



Volume 4: Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany, 1866-1890 German Conservative Party, Founding Manifesto (June 7 / July 12, 1876)

After several years of liberal political dominance in the German Empire, debilitating internal wrangles, and alienation from Bismarck, German Conservatives realized in the mid-1870s that they had to unite on a national basis. The founding manifesto of the German Conservative Party was drafted by party leader Otto von Helldorff-Bedra in close consultation with Bismarck in the late spring of 1876; it was approved at a meeting in Frankfurt am Main on June 7 and published with 27 signatories from Germany's largest federal states in July. This manifesto became the party's *de facto* program and was not revised until 1892. It offers a clear rejection of liberal principles, emphasizing instead the preservation of states' rights and local self-government, a strong monarchy and state authority, and "ordered" economic freedom. Although the Conservatives were trying here to appear up-to-date – national and flexible – they could not bring themselves to hide their fundamental opposition to universal suffrage, Bismarck's *Kulturkampf*, and socialism. This statement of principles concludes by noting that German Conservatives will have to exert their influence both upward toward the government and downward toward the people. The party's subsequent history demonstrated that the party never squared the circle in pursuing these ends. Conservatives benefited from anti-socialist and nationalist election fever, as in 1878, when they won 59 Reichstag seats with 13% of the popular vote, and in 1887 (80 seats, 15%). In 1890, however, the party shrank to 73 seats, supported by about 12% of German voters.

We turn to the conservative elements of the German Reich with the following appeal for united work towards the great common goals:

1. We aim, on the basis of the Imperial Constitution, to strengthen and consolidate the unity won for our Fatherland along national lines. Within this unity, we want the legitimate independence and characteristics of the individual states, provinces, and tribes [*Stämme*] to be preserved.
2. We can only recognize as beneficial such a development of our public and civil legal systems which, based on factual and historical foundations, meets the requirements of the present time and thus ensures the constancy of our entire political, social, and intellectual development.
3. We ascribe decisive significance to the monarchical foundations of our national life and to a strong state authority. We want a full, legally guaranteed degree of civic freedom for everyone and the effective participation of the nation in the legislative process. In the provinces, districts,

and municipalities, we advocate a type of self-administration not based on universal suffrage but on the natural groups and organic divisions of the people.

4. We regard the following principles as the basis of any healthy development and as a guarantee against the increasing degeneration of the masses and the progressive erosion of all social bonds: the religious life of our people, the preservation and refortification of the Christian and ecclesiastical institutions that support it, and, above all, the confessional Christian elementary school. We regard the state-church conflict exploited by liberalism as a *Kulturkampf* [cultural struggle] against Christianity as a calamity for the Reich and the people, and we are prepared to cooperate in ending it. On the one hand, we grant the state the right to order its relations with the church by virtue of its sovereignty, and we will support state authority against any opposing claims by the Roman Curia. On the other hand, we are opposed to any religious despotism and thus to any infringement, through state legislation, on the sphere of internal ecclesiastical life. In that respect, we are prepared for a revision of the laws passed in the course of this struggle. In that same respect, we will also champion the legal rights of the Protestant church to organize its internal institutions independently.

5. In contrast to the boundless liberties found in liberal theory, we advocate an ordered type of economic freedom in all matters of work, trade, and commerce. We demand from economic legislation even-handed consideration for all occupational activities and fair acknowledgement of the interests of landed property, industry, and the artisanal trades, which at the moment are not being given their due. Accordingly, we demand a step-by-step removal of the preferential terms granted to large finance capital. We demand remedy for the severe damage caused by exaggerated economic centralization and the lack of firm regulations for agriculture and small businesses. In particular, we insist on the revision of the laws on the right of abode and freedom of occupation, as experience has made these revisions imperative.

6. We consider it our duty to counter the excesses of the false socialist doctrines, which are driving an increasingly large proportion of our population into hostile opposition to the existing order. We are convinced that the mere unleashing of individual energies cannot result in sound economic development; rather, the state must not refuse the task of protecting honest, gainful employment against excessive speculation and unsavory stock-market dealings; we believe the state also has a responsibility to ensure and promote the moral and economic condition of workers, as well as peaceful cooperation between employers and employees, by means of effective factory legislation.

We ask anyone who agrees with these principles and who is prepared to serve as their advocate both upwards and downwards, to unite into a firmly united Party of German Conservatives.

Source: Ludolf Parisius, *Deutschlands politische Parteien und das Ministerium Bismarcks* [*Germany's Political Parties and Bismarck's Ministry*]. Berlin, 1878, pp. 219-20.

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