person subject to service than a monetary payment, depending on the local circumstances. Changes therein should be left to voluntary agreement, and they should only be promoted by laws, in that one should stipulate the principles under which the dues in kind can be bought off. [...]

4. Creation of the connection between the nation and the state administration.

It is, however, salutary and necessary to bring the nation into closer relationship with the state administration, to make it more familiar with the same and interested in it. The idea of a national representation, as Herr von Altenstein articulated, without abolition of the monarchical constitution, is lovely and useful. The label of a dangerous national assembly does not apply to it. By amalgamating the representatives with the individual administrative agencies, it will provide the usefulness without the disadvantage. It should not form a special constitutive body, no administration of its own [...].

5. Creation of the freest possible use of the powers of the subjects of all classes.

[...] The exercise of personal powers for every trade or craft shall become free, and the impost on the same shall be the same in the cities and the countryside. The abolition of the guilds and taxes, if not all at once then gradually, as Herr von Altenstein indicates, would have to be stipulated, as would the possible elimination of all older monopolies. [...]

7. Means to an end.

I am in full agreement that one must not do any violence to the provincial character, and that one must not, out of an overwhelming urge to force everything into one form, especially a form that is unsuitable, set up all institutions and implement all regulations in the same way everywhere. But it strikes me as wise to imprint a single national character upon the whole, and to gradually work, those maxims notwithstanding, toward that goal, which can also be done without coercion. Accordingly, I would not maintain the administration of the provinces; I would divide and name the administrative departments in accordance with natural conditions and place a chamber at the head of each. Henceforth, the entire state shall be called *Prussia*. [...]

IV. *Military system*

[...] 1. Number and composition of the army. a) Regular troops, b) Land regiments or reserves c) rural contingents, volunteer corps.

It is entirely necessary to immediately assemble as many forces as possible by whatever means, since a situation in which a new war becomes unavoidable can arise again very easily and quickly. [...] In terms of regular troops, one would have to add perhaps 45,000 infantrymen and 25,000 cavalymen, and in addition the necessary artillerymen, engineers, tunnelers, sappers, pontoon-builders, etc. In addition, however, I would propose 80,000 men as infantry reserve troops or land regiments, and in order to make our defense all the more secure, I would let the entire body of the population participate, and I would endeavor to get them more interested in it. To that end, the cities and the countryside – here meaning primarily estate owners and officials – shall be called upon to set up voluntary corps, not for external use, but merely to serve for the protection of their own property. [...]

2. Obligatory military service.

Military conscription would be entirely changed. All previous exemptions would be abolished, without exception. Everyone who is not employed in service to the state in some other way would have to be obligated to real military service in the regular and reserve forces.

Every dishonorable form of punishment, caning, running the gantlet etc., is eliminated [...]

11. Education and training to the soldier's estate

Given the great importance of the soldier's estate, attention to the upbringing of the state citizen must in general already be aimed at giving everyone an education directed at this as well as a sense of patriotism and a sense of obligation to defend the fatherland. Special educational institutions for the military, both for the lower and higher sciences and the individual branches of the same, are important and necessary. [...]

V. Domestic Regulation

[...]

1. Agricultural regulation

With agricultural regulation, the elimination of obstacles by itself will achieve everything one could ask for, and spread activity and life everywhere. This includes especially freedom of trade and equality in regards to this with the cities. [...] Free sale of the products is the second chief requirement. If other examples and advanced scientific culture (which, like the institutions of learning, will follow by themselves) are added to this, then agriculture, this main pillar and source of national prosperity, will surely increase and secure the latter enormously. [...]

3. Trade regulation

When it comes to trade regulation, one observes above all *laissez faire*, which is what a deputy of the merchant class told Colbert as his expert testimony when the latter asked him for it. [...]

Facilitating trade and traffic through the construction of roads, internal shipping, the improvement of seaports and shipyards, and also the promotion of sea-going shipping and trade treaties, where this is advisable and possible, is of great importance. [...]

10. Fine arts and sciences

[...] Our chief maxim also applies to the sciences and arts. Simply remove the obstacles, the guild spirit, the positive opinions and prescriptions, and everything will progress easily and rapidly!

Much has been written and debated about freedom of the press and teaching. I think one says it all by stating: it should be as expansive as circumstances possibly permit. Circumstances alone, with the directives of a wise government, must decide the rare exceptions. For example, it can be a necessary measure to spare a foreign state or its mighty ruler so as not to bring great evil upon the fatherland. However, writings that merely seduce people to crude sensuality must be denounced by censorship.

[...]

VII. Religion.

[...]

8. The state shall exercise tolerance; it shall not interfere in matters of conscience and shall tolerate

every religious service that does not cause a public nuisance and disturb others; it shall not persecute any religious sect unless it acts against the civic order. There is nothing wrong with the state giving preferential care to a religious party that it deems useful and in this sense treats as the reigning church. – In Prussia, that includes both Protestant religions. [...]

IX. *Managing affairs.*

[...] I very much question whether it is advisable for the district authorities [*Kreisbehörden*] to be made up solely of those chosen by the communities and for them to serve entirely without compensation. To me, it seems better for the state to employ a paid, fully qualified, permanent district head [*Kreisvorsteher*], whose status would not be considered in his employment, and to appoint, alongside him, two unpaid elected representatives, who would be given the right to block directives that do not seem useful to them until a decision is reached by the highest authorities.

[...]

Conclusion and epilogue regarding external conditions.

[...] Herr von Altenstein asserts very correctly what can be done immediately under all circumstances: the firm determination, adoption, and promulgation of the chief principles upon which the system is based; especially

1. the abolition, if possible, of the difference between estates, also with respect to a better military establishment;
2. the proposed regulations and decrees on account of the freedom of the subjects and of acquisition;
3. the urgent organization of the military system, new conscription arrangements etc.;
4. freedom of trade and security installations on a domestic level;
5. the necessary overview in the entire financial field, the debt system, the searching out of extraordinary money sources;
6. the organization of the highest administration, the decrees and pronouncements on general principles, the determination of principles concerning pay, pensions. –

Source: Georg Winter, ed., *Die Reorganisation des Preussischen Staates unter Stein und Hardenberg*. Part 1, Volume 1 (Publications of the Prussian State Archives 93). Leipzig: Hirzel, 1931 (reprint: Osnabrück, 1982), pp. 313–24, 330–36, 353 f., 357, 360–62; reprinted in Walter Demel and Uwe Puschner, eds., *Von der Französischen Revolution bis zum Wiener Kongreß 1789-1815*. Deutsche Geschichte in Quellen und Darstellung, ed. Rainer A. Müller, Volume 6. Stuttgart: P. Reclam, 1995, pp. 87–97.

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