

The Prussian Reformers and their Impact on German History

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I

NOTHING IN HISTORY IS SO UNCERTAIN as posthumous fame. On 26 November 1822, the Prussian chancellor of state, Karl August, prince of Hardenberg, died. Two and a half weeks later the *Vossische Zeitung* published a brief factual death-notice. It was only a few days later that a comment appeared in the form of an occasional poem of homage in French addressed to Frederick William III, which ended with the banal sentence: '*Le choix d'un grand ministre est l'éloge des rois.*' (The choice of a great minister is the panegyric of the kings.) What a change of time and mood during the few years which had passed since the reform period and the wars of liberation against Napoleon! Freiherr vom Stein, who had long since withdrawn embittered to his estate at Cappenberg, felt like a relic of times past: 'among a strange race, incomprehensible to us and we to it, isolated, without friends or joys'.¹ The age of Prussian reforms seemed to be definitely over, an episode comparable to the Confederation of the Rhine or the earlier reforms under Joseph II in Austria — partially successful in the short run, but in the long run without major consequences. The poet Ernst Moritz Arndt wrote that nowadays time buries its own creations so fast, that what happened yesterday is forgotten today.²

But then, after a generation, the legend began. The turning point lies in the years preceding the revolution of 1848. It was then that people began to remember the deeds of their ancestors, whose blood had been shed in vain during the campaigns of 1813 for the completion of the Prussian reforms, thwarted by the opposition of the nobility and the king. From this perspective, the struggle of 1848 appears as a continuation of the war of liberation,

¹ Stein to Gagern, 19 July 1824, in Freiherr vom Stein, *Briefe und amtll. Schriften*, adapted by E. Botzenhart, re-edited by W. Hubatsch (10 vols, Stuttgart, 1965), vi, p. 740.

² E. M. Arndt to G. A. Reimer, 6 Jan. 1826, in A. Dühr, ed., *Briefe* (2 vols, Darmstadt, 1973), II, p. 326.

both as a struggle for civil liberty and constitutional law as well as for national independence.

The legend of the lost paradise of civil liberty contrasts with the myth of Reform Prussia as the predecessor of Bismarck's state: Heinrich von Treitschke, the prophet of the *kleindeutsch* German state of 1871 (i.e. Germany without Austria), wrote:

Only now did Prussia truly become the German state... The old, hard, belligerent Prussianism and the wealth of ideas of modern German education finally merged and did not separate again... In this period of suffering and self-contemplation all the political ideals came into being which the German nation is still trying to realize today.³

Half a century later, Max Weber evaluated the exemplary character of that period differently. Just as after 1806, so also after the First World War, according to Weber, Germany would be reborn out of the greatest humiliation: '110 years ago we showed the world that we — and only we — could be one of the great cultured peoples even under foreign domination. We will do this again! History, which has already given us a second youth, will grant us a third'.⁴ The youth of that period, however, did not care for the ideals of the liberal university professor; they preferred those of the man from Braunau who also was dreaming of a revival. In the mid-1920s Adolf Hitler shouted:

What a difference! The state of 1806 was a state that had sadly capitulated on all fronts, an unprecedented wretchedness of civic spirit dominated, and then, in 1813, a state emerged with a glowing hatred of foreign rule and with a patriotic spirit of sacrifice for its own people... What had really changed to make that possible? The people? No, in their innermost being they remained as before, it was only only their leadership that had passed into new hands⁵

Twenty years later the *Führer* led his people into the worst catastrophe of their history. Whereas in the western zones of post-war Germany the memory of the Stein and Hardenberg era had to succumb to the harsh verdict of the victors against Prussia as a whole, their memory was carefully cultivated in the eastern zone under Soviet influence. The reforms, which according to the dictum of Friedrich Engels marked 'the beginning of the bourgeois revolution in Prussia',⁶ were interpreted in the German Democratic Republic as a precondition for the wars of liberation, which, as a 'national-democratic uprising' under the benevolent auspices of the Prussian-Russian alliance, was considered unreservedly as a positive feature of the

³ H. von Treitschke, *Deutsche Geschichte im 19. Jahrhundert* (9th edn, 5 vols, Leipzig, 1913), I, pp. 269 f.

⁴ M. Weber, *Max Weber. Ein Lebensbild* (Tübingen, 1926), p. 649.

⁵ G.L. Weinberg, ed., *Hitlers zweite Buch* (Stuttgart, 1961), p. 145.

