



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

Max von Forckenbeck to Franz von Stauffenberg on the Need for National Liberal Opposition  
(January 19, 1879)

By 1879 Bismarck was not only seeking to restrict the influence of the Reichstag but also concentrating on weakening the National Liberal Party by turning to conservative allies. In the following letter, Berlin's lord mayor Max Forckenbeck (1821-1892) writes to his liberal colleague Baron Franz Schenk von Stauffenberg (1834-1901). Forckenbeck calls for resolute resistance against "the Bismarck system" and the general reactionary mood.

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[ . . . ] I completely agree with your assessment of the situation.

The Bismarck System is developing terribly quickly in exactly the way I always feared. Universal compulsory military service, unreasonable and exorbitant indirect taxes, a disciplined and humiliated Reichstag, and public opinion that is corrupted by the battle of all material interests and thus helpless – that indeed constitutes the politics of powerlessness of the peoples, the destruction of any constitutionally liberal development, and at the same time a dreadful danger for the entire Reich and the young [imperial institution of] Kaiserdom.

Now then, is the National Liberal Party with its current politics, its current program, and its current composition a suitable instrument to counter such dangers? Are we not being led deeper into the quagmire step by step? Is pure opposition not becoming a duty?

These questions have tormented me continuously amidst the pressure of difficult business. On the morning of the second Christmas holiday [26 December], [Eduard] Lasker paid me a visit. His first words revealed that the very same questions were upsetting him terribly. We arranged to meet on New Year's Eve. Attending this meeting were Benda, [Heinrich] Rickert, [Ludwig] Bamberger, Lasker, and me. [Karl] Braun had been invited but did not show up. The draft legislation about the Reichstag's mandate to discipline its own members was not yet known in detail. We agreed that Lasker should draft a short program.

- a.) Resistance to the arbitrary domestic policies of Bismarck that rush everything and force everything into a state of confusion.

b.) *Only the requirements* of the Reich can determine the extent to which indirect taxes will be increased, *therefore* [they can be raised] *only* to the level necessary to make up for the matricular contributions [*Matrikularbeiträge*].\*

c.) No import duties can be imposed on essential commodities, grain, and livestock. For this reason and in general, [there is] opposition to the letter dated 15 December.

Signatures ought to be collected in support of this program, as in the case of the Declaration by the 224;\* at the same time, preparations are being made for the meeting of the Economics Society that Bamberger has just reported on. Lasker is supposed to be kept out of it. What has been disclosed is that he is firmly committed to taking the floor in the Reichstag in defense of free trade and is already working on his speech.

Although [Rudolf von] Bennigsen and [Johannes] Miquel ought to be notified and consulted, proceeding by ourselves and without them was also considered as a possible avenue.

I do not know what has become of the matter. The odd reference in the *National-Zeitung* leads me to surmise that the negotiations continue and that an agreement with Bennigsen has been reached.\*\*

There is, admittedly, a very reactionary current in the country, but signs of resistance are growing. Under no circumstance will I swim with this reactionary tide; I would rather perish, as you write. I have not the slightest desire to serve as [Reichstag] President in the midst of such developments. I believe that the time has come for firm and clear opposition, alongside many or few – as long as they are like-minded people. [ . . . ]

The Kaiser and Crown Prince treated me very graciously on the occasion of my arrival and reception [on assuming his duties as mayor]. During the City Council reception, the Kaiser even expressed his wish that I stay on as President of the Reichstag. (But this is confidential). My position as Lord Mayor of Berlin is truly beset with many difficulties, but that will not be the decisive consideration.

By the way, in Berlin a lively opposition sentiment predominates in all circles; at the same time, it is connected with a great fondness for the Kaiser, who once again appears to be very sprightly and rides around in his open carriage – as if nothing had happened.\*\*\*

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\* Contributions to the Reich budget by the individual German states derived from their own tax revenues – trans.

\* This figure should probably be 204 or fewer – trans.

\*\* Bismarck had offered the National Liberal Party leader a cabinet post in order to secure his party's support, but Bennigsen rejected the offer – ed.

\*\*\* Forckenbeck's reference here is to the two assassination attempts on Kaiser Wilhelm I's life in May and June 1878 – ed.

Source: From the private papers of Franz von Stauffenberg.

Original German text reprinted in Julius Heyderhoff and Paul Wentzcke, eds, *Deutscher Liberalismus im Zeitalter Bismarcks. Eine politische Briefsammlung* [German Liberalism in Bismarck's Era: A Collection of Political Letters], 2 vols., vol. 2, *Im Neuen Reich 1871-1890. Politische Briefe aus dem Nachlaß liberaler Parteiführer* [In the New Reich 1871-1890. Political Letters from the Private Papers of Liberal Party Leaders], ed. Paul Wentzcke. Bonn, Leipzig: Kurt Schroeder Verlag, 1926, pp. 230-31.

Translation: Erwin Fink