

FREDERICK WILLIAM IV



FREDERICK WILLIAM IV, King of Prussia (1840-61), was born Oct. 15, 1795, and died at Sans Souci, near Potsdam, Prussia, Jan. 2, 1861. He succeeded his father Frederick William III, on his death, in June, 1840. He at first granted many minor reforms and pledged himself to radical changes, but, being possessed by exaggerated ideas of the kingly office, kept evading the fulfillment of his promises. His reign is marked by the persistent demands of the people for a constitutional form of government, which though the King at first refused was granted in 1850, meanwhile opposing the revolutionary movements of 1848 and refusing the imperial crown offered him by the Liberal Frankfort Diet. In 1850, the people stormed the arsenal and seized the palace of his brother, William, Prince of Prussia, afterward William I, when he was forced to grant a representative parliament. In 1857, his mystic pietism developed into pronounced insanity, and he resigned the administration to his brother, who, at his death, became king.

OPENING OF THE PRUSSIAN DIET

DELIVERED ON THE OPENING OF THE DIET, APRIL, 1847

ILLUSTRIOUS NOBLE PRINCES, COUNTS, AND LORDS, MY DEAR AND TRUSTY ORDERS OF NOBLES, BURGHERS, AND COMMONS,—I bid you from the depth of my heart welcome on the day of the fulfilment of a great work of my father, resting in God, never to be forgotten, King William III, of glorious memory.

The noble edifice of representative freedom, the eight mighty pillars of which the king of blessed memory founded deep and unshakably in the peculiar organization of his provinces, is to-day perfected in your assembly. It has received its protecting roof. The king wished to have finished his work himself, but his views were shipwrecked in the utter impracticability of the plans laid before him. Therefrom arose evils which his clear eye detected with grief, and, before all, the uncertainty which made many a noble soil susceptible of

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weeds. Let us bless, however, to-day, the conscientiousness of the true beloved king, who despised his own earlier triumph in order to guard his folk from later ruin, and let us honor his memory by not perilling the existence of his completed work by the impatient haste of beginners.

I give up beforehand all co-operation thereto. Let us suffer time, and, above all, experience, to have their way; and let us commit the work, as is fitting, to the furthering and forming hands of Divine Providence. Since the commencement of the operation of the provincial Diets I have perceived the defects of individual portions of our representative life, and proposed to myself conscientiously the grave question how they were to be remedied? My resolutions on this point have long since arrived at maturity. Immediately on my accession I made the first step toward realizing them by forming the committees of the provincial Diets, and by calling them together soon after.

You are aware, lords and gentlemen, that I have now made the days for the meeting of those committees periodical, and that I have confided to them the free working of the provincial Diets. For the ordinary run of affairs their deliberations will satisfactorily represent the desired point of union. But the law of January 17, 1820, respecting the state debts, gives, in that portion of it not as yet carried out, rights and privileges to the Orders which can be exercised neither by the provincial assemblies nor by the committees.

As the heir of an unweakened crown, which I must and will hand down unweakened to my descendants, I know that I am perfectly free from all and every pledge with respect to what has not been carried out, and, above all, with respect to that from the execution of which his own true paternal conscience preserved my illustrious predecessor. The law is, however,

carried out in all its essential parts; an edifice of justice has been built upon it, oaths have been sworn on it, and it has, all unfinished as it is, maintained itself as a wise law for seven-and-twenty years. Therefore have I proceeded, with a cheerful heart indeed, but with all the freedom of my kingly prerogative, to its final completion. I am, however, the irreconcilable enemy of all arbitrary proceedings, and must have been a foe, above all, to the idea of bringing together an artificial arbitrary assembly of the Orders, which should deprive the noble creation of the king, my dear father—I mean the provincial Diets—of their value. It has been, therefore, for many years my firm determination only to form this assembly, ordained by law, or by the fusion together of the provincial Diets. It is formed; I have recognized your claim to all the rights flowing from that law; and far beyond—yes, far beyond—all the promises of the king of blessed memory, I have granted you, within certain necessary limits, the right of granting taxes—a right, gentlemen, the responsibility of which weighs far more heavily than the honor which accompanies it. This august assembly will now denote important periods in the existence of our state, which are treated of in my patent of February 3d. As soon as those periods occur, I will assemble the Diets on each separate occasion round my throne, in order to deliberate with them for the welfare of my country, and to afford them an opportunity for the exercise of their rights. I have, however, reserved the express right of calling together these great assemblies on extraordinary occasions, when I deem it good and profitable; and I will do this willingly and at more frequent intervals if this Diet gives me proof that I may act thus without prejudice to higher sovereign duties.

