

# Bismarck's Letter of Resignation (March 18, 1890)

## Abstract

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After Kaiser Wilhelm II's accession to the throne in June 1888, conflict between the old chancellor Bismarck and the twenty-nine-year-old emperor was almost inevitable. Tensions came to a head over the workers' question and how to deal with the Social Democrats. Germany had experienced a wave of strikes in 1889, and opinion was divided on how to meet the challenge. Wilhelm II did not want to start his reign with bloodshed. His Royal Decree of February 1890 promised social reform and various protections for workers. But Bismarck was more inclined toward a collision course with the Social Democrats, who had emerged from the Reichstag elections of February 1890 with more votes than any other party. He hoped to provoke a domestic crisis that would make him indispensable. On March 15, 1890, Bismarck was awoken at 9 a.m. with the news that the Kaiser wished to see him in the Foreign Office in half an hour's time. At last, the break between the two men could no longer be postponed, and a rancorous, awkward scene resulted, leaving Bismarck no choice but to offer his resignation. As it happened, more than two days ensued before he did so, during which time both men tried to seize the tactical advantage (Bismarck wanted to draw up a letter of resignation that could be published later). The following text is the so-called chancellery draft [*Kanzleikonzept*]*—*the draft of the actual letter that was finally sent to Wilhelm on March 18, 1890.

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Berlin, March 18, 1890.

At my reverential audience on the fifteenth of this month, Your Majesty commanded me to draw up a decree annulling the All-Highest Order of September 8, 1852, which regulated the position of the Minister-President with respect to his colleagues.

May I, your humble and most obedient servant, make the following statement on the genesis and importance of this order:

There was no need at that time of absolute monarchy for the position of a "President of the State Ministry." For the first time, in the United Landtag of 1847, the efforts of the liberal delegate (Mevissen) led to the designation, based on the constitutional needs of that day, of a "Premier-President," whose task it would be to supervise and contribute to the uniformity of the policies of the responsible ministers and to assume responsibility for the results of the cabinet's policy overall. In the year 1848, this constitutional practice was introduced into our system, and "Presidents of the State Ministry" were appointed, such as Count Arnim, Camphausen, Count Brandenburg, Baron von Manteuffel, and Prince von Hohenzollern, who were primarily responsible not for one portfolio, but rather for the overall policy of the cabinet and thus for all the portfolios. Most of these gentlemen did not hold portfolios of their own, but rather only the presidency, as was most recently the case, before my assumption of the post, with Prince von Hohenzollern, the Minister von Auerswald, and Prince Hohenlohe. It was incumbent on them, however, to ensure that the State Ministry maintained—both within itself and in its relationship with the monarch—the kind of unity and constancy without which it is not possible to carry out ministerial responsibility, such as forms the basis of constitutional life. The relationship of the State Ministry and its individual members to the new institution of the Minister-President very quickly required a new constitutional regulation, which was effected with approval of the then State Ministry by the order of September 8, 1852. Since then, this order has remained decisive in regulating the relationship of the Minister-President and the State Ministry, and it alone gave the Minister-President the authority which

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enabled him to take over responsibility for the policies of the cabinet, a responsibility demanded by the Landtag as well as public opinion. If each individual minister can obtain instructions from the monarch, without previous understandings with his colleagues, it becomes impossible in the cabinet to sustain uniform policies for which each member can be responsible. For none of the ministers nor, especially, for the Minister-President, does there remain any possibility of bearing constitutional responsibility for the overall policy of the cabinet. In the absolute monarchy, a regulation such as contained in the order of 1852 was unnecessary and would also be so today if we returned to absolutism without ministerial responsibility; according to the rightly existing constitutional institutions, however, a presidential leadership of the ministerial committee based on the principle of the order of 1852 is necessary. On this point, all of my colleagues agree, as was ascertained at yesterday's meeting of State Ministers; they also agree that any successor of mine in the ministerial presidency would not be able to bear the responsibility for his office if he lacked the authority that the order of 1852 confers. For any of my successors, this need will be even more pronounced, because he will not immediately be supported by the authority that my presidency of many years and the trust of the two late emperors granted to me. Up to this time, I have never felt the need, in my relationships with my colleagues, to draw upon the order of 1852. Its very existence and the knowledge that I possessed the confidence of Their Late Majesties Wilhelm and Friedrich were enough to assure my authority over my staff. Today, this knowledge exists neither for my colleagues nor for myself. I have been compelled, therefore, to return to the order of 1852, in order to assure the necessary uniformity in the service of Your Majesty. On the aforementioned grounds, I am not in a position to carry out Your Majesty's demand, which would require me to initiate and countersign the suspension of the order of 1852 which I recently evoked, and, despite that, at the same time carry on the presidency of the Ministry of State.

