

Bismarck's Diplomatic and Military Gamble through British Eyes (February–August 1866)

Abstract

In early 1866, the situation between the two European powers Austria and Prussia was very tense. Bismarck made no bones about Prussia's unwillingness to defer to Austria any longer. To court public opinion, he announced plans in April for a fundamental reform of the German Confederation. These plans included provisions for a national parliament to be elected by universal manhood suffrage. The conflict that finally broke out in mid-June 1866 has been called the Austro-Prussian War, the German Civil War, and the Seven Weeks' War. On July 3, 1866, the Battle of Königgrätz decided the war in favor of Prussia. In the preliminary peace agreed at Nikolsburg on July 26, 1866, and the Peace of Prague on August 23, 1866, Bismarck placed no territorial demands on the Habsburg Empire; he preferred a sizable indemnity, annexations in Northern Germany, secret military alliances with the middle-sized German states, and the establishment of the North German Confederation (1867–70) under Prussia's leadership. In the following excerpts, we see Bismarck's diplomatic and military gamble through the eyes of the British ambassador to Prussia, Lord Augustus Loftus (1817–1904). Like many others, the British initially regarded Bismarck's policy as reckless and likely to lead to Prussia's defeat; later, Loftus conceded that no other state seemed capable of charting a path toward German unification. Loftus was entirely typical of other diplomats of his time in his frequent use of French.

Source

I.

Lord Augustus Loftus was appointed British ambassador at the court of Prussia in December 1865. When he took up his appointment in mid-February 1866, he wrote:

I found on my arrival at Berlin the political atmosphere very “loaded”—“*Il sentait la poudre*,”^[1] as a Frenchman would say.

II.

On March 7, 1866, Loftus received the following letter from the British Foreign Minister, Lord Clarendon:

[...] Austria will face war rather than the humiliation which Prussia seeks to inflict upon her; and in adopting that course I think she is perfectly right. A disastrous war is better than voluntary disgrace. But in the name of all that is rational, decent, and humane, what can be the justification of war on the part of Prussia? [...]

I wish you would take an opportunity of saying to M. de Bismarck that [...] we earnestly beg of him to pause before he embarks in a war of which no man can foresee the results or the termination.

It is impossible that any *well-founded* complaints which Prussia may have against Austria should not be capable of being settled by negotiation. [...]

I know not upon what means of resistance Austria can reckon, or what support she would find in Southern Germany, but I am sure than any grievous injury to her, such as would destroy the present equilibrium of power, would be a misfortune for the rest of Europe, and as such would be resented—in

fact, the more the question is considered, the more certain it seems that Prussia will array against her the public opinion of Europe, as an aggressive and unreasonable Power; and we have no wish for that. Setting aside family ties, Prussia is the great Protestant Power of Europe, with which we naturally have kindred feelings, and it would be with deep regret that we should see her regarded as a common enemy, because a willful disturber, of the peace of Europe; and still more if, in the course of events, we found ourselves compelled to take any part against her.

III.

When Loftus conveyed these sentiments to Prussian Prime Minister Otto von Bismarck in a meeting of March 11, 1866, Bismarck offered the following reflections on Prussia's relationship with Austria:

I might use the words of Richelieu^[2] to his discarded mistress: "*Nous ne sommes pas ennemis: mais nous ne nous aimons plus.*"^[3]

IV.

The Kingdom of Saxony was Austria's ally in 1866. Just before war erupted in mid-June 1866, Loftus recorded an observation made by the Saxon government leader, Baron (later Count) Friedrich Ferdinand von Beust, about the possibility of avoiding war through mutual concession. "Le vin," said Baron Beust, "est tiré, il faut le boire."^[4]

V.

Loftus observed Bismarck's countenance on the evening war broke out between Prussia and Austria:

I was with Count Bismarck late on the evening of June 15. We had been walking and sitting in his garden till a late hour, when, to my astonishment, it struck midnight. Count Bismarck took out his watch, and said, "*À l'heure qu'il est nos troupes sont entrées en Hanovre, Saxe, et Hesse-Cassel.*"^[5] He added, "The struggle will be severe. Prussia may lose, but she will, at all events, have fought bravely and honourably. If we are beaten," Count Bismarck said, "I shall not return here. I shall fall in the last charge. One can but die once; and if beaten, it is better to die."

VI.

In June 1866 Britain's Liberal government fell and, after some delay, Lord Clarendon was replaced as foreign minister by Lord Stanley in July. Shortly thereafter Loftus offered this assessment of German affairs:

At this time I wrote to Lord Stanley that I could not view with any dissatisfaction or fear of danger to England an increase of power to Prussia. She was the great Protestant State of Continental Europe. She represented the intelligence, the progress, and the wealth of Germany. We have, I said, nothing to fear from her. She will become a Power of great importance in maintaining the peace of Central Europe. She will gradually advance in a constitutional system of government, and she will play the part of a moderator in Europe. We have much in common with her—our race, our religion, our mutual interests are all interwoven with Prussia, and our political interests should be identical. Why, I continued, should not Germany be allowed to constitute herself as she likes, and as Italy has done?

VII.

