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# **Stein and the Era of Reform in Prussia, 1807-1815**

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# STEIN AND THE ERA OF REFORM IN PRUSSIA, 1807-1815

## CHAPTER I

### YOUTH AND EDUCATION

Five centuries span the rule of the Hohenzollerns in Brandenburg-Prussia from 1415 to 1918. The history of the first three centuries contains little that seems of vital significance to any one but themselves and the people of the inhospitable frontier military colony over which they ruled. The drab procession of margraves and electors before 1713 is relieved by only one name of outstanding importance, that of Frederick William, the Great Elector. In the next century the dynasty produced one great administrator in Frederick William I and one genius, his son, Frederick the Great. Whether great or petty, weak or strong, the unbroken succession from this one house built up in four centuries by dynastic policies nicely fitted to the needs of a self-centred state, a powerful monarchy resting upon military force, bureaucratic administration and a feudal agrarian social and economic order. Not until the nineteenth century were there any great Prussian ministers who might be named with those who since the days of Sully had served the French kings or since Wolsey advised the rulers of England. The Hohenzollerns arrogated to themselves all power and forced on their people despite limited resources and unfavor-

able geographical location the rôle of a great power first in German and then in European affairs.

All this was possible in the old Europe in which Frederick the Great played his part and on which he closed his eyes in 1786. The French Revolution and the Napoleonic era from 1789 to 1815 created a new heaven and a new earth. The old Prussia seemingly disappeared forever in the cataclysm. For a brief period of years the harsh dynastic military state was shaken to its foundations. The humiliation of Napoleonic occupation and spoliation after 1806 fused for one brief moment the monarch and the masses and turned the energies of noble, burgher, peasant and prince to the task of rebuilding the Prussian state for the sake of nationality and liberation. For eight brief years the old age and the new, the best of the Frederickian order and the impulses of the new Prussia, the newer Germany, the newer Europe were combined in the work of reform and regeneration. The nineteenth century saw the Prussian state, partly by necessity and partly by choice, renew the old Frederickian dynastic policy of militarism and eighteenth century diplomacy. The work of the reformers was but half done, and a new social and political order was not fully established between 1807 and 1815. Its completion must await the slow working of economic forces or the dynamic pressure of another compelling international political crisis.

Those eight unique years between the Prussia that glorified Frederick the Great and the Prussia led by Bismarck have in themselves a singular interest. The era of Stein, Hardenberg, Humboldt, Queen Louise and Scharnhorst is one of the great might-have-beens of history. Their work was great in its accomplishments

and great in its failures. Over it there shines a light unlike that which illumines any other pages of the history of Prussia. For once she was the hope of Germany and of a continental Europe dominated by the empire of Napoleon. That Prussia deserved well of Germany and of Europe when the hour of trial came was not due to the Hohenzollern then on the throne but to the group of non-Prussians who as young men had entered the service of Frederick the Great and his immediate successors. Upon that roll are the names of Scharnhorst and Hardenberg, the Hanoverians, Blücher and Queen Louise from Mecklenburg, Niebuhr the Dane, Gneisenau the Saxon, and greatest of all in fiery zeal, moral force and tried integrity, the Imperial Knight, Baron vom Stein.

It is one of the paradoxes of German history that the extremes of its particularism have nourished and defended the idea of national unity and empire. The valleys of the Rhine and of its tributaries and the Thuringian Forest are those parts of the old Germany which most distinctly represent the division of Germany territorially, and yet these are the regions where the name of Germany and the glories of the empire were most dearly cherished. No prince of these regions could aspire to make his "Germany" the leader of "the Germanies." The maintenance of some sort of a union was his best hope of preserving himself from the maw of some greater neighbor. Of all the elements in the old Germany which most distinctly represented its weakness and division, the Imperial Knights were the most striking exemplification, and yet their ranks had furnished nationalists from the age of Ulrich von Hutten to the days when Baron vom Stein entered the



service of the most aggressive of the German dynastic states.

Baron vom Stein, Heinrich Friedrich Karl vom und zum Stein, to give him his full name, was born in the ancestral home, a castle only by courtesy, in the little city of Nassau on the Lahn, October 26, 1757. He has left us a sketch of his life,<sup>1</sup> which industrious biographers have supplemented so that we have a fairly satisfactory picture of his youth and preparations for his life work.

His ancestors for centuries had been nobles in the ranks of the imperial knights and for many generations had lived in the Lahn valley, one of the most picturesque of the side valleys of the Rhine. Here they had been the retainers and staunch defenders of the counts of Nassau, from whom William of Orange was descended, and many of the name of Stein had done good work in the service of other states within and without Germany. The ruins of their old castle stand today on the jutting rock which gave them their family name, on the hill above the city of Nassau. The crest of the hill is crowned with the ruined castle of the counts of Nassau. Both families, Nassau and Stein, had joined their cause with that of Luther. Indeed, the surviving line of the Steins was founded by a member who broke his vows as a canon at Trier and married in the same year that Luther did.

