

Andreas W. Daum**Ambiguity as Principle:****Alexander von Humboldt in the Revolution of 1848****ABSTRACT**

This article investigates Alexander von Humboldt's position vis-à-vis the German revolution of 1848 and illuminates the different roles that scientists played in the public arena. Humboldt never committed himself to any political ideology or national movement. Instead, he maintained ambiguity as a social strategy and guiding principle to navigate through the revolutionary turmoil, interact with people of different political opinions, and stay true to his scholarly priorities. With great caution, Humboldt signaled his support for a constitutional monarchy and civil rights while remaining fearful of radical regime changes and violence. Retrospective attributes such as 'democratic' and 'republican' miss the ambiguity in his political stance and his loyalty to the Prussian king. Humboldt's understanding of politics remained personalized and reserved; it was situational and bound to conversational settings.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieser Artikel untersucht Alexander von Humboldts Position zur deutschen Revolution von 1848–1849 und beleuchtet die unterschiedlichen Rollen, die Naturwissenschaftler in der öffentlichen Arena spielten. Humboldt schloss sich keiner politischen Ideologie oder nationalen Bewegung an. Stattdessen pflegte er Ambivalenz als soziale Strategie und leitendes Prinzip, um durch die revolutionären Unruhen zu manövrieren, mit Menschen unterschiedlicher politischer Ausrichtung zu interagieren und seinen wissenschaftlichen Prioritäten gerecht zu

bleiben. Mit großer Vorsicht signalisierte Humboldt seine Unterstützung für eine konstitutionelle Monarchie und allgemeine Bürgerrechte, während er radikale Regimewechsel und Gewalt fürchtete. Retrospektive Attribute wie „demokratisch“ oder „republikanisch“ übersehen die Ambivalenzen in seiner politischen Haltung und seine Loyalität zum preußischen Königshaus. Humboldts Verständnis von Politik blieb personalisiert und reserviert; es war situativ bedingt und in Konversationen verhaftet.

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina la posición de Alexander von Humboldt sobre la Revolución Alemana de 1848–1849 y explica los diferentes roles que desempeñaron los científicos naturales en la arena pública. Humboldt se unió a ninguna ideología política ni movimiento nacional. En cambio, él mantuvo la ambivalencia como estrategia social y principio rector para navegar el malestar revolucionario de 1848–49, interactúa con personas de diferentes orientaciones políticas y permanecer fiel a sus prioridades académicas. Con gran cautela, Humboldt manifestó su apoyo a una monarquía constitucional y a los derechos civiles mientras teme un cambio radical de régimen y la violencia. Los atributos retrospectivos, como 'democrático' y 'republicano', pasan por alto la ambivalencia en su postura política y su lealtad al rey de Prusia. Humboldt's comprensión de la política siguió siendo personalizada y reservada; era situacional y estaba atrapado en conversaciones.



Introduction

When unrest and revolutions shook Europe in 1848, Alexander von Humboldt was at the zenith of his life as a natural scientist and enjoyed international acclaim. Humboldt's journey to the Americas from 1799 to 1804 and his widespread publications – ranging from travelogues to botanical, geological, and climate studies – had turned the Prussian-born nobleman into a living legend. In 1848, at the age of almost eighty years, Humboldt witnessed for the first time a revolution on-site, in Berlin, Prussia's capital and his hometown. He had remotely observed the revolutions in North America, France and Haiti as a teenager and young man. In the 1790s, Humboldt meandered cautiously between the political frontlines and the emerging political ideologies, and he remained deeply ambivalent about the French Revolution.¹ During the succeeding decades, he followed from Europe the cascade of declarations of independence in Latin America and the July Revolution in France in 1830.²

Humboldt lived mainly in Paris after his return from the Americas. From 1827, he resided in Berlin and gained a steady presence at the court of Prussian king Friedrich Wilhelm III., who died in 1840, and his successor, Friedrich Wilhelm IV.³ In early February 1848, the state minister of foreign affairs in the Grand Duchy of Baden, speaking in the second chamber of Baden's deputies, left no doubt about whom to reference to show that the 'German spirit' was appreciated abroad: "Alexander von Humboldt; the civilized world bows to his name".⁴

Two weeks later, revolution broke out in Paris and toppled King Louis Philippe. In the German-speaking territories, too, diverse groups began to forcefully demand political change. Humboldt suddenly found himself in the center of an unprecedented political mobilization. Con-

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- 1 Andreas W. Daum, 'A "Temple of Liberty"? Alexander von Humboldt and the French Revolution', *Annals of Science* 82 (2025), pp. 1–26, doi.org/10.1080/00033790.2024.2433232.
 - 2 Cf. *Lateinamerika am Vorabend der Unabhängigkeitsrevolution: Eine Anthologie von Impressionen und Urteilen aus seinen Reisetagebüchern*, ed. by Margot Faak (Berlin, 2003), with an excellent introductory study by Manfred Kossok; Michael Zeuske, 'Vater der Unabhängigkeit? – Alexander von Humboldt und die Transformation zur Moderne im spanischen Amerika', in: *Alexander von Humboldt – Aufbruch in die Moderne*, ed. by Ottmar Ette et al. (Berlin, 2001), pp. 179–224; Ulrich Päßler, *Ein "Diplomat aus den Wäldern des Orinoko": Alexander von Humboldt als Mittler zwischen Preußen und Frankreich* (Stuttgart, 2009); Tobias Kraft, 'Humanist, Wissenschaftler, Akteur? Alexander von Humboldts Rolle im Jahrhundert der Massensklaverei', *HiN – Alexander von Humboldt im Netz. Internationale Zeitschrift für Humboldt-Studien*, 24, no. 46 (2023), pp. 13–52; and Andreas W. Daum, *Alexander von Humboldt: A Concise Biography*, trans. Robert Savage (Princeton, 2024). For surveys of the revolutionary epoch, see Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth-Century* (Princeton, 2014), pp. 522–557, and Jonathan Sperber, *Revolutionary Europe, 1750–1850* (2nd ed., New York, 2017).
 - 3 Thomas Stamm-Kuhlmann, *König in Preußens großer Zeit: Friedrich Wilhelm III., der Melancholiker auf dem Thron* (Berlin, 1992), pp. 396, 406, 421, 429, 453, 491; David Barclay, *Frederick William IV and the Prussian Monarchy, 1840–1861* (New York, 1995), pp. 76–77, 108, 118, 304; Walter Bußmann, *Zwischen Preußen und Deutschland: Friedrich Wilhelm IV. Eine Biographie* (Berlin, 1990), pp. 80, 113, 168, 190, 266.
 - 4 Alexander v. Dusch, in *Verhandlungen der Stände-Versammlung des Großherzogthums Baden im Jahre 1848: Zweites Protokollheft* (Karlsruhe 1848), session of February 12, 1848, p. 130.

temporaries kept an eye on him since he had contacts across the political spectrum. However, little is known to date about how Humboldt reacted to the revolution. Scholars have pointed out for long that relevant sources are too scarce to provide a comprehensive picture.⁵ This article suggests taking these fragments seriously. It specifies Alexander von Humboldt's place in the revolution and sheds new light on the different roles scientists assumed in public life in 1848–1849.⁶

Humboldt did not perform on the political stage, nor was he simply a disinterested bystander. While some of his earlier works on his travels in the Americas addressed political, economic, and social issues, he did not publish any political statements during the revolution. However, as will be shown, in the spring of 1848 he had the opportunity to get involved with the elections for the Prussian National Assembly when the Berlin-based Constitutional Club approached him, a forgotten episode in Humboldt's life that demonstrates his restraint in political matters. Humboldt declined the offer and chose to comment on the dramatic political events in Prussia and Europe behind the scenes and connect there with some of the actors. His understanding of politics remained personalized, situational, and conversational. He maintained ambiguity as a guiding principle to reconcile his roles in interacting with people of different political opinions, ranging from Friedrich Wilhelm IV to the democratic writer Carl Varnhagen von Ense.