In a letter to Lord Stanley dated August 4, 1866—written shortly after the preliminary armistice agreed at Nikolsburg on 26 July—Loftus continued his analysis:

The annexation of all the States of Northern Germany to the [River] Main will give to Prussia an increase of about four millions of population. Thus in one month will have been effected, with a rapidity and success unparalleled in history, changes which even Count Bismarck, in his most elated moments, never

could have anticipated. Indeed, so great, so unexpected has been the success of the Prussian arms, that it is not unlikely to prove an embarrassment, and even a danger, to the political system which Count Bismarck is aiming to establish. His object, and that of the military party, is to create a great and powerful Prussia, extending from the Baltic to the Main, having full command of the maritime ports on the northern coasts, and the important and strategic maritime position of the Elbe Duchies. On the other hand, the desire of the Liberal party in Prussia and in Germany is to create a united Germany under a strong Power—that Power being Prussia—represented by a national parliament, to be established on the basis of the constitution framed by the Frankfort Assembly in 1849. They look to the fulfilment of their long-cherished dream of a German Empire—uniting the whole German nation under one command. But to attain this end (and they judge that the propitious moment had arrived) Prussia must be fused into Germany, whereas the object of Count Bismarck was to fuse Germany into Prussia.

It is to this point that public agitation will now direct itself, not only in Prussia, but throughout Germany. the weakness and political disorganisation displayed by the Southern States in the late struggle offer a convincing proof that there can be no material force or energy of action where there is a want of unity; and the sad experience acquired by the Civil War is a warning to the South German population that the recurrence of a similar misfortune can alone be obviated by the establishment of an United Germany under one supreme head, with a national representation forming the link of union between the several States.

In my humble opinion a great stride has been made to the attainment of this aim, and the rapid course of events will force Prussia—if not at present, at no distant date—willingly or unwillingly, to rally the nation round her standard, and to put herself at the head of Germany.

Count Bismarck is wise at this moment to restrict his ambition to the acquirement of Northern Germany. Prussia could not now risk a war with France, and without a collision with her no German unity will be established.

But there is another motive which must weigh powerfully with Count Bismarck—viz., a wish not to endanger the advantages already acquired. If at this moment the Imperial crown were offered to the King of Prussia, with the Constitution voted by the National Assembly at Frankfort in 1849, and with the Electoral Law passed by that Assembly, the whole internal system of government in Prussia would be submerged. The Feudal party, with its limited notion of constitutional rights, would be swept to the winds, and a moral revolution would take place in Prussia of as great importance as the miraculous successes which have attended her arms.

For these reasons, therefore, Count Bismarck will resist to the utmost any pressure which may seek to drive him beyond the limits of the preliminaries agreed to at Nikolsburg, and he will be contented with the creation of a great and powerful Prussia, without aiming to place the Imperial crown on the head of his Sovereign.

I may observe that Count Bismarck has passed through with wonderful success one phase of his ambitious undertaking—namely, that of “Demolition.” The second phase is about to commence—namely, the work of Reconstruction. In carrying out this latter phase, Count Bismarck will encounter great difficulties—difficulties, however, which his energy and iron will may succeed in overcoming. The exigencies of a theoretically constitutional, but a practically absolute, monarchy—the reactionary tendency of a triumphant military party—the strong “particularist” feelings in the dispossessed States, which are not uprooted in a day—the fanaticism of a feudal class, whose political opinions are associated with a past age—and the active pressure of the Progressist [sic] party, undaunted by defeat, will severely test the statesmanship, the skill, and the patience of Count Bismarck. [...]

These are difficulties of no mean order, which he [Bismarck] will have to surmount. It is through these

shoals that he will have to steer the vessel of State, and he will be fortunate if in avoiding “Scylla” he is not driven on “Charybdis.”

Bold in conception and energetic in action, unrestrained by scruples and unmoved by principles, governing by fear where he could not win by love, this intrepid, dexterous, and powerful Minister has now in his hands the most important part which, perhaps, has ever fallen to the lot of a statesman to fill. On the success of his policy will not only depend the future greatness and prosperity of his country, but also the maintenance of the security and peace of Europe.

NOTES

[1] “It smelled of [gun-]powder.”

[2] Cardinal Richelieu (born Armand Jean du Plessis, 1585–1642), was France’s foreign minister after 1616 and prime minister after 1624; he was acknowledged as a ruthless master of diplomacy, making France the preeminent power in Europe under King Louis XIII. [All footnotes are from Lord Augustus Loftus, *The Diplomatic Reminiscences of Lord Augustus Loftus*, second series, 1862–1879.]

[3] “We are not enemies: but we do not love each other any longer.”

[4] “The wine has been uncorked, it must be drunk.”

[5] “At this hour our troops have entered Hanover, Saxony, and Hesse-Cassel.”

Source: Lord Augustus Loftus, *The Diplomatic Reminiscences of Lord Augustus Loftus*, second series, 1862–1879, 2 vols. London: Cassell, 1894, vol. 1, pp. 39, 43–45, 60, 69, 99, 105–8. Original British spelling and syntax have been preserved. Available online at:

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044103165486&view=1up&seq=1&skin=2021>.

Recommended Citation: Bismarck’s Diplomatic and Military Gamble through British Eyes (February–August 1866), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-1815>> [May 17, 2025].