

Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm Describes a Prussian State Council Meeting (January 17, 1871)

Abstract

Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm (1831–1888) was the son of Prussian King and German Kaiser Wilhelm I. He was the father of Kaiser Wilhelm II. He ruled Prussia and Germany for only 99 days, from March 9 to June 15, 1888; during this time he took the title Kaiser Friedrich III. Well before ascending the throne, he had been diagnosed with throat cancer, and all surgical and other attempts to halt the progress of the disease failed. He was known to hold less reactionary views than his father, his son, and Bismarck, due in part to the influence of his wife, Princess Victoria, the daughter of Queen Victoria of Britain. Friedrich III, however, was not as committed to a liberal course as many of his contemporaries and some historians believed. The text below, drawn from the crown prince's diary, describes a meeting between Wilhelm I, the crown prince, and Bismarck, one day before the proclamation of the German Empire in the Versailles Hall of Mirrors on January 18, 1871. Even at this point, there was still deep disagreement about the title Wilhelm would accept as the new head of Germany. Bismarck considered the title "Emperor of Germany" inappropriate because the heads of the other German states viewed it as demeaning to them. The same was true of the title "Emperor of the Germans." A solution was devised during the ceremony itself: Wilhelm would be referred to only as "German Emperor." This account can be fruitfully compared with Bismarck's recollection of the same discussions.

Source

Headquarters at Versailles, January 17, 1871

In the afternoon, there was a meeting of the Council, in the presence of the King, at which Count Bismarck, the Minister of the Royal Household, von Schleinitz, and I were present. When Count Bismarck encountered the Minister of the Household, von Schleinitz, in the antechamber, he told him rather brusquely that he did not really understand what sorts of matters the Federal Chancellor and the Minister of the Household needed to discuss jointly with the King. In an overheated room, we spent three hours deliberating on the title of Emperor, the designation of the Crown Prince, the status of the Royal family, the Court, and the army in relation to the Reich, etc.

With respect to the imperial title, Count Bismarck acknowledged that, even during the discussions on the constitution, the Bavarian representatives and plenipotentiaries had not wished to permit the designation "Emperor of Germany," and that in the end he had conceded for their sake and settled on "German Emperor," though without asking His Majesty beforehand. This designation, with which no real idea is associated, aroused both His Majesty's displeasure and mine, and we did our utmost to replace it with "Emperor of Germany." Yet Count Bismarck held to his viewpoint. [...] Furthermore, he attempted to prove that the term "Emperor of Germany" signified a territorial power that we did not wield over the Reich in any way, whereas "German Emperor," on the other hand, was the natural successor to the former *imperator Romanus*. So, eventually, we had to submit, though I was not fond of this solution at all.

[...]

This occasion witnessed a rather embarrassing debate about the relation of Emperor to King; it occurred because the King [Wilhelm], contrary to old Prussian traditions, rates an Emperor higher than a King. The two ministers and I, along with them, opposed this view most resolutely, referring to historical

documents in our archives, in which King Friedrich I, in recognizing the Russian Czar as Emperor, expressly emphasized that he should never take precedence over the Prussian King. Furthermore, another argument focused on a meeting between King Friedrich Wilhelm I and the Holy Roman Emperor, at which the King had insisted on entering a two-door pavilion at exactly the same time as the Emperor, so as to ensure that even the latter would not take precedence over him. Finally, Count Bismarck also pointed out that it was only King Friedrich Wilhelm IV's personal and peculiar humility before Austria that had led him to introduce the principle of submission to the archducal dynasty of that imperial state. The King, however, was not at all convinced by those examples; instead, he became angry and declared that King Friedrich III, in his meetings with Czar Alexander I, had determined that the latter in fact took precedence, and that his royal father's will was authoritative and the decisive factor in the present case. Furthermore, he argued, we would not be able to realize our claims to an advance in rank vis-à-vis the English royal family either, which, as a well-known fact, was entitled to the prime position among all European ruling dynasties. When, however, during the course of the deliberations, it was decided that our family should retain its current status, the King, in turn, expressed his desire that the equality of its position in relation to the Imperial Houses be underscored. In the end, we resolved that nothing definitive should be done in this respect.

[...]

The question of the imperial flag provoked few reservations, since the King did not raise any substantial objections to the black-white-and-red cockade, the less so because the latter, as he himself put it, had not risen from the dirt of the gutter, as had the black-red-and-gold flag. Even so, he would only tolerate the tricolor flag being flown *side by side* with the Prussian one.

The coat of arms proposed by Count Bismarck and myself did not encounter any opposition, though it was not expressly accepted either.

The more clearly, however, the consequences of the designations "Emperor" and "Reich" emerged in the course of the deliberations, the more infuriated the King became. Finally, he burst out in words to the effect that he was merely taking over a pseudo-Kaiserdom, nothing more than another designation for "President"; that he was just like a major who had been granted the title of "acting lieutenant-colonel" upon retirement. Now that it had come to this, he certainly would have to bear this cross, but he wished to do so alone; for this reason, he would not tolerate anyone who expected him to make the same unreasonable demand on the Prussian army that he was facing personally; therefore, he would not hear of calling his forces an "Imperial Army," since he at least wished to spare our army that, and he could not tolerate the troops being asked to accept "German" names and designations. For all he cared, the navy might be called an "Imperial Navy." Moreover, he said in the most extraordinary state of agitation, that he could not even begin to describe to us how despondent he felt about having to say farewell tomorrow to the old Prussia, to which he alone was clinging and would continue to cling in future. At this point, sobs and tears interrupted his words.

[...]

Without having achieved anything in these matters, and with each of us asking the other what was actually going to happen now, we left the prefecture. These were the impressions we took along as we ushered in the magnificent German celebration scheduled for the following day!

Source: Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm's diary entry, January 17, 1871; reprinted in Johannes Hohlfeld, *Deutsche Reichsgeschichte in Dokumenten 1849–1926*, 2 vols. Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte, 1927, vol. 1, pp. 69–76.

Translation: Erwin Fink

Recommended Citation: Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm Describes a Prussian State Council Meeting (January 17, 1871), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-1821>> [April 30, 2024].