⁶ F. Engels, 'Die Bewegung von 1847' in *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe*, 1 Abt. (Glashütten im Taunus, 1970), VI, p. 391.

national heritage — an interpretation that has been used by the East German regime to reinforce its weak bases of legitimacy.⁷ In the Federal Republic of Germany, on the other hand, interest in the Prussian reform movement continued to diminish until the present day. Often a certain helplessness could be observed in the evaluation of the Prussian reformers and their accomplishments, as became clear in the great exhibition about Prussia mounted in Berlin in 1981. The organizers were content to display a few portraits of the reformers and a few reform edicts without any commentary whatsoever.⁸ The information about the period conveyed in modern German school books concentrates on the promise of civil liberty, and a constitution is in the foreground — the ‘black-red-gold’ aspect of the Prussian reforms, in other words. It is not without reason that the revolution of 1848 serves as the starting point for the only noteworthy work in German historiography on the subject since 1945 that presents the Prussian reforms in a wider historical context — Reinhart Koselleck’s classic work *Preußen zwischen Reform und Revolution* (Prussia between reform and revolution).⁹

Indeed, this broad theme not only serves to establish political legitimacy and solidarity. Hardly noticed by the public at large, there has been an increasing tendency to fundamental criticism of the achievements of the Prussian reform movement, primarily in those circles of historians with sociological or economic orientation. In addition to inquiring into the failure of the reforms and the reasons, the question of the social and political costs has also been examined. An impoverished rural population was wiped out, while at the same time the old landed aristocracy had the opportunity, in alliance with the bourgeois land speculators, to transform itself into a new agrarian capitalistic class. As a result of the reforms, a ruling cartel of state bureaucrats and landed aristocracy emerged, which succeeded in suppressing liberal and democratic mass movements. When considered in this light, the reform era appears to be a turning point in German history, the time when Prussian Germany left the mainstream of Western democratic development in order to take a different and peculiarly German path, leading away from Western ideals of liberty and equality.¹⁰ This approach, which has attempted

⁷ F. Straube, ed., *Das Jahr 1813. Studien zur Geschichte und Wirkung der Befreiungskriege* (Berlin, 1962); P. Hoffmann et al., eds, *Der Befreiungskrieg 1813* (Berlin, 1967); J. Streisand, *Deutschland 1789–1815* (Berlin, 1977).

⁸ Critique in H. Schulze, ‘Preußen — Bilanz eines Versuchs’, *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, 11 (1981), pp. 649 ff.

⁹ R. Koselleck, *Preußen zwischen Reform und Revolution. Allgemeines Landrecht, Verwaltung und soziale Bewegung von 1791 bis 1848* (Stuttgart, 1967).

¹⁰ W. M. Simon, *The failure of the Prussian reform-movement, 1807–1819* (New York, 1955); H. Rosenberg, *Bureaucracy, aristocracy and autocracy: the Prussian experience, 1660–1815* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958); A. Gerschenkron, *Bread and democracy in Germany* (New York, 1966); D. S. Landes, *Der entfesselte Prometheus* (Köln, 1973).

to place the Stein-Hardenberg reforms in line with the disastrous *Sonderweg* (special German path), leads logically to Barrington Moore's thesis that the victims of National Socialism were also among the special costs of the Prussian reforms.¹¹

It is not the accomplishments of the reformers which are uncertain; an abundance of documentary publications and detailed monographs inform us extensively, even if not yet sufficiently, of what really happened during the Prussian reform period. It is not the facts which are problematic, but rather the connections, the interpretation, and the consequences of these facts. Thus, I would like to attempt to find the answers to two questions: What is the basic character of the Prussian reforms if one strips them of the accidental, individual, and unsuitable trimmings and treats them as a whole? And what were the consequences for German history?

II

In an anonymous article that appeared in Heinrich v. Kleist's journal *Berliner Abendblätter* on 3 December 1810, one can read the following:

The law is the great inner bond of a nation. It embraces it in ever tighter circles which ultimately terminate in a single, lucid point, in the king. All members of a society must agree, despite other differences of opinion, on their religious veneration for him . . . In the strong and general will to maintain this law or to perish with it rests nationality or patriotism.

The anonymous author, apparently a leading reform bureaucrat, was not talking about the metaphysics of the state, as the tone of the article might lead one to think, but about the edict on taxes and tariffs of 28 October 1810, by means of which Prussia was to make the transition to freedom of trade.¹²

The substance was as interesting as the tone. The problems involved were very serious: the undeniable necessity of increasing the revenue of the pauperized Prussian state in order to pay the debts of the Napoleonic era. The funds were to flow as a result of a new tax to be levied on trade, itself to be expanded by the new freedom of trade, from which everyone could now profit, if they paid the appropriate tax: 'the entrance ticket to a free economy'.¹³ Here the reasons of simple economy prevailed, just as was the case with the edict of 9 October 1807, which emancipated the peasantry, and whose preamble consisted mainly of reflections on the 'principles of an orderly state economy'.¹⁴ It was the same with Stein's municipal ordinance of

¹¹ B. Moore, *Soziale Ursprünge von Diktatur und Demokratie. Die Rolle der Grundbesitzer und Bauern bei der Entstehung der modernen Welt* (Frankfurt a. M., 1969), esp. pp. 577 ff.

¹² *Preußische Gesetz-Sammlung* (GS) (1810), pp. 79 ff.

¹³ Koselleck, *Preußen*, p. 588.

