King Ludwig II of Bavaria – Growing Concerns about his Mental State (1883–86)

Abstract

King Ludwig II (1845–1886) ruled over the Kingdom of Bavaria from 1864 until his mysterious death by drowning in Lake Starnberg (south of Munich) in June 1886. History knows him as "Mad" King Ludwig and builder of the fairyland castle Neuschwanstein. From this series of reports sent to the British Foreign Office by the British Chargé d'Affaires in Munich, Hugh Guion Macdonnel (1832–1904), we discover the gradual rise of worries about Ludwig's health, his mental state, and the extraordinary strain his projects put on the Bavarian state finances.

Source

A. Hugh Guion MacDonell [British Envoy to Bavaria] to Earl Granville [British Foreign Secretary], Most Confidential, No. 80, Munich, September 8, 1883

[Received 13 September by messenger. For: The Queen / X; Ch.W.D. [Charles Wentworth Dilke]; G[ranville]]

Remarks on King of Bavaria's character and reclusive habits

Your Lordship will have perhaps perceived, by the reports of my predecessors, that it is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain what degree of truth may be attached to the various rumours which are constantly in circulation regarding the state of The King's health. Lately again I have been "most confidentially" informed that His Majesty's eccentricities, together with a growing sullenness and irritability of character are causing some uneasiness not only to The Royal Family, but also to the Ministers, who fear the complications which the regency may give rise to.

Though I can in no way vouch for the accuracy of these rumours I deem it nevertheless my duty to bring them to Your Lordship's notice – for what they may be worth.

The King of Bavaria, as Your Lordship is aware lives for the greater part of the year in one of the different palaces, castles or villas situated in the most remote parts of the Bavarian Tyrol, the construction of which has entailed a very considerable expense.

His Majesty communicates with His Ministers, and the Officers of His Household, by means of a private secretary, or of some privileged servant.

It is said that, notwithstanding this isolation, His Majesty keeps Himself well acquainted with the affairs of the state, and is in constant communication with the Imperial Chancellor, indeed, at times, He even takes pleasure in surprising His Ministers by the suddenness of His decisions.

One point worth noticing, in connection with the progress of His Government, is the docility shown, on all occasions, by the Bavarian people, – a docility which everybody agrees in attributing to a strong sentiment of religion, and to a feeling of profound affection for the Wittelsbach dynasty.

As regards the share which His Majesty takes in the public business, The King, I believe, fixes His special, if not exclusive, attention, on questions concerning the prestige of His Crown abroad.

His Majesty speaks French without any perceptible accent, and with an ease the more remarkable that He very rarely has occasion to speak that language; since 1875, when He made a hasty journey to France, The King has probably not spoken French more than a dozen times.

[Ludwig] II is of high stature and strong in proportion and I noticed, on the occasion I had the Honour of being received by Him that He manifested a kind of endeavour to give a majestic character to His bearing.

It would not be difficult with regard to the mental condition of which this endeavour seems to be an indication, to relate numerous and significant anecdotes, the people therefore are not without some apprehension on this point, for if the state of health of his Majesty were, at any time, to require the establishment of a regency, it would be necessary to provide not only for the government of the Kingdom during the life of the present King, but also during that of His Majesty's Brother, Prince Otho, Whose mental incapacity gives no hope of recovery.

Under these circumstances it is probable that an exaggerated importance is given to every fresh eccentricity which His Majesty may indulge in. In any case The King is no doubt strangely sensitive as regards His authority. His feelings on this point are so strong, and His susceptibilities so great, that the Members of The Royal Family, not excepting The Queen Dowager, are required to show the most complete submission, and must on all occasions obtain His Majesty's approval even for a simple change of residence.

The King is moreover as difficult of access to The Princes as to His Ministers, who have hardly any opportunity of approaching His Majesty, except, perhaps, once a year when The King comes on a short visit to Munich, where He limits His receptions to one or two [illegible] dinners, to which the Princes, The Ministers, and the Chief Officers of His Court are invited.

