

# Eugen Richter on the German Nobility (1898)

## Abstract

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Eugen Richter (1838–1906), a liberal intellectual, writer, and politician, criticizes the advantages of noble titles in German society. He explores the origins of noblemen and questions their contributions to nineteenth-century Germany. Even in the opening decades of the twentieth century, nobles enjoyed special privileges and status. Many government positions were closed to those without a title, although, as Richter makes clear, anyone with the necessary financial means could certainly acquire one. There has been an active debate by historians over the extent to which Germany's upwardly mobile middle classes were assimilated into the culture of nobility, with its retrograde attitudes and practices.

## Source

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Nobility.

Nobody is responsible for his name, and no one has the right to infer from an old noble name that its bearer is arrogant and has a domineering personality. By the same token, it is equally unacceptable that any claim to social privilege be derived from a noble name. Should it prove possible, in this day and age, for aristocratic rule to re-emerge temporarily and to seek to assert itself, the blame would fall squarely on the diffidence of bourgeois circles, society's spinelessness, a servile mentality, and thoughtlessness.

Our polity would be in a pitiful state if noble sentiment and the willingness to sacrifice were present most splendidly only in a number of families of noble name. Virtues are sometimes inherited, but so are vices. That applies to noble families as much as to common ones. Quite often, however, inherited vices are joined by individual, personal ones, especially in those who believe they can insist on the accomplishments and qualities of their ancestors. The temptation to do this is all the stronger if the polity or social attitudes grant any kind of privilege to those who bear an old noble name. Often such a name does not even demonstrate a service to the community by the ancestors, let alone by the current bearers of the name. Indeed, noble names of today are found in centuries past on the list of professional highwaymen and robbers. With many we do not know to this day how they acquired a noble name in the first place. Noble names are always handed down without restriction. Some names of the high nobility are found in such numbers that they are never absent from lists with thousands of names, even if they are merely ranking lists or registers of criminals.

Any preferential treatment on account of a noble name is a slight to those whose worth resides in their own person. The community will decline and decay to the same degree that such preferential treatment is generalized. In the years 1806 and 1807, the Prussian state, which rested chiefly on generals of the nobility, collapsed pitifully. The Prussian generals who ignominiously handed the Prussian strongholds over to the French were without exception from the nobility, some from old noble families, while the bourgeois Nettelbeck bravely defended his Kolberg until peace was concluded. The heroes of the Wars of Liberation were also for the most part of simple bourgeois background. Prince Bismarck and Field Marshall Moltke would likewise fail a test of their ancestry, since the mother of each man was a commoner.

Stein's well-known circular of November 24, 1808, described it as the "excellent task of legislation to destroy the disharmony within the people, the struggle of the estates, and to legally create the possibility for everyone among the people to freely develop his powers in a moral direction." Since then, legislation has progressively restricted the privileges of nobility, until the Prussian Constitution stipulated in 1850:

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“All Prussians are equal before the law; privileges of estate do not exist.” The Reich Law Code [*Reichsgesetzbuch*] of 1870 eliminated the revocation of nobility as punishment; it thus decreed that noble scoundrels must remain such, just as bourgeois criminals remain among the bourgeoisie. The Reich Penal Code [*Reichsstrafgesetzbuch*] punishes the bearing of a false name, if it is done vis-à-vis a civil servant. But the Reich Penal Code still permits one distinction, in that it punishes the unjustified bearing of a title of nobility even without this qualification. Moreover, it is still described as an “elevation to the estate of nobility” when individuals are permitted to add “von” or the title of Baron, Count, and so on to their bourgeois names. – In the new Prussian stamp duty law [*Stempelsteuergesetz*], the stamp duty [*Stempelgebühr*] for ennoblement is set at 5,000 marks for the title of Duke [*Herzog*], 3,000 marks for the title of Prince [*Fürst*], 1,800 marks for the title of Count [*Graf*], 1,200 marks for the title of Baron [*Freiherr*], 600 marks for the patent of nobility; one-eighth of the above-mentioned rates are paid for augmenting or changing the coat of arms. Four hundred marks are due for the granting of a patent as a *Kammerjunker* [gentleman of the bed-chamber], 1,200 marks for that as a *Kammerherr* [chamberlain], only 800 marks if the latter was already a *Kammerjunker*. These fees can be waived, however.

After the baleful experiences in the struggle against Napoleon at the beginning of the century, Minister Baron von Stein proposed the abolition of all noble corporations, of cathedral chapters, and of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, since these merely promoted the pride of the nobility. He wrote:

“This large mass of poor, landless, or indebted nobility in Prussia is exceedingly troublesome to the state. They are uneducated, needy, and arrogant; they push into all positions, from court-marshal [*Hofmarschall*] to station-master [*Posthalter*] and police inspector. They stand in the way of all other civic classes through the positions they take away from them by the claims they advance, and they fall below them in their poverty and poor education.”

And State Chancellor [*Staatskanzler*] Hardenberg added in his Riga memorandum: “Every position in the state shall be open not to one class or another, but to accomplishment and ability from all estates.”

However, during the period of the Prussian reaction in the fifties [1850s], efforts were made to revive all kinds of noble privileges in contradiction to the wording of the constitution, or at least its spirit. When the *Herrenhaus* [Upper Chamber] was created, associations of counts [*Grafenverband*] and associations of old noble families were granted a special right of representation.

With the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, originally founded merely to commemorate the earlier Balley Brandenburg, King Friedrich Wilhelm IV sought to create a special noble corporation and to invest it with an importance above all other classes of orders. Bearing the cross of St. John requires old nobility and a certain monetary contribution. The yearly dues for the Knights for Christian Works of Love [*Ritter für christliche Liebeswerke*] is only 36 marks, and the entry fee of 300 or 900, as the case may be, entitles the member to receive proud and splendid insignia. With such contributions, a number of small hospitals with a few hundred beds have been established over the years.

