Eyewitnesses Describe the Battlefield at Königgrätz (July 1866)

Abstract

The Battle of Königgrätz (Hradec Kralove) on July 3, 1866, was the decisive battle of the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 and yielded a momentous victory for Prussia. In these letters to his wife Johanna (A), Prussian Minister President Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898) describes his high-political calculations before and after this battle. In his letter of July 11, he describes accompanying Prussian King Wilhelm I (1797–1888, ruled 1858–1888) as they rode for thirteen hours in the saddle while the battle raged, and Austrian ordnance landed in their proximity. The second eyewitness account (B) describes the Battle of Königgrätz and the day after. Readers of the mass-circulated illustrated journal *Die Gartenlaube*—with a paid circulation exceeding 160,000 in the mid-1860s—learned of the confusion and logistical complexity of troop movements and care of the wounded. The account ends with a ringing endorsement of German unity achieved through force of arms. In contrast to the preceding account by a Silesian farmer, the account given by Georg Hiltl (1826–1878)—an actor, theater director, and popular novelist with an interest in medieval weapons (C)—focuses on the corpses found after the Battle of Königgrätz. Accompanying Hiltl's account in the illustrated journal *Die Gartenlaube* was the image titled "The Last Billet" [*Das letzte Quartier*], by A. Nikutowski. Nikutowski's drawing is rather more romantic than Hiltl's account, which at least suggested the carnage of modern warfare. In the final text (D), which was accompanied by an original etching by Herbert König, readers of the illustrated journal *Die Gartenlaube* were offered an indignant account of how corpses from the battle were plundered by "predators" [*Raubtiere*] of the battlefield. Both the illustration and the text offer a chauvinistic view of the "barbaric" Czechs in Bohemia who inflicted such indignities on German soldiers.

Source

A. Otto von Bismarck to his Wife Johanna (July 1–11, 1866)

Sichrow, July 1, 1866.

We meet prisoners everywhere, there are already over 15,000 according to the information available here. Jitschin was taken by us yesterday with raised bayonets, Frankfurter Division, General Tümpling badly wounded on hip, not lethal. Terrible heat. Difficult to supply provisions; our troops are suffering from fatigue and hunger. Not many traces of war in the countryside so far, except for crushed cornfields. People are not afraid of the soldiers; they stand in front of their doors in their Sunday clothes with wife and child and wonder.

Jitschin, July 2, 1866.

Just arrived from Sichrow; the battlefield on the way here was still full of corpses, horses, weapons. Our victories are much greater than we thought; it seems that we already have more than 15,000 prisoners, and the losses of the Austrians in dead and wounded are reported to be even higher, around 20,000 men. Two of their corps are completely shattered, some regiments destroyed to the last man. So far I have seen more Austrian prisoners than Prussian soldiers.

Hohenmauth, Monday, July 9, 1866.

We're fine; if we don't exaggerate our claims and don't believe we have conquered the world, we will

achieve a peace that is worth the effort. But we become intoxicated as fast as we grow despondent, and I have the thankless task of pouring water into the exhilarating wine and asserting that we do not live alone in Europe, but with three neighbors. The Austrians are in Moravia, and we are so bold to announce that our headquarters for tomorrow will be where they are stationed today. We are still collecting prisoners, and cannons captured from the 3rd to the present number 180. If they engage us with their southern army, we will still defeat them with God's merciful assistance; everyone is confident. I would like to kiss our troops, each one so courageous, quiet, obedient, civil, and with an empty stomach, wet clothes, wet camp, little sleep, boots losing their soles, yet friendly to all, no plundering or scorching, they pay what they can, and eat moldy bread. In the common man there must indeed be a deep vein of the fear of God, otherwise this could not be happening at all. Messages about acquaintances are hard to come by; one is stationed miles apart from the other, no one knows where the other is, and nobody knows how to send a message, except on foot, since there are no horses. The king, however, was very much in evidence on the 3rd, and it was very good that I was with him, since all the others' warnings had no effect, and no one would have dared to speak as I finally allowed myself to do, which helped; and this after a ravel of 10 cuirassiers and 15 horses of the 6th Cuirassier Regiment agonized, bleeding beside us, and the shells swirled around the king in the most unpleasant proximity. Happily, the worst was avoided. But I would have preferred for him to call for exaggerated caution. He was enthusiastic about his troops and rightly so, such that he did not seem to notice the bolting and battering beside him, but rather remained calm and comfortable as on the Kreuzberg, and he kept finding battalions which he had to thank and say good evening to, until we were again really in the midst of fire. But he has heard so much about it that he will let it be in the future, and you can rest assured: I don't believe we'll have a real battle anymore.

Zwittau in Moravia, July 11, 1866.

