

Hans Delbrück on Bismarck's Legacy (April 1890)

Abstract

To many contemporaries Bismarck's resignation on March 20, 1890, constituted a momentous event; it certainly produced a flood of commentaries. In this extended analysis, published in the *Preußische Jahrbücher* in April 1890, the historian, journalist, and Free Conservative Reichstag deputy Hans Delbrück (1848–1929) tries to strike a balance between praise for Bismarck's great achievements and confidence in Germany's future after his departure. As he writes, Germany's soul has been “deeply moved, but without political distress.” Nevertheless, Delbrück seems certain that Germany's present constellation of political parties will not survive Bismarck's dismissal unchanged. He suggests that the left-liberal Radical Party has the most to lose unless it gives up sterile opposition to great “national” goals.

Source

In the passage in his *Weltgeschichte* [*World History*] where [Leopold von] Ranke relates the end of St. Boniface, the Apostle of Germany, one reads: “It is the fate of highly talented people: with their deepest and innermost thoughts they seek to intervene in the world. In doing so, however, they get caught up in the machinery of the battles taking place around them; they manage to have a great impact, but in the process they become dispensable. By recommencing his mission without the same support he had had in the past, Boniface perished, sullen and disgruntled about his external circumstances, yet enthusiastic in his mission, unshaken, magnanimous, and courageous in his soul.”

Has the tragic muse ever spoken more movingly? It is the fate and, in fact, the greatness of a great man that he eventually makes himself dispensable through his own achievements. Are we witnessing once again a world historical phenomenon, which thus places before the sorrowful eye the utmost in human creative power and humanity's limitations in their inexorable unity?

Triviality is able to regard this “making himself dispensable” as a disparagement or at least a diminishment of respect. We do not intend to let that deter us from examining the event of Prince Bismarck's dismissal from this very perspective, for this dispensability—though it certainly cannot explain the catastrophe—made it possible in the first place. This is the perspective of optimism; we want to profess it courageously.

Years ago, Herr von Bismarck started out with foreign policy; this ought to be the point of departure now. The great tension of war with Russia and France, which has kept Europe on tenterhooks for the past decade, has not been overcome, and by its very nature can never be overcome, except by the tension itself reaching a breaking point. For over a year, however, a situation has gradually arisen that represents the best possible outcome, namely, that the crisis is no longer regarded as imminent. No one knows how long this relative calm will last, how soon that eerie nervousness of anticipation will reawaken, both in the politicians and in public opinion; but it is clear that the change of chancellors in Germany was possible only during such a lull, and that it is none other than Bismarck himself whom we can thank for that lull, momentary as it may be. The Triple Alliance, Great Britain's moving closer to this alliance, and the steadfastness of the alliance through three administrations^[1] are all his doing. The drastic change in public opinion abroad concerning the personal military ambitions of our Kaiser is of immense value. From the speech by Prince Wilhelm (February 8, 1888) in which he protested against such “criminal imprudence,” to the February decrees of this year—which, with irrefutable logic, imparted the certainty that this ruler was intent, insofar as he was capable, on seeking greatness in works of peace—the Kaiser has been working to lift the fog of this prejudice—to dispel it at last with the warm sunbeams of new

ideas about the commonweal and the struggle against human misery. Any hint of a pretext that Germany or the Triple Alliance is toying with ideas of an attack (one that would have to be preempted) has now vanished. But we know that this would have always been just a pretext. The real reason for the danger of war is solely Pan-Slav fanaticism, on the one hand, and the chauvinistic notion of [French] *revanche* on the other. Power and power alone is capable of subduing these demons. It is Prince Bismarck who created this power for us in the form of the Triple Alliance; he is the one who created this power for us in his own hands.

This is the juncture at which foreign policy blends into domestic affairs. Bismarck managed to make clear to the German people the necessity of bearing a heavy burden of armaments without provoking the neighbors against whom these efforts are directed: on the contrary, he managed to fashion that wonderful speech of February 6, 1888, in which he justified these efforts simultaneously as an announcement and a guarantee of peace. The slow dissipation of war anxieties dates from this speech and the publication of the alliance treaties.

