

Reactions to the Second Attempt on Kaiser Wilhelm's Life (Retrospective Account, 1910)

Abstract

In Part A of this document, Reich Chancellery Chief Christoph von Tiedemann (1836–1907) describes the events of 2 June 1878, when Kaiser Wilhelm I was seriously wounded by a would-be assassin. Upon hearing the news, Bismarck's first reaction was not to inquire about the health of his king and Kaiser but rather: "Then we must dissolve the Reichstag." The next day, under the influence of wild rumors, Bismarck and Prussian Minister of War Georg von Kameke (1817–1893) express worries—but underlying confidence—about the ability of the Prussian army to put down a rebellion in the streets. In Part B, we discover that Bismarck in August 1878 had far-reaching plans—beyond the eventual Anti-Socialist Law passed in October 1878—to deny Social Democrats their basic civil liberties and their eligibility to vote in Reichstag elections. At the time, Bismarck was upset that some of his ministers had released details about the planned Anti-Socialist Law to the press, including the establishment of a Reich Office for Associations and Press, which now stood no chance of acceptance because of the leak. In Part C, Bismarck expresses to War Minister Kameke his (apparently sincere) worries about the reliability of the army and the civil service in the face of a popular revolt in Berlin. One source of Bismarck's worries was the number of Social Democratic votes cast in Berlin in the Reichstag elections of July 31, 1878.

Source

A. Christoph von Tiedemann on the Second Attempt on Kaiser Wilhelm I's Life (Retrospective Account, 1910)

II.

On Sunday, June 2 Count von Bismarck had stated during breakfast that he would forgo our joint horseback ride today and would go for a walk in the woods instead. Thus Count Herbert and I rode alone. We expanded our ride further than usual and were surprised when, looking at the clock, we realized that it was already afternoon and thus high time to turn around if we wanted to be back in time for dinner. On that day guests were expected: District President von Bötticher from Schleswig and the two Messrs. von Ohlendorff from Hamburg. We had the intention of picking them up at the train station. Now we returned home, galloping all the way.

When we thundered into the castle courtyard, Count Kuno Rantzau and Countess Marie Bismarck stood outside the front door, apparently eagerly awaiting us. From their distraught expressions we could see that something shocking must have occurred. Rantzau held a number of telegrams in his hand, all of which contained the same: the news that a second assassination attempt against the Kaiser had been carried out and that he had been severely injured by shotgun pellets.^[1] It is hard to describe the impression this news made on us. We were speechless at first. Then I asked Rantzau whether the Count had already been informed of this terrible event. When Rantzau answered in the negative, adding that he had not yet returned from his walk, I asked Herbert to go to meet the Count and show him the telegrams. Yet Herbert did not seem to be inclined to do so; he said it would be more appropriate for me to do this, for I was here on duty and the telegrams were in part of an official nature. Since I had to acknowledge that this objection was justified, I therefore decided with a heavy heart to meet the Count.

As I emerged from the park at Friedrichsruh on my way to the Aumühle mill, I saw the Count who,

accompanied by his dogs, walked across the field at a slow pace in the sunshine. I stepped towards him and joined him after a few words of greeting. He was in the most cheerful mood and told me of his walk on that day and of the beneficial effect the long exercise in the forest air had had on his nerves. After a short pause I said: "Some important telegrams have arrived." He replied jokingly: "Are they so urgent that we have to deal with them out here amidst the fields?" I replied: "Unfortunately. They contain outrageous news; the Kaiser has been shot at again and this time the shots hit their target; the Kaiser is severely injured."

The Count stopped abruptly. In a forceful movement he stuck his oak walking stick into the ground in front of him and said, exhaling deeply as if a flash of inspiration had just struck him: "Then we'll dissolve the Reichstag."

He now rapidly walked through the park towards the house while animatedly asking about the details of this criminal act. Upon entering the house he ordered the servants to prepare everything for his departure to Berlin. We were to leave early the next morning.

The dinner, whose guests had arrived in the meantime, passed in a subdued mood. An atmosphere heavy with thunderstorms seemed to hover over the dinner party. Only towards the end did the conversation become livelier. The guests bid their farewell earlier than usual. The Count went to his office and had me called a few minutes later in order to give me instructions for several letters that were to be written to the leading ministers of the other German states besides Prussia and in which the necessity of dissolving the Reichstag was to be explained. I worked on these letters until late at night.

On the next morning we departed. It was a dreary, rainy day that corresponded well to the dark mood that had come over all of us. I turned down the Count's invitation to ride with him and his family in his parlor car. I preferred to be alone, and I managed to find a compartment that was completely empty.

