



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 4. Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany, 1866-1890

Heinrich von Sybel to Hermann Baumgarten on the Founding of the Reich (January 27, 1871)

The proclamation of the German Empire on January 18, 1871, fulfilled a goal that German liberals had pursued for decades: national unity. The highly emotional nature of this event comes through in the following letter, which was written by Heinrich von Sybel (1817-1895) just nine days after the “Kaiser Proclamation” at Versailles. A doyen of Borussian historiography and a National Liberal parliamentarian, he freely confessed tears of joy to his liberal colleague Hermann Baumgarten (1825-1893). Sybel spoke for countless other liberals who proclaimed the dawn of a new era almost overnight. At the same time, however, he also wondered whether Germany’s future could possibly hold another liberal goal equally worth pursuing.

Bonn, January 27, 1871

[. . .] I have promised the local Military Hospital Association a “public lecture on a patriotic topic.” And then there are preliminary inquiries as to whether I would accept a seat in the first German Reichstag, and who the devil would say no to that?

Dear friend, here I am writing about all of these trivialities and my eyes are constantly straying to the special edition of the newspaper and tears roll down my cheeks. How does one deserve God’s grace for experiencing such great and monumental things? And how will one live afterwards? What had been the object of all wishes and desires for twenty years has now been fulfilled in such an incredibly wonderful way! Where now, at my advanced age, can one derive a new purpose for the rest of one’s life?

Source: Private Papers of Heinrich von Sybel.

Original German text reprinted in Julius Heyderhoff, ed., *Die Sturmjahre der preußisch-deutschen Einigung 1859-1870. Politische Briefe aus dem Nachlaß liberaler Parteiführer* [*The Tumultuous Years of Prussian-German Unification 1859-1870. Political Letters from the Private Papers of Liberal Party Leaders*], vol. 1. Bonn and Leipzig: Kurt Schroeder, 1925, p. 494.

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