

OLLI Lecture

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“The Age of Bismarck”

The Kingdom of Prussia, whose fortunes Bismarck inherited as Prime Minister in 1862, was an interesting place. Smack in the heart of northern Europe, it had no natural boundaries, no especially abundant resources, nor even any great ports that allowed it access to the greater world. In fact, Napoleon I, after destroying Prussia’s army in a single day at Jena (1806) considered eliminating it altogether from the map of Europe.

Still, there were some remarkable attributes to the place. It was highly literate since universal male education had been in place since the 18th century, as well as universal male military service thereafter. It was the second largest state in the German Confederation and the leading force in the *Zollverein*, a customs union that since 1818 had stimulated trade between most of the Confederation states (but did not include Austria). The results of that common market had been quite impressive as Prussia led most of the German states in industrial output, such as coal production, iron production (which quadrupled between 1850 and 1875), and railroad construction. 8,000 miles of track were laid down in Prussia between 1850 and 1870. Thus, the subjects of the Prussian king were among the best educated and industrious populations in Europe. And they were very well-armed. The industrial firm, Alfred Krupp, had by the 1860’s equipped Prussia’s army with breach-loading cannon and a particularly lethal breach-loaded rifle called the “needle gun.” In 1866, Werner Siemens in Berlin invented the dynamo, a creation that was pivotal to the second Industrial Revolution of the late 19th century that was driven by breakthroughs in electronics and chemicals.

Nevertheless, the Prussians weren’t Austrians. They didn’t speak “high Deutsch;” they had no prestigious connection to Rome; Vienna far outshined the Prussian capital, Berlin, in its glory; and their dynasty, the Hohenzollerns, stood nowhere near the historic luster of the Hapsburgs, whose diplomats were the central

figures in the annual deliberations of the German Confederation. Underscoring Prussia's subordination to the Hapsburgs was the Olmütz conference of 1850 when the Austrians obliged the Hohenzollerns to forego any ambitions to the crown of a united Germany, excluding Austria.

Then came the Danish attempt in 1864 to capture the provinces of Schleswig and Holstein that I mentioned last time. Denmark was defeated by the combined forces of Austria and Prussia, acting in the name of the German Confederation, in a matter of weeks. Under the terms of the peace settlement Prussia was given jurisdiction over Schleswig and Austria over Holstein. The Germans were elated; Prussia even more so. Hapsburg troops were now planted between two Prussian armies.

Last week I also noted that Otto von Bismarck spent the next two years attempting to convince the Hapsburgs that they should agree to a division of the German states between north (mostly Protestant) and south (mostly Catholic); the former being dominated by Prussia. The Austrians refused such notions. Failing in this effort, Bismarck then took steps to insure that the Hapsburgs had no allies in a possible German civil war. Thus,

- In 1863, when Polish nationalists rebelled against Russian control, Prussia assisted the Russians in the suppression of the Polish rebels.
- In quiet negotiations with the new Kingdom of Italy, Victor Emmanuel II was assured that the Italians would at last gain Venetia should they enter an Austro-Prussian conflict on Prussia's side. A secret treaty to that effect was signed in June, 1866.
- The English, now concentrating on their empire, were reassured that a consolidation German states would not be detrimental to their interests.

Then there were the French and Napoleon III. As quiet negotiations proceeded, the Emperor was led in an informal meeting with Bismarck at Biarritz in 1865 to understand that, should there be a German civil war and France remained neutral, there might be compensation for that gesture of good will by the addition of parts of the Rhineland to French territory. 'Nothing in writing, of course.

All that remained now was to find an incident that would provoke the Austrians into war. That occurred in June 1866 when Austria attempted to reorganize its administration of Holstein. Bismarck claimed the effort violated the agreement under which the two provinces were to be governed. He cut off Austrian supplies to Holstein and sent in Prussian troops to restore order. The Austrian response was immediate. Its diplomats convinced the German Confederation to declare war on Prussia and mobilized its army on the Prussian border. Events then moved quickly and to the Hapsburgs' dismay.

