

# Final Discussions before the Proclamation of the German Empire (January 17–18, 1871)

## Abstract

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Although the dynastic foundations of Imperial Germany had already been agreed upon by early January 1871, the entire project almost foundered at the eleventh hour on the resistance of the designated emperor, King Wilhelm I of Prussia (ruled 1861–1888). In the hours leading up to the Versailles ceremony at which he was proclaimed German Kaiser [Emperor], Wilhelm opposed the subordination of his Prussian kingship to the imperial crown. As King of Prussia, Wilhelm believed that he enjoyed more prestige among European monarchs than he could ever enjoy as German Emperor. Moreover, Wilhelm did not wish to be *primus inter pares* among other German sovereigns; he steadfastly held to the notion that he would actually be Emperor “of” Germany. His opposition was not overcome by Bismarck’s subtle arguments, but rather by some highhanded maneuvering and, at the last moment, by the Grand Duke of Baden’s deft omission of the word “Germany” altogether. Wilhelm was so overwrought by these wrangles that he broke into tears just before the ceremony and deliberately ignored his loyal minister as he descended the rostrum after the proclamation. That snub, however, did not preclude the two men’s close cooperation, which lasted until Wilhelm’s death in 1888. As with the dramatic events of January 18, 1871, this cooperation was almost always on Bismarck’s terms.

## Source

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When it came to formulating the imperial title, His Majesty presented a new problem by insisting that if he were to be called Emperor [*Kaiser*]<sup>[1]</sup> at all, then he wished to be called Emperor of Germany. At this stage, the Crown Prince, who had long since abandoned his thought of ever becoming King of the Germans,<sup>[2]</sup> and the Grand Duke of Baden each supported me in his own way, even though neither of them openly challenged the old gentleman’s wrathful aversion to the “*Charaktermajor*.”<sup>[3]</sup> The Crown Prince supported me by offering passive assistance in the presence of his royal father and by occasionally giving brief expression to his views, which did not, however, strengthen my battle position vis-à-vis the King, but rather resulted in intensified irritability on the part of His Highness. For the King was still more inclined to make concessions to his minister than to his son, in conscientious recollection of the constitutional oath and ministerial responsibility. He viewed differences of opinion with the Crown Prince from the perspective of the *pater familias*.

During the final deliberations on January 17, he rejected the title German Emperor and declared that he wished to be Emperor of Germany or no emperor at all. I emphasized how the adjectival form German Emperor and the genitive form Emperor of Germany differed linguistically and historically. People said Roman Emperor, not Emperor of Rome; the Czar did not call himself Emperor of Russia, but Russian, or “pan-Russian” (*wserossiski*), Emperor. The King fiercely contested the latter remark, referring to the fact that reports from his Russian Kaluga Regiment were always addressed with “*pruskomu*,”<sup>[4]</sup> which he translated incorrectly. He would not believe my assurances that it was the dative form of the adjective, and only later was he convinced of this by his usual authority on the Russian language, Privy Counselor Schneider. I also pointed out that, under Friedrich the Great and Friedrich Wilhelm II, thalers were minted *Borussorum*, not *Borussiae rex*; that the title Emperor of Germany involved a sovereign claim to non-Prussian areas that other [German] sovereigns were not prepared to grant; that the letter by the King of Bavaria included the suggestion that “the exercise of presidial prerogatives would be linked to bearing the title German Emperor”; and finally that, on the recommendation of the Federal Council, this very title was included in the new version of Article 11 of the constitution.

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The discussion turned to the hierarchical ranking of emperors and kings, of archdukes, grand dukes, and Prussian princes. My argument that emperors, in principle, are granted no precedence over kings found no credence, even though I was able to support my claim—Friedrich Wilhelm I, upon meeting Emperor Karl VI, who was after all the feudal lord of the Brandenburg Elector, claimed and asserted his equality as Prussian King by constructing a pavilion that the two monarchs entered simultaneously from opposite sides in order to meet in the middle.

The approval that the Crown Prince expressed for my explanations just aggravated the old gentleman even more, prompting him to beat his fists on the table and shout: “and even if it was the case in the past, I now command how it should be henceforth. Archdukes and grand dukes have always taken precedence over the Prussian princes, and so must it continue.” With this, he got up, walked over to the window, and turned his back to those sitting at the table. The discussion of the title question reached no clear conclusion; still one could feel justified in scheduling the ceremony of the imperial proclamation, but the King had ordered that there would be no mention of the German Emperor, but rather the Emperor of Germany.

The following morning, before the ceremony in the Hall of Mirrors [at Versailles], this state of affairs prompted me to call on the Grand Duke of Baden, who would probably be the first among the attending rulers to speak after the proclamation, and to ask him what he intended to call the new emperor. The Grand Duke answered: “Emperor of Germany according to His Majesty’s command.” Among the arguments I then presented to the Grand Duke as to why the final cheer for the Emperor could not be formulated in *this* way, the most effective one involved my referencing the fact that the future text of the imperial constitution was already anticipated by the resolution of the Reichstag in Berlin. The emphasis on the Reichstag resolution, which fit exactly into his constitutional horizon, prompted him to go to the King once more. I have no knowledge of the two men’s conversation and felt anxiety while reading the proclamation. The Grand Duke avoided the issue by giving a cheer to neither the German Emperor nor the Emperor of Germany, but rather to *Emperor Wilhelm*. His Majesty took this entire course of events so badly that when he stepped down from the higher rostrum reserved for the monarchs, he ignored me—although I was standing alone in the empty space before it—and walked by me to shake hands with the generals behind me. He persisted in this attitude for several days until our relationship fell back into the old pattern again.

## NOTES

[1] The German term *Kaiser* corresponds to the English term emperor. The German term *Reich* is translated as empire. Thus “*Kaiserreich*” is a somewhat redundant description of what English-language historians refer to as Imperial Germany or the German Empire—ed.

[2] The Crown Prince was named Emperor Friedrich III in 1888—ed.

[3] “*Charaktermajor*” was the military rank of major given to a Prussian captain upon retirement. The approximate equivalent in English is brevet major, which connotes a temporary promotion and/or a promotion without an increase in pay. King Wilhelm’s allusion here is clear: he believed that the automatic “honor” of being “promoted” from Prussian king to German emperor was hollow (or worse)—ed.

[4] *Wserossiski* (nominative) was rendered by Bismarck in German as “*gesammtrussischer Kaiser*”; *pruskomu* (dative) means “to the Prussian king”—ed.

Source: Otto von Bismarck, *Gedanken und Erinnerungen*, edited by Horst Kohl, 3 vols. Stuttgart: J. G. Cotta, 1898, vol. 2 (Ch. 23: Versailles), pp. 119–22. Available online at:

<https://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht/?PPN=PPN816111677>. Original German text

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reprinted in Otto von Bismarck, *Gedanken und Erinnerungen*, with an essay by Lothar Gall.  
Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998, pp. 360–62.

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