

Benjamin Disraeli on the “German Revolution” (February 9, 1871)

Abstract

Benjamin Disraeli (1804–1881) was Britain’s first and only Jewish prime minister. Defeated in a general election in 1868 by William Gladstone (1809–1898), Disraeli faced another six years on the benches of the opposition. In this speech to the House of Commons, Disraeli takes stock of German affairs less than a month after proclamation of the German Empire. Although Britain had stood aside during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71, Disraeli describes the import of these events on Britain’s and Germany’s place in Europe. In the process, he mentions Lord Palmerston—Henry John Viscount Palmerston (1784–1865)—who had enjoyed long service as Britain’s foreign secretary and prime minister. In both posts, Palmerston personified Britain’s commitment to the European balance of power, which Disraeli now sees as “entirely destroyed.”

Source

Let me impress upon the attention of the House the character of this war between France and Germany. It is no common war, like the war between Prussia and Austria, or like the Italian war in which France was engaged some years ago; nor is it like the Crimean War.

This war represents the German revolution, a greater political event than the French revolution of last century. I don’t say a greater, or as great a social event. What its social consequences may be are in the future. Not a single principle in the management of our foreign affairs, accepted by all statesmen for guidance up to six months ago, any longer exists. There is not a diplomatic tradition which has not been swept away. You have a new world, new influences at work, new and unknown objects and dangers with which to cope, at present involved in that obscurity incident to novelty in such affairs. We used to have discussions in this House about the balance of power. Lord Palmerston, eminently a practical man, trimmed the ship of State and shaped its policy with a view to preserve an equilibrium in Europe.

[...]

But what has really come to pass? The balance of power has been entirely destroyed, and the country which suffers most, and feels the effects of this great change most, is England.

Source: Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates*, series III, vol. 204, February–March 1871, speech of February 9, 1871, pp. 81–82. Available online at: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1871-02-09>. Original English text reprinted in William Flavelle Money Penny and George Earle Buckle, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield*, new rev. ed. in 2 vols., vol. 2, 1860–1881. London: John Murray, 1929, pp. 473–74.

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