With the exception of these receptions, which are becoming remarkable by their rarity, The King lives in Munich as in His mountain retreat, in solitude, and without communication with the outer world; sitting up at night, in town as in the country, till four or five o'clock in the morning, resting during the day till five or six o'clock in the evening, He spends His time in reading or dreaming, and only quits His silent retreat at nightfall to take a rapid drive in a closed carriage, or to witness at one of the two theatres attached to His palace, some performance of which He is the only spectator.

Such is The Prince, Who although still young, has already for many years presided over the Government of Bavaria.

Numerous are the tales to which the conduct and peculiarities of The King give rise, and it is therefore not necessary to enquire how far the apprehensions above referred to are justified. The dangers arising from this sort of abdication are already apparent and can no longer be concealed. Indeed the isolation in which King [Ludwig] II has for more than twelve years maintained Himself leaves His Country, so to say, defenceless, and as the Prussian Minister has confidentially observed to me "If Prussia had had to model a King after her own idea she could not have succeeded better."

Source: The National Archives, UK, FO 9/250; reprinted in Markus Mößlang and Helen Whatmore, eds., *British Envoys to the Kaiserreich*, 2 vols., vol. 1, *1871–1883.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp. 524–26. Available online at: https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/royal-historical-society-camden-fifth-series/volume/5F056ACE3AF9F8AA0965FC88CBE75926

B. Hugh Guion Macdonell to Earl Granville, Most Confidential, No. 108, Munich,

December 17, 1883

[Received 19 December by messenger. For: The Queen / Gladstone / Prince of Wales; Qy: copies confidential to Paris / Berlin / Vienna / Madrid, 26 December; Ch.W.D. [Charles Wentworth Dilke]; G[ranville]]

Remarks on condition of Bavarian King; rumours about possible regency; speculation on succession

I learn from my French colleague, Monsieur Mariani, that The King's eccentricities as well as His Majesty's reckless extravagance are again giving cause for serious uneasiness to the various Members of The Royal Family, and are awaking grave apprehension in the minds of those more closely connected with the Bavarian Court. Indeed, according to Monsieur Mariani's version an important question is at the present moment being considered and discussed in the Royal Family Circle viz. that of a regency.

[…]

Apart from other considerations the fact should not be lost sight of that however monarchical and tolerant, as regards the short comings of their Sovereign, the Bavarians may be, the placing under restraint of their King and His Heir presumptive, would barely tend to strengthen their devotion to the Wittelsbach Dynasty, on the contrary, the experience they have made during the last ten years of the present regime, is more likely to induce them to put an end to the anomalous state of things created, by throwing in their lot altogether with the Empire. Moreover it is not likely that the Imperial Chancellor will allow such a favourable opportunity to slip for doing away with the monarchy in this, the more important state of the confederation; but be this as it may, His Highness will not certainly countenance the placing on the throne of a recalcitrant Prince in lieu of an accommodating Sovereign.

As I have already had the honour to inform Your Lordship, The King lives nearly the whole year in one of the Castles, Palaces, or Villas situated in the most remote parts of the Bavarian Tyrol. It is the enormous outlay for the construction and maintenance of these buildings, in addition to the pomp and state by which, in His Solitude, He is continually surrounded, that have produced the present financial crisis. To satisfy His whims and fancies, His Majesty has seized on all the available funds which He could lawfully dispose of, and is now, it is said, seeking to obtain possession of the considerable private fortune of His demented Brother, Prince Otho, in order to clear His liabilities amounting to twenty millions of marks.

Prince Ludwig, and His Brother, are using Their utmost efforts to resist this great violation of Their trust, hence the violent fits of temper to which His Majesty has lately been subject, and which are naturally creating unusual alarm.