This revision allows us to recast the image of Humboldt as a man with a longstanding commitment to “democratic principles” and “republican ideals”.⁷ His private comments about standing in the tradition of German liberalism require qualification and must be balanced against Humboldt's unwavering loyalty to the Prussian monarchy and his fear of regime changes, violence, and anarchical situations.⁸ A closer look at Alexander von Humboldt, Germany's most famous scientist at the time, adds a new angle to the historiography of 1848, which tends to position this year's actors in easily recognizable factions and has hardly dealt with the role of natural scientists and non-aligned observers.

5 Alfred Dove, 'Alexander von Humboldt auf der Höhe seiner Jahre (Berlin 1827–59)', in: Karl Bruhns (ed.), *Alexander von Humboldt: Eine wissenschaftliche Biographie*, vol. 2 (Leipzig, 1872), pp. 392–406; Hanno Beck, *Alexander von Humboldt*, vol. 2: *Vom Reisewerk zum 'Kosmos' 1804–1859* (Wiesbaden, 1961), pp. 194–200; Ingo Schwarz, 'Einführung', in: *ibid.* (ed.), *Alexander von Humboldt – Samuel Heinrich Spiker: Briefwechsel* (Berlin, 2007), pp. 25–26.

6 The term 'scientist' is used in this article in a broad, modern sense, denoting scholars in the broad array of fields concerned with the natural world. Most of these would be called today natural scientists (*Naturwissenschaftler*). In the decades before 1848, and in some instances even later, contemporaries included in this definition 'naturalists' and others who were not nominally anchored in universities and research institutions, such as Alexander von Humboldt and Charles Darwin. At that time, research still meant multiple practices and forms of inquiry with fluid boundaries between them, before being professionalized and institutionalized. For the rationalization processes at work in the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, cf. William Clark, *Academic Charisma and The Origins of the Research University* (Chicago, 2006).

7 Ottmar Ette, *Alexander von Humboldt und die Globalisierung: Das Mobile des Wissens* (Frankfurt a. M., 2009), p. 101.

8 On the connection between the search for stability grounded in freedom and fears of revolution and of despotism as a hallmark of liberal, western thinking, see Alan S. Kahan, *Freedom from Fear: An Incomplete History of Liberalism* (Princeton, 2023).

I. Priorities

The 1840s were marked by increasing social tensions, economic crises and political dissatisfaction with the status quo and existing illiberalism across Europe.⁹ While politically engaged citizens – lawyers, civil servants, entrepreneurs, other middle-class professionals and an increasing number of workers and craftsmen – intensified their discussions about reforming German society, Humboldt had different priorities. Despite his age, Humboldt's scholarly agenda was packed.

Humboldt's primary interest lay in completing two major scholarly works, planning even more publications and solidifying his reputation. In 1843, Humboldt published *Asie Centrale*, a massive, three-volume compendium on the journey that had led him through Imperial Russia and to its border with China in 1829.¹⁰ Since Humboldt wrote this book, as his travelogues on the American journey and other studies, in French, their resonance in Germany was limited. He faced the paradoxical situation that knowledge was becoming more interconnected on a transnational scale, yet often stranded at national and linguistic borders outside the realm of experts. Humboldt was increasingly concerned about the translations of his works, especially into English. Two years after *Asie Centrale*, “[in] the late evening of an active life”, Humboldt chose the German language to present the first volume of *Cosmos*. This *Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe* was meant to provide a comprehensive panorama of natural phenomena “in their general connection”.¹¹ *Cosmos* enjoyed enormous success on the book market, initially in Germany and then abroad, but generated a new challenge. German and international copyright regulations, which would have firmly protected Humboldt as an author against unauthorized reprints or translations and secured honoraria abroad, were insufficient or did not exist.¹²

In 1847, Humboldt concluded the second *Cosmos* volume and began to work feverishly on the third. That required updating his earlier studies, many of which he had started decades prior. Humboldt intensified his communication with fellow scholars across the disciplines to solicit additional information, such as astronomical details from Friedrich Wilhelm Bessel and Johann Franz Encke; geographical knowledge in exchange with Carl Ritter; issues related to terrestrial magnetism while communicating with the mathematician Carl Friedrich Gauss; new research concerning experimental physiology and electrophysiology conducted by Emil du Bois-Reymond; and philological specifications from August Böckh. Politics and the revolution only surface at the margins, if at all, in these correspondences.

9 Michael Rapport, *1848: Year of Revolution* (New York, 2008), pp. 29–41; Christopher Clark, *Revolutionary Spring: Fighting for a New World 1848–1849* (New York, 2023); chapter 1–3 and specifically pp. 210–264; Jonathan Sperber, *The European Revolutions 1848–1851* (2nd ed. Cambridge 2005), pp. 5–55.

10 Alexander von Humboldt, *Asie Centrale: Recherches sur les Chaînes de Montagnes et la Climatologie Comparée*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1843).

11 Alexander von Humboldt, *Cosmos: A Sketch of the Physical Description of the Universe*, trans. E. C. Otté, vol. I [1858]. With an introduction by Nicolaas Rupke (Baltimore, 1997), p. 7.

12 Isabella Löhr, *Die Globalisierung geistiger Eigentumsrechte: Neue Strukturen internationaler Zusammenarbeit 1886–1952* (Göttingen, 2010), pp. 41–48; Andreas W. Daum, “The Next Great Task of Civilization:” International Exchange in Popular Science: The German-American Case, 1850–1900’, in: Martin H. Geyer and Johannes Paulmann (eds.), *The Mechanics of Internationalism: Culture, Society, and Politics 1850–1914* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 280–314 (298, 302–305).

Maintaining his scholarly exchange was time-consuming for Humboldt.¹³ In addition, he used four extended stays in Paris (1841, 1842–1843, 1844–1845 and 1847–1848) to collect even more information and attend lectures by François Arago, France’s prominent mathematician and astronomer.¹⁴ Humboldt’s scholarly writing could only take place in the limited time his busy schedule left. In 1846, he confided to Gauss that his life was “arduously disrupted and laborious”,¹⁵ leaving him with a few hours, mostly around midnight and in the early morning, to focus on his scholarly work.¹⁶

Furthermore, Humboldt practiced informally academic politics. In 1842, the Prussian king appointed him as the first chancellor of the new, so-called peace branch of the order *Pour le Mérite*, designed for distinguished individuals representing scholarship and the arts. Humboldt thus gained an official outlet for this kind of activity, which he had already practiced for decades. He generously promoted other scientists and suggested individual scholars for academic positions. Humboldt served as a correspondent for the never-ending stream of people approaching him. Constantly reading and writing letters, tens of thousands on both accounts by the end of his life,¹⁷ Humboldt felt like he was running a “help desk for questions”.¹⁸

Humboldt faced an economic challenge, too. It was fundamentally different from the hardship that peasants and impoverished workers suffered due to acute economic and financial crises between 1845 and 1847: bad harvests, food shortages, inflation, an erosion of the credit system, overcrowded urban quarters and outbreaks of typhus, such as in Silesia. Humboldt had used up his mother’s inheritance and spent considerable sums to publish reports of his American journey in France. The Mendelssohn bank in Berlin, which had provided Humboldt with interest-free loans, remained loyal to him, but other loans ran out.¹⁹ Since he had left the Prussian mining service half a century earlier, Humboldt lived without a regular income. The payments he received as a member of the Prussian court and the Berlin Academy of Sciences were insufficient to finance his endeavors. Despite the considerable honorarium his publishing house, Cotta in Tübingen, granted him for *Cosmos*, Humboldt needed to avoid financial ruin by requesting pre-payments and other privileges. He did not hesitate to ask for support for specific projects in his correspondence with Johann Georg von Cotta, the publisher, and the Prussian king.

13 Petra Werner, *Himmel und Erde: Alexander von Humboldt und sein Kosmos* (Berlin, 2004).

14 Humboldt, letter to Johann Franz Encke, 26/27 January 1845, in: Oliver Schwarz and Ingo Schwarz (eds.), *Alexander von Humboldt – Johann Franz Encke: Briefwechsel* (Berlin, 2013), pp. 309–310.

15 Humboldt, letter to Carl Friedrich Gauß, 7 April 1846, in: Kurt-R. Biermann (ed.), *Briefwechsel zwischen Alexander von Humboldt und Carl Friedrich Gauß* (Berlin, 1977), pp. 89–90.

