



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 2. From Absolutism to Napoleon, 1648-1815

Frederick William III's Call for National Mobilization, "To My People" (March 17, 1813)

Following Napoleon's defeat in Russia in 1812, there was growing pressure in Germany for a war to expel the French. This eventually led to the Battle of Leipzig (1813), where Prussia and Austria and their German allies defeated Napoleon's forces. In advance of this "War of Liberation," the Prussian king had issued an unprecedented appeal for voluntary enlistment in the Prussian army, whose ranks had been thinned at France's behest in the Treaty of Tilsit of 1807. This text illustrates the ideological and rhetorical process by which the Prussian state tradition was nationalized from the top down: the kingdom's former subjects now figured as free citizens to whose loyalty to "king and fatherland" the government appealed.

To My People

There is no need of explaining to my loyal subjects or to any German, the reasons for the war which is about to begin. They lie plainly before the eyes of awakened Europe.

We succumbed to the superior force of France. The peace which followed deprived me of my people and, far from bringing us blessings, it inflicted upon us deeper wounds than the war itself, sucking out the very marrow of the country. Our principal fortresses remained in the hand of the enemy, and agriculture, as well as the highly developed industries of our towns, was crippled. The freedom of trade was hampered and thereby the sources of commerce and prosperity cut off. The country was left a prey to the ravages of destitution.

I hoped, by the punctilious fulfillment of the engagements I had entered into, to lighten the burdens of my people, and even to convince the French emperor that it would be to his own advantage to leave Prussia her independence. But the purest and best of intentions on my part were of no avail against insolence and faithlessness, and it became only too plain that the emperor's treaties would gradually ruin us even more surely than his wars. The moment is come when we can no longer harbor the slightest illusion as to our situation.

Brandenburgers, Prussians, Silesians, Pomeranians, Lithuanians! You know what you have borne for the past seven years; you know the sad fate that awaits you if we do not bring this war to an honorable end. Think of the times gone by, – of the Great Elector, the great Frederick! Remember the blessings for which your forefathers fought under their leadership and which they paid for with their blood, – freedom of conscience, national honor, independence, commerce, industry, learning. Look at the great example of our powerful allies, the Russians;

look at the Spaniards the Portuguese. For such objects as these even weaker peoples have gone forth against mightier enemies and returned in triumph. Witness the heroic Swiss and the people of the Netherlands.

Great sacrifices will be demanded from every class of the people, for our undertaking is a great one, and the number and resources of our enemies far from insignificant. But would you not rather make these sacrifices for the fatherland and for your own rightful king than for a foreign ruler, who, as he has shown by many examples, will use you and your sons and your uttermost farthing for ends which are nothing to you? Faith in God, perseverance, and the powerful aid of our allies will bring us victory as the reward of our honest efforts.

Whatever sacrifices may be required of us as individuals, they will be outweighed by the sacred rights for which we make them, and for which we must fight to a victorious end unless we are willing to cease to be Prussians or Germans.

This is the final, the decisive struggle; upon it depends our independence, our prosperity, our existence. There are no other alternatives but an honorable peace or a heroic end. You would willingly face even the latter for honor's sake, for without honor no Prussian or German could live. However, we may confidently await the outcome. God and our own firm purpose will bring victory to our cause and with it an assured and glorious peace and the return of happier times.

FREDERICK WILLIAM

Breslau, March 17, 1813

Source of English translation: James Harvey Robinson, *Readings in European History, A collection of extracts from the sources chosen with the purpose of illustrating the progress of culture in Western Europe since the German Invasions*, Volume II. Boston, New York, Chicago, London: Ginn & Company, 1904-06, pp. 522-23.

Source of original German text: *Schlesische Privilegirte Zeitung* from March 20, 1813, no. 34, pp. 1.

Reprinted in Walter Demel and Uwe Puschner, eds., *Von der Französischen Revolution bis zum Wiener Kongreß 1789-1815 [From the French Revolution to the Congress of Vienna, 1789-1815]*, *Deutsche Geschichte in Quellen und Darstellung*, edited by Rainer A. Müller, vol. 6. Stuttgart: P. Reclam, 1995, pp. 413-16.