I will remember this train journey for the rest of my life; it was rich in sensational moments. News of Nobiling's assassination attempt, which had gone around the country fast as lightning, had greatly stirred the public's imagination; the wildest and most incredible rumors were in the air and were spread uncritically. At the Wittenberg train station an excited crowd of people pushed their way to the Count's parlor car, having recognized him immediately, and called to him that the crown prince had been shot at as well and that the whole royal family was in danger. In Nauen there were similar scenes. Here they claimed that Prince Friedrich Karl was wounded.

When we arrived at the Spandau train station, the Count noticed several officers he knew in the crowd, which was also in the hundreds here, and he called one of them over to ask him whether the rumors of attempts on the life of the crown prince and Friedrich Karl had also reached this far. The officer replied in the positive, adding however that none of it seemed to be true. Meanwhile people were now saying that mines had been found under the royal palace. One could not exclude the possibility of a revolt in Berlin.

The Count now asked me to come to his parlor car and while we continued our journey to Berlin he told me: he considered the rumors going around as exaggerations, yet one had to be prepared for anything these days and therefore it was becoming necessary to protect ourselves against unpleasant surprises. He needed to know whether the military had already done so. Therefore I was to see Minister of War General von Kameke directly after our arrival in Berlin and inquire of him whether and which military orders, notably for reinforcement of the Berlin garrison, had been issued in case riots broke out.

Once we arrived in Berlin, I drove directly from the train station to the Ministry of War. General von Kameke saw me immediately and after I had stated my business, he said, jovially speaking in Berlin dialect: "Nah! Everything has been taken care of. It's like with the telegraph. If I press this button, the Spandau garrison starts moving, so-and-so many battalions and batteries, if I press that button the

Brandenburg battalions will come, then the Frankfurters with so-and-so many batteries and finally the ones from Stettin and with them comes Caprivi, and he is worth ten battalions.”

I was surprised by this appreciation of Caprivi and I took the liberty of asking a question to that effect.

“Yes,” Kameke replied, “if something really happens here, Caprivi will be made military commander of Berlin, and he knows what he is doing. So go ahead and tell the Count not to worry. We won’t be blown up that easily. Let the scoundrels come.”

[...]

Count von Bismarck, who had seen the Kaiser on the evening of our arrival but only stayed for a few minutes by request of the Kaiser’s personal physician, returned from this visit in a wistful mood. Despite a traumatic fever, the Kaiser had been wonderfully composed; with an attempted smile, which he could hardly manage due to his facial injury, he had mildly spoken of a bloodletting, his injuries had no larger significance; one had to quietly and devoutly submit to acts of God. The Kaiser had been unable to suppress his outrage at one thing only, namely that he had been shot at with pellets. If only it had been an honest bullet! The Count shared this sentiment. To these two expert hunters, the assassination attempt seemed especially miserable because a noble monarch had been shot at like a common piece of game.

[...]

Source: Christoph von Tiedemann, *Sechs Jahre Chef der Reichskanzlei unter dem Fürsten Bismarck*. Second edition. Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1910, pp. 266–73.

B. Bismarck to Christoph von Tiedemann (August 15, 1878)

Kissingen, August 15, 1878

I ask Your Grace to express my regrets to the Minister Count Eulenburg and Privy Councilor Hahn that the draft for the Anti-Socialist Law has been published officially in the Provincial Correspondence before it was presented to the Bundesrat.^[2]

This publication prejudices against any amendment by us and is offensive to Bavaria and other dissenters. Following my negotiations with Bavaria from here, I must assume that the latter will absolutely uphold its opposition to the Reich Office. Württemberg and, I am told, Saxony, too, do not object to a Reich Office in principle but on a justified point, namely the involvement of judges. Personally, I can only agree with this objection. These are not judicial, but political roles, and neither must the Prussian ministry be subordinated to a judicial council in its preliminary decisions and thus be paralyzed in its political movement against socialism for all time. In my opinion, the tasks of the Reich Office can only be executed by the Bundesrat, either directly or by delegation to an annually elected committee. The Bundesrat represents the governance of Germany’s overall sovereignty similar to the Staatsrat under different circumstances.

At this point I must assume that Bavaria will not accept the proposal that is acceptable to Württemberg, Saxony, and me personally. Also, the clause included in no. 3, article 23, that only unemployed individuals may be deported is insufficient for its purpose.

Moreover, the law needs an addition with regard to civil servants to the effect that involvement in socialist politics will result in dismissal without pension claims. The majority of ill-paid low-ranking civil servants in Berlin and also among railway signalmen, switchmen and similar categories are socialists, a fact whose perilousness during revolts and troop transports is evident.

Furthermore, if the law is to be effective, I do not think it possible in the long term to continue to grant citizens who have legally been proven to be socialists the right to vote and stand for election and to enjoy the privileges of Reichstag delegates.