I do not have an inkwell, since all of them are now occupied, otherwise I'm fine, having slept well on a cot with air mattress and was awakened by a letter from you at 8. I went to bed at 11. At Königgrätz I rode the big chestnut horse, 13 hours in the saddle without any food. He managed very well, wasn't frightened by shooting or corpses, ate his preferred grass grains and plum leaves during the most difficult moments, and strode briskly to the end of our march, where I seemed more tired than the horse. My first camp for the night, however, was on the pavement of Horic, without any straw, but with the aid of a wagon cushion. All the beds were occupied by the wounded. The Grand Duke of Mecklenburg discovered me, and then shared his room with me, R., and two adjutants, which I was glad to accept because of the rain. As for the King and the grenades, I have already written to you about this. The generals all had the notion that they as soldiers should not speak to the King of danger, and rather sent me—just a major—to alert him each time we encountered danger.

Source: *Bismarck's Political Letters from the Years 1849–1889*. Berlin: Hugo Steinitz Verlag, 1889, pp.187–90.

Translation: Richard Pettit

B. "At Königgrätz the Day after the Battle. From a Silesian Landowner" (1866)

Already in Gitschin, where on the 3rd of July in the afternoon I arrived on a sutler's cart following the sixty-fourth Prussian regiment, we learned that an important battle was raging at Josephstadt or Königsgrätz. We were surprised by the fact that at a distance of five or six miles, we had been listening for cannon thunder in vain all day; the rainy weather and the direction of the wind probably prevented the sound from reaching us. After a short rest we hurried on, hoping to arrive at the camp, if possible, on the day of the battle; but the fine broad country road was filling up more and more with columns of provisions, ammunition and fodder, so that we could not leave the uninterrupted row of wagons. When darkness fell, everything came to a standstill due to the blockage caused by the three rows of wagons.

For the time being we could not advance, so we took a detour to the village of Konetzchlum.

At the inn, of course, we found neither innkeepers nor food, nor straw, but fortunately there was water in the courtyard. After much effort we got some hay in the village and prepared a camp in the inn. At two o'clock in the morning, some seventy wounded men drove up on wagons and dragged themselves into the dark room, where they fell over each other, exhausted and clinging to their shattered limbs. I was awakened by the call for light and water, and a soldier gave me a tiny lantern which I lit and then scattered the little bit of hay from my bed, so that at least the most seriously wounded of them would get some layer of bedding. In the meantime, the floor filled up more and more, and the small adjoining kitchen was also so crowded that I even had to use straw-covered horse manure for pillows. All the wounded were very thirsty, most of them also hungry. I fetched a bucket of water, found a broken beer bottle, and one after another gave them water to drink; I also distributed in small pieces a few hard army biscuits that I had with me. The lantern had burned out, but not all the wounded were taken care of, so I tried to find a light in the village, but in vain. I then went to a bivouac on the road, woke the commanding officer sleeping in a straw hut, who very readily gave me a light from his wagon lantern. He himself, however, had not a single bit of bread, and only one man in his column was able to give us a hand-sized old crust of army bread. His troops then tied the straw from their camp together and followed me with it. On the way we met on the street—what joy!—a cart filled with bread, from which the obliging officer promptly requisitioned eight loaves for me.

The wounded in our inn formed the first transport of injured soldiers from the great battle of Königsgrätz. Almost all of them were Prussians; they had already left the battlefield on wagons in the morning and arrived here, accompanied by exhausted Bohemian stable boys, without any medical or military escort. Although most of them were only slightly wounded, many had shattered arms and legs, one man was shot in the back, another in his chest, and the constant wheezing of this man could well have been his death-rattle. We now also examined the rack wagons in this transport and found several more seriously wounded men, almost frozen by the cold of the night.

At four o'clock in the morning we resumed our journey, after having passed on the wounded to the care of the officer in charge. The most beautiful morning followed the rainy weather of the previous day and refreshed the blessed meadows. Splendid wheat, oilseed rape and clover pleased the eye as far as one could see, and only on both sides of the road, bordered with double rows of plum trees, and at the bivouac places, the crops in a breadth of ten to twenty rods? (Ruthen) were completely crushed. In the inn at Wojic we encountered the exceptional Bohemian landlady who aroused our sympathy, as she assisted the military in attendance at coffee-making, provided us with milk from her last cow without payment, and generously helped to cleanse and bandage the wounded. After a short refreshment we left, sending the wagon on ahead, when the friendly landlady came hurrying after us, desperately sobbing, and telling us how the ammunition column that had just passed had taken her last cow from the stable! Very agitated, the woman pleaded with us for help, and we were able to convince a horseman riding towards the headquarters in Horzitz to reclaim the cow, and were pleased to see that our efforts were successful.

