

Christoph Friedrich Cotta on the Mainz Republic (1792)

Abstract

German Jacobins like the jurist Christoph Friedrich Cotta (1758–1838) had to contend with the fact that the Mainz Republic, which existed for a few months in 1792–93, came into being under French occupation. Cotta, who moved from Stuttgart to Strasbourg in 1791 and acquired French citizenship, marched with the French army into Mainz in 1792. He emphasized the advantages of a republic under “Frankish rule,” touting the abolition of serfdom or peonage. But the republic meant that the left bank of the Rhine was now integrated into the French dominion, which shaped Germans’ perception of democratization. Its contemporary meaning was thus linked to the domination of the French and the perception of inferiority.

Source

On the Good Life the People of the Rhine and the Mosel Can Now Have

Dear People,

You have recently learned from a large-scale broadsheet, which has been posted and read everywhere, about the new state constitution [*Staatsverfassung*] in France. Without a doubt you have seen that it intends only the best for the people, and it will markedly improve your condition, if you, too, would live according to it. Yet I do not believe that you have considered all the evils that you will escape when you commit to this constitution.

Hear me, dear people! From the heart I mean well, and I have long strained with you under the same yoke and wish now that you may also be happy, as I myself am. Let us go through the hindrances, which hitherto have kept you from being fully prosperous in your craft, your trade, your farming, so that you are unable to support yourself and your families as well as you might expect from your hard work. Let us just look at some of them and see whether they are present in the French constitution as well.

The existing obstacles to your greater prosperity are:

1. *Serfdom*. They regard our Lord God’s free people as livestock, who have no will of their own, and do not even let people die without paying, but instead take away some money from the widow or widower and the orphans, because their father or mother has died. The poor orphaned children must also become serfs, and even if they want to move to a community that is not enserfed, then they must leave behind fifteen percent of their assets. With the new arrangements in France all of that falls away. There no person is enserfed. There, everyone is born free and may die for free. There, he can move from one area to another and become a citizen without paying anything.
2. *The Man- or Head-Tax*. They are not satisfied with the regular [tax] assessment, which admittedly cannot cease in any constitution, because the general outlays must be paid, for example for your officials and so on. However, they still also illegally squeeze from every peasant, whether he be a citizen or a migrant, poor or rich, twelve shillings [*Kreuzer*] monthly. That does not apply to the new arrangement in France. He who pays his taxes is required to pay nothing further. He does not need to give any more, not even to the clergy, may he come into this world or depart from it, may he be married or baptized. He does not even need to pay the judge, who is to pass

judgement quickly and without payment.

3. *The Feudal Labor Dues.* The so-called great lords have so many servants with such amazingly large salaries, and still they demand that the poor peasant should abandon his trade, his plow, etc., and work for him for no pay, deliver fodder, help him and his hunters with the hunt, etc. That is all abolished with the new arrangement in France. Anyone who wants to have something done can offer to pay people, and anyone who wants to hunt cannot expect that anybody should help him with it. Another matter is work for the people themselves, for example, the work [on the fortress] at Kastel near Mainz now. However, that is work to which every patriot is bound for the defense of his person and his property, and beyond that one is still paid for it, so it is not performing labor dues.

4. *The Feudal Sheep Pasture.* When an elector-prince, prince, or count wants to keep sheep, then he keeps them at the cost of the peasant. The peasant is thereby hindered from cultivating his field as he sees fit, and he must unnecessarily leave it fallow because of the feudal sheep pasture, or if he does not want that, then there is no other means than that he lease the pasture and pay a lot of rent money, but his neighbor is still not helped, unless he assumes the lease. This is also unknown with the new arrangements in France, and everyone may work his field as he wants and with what he wants, and anyone who wants to keep sheep can do it, but without harming his neighbor.

