"Declaration of Sovereignty of the [German] People Between the [Rivers] Meuse, Rhine, and Mosel" (November 13, 1797)

Abstract

The numbers of German partisans of the French Revolution – German Jacobins – are difficult to establish, but in the early and mid-1790s they gained strength, especially in west and south Germany. In 1792-93, they succeeded in establishing a short-lived republic in the important city of Mainz. Later, they aimed at the creation of a German republic on the left bank of the Rhine, but when French policy decreed the annexation of this "cisrhenian" region into the French Republic, the German Jacobins shifted their ground accordingly, producing the statement excerpted here as a "declaration of sovereignty," that is, secession from the Holy Roman Empire. This text illustrates the various strands of criticism of Old Regime Germany and liberal-democratic Enlightenment ideology that comprised the German Jacobins' exalted mentality.

Source

Straining under the yokes of our tyrants, oppressed by the despotism of the monarchy, we kissed the hand that struck us, and we did not even dare to think of a revolution [*Umwälzung*] that could end all of that evil. Our oppressors saw that their crimes went unpunished; blinded by this, they pondered the means of spreading their limitless despotism further, and they allied themselves with the conspirators whom a reborn France had disgorged from its crotch [*Schoße*]. Then, at once, the French people shook the kings on their wobbling thrones, the people were witnesses to the victories of the great nations who proclaimed the inalienable rights of humankind [*unveräußerlichen Rechte des Menschen*]. Restored to our natural state, we say: the tyrants are only great because the people kneel before them. Stand up, people! And the tyrants will lay at your feet. We are thoroughly convinced that no public good [*Gemeinwohl*] is conceivable without the exercise of democratic principles. We have been taught by experience that the people who deviate from such principles can never accomplish the goals that they have articulated in forming an association [*bei der Bildung in Gesellschaften*]. Thus, we have decided to break the chains of slavery which have hitherto shackled us.

For these reasons […]

The patriots, who represent the people between the Meuse, Rhine, and Mosel [Rivers] by way of the reconquest of inalienable natural rights, in consideration of all this, proclaim before the Supreme Being the sovereignty of the people, and declare as follows:

1) The former princes or so-called sovereigns of these territories are enemies of the nation and banished from this region forever;

2) The inhabitants of the aforementioned territories are free and independent;

3) The people accept as a guarantee of their freedom the French constition, which is founded on the rights of man and equality;

4) The people between the Meuse, Rhine, and Mosel are united, in order to secure their political independence, with the French people, and they incorporate their territory into that of the [French]

republic, which, after it has subdued the kings, will make known its decisions [*auch ihren Beschlüssen bei denselben Achtung zu verschaffen weiß*];

5) The union with the German Reich is abolished forever.

6) The people of these territories will never deny their most sincere brotherly love for the German people, regardless of how much they separate themselves from them, and will seek to carefully maintain the relations between Germany and the French Republic;

7) All military, administrative, and judicial authority stemming from the former princes or the old order, whatever name it may carry, is eliminated [*vernichtet*];

8) Noble titles, orders of [social] distinction, general and special privileges, exemptions, feudal rights, seigneurial dues, tithes of every kind, etc., as well as all institutions that bring about inequality among [people's social] ranks [*Stände*] are and remain abolished;

9) The former princely domains as well as property that supposedly belongs to the church have become property of the people;

10) Measures are to be taken to make payments on the state's debts;

11) Freedom of conscience and the performance of religious services are in the whole extent of the words acceptable, but the state will pay no servant for [performing] them.

Should the inhabitants of these territories slide back under the despotism of their oppressors, against all expectations of success in this bloody war […], then we swear in such case to disregard everything [*hören auf nichts als*] but the fury of desperation and to let ourselves be buried under the ruins of our fatherland rather than be witnesses to the triumph of despotism.

This declaration shall be published and made known in the entire territory between the Meuse, Rhine, and Mosel. It shall be sent to the National Legislature of the French people, to the Executive Directory, to the National Legislatures of the Batavian and Cisalpine Republics, to the Executive Directory of the same, to the Supreme Comander of the Army of Germany, to the President of the National Institute in Paris, to the President of the Intermediary Commission in Bonn, and to the Congress in Rastatt.

Issued in Bonn, on the 23rd day of Brumaire, Year 6 of the French Republic (November 13, 1797), in the name of the plenipotentiary General Committee of all Central Committees of the Federation of Patriots of the Left Bank of the Rhine.

Source: Joseph Hansen, ed., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Rheinlandes im Zeitalter der Französischen Revolution 1780-1801*. Vol. 4. Bonn: Hanstein, 1938, pp. 321–26; 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. 255–64.

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