¹⁴ GS (1806-10), pp. 170 ff.

19 November 1808¹⁵ — an especially urgent measure, because the state could not fulfil its financial obligations resulting from its guardianship of the cities.¹⁶ It is true that the reforms of Stein of 1807 and 1808, unlike those of Hardenberg, were not embedded in a grand plan to renew the economy and state finances, but they served one great goal, as did the reorganization of government authorities and later the judicial, educational, and military reforms: namely, to increase the efficiency of the Prussian state in order to master the acute emergency.

This was not really a programme without precedent, for Prussia was not alone in Napoleonic Europe in this respect. The states of the Confederation of the Rhine also initiated reforms, in some respects sooner and more comprehensively. In fact, the Prussian reformers did not consider themselves to be an *avant-garde*: on the contrary, they were aware that they faced strong competition. In a letter to his wife written immediately after the Peace of Tilsit of 1807, the financial official Stägemann, one of the leading reform bureaucrats, wrote enviously that in Napoleon's kingdom of Westphalia 'all the privileges of the nobility have been done away with, and the Junkers are going to be treated just like the sons of the bourgeois or of peasants. That's not bad'.¹⁷ It was the explicit intention of Napoleon to make model states out of Westphalia and Berg. They were to become not only the imperial bases of personnel recruitment and of power, but also attractive examples of the realization of the promises of the French Revolution — of liberty and equality for all citizens. At least with respect to the legal and administrative reforms, this was accomplished so well that after the wars of liberation the victorious Prussian state adopted essential elements of the Napoleonic code in its western provinces. But the great difference, and what still today accounts for the myth-inspiring potential of the Prussian reforms, and not of those of Napoleon in Germany, is not just that history loves the winner, but that the Stein-Hardenberg reforms, for all their acknowledged dependence on French and English models, had their own peculiar tone, their own pathos, their own substance, and — in contemporary parlance — their own spirit.

If one wants to discover the bases of the Prussian reform legislation, one will have to inquire beyond the actual lawmakers. Of course, the names Heinrich Friedrich Karl Reichsfreiherr vom und zum Stein and Karl August Graf von Hardenberg are inseparably linked, and rightly so, with the events.

¹⁵ GS (1806–10), pp. 324 ff.

¹⁶ J. Ziekursch, *Das Ergebnis der friderizianischen Städteverwaltung und die Städteordnung Steins, am Beispiel der schlesischen Städte dargestellt* (Jena, 1908).

¹⁷ Stägemann to his wife, 21 Sept. 1807, in F. Rühl, ed., *Aus der Franzosenzeit. Ergänzungen zu den Briefen und Aktenstücken zur Geschichte Preußens unter Friedrich Wilhelm III. vorzugsweise aus dem Nachlaß F. A. von Stägemann* (Leipzig, 1904), pp. 39 f.

The edicts and laws which were passed during their terms of office as ministers bear their personal mark, and the intermezzo of Dohna-Altenstein's ministry of bureaucrats from 1808 to 1810 demonstrates that without an outstanding personality as minister, who could confront the king independently and without fear, the reform spirit petered out quickly.

Personalities were programmes, and the fact that Stein held conservative views, whereas Hardenberg was strongly influenced by the liberal, rational concepts of society of West European provenance, has led to the opinion that one should distinguish between two phases of the reforms, each of which is associated with the name of the leading statesman.¹⁸ This impression is intensified by the strong personal dislike of the two men for each other, especially on the part of Stein. Whereas Hardenberg accused his famous predecessor of political naïvety in dealing with France and of a preference for ineffective collegialism in administration, Stein literally hated the chancellor of state, accused him of political opportunism, even of having affairs with women, and upon hearing the news of Hardenberg's death, he went so far as to congratulate 'the Prussian monarchy on this happy event'.¹⁹

But, despite this first impression, Stein and Hardenberg were not the only actors on the stage. Behind and beneath them was a collective partner, the Prussian reform bureaucracy, a group of state and financial councillors, war and domain councillors, chiefs of police and officers, who after the defeat were concentrated in East Prussia and exercised an essential control over the reconstruction process. The names Altenstein, Frey, Gruner, Hippel, Raumer, Scharnweber and Schön or Scharnhorst, Boyen and Gneisenau are representative of many others. But they, too, did not constitute a small, socially isolated elite, as the literature would sometimes lead one to think. They were part of a social stratum that had started to emerge in Prussia since the middle of the eighteenth century.

This stratum was socially quite heterogeneous. Its members included bureaucrats, protestant ministers, university and secondary school teachers, doctors and other high-level professionals. One thing united them all: they exercised their offices and professions, not on the basis of their social standing, but on the basis of their qualifications; and the proof of their qualifications was their academic education. The growing need of the absolutist state for a capable, trained intelligentsia from which to recruit its top officials contributed decisively to the creation of this social stratum. Since 1755 lawyers in Prussia had had to pass a state examination, and from 1770 such an examination was required for all high-ranking officials. And to render such an education possible, the state established educational institu-

¹⁸ B. Vogel, 'Reformpolitik in Preußen 1807-1820', in H.-J. Puhle and H.-U. Wehler, eds, *Preußen im Rückblick* (Göttingen, 1980), pp. 202 ff.