5. *Damages from Game Animals.* When a good and diligent peasant has diligently cultivated his piece of land, and when he is looking forward to God's fine blessings, which are bestowed upon him for his hard work, then, God have mercy, the elk and boars of the most gracious lord come, and they destroy in one night what should have fed the peasant and his wife and child for an entire year. If he wants to prevent this, then he must, tired after a day's work, mind the field at night, and that often does not help, either. However, that is also totally different with the new arrangement in France. There the game animals belong to everybody, and everybody may catch them and take of them what he wants and can. He who wants to keep game animals and has a woods for it, must build a great wall around it, so that the game animals do not break out. If it happens that they do, then anybody may bag the game animal, and if the game animal does damage, then the master of the game animal must pay full compensation.

6. *Toll on One's Own Products.* It is entirely mad that the peasant or the manual laborer should pay a toll on what he grows or makes so that he can sell it in another area and bring money into this territory. With the new arrangement in France one pays tolls only for luxury goods which come from outside the territory, or for goods which are being transported through the territory. The tolls are moderate and they will become even more moderate, and they can be paid once and for all at the border. And with the new arrangement in France there is also no more road-tax, excise tax, or consumption tax or the kind of peripheral taxes which were invented by the unchristian enemies of the people.

A great sin is

7. *The Jew Toll.* As if the Israelites were not people just as much as others, but rather an item of commerce. With the new arrangement in France they can pass back and forth as freely as the Christians.

8. *Military Service.* Everyone must serve a certain number of years as a soldier, or in the event that he is incapable by nature, then pay for a dispensation. During his time of service he cannot support his old father or his indigent mother, and he must spend his time miserably in the garrison. Oh, that is also entirely different in France since the new arrangement. Every citizen is armed, but only to maintain the peace and order in his village or his city as the

national guard with other citizens. He who cannot perform his service, sends his son or brother or a neighbor. This service is only 12 or 24 hours once per month. No one is forced to go to war, but rather only those who volunteer are taken as soldiers, and then they serve to defend the Fatherland: not for the self-interest of an emperor; not for the vanity, authoritarianism, or vengeance of an elector; not for the pride of a prince or count; and not to parade for a magistrate.

Also the

9. *Feudal Tithe* has been entirely abolished by the new arrangement in France, for the benefit of the peasant. Voluntary tithes, from which pious institutions of many kinds are maintained, also are to be abolished once the new arrangement in France is fully implemented. However, it cannot be done at once, because otherwise some pious institutions would go under. There are all sorts of means and ways, meanwhile, to relieve and reimburse the peasant until every tithe has been abolished, and meanwhile communities will indemnify the previous recipients of the tithe or the tithe lords, so that the tithe can stop right away. They will be fully supported thereby by the high officials of the republic in Mainz, Worms, Speyer, and other areas.

See, dear people between the Rhine and the Mosel, those are the main evils which have been oppressing you. However, you are to be freed from them when you accept the new arrangement from France, because this new arrangement is entirely to the advantage of the peasants and tradesmen or the other so-called common people who previously were so disdained and who in France now have been set in their proper place again.

Judge now for yourselves, dear people, which arrangement is better, your previous one or that of France. Some of you will say: "I cannot see how our position is better since the French are in our country." You are not entirely wrong, only that, dear people, you have also not yet said, at least the majority of you have not yet said: "We want to be French, in the future we want to be one with the great French family." Only then, when you have declared such, when you want to accept the French constitution, only then can you enjoy its advantages. Or do you want to reap something before you have sowed? However, you will consider all of your advantages and soon see that you could not be any safer or more peaceful than under the protection of your neighbor, the French. Then you yourselves will appeal to the plenipotentiaries and the representatives of the French people to take you into their confederation.

Mainz, the 30th of November 1792, in the first year of the French Republic.

Source: Friedrich Cotta, "Wie gut es die Leute am Rhein und an der Mosel jetzt haben können" (November 30, 1792), in C. Träger, ed., *Mainz zwischen Rot und Schwartz* Berlin: Rütten & Loening, 1963, pp. 300–05; reprinted in Jost Hermand, ed., *Von deutscher Republik 1775–1795. Texte radikaler Demokraten* © Insel Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1968, pp. 152–57.

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