

Karl August von Hardenberg, Prussian Statesman (c. 1810)

Abstract

Karl August von Hardenberg (1750-1822) was appointed to the Prussian foreign ministry in 1798; from 1804 to 1806, he served as foreign minister and strove to secure territorial gains for Prussia in return for neutrality *vis-à-vis* Napoleonic France. Dismissed twice at Napoleon's behest, Hardenberg worked behind the scenes for Frederick William III (r. 1797-1840) to promote Prussia's recovery after its devastating defeat at the battles of Jena and Auerstedt in 1806. In 1810, Hardenberg succeeded Karl Baron vom und zum Stein (1757-1831) as Prussian chancellor. Stein's administration had abolished juridical serfdom among the Prussian peasantry and introduced elected municipal self-government. Hardenberg's cabinet subsequently abolished guild monopolies in favor of a liberal market economy, extended citizenship and (on conditional terms) civil rights to Prussia's Jewish population, introduced a new state-funded system of public education from elementary school to the university level, administered the conversion of noble-dependent peasant farms into freehold property, and introduced a reformed tax system. Like Stein and other reformers, he aimed at the promulgation from above of a constitution with new parliamentary organs but suffered defeat in the conservative reaction that spread throughout Germany and Europe after 1815.

In foreign policy, he adopted a cautiously supportive stance toward France before aligning Prussia with the anti-Napoleonic coalition in 1813. Prussia took the lead in organizing the military forces and campaigns that led to Napoleon's expulsion from Germany. The Prussian army was co-victor, alongside Wellington's British soldiers, against a resurgent Napoleon at Waterloo. These accomplishments enabled Prussia to make valuable territorial gains, notably the acquisition of the industrially important Rhineland and Westphalia, at the Congress of Vienna in 1814-15. After 1819, Hardenberg's reform program stalled as conservative circles supported the Prussian king in acquiescing to Austrian Chancellor Clemens von Metternich's repression of liberal, democratic, and popular nationalist movements.

Source



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