16 Humboldt, letter to Friedrich Wilhelm Bessel, March 22, 1844, in: Hans-Joachim Felber (ed.), *Briefwechsel zwischen Alexander von Humboldt und Friedrich Wilhelm Bessel* (Berlin, 1994), p. 157.

17 Ingo Schwarz, ‘Korrespondenz als Last und Vergnügen: Zum Briefwechsel Alexander von Humboldts’, in: Jürgen Herres and Manfred Neuhaus (eds.), *Politische Netzwerke durch Briefkommunikation: Briefkultur der politischen Oppositionsbewegungen und frühen Arbeiterbewegungen im 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 2002), pp. 193–217.

18 Humboldt, letter to Bessel, March 22, 1844, in: *Briefwechsel zwischen Alexander von Humboldt und Friedrich Wilhelm Bessel*, p. 157.

19 In 1846, Humboldt had received a loan of 6,000 talers from the president of the Prussian Seehandlung, which was cancelled in 1849; see Ulrike Leitner (ed.), *Alexander von Humboldt und Cotta: Briefwechsel* (Berlin, 2009), p. 40.

II. Politics, 1840–1847

The 1840s brought Humboldt closer to the world of politics in Prussia than ever before. The new king, Friedrich Wilhelm IV, kept Humboldt as one of the court's chamberlains and appointed him as a member of the Prussian State Council, the kingdom's highest advisory council, in December 1840. Without success, Humboldt tried to dodge the assignment; until March 1848, he attended only twenty-six out of 216 council meetings.²⁰

Moreover, until the end of 1847, Humboldt wrote over fifty diplomatic reports from Paris to the Prussian king about France's domestic scene and foreign policy. Humboldt gained access to the court of French king Louis Philippe, to François Guizot, France's foreign minister, and other members of the political and intellectual elite. The main result might have been to retain bilateral trust despite bilateral crises, such as in 1840–1841. Humboldt saw this task with a grain of salt. It contributed to his mingling in privileged circles and made him blend political observation with salon entertainment. In March 1845, he reported from Paris to his niece Gabriele von Bülow, the daughter of his late brother Wilhelm:

I write what people call dispatches and what, in my case, may look like a bad newspaper. It's not my mistake that nothing is happening here. But I still visit all places—the Tuileries [royal palace], the Duchess of Orléans [the German-born wife of the French king's oldest son and heir to the throne—A. D.], to whom I had to read for about an hour from the introduction to *Cosmos* ..., Guizot for breakfast, Molé [minister in the king's cabinet until 1839], ... Rothschild [French banker], in the parliamentary chambers. I do everything possible to earn my money—but one would need to invent something new to get something new. That alone may make me disgruntled and fearful since one does not want to come across as more ignorant than others.²¹

Humboldt did not show a deeper understanding of France's structural problems and the lack of democratic participation. Still, he was not as ignorant as his letter ironically suggested, nor did he support the French government's increasing illiberalism. Instead, the way he framed political developments differed from that of political analysts. Humboldt registered political moves and (though to a much lesser extent) the growing gap between the status quo and the demands for fundamental reforms. But he did so primarily through the lens of elite conversations, and he personalized these issues. This form of communication left space for diverging interpretations. Humboldt repeatedly pointed out the tranquility and acquiescence of the French population.²² While this emphasis might have been a strategy to appease the Prussian king, it also demonstrates Humboldt's deep-seated aversion against political eruptions. He had kept this attitude – combined with his reform-minded cosmopolitanism and his critique of slavery – since the French Revolution of 1789, during his American journey and into the nineteenth century.²³

20 Ulrike Leitner (ed.), *Alexander von Humboldt – Friedrich Wilhelm IV: Briefwechsel* (Berlin, 2013), p. 26.

21 Humboldt, letter to Gabriele von Bülow, March 1, 1845, in: Ulrike Leitner (ed.), *Alexander von Humboldt – Gabriele von Bülow: Briefe* (Berlin, 2023), p. 170.

22 Laura Péaud, 'Die diplomatischen Berichte Alexander von Humboldts aus Paris zwischen 1835 und 1847', in: David Blankenstein et al. (eds.), *'Mein zweites Vaterland': Alexander von Humboldt und Frankreich* (Berlin, 2015), pp. 22–23; Päßler, *Ein 'Diplomat aus den Wäldern des Orinoko'*, p. 173.

23 Daum, 'A "Temple of Liberty"?'; Walther L. Bernecker, 'Politik', in: Ottmar Ette (ed.), *Alexander von Humboldt-Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Wirkung* (Stuttgart, 2018), pp. 159–165; Jobst Welge, 'Poli-

In Prussia, Humboldt played a peculiar role as a regular guest at the king's social events, informal scholarly advisor, and intellectual entertainer. He was part of but remained an outsider in the complicated web of court, state and military circles, amended by gatherings of friends and personal advisors, that surrounded Friedrich Wilhelm. Humboldt did not hesitate to approach the king when individuals who dissented from the opinions of the Prussian government needed protection, as in the case of the literary writers Heinrich Heine and Bettina von Arnim. In 1844, he shared with Friedrich Wilhelm his "disgust" about censorship, only to assure him that von Arnim's book at stake was "entirely apolitical".²⁴ Humboldt was not the man to speak up publicly in Prussia against the ongoing measures against free speech. We should not overestimate his political influence. Humboldt did not intervene in or influence domestic and foreign policy decisions. He served primarily as a resonance board for Friedrich Wilhelm IV before, during, and after the revolution of 1848.

Humboldt lived ambiguity in political matters as a principle that eased his exchange with others whose opinions differed significantly. Throughout the 1840s, Humboldt was eager to please Friedrich Wilhelm, known for his scientific and artistic inclinations, whose inconsistent course often surprised both supporters and critics. In his private correspondence, Humboldt took a more distanced stance. He delighted in poking fun at the intrigues and factions in the king's entourage.

Operating in a gray zone of politics, Humboldt needed to constantly perform a balancing act. The year 1847 offered multiple opportunities. In January, Friedrich Raumer, a professor of history at Berlin's Friedrich-Wilhelms-University, who was known for his liberal leanings, caused a stir when he used a speech at the Berlin Academy of Sciences to praise the idea and practice of religious tolerance under Friedrich II, Prussia's king from 1740 to 1786. A part of the audience understood this as a critique of the present monarch, who reacted angrily.²⁵ After tedious discussions and efforts to mediate, Humboldt joined those Academy members who signed a letter of apology to the king, expressing in private his discomfort with all parties involved. He also realized that he could not control the dynamics of publicity, which he wanted so much for his scholarly work. "My name, too, pops up in all newspapers in this affair, and they ascribe to me what I have not said myself", Humboldt complained to Gabriele von Bülow.²⁶

Meanwhile, voices that called for fundamental changes and more political participation grew louder. Friedrich Wilhelm decided to summon Prussia's provincial estates despite the opposition from his son, Prince Wilhelm, and conservatives at home and in Austria, where the state chancellor Klemens von Metternich supported a hard line. In his opening speech in the Berlin Schloss on April 11, 1847, however, the king rebuffed all hopes for the introduction of a constitution and disappointed democrats and liberals. Humboldt was present at the event but could

tik und Engagement', in: *Alexander von Humboldt, Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 10: *Durchquerungen – Forschung* (Munich, 2019), pp. 487–512.

24 Humboldt, letter to Friedrich Wilhelm IV, c. May/June 1844, in: *Alexander von Humboldt – Friedrich Wilhelm IV*, p. 282.

