

Count Friedrich von Beust in Praise of the German Confederation (1887)

Abstract

Like the Württemberg democrat Ludwig Pfau (1821–1894), Count Friedrich Ferdinand von Beust (1809–1886) was willing to defend Germany’s legacy of *Kleinstaaterei*—loosely translated, the fetish of small statehood. Beust had played a part in putting down the Dresden Uprising of May 1849, and as the Kingdom of Saxony’s *de facto* government leader from 1849 to 1866 he implemented a period of political reaction that frustrated liberals and nationalists alike. Beust was the leading proponent of a “third Germany” (mentioned in the following entry as the “idea of the Trias”), in which authority in German-speaking central Europe was to be divided among Prussia, Austria, and the smaller German states. Beust was also Bismarck’s chief diplomatic rival outside of Austria and one of the German Confederation’s staunchest advocates. He led Saxony into the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 on Austria’s side and was forced from office after the Austrian defeat; almost immediately thereafter, he assumed the post of foreign minister—and then prime minister—of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In this excerpt from his memoirs, which were published more than twenty years after the demise of the German Confederation (1815–1866), Beust tries to justify his opposition to Prussia, Bismarck, and the *kleindeutsch* (small German) unification of 1871. Like Pfau—but from the opposite end of the political spectrum—Beust believed that unity could have been achieved without disavowing Germany’s federalist traditions.

Source

Was the German Confederation in reality so objectionable? It is a fact that during the fifty years of its existence, external peace was undisturbed, and Germany was not involved in a single war. It is said—and I myself said so in my last speech at the delegation of 1871—that this happy result was owing to the long understanding between Austria and Prussia. Undoubtedly. But this understanding was created and facilitated by the Confederation as the connecting link. So long as that understanding lasted, no German government had any other program than complete union with those united powers. Only when Prussia began after 1848 to pursue the policy of gradually expelling Austria from Germany, did it become inevitable that some governments should side with Prussia, others with Austria. But we must not forget that not one of the German governments of that time ever took a single step that might have warranted foreign countries in interfering in German affairs. If there were times when excessive deference was shown to Russia, and later on perhaps to France, we must look for the reason elsewhere than in Frankfurt. For years the German courts were trained by Vienna and Berlin in the fear of God and of the Czar Nicholas, and they did not give the first example of subservience to Napoleon III. But when the moment came for the German Confederate princes to defend themselves and their country, as in 1840 and 1859, they rose nobly and patriotically as one man. And I must add this consideration, which is often overlooked in the present day: It is highly satisfactory and desirable to be always hearing of the German Empire and its allies for the preservation of peace. But the more welcome the result of these efforts, the more essential is their necessity. This is a logical and irrefragable conclusion. In the days of the German Confederation we heard little of such efforts, because peace was regarded as a matter of course—which it has ceased to be since 1866 and 1870.

The severe judgment passed on the Confederation was extended to the system of Federal Union, and the restrictions on the independence of the federal states. But can it be forgotten that the representative system did not owe its origin and development to the two great powers, in whose dominions it was only introduced after having flourished for twenty or thirty years in the German central states, in spite of the

opposition of Vienna and Berlin? Can it be maintained that this system, which has long been identified with progress in Germany, as in France and Italy, only acquired full development and respect in the German Empire? There are still many who advocate the imposition of limits to popular representation; but not one of them will assert that the time will not come when the representative system will be wanted, not as a curb for the higher, but as a safety-valve for the lower classes. These times are sure to come, and a grave responsibility will fall on those who are now using their power to bring that system into discredit.