¹⁹ Stein to Merveldt, 6 Dec. 1822, in Freiherr vom Stein, *Briefe*, vi, p. 138.

tions which surpassed in number and quality those of most other European countries. A bourgeois career was thus possible, and it was much sought after. The poet Clemens von Brentano, not without good reason, ends his poem in which he lists all the troubles of youth, with the comforting lines:

So geplackt und so geschunden
Tritt man endlich in den Staat.
Dieser heilet alle Wunden
Und man wird Geheimer Rat.
(So tormented and mistreated
Finally one joins the state;
It heals all wounds
and one becomes a privy councillor.)

The service nobility, too, was forced to comply with bourgeois standards of education in order to attain higher posts in the administration. By virtue of the Prussian Land Law, this group was clearly privileged: it enjoyed tax exemption, was not obliged to perform military service and was subject directly to the jurisdiction of the royal courts. In this way an educated elite, comprising both nobles and commoners and existing outside the structure of the traditional estates, came into being, bound to the state and the crown more strongly than the upper bourgeoisie in France.

In this respect Prussia was more modern than the otherwise so exemplary France of the *ancien régime*. In France the constant feeling of being underprivileged and socially discriminated against created a revolutionary bourgeoisie. Such a feeling did not find fertile soil in Prussia. It is true that the Prussian bureaucratic and cultural bourgeoisie was pervaded by the universal ideas of the Age of Enlightenment. In particular, the fact of its not belonging to the corporate estate of the nobility was always a painful thorn. The untenability of the social and economic order of the eighteenth century, which so strongly negated the great idea of man's freeing himself from his 'self-induced state of immaturity' (Kant), was a commonly held view among these citizens, who had an insatiable hunger for reading and discussion. Therefore, almost all the intelligentsia of Prussia welcomed the French Revolution, but at the same time they were absolutely convinced that such an event did not need to take place in Prussia. Thus, the Prussian Foreign Minister Hertzberg found general consent when in a widely circulated speech delivered a few months after the outbreak of the French Revolution he categorically said that 'the Prussian government is not despotic'.²⁰ That it was not despotic was proved by a whole series of reforms before the Reform,

²⁰ 'Abhandlung über das dritte Jahr der Regierung Königs Friedrich Wilhelm II., um zu beweisen, daß die Preußische Regierung nicht despotisch ist, verlesen am 1. Oktober 1789', quoted in K. von Raumer, 'Zur Beurteilung der preußischen Reform', in *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, 18 (1967), p. 344.

starting with the General Land Law of 1794, followed by the abolition of hereditary serfdom for domain peasants, and extending to the beginnings of the tax and tariff reforms upon Stein's appointment as finance and economics minister in 1804.

In this manner, the bond between the state and the functional bourgeoisie was as strong as ever, although the increasing ossification, the structural immobility, of the system dating back to Frederick the Great, was painfully felt. It is interesting to read the articles of Lieutenant Hermann von Boyen — the later reformer — published in the magazine *Bellona* in 1795, in which he demanded, true to the spirit of the times, the abolition of corporal punishment for Prussian soldiers, to witness only eleven years later how a military machine held together by the fear of inhuman punishment was defeated by the French citizen-soldiers. This feeling of banging one's head in vain against the unyielding walls of tradition and convention was common to thousands. In addition, there was the change of consciousness from the generation of Frederick the Great to that of 1800, promoted by the radical upheavals in America, France and throughout the European states-system. Having experienced terror and genocide in the name of all virtues of the Enlightenment, there was in particular a spiritual reaction, begun in the 'Storm and Stress' period, in which the independent individual sought to emancipate himself from the cold abstractions of enlightened reason. The twenty-year-old Alexander von der Marwitz, the brother of the leader of the Junker opposition to the Hardenberg reforms, and Rahel Lewin's closest friend, wrote:

It is a peculiar and truly mystical time in which we live . . . What shows itself to the senses is weak, incapable, completely rotten. Yet streaks of lightning dash through our souls, premonitions appear, thoughts wander through time and show themselves, like ghosts in mystical moments, to the more profound minds. These thoughts signify a sudden transformation, a total revolution, where everything from the past will disappear like land swallowed by an earthquake, while the volcanos bring forth new land in the face of dreadful destruction.²¹

It was a generation that lived with a strong consciousness of a current crisis and a new age to come. In contrast to the previous generation, to which for example Hardenberg belonged, it had a world view that was not rational, but poetic; and the promise of the Enlightenment appeared to it as shallow and discredited. The creation of a state as a more perfect machine to make mankind happy was no longer considered a worthy goal, but the aim was rather the unity of all social strata, the grand harmony of the state and the people. These two generations, that of the fifty-year-olds and that of the

²¹ Von der Marwitz to Rahel Levin, 2 Jun. 1811, in F. Kemp, ed., *Rahel Varnhagen Briefwechsel mit Alexander von der Marwitz* (Munich, 1966), p. 67.

thirty-year-olds, determined the political climate and the agenda after the catastrophic defeats of 1806 and 1807, when only rudimentary state institutions existed, and the authority of the estates, the powers of inertia and tradition, suddenly lost all influence. The hour of the educated bureaucracy had come, the hour for which it had had to wait so long, and the reforms were carried out in the spirit of this social group.