25 Humboldt, letters to Encke, February 13 and 24, 1847, in: *Alexander von Humboldt – Johann Franz Encke*, pp. 356–357.

26 Humboldt, letter to Bülow, March 9, 1847, in: *Alexander von Humboldt – Gabriele von Bülow*, p. 210.

not hear the speech in the crowded environment.²⁷ In a letter to Johann Georg von Cotta, Humboldt described his mood as “deeply saddened”. He understood that Friedrich Wilhelm had fueled the tensions in Prussia. However, he took himself, the scholar, out of the political arena. In three years, the king had not given him “the remotest opportunity” for a political statement and never conversed with him about the political pages of the press.²⁸

Writing to Christian C. J. Bunsen, a liberal scholar-diplomat and Prussia’s envoy in London, Humboldt expressed his hope that Prussia would transition into a constitutional state. As so often, he personalized the situation: representatives of the Prussian state behaved “skillfully” and showed a “laudable moderation”; the men from the liberal opposition had been “very decent”.²⁹ Humboldt’s optimism was premature. Prussia did not tackle urgent political issues that bothered citizens outside conservative circles. Humboldt stuck to his busy schedule in 1847 and visited Paris one last time. After three months in the French capital, he returned to Berlin in mid-January 1848.

III. March 1848

Humboldt entered 1848 as a man who cultivated contacts across the political spectrum, ranging from the democrat Varnhagen to Metternich, to whom he sent a copy of *Cosmos*.³⁰ According to Humboldt, Metternich had showered him with “signs of affection” during their last meeting three years prior.³¹ In performing diplomatic splits in his social life, he resembled Bettina von Arnim, who maintained two salons to entertain acquaintances with various political backgrounds.³² Privately, Humboldt declared that he had subscribed to “liberalism” for “half a century”.³³ However, the continuity of liberalism he suggested did not exist. Humboldt’s statement fell behind the political spectrum’s diversification, which had materialized in diverse associations and their media outlets during the *Vormärz*, the pre-March 1848 time.³⁴

By 1848, some representatives of the workers’ movement and left-leaning Hegelians thought of radical reforms or even perceived society’s social conflicts as a class struggle. Most so-called democrats, although less radical, suggested replacing the monarchical order with forms of republican government, drawing on far-reaching constitutional rights and the separation of church and state. Moderate liberals from the educated middle classes, such as those gathered around the *Deutsche Zeitung* (German Newspaper), founded in 1847, rejected a revolution-

27 Humboldt, letter to Bülow, April 11, 1847, in: *Alexander von Humboldt – Gabriele von Bülow*, pp. 212–213; see Bußmann, *Zwischen Preußen und Deutschland*, pp. 208–214.

28 Humboldt, letter to Cotta, April 12, 1847, in: *Alexander von Humboldt und Cotta*, p. 307.

29 Humboldt, letter to Christian C. J. Bunsen, April 26, 1847, in: Ingo Schwarz (ed.), *Briefe von Alexander von Humboldt an Christian Carl Josias Bunsen* (Berlin, 2006), p. 97.

30 Humboldt, letter to Cotta, April 25, 1845, in: *Alexander von Humboldt und Cotta*, p. 278.

31 Humboldt, letter to Alexander Mendelssohn, August 8, 1845, in: Sebastian Panwitz and Ingo Schwarz (eds.), *Alexander von Humboldt – Familie Mendelssohn: Briefwechsel* (Berlin, 2011), p. 144.

32 Clark, *Revolutionary Spring*, p. 443; Barbara Becker-Cantarino (ed.), *Bettina von Arnim Handbuch* (Berlin, 2019), pp. 350–352.

33 Humboldt, letter to Cotta, April 12, 1847, in: *Alexander von Humboldt und Cotta*, p. 307.

34 Sperber, *The European Revolutions*, pp. 65–89.

ary break.³⁵ They advocated introducing constitutions within a monarchical system, launching significant reforms, and promoting individual and economic freedoms. The term liberalism, which Humboldt used boldly, remained fluid and in itself ambiguous.³⁶ It had gone through transmutations in the preceding decades and provided an umbrella for various political leanings – some more right and others more left, some more loyal to the state, and others more critical.³⁷ There were conservative liberals and liberals among the monarchists, next to hard-core royalists in the military apparatus, the nobility and the king's entourage.

Humboldt's dual identity as a scholar eager to seek publicity and a citizen reluctant to enter the political limelight also hinged on his physical condition. He showed increasing signs of exhaustion. In February and the late summer of 1848, extended periods of fever and gastric problems limited his activities.³⁸ Humboldt had just recovered from fever when news about the revolution in France reached Berlin. Humboldt reacted to the revolution in his well-known pattern and focused on individual actors' personalities, postures and actions. The aging scientist refrained from an analysis that would have tied the events in Berlin to their underlying structural causes. He remained receptive to anecdotes, mixed the politically relevant and the mundane, and easily absorbed "gossip".³⁹ On March 3, 1848, Gabriele von Bülow learned from Humboldt the following:

The news about the Duchess of Orléans remain, alas!, entirely confusing. She is said not to have stayed in Koblenz but in Deutz and that from there she went with the children to Ems! This is so improbable; people might have taken someone else for her. The successful transit of Louis Philippe and his wife [to England ...] is certain. The Belgian king has letters from Louis Philippe from Brighton. The republic is spreading everywhere in France. Lyon, too, has become republican and an old battle. The Pourtalès' wedding takes place tomorrow, followed by a small family dinner at Stolberg's, together with Babel. In the evening, there is a soirée at the Pourtalès'. I think I'll attend since I have a particularly tender affection for the little, clever bride.⁴⁰

Humboldt distanced himself from what he perceived as "characterless" unrest and the danger of "republican movements" spreading in other European regions.⁴¹ He briefly considered the

35 Ulrike von Hirschhausen, *Liberalismus und Nation: Die Deutsche Zeitung, 1847–1850* (Düsseldorf, 1998).

36 Rudolf Vierhaus, 'Liberalism', in: Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck (eds.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, vol. 3 (Stuttgart, 1982), pp. 741–785 (775); Dieter Langewiesche, *Liberalism in Germany*, trans. Christiane Banerji (Princeton, 2000), pp. 1–55.

37 For the necessary differentiations, see Christina von Hodenberg, *Die Partei der Unparteiischen: Der Liberalismus der preußischen Richterschaft 1815–1848/49* (Göttingen, 1996), pp. 16–19, 331–336.

38 Humboldt, letters to Bülow, February 4, 1848, in: *Alexander von Humboldt – Gabriele von Bülow*, p. 252; Humboldt, letters to Alexander Mendelssohn, August 4, 1848, and to Joseph Mendelssohn, end of August 1848, in: *Alexander von Humboldt – Familie Mendelssohn*, pp. 175 and 180–181.

39 Humboldt, letter to Bülow, March 9, 1847 and May 26, 1847, in: *Alexander von Humboldt – Gabriele von Bülow*, pp. 209 and 216.

40 Humboldt, letter to Bülow, March 3, 1848, in: *Alexander von Humboldt – Gabriele von Bülow*, p. 251.

41 Humboldt, letters to Bülow, February 27 and 29, 1848, in: *Alexander von Humboldt – Gabriele von Bülow*, pp. 246–247.

possibility of a French attack on the Rhineland and deemed the declaration of a republic in France short-lived. Humboldt was irritated when François Arago, his scholarly friend, joined the new provisional government in France. One of his biggest concerns was the well-being of the French royal family, which fled the country, and soon that of the Prussian king's family. He had developed a liking for Augusta von Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach, wife of Prince Wilhelm, the king's brother and a staunch conservative.

Still, Humboldt retained political flexibility. He feared violence on the part of all actors involved. That included the Prussian military once events accelerated in Berlin in early March with people's demonstrations and street protests. Friedrich Wilhelm tried to calm the situation by promising to have the provincial estates meet regularly. But the Prussian hardliners allowed the military to shoot into crowds of citizens from March 13, while news arrived about street fighting in Vienna, where Metternich abdicated.⁴² Humboldt shared his ambivalent feelings with Gabriele von Bülow: "it begins, the whole world is becoming fragile, one familiarizes with ideas that one had deemed sinful before".⁴³

On March 18, confusion and the military's brutal intervention led to a massive confrontation at the Berlin castle, the king's urban residence. Barricade fights began to rage in Berlin's inner city between the military and a heterogeneous crowd of workers, artisans, students, and middle-class citizens. At this crucial moment in what now amounted to a revolution, Humboldt recognized the need to introduce a constitution long demanded by democrats and liberals. He put his hope in the reconciliatory attitude of the king and the prudence of enlightened conservative leaders. Humboldt appreciated the moderate course suggested by Ernst Heinrich von Pfüel, an intellectually versatile general who served for eight days as governor of Berlin, and Alexander von Uhdén, his peer on the Prussian State Council and minister of justice. Humboldt agreed that "a form of constitutional government had to be announced now".⁴⁴

An estimated 270 to 300 civilians, mostly from the lower classes, which constituted the vast majority of Berlin's population, were killed on March 18.⁴⁵ The king managed to ease the tensions with new promises for freedom of the press and free elections, as well as public gestures that contributed to the "theatricality of events".⁴⁶ Friedrich Wilhelm agreed to have the corpses of civilians carried to the castle's court and paid them respect from the balcony. Two days later, he showed himself on horse riding through the city, wearing a black-red-gold armband, the colors of the revolution and of the pre-March movement for a constitutional German nation-state.