Not only in this sphere of political organization, but also in legislation and administration, it was the smaller and not the great states that took the lead and did much that was beneficial. I will instance the construction of railways. The Nürnberg-Fürth line was the first short railway in Germany, and the Leipzig-Dresden, afterwards continued to Magdeburg, was the first long one. I was Secretary of Legation at Berlin when the Committee of the Leipzig-Dresden railway was formed. How many times did I hear sneering remarks on “the Saxon wisecracks!” The Minister of Foreign Affairs, who became later on my uncle by marriage, confidentially warned me not to have anything to do with this undertaking. And need I remind my readers how powerfully arts and sciences were promoted by the multiplicity of the German cities where kings held their court? It may be retorted that there is nothing to prevent the minor states from continuing to pursue this beneficial course. But I must point out that there is more than one of the most important branches of legislation and administration in which they are no longer able to have a decisive voice. There is further a lack—from what causes I need not state—of that spirit of mutual emulation among the independent sovereigns which was so powerful in promoting many undertakings.

[...]

And how strangely has the idea of the Trias,^[1] which I represented, been distorted! It is worthy of notice that this combination [...] never received any sympathy in foreign countries, least of all in France. The French cabinet perceived plainly what Germany was so blind as to ignore, that the third group could not be tampered with, and that it would be the best bulwark against special alliances with foreign powers, such as that of Prussia with Italy, as it would then side with the power not making the alliance.

[...]

As to the argument drawn from the state of Italy before it was united, there was really no analogy between Italy and Germany. In the former country there was no Confederation of the various states; each of them depended more or less on foreign powers. Even Piedmont followed the lead of Austria up to 1847; those states which belonged to branches of the House of Austria did so naturally, and Naples oscillated between the influence of Austria and that of France.

Very different was the state of affairs in the various states of the German Confederation. Was there one of them that Gladstone could have held up to public abhorrence as he did the kingdom of Naples? I was on a short visit to Saxony after 1870, at the time when Prince Bismarck was first attempting to make the railways of the various states an Imperial monopoly. This measure excited bitter opposition, which a National Liberal paper deplored with the words: “This narrow, local spirit reminds us of the worst times of Beust.” “Nay, it explains the worst times of Beust,” said I to a friend. In those times the Saxon had not yet the gratification of having conquered Alsace, but the Alsatian manufactories were not competing with the Saxon; nor had the Saxon the gratification of possessing a navy ready equipped for war; but the products of his industry were being sent across the sea far more frequently than now. He had not the satisfaction of being a member of the greatest military power in Europe; but he enjoyed the harmless pleasure of hearing Saxony raise her voice in the Confederation, and seeing her minister become a member of a European Conference. He paid for this less dearly than now, when he is obliged to contribute sixty thousand men to the Imperial army—three times the number that was then considered sufficient to preserve the peace and security of the country. And finally, he did not possess the

satisfaction of knowing that if he were ill-treated at Buenos-Ayres, a man-of-war would be sent to punish his tormentors. Such a disaster, however, rarely happened, while he was often in a position to want help and support in Paris, London, and St Petersburg, in which case he used to receive from the Saxon ministers at those places every possible assistance, as they had both time and means to devote to him. Now, on the other hand, the German embassy throws him into the common pot, where little remains for each individual, considering the multitude of applicants.

NOTES

[1] The scheme for dividing Germany into three groups, composed of Austria, Prussia, and the smaller states.

Source of English translation: *Memoirs of Friedrich Ferdinand, Count von Beust*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. London: Remington & Co., 1887, vol. 1, ch. 29, pp. 283–85, ch. 34, pp. 343–45. Available online at: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015063790557&view=1up&seq=14&skin=2021>.

Source of original German text: Friedrich Ferdinand Graf von Beust, *Aus drei Viertel-Jahrhunderten. Erinnerungen und Aufzeichnungen*, 2 vols. Stuttgart: Verlag der J. G. Cotta'schen Buchhandlung, 1887, vol. 1, 1809–1866, ch. 30, pp. 421–23, vol. 2, 1866–1885, ch. 3, pp. 31–33. Available online at: [https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.\\$b790609&view=1up&seq=8&skin=2021](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b790609&view=1up&seq=8&skin=2021) (vol. 1) and <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015009229322&view=1up&seq=9&skin=2021> (vol. 2).

Recommended Citation: Count Friedrich von Beust in Praise of the German Confederation (1887), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-1823>> [May 03, 2024].