

“Bismarck is now the Most Popular Man in Prussia”: Wilhelm von Kügelgen after the Battle of Königgrätz (July 5, 1866)

Abstract

The Battle of Königgrätz on July 3, 1866, was the decisive battle of the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 and yielded a momentous victory for Prussia. Before the war, German public opinion was not on Bismarck's side. He was locked in a constitutional conflict with liberal deputies in the Prussian state parliament, and his course was considered too reactionary by some and too liberal by others. He was also believed to be gambling Prussia's fate recklessly because Austria was considered the stronger military power. In the following text, we read how public opinion seemed to change overnight as the result of Prussia's stunning military victory. Written two days after Königgrätz, this account is taken from a letter by Wilhelm von Kügelgen (1802–1887), an artist and chamberlain in the small German state of Anhalt-Bernburg, to his brother Gerhard. Kügelgen mentions Ludwig August von Benedek (1804–1881), commander of Austria's Northern Army during the Austro-Prussian War.

Source

[Ballenstedt, Anhalt-Bernburg]. *On 5 July*. [...] Yesterday, Benno^[1] passed through cities where there was nothing but fluttering flags and immense rejoicing, since news had spread of a new and decisive victory at Königgrätz. Also, as early as yesterday evening, the postal service supposedly received official notification that eight army corps had participated in the battle and that Benedek had been vanquished. Prague is supposed to be in Prussian hands. If that were true — The newspaper has just arrived; telegraphic dispatch by the King to the Queen dated July 3: “Great triumph over the Austrians. All eight corps under fire for eight hours; Austrians completely defeated. Extent of trophies still cannot be estimated. Our losses are significant. We are all well; may God's grace continue to be with us.” — This represents an incredible mobilization of power. Since June 27, there have been battles every day; finally this victory, which may essentially put an end to the conflict. The army has exhibited an excellence that had not been anticipated on either side. Even the much-vaunted Austrian cavalry was beaten by the Prussian one in every engagement. Bismarck is now the most popular man in Prussia. Everyone sings his praises, even the Democrats. I hope he manages to bring us a unified Germany. Besides that, there is howling and lamenting in most families. These victories were not easy; a lot—a whole lot—of blood was shed. Another six officers from Ballenstädt must have participated in the battles near Gitschin and Königgrätz, and many next of kin of local families must have been involved, too—no word about any of these yet. Our house has been flooded with sympathetic visitors from all classes. This certainly does us good; but—oh, our Gerhard! — Three beloved children are now gone. Oh, my Lord, dear God, how it hurts so bitterly!—and the poor bride who was always writing such courageous letters—how dejected she will be. I cannot go on writing. You are all warmly embraced.

Wilhelm

NOTES

[1] Wilhelm von Kügelgen's son—trans.

Source: Wilhelm von Kügelgen to his brother Gerhard, July 5, 1866, in Wilhelm von Kügelgen, *Bürgerleben. Die Briefe an den Bruder Gerhard 1840–1867*, edited and introduced by Walther Killy. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1990, pp. 999–1000; reprinted in Wolfgang Piereth, ed., *Das 19. Jahrhundert. Ein Lesebuch zur deutschen Geschichte 1815–1918*, 2nd ed. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1997, pp. 134–35.

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