In the years 1888 and 1889, the Reichstag granted the funds for military armaments almost unanimously. At that time, one viewed this as a reaction to an external threat that compelled even the opposition parties to agree. Increasingly, though, it is becoming apparent that this unanimity had a greater significance: it ushered in the final renunciation of fundamental opposition to the military. Certainly, it has not been practically tested, but political circles have little doubt any longer that even the German Radical Party, once it is faced with serious responsibility, will hardly take a different stance on the army question than the Cartel.^[2] Of course, conflicts will continue—about some barracks and food rations, officers' orderlies and fortress commandants, the regiment Garde du Corps and officers' quarters. But the parties will neither dare to challenge the fundamentals of the existing army constitution nor reject any substantial new demands that the government might put forth. In fact, the greater these demands, the less likely they are to be rejected. Whose achievement is this radical transformation of our party scene? It is Prince Bismarck's achievement, for it constitutes the lasting after-effect of the *Septennat* elections [of February 1887]. Never again in the foreseeable future will the opposition risk having the Reichstag dissolved because of an army issue. All the rumbling and grumbling in the German Radical press against militarism is nothing but a rearguard action. The National Liberals, too, took more than a decade before they were able to free themselves completely from their [anti-]military views and their catchphrases from the age of conflict.^[3] Thus, the German Radical Party will also continue to adhere to its standpoint "on principle": it will receive some formal concessions here and there, but it will still do in practice what is really necessary. Scoffers believe that they can already foresee the Center Party and the Radical Party riding military-friendly horses in the next Reichstag in a race to see who is the better patriot. Of course, it won't come to such a happy situation; but the mere fact that such possibilities are emerging makes it clear to anyone looking over the past few years just how great the transformation has been.

Even greater is the change in our political life regarding views of social policy. The old, pure Manchester school is as outdated as the idea of establishing a militia instead of a standing army. The Conservative Party was forced to give up its old patriarchal-feudal ideals in favor of reform concepts, the National Liberal Party had to relinquish individual self-help, and finally, the German Radical Party also converted itself and conformed to the "decrees."^[4] The party's initial cloaking itself in opposition may have substantially helped this transition. At the very moment when it became apparent that the Reich chancellor was holding back on one aspect of the new system, workers' protection, the German Radical Party began to warm to this very effort, and thus gradually adopted the insight "of also having learned something" and buried the principle of a natural harmony of interests. Even last summer's Invalids Law [providing old age and disability insurance] had to be built up solely by the Herculean power of Prince Bismarck. In this context, the full force of particularism united with doctrinaire opposition and economic egoism. No minister other than Prince Bismarck would have been able to defeat this phalanx. With this

victory, however, this campaign is also concluded and definitively won. [...]

Similarly, it is Bismarck's very own idea of monarchical social policy that underwent further evolution and, as it did, left behind its originator's intentions and prepared the ground for his fall. No one is able to stop this idea anymore. The future belongs to it. Henceforth, it no longer lives through its creator but by virtue of its own power.

The German Reich constitution—the balance of unity and independence in the confederation, of monarchy and parliament in governmental structure—is secured for generations to come because of proper conception in its design and established practice in its implementation. Like-minded people and contributors to this journal have repeatedly demanded that the conclusion of Bismarck's work should be the project of a party to which he may one day bequeath the legacy of his political ideas, entrusting it with Germany's future. The Cartel finally seemed to come close to fulfilling this wish. With the electoral defeat of the Cartel [in the Reichstag elections of February 1890], the wish has again evaporated. We have always taken a different point of view—not just after this defeat, but before, too. The future of a country can never depend on one party or party combination alone. "Party" postulates the concept of "opposition party" and thus change in government. It sounds paradoxical but is absolutely true: the Cartel is not able to govern because the "anti-Cartel" is not able to govern. [In Britain] the Whigs are only capable of governing because once they have come to the end of the road, the Tories are right there to replace them. If that were not the case, some other authority would have to fill the gap, and it, too, would have to have existed before, and therefore also at least have shared power with the Whigs. We have this third authority: the monarchy, supported by the civil service and the army. What short-sighted, ordinary politicians are in the habit of calling the "fragmentation" [*Zerfahrenheit*] of our party landscape is nothing other than an expression of variety and health. How impoverished is a country whose political vitality is eventually represented by no more than two ideas! The wealth of parties in Germany equates to the wealth of our political life, and within this wealth the monarchy constitutes the element of unity. The unassailability of the monarchy's position is founded on the fact that no single party could ever dream of obtaining a majority in the Reichstag on its own. That is simply a given, based on Germany's nature and history. From this situation, it is Prince Bismarck's achievement to have shaped an organic political system. Hardly any party is absolutely opposed to the government; none can boast about being wholly identified with it either.

These reflections are all based on arguments we have already outlined in our previous two articles, published both before and after the elections. Whatever point of view one adopts, these considerations always culminate in the sentence: the traditional party divisions are obsolete; partly for practical reasons, partly even for principled ones, those divisions have been overcome, and any that remain are relegated to the background. The new tasks, however, which not long ago seemed to be taking shape, have become urgent surprisingly quickly. Just as a new chapter in social legislation, which we believed to be far off in late January, was suddenly opened by the February decrees, the reorganization of our party life, which only seemed to be dawning on the horizon, will be unquestionably accelerated by the change in chancellors. Politics is conducted by people; consequently, every political rearrangement is facilitated if the traditional forces are represented by new faces. That is a law as old as parties and political life themselves. If it now happens that after the election outcome the government must make an attempt to pave the way for a *modus vivendi* with the German Radical Party, this will certainly be much easier for Chancellor [Leo] von Caprivi than for his predecessor. Prince Bismarck battled his way through the constitutional conflict against the liberals and yet created the Reich constitution with these same liberals. He battled his way through the *Kulturkampf* against the Center Party and yet created the system of protective tariffs and the foundations for social reform with this same Center Party. He would even have been able, if it were at all possible and if he had so wished, to engage the free trade party in useful cooperation as well. This is not to claim that his inventive mind could not have discovered any other options, or that there were necessarily signs that he wanted to take this course. His successor, however,