Despite the dejection after a defeat the like of which Prussia had never experienced before, the catastrophe was also seen as an opportunity to create something new. The theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, who belonged to the circle around Stein and Humboldt and was to have a decisive influence in establishing the University of Berlin in 1810, wrote the following lines to a friend only a few weeks after the battle of Jena:

Everything political which existed until now was generally speaking untenable, a hollow appearance. The separation of the individual from the state and the educated person from the masses was so great that neither the state nor the masses could acquire any significance. This state of affairs must be eliminated and only upon its ruins can truth establish itself. An all-encompassing regeneration is a necessity and will develop on the basis of these facts. One cannot discern yet how, but we want to take part in it.²²

The mood among that educated elite was nearly revolutionary, but only nearly. Their loyalty to the king and to the state remained firm and unflinching, and the means of bringing about the change were determined by the bureaucratic origins of the reformers: by the law. The anonymous reformer-bureaucrat, author of the article cited above, who demanded religious veneration of the law, corresponded fully to the revolutionary pathos of the time: in France it was 'the holy guillotine' which was the instrument of inexorable progress, in Prussia it was the 'holy law'.

There are other characteristics of the reformers' rhetoric which remind one of revolutionary models: for example, their talk of nationality created by the common will to uphold law. One immediately thinks of Rousseau's '*volonté générale*'. And our anonymous author continues: this nationality 'will prosper best in a state in which the freedom of its members is not limited more than is necessary and by the equal rights of the others and in which the laws increasingly shed any arbitrary element.'²³ To get rid of tyranny, to achieve general and equal civil liberty — that is nothing less than revolutionary, and that was intended. According to the military reformer Neithart von Gneisenau, the only means by which Prussia's former power could be regained was to reach into 'the arsenal of revolution'.²⁴ Thus it was planned

²² Schleiermacher to Georg Reimer, 14 Nov. 1806, in K. Griewank, ed., *Gold gab ich für Eisen* (Leipzig, 1939), p. 150.

²³ *Berliner Abendblätter*, 3 Dec. 1810, p. 73.

²⁴ Gneisenau to the king, June 1810, in K. Griewank, ed., *Ein Leben in Briefen* (Leipzig, 1939), p. 150.

to abolish the estates and to introduce compulsory military service, national representation, and national education, in addition to streamlining and modernizing the state institutions and the economy. The fear of the landed gentry, who tried to warn the king of the new age in a petition dated 9 May 1811, drafted by Ludwig von der Marwitz, was well founded: the state was now to be governed by strange principles, the old estate order was to be abandoned, all rightfully acquired privileges of the landed gentry were jeopardized. In short, the country had begun to be revolutionized.²⁵

But if that was revolution, then it was very different from the revolutions experienced by America and France. It was not the nation which had declared itself sovereign, which had given itself a constitution and which had established the unity of the bourgeoisie, the state, and the people. For the older reformers, of whom Hardenberg can be considered typical, the real aim was the re-establishment and extension of state authority. And the French Revolution only served as a model by suggesting two ideas to the Prussian reformers: that a defeat like that of 1806 should never happen again, and secondly, at least for some of them, that Prussia too should produce its own version of Napoleon one day. The new state was being conceived with an unprecedented degree of concentration and authority. And when speaking of the nation, this nation was yet to be created: to be precise, it still existed only in the heads of a small, educated elite, which provided the support for the reforms. Furthermore, Prussia was a maze of provinces, each with its own legal system and administrative bodies, and even if one was successful in unifying the institutions and legal systems, state authority was still limited by the extensive feudal autonomy of the lower gentry in the countryside. The largest portion of the Prussian population lived as serfs on large estates; for them the state and the king were very remote. This particular problem could not be solved in the face of the furious opposition of the landed nobility. As a result, there were only two means available for strengthening the state: apart from the reform of the executive and administrative structures, people in the cities and in the countryside had to be emancipated. But this liberty did not mean political liberty as reflected in the American or French constitutions, but 'civic' liberty; not equal participation in the state, but rather personal liberty in the state; not the ideas of Rousseau, but those of Adam Smith, whose doctrines were very popular at the universities of Prussia and Hanover, and who stood as godfather to the reforms. 'True liberty' meant equal application of laws, free competition based on competence, security of property and of the individual, and the fair distribution of the burden. The good citizen, according to Smith, was the free 'economic' citizen, who

²⁵ Petition to the king, dated 9 May 1811, in W. Conze, ed., *Quellen zur Geschichte der Bauernbefreiung* (Göttingen, 1957), pp. 128 ff.

increased the wealth of the state while increasing his own. Thus liberty was a constitutive element of the state, not its restriction.

