

Excerpts from Bismarck’s “Blood and Iron” Speech (1862)

Abstract

Prussian Minister President [Otto von Bismarck](#) (1815–1898) delivered his famous “Blood and Iron” speech at a meeting of the budget committee of the Prussian parliament on September 30, 1862. He emphatically called for a “small German” nation-state dominated by Prussia and rejected demands for liberal reform.

Source

Bismarck responds to [Max von] Forckenbeck’s lengthy arguments about appropriation rights and Art. 99 of the constitution and the people’s wish for a shortened military service^[1]:

He would like to go into the budget for 1862, though without making a prejudicial statement. An abuse of constitutional rights could be undertaken by any side; this would then lead to a reaction from the other side. The Crown, e.g., could dissolve [parliament] twelve times in a row—that would certainly be permitted according to the letter of the constitution—but it would be an abuse. It could just as easily reject cuts in the budget, immoderately; it would be hard to tell where to draw the line there; would it be at 6 million? At 16? Or at 60?—There are members of the National Association [*Nationalverein*], an association that has achieved a reputation owing to the justness of its demands—highly esteemed members who have stated that all standing armies are superfluous. Well, what if a public assembly had this view! Would not a government have to reject this?! —There was talk about the “sobriety” of the Prussian people. Yes, the great independence of the individual makes it difficult in Prussia to govern with the constitution (or to consolidate the constitution?); in France things are different, there this individual independence is lacking. A constitutional crisis would not be disgraceful, but honorable instead.—Furthermore, we are perhaps too “well-educated” to support a constitution; we are too critical; the ability to assess government measures and records of the public assembly is too common; in the country there are a lot of catiline [conspiratorial] characters who have a great interest in upheavals. This may sound paradoxical, but everything proves how hard constitutional life is in Prussia.—Furthermore, one is too sensitive about the government’s mistakes; as if it were enough to say, “this and that [cabinet] minister made mistakes,” as if one weren’t adversely affected oneself. Public opinion changes, the press is not [the same as] public opinion; one knows how the press is written; members of parliament have a higher duty, to lead opinion, to stand above it. We are too hot-blooded; we have a preference for putting on armor that is too big for our small body; and now we’re actually supposed to utilize it. Germany is not looking to Prussia’s liberalism, but to its power; Bavaria, Württemberg, Baden may indulge liberalism, and yet no one will assign them Prussia’s role; Prussia has to coalesce and concentrate its power for the opportune moment, which has already been missed several times; Prussia’s borders according to the Vienna Treaties [of 1814–15] are not favorable for a healthy, vital state; it is not by speeches and majority resolutions that the great questions of the time are decided—that was the big mistake of 1848 and 1849—but by iron and blood. Last year’s appropriation has been carried out; for whatever reasons, it is a matter of indifference; he^[2] is sincerely seeking the path of agreement: whether he finds it does not depend on him alone. It would have been better if one had not made a *fait accompli* on the part of the House of Deputies.—If no budget comes about, then there is a *tabula rasa*; the constitution offers no way out, for then it is one interpretation against another interpretation; *summum ius, summa iniuria*^[3]; the letter killeth. He is pleased that the speaker’s remark about the possibility of another resolution of the House on account of a possible bill allows for the prospect of agreement; he, too, is looking for this bridge; when it might be found is uncertain.—Bringing about a budget this year is hardly possible given

the time; we are in exceptional circumstances; the principle of promptly presenting the budget is also recognized by the government; but it is said that this was already promised and not kept; [and] now [it's] "You can certainly trust us as honest people." He does not agree with the interpellation that it is unconstitutional to make expenditures [whose authorization had been] refused; for every interpretation, it is necessary to agree on the three factors.

NOTES

[1] Note: this summary of Bismarck's speech employs "indirect" speech, which is used in German by journalists or stenographers to record "reported"—as opposed to precisely quoted—speech. The document therefore does not always reproduce Bismarck's speech word for word, although on occasion it comes close to a verbatim transcript. In the opening sentence, and in a few other places toward the end of his remarks where Bismarck strikes a conciliatory pose, the Prussian prime minister is referred to in the third person as the "he" who is delivering this reported speech—trans.

[2] Note: the reference here is to Bismarck himself—trans.

[3] Cicero's "the highest law [can be] the greatest injustice"—trans.

Source: Otto von Bismarck, *Reden 1847–1869*, edited by Wilhelm Schüßler, vol. 10, *Bismarck: Die gesammelten Werke*, edited by Hermann von Petersdorff. Berlin: Otto Stolberg, 1924–35, pp. 139–40.

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