42 On the course of events in Berlin, see Rüdiger Hachtmann, *Berlin 1848: Eine Politik- und Gesellschaftsgeschichte der Revolution* (Bonn: Dietz, 1997) and Wolfgang Ribbe (ed.), *Geschichte Berlins*. Vol. 2: *Von der Märzrevolution bis zur Gegenwart* (3rd ed., Berlin, 2002), pp. 605–644.

43 Humboldt, letter to Bülow, March 17, 1848, in: *Alexander von Humboldt – Gabriele von Bülow*, p. 256.

44 Humboldt, letter to Bülow, March 17, 1848, in: *Alexander von Humboldt – Gabriele von Bülow*, p. 256. See Bernhard von Gersdorff, *Ernst von Pfüel: Freund Heinrich von Kleists, General, preußischer Ministerpräsident, 1848* (Berlin, 1981), pp. 99–109; Bußmann, *Zwischen Preußen und Deutschland*, p. 231.

45 Ribbe, *Geschichte Berlins*, p. 622.

46 David Blackbourn, *History of Germany 1780–1918: The Long Nineteenth Century* (2nd ed., Malden, Mass., 2003), p. 107.

Humboldt experienced these March days in Berlin. His urban apartment in the Oranienburger Straße was near the King's castle, which probably allowed him to hear shots fired in the barricade fights. Friedrich Wilhelm kept him close by. Varnhagen's diaries mention that Humboldt sent him on March 14 a poem by the democratic writer Ferdinand Freiligrath in honor of the "republic".⁴⁷ Such moves reflected Humboldt's diplomatic style in catering privately to his friends' different political positions. On March 17 and 18, Varnhagen and Humboldt wanted to meet but missed each other.⁴⁸ Humboldt might have spent most of his time in the royal castle.

Soon after 1848, rumors about Humboldt's role in the revolution began to spread. They offer impressions about how their transmitters wanted to cast retrospectively Humboldt's role in March 1848. One story had it that the director of the urban *Realgymnasium* (high school) in Cölln, a neighborhood of Berlin, visited Humboldt in his apartment on the night of March 17 to 18.⁴⁹ He encouraged the old savant to use his influence to have the king pull back the regular military and agree to the protesters' demand for a civilian, armed protection force. If one were to follow that lead, Humboldt reacted accordingly the next morning.

Two other episodes are well documented and reveal Humboldt's inner distance from revolutionary turbulence. First, already on March 20, Humboldt turned his full attention again to his scholarly agenda. He provided his German publisher with a lengthy letter in which he discussed the resonance to his second *Cosmos* volume at home and in England, and addressed his other book plans. Humboldt was annoyed by the critique targeting *Cosmos* and equally determined to complete the third volume and secure the "applause from the masses". Only in his last paragraph did Humboldt comment on recent events in Europe. The "old authorities crumble", Humboldt wrote. The *Cosmos* author praised Austria's temporary retreat from dissenting regions in northern Italy. He expressed "embarrassment and mourning" about the abdication of Bavarian king Ludwig I. Humboldt trusted in the "forces of reason and leniency" that would not give in to "rough contingencies".⁵⁰

The second moment became a ubiquitous trope in the politics of memory embracing Humboldt. On March 22, Berliners saw a festive funeral procession of c. 20,000 participants, representing various segments of the urban population and civic and state institutions.⁵¹ The procession brought the coffins of the civilian victims of the street fighting from a Berlin church to their burial site. Humboldt led the university delegation together with its rector. The official speeches emphasized the need for reconciliation, transcending the bitter conflict and confessional divides. Adolph Menzel, well-known for his historical paintings, produced a small oil painting capturing the procession; but it became publicly known only decades later.⁵²

47 Varnhagen did not specify the poem, but it is likely that it was Freiligrath's 'Die Republik', published in London on March 10, 1848; see Ernst Fleischhack, *Bibliographie Ferdinand Freiligrath 1829–1990* (Bielefeld, 1993), p. 135.

48 *Tagebücher von K. A. Varnhagen von Ense*, vol. 4 (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1862), pp. 274 and 289.

49 Ernst Ferdinand August; see Adolf Wolff, *Berliner Revolutions-Chronik: Darstellung der Berliner Bewegungen im Jahre 1848 nach politischen, sozialen und literarischen Beziehungen*, vol. 1 (Berlin, 1851), pp. 126 and 199.

50 Humboldt, letter to Cotta, March 20, 1848, in: *Alexander von Humboldt und Cotta*, p. 331–332.

51 Manfred Hettling, *Totenkult statt Revolution: 1848 und seine Opfer* (Frankfurt a. M., 1998), pp. 17–51.

52 Peter Paret, 'Menzels 'Aufbewahrung der Märzgefallenen', in: *ibid.*, *Kunst als Geschichte: Kultur und Politik von Menzel bis Fontane* (Munich, 1990), pp. 111–124; Françoise Forster-Hahn, 'Das un-

In his private comments, Humboldt showed relief that it had unfolded peacefully. “No hint of indecency, no word of politics, as feared”. Never had he seen “more order and calm” in a large crowd.⁵³ This impression matched Humboldt’s desire to see the Prussian population not questioning the monarchical order. He was right; the event lacked any anti-monarchical intonation. However, Humboldt was sufficiently well-informed to realize that this moment, in which political and class divisions seemed bridged, was deceptive. He anchored his ambivalent assessment, imbued with ironic remarks, in observations on individuals in the state and military apparatus, the royal family and snippets of news. Humboldt feared calls for a republic as much as a renewed deployment of military force. The Berlin *Handwerker-Verein*, the association of artisans, even sent two guards to protect the savant from the potential danger of “gang plebs”.⁵⁴

IV. The Constitutional Club and Humboldt

From mid-March to early autumn 1848, the revolution gained traction. The dynamics that unfolded politically in Prussia and beyond starkly contrasted with Humboldt’s retreat to his scholarly tasks and the royal court’s social life. He focused on his publication projects, tried to entertain his niece’s children with “botanical illustrations”,⁵⁵ and responded to the king’s scientific interests during dinners and joint astronomical observations on the terrace of Sanssouci castle in Potsdam.⁵⁶

In the following months, the situation became dramatic in Prussia, the other German states, and Austria. More violence occurred, and more political groups organized themselves and went public, not only in urban centers. More political platforms attracted public attention, among them the National Assembly for Prussia in Berlin and the national parliament for a future German nation-state in Frankfurt/Main, as well as congresses of workers and artisans. Elections took place in all large German states, and new ministries, composed of moderate liberals, attempted to steer the course of events – and they often failed. More foreign policy conflicts arose, too. The Prussian military intervened in Schleswig and Posen in April and May.⁵⁷

In late February, Humboldt had announced that he would “immerse [himself] deeply into work”. Yet, he suspected that outside events would “lead [him] always back to the colossal political

fertige Bild und sein fehlendes Publikum: Adolph Menzels “Aufbahrung der Märzgefallenen” als visuelle Verdichtung politischen Wandels’, in: Uwe Fleckner (ed.), *Bilder machen Geschichte: Historische Ereignisse im Gedächtnis der Kunst* (Berlin, 2014), pp. 267–279; Clark, *Revolutionary Spring*, p. 567.

