

Bismarck Remembers the Evening the Ems Dispatch was Edited (July 13, 1870)

Abstract

In June 1870, the throne of Spain was offered to Prince Leopold of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen (1835–1905), a relative of King Wilhelm I of Prussia. Leopold accepted the candidacy, which was ultimately withdrawn on July 2 after the French government protested. In mid-July, Wilhelm I was taking the waters at Bad Ems. There, he met with the French ambassador Count Vincent Benedetti (1817–1900), who, in an interview, requested Wilhelm’s guarantee that the candidacy of a Hohenzollern to the Spanish throne would never be renewed. Wilhelm rejected the request politely, and a telegram reporting this was sent to Bismarck in Berlin by Heinrich Abeken (1809–1872), a member of the North German Confederation’s legation in Paris. Bismarck, intent on provoking war with France, consulted with War Minister Albrecht von Roon (1803–1879) and Prussian Chief of Staff Helmuth von Moltke (1800–1891). Before releasing the report of the king’s conversation with Benedetti to the newspapers, Bismarck edited it in a manner certain to provoke the French. France declared war on July 19 and the Franco-Prussian War began. Bismarck succeeded in his plan to make Prussia appear the victim of French aggression; this, in turn, contributed substantially to the decision of all the German states to join the conflict and then later, in January 1871, to join the new German Empire. The text below is an excerpt from Bismarck’s memoirs, which should always be taken with a grain of salt. Here, he denies adding to or altering the text of the telegram—he just shortened it. The original text of the Ems Dispatch and the version Bismarck released to the press follow in the next two entries.

Source

Having decided to resign [after the abandonment of the Hohenzollern candidacy], I invited [Roon] and Moltke to dine with me alone on the 13th, and communicated to them at table my views and projects for doing so. Both were greatly depressed, and reproached me indirectly with selfishly availing myself of my greater facility for withdrawing from service. I maintained the position that I could not offer up my sense of honor to politics, that both of them, being professional soldiers and consequently without freedom of choice, need not take the same point of view as a responsible foreign minister. During our conversation I was informed that a telegram from Ems, in cipher, if I recollect rightly, of about 200 “groups,” was being deciphered. When the copy was handed to me it showed that Abeken had drawn up and signed the telegram at his Majesty’s command, and I read it out to my guests^[1], whose dejection was so great that they turned away from food and drink. On a repeated examination of the document I lingered upon the authorization of his Majesty, which included a command, immediately to communicate Benedetti’s fresh demand and its rejection both to our ambassadors and to the press. I put a few questions to Moltke as to the extent of his confidence in the state of our preparations, especially as to the time they would still require in order to meet this sudden risk of war. He answered that if there was to be war he expected no advantage to us by deferring its outbreak; and even if we should not be strong enough at first to protect all the territories on the left bank of the Rhine against French invasion, our preparations would nevertheless soon overtake those of the French, while at a later period this advantage would be diminished; he regarded a rapid outbreak as, on the whole, more favorable to us than delay.

[...]

[Various] considerations, conscious and unconscious, strengthened my opinion that war could be avoided only at the cost of the honor of Prussia and of the national confidence in it.

Under this conviction I made use of the royal authorization communicated to me through Abeken, to publish the contents of the telegram; and in the presence of my two guests I reduced the telegram by striking out words, but without adding or altering, to the following form:

“After the news of the renunciation of the hereditary Prince of Hohenzollern had been officially communicated to the imperial government of France by the royal government of Spain, the French ambassador at Ems further demanded of his Majesty the King that he would authorize him to telegraph to Paris that his Majesty the King bound himself for all future time never again to give his consent if the Hohenzollerns should renew their candidature. His Majesty the King thereupon decided not to receive the French ambassador again, and sent to tell him through the aide-de-camp on duty that his Majesty had nothing further to communicate to the ambassador.” The difference in the effect of the abbreviated text of the Ems telegram as compared with that produced by the original was not the result of stronger words but of the form, which made this announcement appear decisive, while Abeken’s version would only have been regarded as a fragment of a negotiation still pending, and to be continued at Berlin.

After I had read out the concentrated edition to my two guests, Moltke remarked: “Now it has a different ring; it sounded before like a parley; now it is like a flourish in answer to a challenge.” I went on to explain: “If in execution of his Majesty’s order I at once communicate this text, which contains no alteration in or addition to the telegram, not only to the newspapers, but also by telegraph to all our embassies, it will be known in Paris before midnight, and not only on account of its contents, but also on account of the manner of its distribution, will have the effect of a red rag upon the Gallic bull. Fight we must if we do not want to act the part of the vanquished without a battle. Success, however, essentially depends upon the impression which the origination of the war makes upon us and others; it is important that we should be the party attacked, and this Gallic overweening and touchiness will make us if we announce *in the face of Europe*, so far as we can without the speaking-tube of the Reichstag, that we fearlessly meet the public threats of France.”

This explanation brought about in the two generals a revulsion to a more joyous mood, the liveliness of which surprised me. They had suddenly recovered their pleasure in eating and drinking and spoke in a more cheerful vein. Roon said: “Our God of old lives still and will not let us perish in disgrace.” Moltke so far relinquished his passive equanimity that, glancing up joyously towards the ceiling and abandoning his usual punctiliousness of speech, he smote his hand upon his breast and said: “If I may but live to lead our armies in such a war, then the devil may come directly afterwards and fetch away the ‘old carcass’.” He was less robust at that time than afterwards, and doubted whether he would survive the hardships of the campaign.

NOTES

[1] The telegram handed in at Ems on July 13, 1870, at 3:50 p.m. and received in Berlin at 6:09, ran as deciphered:

“His Majesty writes to me: ‘Count Benedetti spoke to me on the promenade, in order to demand from me, finally in a very importunate manner, that I should authorize him to telegraph at once that I bound myself for all future time never again to give my consent if the Hohenzollerns should renew their candidature. I refused at last somewhat sternly, as it is neither right nor possible to undertake engagements of this kind *à tout jamais*. Naturally I told him that I had as yet received no news, and as he was earlier informed about Paris and Madrid than myself, he could clearly see that my government once more had no hand in the matter.’ His Majesty has since received a letter from the Prince. His Majesty having told Count Benedetti that he was awaiting news from the Prince, has decided, with reference to the above demand, upon the representation of Count Eulenburg and myself, not to receive Count Benedetti again, but only to let him be informed through an aide-de-camp: That his Majesty had now received from the Prince confirmation of the news which Benedetti

had already received from Paris, and had nothing further to say to the ambassador. His Majesty leaves it to your Excellency whether Benedetti's fresh demand and its rejection should not be at once communicated both to our ambassadors and to the press."

Source of English translation: Theodore S. Hamerow, ed., *The Age of Bismarck: Documents and Interpretations*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973, pp. 93–95.

Source of original German text: Otto von Bismarck, *Gedanken und Erinnerungen*. Stuttgart: J. G. Cotta, 1898, vol. 2, pp. 87–92. Available online at:
https://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht?PPN=PPN816111677&PHYSID=PHYS_0001&DMDID=DMDLOG_0001.

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