My trusty and free subjects have received all the laws which I and my father have granted them for the protection of their

highest interests, and especially the laws of the 3d of February, with warm gratitude, and woe to him who shall dare to dash their thankfulness with care, or to turn it into ingratitude.

Every Prussian knows that for twenty-four years past all laws which concern his freedom and property have been first discussed by the Orders, but from this time forward let every one in my kingdom know that I, with the sole necessary exception of the occurrence of the calamity of war, will contract no state loan, levy no new taxes, nor increase existing ones, without the free consent of all Orders.

Noble lords and trusty Orders, I know that with these rights I entrust a costly jewel of freedom to your hands, and that you will employ it faithfully. But I know, as certainly, that many will mistake and despise this jewel—that to many it is not enough. A portion of the press, for instance, demands outright from me and my government a revolution in church and state, and from you, gentlemen, acts of importunate ingratitude, of illegality—nay, of disobedience. Many also, and among them very worthy men, look for our safety in the conversion of the natural relation between prince and people into a conventional existence granted by charters and ratified by oaths.

May, however, the example of the one happy country, whose constitution centuries and a hereditary wisdom without a parallel, but no sheets of paper, have made, not be lost upon us, but find the respect which it deserves. If other countries find their happiness in another way than that people and ourselves, namely, in the way of “manufactured and granted” constitutions, we must and will praise their happiness in an upright and brotherly manner. We will, with the justest admiration, consider the sublime example, when a strong will of iron consequence and high intelligence succeeds in delaying, in master-

ing, and allaying every crisis of serious importance; and, above all, when this tends to the welfare of Germany and the maintenance of the peace of Europe. But Prussia, gentlemen, Prussia cannot bear such a state of things. Do you ask why? I answer, cast your eyes at the map of Europe, at the position of our country, at its component parts; follow the line of our borders, weigh the power of our neighbors, throw before all an enlightened glance on our history. It has pleased God to make Prussia strong by the sword of war from without and by the sword of intellect from within; not, surely, by the negative intellect of the age, but by the spirit of moderation and order. I speak out boldly, gentlemen. As in the camp, unless in cases of the most urgent danger or grossest folly, the command can only be rested in the will of one, so can the destinies of this country, unless it is to fall instantly from its height, only be guided by one will; and if the King of Prussia would commit an abomination, were he to demand from his subjects the subserviency of a slave, so would he commit a far greater abomination were he not to demand from them the crowning virtue of freemen—I mean obedience for the sake of God and conscience. Whoever is alarmed at the tenor of these words, him I refer to the development of our laws for a century back, to the edicts of the Orders, and finally to this assembly and its rights; there he may find consolation if he will.

Noble lords and trusty Orders, I am forced to the solemn declaration that no power on earth will ever succeed in moving me to change the natural—and, in our own case, so imperatively necessary—relation between prince and people, into something merely conventional or constitutional; and that, once for all, I will never suffer a written sheet of paper to force itself in, as it were a second providence, between our Lord God in heaven and this people, in order to rule us with its

paragraphs, and to replace by them our ancient and time-hallowed trusty reliance on each other. Between us be truth. From one weakness I feel myself entirely free—I strive not for idle popular favor; who could do so if he has read history aright? I strive alone to fulfil my duty, so as to satisfy my understanding and my conscience, and to deserve the thanks of my people, even though it be never my lot to obtain it.

