



Volume 2. From Absolutism to Napoleon, 1648-1815

Karl Baron vom und zum Stein, Petersburg Memorandum (September 17, 1812)

Karl Baron vom und zum Stein (1757-1831) is closely associated with the Prussian reforms of the early nineteenth century and the resistance against the Napoleonic domination of Germany after the Prussian defeat at the battle of Jena in 1806 and the humiliating Peace of Tilsit in July 1807. He entered the Prussian civil service in 1780 and occupied a variety of important offices over the subsequent decades. He served, for instance, as Prussian minister of finance and economics from 1804 to January 1807 and was appointed first minister by King Frederick William III on September 30, 1807. In November 1808, he was forced to resign this post when French occupiers learned from one of his letters of plans for a national uprising. In the aftermath, the outlawed Stein fled to Austrian Bohemia and eventually to Russia in 1812, where he prepared the anti-Napoleonic uprising and established ties with the future Prussian ally, Czar Alexander I (r. 1801-1825). In this September 17, 1812, memorandum to the czar, Stein delineates the elements of a post-Napoleonic order involving a consolidated Germany but dismisses the possibility of restoring the old imperial constitution. His central concern was to convince the czar of the viability of a future German state worth liberating from French occupation and also to prevent the destruction of Prussia in the process.

The fortune of arms will decide the fate of Germany and the constitution that it will be given. The security of all of Europe demands the dissolution of the disgraceful Confederation of the Rhine. But what shall take its place? Here only general observations can be made. One opinion expressed by many is that the old imperial constitution should be restored. But the question always remains – which one? The one on which the Peace of Westphalia was based? Or the one created by French supremacy and the slavish spirit of the German princes in 1802?

It is in the interest of Europe, and especially Germany, that Germany be elevated to the position of a robust state in order to resist France's supremacy and be able to retain its independence, to keep its great rivers and its coasts accessible to England, to protect Russia against French invasions. To this end, one can elevate the land between the Oder, the mouth of the Rhine, the Maas, and the Mosel mountains into a single potent state, or one can divide Germany, thus circumscribed, along the course of the Main into Prussia and Austria, or one can place various parts of this country, for example, into a subordinate relationship to Austria and Prussia; all of these arrangements give Germany more power than it has previously had, but the restitution of the former imperial constitution is impossible.

That constitution was not the result of a nation guided by experience and knowledge of its own interest; it sprang from the impure sources of influence of power-hungry Popes, from the perfidy of rebellious magnates, from the machinations of foreign powers. [. . .]

After such sad experiences, would we want to restore the old, rotten state constitution, if we could? And could we?

Thus, we must, if only to preserve some kind of unity, destroy Prussia, restore the clerical and small secular princes, the Imperial Knights, the Imperial Cities, and the Imperial Courts, for only these tools could give Austria sovereignty over the influence and prestige of the supreme power. But we would also have to reestablish the estate-based constitution in these lands and put limits on the despotism of the small princes. If this were possible, though it cannot be done without resistance from Prussia, Bavaria, Saxony, Württemberg and so forth, goals that are greater and more beneficial to the nation could be achieved through a different, better way.

For this condition will always remain deficient, Germany will remain weak in its defenses against foreigners, internally fragmented into middling powers – one consequence of their formation is the loss of nationality, of the military spirit, the destruction of patriotism; interest is diverted from the general, from the large to the small administrative district of a tiny land, to the doings of small courts, whose multiplication at the same time spreads moral degeneracy, courtliness, servility, and destroys the sense of independence and autonomy of the individual.

But if I could recreate a state of affairs from the past, it would be the one under our great emperors of the tenth to thirteenth century, who kept the German constitution together through the mere nod of a head and gave foreign nations protection and laws.

The land between the Oder, the Rhine, the Mass, Switzerland, Italy, and the Austrian states would then form one large whole, which would contain within itself all the physical and intellectual elements necessary for a happy, strong, free state, and which would be able to resist the wild rustlings of France. A sense of autonomy would be reawakened in the nation, its powers would not be squandered on small matters, it would occupy itself with its great interests, and such a state of affairs is suitable to the wishes of the majority, who see their princes only as bailiffs of foreigners, [rulers] who strive to eke out their miserable existence through the blood of their subjects.

If the restoration of the old monarchy is impossible, the division of Germany between Austria and Prussia is preferable to the restoration of the old imperial constitution, even if it should prove necessary to restore the expelled princes, in order to spare their egos, and to place them into a federal relationship with the part of Germany that surrounds them. [. . .]

Source of original German text: *Freiherr vom Stein: Briefe und amtliche Schriften* [*Baron vom Stein: Letters and Official Writings*], vol. 3, edited by Erich Botzenhart, newly published by Walther Hubatsch. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1961, pp. 742 ff.

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