53 Humboldt, letter to Bülow, March 22, 1848, in: *Alexander von Humboldt – Gabriele von Bülow*, p. 257.

54 According to Humboldt, letter to Bunsen, September 28, 1855, in: *Briefe von Alexander von Humboldt an Christian Carl Josias Bunsen*, p. 195, Humboldt was a member of the Handwerker-Verein from 1848 to 1850. I could not verify this information.

55 Humboldt, letter to Bülow, April 18, 1848, in: *Alexander von Humboldt – Gabriele von Bülow*, p. 259.

56 Humboldt, letter to Encke, May 1, 1848, in: *Alexander von Humboldt – Johann Franz Encke*, p. 367.

57 James J. Sheehan, *German History 1770–1866* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 656–710; Blackbourn, *History of Germany*, pp. 104–124; Wolfram Siemann, *Die Deutsche Revolution von 1848/49* (Frankfurt a. M., 1985), pp. 90–114; Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600–1947* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006), pp. 484 and 492.

storms”.⁵⁸ From March 1848, Humboldt meandered through the broad middle segment of the political landscape without declaring allegiance to a specific political group. Behind the scenes, he signaled his support for civil rights, a constitution acceptable to the king, the continuity of the Prussian monarchy and that of other countries, and international peace. Humboldt left no doubt that he opposed abrupt regime changes, a republican order, and any form of violence.

Unexpectedly for Humboldt, he even became close to becoming involved with the Prussian National Assembly. On March 27, a group of liberal-minded Berliners formed the *Konstitutioneller Klub* (Constitutional Club), which positioned itself between the conservative forces and democrats. This was the middle ground Humboldt preferred. In April 1848, c. five to six hundred citizens belonged to the Constitutional Club; representatives of the educated middle classes, the *Bildungsbürgertum*, dominated. The Club soon immersed itself in disputes between those advocating for a moderate program and members like Robert Prutz, who pursued a more progressive course and emphasized the need for democratic participation in a constitutional monarchy.⁵⁹

Among the Club’s members whom Humboldt knew was Otto Schomburgk. After his theological education, during which he became active in a student association surveilled by state authorities in Halle, Schomburgk was sentenced to fortress imprisonment for high treason but released in 1840 with outside support by Humboldt.⁶⁰ In 1841, Humboldt provided a preface to the travelogue that Otto’s better-known brother, Robert Schomburgk, had written about his journey to Guiana and the Orinoco.⁶¹ The Orinoco River was enshrined in European readers’ imagery of South America since Humboldt’s American journey. Otto Schomburgk then studied natural sciences in Berlin and co-edited a natural history yearbook.⁶² During the revolution, he took part in the March protests in Berlin.

In April 1848, time and publicity were of the essence for the Constitutional Club since it needed to prepare itself for the indirect elections of the Prussian National Assembly in Berlin and the German National Assembly in Frankfurt, to be held in early May.⁶³ Accordingly, discussions focused on the procedure: electorates had to be nominated, who would then elect the deputies—and the proper candidates. On April 21, the Club settled on separate lists consisting of those voted for internally, others who volunteered as candidates, and a list suggested by the Club’s

58 Humboldt, letter to Friedrich Wilhelm IV, February 28, 1848, in: *Alexander von Humboldt – Friedrich Wilhelm IV*, p. 385.

59 Hartwig Gebhardt, *Revolution und liberale Bewegung: Die nationale Organisation der konstitutionellen Partei in Deutschland 1848/49* (Bremen, 1974), pp. 30–35; Hachtmann, *Berlin 1848*, pp. 281–285.

60 Humboldt, letter to Friedrich Wilhelm IV, October 5, 1840, in: *Alexander von Humboldt – Friedrich Wilhelm IV*, pp. 175–177 and 69–70; Bernhard Schroeter (ed.), *Für Burschenschaft und Vaterland: Festschrift für den Burschenschafter und Studentenhistoriker Prof. (FH) Dr. Peter Kaupp* (Norderstedt, 2006), p. 151.

61 Alexander von Humboldt, ‘Vorwort’, in: Otto A. Schomburgk (ed.), *Robert Hermann Schomburgk’s Reisen in Guiana und am Orinoko während der Jahre 1835–1839: Nach seinen Berichten und Mitteilungen an die Geographische Gesellschaft in London* (Leipzig, 1841), pp. XV–XXIV.

62 *Fortschritte der Geographie und Naturgeschichte: Ein Jahrbuch*.

63 Manfred Botzenhard, *Deutscher Parlamentarismus in der Revolutionszeit: 1848–1850* (Düsseldorf, 1977), pp. 132–143.

internal subcommittee for electoral affairs. It is on the subcommittee's list that Alexander von Humboldt's name showed up and was ranked first.⁶⁴

This was the only time in his life that Humboldt came near to influencing the composition of a parliamentary group and found himself on the political party list. It was not to happen. On April 27, the Club informed its members that the savant turned down a candidacy "since his progressed age and scientific habits excluded him from a political career".⁶⁵ This was not surprising; Humboldt was known for his caution vis-à-vis any form of public political engagement. The Club's internal vetting process gave a sense of what entering the political arena would have meant. It scrutinized potential candidates about their political credibility, which led to heated discussions. The Club even examined how individuals had reacted to Raumer's academy speech in 1847. The German *Gelehrtentum*, the social formation representing scholarly education and erudition, was politically tested in 1848.⁶⁶ Half a year later, Humboldt would lend his support to a young mathematician with the explicit remark that the man had been seen in the spring in the Constitutional Club's democratic counterpart, the Political Club, but left that democratic association when "accused of republican tendencies" and stayed away from any "political agitation".⁶⁷

We do not know whether Schomburgk suggested Humboldt as a candidate in April 1848. It is unlikely that Wilhelm Jordan, another subcommittee member, took the initiative. Jordan's call for a "steamship fleet"⁶⁸ did not conform to Humboldt's distance to military force; it anticipated Jordan's pro-interventionist position on foreign affairs in the Frankfurt National Assembly. And Humboldt might not have been pleased to see that the Prussian assembly stood further left in its social and political composition than the Frankfurt parliament because of the elections.⁶⁹ Humboldt knew well the building where the Prussian parliament convened from May to September 1848. Two decades earlier, the Berlin Singakademie had hosted Humboldt for his famous lectures on nature's physical geography, later often called Cosmos Lectures. He contributed to integrating the natural sciences into the public sphere.⁷⁰

V. From 1848 to the Counterrevolution

The available sources provide only glimpses of Humboldt's take on the turbulent developments that unfolded in Prussia and Europe from May 1848 to the early summer of 1849. Again, political observations, details from his social life, and anecdotes coalesced in his correspondence. To the sculptor Christian Daniel Rauch, Humboldt indicated that he was aware of the complexity of the issues that arose from the attempt to reconcile the principles of popular sovereignty

64 *Constitutionelle Club-Zeitung*, ed. by Constitutioneller Club zu Berlin. Redakteur: Robert Prutz, No. 1, April 22, 1848, p. 6.

65 *Constitutionelle Club-Zeitung*, No. 3, May 3, 1848, p. 18.

66 *Constitutionelle Club-Zeitung*, No. 2, April 26, 1848, pp. 10–11.

67 Humboldt, letter to Johannes Schulze, September 15, 1848, in: Kurt-R. Biermann (ed.), *Alexander von Humboldt: Vier Jahrzehnte Wissenschaftsförderung. Briefe an das preußische Kultusministerium 1818–1859* (Berlin, 1985), p. 123.

68 *Constitutionelle Club-Zeitung*, No. 1, April 22, 1848, p. 2.

