Anton von Werner, *The Congress of Berlin* (1881)

Abstract

At the height of the socialist scare in the early summer of 1878, international affairs also demanded Bismarck's attention. The Berlin Congress was convened from June 13 to July 13, 1878, as an international meeting to solve the Balkans question in the wake of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78. Bismarck offered his services as an "honest broker" [*ehrlicher Makler*], thereby scoring a major diplomatic triumph. Originally, the Berlin senate hoped to organize a festive reception to mark the conclusion of the congress. But when the plan went awry, it used the allocated money to commission this painting from Anton von Werner (1843–1915). On March 22, 1881, the Kaiser's 84th birthday, the artist presented the painting to the Berlin city fathers. Werner's painting highlights a number of important participants in the congress, including British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli (1804–1881), seen at the left. The real focus of the viewer's attention, however, is the trio in the immediate foreground, and, even more specifically, the handshake between Bismarck and the second-ranking Russian diplomat in attendance, Count Pyotr A. Schuvalov (1827–1889). The Austro-Hungarian representative, Count Gyula Andrássy (1823–1890), looks on. That Schuvalov enjoyed such good relations with Bismarck angered the leader of the Russian delegation, Prince Alexander M. Gorchakov (1798–1883) (seated at the left), who subsequently ensured that his career went downhill. Among the men standing at far right are Lord Salisbury, the British foreign secretary, and Lord Odo Russell, the British ambassador in Berlin (third and fourth from the end, respectively). The foreground handshake was partially orchestrated by the artist himself, who wanted the viewer to be able to focus on a relatively intimate group, as opposed to an undifferentiated collection of diplomats. But this still did not prevent critics from complaining that Werner had painted only a "cabinet of wax figures." Werner had even suggested the setting, for the room in which the handshake took place was better lit than the one in which the main negotiations were held.

Source

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