The family possessions of the Steins at the close of the eighteenth century were scattered under the dominion of many overlords—Trier, Mainz, the Palatin-

<sup>1</sup> Pertz, "Das Leben des Freiherrn vom Stein," VI, Pt. 2. Beilagen, pp. 155-197. The most illuminating treatment is that in Max Lehmann, "Freiherr vom Stein," 3 vols., Leipzig, 1902-05. The abbreviated one-volume edition of Lehmann, published in 1920, compresses the material on Stein's early life.

ate and Hesse—in all about fifty small holdings and claims to rent and service on both banks of the Rhine, all of which taken together would not have given them much more than a fair sized estate. The house of Nassau, too, in some of its branches had gone forth to play a larger part in German and European politics. The old simple loyalty between the two houses had long disappeared. The relations between the two families had been embittered by frequent quarrels over rents and dues and all the subjects of dispute that made of the politically powerless imperial knights the unrelenting enemies of the immediate princes and the most loyal friends of the Emperor in Vienna, to whom alone their allegiance was due and from whom alone they might expect aid and protection. The fortunes of the Stein family had fallen and when Stein's father inherited the holdings he found the family finances in sad disorder, and many holdings in decay or heavily burdened with debt.

Stein's father was a sober upright man of sound qualities, neither great nor possessed with the idea that he was great. Forty years of his life he had passed at Mainz, and his later years in the Lahn valley show him only as a level-headed and trustworthy manager of his scattered holdings, given more to hunting and outdoor life than to books and accounts and longings for official honors. He is buried at Frücht in the same tomb with his great son, who wrote for him in filial appreciation the oft quoted epitaph:

“Sein Nein war Nein gewichtig;  
Sein Ja war Ja vollmächtig;  
Seines Ja war er gedächting;  
Sein Grund, sein Mund einträchtig,  
Sein Wort, das war sein Siegel.”

This country knight had married a widow, a former Fräulein Langwerth von Simmern, of excellent family, whose mental endowment and character help us better than do those of the father to understand the genius of her son, the Baron vom Stein. She was a woman of quick and lively temper, with the deep feeling which broke forth so often in the son. Her great common sense and breadth of interest, which knew no narrow pride of class or castle, are revealed in the letters she wrote her favorite son while he was in college. Her discernment of character is proved by her choice of him as the one of all her four surviving sons best qualified to be head of the family with the chief responsibility for maintaining its estates and perpetuating the family name. The son's devotion to her and his desire to do always that thing which should seem right in her eyes are simple and direct testimonials to her influence over him and of his recognition of the righteousness and disinterestedness of her opinion.

Baron Stein was the youngest but one in a large family. None of them was commonplace. The two oldest sons entered the ranks of the Teutonic Knights, for this medieval order survived until 1809 despite its expulsion from the scenes of its great achievements in the Baltic provinces of Prussia. The elder of these two became a Prussian official and the representative of Prussia at Mainz. His character is sufficiently indicated by the fact that he was not only the envoy but the close personal friend of the pleasure-loving and sensuous Frederick William II. The second son entered the service of Austria and distinguished himself in the wars against the Turks. Death by fever robbed him of the chance to immortalize the name of Stein in military annals. The third son was the black sheep of

the family, and after a varied career in the French service in Europe and America he deserted and came home sunken so low that he was induced to accept a pension and give up the family name. It was the irony of fate that though blind and broken by dissipation he outlived his brothers, dying in 1840.<sup>2</sup> The three sisters each had an individuality in character and person as noteworthy as their brothers. The eldest and most beautiful was admired by Goethe and beloved by Hardenberg, the Prussian statesman with whom her brother's name is most closely associated.<sup>3</sup> She married a Saxon nobleman who was later Saxon ambassador to Spain. The marriage was an unhappy one through no fault of the bride. The second sister married a Hanoverian nobleman who was later a member of the regency through which George III of England conducted the government of his German electorate. Marianne, the youngest sister, who most closely resembled her great brother, never married. She managed the household after the mother's death and later became the head of a religious establishment at Homburg. The relations between Stein and his sisters seem by the account of his friend Rehberg to have been almost ideal. Those with the two surviving brothers were not untroubled. In 1774 the mother brought it about that Karl, though the youngest of the sons, should be the conservator of the family name and estate. The elder

<sup>2</sup> He settled in Bremen but lost his small business during the French occupation. In 1814 he appealed to Stein for aid. Lehmann III, 367-368.

<sup>3</sup> The ambitious parents of Hardenberg, the mother in particular, had selected for him a wealthy and spoiled fifteen-year-old girl whose intrigues with the Prince of Wales, later George IV, drove her husband to resign from the English-Hanoverian service, from which he passed by way of Brunswick into the Prussian administration.