Unfortunately, however, this free citizen was still an ideal. In reality tremendous resistance was encountered, and not only on the part of the noble estates, from whom nothing else could have been expected, but precisely from those social strata whose emancipation was intended. While the landlords were organizing their resistance to the reform, the peasants of Middle and Upper Silesia revolted. They took the October edict's promise of emancipation seriously. The peasants did not wish to accept the fact that they still had to perform services for the landlord, especially since they now had to pay excise duties, just like the urban population. This was impossible for them to do, since they were being paid in kind.

The introduction of the municipal ordinance provoked bitter resistance from the citizenry of the East Elbian small towns, because their tax burden had increased. The introduction of freedom of trades naturally offended those craftsmen who feared that they would lose the economic security previously guaranteed by the guilds. The introduction of compulsory military service mobilized citizens previously exempt who, though demanding liberation from the obligations of the estates, suddenly saw themselves confronted with considerable personal costs and duties.

The unavoidable conclusion the reformers drew from this resistance was that the Prussian people were not yet ready to grow together into a nation of free citizens. What was needed was education: and who better suited for this task than the bureaucrats and professors, who had experienced personally the blessings of good education and culture in the form of higher social status. Not only the great reforms of the educational system, namely that of the universities by Wilhelm von Humboldt and that of the schools by Johann Wilhelm Süvern, but also the preparations for great reform projects, such as the municipal ordinance, which were intended to help the citizens practise self-administration and self-responsibility before their direct participation in regional or central administrative bodies, should be seen in this light.

In addition to the establishment of a liberal educator-state, the reformers had another consideration based on experience. Both Stein and Hardenberg planned the establishment of a national representation of Prussian citizens as the culminating point of their reforms, to serve as an overt symbol of the union of the Prussian provinces in a Prussian nation and thus of a united and centralized Prussia. In the Finance Edict of 27 October 1810, this constitutional promise was proclaimed.²⁶ But not only did the opposition of the old estates have to be overcome: what was more important was that the real pressure necessary to overcome this resistance was lacking. The bureaucracy,

²⁶ GS (1810), p. 25.

which was virtually the incarnation of the citizen-state, considered itself the legitimate representative of the state as a whole, so that from the point of view of the reform bureaucrats a national parliament was more of an annoyance. This was a logical conclusion, for the reforms had to be pushed through against the will and customs of the population. Also the example set by the regional parliaments in the states of the Confederation of the Rhine showed that reforming legislation, such as the abolition of tax privileges in the kingdom of Westphalia, always had to contend with the opposition of the representative bodies.²⁷ Of the two institutions in Prussia which competed with each other in claiming to represent the interests of the whole, the bureaucracy existed first. So the bureaucracy remained the constitutional core of Prussia.²⁸

All in all, the Prussian reforms present a peculiarly vacillating picture, simultaneously revolutionary and conservative, just like the bourgeois-bureaucratic origins of its drafters. The language, the pathos, the unmistakably utopian features, an optimistic confidence in the possibility of being able to create a new society and a new state through legislative action were revolutionary. As Altenstein put it, the reformer does not take the core of the state 'as it is, but as it could be and transforms it according to his aims, which coincide with the highest aim of the whole... A new creation must be the result.'²⁹ Prussian bureaucracy as the creator, as 'the tool which selects the world government for the education of the human race', as Hardenberg put it at the end of the reform era³⁰ — this was comparable to the confidence in a self-evident world plan which inspired Robespierre or Napoleon.

The re-creation of the Prussian state, however, which enjoyed its successes despite all opposition, was also essentially nothing more than the triumph of the absolutist Prussian tradition. Centralization and rationalization of the state's authority, depriving the estates of their political prerogatives in favour of the monarchical head of state, extension of the state's monopoly of power to all regional, social, and cultural fields — for even the state's self-imposed restriction with regard to the self-administration of the communes and the universities often had to be implemented by means of unilateral decisions on the part of the state — and last but not least, an independent bureaucracy committed only to the state and the monarch and free of all influences emanating from the estates — all this corresponds to an

²⁷ B. Vogel, "Revolution von oben" — Der "deutsche Weg" in die bürgerliche Gesellschaft?, *Sozialwissenschaftliche Informationen für Unterricht und Studium*, 8 (1979), p. 72.

²⁸ E. Fraenke, *Deutschland und die westlichen Demokratien* (Stuttgart, 1964), pp. 23 ff.