69 Siemann, *Die deutsche Revolution*, p. 141.

70 Daum, *Alexander von Humboldt*, pp. 88 and 115–117.

and the recognition of the March revolution's demands – like jury courts and an armed, civilian protection force (*Bürgerwehr*) – with the government's interest in preserving hierarchical structures sanctioned by the king.⁷¹ In bold strokes, he confessed to the “constitutional order which I dearly wish for”.⁷²

Humboldt did not engage with the multiple issues the Frankfurt National Assembly discussed at the same time.⁷³ These reached from finding a balance between codifying the right to property and abolishing remnants of feudal structures in agriculture to separating church and state. Defining a German nation required deciding whether (and which) ethnic minorities a future German nation-state should include. Meanwhile, more political unrest erupted in the German-speaking territories. This was not a good omen for Humboldt, who was convinced that the parliament needed to correct the “current anarchical conditions”.⁷⁴

After several weeks of sickness in the late summer, Humboldt surfaced in public only one more time in 1848, not coincidentally on a ceremonial occasion. Together with the Prussian king, Prince Wilhelm, Metternich and Archduke Johann of Austria, whom the Frankfurt National Assembly had elected as the regent (*Reichsverweser*) above the provisional government, Humboldt participated on August 15 in the celebration honoring the six-hundredth anniversary of the Cologne Cathedral's construction start.⁷⁵ The Cologne event was one of the few occasions that allowed him to encounter personally deputies of the Frankfurt parliament, who showed up in a large number. There is no evidence that this encounter led to a sustained exchange.

The fact that the artist Johann C. Schall enshrined in a lithograph the aged Humboldt in the foreground, close to Friedrich Wilhelm and Johann of Austria, signaled respect for the scientist's prominence in public life. This artistic rendering became a part of the revolutionary year's iconography.⁷⁶ However, it does not match Humboldt's retreat into the role of a gentleman scientist, commenting only privately on political events. Six months after the March revolution, Humboldt's hopes rested on liberal conservatives like Pfuël, who headed a new and short-lived Prussian ministry since September 22, and Hermann von Beckerath, a Rhinish liberal who played an important role in the constitutional debates of the Frankfurt Assembly and as the national Minister of Finance.⁷⁷

71 Humboldt, letter to Christian Daniel Rauch, May 29, 1848, in: Bernhard Maaz (ed.), *Alexander von Humboldts Briefe an Christian Daniel Rauch: Kommentierte Edition* (Berlin, 2007), p. 78.

72 Humboldt, letter to Nathan Mendelssohn, June 11, 1848, in: *Alexander von Humboldt – Familie Mendelssohn*, p. 173.

73 See Mark Hewitson, “The Old Forms are Breaking Up, ... Our New Germany is Rebuilding Itself”: Constitutionalism, Nationalism and the Creation of a German Polity during the Revolutions of 1848–49, *English Historical Review*, 125 (2010), pp. 1173–1214.

74 Humboldt, letter to Bunsen, June 8, 1848, in: *Briefe von Alexander von Humboldt an Christian Carl Josias Bunsen*, p. 107.

75 Andreas W. Daum, ‘Alexander von Humboldt am Rhein: Zur regionalen Grundlage von Humboldts Wissenschaft, Reisen und Politikverständnis 1789–1848’, *Rheinische Vierteljahresblätter*, 85 (2021), pp. 148–184 (179–180).

76 See https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Schall_Dombaufest_1848_Reichsverweser_Johann_K%C3%B6nig_Friedrich_Wilhelm_IV.jpg.

77 Humboldt, letter to Cotta, September 16, 1848, in: *Alexander von Humboldt und Cotta*, p. 337.

Dramatic months followed. The Prussian military intervened repeatedly in Berlin and against Denmark in the north. The parliament in the Singakademie was dissolved and began under duress to reconvene outside the city.⁷⁸ Friedrich Wilhelm had a constitution imposed on his country on December 5. Berlin was under siege by the Prussian military when Friedrich Bassermann visited the king in his Potsdam castle in mid-November. Bassermann had co-founded the *Deutsche Zeitung* (“German Newspaper”) in 1847 and was one of the leading parliamentarians in Frankfurt. He advocated for a constitutional monarchy and a *kleindeutsch* (“small German”) Germany without Austria. At the king’s dinner, he noticed that Humboldt served the king “like a dictionary”. The savant shared with Bassermann that he had witnessed so many revolutions that they had lost the unusual and exiting momentum for him, while he worked on his scholarly publications.⁷⁹ But Humboldt, too, felt the pace of events as all actors moved toward finding a conclusion to the revolution.

It is difficult to pin down Humboldt’s political stance between January and May 1849, when military troops dissolved the National Assembly in Frankfurt. Prolonging his principle of ambiguity into the new year, Humboldt continued to support individuals who represented a broad range of political views. In January, he lobbied successfully at the monarchical court to provide a professorship for Robert Prutz, who had been on the left wing of the Constitutional Club in the spring of 1848.⁸⁰ The ongoing military confrontation with Denmark and other international tensions concerned Humboldt. Some of his remarks suggest a growing distance from Austria. Others indicate skepticism vis-à-vis a *kleindeutsch* solution, promoted by Heinrich von Gagern, who pushed for finishing the draft of a German constitution in the Frankfurt National Assembly. Humboldt’s thinking remained distant from nationalism as a political ideology fueled by the revolution.⁸¹ He associated Prussia with its monarchy and state rather than with a national community, and that attitude influenced his take on creating a possible German nation-state. He disapproved of the “audacious tendencies toward centralization” in the Frankfurt Assembly, as he wrote to Samuel Spiker, the conservative editor of the royalist newspaper *Berlinische Nachrichten*.⁸²

In February 1849, Humboldt characterized Friedrich Wilhelm as “worlds apart from reactionary ideas, and very German-minded”.⁸³ This assessment was not unfounded if one compared the king with the conservative Prussian hardliners who surrounded him. In late March, Humboldt’s liberal publisher, who knew well his author’s mindset, cast the alternative Germany faced for its future as one between “agitation without freedom, or lawful freedom without agitation”.⁸⁴ Agitation meant uncontrollable mass behavior, an anathema to most liberals.

78 Sperber, *The European Revolutions*, pp. 228–246.

79 Friedrich Bassermann, *Denkwürdigkeiten* (Frankfurt a. M., 1926), pp. 273–274.

80 Humboldt, letter to Friedrich Wilhelm IV., January 19, 1849, in: *Alexander von Humboldt – Friedrich Wilhelm IV.*, p. 408.

81 Helmut Walser Smith, *Germany: A Nation in its Time. Before, During, and After Nationalism, 1500–2000* (New York, 2020), pp. 154–233; Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, pp. 486–497.

82 Humboldt, letter to Spiker, January 24, 1849, in: *Alexander von Humboldt – Samuel Heinrich Spiker*, p. 208.

83 Humboldt, letter to Cotta, February 5, 1849, in: *Alexander von Humboldt und Cotta*, p. 350.

84 Cotta, letter to Humboldt, March 29, 1849, in: *Alexander von Humboldt und Cotta*, p. 363.

Throughout the turn from revolution to counterrevolution and the enforced end of the Frankfurt parliament, Humboldt put his personal loyalty to the king above policy issues. In late March, he anticipated the king's refusal to accept the role of an emperor in a united Germany, excluding Austria, which a Frankfurt delegation delivered to Friedrich Wilhelm a few days later: "One cannot accept [the offer] from those who had insulted oneself before and whom one does not grant the right to make decisions about an empire unilaterally".⁸⁵ When Friedrich Wilhelm turned down the offer by the Frankfurt delegation, headed by Eduard von Simson, Humboldt stuck to the conversational tone in which he had commented on political questions for decades. He praised Simson's and the king's honorable posture, signaled to Cotta his regret about the king's decision, and resorted to metaphorical language. Humboldt deplored "deeply all those complications since the world's wheel is spinning with such monstrous speed",⁸⁶ only to refocus energetically on his priorities in promoting his *Cosmos* and other works.