Noble lords and trusty Orders, it has often caused me care and impatience during the first years of my reign, that I could not remove hindrances which opposed an earlier convocation of your assembly. I was wrong. On both sides we should have been poorer by many experiences, poorer by experiences in part of a costly nature; but all of them, if not always good, yet for us of priceless worth. We have now lying open before us the experiences of seven years, and, by God's good pleasure, not in vain. The working of parties on one side, and the temper of my people on the other, are now clear and indubitable. It is a splendid privilege of the kingly office that it can on all occasions call things by their right names without fear. I will do this to-day before you, as a duty which I have to fulfil. I beg you now to follow me a moment while with a sharp eye we consider the state of things at home.

The dearth which has visited Europe of latter years has also penetrated to us, if with less severity than in other countries. It has, however, found us well prepared, and I can give my government the honorable testimonial that it has honestly done its part towards alleviating the calamity. There are, also, means further to resist it, if God spares us from new failures in the crops. Here I must mention private benevolence, which, in these times, has manifested itself anew so nobly, so cheerfully; and I pay it here, before you, the tribute of my admiration and my gratitude.

The extinction of the national debt is progressing. The taxes are diminished, the finances are put in order. I have to-day the happiness to offer the provinces, for the use of their treasuries, a donation of 2,000,000 rix-dollars.

The management of affairs and the administration of justice are with us in a purer condition than almost in any other country; publicity is established in our courts; roads, canals, all kinds of improvements of the land are proceeding to an extent before unknown; science and art are in the most flourishing condition; the national prosperity is increasing; trade and industry, if, alas! not protected against their European vicissitudes, are comparatively satisfactory; paternal care and good will are certainly nowhere to be mistaken; the press is as free as the laws of the confederation permit; the freedom of confession is associated with animating power to our old liberty of faith and conscience; and our just pride and strong shield, my army of the line and militia, may be called incomparable.

With our neighbors and with the Powers on this and the other side of the ocean we stand on the best terms, and our relation to our allies, in combination with whom we once freed Germany, and from the happy concord of whom depends the maintenance of a thirty-two years' peace in a great part of Europe, is firmer and closer than ever.

I could add much which would be calculated to bend our knees in thanks toward God, but this will suffice. For it is quite sufficient to found this gratitude, and a state of contentment, which in an honest comparison, in spite of many just wishes, appears quite natural. Before all, one would think that the press must diffuse gratitude and contentment on all sides, for I venture to say that it is the press which, to a particular extent, owes me thanks. Noble lords and faithful

States, I require your German hearts to grant me those thanks. While recognizing the honorable endeavor to elevate the press by a noble and conscientious spirit, it is yet unquestionable that in a portion of it a dark spirit of destruction prevails, a spirit that entices to revolution, and that deals in the most audacious falsehood, disgraceful to German fidelity and Prussian honor. I know that the genuine sense of the people remains firm, but we do not deceive ourselves as to the evil fruits of the evil tree, which meet us in the shape of dissatisfaction and want of confidence, attended by still worse facts, such as open disobedience, secret conspiracy, a declared revolt from all which is sacred to good men, and attempted regicide. Even in our churches are seen those fruits, together with the twofold death in indifference and fanaticism. But ecclesiastical matters do not belong to the states. They have their legitimate organs in the two confessions. One confession of faith I am, on this day, unable to suppress, bearing in mind the frightful attempt to defraud my people of its holiest jewel—its faith in the Redeemer, Lord and King of itself and of us all. This avowal is as follows. [Here his Majesty arose and spoke the word standing, and with right hand uplifted] "I and my house, we will serve the Lord."