Now the road was crowded with couriers from all sorts of cavalry regiments, with officers carrying dispatches, with a divisional or brigade staff hurrying forward, with several wagons from the field post office and telegraph office, with requisitioned carriages for civil servants or doctors, and with columns and provision wagons of all kinds. Everyone was rushing towards headquarters, the encampment or the battlefield. Before reaching Horzitz we encountered a transport of about one thousand and five hundred Austrian prisoners of different troop types; they all looked depressed, haggard, and their clothing was badly battered. Their headgear stood out in particular and was of very different origins. Thus a little brown Italian was wearing his uniform together with a black top hat; civilian caps of various shapes and age categories were often seen among the wounded. Of course the Kaiserjäger infantry with their Tyrolean hats and plumes, stood out very handsomely against this backdrop.

Horzitz itself showed less bullet damage than Gitschin, but was so overcrowded with columns and service goods that one could hardly get through. The exceedingly large number of field hospitals, recognizable by their white flags, surprised us; sometimes, however, the appropriate fabric for these flags was missing and white aprons or even a white petticoat were called into service as markers. We joined a supply column and continued on at a sharp trot. The fields had suffered a lot here; on both sides of the road, the crops were so beaten down that it appeared as if the fields had been covered with straw mats. The cherry trees along the road had been plundered in haste by the passing troops, and some branches had been chopped off with a bayonet, saber, or cutlass, and then distributed to their comrades, who ate the fruit as they marched on. Teams from all regiments drove along the road requisitioned cattle for slaughter, small country cows, oxen, calves, pigs; an infantryman, to the general amusement of the troops, forged ahead with five or six of the loveliest young English pigs, who did not make it easy for him. At the village of Klenitz we reached the Prussian encampment. With its two hundred thousand men of all troop types, their columns spread over vast areas on both sides of the road, it offered a truly magnificent sight.

My sutler (*Marketender*=owner of a provisions store) took up position with his regiment, which was on a hill to the left of the road, but I climbed up on a supply wagon to first gain a quick overview of the battlefield; I saved closer inspection for the way back. In long columns the wounded drove past us on ordinary agricultural wagons and field hospital carriages; the corpses were taken to their resting places on freight wagons, and lay in their different uniforms, piled up high above the wagon drivers. The fields on both sides were covered with thousands of huts covered with leaves, in which the Austrian riflemen and infantry had tried to resist the attack. The edge of the forest was beaten down, but the stumps had been left to stand two feet high to make the assault more difficult. Twigs and foliage had to serve for the construction of these huts. In many cases marking stakes were set up and the bark peeled off the trunks to indicate distance for the Austrian artillery; thus it's not surprising that they were so accurate from an already excellent firing position. The forest was so devastated by Austrian canister shots, that it appeared as if the old spruce and pine trees had been shattered by a terrible hailstorm. The ditches alongside the road and the fields were strewn indiscriminately with corpses of men and horses, knapsacks, helmets and garrison caps, cookware, bayonets and side guns, grenades, needle-fired guns and Austrian rifles—everything disparately mixed up and on top of each other.

At the village Sadowa the main battlefield begins and extends on both sides of the Königsgrätzer road to behind Lipa and Chlum. Four artillerymen accompanied me to the nearby ramparts in Lipa, a village lying on the right and left of the road at the height of a ridge, which slopes regularly towards the Elbe up to Königsgrätz, one and a quarter miles away. From here I had an overview of the whole dreadful battlefield. A staff officer checked my papers and was then kind enough to explain the various positions to me in great depth and most instructively. During the artillery attack on the brick factory near Lipa, the village of Cistoves, among others, was also set on fire by the shelling. Unfortunately, along with this village a large part of the Austrian wounded troops also perished in this fire. During the battle they had been removed to the vicinity of some entrenchments in the village to keep them safe. I learned of this later from an older Austrian officer, who had himself carried out on his back a wounded man from a burning house into an open field.

From our ramparts we overlooked the whole battlefield, and beyond Sadowa we could see the endless encampment of the Prussian army; seen through a spy glass, it resembled a dark anthill. The ramparts themselves were so sharp-edged and intact that a general bayonet battle could hardly have taken place here, although I did find several rifles with bent bayonets. There were no guns to be seen. Close to the ramparts, however, dead bodies from both contending armies lay by the hundreds, in some places two to three on top of each other; behind the hills, towards Königsgrätz, the wide plains were speckled with Austrian corpses. Some of the dead lay in the position they had fallen, arms and legs stretched out on the ground; with others one could see that they had rolled over like stricken rabbits and had collapsed. Many

corpses had their faces covered with a handkerchief; either they themselves had prepared for the death they expected, or merciful companions had shown them this last service of love. Some had both hands over their eyes. An Austrian officer still held an open letter in his cold hand. I picked it up in order to deliver it, but it was addressed to the person himself who had fallen, and I put it down again, because I was not the one supposed to read it. Now I regret this; it might have been one last dear memory for those close to him.

