The Wife of the British Ambassador in Berlin Writes to Queen Victoria about Bismarck's Political Omnipotence (December 27, 1880)

Abstract

Lady Emily Russell was married to Britain's ambassador to the German Empire (1871–1884), Lord Odo Russell (1829–1884). Whereas the German chancellor had been eager to rid himself of Russell's predecessor, Lord Augustus Loftus (1817–1904**)**, he seemed to like Russell, who has been described as "Bismarck's favorite Englishman." But as the following letter suggests, Russell's wife (who lived until 1927) is unlikely to have been Bismarck's favorite Englishwoman. The letter begins with the ambassador's wife thanking Queen Victoria for granting her husband a peerage. (Russell was gazetted Baron Ampthill on March 11, 1881.) The German emperor to whom Lady Russell refers is Kaiser Wilhelm I. Wilhelm's son, Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm, was married to Queen Victoria's daughter; he ruled as Kaiser Friedrich III for a mere 99 days in 1888 before dying of throat cancer and being succeeded by Kaiser Wilhelm II. The crown prince and his wife opposed Bismarck's virtual dictatorship as vigorously as they could during the 1880s (as shown in one of the subsequent documents). Lady Russell obviously shared their distaste for Bismarck's "absolute power" and ability to "terrorize" Germany.

Source

Lady Emily Russell to Queen Victoria.

British Embassy, Berlin, 27th December 1880.

[…]

The Crown Prince honoured me with a visit when he first arrived in Berlin, and Odo saw his Imperial Highness out shooting in the Grünewald, when he was graciously invited by the Emperor to join the *chasse* prepared for the King of Saxony and Prince George. We were both struck by his Imperial Highness not looking very well, and everyone thinks him rather low and out of sorts, and noticed that at the *Jagdfrühstück* in the wood, when the Emperor and the King were more than ever cheerful and gracious, the Crown Prince seemed lost in thought, and took no part in the general conversation which was very lively and interesting. Those who know the Crown Prince well think that he is worried and pained to see the Emperor so completely under the influence of Prince Bismarck, whose policy in regard to home questions and Imperial matters he does not approve of; and he fears that the public will hold his Imperial father responsible for the arbitrary and unconstitutional proceedings which the Chancellor delights in.

The *initiated* know that the Emperor, since the horrible attempts of 1878,[1] has allowed Prince Bismarck to have his own way in *everything*; and the great Chancellor revels in the absolute power he has acquired and does as he pleases. He lives in the country and governs the German Empire without even taking the trouble to consult the Emperor about his plans, who only learns what is being done from the documents to which his signature is necessary, and which his Majesty signs without questions or hesitation. Never has a subject been granted so much irresponsible power from his Sovereign, and never has a Minister inspired a nation with more abject individual, as well as general, terror before. No wonder, then, that the Crown Prince should be worried at a state of things which he has not more personal power or influence to remedy than anyone else in Prussia, whilst Prince Bismarck lives and terrorises over Germany from Friedrichsruhe with the Emperor's tacit and cheerful consent.

Bismarck has gradually appointed a Ministry of Clerks out of the Government Offices, who do as they are told by him, and he has so terrified the Bundesrath, by threatening to resign whenever they disagreed with him, that they now vote entirely in obedience to his instructions. He now expects that at the next general election he will, by careful management, obtain the absolute majority he requires to carry through his new taxation and commercial policy.

If Bismarck should ever die suddenly from indigestion, which his doctors fear and predict, the difficulty of reforming the general abuses which his personal administration has created will be great, and will impose a hard and ungrateful task on the Sovereign, who will have to find and appoint the Ministers capable of re-establishing constitutionalism in Prussia.

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NOTES

[1] In that year the Emperor was on two occasions shot at and once seriously wounded.

Source: Lady Emily Russell to Queen Victoria, December 27, 1880; original English text published in George Earle Buckle, ed., *The Letters of Queen Victoria: A Selection from Her Majesty's Correspondence and Journal Between the Years 1862 and 1885*, second series, 3 vols. Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1928, vol. 3, pp. 168–70.

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