

Negotiating Kaiserdom: Letter from Bismarck to King Ludwig II of Bavaria (November 27, 1870)

Abstract

The German Empire was formally founded as a union of federal states whose special interests and sensibilities had to be respected. This applied particularly to Bavaria, the second largest German state after Prussia. In this letter from late November 1870, Bismarck skillfully overstates Bavaria's significance by suggesting to Bavarian King Ludwig II (ruled 1864–1886) that he personally take the lead in proposing Prussian King Wilhelm I as future German emperor [Kaiser]. Bismarck's ulterior motives are not difficult to discern: he was determined that Germany's "princes," rather than parliamentarians representing "the people," initiate the "voluntary transfer" of allegiance to Prussia's monarch. When Bismarck got his way, the fiction of Kaiserdom "by the grace of God" was bolstered by the notion that Germany rested on a private agreement among sovereign rulers (this agreement included a secret bribe to Ludwig that helped finance the building of fairy-tale castles like Neuschwanstein).

Source

Versailles, November 27, 1870

Your Most Serene Highness, Supreme Majesty!

For the gracious revelations made to me by Count Holnstein^[1] on Your Majesty's orders, I beg Your Highness to accept the most reverent expression of my thanks. My gratitude toward Your Majesty has a more profound and broader reason than the personal one; it lies in the official position in which I am called upon to acknowledge the magnanimous decisions through which Your Majesty, at the beginning and at the imminent end of this great national war, has achieved a great conclusion to the unity and power of Germany. It is not my commission, however, but that of the German people and their history to thank the Most Serene Bavarian dynasty for Your Majesty's German politics and the heroism of Your army. I can only assure that, as long as I live, I will be devoted and obedient to Your Majesty in reverent gratitude, and I will always consider myself lucky if ever I get a chance to be at Your Majesty's service.

With respect to the question of German Kaiserdom, it is in my respectful estimation important above all that its proposal [should] first originate with none other than Your Majesty and certainly not with the representative body of the people. The title would be compromised if its origin were not in the well-considered initiative of the most powerful among the princes joining the confederation. I have taken the liberty of handing over to Count Holnstein, upon his request, a draft statement to be directed to my most gracious King [Wilhelm of Prussia] and, with some necessary revisions to that version, to the other allies. This statement is based on the idea that indeed fills the hearts of the German tribes: The German Kaiser is their countryman, the King of Prussia their neighbor; only the German title shows that the privileges connected with it derive from the voluntary transfer by the German princes and tribes. History teaches us that the great dynasties of Germany, including the Prussian one, would not be diminished in their prominent European position through the existence of a German emperor elected by them.

Filled with deep awe, I am Your Majesty's most humble and obedient servant,
v. Bismarck

NOTES

[1] Max Graf von Holnstein of Bavaria (1835–1895), trusted advisor to King Ludwig II of Bavaria. [Information provided in Ernst Rudolf Huber, ed., *Dokumente zur deutschen Verfassungsgeschichte*, 3rd rev. ed. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1978, vol. 2, p. 348.]

Source: Otto von Bismarck, *Die gesammelten Werke*, edited by Gerhard Ritter and Rudolf Stadelmann, Friedrichsruh edition, 15 vols. Berlin, 1924–1932, vol. 6b, no. 1932; reprinted in Ernst Rudolf Huber, ed., *Dokumente zur deutschen Verfassungsgeschichte*, 3rd rev. ed. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1978, vol. 2, pp. 348–49.

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