

**KING FRIEDRIC WILHELM III AND THE
ELECTIVE RIGHTS OF THE PRUSSIAN
CITIZENS IN THE EARLY XIX CENTURY**

Yu. Bokov

*Volgograd State University
Volgograd, Russia*

The representative assemblies which appeared in Prussia after 1808 can be characterized as "dragging out a miserable existence and powerless". Most people believed that the representative assemblies were not enough so the King failed to fulfill his promise about All-Prussian people's representation, nevertheless the political organizations made no complaints [9, p. XXII]. And "the people refrained from violence waiting patiently for the King to die; they were grateful to him for the reforms which he had implemented in the early days of his reign".

The liberal ideas set forth by the Great French Revolution were in no way accepted in absolute monarchical Prussia for many years unlike in some other German states. But as time passed more and more citizens demanded a constitution and people's representative bodies formed by elections.

In 1807 the Prussian king Friedric Wilhelm III, in order to boost the consolidation of the country after the devastating French invasion and humiliating peace treaty, promised to establish representative bodies which could be formed by all the citizens. The king was forced to promise so under the pressure of the situation but he broke his word as soon as an opportunity came because he feared lest the representative bodies limited his power.

On the eve of the battle of Waterloo the Prussian king in his address to the people said again about his intention to grant a constitution, liberty and voting rights to decide on the German affairs. Later he again

refused to fulfill his promise, and in order to calm the public opinion he started to appoint commissions for discussing the reforms. As B. Burdes remarked to the point, "generous with extravagant promises at hard times the German authorities called on the people to fight against Napoleon but they were hard to keep the word and often took away with one hand what they gave with the other" [7, p. 6].

Friedric-Wilhelm III in his decree of 22 May 1815 again declared about his intention to form representative bodies on the basis of universal suffrage though he added that he would do it "in due time". This promise was made against a background of a ban on liberal books and newspapers and persecution of liberal-minded individuals. It was a kind of gratitude to the Prussians who bravely fought against Napoleon for freedom of Prussia.

The election of All-Prussian people's representation should have been a conclusion to all the Prussian reforms which had been implemented by L. Stein and W. Humboldt [4, p. 290].

Less than three years later, on 21 March 1818, the Prussian king in a new decree duplicated his promise but no date was again appointed.

In October 1819 Baron von Hardenberg submitted to the commission a project "On the class constitution of Prussia" in which he proposed that deputies of the All-Prussian landtag should be elected by the provincial assemblies. W. Humboldt in a memorandum "On the class constitution of Prussia" insisted on direct elections. But the commission made an utterly conservative

decision that Prussia did not need people's representation at all.

The royal act of 1820 ordered the government to lend or borrow or impose new taxes only with the prior consent of the people's representatives. Constitutional commissions were again formed. The commissions on working out a project of the people's representation finished their work in 1823. According to the project by the 5th commission in which the chairman was the Crown Prince (opposed to any extensive reforms and to people's representation in particular), the King promulgated a law "On organization of the provincial class representation" on 5 June 1823 and a law "On organization of the representative bodies in some provinces" on 1 July 1823.

The class representative bodies were to be formed by regular elections taking place every two years. The provincial class representatives had the right for consultative votes in local and partly national legislation, also they could address the provincial requests to the King on behalf of the province (the landtags could only express their wishes but not issue decrees).

If one tries to characterize these newly formed bodies (the landtags or "land assemblies") one has to note that they were "quite different from constitutional bodies" [8, p. 20].

According to the suffrage of the Prussian provincial towns of 5 June 1823 and 2 June 1824 in the town of Solingen only 511 of its 7934 citizens had the voting right (6.4 percent), in Dusseldorf only 246 of 31 596 (0.7 percent). Nevertheless even this limited suffrage was rather progressive in that time. Owing to it, less than 50 years later almost

universal suffrage was temporarily enacted in Germany.

On 5 June 1825 the Friedrich Wilhelm III's government implemented a law "On the regional class assemblies" that were to be gradually introduced in several provinces.

We can get a general notion of these assemblies by analyzing, for instance, the provincial landtag of Brandenburg. A. Bebel points out that "the noble landowners and 4 representatives of the ancestral nobility had 35 votes, the towns had 23 votes while the peasantry had only 12 votes. Besides, the peasant and town representatives were not elected by all the peasantry and town citizens but by certain groups of voters" [6, p. 13]. O. Buch points out that some 2000 noble estate owners elected a half of the landtag deputies while the other half were elected by 1 335 000 citizens [3, p. 113].

It was established that the ratio of class representation should be 3:2:1 but the actual ratio was different. The noblemen elected slightly more than a half of the deputies, the townspeople – about 1/3 and the peasantry – no more than a quarter.

The age qualification to elect was set at 25 and the age qualification to be elected was set at 30. It was only the nobility who had the right of direct voting. The citizens aged above 25 constituted 20-23 percent of all the Prussia's population [5, p. 31].

The representative assemblies which appeared in Prussia after 1808 can be characterized as "dragging out a miserable existence and powerless" [2, p. 223]. Most people believed that the representative assemblies were not enough so the King failed to fulfill his promise about All-Prussian people's representation, nevertheless the political

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