

Bismarck Tells the British Ambassador that Germany has Achieved its Legitimate Objectives (February 11, 1873)

Abstract

The text below is an excerpt from a letter by Lord Odo Russell (1829–1884), Britain’s ambassador to Germany from 1872 to 1884, to the British Foreign Secretary Lord Granville. Russell was allegedly “Bismarck’s favorite Englishman,” and this account suggests the closeness of the two men’s rapport. In this piece of correspondence, Russell describes Bismarck’s efforts to quell any notion that Germany desired further expansion or intended to build up a naval force. This was in accordance with Bismarck’s frequent statements that Germany after 1871 was a “satiated power.” One wonders, however, whether Russell himself believed the many disingenuous claims Bismarck made during this conversation, including the obvious lie that he preferred the system of ministerial responsibility that England enjoyed.

Source

Private.

Berlin, 11 February 1873.

Dear Lord Granville,

Prince Bismarck asked me this evening after dinner to come and smoke a Pipe with him in his sitting room. I did so, and found him alone. He said he wished to talk to me on various subjects but as he preferred in his dealings with me to speak with perfect freedom instead of with that diplomatic reserve which the dread of our Blue Books imposed on Foreign Ministers conversing with English Diplomats he hoped I would grant him the favour of reporting him privately and not officially.

In the first instance he wished to solicit my cooperation in contradicting calumny. — It had been reported to him that the Queen of Holland^[1] who, for incomprehensible reasons of her own was a bitter enemy of Prussia and of German Unity, had succeeded during her frequent visits to England in propagating the idea that Prussia sought to annex the Netherlands with a view to acquiring Colonies and a Fleet for Germany [...].

He neither desired Colonies or Fleets for Germany. — Colonies in his opinion would only be a cause of weakness, because Colonies could only be defended by powerful Fleets—and Germany’s geographical position did not necessitate her development into a first class Maritime Power. A Fleet was sufficient for Germany that could cope with Fleets like those of Austria, Egypt, Holland and perhaps Italy—scarcely with that of Russia, but it could not be a German interest so long as she had no Colonies to rivalize with Maritime Powers like England, America or France. — Many Colonies had been offered to him—he had rejected them and wished only for coaling stations acquired by Treaty from other Nations.

Germany was now large enough and strong enough in his opinion, and even the Emperor William’s [i.e., Wilhelm’s] insatiable desire for more territory had not led him to covet the possession of the Netherlands.

He had had trouble & vexation enough to combat the Emperors desire to annex the German Provinces of Austria, the population of which certainly desired to form part of the great German Family, but that desire he would oppose so long as he was in power, because he preferred the Alliance and friendship of

Austria to the annexation of Provinces that would add nothing to the strength and security of Germany and the loss of which would lessen the value of Austria as an ally.

The Swiss, for instance, were a German speaking nation, but Switzerland was of greater value as an independent friendly neighbor to Germany than as a province of the German Empire.

After the Danish War the Emperor had not spoken to him for a week so displeased was His Majesty with him for not having annexed a larger portion of Denmark. — In his opinion Germany had too many Danish speaking subjects and he would willingly pay out of his own pocket to rid Germany of them, but public opinion would not yet allow a German minister to give up any portion of territory so recently acquired. In like manner he held that Germany had too many Polish subjects, but how to deal with them was a question which must depend on the success of the measures now under discussion for the neutralization of the antinational Roman Catholic Element in the new Empire. It was now evident that the strength of Germany was in the Protestant North—her weakness in the Catholic South.

Prince Bismarck paused and puffed away the smoke from his long meerschaum pipe for some time in silence, and then he added in measured terms: “Our honour may compel us to deal differently with the South of Germany than we originally wished or intended.” — He then rang his bell, called for a bottle of Beer and another Pipe and went on [...] to repeat his grievance against his Imperial Master for resisting the introduction of a system of administration under a responsible Premier as in England which he (Prince Bismarck) considered the best method of developing the political education of the Germans and teaching them the art of Self government. — If however, he should have the misfortune of outliving the Emperor William he foresaw no difficulty in persuading the Crown Prince to follow the good example of England, which His Imperial Highness understood and appreciated as the best for Germany.

[...]

Sincerely yours,

Odo Russell

NOTES

[1] Queen Sophie of the Netherlands (1818–1877), consort of Wilhelm III. An excellent source of information on “la reine rouge” is Lady Burghelere, *A Great Lady’s Friendships: Letters to Mary, Marchioness of Salisbury, Countess of Derby, 1862–1890*. London, 1933. [Footnote from Paul Knaplund, ed., *Letters from the Berlin Embassy: Selections from the Private Correspondence of British Representatives at Berlin and Foreign Secretary Lord Granville, 1871–1874, 1880–1885*. Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1944, pp. 87–89.]

Source: Lord Odo Russell to Lord Granville, February 11, 1873, in Paul Knaplund, ed., *Letters from the Berlin Embassy: Selections from the Private Correspondence of British Representatives at Berlin and Foreign Secretary Lord Granville, 1871–1874, 1880–1885*. Washington, DC: USGPO, 1944, pp. 87–89.

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