

Alfred Krupp on the Charm of Belching Smokestacks (January 12, 1867)

Abstract

The Krupp enterprise was founded by Friedrich Krupp (1787–1826), whose eldest son Alfred (1812–1887) took over sole proprietorship in 1848. Krupp’s principal products were machinery and machine components made of high-quality cast steel: equipment for Germany’s expanding railroad network; artillery for the Prussian military; and later, armored plating for the German navy. At the time of Alfred Krupp’s death in 1887, his firm employed more than 20,000 workers.

In 1867, Krupp was determined to have photographs of his factories taken for that year’s Paris World Exhibition—but also as gifts for “prominent persons.” As he explains in the letter below, the photographs were to be taken in May—“when everything is turning green and the wind is calm”—and also on a Sunday, when there would be relatively little smoke in the air, though he does add that a little smoke here and there would in fact look rather nice. Indeed, belching smokestacks were considered a sign of prosperity and good management. As such, they were often featured on the letterhead of company stationery. The following letter was written in Nice, where the Krupp family had gone to escape a cholera epidemic that afflicted 1,460 of Essen’s 40,000 inhabitants.

Source

Nice, January 12, 1867

For the Paris Exhibition, and as individual gifts for prominent persons, we have to take new photographs in May, when everything is turning green and the wind is calm. I do think that in general, smaller photographs are completely sufficient; in addition to them, however, I would also like to have one or, better yet, two large-format views of façades and lively activity on [factory] squares, yards, and railways. I would suggest that they be taken on Sundays, because the workdays involve too much smoke, steam, and restlessness, and besides, the loss would be too substantial. Whether 500 or 1,000 men will be necessary is something I am leaving up to you. It would be disadvantageous if too much steam obscured the surroundings, but it would be very pretty if a smaller amount of steam were to escape from as many places as possible. The locomotives and trains are also very impressive, as are the large dollies for castings.

If Mr. Diechmann considers this matter with v. Werden^[1] in good time and prepares everything, this may turn out to be a very effective picture. Due to the size of the area, however, one will probably have to take it from at least two or, perhaps better yet, four perspectives, namely from the two water towers, the big chimney, and from the highest elevation above the large mechanical workshop. These pictures will have to make do for several years, and if they turn out as well as I imagine, the photographing plus payment for the extra people may amount to a couple of thousand Thalers. Provided enough space is available around it, our exhibit [in Paris] must be decorated with framed versions of these pictures (without glass).^[2]

NOTES

^[1] Diechmann and van Werden were members of the managerial staff. [Both footnotes were taken from Franz-Josef Brüggemeier and Thomas Rommelspacher, *Blauer Himmel über der Ruhr. Geschichte der Umwelt im Ruhrgebiet 1840–1990*. Essen: Klartext, 1992, p. 129.]

[2] On April 5, 1867, Alfred Krupp wrote from Nice: “The photographs I just received pleased me very much, and I am therefore looking forward to the exhibit itself. The large cannon should have had some people around it as trimming—I would always recommend this for large objects because it provides an immediate sense of scale. I would also suggest that a grey paper wall be used as a backdrop for certain items, so that nothing obscures the actual picture. I can readily understand, however, that such touches were not possible in light of the current haste.”

Source: *Alfred Krupps Briefe und Niederschriften*, vol. 9, 1866–1870, pp. 108–9; reprinted in Franz-Josef Brüggemeier and Thomas Rommelspacher, *Blauer Himmel über der Ruhr. Geschichte der Umwelt im Ruhrgebiet 1840–1990*. Essen: Klartext, 1992, p. 129.

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Recommended Citation: Alfred Krupp on the Charm of Belching Smokestacks (January 12, 1867), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-1790>> [May 06, 2024].