



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 4. Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany, 1866-1890
Theodor Fontane, "Bismarck Is a Despot" (March 12, 1881)

Theodor Fontane (1819-1898) was a novelist and the most important Realist writer in Germany. The following text is taken from a letter he wrote to Count Philipp zu Eulenburg-Hertefeld (1847-1921), a diplomat then serving in the German embassy in Paris and later a friend of Kaiser Wilhelm II. In March 1881, Bismarck abruptly forced Philipp's cousin, Count Botho zu Eulenburg (1831-1912), the Prussian Minister of the Interior (1878-1881), out of office. Here, Fontane tries to rationalize Bismarck's despotism as a bulwark against parliamentarization.

*To Philipp zu Eulenburg
Berlin, March 12, 1881*

The Chancellor [Bismarck] is a despot;

but he has the right to be one, indeed, he *must* be one. If he were not a despot, if he were an ideal parliamentarian who allowed his course to be determined by the dumbest thing there is, by parliamentary majorities, then we wouldn't even have a chancellor yet, and least of all a German Reich. On the other hand, it is certainly true that only dependent characters or figures of the second and third rank can serve under such a despot, and that any free man would be well advised to resign in good time. In doing so, the free man does what is right for him; but the Chancellor *also* does what is right for him in not allowing himself to be swayed in his actions or inaction.

Source: Theodor Fontane to Philipp zu Eulenburg, March 12, 1881, in Theodor Fontane, *Werke, Schriften und Briefe* [Works, Writings, and Letters], ed. Walter Keitel and Helmuth Nürnberger, Part 4, *Briefe* [Letters], vol. 3, 1879-1889, ed. Otto Drude et al. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1979, p. 125.

Translation: Erwin Fink