

The Public Mood in Bavaria and Other Federal States through British Eyes (December 3, 1866)

Abstract

After Prussia's victory in the Austro-Prussian War of 1866, the future lay open. Annexations in the north and the forced incorporation of the Kingdom of Saxony into the North German Confederation had vastly increased Prussia's power and prestige; but still the southern German states remained independent. Since many Germans longed for a unified Germany, there was a great deal of speculation about where Bismarck's expansionist plans would lead next. The following appraisal was written in December 1866 by Sir Henry Francis Howard (1809–1898), who served as the British envoy to Bavaria from 1866 to 1872. In this confidential report to the British Foreign Office, Howard sums up the mood in the annexed territories and in the southern states. Although it was in Britain's interest for Prussia to provide a bulwark against possible French aggression in the future, other diplomatic complications clouded the overall picture. Domestically, Prussia's hegemony was proving difficult to swallow by those who had fought on the losing side during the war. Howard accurately describes the bitterness felt towards Prussia in many parts of Germany at the time.

Source

Munich, December 3, 1866

My Lord,

The Prussian annexations have no doubt considerably advanced the unification of Germany, but the process of consolidation will be a slow one, because they were effected by conquest and contrary to the will of the population of the annexed countries, and the general state of Germany after the war is anything but settled or satisfactory.

In Prussia, the triumphs of the Army and a common feeling amongst all classes in favor of aggrandizement have divided the opposition in the Chamber of Deputies and have procured for the Government Parliamentary successes hardly less remarkable than those they gained in the field — But nevertheless the internal conflict in Prussia, though suspended in order not to frustrate Count Bismarck's external policy, the results of which meet with such general approbation from all parties in the country, is not altogether terminated and may break out again at any time, the anti-liberal system of internal Government and the political prosecutions still continuing as before the war.

In Hanover, the people by no means view the incorporation of their country in the light in which it is represented by some political writers, either ignorant of the real state of the case, or regardless of the truth, namely in that of a blessing. On the contrary the Hanoverians, a people as highly educated as the Prussians, who would have been ready to make sacrifices in order to promote the public good and to strengthen the common action of Germany, are unable to reconcile themselves to the expulsion of their dynasty, to the total extinction of their separate existence and independence, and to the loss of their own institutions, more liberal than the Prussian and in many respects superior to the latter. The Prussians, as I am credibly informed, meet with ill will and opposition from all classes of the population, with the exception of a portion of that in the towns and in the provinces annexed to Hanover in 1815. On their part, therefore, it will, require much delicate handling, patience and time before they can succeed in moulding the Hanoverians to their shape and system, and however intelligent and able they may be,

they notoriously do not possess the talent of making themselves easily beloved.

In Hesse Cassel, where the people had much ground of complaint against their Sovereign and Government, and in Nassau, where the Government were not popular, the case is no doubt different, but still there has been in both those States much more unwillingness to accept the new order of things than had been anticipated.

The Free City of Frankfurt does not cease to bewail the loss of its independence and of those liberal institutions which it knew how to assert in opposition even to the two most powerful members of the former Confederation, Austria and Prussia, and sees the elements of its prosperity menaced with ruin.

As regards the Duchy of Holstein, it appears to me that, once separated by Treaty from Denmark, under whose rule, notwithstanding certain drawbacks, it enjoyed a prosperity which it has not since known, its lot, as annexed to Prussia, will be a happier one than were it to be erected, as was in contemplation, into a mere Vassal State.

The same may be said of the Duchy of Schleswig, provided Prussia does not evade, as there is every appearance She intends to do, the stipulations of the Treaty of Prague, according to which its Northern districts are to be re-annexed to Denmark, should they desire it.

So much for the annexed States. Of those which are to form with Prussia the Northern Confederation, the only important one is the Kingdom of Saxony, and the recent proceedings of the Saxon Chambers show how much more good will Prussia would have caused, and how much easier She would find the task of assimilation, had She evinced more generosity and imposed less severe conditions upon the vanquished.

Of the other German States, Hesse Darmstadt, with one foot in the Northern Confederation and the other out of it, can hardly be taken into account.

Of the independent States, Baden leans entirely to Prussia, and is desirous to accede to the Northern Confederation, but cannot gain admittance, because Prussia has not yet digested Her conquests, and is afraid of bringing on a rupture with France by interfering, for the present, with the States South of the Main.

In Wurtemberg [sic], on the contrary, I am told that an anti-Prussian feeling and a wish to see the independence of the Country maintained, coupled with an understanding with the other South German States, have at the present decidedly the upper hand.

In Bavaria, the Austrian Alliance is entirely abandoned, and public opinion points to the necessity of an alliance with Prussia, more particularly against French aggression, but at the same time the predominant feeling of the country seems at present opposed to such a sacrifice of its independence as would be entailed by an accession to the Northern Confederation as contemplated by Prussia. Had Prussia really intended the formation of a Federal State on an equitable basis, Bavaria and the remaining independent States would, there is every probability, have been ready to join it. But in the first place, for the reasons I have alleged, Prussia declines at present to receive them into a Confederation with Her, and in the second place Her object evidently is to create what the Germans call a Unity State—in other words not a Great German, but an exclusively Prussian one—repugnant to the feelings of the majority of the South Germans. She therefore, it seems, prefers in the first instance consolidating Her power in the North of Germany, to seeking the ultimate attainment of Her end, on an enlarged scale, through the medium of a Confederation comprising the whole of Germany, trusting no doubt to circumstances occurring sooner or later which may enable Her to impose Her own terms on the South German States.