I turn my troubled glance from the aberrations of a few to the whole of my people. Then does it grow bright with tears of joy; there, my lords, amid all the heavy troubles of government, is my consolation. My people is still the old Christian people—the honest, true, valiant people—which has fought the battles of my fathers, and the honorable qualities of which have only grown with the greatness and fame of their country, which once, like no other, in the days of trouble, bound itself to its paternal king and bore him, as it were, upon its shoulders from victory to victory,—a people,

my lords, often tempted by the arts of seduction, but always found proof against them. Even out of the strongest of these trials it will come forth pure. Already is the impious sport with Christianity, the abuse of religion as a means of distinction, recognized in its true form as sacrilege, and is dying away. My firm reliance upon the fidelity of my people, as the surest means of extinguishing the conflagration, has been ever nobly rewarded both by the older and the younger sons of our Prussian country, even where another language than ours is spoken.

Therefore, hear this well, lords and faithful States, and may all the country hear it through you. From all the indignities to which I and my government have been exposed for some years, I appeal to my people! From all evils which perhaps are still in reserve for me, I appeal beforehand to my people! My people knows my heart, my faith and love to it, and adheres in love and faith to me. My people does not wish the association of representatives in the government, the weakening of rank, the division of sovereignty, the breaking up of the authority of its kings, who have founded its history, its freedom, its prosperity, and who alone can protect its dearest acquisitions, and will protect them, God willing, as heretofore.

Know, my lords, I do not read the feelings of my people in the green arches and huzzahs of festivity; still less in the praise and blame of the press, or in the doubtful, sometimes criminal, demands of certain addresses which are sent to the Throne, and States, or elsewhere. I have read them with my own eyes in the touching thanks of men for benefits scarcely promised, scarcely begun; here, where broad districts of land stood under water; there, where men scarcely recovered from hunger. In their grateful joy, in their wet eyes, did I read

their feelings three years ago, when the lives of myself and the queen were so wonderfully preserved. This is truth—and in my words is truth when I say that it is a noble people; and I feel entirely the happiness of presiding over such a people. And your hearts will understand me and accord with me when in this great hour I urgently call upon you—"Be worthy of this people!"

Illustrious princes, counts, and lords, you will have recognized in the position assigned to you by law in this united Diet, my intention that that position should be a dignified one, at once answering to the conception of a German order of nobles and also beneficial to the whole community. I rely upon your deeply feeling at this hour, and in these times, what is meant by being the first of a nation and also what is required at your hands. You will repay my confidence.

You, my lords of the nobility, and my faithful burghers and commons, are, I am firmly persuaded, impressed with this truth, that on this day and in this hour you are the first of your respective Orders; but therefore, also, the protectors of your ancient renown. Look at this throne! Your fathers and mine—many princes of your race, and of mine, and myself—have fought for the preservation, the deliverance, and the honor of that throne, and for the existence of our native land. God was with us! There is now a new battle to be fought on behalf of the same glorious possessions—a peaceful one, indeed, but its combats are not a whit less important than those of the field of war. And God will be with us yet again, for the battle is against the evil tendencies of the age. Your unanimity with me, the prompt expression of your wish to aid me in improving the domain of rights (that true field for the labor of kings) will make this Diet a pitched battle gained against every evil and lawless influence that troubles and dis-

honors Germany; and the work will be to your renown and that of the country, and the contentment and satisfaction of the people.

Representatives of the nobles, be now and for the future, as of old, the first to follow the banner of the Hohenzollerns, that for three centuries has led you on to honor. And you, burghers, give to the whole world a living testimony that the intelligence—the great mass of which you are proud to represent—is, among us, that right and true one which ennobles by the development of religion and morality and by the love of your king and country. And you, representatives of the commons, you and your Order are never the last when your country and your king call on you, whether it be in peace or in war. Hear the voice of your king, that tells you they require you again!

In my kingdom, neither of the three Orders ranks above or beneath the other. They stand beside each other on an equality of rights and honor, but each within its limits, each with its own province. This is a practicable and reasonable equality. This is freedom.

Noble lords and trusty Orders, a word more on the question—yes, the question of existence between the Throne and the different Orders. The late king, after mature consideration, called them into existence, according to the German and historical idea of them; and in this idea alone have I continued his work. Impress yourselves, I entreat you, with the spirit of this definition. You are German Orders in the anciently received sense of the word—that is, you are truly, and before all, “representatives and defenders of your own rights,” the rights of those Orders whose confidence has sent here the far greater portion of this assembly. But after that you are to exercise those rights which the Crown has recognized as

yours; you have, further, conscientiously to give the Crown that advice it requires of you. Finally, you are free to bring petitions and complaints, after mature deliberation, to the foot of the throne.