Immediately after acceding to the throne on August 23, 1888, Kaiser Wilhelm II, while participating at a chapter of the Order of St. John in Sonnenberg, said in a speech before the banquet: “To elevate and to strengthen and develop the people morally and religiously, I need the support of its noblest members, my nobility, and I see a substantial number of the same united in the Order of St. John.”

Actual discrimination against the bourgeoisie in the higher administrative service is explicitly admitted in an article in the free-conservative *Post* of May 24, 1897, as the reason for the discontent in many circles. This article lamented and detailed the arrogance of the administration towards the judicial system:

“This is connected with the further fact that when it comes to both acceptance into the administrative service and advancement in the same,

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certain social classes, especially the nobility and the large landowners of the eastern provinces, are given preferential treatment, and more importance is placed on family connections, external appearance and dashing looks, than on scientific and practical ability. Here, too, we are no doubt often dealing with exaggerations and the generalization of isolated occurrences. Still, this critique does not appear to be entirely unjustified. [...] The temptation to give special consideration to members of respected families, especially of the district, is equally great. To this are added student fraternity and other similar connections, as a result of which the next generation of our officials in the general state administration has indeed become more exclusive and lopsided than is in the general interest or in the interest of the administration itself. Moreover, it is beginning to appear that when it comes to the filling especially of so-called political administrative posts that also involve representation, the nobility is, at the very least, not suffering any disadvantage.”

Among the students of jurisprudence, from which all higher administrative officials with the exception of a small portion of the *Landräte* [district presidents] are drawn, only 5.8% are noblemen compared to 94.2% commoners. However, in the department of the Prussian Ministry of the Interior, the ratio within the various ranks stands as follows: of the *Regierungsassessoren* [government assessor], 32% are noble and 68% are common; of the *Regierungsräte* [members of government boards], upon whom the real work rests, only 17.7% are noble and 82.3% are common; among the *Oberregierungsräte* [the head clerks of government boards, who rank above the *Regierungsräte*] the ratios are 34.4 and 65.6%; among the *Landräte*, 52.8% are noble as opposed to 47.2% commoners; and among the *Regierungspräsidenten* [presidents of government boards], the ratio is no less than 76.5 versus 23.5%.

Between the end of 1893 and February 1897, 103 *Landrat* positions were filled, with 71 (69%) coming from the nobility and 32 (31%) from the commoners. In the year 1894-95, however, 608 *Regierungsassessoren* passed their state examinations [*Staatsexamen*], among whom there were only 185 (31%) noblemen. When it comes to appointments of *Landräte*, the ratio is therefore exactly reversed. In Pomerania, only 3 of 28 *Landräte* are commoners, in Brandenburg only 6 of 28.

As far as the officer corps is concerned, according to the rank and billeting-list of 1897, only 16% of generals were commoners. Among the 74 generals of the infantry, cavalry, and artillery, only a single commoner is found alongside ten men only recently ennobled. In total, however, noblemen account for only 44% of the officers in the Prussian army. Thirty regiments, along with the battalions of the Chasseurs of the Guard [*Gardejäger*], the Riflemen of the Guard [*Gardeschützen*], and the Third Chasseurs, have not a single common officer. The number of regiments that have only noble second lieutenants has grown from 15 to 17, which means that apart from the three battalions, a total of 47 regiments accept only the sons of the nobility. Moreover, in one regiment there is not even a single common reserve officer. Among the entire Guard Cavalry there are only 14 reserve officers with a common name. All in all, the Guard has 93% noble officers, though these are found chiefly in the Guard Foot Artillery, among the Guard Pioneers, and in the Guard Train.

The ministry has repeatedly tried to deny the fact that a distinction is made between the nobility and commoners in the army. In the officer corps, it has said, whether someone is a nobleman or a commoner matters as little as it does whether he has blue or brown eyes. But no minister of war can deny that a common officer can become at most a commanding general, but certainly not a lieutenant in the First Guard Regiment on Foot. The number of regiments that have exclusively noble officers does not sufficiently reflect the true state of affairs, for there are also a number of regiments in which the dominance of the nobility is outwardly masked through the toleration of an isolated common officer, the so-called “Konzessions-Schulze.”

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A discussion of a statistic on noblemen in Berlin in the *Deutsches Adelsblatt* in August 1897 referred to those who had turned to common professions – merchant, factory owner, agent – as “failures in life.” As some kind of consolation for these “failed lives,” it added that the “class of merchants is elevated” through the addition of noblemen “who know no profit mania.” The *Korrespondenz für Zentrumsblätter* reminded those gentlemen of the *Deutsches Adelsblatt*, with their old family trees, that among their ancestors there may have been those who lived “by their wits” in their day and who honored the principle:

Riding and robbery is no disgrace  
The noblest of the land do it

by lying in wait for the merchant along the road and taking his goods by force. Most peculiar is the sentence about the noblemen who “know no profit mania,” if one thinks of the gentlemen who now set the tone in the Agrarian League [*Bund der Landwirte*], and who in their demands à la Kanitz and the like are surely the eminent masters of noble modesty and the most avowed despisers of this “profit mania.”

Moreover, the *Adelsblatt* complains that 202 noblemen in Berlin are forced to make do with lower civil service jobs, and it says about them: “Here one can speak with even greater justification of a social decline.”

Source of original German text: Eugen Richter, *Politisches ABC-Buch: Ein Lexikon parlamentarischer Zeit- und Streitfragen*. 9th edition, Berlin, 1898.

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