

Herbert von Bismarck on Election “Overseers” in Danzig and Bismarck's Strategy against Left Liberalism (October 1881)

Abstract

In the 1880s Bismarck took great pains to mobilize pro-government conservative forces and undermine support for liberal candidates to the Reichstag. These excerpts from letters written by his son Herbert (1849–1904) to the chancellor’s son-in-law show how such dirty tricks were implemented during the campaign preceding the Reichstag elections of October 27, 1881. When Socialist and Progressive candidates faced each other in the runoff elections, Bismarck deemed the Socialist to be the lesser evil, though he did not dare express such a view in public.

Source

I. Herbert von Bismarck to Count Kuno zu Rantzau^[1]

Varzin, October 21, 1881

Dear Kuno,

[...] Yesterday a senior civil servant from Danzig came by to give a report on the election prospects there. His name is Paschke and he is head of the local conservative election office. He said the outlook was still good, but a lot probably depends on how the civil servants vote: there are 1,000 of them (military and garrison administrations, tax office, government, railroads, post and telegraph offices), that is, *besides* the shipyard workers and pilots, who he thinks number around 1,600. He believes them to be a sure thing, because Livonius, who is standing in for Stosch, has apparently sent instructions to the naval station to vote for Puttkamer.

Really rotten, however, are the tax office and the railroads, whose heads—Naumann and Honth-Weber—are said to be thoroughly liberal.

Consequently, Papa has written to Schlieckmann and asked him to work on Maybach and Bitter personally so that they straighten out their civil servants. Apparently, the tax officials are the worst, but at the railroad they are almost as bad. Papa asks that you call on Maybach and perhaps also on Bitter, and ask them privately on his behalf to do something about Rickert.

Do talk to Schlieckmann about which one of you should go there first; / would definitely consider it better if you let Schlieckmann go ahead and then follow discreetly. Please ask Schlieckmann, too, whether *you* should call on Bitter or rather only on Maybach.

Please tell Maybach that you wrote to us about your recent conversation with him; that Papa was very pleased about it and extended congratulations on the brilliant results in his department.

Please mention the name of Government Counselor Paschke to Schlieckmann *only*, in confidence; keep quiet about him with the other one.

The aforementioned Paschke, a lively and eager man, told me that he believed the liberals are capable of all sorts of dirty tricks: making conservative ballots disappear or switching them or deliberately soiling

them (by touching their dirty and oiled boots beforehand), which invalidates them. Apparently, for the 35 election committees required for Danzig, Winter, who mobilized all urban civil servants for Rickert, has appointed 30 liberal and 5 conservative election commissioners; and with a certain degree of skill or audacity, the election commissioner can very easily suppress ballots even during the count. In Berlin things will be just as bad or even worse. Paschke told me: “The elections are public, therefore persons other than the election commissioners can be present in the polling station. I have had a copy of the electoral lists supplied to me, and there will be two sure conservative supporters sent as a monitoring commission to each polling station with these lists: They will 1) keep a close eye on the election commissioner, 2) check whether any conservative voters are still missing and have them fetched from their homes—by agents waiting at the door (4–5 in front of each polling station)—to cast their votes in the afternoon; *everyone* is to be dragged along, and the superbly organized Catholics will render invaluable service to this end, 3) keep a close watch during the count to see to it that no election ballots are torn up, etc. Moreover, all voters should be told: “Be sure that the election commissioner who takes the ballot has clean hands, otherwise insist that he wash his hands.”—

That is good organization! Please give the details to Seckendorff and Luckhardt, et al., for them to follow.—

And now, farewell,

Your loyal HB.

II. Herbert von Bismarck to Count Kuno zu Rantzau

Varzin, October 29, 1881

Dear Kuno,

[...] In the runoff elections between Progressives and Socialists, the correct way to proceed would definitely be for all conservatives not to abstain but rather to vote for the Social Democrats. Papa says: “With the Socialists, we can either make a deal with them [*paktieren*] or crush them; they can never threaten the current government. A victory of the Progressives, however, = republic, in which case the government will be so weakened that the state must necessarily be ruined.” Lindau could speak along these lines to Luckhardt as if it were his own thinking so that Luckhardt would act accordingly, and also let this advice slip into the provincial press. One cannot say this explicitly in the *Post* and the *Norddeutsche [Allgemeine Zeitung]*, and Papa’s name must not be mentioned. He would like, however, to see the Socialists win against the Progressives in the runoffs mentioned, e.g., in Berlin. Please speak to Lindau and see what you can do!^[2]—Finally, Papa also wishes that all of the mendacious leaflets of the Progressives should be collected and filed away.

And now, farewell,

Your loyal HB.

NOTES

[1] Rantzau was Otto von Bismarck's son-in-law. Other individuals mentioned in these letters include Albrecht von Schlieckmann, District Governor in Gumbinnen; Albert von Maybach, Prussian Minister of Public Works; Robert von Puttkammer, Prussian Minister of the Interior; Karl Hermann Bitter, Prussian Minister of Finance; Albrecht von Stosch, Chief of the Admiralty; retired army major Baron Leo von Seckendorff, secretary-treasurer of the German Conservative Party; Friedrich Luckhardt, chief editor of the conservative *Deutsches Tageblatt*; Heinrich Rickert, leading left-liberal Reichstag deputy; and Rudolf Lindau, Privy Counselor in the Foreign Office—ed.

[2] On the same day Rantzau asked whether the Chancellor favored Socialist over Progressive candidates in the Berlin runoff elections. Because their letters had crossed, Herbert repeated his earlier instructions in a letter dated October 30: “That Papa considers the Social Democrats preferable to the Progressives not only in the runoffs but also *in general*, cannot be stated openly because of the assassinations [the two attempts on Wilhelm I’s life in 1878]. But private views are free [...]” Information provided in *Staatssekretär Graf Herbert von Bismarck. Aus seiner politischen Privatkorrespondenz*, p. 109.

Source: Herbert von Bismarck, *Staatssekretär Graf Herbert von Bismarck. Aus seiner politischen Privatkorrespondenz*, edited and introduced by Walter Bussmann with the assistance of Klaus-Peter Hoepke. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964, pp. 107–09.

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