Those are the rights, those the duties, of German Orders; this is your glorious vocation. But it is not your province to represent opinions or bring opinions of the day, or of this or that school, into practical operation. That is wholly un-German, and, besides, completely useless for the good of the community, for it would lead necessarily to inextricable embarrassments with the Crown, which must govern according to the law of God and the land, and its own free, unbiased resolution, but which cannot and dares not govern according to the will of the majority, if “Prussia” would not soon become an empty sound in Europe. Clearly recognizing my office and your vocation, and firmly resolved to treat that recognition faithfully under all circumstances, I have appeared among you, and addressed you with royal freedom. With the same openness, and as the highest proof of my confidence in you, I here give you my royal word that I should not have called you together had I had the smallest suspicion that you would otherwise understand your duties, or that you had any desire to play the part of what are called representatives of the people. I should not have called you together for that purpose, because according to my deepest and most heartfelt conviction, the Throne and state would be endangered by it, and because I recognize it as my first duty, under all circumstances and events, to preserve the Throne, the state, and my government, as they at present exist. I remember the axiom of a royal friend, “Confidence awakens confidence.” That is this day my brightest hope. That my confidence in you is great, I have proved by my words, and sealed by my act.

And from you, gentlemen, I expect a proof of confidence in return, and an answer in the same manner—by your acts. God is my witness, I have summoned you as your truest, best, and most faithful friend; and I firmly believe that, among the hundreds before me, there is not one who is not resolved, at this moment, to preserve that friendship. Many of you were at Königsberg on the 10th of September, 1840; and I can even now hear the thunder of your voices as you pronounced the oath of fidelity, that then penetrated my soul. Many of you, on the day on which I received the homage of my hereditary estates, joined with thousands in the still echoing “Yes!” with which you replied to my demand whether you would, “in word and deed, in heart and spirit, in truth and love, help and assist me to preserve Prussia as it is, and as it must remain, if it would not perish: that you would not let or hinder me in the path of considerate but vigorous progress, but endure with me through good days and through evil.” Now redeem your word—now fulfil that vow!

You can do it by the exercise of one of your most important duties—namely, by choosing from among you faithful and upright friends of the throne and of our good purpose for your committees—men who have comprehended that at this time it is the first duty of the Orders to encourage and support the good disposition and fidelity of the country by their own example, and, on the contrary, to strike down and discountenance every kind of many-headed faithlessness—men who, enemies of every kind of slavery, are, above all, enemies of that shameful yoke which a misguiding opinion (branding the name of freedom of thought) would lay upon your necks. This selection is a very critical act—one pregnant with consequences. Weigh it in your hearts, and choose conscientiously.

Remember, also, that the day of uncertainty as to the form which the activity of the Orders is to take is passed. Many things which, under this uncertainty, forbearance could excuse, have henceforth no excuse remaining. The 3d of February of this year, like the 3d of February, 1813, has opened to the real children of our fatherland that path they have now to pursue: and the same unspeakable happiness which then fell to the lot of my glorious father is now also mine—mine in this moment. I speak, as he did, to the hearts of German—of Prussian men!

Go, then, illustrious princes, counts, and lords—dear and faithful Orders of nobles, burghers, and commons—proceed with God’s help to your task. You will, I am certain, in this moment, when all Europe is gazing on you, and through all the future labors of the Diet, prove yourselves true Prussians; and that one thing, believe me, will not be absent—namely, God’s blessing, on which all things depend. Out of our unanimity it will descend on the present and future generations, and, I hope, on all our glorious German fatherland, in one broad stream, beside which we may dwell in peace and safety, as by the shores of the blessing-bringing rivers that water the earth. And now, once more, and out of the fullness of my heart—welcome!