The battle in the woods on the right side of the hill near Chlum must have been terrible. Here, along the critical stretches of the route, the corpses were frequently piled up so densely that one had to take care not to step on them. At this location there was also an Austrian rifleman in the roadside ditch; in his left hand the rifle with the trigger cocked, in the raised right hand between thumb and forefinger there was still the fourfold slotted primer for firing, which I took with me as a keepsake. All the corpses had opened eyes, often with bits of hard bread in their hands and mostly wild, pain-distorted facial features. They had, however, all been plundered, all their pouches were turned inside out and were still hanging open. The purses and notebooks had been emptied and opened, and lay in each case next to their former owners, whose uniforms and trousers were torn open, so that their last cash on hand, fastened to their bodies, could be stolen. Each knapsack had been opened, clean sheets, shaving kits, prayer books, clothes, sewing kits, manuals, cartridges, packages, etc. were scattered about like worthless objects; I even saw revolvers and field glasses in the cases next to officers' corpses, but I did not notice a closed knapsack and rarely a pouch that had not been turned inside out.

How so many people can come together within twelve hours to plunder these thousands of bodies is virtually inexplicable to me. A field cap, a white riding coat, the plume of an imperial rifleman, the sash of an officer, but especially canteens may well have been taken as trophies or as replacement equipment for the victors; but to steal objects of value would be a disgrace for any Prussian soldier, and of this I had several chances to convince myself. It was noticeable that the Austrians were carrying full shaving equipment and many lanterns. The brass cap badges, two inches in diameter, were mostly tied inside the caps to specific laces at the top of the cap, probably because they were too shiny and could have provided targets to the enemy. A few affectionate Affenpinschers (a breed of dog) offered a touching sight. These loyal animals ran around among the corpses, looking for their masters, while they themselves looked quite pitiful from hunger, moisture, and fear.

On the other side of the road, we passed the densely packed fields of corpses behind the houses in Lipa, and here we found twenty-seven excellent Austrian horse-drawn cannons; only one of them was loaded! There were still five horses in the breast harnesses of one cannon, and the sixth had pulled loose and was stretched out close to the weapon, the men who had been driving the horses lay on top of them. A cannoneer had both legs demolished by a grenade and the boot with the leg stuck in it appeared literally to have been thrown elsewhere. Some horses were almost torn apart, others had up to fifteen wounds. One horse had a hole in its forehead, so large that one could have reached in with a fist, another had a single pellet hole in the middle of the forehead. A red blister marked the spot; the opening was so small that the end of a walking cane could hardly have penetrated it. The animal lay as calm as if it had lain comfortably on fresh litter in the stable. Here too the Prussian artillery had been very effective. A man's skull was completely torn off, his extremities had almost disappeared from his body, his chest was so torn open that his body swam in a pool of coagulated blood. The plain in front of these cannons and running to the grove before Sadowa and Dohaliz was already cleared of human corpses, but the whole plain was still covered with dead horses from the brave Prussian Guards and Zieten-Hussars. As if struck by lightning, these beautiful, for the most part noble animals simply lay there; most of them seemed to have died immediately. They still had their horseshoes, manes, and tails, while those killed in Gitschin were missing these parts; they had been cut off, torn off, and stolen.

The ammunition chests of the cannons were still abundantly filled with ordnance; in pouches we found the measured loading quantities of a coarse, unpolished, very easily friable explosive powder and

numerous grape-shot.

Near Lipa we encountered individual detachments of troops who had set up camp and were preparing their midday meal. Geese, chickens, and piglets had been rounded up, and were cooked together with army ration biscuits to produce strong soups or roasted on green alder sticks; the plucked goose feathers often appeared like white snow-covered patches on the road. I distributed my last cigars among some of the officers, and then, after a short rest, moved on to the leaf-covered huts on the right side of the road above the tiny aforementioned woods. Here, too, there was a ghastly multitude of corpses, almost every hut had one or more unmoving inhabitants. Most of them seemed to have belonged to a Hungarian regiment; many had undressed, except for trousers and shirts, and had pulled up their shirtsleeves in order to be unencumbered in exercising their bloody craft; I often saw cocked guns in their cold hands.

Beyond the meadow beside the forest, the fallen were buried in large numbers, friend and foe together in their uniforms. The burial of the horses, a very time-consuming job, had already begun; two or three animals landed in each pit, the often unruly legs were hacked off or broken and one or two feet of earth were thrown over them. In a few weeks, this area would breathe out a deadly miasma!

A motley, ragtag commotion of war surged along the road. In long rows the requisitioned harnessed teams from the provinces of Silesia, Saxony, and Brandenburg drove down the road. I can, however, assure their owners that the many thousands of such teams I have encountered so far all generally looked good. The waggoneers themselves were, for the most part, worse off than the animals, since they lived only on army ration bread, bacon, and water, and at times had to do without it. In the process, they had to be able to withstand the heat, cold, and rain outside, and even if hot coffee and brandy were available, the poor lads usually lacked the money to buy these refreshments. Incidentally, the waggoneers showed a strange special affection for the blue Austrian field caps; several times I myself noticed how the headgear of a lifeless man had been exchanged.