is virtually compelled to follow this path. Just as with the Center Party, the reconciliation will hardly be fundamental, sudden, or complete. The German Radical Party will continue in opposition. With regard to practical questions, on the other hand, that party's members, or some of them, will be open to negotiation, and in the process the spiteful personal discord might gradually grow much quieter, though without being silenced altogether.

By and large we can identify three reasons why the younger generation, since the 1870s, has turned away from the old Progressive—now German Radical—Party: because it resisted the establishment of the new national state system instead of contributing to it; because it did not make concessions to the requirements of patriotic military strength with adequate devotion; and lastly, because it opposed the new ideal of legislated social reform. These three negative positions [*Negationen*] have burdened the party in public opinion with the curse of not being a “national” party. If the last elections have seen the party gain back a bit of ground, the party owes this above all to its advocacy of a positive idea: free trade (besides the liquor tax). An added ingredient, however, is the fact that those three main accusations, from which the party was suffering among the well-to-do and better-educated segments of the population, are beginning to fade. The Reich is completed; in the army question, the party toed the line on the occasion of the last showdown, and it has accepted the February decrees. Thus, it is only natural that public opinion is starting to view the party with somewhat different eyes than before. The major difficulty preventing a sound development in this direction has to do with the personality of Reichstag Deputy [Eugen] Richter. The Center Party, too, contains the same negative, demagogic element that makes the German Radical Party so repulsive; however, the discipline of the Catholic Church is quite skilled at both taming and using that element. [Paul] Majunke (or now [Georg Friedrich] Dasbach) from the Center, [Adolf] Stöcker from the Conservatives, and Richter from the German Radical Party are analogous elements; but what a difference exists in the positions they enjoy within their respective caucuses! The kind of statesman who keeps his flock together will enjoy success and power. The German Radical Party not only lacks discipline; the chief representative of purely negative demagoguery, the polar opposite of positive statesmanship, is actually the principal leader of this party. In view of that circumstance, many an observer might consider any hope of accommodation with this caucus illusory. Yet there is no lack of signs that the patriotic and worthy members of the party are aware of their responsibility. And unless I am very much mistaken, the Social Democrats will soon enough ensure that governing becomes difficult for the new chancellor in general but, conversely, also becomes easier specifically with regard to his relations to the other parties.

Thus, with sorrow and indelible gratitude in our hearts for the retiring chancellor, we nonetheless confidently look to the future: full of new struggles, new work, but not without hope for new victories and successes. Every accusation that Prince Bismarck custom-tailored and designed the new Reich and its institutions only to suit his own person—so that one day, when he departed, anarchy would break out—has collapsed in shame. Nothing came of those Cassandra-like warnings: “Will the monarchy of the Hohenzollern continue to exist? Our children will have to provide the answer to that question.” Allegedly the dynasty was going to be confronted with the “rule of the major domos” [*Hausmeiertum*]; but this specter has turned out to be hollow and empty. Its soul deeply moved, but without political distress; firm and unwavering; bonded together in institutions that are new yet already strong and steadfast—this is how the German people bid farewell to the great Bismarckian age in order to begin a new era.

NOTES

[1] Under the reigns of three Kaisers: Wilhelm I (1861–1888), Friedrich III (1888), and Wilhelm II (1888–1918)—ed.

[2] The loose alliance of pro-government parties (German Conservatives, Free Conservatives, and National Liberals) that supported Bismarck's policies from 1887 to 1890—ed.

[3] Referring to the constitutional conflict between the Prussian government and the liberal majority in the Prussian House of Deputies in 1861–66; the latter opposed the government's army

increases—ed.

[4] Delbrück refers here to the royal decrees [*Kaiserliche Erlasse*] issued on November 17, 1881, and in subsequent years, announcing comprehensive social legislation that Bismarck was able to realize only in part during the 1880s. On February 4, 1890, Kaiser Wilhelm II issued his own decree signaling more social insurance, greater workplace protection, and attention to the grievances of labor—ed.

Source: Hans Delbrück, “Politische Korrespondenz. Der Kanzlerwechsel,” in *Preußische Jahrbücher*, vol. 65 (April 1890): pp. 461–66; reprinted in Hans Fenske, ed. *Im Bismarckschen Reich 1871–1890*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978, pp. 466–72.

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