As I have stated above, the heir presumptive to the throne is Prince Otho. In the event of The King's death the question of succession would therefore be somewhat complicated owing to the insanity of the former, no provision having been made in the Bavarian Constitution for a like contingency; consequently if The King were placed in the same position as His Brother, the confusion would be such as probably to call for the interference of the Imperial Government. Furthermore it is believed that an agreement exists by which Prince Luitpold, The King's Uncle and next heir, is to abdicate in favour of his Son, Prince Ludwig, married to The Archduchess Maria Theresa of Austria-Este.

Prince Ludwig is noted here for his strong ultramontane proclivities, and has moreover taken a prominent part as an autonomist, as such he has since 1871 studiously avoided meeting any member of The Imperial Family, and has made it a point to quit Munich whenever The Emperor or The Crown Prince have had occasion to visit, or pass through, this Capital.

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Source: The National Archives, UK, FO 9/250; reprinted in Markus Mößlang and Helen Whatmore, eds., *British Envoys to the Kaiserreich*, 2 vols., vol. 1, *1871–1883.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp. 524–26. Available online at: https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/royal-historical-society-camden-fifth-series/volume/5F056ACE3AF9F8AA0965FC88CBE75926

C. Hugh Guion Macdonell to Earl Granville, Confidential, No. 26, Munich, May 1, 1884

[Received 7 May by messenger. For: The Queen / X, Ch.W.D. [Charles Wentworth Dilke] / Prince of Wales; G[ranville]]

King's absence from installation of Knights of St George due to financial discomfiture

The absence of the King from the ceremony of Installation of the Knights of St. George – which took place on the 25th ultimo – has again given rise to strange reports regarding the mental condition of His Majesty.

The fact of the King deputing his uncle, Prince Luitpold, to perform the duties of grand master on that occasion, was a direct violation of the statutes of the order.

His absence from the ceremony is said to have been due to His Majesty's financial embarrassments, which are daily increasing; but I have also been privately informed that the King declined to appear in public lest the discontent of the smaller tradesmen might induce them to seize that opportunity for making some sort of demonstration. This supposition I believe to be groundless for the Bavarians are, as I have already had occasion to remark, thoroughly devoted to their Sovereign, a fact amply shown by the indulgence they have hitherto given to his excentricities [*sic*]. His Majesty is, it appears, now determined that the subject of money shall not stand in the way of his whims and fancies; in consequence of which his ministers, it is sad to relate, think it right to deceive him as to the real state of things. They have even gone so far as to invent excuses for the stoppage of the works at his numerous country palaces, inducing him to believe that the stones requisite for the buildings are too heavy for transport by train. The only person admitted to His Majesty's presence is his personal attendant, through whom he transacts all the business of the state. In spite of the mask of confidence – when his temper has been roused – he does not hesitate to descend to acts of violence against him.

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Source: The National Archives, UK, FO 9/252; reprinted in Markus Mößlang, ed., *British Envoys to the Kaiserreich*, 2 vols., vol. 2, *1884–1897.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 469–70. Available online at: https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/royal-historical-society-camden-fifth-series/volume/B31A00FE18808B55213124841CDFF481

D. Victor Drummond to Earl of Rosebery, Confidential, No. 10, Munich, May 25, 1886

[Received 2 June by Mr Vickers. For: The Queen / Prince of Wales / Gladstone / Confidential to Berlin for perusal, No 322; R[osebery], 3 June]

Remarks on king's finances and ministerial actions; possible regency

With reference to my previous Despatches on the King of Bavaria's extravagance and the difficulty of the Government to find means of obtaining an assurance from His Majesty that He will curtail His expenses in building, I have the honour to inform Your Lordship that the Press now generally pronounced on the question; the Ultramontane portion blame the present Bavarian Ministry for not having taken measures, sooner, to impress on The King the absolute necessity to live within His means; but the Liberal Press

deny this, and show that as early as, 1877 the King's attention was drawn to the matter by His Secretary and strongly supported by the King's Ministers, and again two years ago the Minister of Finance presented a statement to the King showing how it was possible for him to arrange with his Creditors, but no attention has ever been paid to these humble remarks, made with a desire of preventing such a crisis as is now presented to the public.