My intention had been to stay overnight with the sutler, my new friend and fellow traveler, in order to witness, as far as possible, the anticipated bombardment of Königgrätz; but when I arrived in the amputation field station in Sadowa, I became convinced that I could be of use as a companion to the wounded, and placed myself at the disposal of one of the medical officers. He entrusted me with a column of about one hundred and fifty severely and less severely wounded men with the instruction to move them to the military hospitals in Millowitz and Horzitz, and there to exchange the more severely wounded for the less severely wounded and to move the latter as far away as possible. The two hussars accompanying me were informed as to my new assignment, I took a seat in the first wagon to pass and drove off.

To the right and left of us uninterrupted columns were advancing, while we drove up the middle of the road. In the area around Klenitz I encountered the headquarters of the King of Prussia, coming in the opposite direction. He drove slowly past in an elegant carriage drawn by four black horses, and the whole procession probably took fifteen minutes to pass, since of course it took time to clear the way for them.

With the large number of accompanying officers in almost all European uniforms, together with the adjutants, couriers, bodyguards, etc., I was not able to recognize the outstanding persons in this retinue. The Crown Prince also passed by in a carriage. An adjutant ordered me to get out of the way, but I complained that this would cause my patients too much pain, and so the prince as well as the king slowly drove to the side to avoid us.

The trip to Millowitz, three quarters of a mile away, was a very distressing one for me. At the slightest obstacle on the way or at a sharper pace of the horses, most of the wounded men shouted and moaned; the Italians loudly prayed one Ave Maria after another. At one point I was called over to one of the

wagons; the leg of an Italian soldier, lying shattered beneath his body, had slipped down over the edge of the wagon. None of the other wounded men had the strength to raise it up. I wrapped the chain of a freight car around it, giving it added stability. Finally, we reached the village of Millowitz. Three or four buildings in the village had been converted into a field hospital, but the whole arrangement consisted in nothing more than rooms, hallways, and floors that had been cleared out, and entrance halls that had been scantily covered with straw.

Both severely and less severely wounded were packed densely into this space, leaving little room for the newcomers. I asked for the person in charge, for a doctor or a nurse—nobody was there; the moderately wounded men supplied the others with water, bread was not to be found. Finally, I learned that some Prussian officers were lying in a little house across from the hospital; there were at least some cots there, but otherwise everything else was lacking. I spoke to Captain v. Kr. and with Major R. of the artillery. The latter has suffered an amputation and lay here now without any help or nourishment. The former suffered severely from a shot through his leg. He told me that there was only a medical assistant available, who suffering himself had remained behind, when suddenly the village had filled with several hundred wounded soldiers after the battle. To be sure the doctor had sincerely attempted, day and night, to treat all these wounded men, but now he needed to take some rest. How gladly I would have moved these two officers to a location with better care! But they could not be transported on ordinary freight or hay wagons, and I could serve them only by asking for medical help and their hospital needs as quickly as possible.

I would gladly have transported all my wounded further, but unfortunately it was not possible, since the two hussars had orders to use most of the wagons to forage for provisions, and to use only the empty wagons for transporting the wounded. And so, with the help of the still suffering doctor, who now appeared, we moved the wounded to shelter. I could not, however, accommodate the sad freight of one wagon, and a requisitioned wagon, that was passing by, had a certificate requiring its return to its point of origin. Neither was I able to induce a Bohemian servant to move my wagon, and therefore I asked an officer who was rushing by for assistance, which was carried out in such a practical manner, that the man harnessed his horse with great agility and it remained compliant until they reached Horzitz.

I drove on with the rest of the six to eight wagons and reached Horzitz late in the evening in heavy rain, distributing there my wounded in various field hospitals. Only an Austrian officer had to be assigned to quarters in a back building, as he had unfortunately expired quietly on the way, without his two companions having noticed anything—so ill were they as well.

At nightfall we continued our transport with two wagons, rested in Gitschin, where we arrived at one o’clock in the morning, spent several hours in the hospital, and then continued on, stopping early at nine o’clock in front of the train station in Thurnau. Here several hundred Prussians and Austrians of all ranks and regiments had gathered; the station had been repaired to house the wounded, but there was no food or refreshment here either. It was not till noon that I received some army ration bread for distribution. Later, a sutler came with some beer and many wounded were now able to refresh themselves. At two o’clock a train with eight freight cars was ready for loading, straw was spread out, and around one hundred of the most severely wounded were carried onto the train. Again, not a single doctor or nurse could be spared, so I continued on with the transport, carrying out the most necessary tasks. Before departure, each car received a bottle of red wine from one of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem. How this noble refreshment was appreciated and carefully distributed! The severely wounded Austrian chamberlain shared the little glass with the Prussian rifleman lying on a narrow strip of straw beside him; a captain, who had fought at Magenta and Solferino, shared with the sixteen-year-old eighth grader from Olmütz, who had, just fourteen days earlier joined an Italian regiment as an officer cadet! All nationality and rank differences tend to cease in such circumstances; each supports the other as far as his strength and wit allow. How wonderfully the flower of true charity blooms in these blood-soaked fields, where only a few hours ago the unleashed passions of these armies, with all their strength

and effort, ravaged themselves!