VI. Scientists, the Public, and Politics

The ambiguity Humboldt expressed through his cautious maneuvering in political matters prevented him from public scrutiny in 1848, and only occasionally snapshots surfaced. He registered them with some amusement and understood that speculations were integral to the mobilization of public opinion. In early December 1848, the old scholar noted ironically that the king of Hanover inquired whether Humboldt was "still a Republican".⁸⁷ In the decades following 1848, fueled by the publication of his correspondence with Varnhagen in 1860, some contemporaries recast Humboldt as a staunch liberal, if not a democrat, and as a man who sympathized with the revolution of 1848.⁸⁸ Yet, in 1848, others characterized Humboldt as a well-meaning, accommodationist royalist.⁸⁹

Since his early publications around 1800, publicity and communication with various audiences mattered for Humboldt. He sought the public sphere, *Öffentlichkeit*, like few other scientists. During the *Vormärz* period, Humboldt made sure the annual meetings of the German Association of Natural Scientists and Physicians became public events and addressed issues of general concerns (the 1848 meeting was cancelled because of the revolution). His Singakademie lectures on the cosmos of the nature were a spectacular performance in Berlin in 1827–1828. Humboldt promoted *Öffentlichkeit* as an essential precondition of civil society.⁹⁰ He knew that knowledge had become a public good that society wanted to consume. But even in that regard, Humboldt retained some caution. Other than occasionally reported, he did not sign the

85 Humboldt, letter to Bülow, March 31, 1849, in: *Alexander von Humboldt – Gabriele von Bülow*, p. 405.

86 Humboldt, letter to Cotta, April 7, 1849, in: *Alexander von Humboldt und Cotta*, p. 367.

87 Humboldt, letter to Bülow, December 5, 1848, in: *Alexander von Humboldt – Gabriele von Bülow*, p. 292.

88 *Briefe von Alexander von Humboldt an Varnhagen von Ense aus den Jahren 1827 bis 1858* (Leipzig, 1860). See Nicolaas Rupke, 'Alexander von Humboldt and Revolution: A Geography of Reception of the Varnhagen von Ense Correspondence', in: David N. Livingstone and Charles W. J. Withers (eds.), *Geography and Revolution* (Chicago, 2005), pp. 336–350.

89 Alexander von Sternberg, *Die Royalisten*, (2nd ed., Bremen, 1848), pp. 259–264.

90 Andreas W. Daum, 'Popularisierung des Wissens', in *Alexander von Humboldt-Handbuch*, pp. 200–204. Cf. James Brophy, 'The Public Sphere', in: Jonathan Sperber (ed.), *Germany 1800–1870* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 185–208.

petition that Berlin's 'Physikalische Gesellschaft', under Emil du Bois-Reymond's leadership, directed in late spring 1848 to the Berlin Academy of Science. It demanded to open all scholarly sessions to the public. Signing public calls was never Humboldt's thing, and he belonged to the Academy's elders who guarded their institution.⁹¹

Instead, Humboldt continued his tireless efforts to secure *Cosmos* and his other works a place on the international book market during the revolutionary year. On September 16, 1848, when a majority of the Frankfurt National Assembly voted to accept the Prussian-Danish armistice, Humboldt launched another idea for more publicity to his publisher, the publication of a "Mikro-Kosmos". This 'easily sellable book' would offer a handy, slimmer version of the big *Cosmos* and increase its "popularity".⁹² For a variety of reasons, the plan did not materialize. Still, it summarizes that Humboldt wanted to enter the public sphere as a scientist, not as a political actor in 1848. He resembled many colleagues who refrained from political activity. But Humboldt distinguished himself from other representatives of the natural sciences and medicine who entered the political arena on the local, state or national level.

Their number is difficult to estimate, and it lies below that of lawyers and scholars of history and the social sciences among the forty-eighters, i.e., those who participated or supported the revolution of 1848. We are still lacking a systematic analysis, which would also need to ask whether scientists became politically active *as scientists* because of their training and scientific convictions.⁹³ Rudolf Virchow's political engagement indicated that science could provide a resource for political debates. Virchow participated in the March revolution in Berlin, published the *Medical Reform* journal and gained attention through his analysis of the typhus epidemic in Silesia, which recognized social inequality and discrimination by state and church as decisive factors.

Most of the scientifically trained democrats and liberals in 1848, including men like Otto Schomburgk and the pedagogue Adolph Diesterweg, both of whom joined the Constitutional Club in Berlin, or the teacher Otto Ule and the geologist Otto Volger, are forgotten today. Among the deputies of the Frankfurt Assembly, there were only two full-time professors of natural science, Carl Vogt and Emil Adolf Roßmäßler. They placed themselves on the left and promoted science as a realm of public knowledge, in which all strata of society should participate. After

91 An die Königl. Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, Acta betreffend die Adresse der hiesigen physikalischen Gesellschaft wegen Oeffentlichkeit der Gesamtsitzungen der Akademie 1848, Archiv der Berlin-Brandenburgischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Akten der Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 1812–1945, Öffentliche Sitzungen 1848–1849. This original contains the name 'Wilh. [sic] von Humboldt' in the list of the petition's signers, clearly not in A. von Humboldt's handwriting. The misunderstanding is repeated in Norton M. Wise, *Aesthetics, Industry, and Science: Hermann von Helmholtz and the Berlin Physical Society* (Chicago, 2018), p. 236.

92 Humboldt, letter to Cotta, September 16, 1848, in: *Alexander von Humboldt und Cotta*, pp. 338–339. Cf. Andreas W. Daum, *Wissenschaftspopularisierung im 19. Jahrhundert: Bürgerliche Kultur, naturwissenschaftliche Bildung und die deutsche Öffentlichkeit, 1848–1914* (2nd ed., Munich, 2002), pp. 280–286.

93 As starting points, see Thomas Junker, 'Darwinismus, Materialismus und die Revolution von 1848 in Deutschland: Zur Interaktion von Politik und Wissenschaft', *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences*, 17 (1995), pp. 271–302; Daum, *Wissenschaftspopularisierung*; Constantin Goschler, *Rudolf Virchow: Mediziner, Anthropologe, Politiker* (Cologne, 2002); Lynn K. Nyhart and Florence Vienne, 'Introduction to: Special Issue: Revolutionary Politics and Biological Organization in Nineteenth-Century France and Germany', *Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences*, 47 (2017), pp. 589–601.

the enforced end of the revolution, Roßmäßler launched a popular science movement, evoking Humboldt as its intellectual godfather. Roßmäßler and other Humboldt admirers from the natural science often engaged in free religious communities, especially the *Deutschkatholiken* (German Catholics) and *Lichtfreunde* (Friends of Light), which disassociated themselves from the Catholic and Lutheran churches and propagated an enlightened, natural worldview based on the empirical analysis of nature (Humboldt himself remained distant from both groups). A growing number of scientifically trained men joined them in bringing scientific education to the public's attention. So, too, did non-experts like the journalist Moses Hess and Aaron Bernstein, a member of the Jewish reform community in Berlin and a street fighter in March 1848. They discovered the realm of nature and the natural sciences as sources to nourish a new, rational and anti-authoritarian worldview.⁹⁴

Germany's most famous scientist, Alexander von Humboldt, carved out a niche for himself in the political landscape that eluded the polarization Germany experienced in the revolution of 1848. Humboldt was neither a democrat or republican nor an uncompromising royalist. Behind the scenes, he cautiously supported a constitutional monarchy and civil rights. Even that attitude left ample space for multiple interpretations, as Humboldt adjusted his observations on politics depending on those he communicated with. He never departed from his loyalty to the Prussian king. Humboldt's bold definition of liberalism offered little to position him distinctly in the issues that fueled the revolution, such as social inequality, democratic participation, and national identity.

Alexander von Humboldt cultivated ambiguity as a social strategy and principle to navigate through the revolution of 1848–49. This attitude resembled the way in which he had maneuvered through the political turmoil in Europe after the French Revolution of 1789.⁹⁵ Ultimately, his scholarly priorities prevailed. Humboldt's multiple roles as a natural scientist, an insider in high circles, and a citizen who refused to take a political position in public belongs as much into the history of 1848 as that of those who engaged in forging a new Prussia and Germany.

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94 Daum, *Wissenschaftspopularisierung*, pp. 142–152, 195–209, 203–209, 394–395, 414–447, 460–461. Cf. Andreas W. Daum, 'Science, Politics, and Religion: Humboldtian Thinking and the Transformations of Civil Society in Germany, 1830–1870', in: Thomas Broman and Lynn K. Nyhart (eds.), *Science and Civil Society* (Osiris, no. 17). (Chicago, 2002), pp. 107–140.

95 Cf. Daum, 'A "Temple of Liberty"?'.