The King's father, King Maximilian, had not such a large allowance as King Ludwig has, nevertheless, He managed not only to give an allowance to His Father, but also built many useful state Buildings (even if not of neat architectural beauty) and at his death left several millions of marks. The present King[,] if He would, could also, after a few years[,] find himself in an equally favorable position; His Ministers, however, are evidently of [the] opinion that the chance is small, for a short-time ago they arranged to meet in Conference the leading Members of Parliament, Ultramontane, Liberal and Conservative, they sought together in confidence a means of solving the problem, but after more than one sitting the Conference broke up with no result. One thing, however, was proved that no one was inclined to have recourse to a Vote of the Chambers to pay the King's Debts and it was shown that the Opposition, if the occasion offers, is not inclined to accept office until the King consents to allow himself to be governed by the advice of His Ministers.

Since the Conference last month a very humble address has been again transmitted to His Majesty signed by each one of His Ministers showing how His Majesty's most importunate creditors may be satisfied and how easily His Debts may be paid by the Privy Purse without having recourse to a Loan, by, I am told, deducting yearly an eighth part; again an appeal was made to The King to curtail his building expenses.

This address has been treated in the same manner as that sent to His Majesty last January, namely, by taking no notice of it.

[…]

We may then expect serious events, if, as I am informed, the Government will insist on a reply to the two Messages sent by them to His Majesty, and it is possible that in case His Majesty does not submit to their conditions, The Chambers will be convoked and the whole matter brought before the Representatives of the Bavarian people; abdication is then possible and a Regency under Prince Luitpold, from the cursory remarks made to me by my German Colleague I imagine such a result would not be disagre[e]able to Prince Bismarck, who very likely believes that if this scandal continues, the little surface cloud of socialism in Bavaria may by its' use grow larger. There is no doubt [that] harm in this sense has already been done, as the people, who formerly never paid any attention to the matter, make it now a perpetual subject of discussion and stories respecting the King's eccentricities true and untrue are bandied about.

[…]

Source: The National Archives, UK, FO 9/256; reprinted in Markus Mößlang, ed., *British Envoys to the Kaiserreich*, 2 vols., vol. 2, *1884–1897.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 483–85. Available online at: https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/royal-historical-society-camden-fifth-series/volume/B31A00FE18808B55213124841CDFF481

E. Victor Drummond to Earl of Rosebery, No. 16, Munich, June 12, 1886

[Received 16 June by post. For: The Queen / Prince of Wales / Gladstone; R[osebery]]

King of Bavaria resigns himself to medical care; medical problems declared incurable

I have the honour to inform Your Lordship that His Majesty the King of Bavaria, has submitted Himself to the care of the Doctors appointed by the Government to take charge of His Majesty, who arrived this morning at Schloss Berg, from Hohenschwangau. Schloss Berg is a small Castle, very prettily situated on Starnberg Lake, with about one hundred acres of wooded Park, and one hour from Munich.

Many people it appears waited on the road to greet His Majesty on His departure from Hohenschwangau.

It is said that He thanked them in a few touching words.

I regret to state, however, that it is reported that Experts declare His Majesty's malady incurable, and He is now it is stated watched by four ordinary Keepers, under a head Keeper. Two of these, have already been in personal attendance on His Royal Highness, Prince Otto of Bavaria.

It is, I assure Your Lordship a very sad duty to me, to be obliged to report what has happened, for not only do I feel that the King of Bavaria's subjects have (even if only for a time) lost, by the will of God, one who they respected and were devoted to, but I am convinced that if His Majesty's mind had not been affected, He, from His extraordinary intelligence, His liberal views, and enlightened idea, would have been one of the most popular Monarchs of Modern times. All my Colleagues, who have had the honour of conversing with His Majesty, tell me that He is so well informed and entertaining, that however long their audience had lasted, they always left His Majesty's presence, feeling that it had been one of pleasure; only, too ab[b]reviated.