²⁹ K. Freiherr vom Stein zum Altenstein, 'Über die Leitung des preußischen Staats, Denkschrift vom 11.9.1807', in G. Winter, *Die Reorganisation des preußischen Staates unter Stein und Hardenberg*, 1 Teil (2 vols, Leipzig, 1931), I, pp. 369, 462.

³⁰ Hardenberg, quoted in Koselleck, *Preußen*, p. 160.

absolutist programme and had long been part of the history of Brandenburg-Prussia. In addition, there was an unmistakably patriarchal touch, for Prussia never shed its character of being an enlarged East Elbian estate with the king as the chief landlord. Paternal concern for the well-being of the subjects was deemed to belong to the Christian and social duties of the ruler.³¹ The aim of the reformers was not to do away with the king, although Frederick William III often stood in their way. It was to remove all obstacles between the people and the king. In this the older, enlightened-absolutist reformers assisted the younger, romantic-conservative ones, whose utopia of a free people in a wisely guided monarchy became the common property of the people by way of Grimms' fairy tales and the folk songs of Arnim and Brentano. In these we find only the king and the people. The free, industrious, mobile journeyman is bound to be lucky, and as the greatest reward he wins the hand of the fair-haired princess, with whom he had once tended geese.

III

This Janus-faced glance of the Prussian reformers into both the past and the future enabled men as different as Treitschke and Max Weber to look to them as their mentors. The effects of the reforms extended into many German historical traditions, into the black-white-red as well as into the black-red-gold, even into the red. The attempt of the reformers to bind revolution and tradition to each other, as well as the experience of later decades that a state and a society cannot be created on a drawing board by an enlightened elite, both lead to the problem of discerning the essence of the reforms, because after all the spirit of the times did not reveal itself in the offices of Prussian civil servants. The reforms essentially had consequences very different from those intended by statesmen like Stein or Hardenberg, and the cause lay not in the resistance of the old estates, but in the reforms themselves.

The great error of the reformers was their conviction that liberties granted by the state would lead the community of free citizens and the Prussian authoritarian state to the harmony of a stable nation-state, united internally and strong externally. In the event, however, in the ensuing period the Prussian state bureaucracy saw itself in the role of the sorcerer's apprentice, who could no longer master the spirits he had set free. In the process, the hope of modernizing the economy was realized: agriculture, for many decades to come the backbone of the Prussian economy, was put on

³¹ R. M. Berdahl, 'Paternalismus als Herrschaftssystem', in Puhle and Wehler, eds, *Preußen*, pp. 123 ff.

steadier foundations by supporting not only the Junkers but many owners of large and medium-sized farms, which provided a tremendous impetus to the extension of cultivation and the increase in agrarian production. With the introduction of freedom of trade, freedom to establish residence, free property relationships, with the reform of the customs duties and taxes, prerequisites were created which later permitted the industrialization of Prussia to proceed more rapidly and effectively than in many other European countries, especially faster than in Austria. This, and not merely the superiority of Prussian weapons, ultimately led to the Prussian-induced *kleindeutsch* solution to the German question.

But the social costs were high. In the countryside the decline in the vast number of petty jobs and of landowning peasants resulted in a destitute rural proletariat. A similar development took place in the cities, for after the great depression of 1817 it became clear that it was just the social stratum which had expected the most from the introduction of freedom of trades, namely the journeymen, who were the helpless victims of market forces, for they now lacked the former protection of the guilds. There were now far more people involved in trade than the market needed. Thus, while the financially powerful owners of land or trading enterprises profited from the new conditions of trade, the situation of the great mass of the rural and urban population deteriorated. The social climate did not improve: on the contrary, dangerous tensions developed. Furthermore, the fact that the reformers made use of the 'arsenal of revolution' did not remain unpunished. One could not introduce compulsory military service, improve public education, manipulate public opinion to the point of rousing the masses to frenzy during the wars of liberation, and then expect the people to submit to the wise, educating measures of an enlightened bureaucratic elite. In addition to the growing social discontent between 1815 and 1848, the people became embittered about the broken promise of a constitution. They also turned against a state which, shocked by the radical tone of public opinion and filled with the fear of a repetition of the events in France of 1789, sharpened censorship and attempted to master demands for combining economic with political freedom by the application of police power. In this way state and the society were not brought together; rather they were driven apart. It was a process which was contrary to the intentions of the reformers, but it had been facilitated by their measures. In 1848 they paid the price.

It is of decisive importance for the political culture of Germany that the successor to Reform Prussia was not the parliamentary, democratic nation-state of the 1848 liberals, but Bismarck's *kleindeutsch* authoritarian state. The problems faced after the unification of the German empire were not so very different from those experienced after Jena and Tilsit. Again, it was a matter of internal stabilization of the state by integration imposed from

above. Now the profound social and economic breaches, which had developed as a result of the industrial revolution and which had jeopardized the unification process, had to be repaired. The clash of interests between north and south, east and west, between the traditional parties and those believing in the new, revolutionary ideas of legitimacy, as well as between Protestantism and Catholicism, had to be reconciled. The bureaucratic educator-state intervened again to bring state and society together.