In Zittau, Herrnhut, and Loebau, medical aid and refreshments of every kind were offered to us in the fullest measure. At midnight we arrived in Görlitz. Here, too, our transport was only the first or second which had arrived from Königsgrätz; thus the facilities at the station left much to be desired. No doctor was to be found and there were only two stretchers available for the wounded! My injured charges had gradually become very dear to me. It was quite difficult for me to part with them when they no longer required me, and many a cordial handshake and grateful glance rewarded me abundantly for the little I was able to do for them.

But all of you, who have bled in this great battle, may you not suffer too much, and may you all one day return healed to the arms of your loved ones! And may fate ordain that you will then look upon a great, united Germany under strong unified leadership, and say with pride: "We have earned it with our blood!" May the everlasting laurel of this glory one day decorate your hoary head!

Source: "At Königsgrätz the Day after the Battle. From a Silesian Landowner," *Die Gartenlaube* (1866), issue. 33, pp. 512–14.

Translation: Richard Pettit

C. Georg Hiltl, "Memories from the German War of 1866," no. 2, "At Chlum" (1866)

The battle of Königsgrätz was over. The next day, as I have already said, I came to the battlefield, right to where the battle had raged most violently, to the heights of Chlum. It is a strange, oppressive, eerie silence, which lies over the vast field of battle on the day after the fighting. The long rows of eternally mute, the bloody, layered, and jumbled tangles, which, consisting of slain souls, rise in certain intervals on the trampled plain, and seem to be guarded by invisible powers, who scare away every living being. No bird is chirping here in the fields, no cricket bounces around, even the wind, it seems to the beholder, blows high above the fallen, and only occasionally does it move a bush, touching on a victim's hat or it brushes the hair of a corpse with its breath. A bleak wasteland—leaden calm everywhere. A few birds of prey are circling high in the air, and a swarm of ugly carrion crows swirls around the distant horizon. Only around the corpses of the fallen warriors there is a bustling crowd of innumerable moving and flowing points, composed of the myriad army of beetles, ants, and spiders. The vermin sense rich booty.

The dead are the last to receive their due; first, and so it should and must be, one seeks to save the living. Immediately after their meeting, search teams with lanterns and torches scan the area, looking for whatever else can be found. Wherever a still breathing soul reveals itself, or the slight movement of a hand or head is noticed, the diligent stretcher bearers of the victorious army lift up and move the shattered man onto the sheltering carriage, the one with a red cross on a white field, which then returns to the field hospital with its sad burden. When at last every part of the battlefield has been carefully searched, the dark-clad workers approach.

The eerie silence is interrupted by the sound of wagons and footsteps. High up on the slope of the hill, where it seems to connect with the horizon, one sees a long, dark stripe winding around the cone-shaped mountain and running down onto the plain. Some of them are larger, some are smaller wagons made of wickerwork, others are roughly finished, ladder-sided carts of wood. A few piles of straw cover the bottoms of these vehicles, and on top of the straw lie those destined for eternal rest, piled on top of each other. What ghastly configurations these rigid bodies have assumed! How dislocated the arms are, how horribly spread or bent the legs! They stare out from between the rungs of the ladder-carts, here and there, jostled from the motion of the cart, a bloody head shifts free from the straw, the eyes staring wide open, glassy and swollen, into the sky, no loving hand has closed them. The dead are then buried! In long trains the wagons are approaching, and those dark, mobile ranks are grave-digger companies. A few minutes later they all stop. Here is a spot especially ravaged by the deadly battle, and with heads shaking

the men, accustomed to horrors of every kind, contemplate this place of desolation.

We have reached the little ravine in which I am also standing, and which flows out into the plain; on the right-hand side lies the village Chlum on a hill. On the top of the hill, which they have just left, is the encampment behind which stood the death-dealing cannons of the Austrians. Some of the workers turn left, onto the plain, and now a serious operation begins. “Fall in!” The command sounds in a low voice, the men stand in a quadrangle around a large, open space, they pick up their tools, and then the blows of the picks and spades break through the silence of the battlefield. Moving the tools up and down, almost in sync, dig the wide pit—the “final quarters” of the fallen. The men work quickly and with a certain flurry. They build these last dwellings with skilled craftsmanship, but they seem to be in a special hurry and soon the huge, deep ditch is hollowed out. Now they all take a short breather, leaning on their spades and wiping the sweat from their foreheads. From the ravine the ghastly caravan is visible, bringing those in eternal rest to occupy the final quarters. Two riders escort the train. They are fresh and fit, their brown faces full of vigor under their hussars’ caps, and yet their eyes stray, looking bleakly across the rows, which are now forming near the edge of the pit; the riders see some, whom they knew, and who just a few hours before were calling out to them and waving their hands. But now these hands hang down shattered, and these mouths are forever closed.

