

# The Struggle for Civilian or Military Control of the War against France (December 1870)

## Abstract

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In the course of the Franco-German War (1870–1871), Otto von Bismarck insisted that grand strategy and the conduct of war remain firmly under civilian (that is, his own) control rather than military control. As Bismarck's appeal to Prussia's King Wilhelm I indicates, military successes in the two previous wars of unification had not just enhanced Bismarck's own political standing; they had also encouraged the self-confident Prussian General Staff under Helmuth von Moltke to seek autonomy in both military and political decision-making by gaining direct access to Wilhelm. Although Bismarck observes that he feels no pressure to make a quick peace, we know that he was less interested than Moltke in continuing the bombardment of Paris, starving its people, or staging a victory parade on the Champs-Élysées. Bismarck's priorities were to conclude a formal peace agreement before other Great Powers intervened and to ensure his ascendancy in both domestic and foreign policy. It is therefore understandable that he appealed to Wilhelm I at exactly the moment (early December 1870) when negotiations about the federal structure of the new Empire were at their most delicate point.

## Source

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In accordance with the gracious authorization granted by Your Royal Highness in the received communication, I sent word to General Count von Moltke that the letter in question to General Trochu<sup>[1]</sup> should be stopped; however, it had already been dispatched to the outposts.

Your Majesty has deigned to grant permission to my most humble request that no initiatives for negotiations with the enemy would be undertaken on our part, so as to avoid the impression that we were in need of a quick peace and to give no rise to attitudes that deceit and gullibility might associate with it. Along these lines, I implied to Lieutenant Colonel von Bronsart<sup>[2]</sup> this morning that the proposed step did not seem unproblematic to me. I believed, however, that lacking any more detailed knowledge of the situation, I ought not to raise my objections against the proposed step. In all of this, I assumed that before the supreme order was given, I would have ample opportunity to report to Your Majesty myself on a matter that touches upon my own area of responsibility. I deemed such an order all the less imminent as the dispatch of the letter was supposed to be delayed until information about the capture of Orleans came in, news of which I still have not received by this afternoon. I had no doubt that I would be permitted beforehand to report to Your Majesty in person on the subject of negotiations with the French government, and for that reason had not put crucial weight on my discussions with Lieutenant Colonel Bronsart. Instead, I had reserved the right to raise my fundamental and formal reservations not with the General Staff but with Your Majesty. On principle, I did not agree with this step at all, because any German initiative for negotiations is misunderstood and abused in Paris; and because I believe that there should be no communication on the part of the *military* that would accommodate the current French government, as long as it has not clarified its position toward the officers who have deserted under violation of their oath. Formally, I had wished to propose to Your Majesty a different version of the letter, namely the use of German. On another occasion, I will take the liberty of humbly suggesting this for general practice, because German officers and civil servants are always at a disadvantage if they are officially required to use French in correspondence with the enemies, who necessarily have better command of their mother tongue.

May Your Royal Majesty graciously allow me, in light of this incident, to make the respectful general

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request:

That Your Majesty may graciously order that I be consulted in all military talks that touch upon political issues, and that I be authorized to direct to the General Staff any questions concerning the military situation, about which I, as Foreign Minister and Prime Minister, believe information is required.

## NOTES

[1] Louis Jules Trochu (1815–1896); from August 1870 to January 1871 Trochu was Governor of Paris and from September to February 1871 President of the French “Government of National Defense.” [All notes from Ernst Rudolf Huber, ed., *Dokumente zur deutschen Verfassungsgeschichte*, 3rd rev. ed. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1978, vol. 2.]

[2] Paul Bronsart von Schellendorf (1832–1891) was an officer in the Prussian General Staff in 1870; from 1883 to 1889 he served as Prussian Minister of War.

Source: Otto von Bismarck, *Die gesammelten Werke*, edited by Gerhard Ritter and Rudolf Stadelmann, Friedrichsruh edition, 15 vols. Berlin, 1924–1932, vol. 6b, no. 1950; reprinted in Ernst Rudolf Huber, ed., *Dokumente zur deutschen Verfassungsgeschichte*, 3rd rev. ed. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1978, vol. 2, pp. 359–60.

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