Not only was economic adjustment sought, when the interventionist state implemented protective tariffs and cartel laws, granted subsidies and became economically active in its own right, but another objective was the pacification of society through bureaucratic regulation, and this not only by way of legal repression — the *Kulturkampf*, the law against the socialists, for example — but also by transferring the social costs of industrialization to the state with the help of social legislation. In the statement of the reasons for the Industrial Injuries Insurance Law of 1881 one can read that it is the duty of a policy which maintains governmental authority to pursue the goal 'of also convincing the unpropertied classes of the population . . . that the state is not simply a necessary, but also a benevolent institution.'³²

It was the state which had put into effect what two generations of democrats had fought for since the promise of a constitution in 1810. The state granted the universal and equal right to elect representatives to the Reichstag. Bismarck acted here in the spirit of Hardenberg, who had aimed at a 'good' revolution, which he defined as 'democratic principles within a monarchy', as a prophylactic against the revolution from below.³³ Bismarck, the 'white revolutionary',³⁴ was mistrusted for this very reason by his noble colleagues just as much as the notorious 'Jacobin' Hardenberg, but there remained a decisive difference: the pathos was missing, the wide ethical horizon, the liberal utopia. The 'moral and spiritual strength' with which Freiherr vom Stein had attempted to counterbalance, as he himself put it, 'the relative weakness of the Prussian monarchy',³⁵ was done away with, pure *Realpolitik* took the place of moral responsibility. What remained was a bureaucratic authoritative educator-state, which, with the help of civil servants cured of their liberal origins, placed society under their guardianship in its own interest. This was no more successful at the end of the nineteenth century than it had been at the beginning, and Bismarck ultimately failed due

³² Verhandlungen des Reichstags, 4, Legislaturperiode IV, Session 1881, vol. 3, p. 228.

³³ K. A. von Hardenberg, 'Rigaer Denkschrift, 12 Sep. 1807', in Winter, *Reorganisation des Preußischen Staates*, 1/I, p. 306.

³⁴ H. A. Kissinger, 'The white revolutionary, reflections on Bismarck', *Daedalus* (1968), pp. 888 ff.

³⁵ K. Freiherr vom Stein, 'Verfassungsdenkschrift für den Kronprinzen, 5 Nov. 1822', in Freiherr vom Stein, *Briefe*, 4, p. 118.

to the dynamics of uncontrollable social developments affecting the mass of the population.

But the habit of looking to the state to be the initiator of all change, to expect from the top the control and reconciliation of social conflicts, the suspicion that the people were not mature for democracy, all this had deeply penetrated the political consciousness of the Germans, and not only of the bourgeoisie. '*Der Feind, den wir am tiefsten hassen, das ist der Unverstand der Massen*' ('The enemy we hate the most is the ignorance of the masses') was not a motto hanging on the walls of Prussian offices, but is a line from the social democratic 'Workers' Marseillaise'. That even the Social Democratic Party, which was programmatically opposed to this state, reproduced down to the last detail in its own party structure the relationship between authority and bourgeoisie, proves how deep bureaucratic absolutism — now lacking the soothing oil of the liberal spirit of times gone by — had penetrated German society. Not least here we can identify the causes for the next failure of the black-red-gold experiment of the Germans — the Weimar Republic. The democratic parties lacked self-confidence and the will to power, the authoritarian bureaucracy served as a safe haven offering refuge from the trials and tribulations of the times. This had a profound effect, although a man like Brüning was even less able to master the social forces of the masses than Hardenberg or Bismarck.

IV

What remains today of that period? There remains a tradition and an experience. Fortunately, the tradition of the Prussian reform era again has two faces. What had become historically operative once more after 1945 was not only the old problem of the correct relationship between the state and the citizen, of opinion-making 'from below'. Precisely in those fields which were at the core of the previous reform — in the administration and the army — the ambivalence of the goals and the possibilities again became apparent. We have the principle of compulsory military service, taken directly from the 'arsenal of revolution' by Scharnhorst and his colleagues of the Military Reorganization Commission, which is linked to the problematic postulate of the citizen-soldier, who should be no different from what he is in a civilian life. We also have the municipal statutes of Freiherr vom Stein, which have survived in the local government constitutions of the Federal Republic of Germany. And it is extremely important for the political culture of post-war Germany that, after the total collapse of the German state in 1945, the democratic reconstruction in the western zones proceeded from the bottom, from the municipality — a late but clear confirmation of Stein's belief that the municipality is the primary ground for civic self-determination, without

which a free state cannot come into being. In my opinion a lesson for Germany can be drawn from the above, namely, that those elements of the Stein-Hardenberg reforms should be resurrected in the collective German memory, which resulted not merely from the mastering of an emergency, but stemmed from the liberal imperative of a state that has received its legitimacy and its structure from below, from its citizens. To learn from history means to learn against history: the state is not above us, we are the state.