Slowly, the dead are lifted from the wagons. Some men in ordinary clothing, in concert with the uniformed grave diggers, go about the serious business. These men have white bandages wrapped around their left arm with a red cross displayed on each bandage—they are the Samaritans of the battlefield, because they care for friend and foe alike, and where they can no longer offer care, they help to prepare the final quarters and seek to identify those among their friends who rest in this damp grave.

The dead are laid out side by side, lying in double rows so that their feet touch those in the accompanying row. There they rest, peacefully, quietly, the same ones who fought so bitterly against each other just a few hours ago! The uniforms exhibit a sharp contrast. The white color of the Austrian tunics beside the darkness of the Prussians; gray riflemen next to blue dragoons, brown, pain-ridden faces, surrounded by black hair, next to pale, calm faces, framed by blonde hair and beards, the Italian next to the Pomerania, the Czech next to the Märker, a soldier from the Mark Brandenburg—all in place, all ready to share their final quarters peacefully with each other.

All at once a loud, painful howling breaks through the silence. On a stretcher and cart they are carrying two corpses which they have found in the awful ravine in front of Chlum. These silent men lay under a bush whose branches protruded into the path. When these two warriors went forward to fight, they ran into each other here, neither one wanted to, nor could, give way, and so the struggle unfolded. They were bitter, strong opponents; their cartridges were spent, and the fury of the battle seized both of them, so ferociously and powerfully, that they would in any case have disdained to exchange bullets. And so they take out their bare knives and attack each other.

A desperate struggle ensues, the leaves of the bushes are torn away, the men wrestle against each other, bleeding already from many wounds, until finally one of them sinks down into the sand. He tries to rise once again, but the wound is deadly, the iron blade of his opponent has found the way to his heart all too well—in death his eye ruptures and the dying man falls twitching into the shadow of the bushes. His opponent tries to hold on, but in vain! He, too, was struck hard by the thrusts of the fallen man. He wants to drag himself further, so that he can be rescued, when suddenly something crashes above, beneath, all around him. From the encampment on the hill a murderous shell flies softly and explodes, splintering the branches of the surrounding bushes, which fall like rain on him, and a bit of iron, barely an inch long, pierces his chest—another dull scream, a convulsive clasping of hands, then the warrior collapses and, tottering forward in the storm of battle, he embeds himself on the body of his slain enemy. Again a convulsive movement, his arms stretch out and clasp the corpse of the opponent and thus, with his head placed on the dead man’s chest, the victor expires on top of the vanquished. As the stretcher bearers

search the ravine, they find the two in a rigid, gruesome embrace. Above them the shattered branches of the bushes move gently in the light morning breeze; in front of them sits the big, brown dog of the Austrian, who has finally found his master and now lets out a plaintive howl, a bloodcurdling cry from the throat of an animal to the ear of man.

“We want to keep them both together like we found them,” the corporal says to the stretcher bearers in a serious voice, and so it happens. They carry the Prussian and the Austrian on a stretcher into the pit, and the poor brown dog sits sadly in front of them and whines until he can no longer see his master, for the grave diggers hastily shovel over the grave until it is covered. Often enough they must shoo away the good dog, who always returns and wants to scrape away the earth. At last enough sand has been thrown over the grave, under which all those rest who have found their way to the “final quarters”. Now the grave diggers pray softly; all around it is quiet again, only the mournful tones of the dog interrupt the Lord’s Prayer. “Ready,” says the commander, “turn to the left,” and from across the wide grave site the workers swing around to begin another serious day’s work elsewhere. When they look back after a while, they see the dog sitting on the grave; he has drilled his snout into the sand, his long ears are hanging down, his tail is slapping the ground covering his beloved master. No calling out can lure the faithful animal away from this place, and later as the patrols move across the field by the light of the moon, they still see the dog in the same position. He cannot get through to his master, and so he guards the entrance to the “final quarters” of the fallen.

Source: Georg Hiltl, “Memories from the German War of 1866,” no. 2. “At Chlum,” *Die Gartenlaube* (1866), issue 41, pp. 643–45.