Should Austria hereafter seek to recover Her lost position by an Alliance with France—a contingency by no means improbable—the position of Bavaria will be a very difficult one, and the interest of Prussia will

certainly be, as [Bavarian Minister President] Baron von der Pfordten represented to Count Bismarck at Berlin, to conciliate Her as much as possible and not to drive Her, as well as the other South German States, into a Franco-Austrian Alliance.

Of Austria it is no longer permitted to talk as a German power, but it is to be remembered that She has several millions of German Subjects, who, to judge by the language lately held in the Diets of the German Provinces, are unwilling to accept their exclusion from Germany as a definitive arrangement.

Thus a German question, arises in Austria and adds another embarrassment to the other almost overwhelming difficulties which beset Her path—whether Austria did not, in part at least, bring on Her own misfortunes by numerous political mistakes, and by none greater than that which She committed in endeavouring, without sufficient means, to uphold Her position both in Italy and in Germany, is a question which it would now be superfluous to discuss. Suffice it to say, that Her present enfeeblement cannot but be a subject of regret, and that Her existence as a great power is unquestionably a European interest.

Without entering into the question whether the late territorial changes in Germany be ultimately for good or evil, it is unquestionable that the immediate state of things which they have produced is far from satisfactory.

Instead of a general disarmament following the peace, the pecuniary and personal burdens of the people are being increased by large additions to the War Estimates and to the numerical strength of the Armies of the several Countries, and Science seems to be chiefly valued as the means of inventing new instruments of human destruction. — Even Prussia, whose successes have been so brilliant, and whose military organization has proved itself so efficient, is augmenting Her Army Budget and adding largely to Her own Cavalry Force, whilst She is straining the resources of Her newly acquired territories for military purposes and requiring Her new Ally, or rather Vassal, the King of Saxony to double his Army. — In those States of Germany, where the general obligation to serve in the army did not previously exist, it is being introduced, and the whole of Germany, like Prussia, will soon be converted into one vast camp. This state of things has indubitably been brought about by the ambition of one power—Prussia, who has turned the great superiority of intelligence which She possesses to the cultivating of the art of war rather than of those of peace.

It remains to be remarked that the feeling of uneasiness in Germany is augmented by the impression that, when the Paris Exhibition of next year shall have passed over, and when France shall have completed Her military preparations, She will seek a war with Germany so as to obtain those compensations for the aggrandisement of Prussia, which She has sketched out, but which She has already learnt will only be yielded to superior force.

Whether the fears thus entertained in regard to the eventual course of France and to the alliances to which it may give rise will be realized or not, some seventeen or eighteen months hence, their existence produces a feeling of uncertainty as to the future and furnishes a motive for military preparation on the part of Germany.

In conclusion, I may perhaps be permitted to repeat an opinion, which I have formerly taken the liberty of expressing, that, although, abstractedly speaking, it is in the interest of Great Britain that there should be a strong Prussia to serve as a barrier against France, yet that Her aggrandisement, under the present circumstances, cannot be looked upon with unmixed satisfaction from a British point of view. — From a defensive [power], Prussia has become an aggressive power. — Her tendencies are Russian. — If She has not concluded, as I believe She has not, any Treaty of Alliance with Russia, She has an understanding with Her—equivalent to an alliance in these days, when the fact of engagements being written does not appear to add to their force. The question which has principally drawn Russia closer to Prussia at the

present moment and made Her overlook the subversion by Prussia of thrones established by Treaties to which Russia was a party is, I understand, that of Poland.

The Emperor of Russia is jealous of the concessions which Austria is making to Her Polish subjects, and which he fears will disturb the tranquillity of his own Polish dominions, whereas he finds in Prussia an Ally ready to cooperate in preventing or suppressing any Polish movements.

But, although the Polish Question may for the present be the principal subject of an understanding between the two Powers, have we any security that, should the Oriental Question be again brought forward, Prussia, in exchange for the consent of Russia to Her further aggrandisement in Germany, will not assist Russia towards Her object, in the midst of the general subversion of other Treaties, to cancel those which were imposed upon Her after the Crimean War, and which have already been infringed by the success of the Prussian manoeuvre in placing the Prince of Hohenzollern on the throne of the Danubian Principalities and to extend Her power in the East? — The part which Prussia played in that war is not calculated to inspire confidence in this respect. — If the Alliance of the two Great Northern Powers were to have such a result, which is certainly within the range of possibilities, British interests would undoubtedly be affected. But it would be wearying your Lordship were I further to prosecute the theme of the Alliances and complications which may arise out of the present state of things. — Suffice it to say, that I trust that my fears lest the results of the late War should have sown the seeds of fresh and perhaps more extended wars, may not be realized.

I have the honor to be with the highest respect,
My Lord,
Your Lordship's most obedient humble servant,

Henry F. Howard

Source: British envoy to Bavaria Sir Henry F. Howard, Munich, to British Foreign Secretary Lord Stanley, London (confidential), report no. 140, December 3, 1866, in The National Archives, Kew (formerly Public Record Office, Kew), FO 9/177, unfoliated, handwritten. Original British spelling and syntax have been retained.

Recommended Citation: The Public Mood in Bavaria and Other Federal States through British Eyes (December 3, 1866), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-1817>> [May 15, 2024].