The story I have reported is made still sadder, by Her Majesty the Queen Mother's illness, since the occurrence has been broken to Her.

[…]

The Bavarians are a most loyal, and devoted people to their Sovereign, and their Princes, and they certainly, will not reprise themselves this opportunity of showing their commiseration for Their Majesties, for whom they entertain so much reverence.

Source: The National Archives, UK, FO 9/256; reprinted in Markus Mößlang, ed., *British Envoys to the Kaiserreich*, 2 vols., vol. 2, *1884–1897.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 485–86. Available online at: https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/royal-historical-society-camden-fifth-series/volume/B31A00FE18808B55213124841CDFF481

F. Mr. [Victor] Drummond to Earl of Rosebery, No. 18, Munich, June 14, 1886

[Received 16 June by post. For: The Queen / Prince of Wales / Gladstone / Treaty Department; Her Majesty's condolences have been telegraphed to Mr Drummond together with the sympathies of Her Majesty's Government; R[osebery]]

King of Bavaria and Dr Gudden found drowned in Lake Starnberg

I have been staying these last few days, in a Country Inn, on Lake Starnberg, one hour from Munich, the Inn is only twenty minutes from the Schloss Berg, where the King of Bavaria has been, since he left Hohenschwangau, as I have already reported to Your Lordship in my Despatch of the 12th Instant.

Yesterday, [a] friend of mine who had come to pass the day with me, walked over to the Schloss, to enquire in what state the King was, after His journey. He saw there, Dr. Gudden and Baron Washington, in attendance of His Majesty. [T]hey both said that His Majesty had passed a good night, and was as well as could be expected under the circumstances, they added that His Majesty had no intention of going to

Munich this week, as had been gossiped. At seven this morning, as I was about to go to Munich my servant rushed in, and told me that he had just heard, that His Majesty had last evening committed suicide. On enquiring I could only find, that this was a rumour, I sent my servant off in a boat, with a note to Baron Washington, in attendance on the King, requesting him to be good enough to inform me what truth there was in the report, and in case it was correct, I begged to express my sincere sympathy, with those who were in attendance with His Majesty.

In an hour after, I received a letter (copy herewith inclosed) in reply to mine, from Count Törring, verifying the rumor.

Your Lordship will see that it is not only a suicide, but a tragedy, for it appears that a tremendous struggle, must have taken place between the King and poor Dr Gudden, whom His Majesty must have dragged into the Lake with Him.

I have just learned that some time after the King and Doctor Gudden had gone out, their absence being prolonged, search was made for them, and not finding any trace of them in the Park, a Gendarme was dispatched to this Inn, (which is just outside the Park) to enquire of the Proprietor, if by chance, the King had come here, the Gendarme ascertaining that there was no news of Him here, returned, and the alarm was raised, and search made in the Lake, where the Bodies were discovered.

I cannot give any further details at present, but it seems extraordinary, that no precautions were taken by Doctor Gudden, for he must have known how violent the King had been at times, and it is curious that he should have suspected nothing, in the King's expressing a wish to take a walk in the Park, at that time of night, in a pouring rain.

Curious also, that whereas in the daytime Gendarmes were all round the grounds, that at night, there was not one within hailing distance.

I feel sure that popular feeling will declare itself in a very pronounced manner against the Ministry, and I must say, I think, with some reason, for their manner of proceeding has not been one which could possibly find favour with the late King's subjects, who consider that His treatment was very harshly carried out.

Source: The National Archives, UK, FO 9/256; reprinted in Markus Mößlang, ed., *British Envoys to the Kaiserreich*, 2 vols., vol. 2, *1884–1897.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 486–87. Available online at: https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/royal-historical-society-camden-fifth-series/volume/B31A00FE18808B55213124841CDFF481

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