D. “The Predators of the Battlefield” (1866)

The small, wooded grove of Sadowa has witnessed a great deal in the last few days. It saw whole columns of the brave fall by the wayside at its edge, as hundreds of soldiers breathed their last breaths under the shade of its trees. “He died in the field of honor,” is a great and exalted saying—easily said—but hard to do! The bullet does not always hit the heart; it often cruelly lacerates the poor human body before it breathes its last breath, before it is given over to the earth. But it is not only these wounds and tortures that the soldier fears—many fear the desecration after death just as much, maybe even more. They speak in resigned tones of the desolate pit in which they might soon rest, but mention only with a secret shudder those beasts of prey in human form, whom poverty, misery, vindictiveness or naked depravity drive onto the still steaming battlefield—to plunder the bodies of the dead combatants, to mutilate, yes, often to strip the living or those dying in agony and expose them to even greater misery. We do not want to try to enumerate once again all the gruesome details of acts which were carried out in this respect on the battlefields of Bohemia—just as we do not want to accuse the inhabitants of this country of inhumanity because of some barbaric exceptional cases, nor do we want to hold them responsible for these acts.

Surely, however, those well-known and proven instances of robbery, murder, plunder, and desecration cast a gloomy shadow over the land of the Czechs, which should not be surprised if it is again regarded by foreigners with prejudice and reproach. For not with pride, but rather only in the awareness of our humanity may we exclaim: in Germany, which has been so vilified, a similar barbarism has occurred only very exceptionally.

A walk across this battlefield, as real as it is poignant, has just been described in these pages. But a battleground abandoned by fighting troops and the living is such an awesomely terrible tragedy that it cannot simply be captured in a newspaper article. We stepped out, I think it was on the fourth or fifth of July, from the forest grove of Sadowa. Blackish blue low clouds swept across the landscape, which resembled a funerary site. We saw bodies lying on the ground with torn faces and heads, here and there only a hulk or something twitching that hardly reminded one at all of the “image of God”. Hands and

arms, stretched to heaven and frozen in such painful agony, stood out as the terrible features of a furious battle that raged here, from a chaos of weapons, pounded earth, blood and mud—and the air was already filling with those exhalations that precede decay and putrescence. Nature, so great and transcendent in the sublime, yet here so unimaginable and inventive in its horror, in this image of annihilation! He who has not seen the dead on the field of battle does not know what death means—does not understand its horrors—nor its transfigured face, its Medusa-like countenance. Here one looks only upon open, rigid eyes, "which a loving hand did not close"—one set of them looks at us as if to say smilingly: I will also come to know you too—and it requires strong nerves to endure for very long this penetrating gaze from beyond. A horrible curse still seems to float on the lips of this dead man—a grenade tore open his abdomen, and he is still holding back his exposed intestines with his left hand. Do not, dear reader, turn away from this page with petty sensitivity—you can bear to read what those poor men suffered! Believe me, the sight of such suffering helps to develop oneself, and makes one humble and content with one's fate, however harsh it may be—or it petrifies our mind and wears out our senses and makes them dull.

I am still shocked when I write this down now and remember the scene our eyes beheld at the edge of the Sadowa forest—it was hair-raising and made the blood in one's veins stiffen. We were still occupied by the sight of the dead we had just seen, when the sounds of a foreign language and raw, obnoxious laughter hit our ears. Startled, we look at each other in astonishment: it is no longer the sight of corpses that convulses us, it is the living who horrify us and whose actions fill us with hate, shame, revenge, and disgust—these are the predators of the battlefield! Around the half-naked, white body of a Prussian grenadier, identified by the helmet lying beside him, there gathers a group of that riffraff who conduct the "gleaning" of the battle-field. A small, cretin-like monster of a man tries, under the laughter of the bystanders, to remove the boot of the fallen man. A brutish fellow, who has adorned himself with a saber, watches the imp's heroic deed in a particularly approving manner, while a sturdy harlot looks vacuously at the features of the dead man and consumes her bread and cheese sandwich.

Rapacity and derision are directed here, nevertheless, only towards a corpse, but now a living being is also to be disposed of—slaughtered, so that the paltry things that are still on his body or in his pockets can be seized. A fellow armed with a pitchfork, ready for a fatal blow into the poor, already battered chest of a soldier—who, half risen and laboriously resting on his wounded arm, solemnly raises his right arm, as if to summon heaven for revenge—all this flashed before our eyes—no! this must not be—and with a rider's pistol found along the way, one of us fired recklessly above the group. The shot had its intended effect on the wretched group; scarcely had the smoke from the fired weapon cleared, when these beasts were already running for cover. We brought the soldier, who informed us on the way that he had struggled for his life with the peasant for a quarter of an hour, to the nearest field hospital, where he died after a few minutes, as a result of severe bleeding and, as he was still laboriously able to express, from having overcome his fear of death.

Source: "The Predators of the Battlefield," *Die Gartenlaube* (1866), issue 39, pp. 612–14.

Translation: Richard Pettit