According to the information conveyed to me yesterday by Lieutenant General von Hahnke and Cabinet Privy Councilor von Lucanus, I can have no doubts that Your Majesty knows, and believes, that it is impossible for me to rescind the order while at the same time staying on as Minister-President. Nevertheless, Your Majesty has upheld the command given to me on the fifteenth of March and has held out the prospect of granting my request for dismissal.

After past discussions with Your Majesty on the question of whether my remaining in office would be unwelcome to Your All-Highest Majesty, I had reason to assume that Your All-Highest Majesty would be pleased if I gave up my positions in His Prussian services but continued on in Reich services. Upon closer examination of this question, I took the liberty of drawing attention, with all due reverence, to a number of serious consequences that would result from the separation of my offices, especially with regard to the future appearance of the Chancellor in the Reichstag, and I will refrain from repeating all of the consequences that such a separation between Prussia and the Reich Chancellor would have. As a result, Your Majesty deigned to grant permission to "leave things as they are" for the time being. However, as I had the honor of explaining, it is not possible for me to maintain the office of a Minister-President after Your Majesty has repeatedly ordered the *capitis diminutio* (reduction of authority) entailed by the annulment of the fundamental order of 1852.

During my reverent report on the fifteenth of March, Your Majesty also deigned to place restrictions on the expansion of my official privileges, thereby leaving me without the degree of participation in state affairs and the oversight of the latter, and without the degree of freedom in my ministerial decisions and in my dealings with the Reichstag and its members, that I require to assume constitutional responsibility for my official activity.

However, even if it were feasible to make our foreign policy as independent from our domestic policy and our Reich policy as independent from our Prussian policy as would be the case if the Reich Chancellor were just as uninvolved in Prussian politics as he is in Bavarian or Saxon politics, and if he had no share in the arrangement of the Prussian vote in the Federal Council and the Reichstag, it would still be impossible for me to implement the orders stipulated by Your Majesty with regard to foreign policy. It

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would be impossible after Your Majesty's recent decisions on the direction of our foreign policy, as summarized in the imperial billet which Your Majesty enclosed with the reports that were returned to the consul in Kiev yesterday. If I were to do so, I would call into question all of the important successes attained for the German Reich under a foreign policy in keeping with the wishes of Your Majesty's two late precursors, all of the successes attained over decades, and under unfavorable conditions, in our relations with Russia, and whose great significance, beyond all expectations, for the present and the future, was just confirmed to me by Count Shuvalov after his return from St. Petersburg.

Considering my attachment to service for the monarchy and for Your Majesty and the long-established relationship which I had believed would exist forever, it is very painful for me to terminate my accustomed relationship to the All Highest and to the political life of the Reich and Prussia; but, after conscientious consideration of the All Highest's intentions, to whose implementation I must always be ready to act, if I am to remain in service, I cannot do other than most humbly request Your Majesty *to grant me an honorable discharge with legal pension from the posts of Reich Chancellor, Minister-President, and Prussian Minister for Foreign Affairs.*

Judging from my impressions over the past weeks and from the revelations of which I learned yesterday from communications by Your Majesty's Civilian and Military Cabinet, I have reason to reverently assume that I am accommodating the wishes of Your Majesty with my request for discharge, and thus I am able to rely with certainty on the gracious approval of my request. I would have submitted the request for dismissal from my offices to Your Majesty earlier, had I not been under the impression that it was Your Majesty's wish to make use of the experience and talents of a loyal servant to His ancestors. Now that I am certain that Your Majesty does not require these, I may withdraw from political life without fearing that my decision will be condemned as untimely by public opinion.

Source of English translation: A portion of this translation was taken from Louis L. Snyder, ed., *Documents of German History*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1958, pp. 266–268. Passages omitted from Snyder's anthology were translated by Erwin Fink for *German History in Documents and Images* and added to Snyder's translation.

Source of original German text: Otto von Bismarck, *Die gesammelten Werke*, ed., Gerhard Ritter and Rudolf Stadelmann, Friedrichsruh ed., 15 vols., vol. 6c, no. 440, Berlin, 1924–1935, pp. 435ff.

Recommended Citation: Bismarck's Letter of Resignation (March 18, 1890), published in: German History in Documents and Images,  
<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-1859>> [May 17, 2024].