



Volume 4: Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany, 1866-1890  
Liberal Secessionists' Declaration (August 30, 1880)

Bismarck's attempts to restrict constitutional liberties and his turn from free trade to protectionism increased pressure on the National Liberal Party to defend liberal principles. However, the following declaration by liberal "Secessionists" illustrates that, in their opinion, the National Liberal Party had been unable to remain resolute in these areas. The 28 Reichstag and Prussian *Landtag* deputies who signed this declaration split off from the party to form the Liberal Union (also known as the "Secession"), which won 46 seats in the Reichstag elections of 1881 with about 8% of the popular vote. It eventually fused with the German Progressive Party in March 1884 to form the German Radical Party.

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The experiences of the past two years have increasingly forced upon us the conviction that, in light of fundamentally altered circumstances, the National Liberal Party is no longer sustained by the unity of political attitudes that was once its *raison d'être* and the exclusive source of its influence.

Based on this conviction, the undersigned declare their departure from the National Liberal Party.

A secure course for the smooth and progressive development of our national unity – which is rooted in the Kaiser and the imperial constitution – can only proceed from a truly constitutional system, which the German liberal party has pursued without deviation since its inception. The united cooperation of the liberal party in essential questions and the cessation of confusing and exhausting struggles between different liberal factions, however, appear to us as absolute prerequisites to reach the desired goal.

Firm resistance to the retrograde movement and adherence to our hard-won political liberties is the joint responsibility of the entire liberal party.

Closely connected to political liberty is economic freedom; only on the secure basis of economic freedom can the material welfare of the nation be guaranteed in the long run.

Only by preserving constitutional rights, only by rejecting all unnecessary burdens on the people and all indirect taxes and duties that shift the tax burden primarily to the disadvantage of the poorer classes, may the reform of imperial taxes go forward.

For Germany, more than any other country, ecclesiastical and religious freedom is the basic prerequisite for internal peace. That freedom, however, has to be guaranteed and ordered through independent constitutional legislation. Its implementation should not be made dependent on ulterior political motives. Inalienable constitutional rights must be preserved and schools must not be subordinated to church authority.

We are prepared to consent to an accord on this basis. For us, however, as members of a liberal party, these views will be the determining ones under all circumstances.

[Initially, the names of 25 representatives of the Reichstag and the Prussian House of Representatives followed, to which Rickert added Struves' name.]<sup>\*</sup>

Source: From the private papers of Franz von Stauffenberg and Eduard Lasker. Text of declaration sent by Heinrich Rickert to Franz von Stauffenberg, August 29, 1880.

Original German text printed 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. 356-57.

Translation: Erwin Fink

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<sup>\*</sup> Sent to Stauffenberg by Heinrich Rickert; to Lasker by Gustav Lipke. Addendum by Rickert on August 29: "I am sending you in all haste the attached declaration, which will be published Tuesday morning in Berlin. Yesterday, I sent the necessary copies to Lipke in Berlin with the request, that he also send them to the foreign newspapers (to Becchioni and the Augsburg Zeitung in Munich). At the moment, we have not included anyone other than Parliamentarians. A declaration of agreement from the others should follow. We want to talk things through further in Berlin on September 8. In Prussia we must now organize *quickly*. What we do not accomplish at the outset will be left undone." [Note from Heyderhoff and Wentzcke, eds., *Deutscher Liberalismus im Zeitalter Bismarcks. Eine politische Briefsammlung* {German Liberalism in Bismarck's Era: A Collection of Political Letters}, pp. 356].