

# The Prussian Reforms

Prussia had remained neutral since 1795. In September 1806, however, King Frederick William III (1797–1840) rather unwisely decided on war with France. The Prussian army, which by the later eighteenth century, after decades of non-reform, had fallen into a state of indiscipline and ill-preparedness, suffered a major military defeat against the then powerful French army in the Battle of Jena on 14 October 1806. In the 1807 Peace of Tilsit Prussia lost all territories west of the Elbe to France, as well as some eastern territories. Prussia also had to pay indemnities, and to make contributions of men and money to Napoleon's further campaigns. This defeat provided both the opportunity and the impetus for a series of reforms in Prussia.

The Prussian reforms neither amounted to a single coherent programme, nor were carried by a close-knit, homogenous group of reformers. (Indeed, two of the main reformers, often linguistically linked by a hyphen in the misleading phrase 'Stein-Hardenberg reforms', personally detested each other.) A minority of reformers exploited the situation after the Prussian defeat to effect certain previous plans for reform, while other measures were taken as a form of 'defensive modernisation' or specifically to deal with current exigencies, particularly in connection with economic and military affairs.

Text source: *Mary Fulbrook, A Concise History of Germany* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), pp. 98-100

**Task:** Please discuss to what extent the Prussian Reforms were a process of modernisation.

In 1807, serfdom was abolished. Since peasants frequently could not meet the compensation payments, their formal freedom in practice meant little. The main beneficiaries were in fact the nobles (and the legislation was in any case later modified by regulations unfavourable to the peasantry). Restrictions imposed by the notion of 'estates' as status groups defined by birth, rather than social classes, were lifted, so that nobles could now engage in middle-class occupations, while peasants and burghers could (at least in theory) buy noble lands. This transformation from a status to a class society created a potential mobility of labour, which formed a precondition for later capitalist economic development. Also important in relation to later economic growth were the abolition of the restrictive powers of the guilds, and of certain internal barriers to trade, including the urban excise tax. However, economic reforms were at this time only partial, and some measures were later reversed; noble tax exemption, for example, was abolished in 1810 but restored in 1819. Moreover, Prussian nobles retained civil jurisdiction over their former serfs until 1848, their police powers until 1872, and certain administrative powers until 1891. In the political arena, there was a certain modernisation of Prussian government, with a more streamlined system of ministries and cabinet, but as yet neither a constitution nor an all-Prussian parliament. Municipal self-government for towns was introduced, but not rural self-government. Army reforms, associated with the names of Scharnhorst, Gneisenau and Clausewitz, were carried out largely in response to the shock of French military success. In 1813 conscription was introduced, and a militia (*Landwehr*) established; and in 1814 an Army Law was passed. Again, reforms were not necessarily complete; after 1815, conscription was in practice not universal. In the sphere of education, the spread of compulsory basic schooling in the eighteenth century (which had accompanied the expansion of technically orientated secondary schools as well as aristocratic *Ritterakademien*) was supplemented by the introduction of elite secondary schools – *Gymnasien* – across Prussia, and the establishment, under Humboldt, of a university in Berlin. The Prussian education system was to produce major achievements in the course of the nineteenth century, ranging from advances at the forefront of research through to the efficient training of one of the best-educated work-forces in industrialising Europe. Whatever the limitations, patchiness, and lack of overall coherence of the Prussian reforms of this period, Prussia in general certainly emerged somewhat better equipped to meet the challenges of the nineteenth century.