All of these restrictions will have a much smaller chance of success in the Reichstag after a milder form has been announced in all newspapers simultaneously and thus been officially communicated to them than would be the case if a milder version was not officially published. The draft as it is now will do practically no harm to socialism, it will by no means suffice to disarm it, notably because there can be no doubt that the Reichstag will amend any draft.

I regret that my health absolutely prevents me from immediately participating in the Bundesrat negotiations, and with a view to the regular Reichstag session, I must reserve the right to submit my further proposals to the Bundesrat in the winter.

Source: Bismarck to Christoph von Tiedemann, August 15, 1878, in Otto von Bismarck, *Gesammelte Werke*, 15 vols. Friedrichsruher Edition. Berlin, 1924–35, vol. 6c, ed. Werner Frauendienst, 1935, Nr. 126, pp. 116–17; printed in: Otto von Bismarck, *Gesammelte Werke*, Neue Friedrichsruher Ausgabe, Abteilung III, vol. 3, *Schriften 1877–1878*, ed. Michael Epkenhans and Erik Lommatzsch. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2008, Nr. 469, pp. 536–37.

C. Tiedemann's Draft for Bismarck to War Minister George von Kameke (September 3, 1878)

Gastein, September 3, 1878.

Your Grace, with a view to the upcoming opening session of the Reichstag, I take the liberty of asking you to once again consider the question whether a reinforcement of the Berlin garrison will be necessary after all. The elections have shown that there are more than 50,000 Social Democrats older than 25 in Berlin and certainly 80,000 if one considers the element under 25 years of age, which is particularly active during revolts and which the election lists does not include. Furthermore, reports about election trends show that among the class of low-ranking civil servants generally, notably in the railway, postal and telegraph service but also in the police force and the constabulary, the supporters of Social Democracy are dominant in some places and very numerous everywhere. Therefore it is safe to assume that in case of revolts the service in these branches will partly come to a halt. In light of the excellent organization of Social Democracy, its allies among low-ranking railway officers, signalmen, switchmen, etc. will be informed of the plans for revolt early enough, and I fear that Your Grace will be prevented from requesting troops from outside the city in time by an interruption of all railway connections. Even communication within the city can fundamentally be impeded by blowing up bridges due to the availability of dynamite cartridges to anyone. Even if such conditions do not apply, the question remains whether the garrison is strong enough to occupy and hold all necessary points in the city against a very well-organized hostile mass of 50,000 Social Democrats.

I do not presume to judge these questions and submit them entirely to the responsible judgment of Your Grace. The purpose of this note is rather to express my concern that the railway lines will be interrupted due to connivance by their staff and that the police and telegraph officers will not all be reliable. It is about these more political questions that I believe I should express my views to Your Grace and also about the fact that I do not consider it unlikely that riots will break out depending on the outcome of the Reichstag debates. Any evidence that the government is on its guard and adds reinforcements will be effective in preventing riots.

NOTES

[1] *) In the “Politische Geschichte der Gegenwart“ [Contemporary Political History] by Wilhelm

Müller, 1878, the events are told in the following way: “On Sunday, June 2 the Kaiser, sitting alone in his carriage, rode towards the Brandenburg Gate on the street Unter den Linden. Around three o’clock two shots were fired in rapid succession from a window on the second floor of the house no. 18; the Kaiser was wounded in the face, arms and other body parts by several pellets and buckshot; the carriage turned around and slowly returned to the palace. “I don’t understand why they’re always shooting at me,” the Kaiser said when he had returned to the palace. The assassin was Dr. Karl Nobiling, born in 1848 as the son of a demesne tenant in Kollm near Birnbaum. He pursued agriculture, studied in Halle and Leipzig and obtained a doctorate at the latter university. This eccentric man, who was driven by delusions of grandeur, studied Social Democratic writings, attended Social Democratic assemblies, called himself a Social Democrat in front of his fellow students and was known among them as a “Petrolist” and “communist.”

[2] Stolberg had submitted the draft for the Anti-Socialist Law to the Bundesrat on August 13, 1878. On August 14, Eulenburg had the draft, which had been kept confidential until then, published in the “Provincial-Correspondenz” paper although official deliberations had only begun on that day.

Source: Tiedemann’s draft for Bismarck to War Minister Georg von Kameke, September 3, 1878, written from the spa town of Bad Gastein, originally in Otto von Bismarck, *Gesammelte Werke*, 15 vols. Friedrichsruher Edition. Berlin, 1924–35, vol. 6c, edited by Werner Frauendienst, 1935, Nr. 129, pp. 119–20; reprinted in Otto von Bismarck, *Werke in Auswahl*, 8 vols., ed. Gustav Adolf Rein et al., vol. 6, *Reichsgestaltung und Europäische Friedenswahrung, Zweiter Teil: 1877–1882*, ed. Alfred Milatz. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2001, pp. 193–94.

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