- Prussian forces successfully invaded Hanover, Saxony, and Hesse-Cassel; i. e., North Germany.
- The Italian army attacked and conquered Venetia.
- On July 2, 1866 a huge battle involving 400,000 men was fought at the Czech border town of Koniggrätz (or Sadowa). 24,000 Austrians perished and another 13,000 were captured. One historian calls it “one of the most decisive battles in modern history.” In many ways this German civil war resembles its American counterpart: brave and glamorous Austrian hussars on horseback against Prussian infantry armed with their needle guns. It was over in a day's time and the Austrian Empire would never recover.

Much credit for this astounding turn of events belongs not to Bismarck but to his military counterparts, especially Helmuth von Moltke (1800-1891) who had created a Prussian general staff and coordinated its planning with industrial development. Thus, when Austrian armies began to concentrate near Koniggratz by horseback, the Prussians were there in force by rail. In a single day, Hapsburg control of central Europe came to an end. In the peace treaty that followed:

- Prussia gained Schleswig-Holstein and most of the north German states. With these new territories it now created the North German Confederation with a parliament representing the several states presided over by King Wilhelm I of Prussia (and, of course, Otto von Bismarck as Chancellor).
- The former German Confederation was abolished, leaving the south German states on their own, and Austria excluded altogether from German affairs.

- Italy was allowed to keep Venetia, leaving only the French troops in Rome as foreign “occupiers” of Italian soil.

The Austrian catastrophe did not end there. It had only been Russian help in 1848 that kept the Hungarians with the Hapsburg empire. Hungarian nationalist sentiment had simmered ever since, led by Louis Kossuth. Rather than risk further dismemberment of Hapsburg holdings, in 1867 the state was reorganized into the Austro-Hungarian Empire with the Hungarians (Magyars) granted their own parliament and essential autonomy. Only in military and foreign affairs would the Austro-Hungarian Empire be a cohesive political unit. This “*ausgleich*” was satisfactory to Kossuth, but there were lots of other nationalities in the Dual Monarchy (Czechs, Slovenes, Serbs, Slovaks, Moravians) who weren’t accorded such privileges. That issue would prove to be extremely important.

The constitution of the North German Confederation allowed for an upper house to represent its several states (Prussia being the largest) and a lower house whose members were elected by universal male suffrage; even more democratic than Great Britain at the time, at least in appearance. In actuality, there still was no ministerial responsibility, so that Chancellor could go on doing pretty much as he pleased. Bismarck was, in fact, pleased to enjoy the *status quo*. There was no victory parade through downtown Vienna; no public humiliation of Franz Josef. Instead, he made gestures of friendship toward the Hapsburgs, expressions of good will toward the English, and even conciliatory statements toward the French (whose written statements of designs on the Rhineland he had carefully preserved).

Bismarck once said that it was best that the public not be allowed to see how either sausage or foreign policy was made. It is easy to get the impression about this man that he knew exactly what he intended to do and when. That would be a misunderstanding of him. Bismarck was a *Junker* entrepreneur (if that’s not a contradiction in terms). He took advantage of opportunities when they presented themselves. He did not scheme to create a German Empire, but he created one when circumstances allowed him to do it.

Who could have guessed, for example, that in September 1868, Spain's elite (mostly the military) would have become so disenchanted with their monarch, Queen Isabel II (1830-1904), that they would rise up and drive her into exile. Of course, there was the fact that her consort, Francisco de Borbon, was a notorious homosexual and nevertheless she had 12 children. Or that she was having a very public affair with the US ambassador in Madrid, Union general Daniel Sickles, at a time when Spain was fighting against a colonial insurrection in Cuba, backed by US financial interests.

Thus began a long period of internal turmoil in Spain as the Spanish government looked across the lists of European royalty to find someone willing to occupy the vacant throne. At one point, they spotted Prince Leopold of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen (1835-1905), a Catholic royal who might have been available for service. Here was the possibility that Imperial France would be confronted on two sides by Hohenzollerns. Wilhelm I of Prussia understood what might be construed as a grave threat to France and counseled caution. Bismarck understood it too and urged the Prince's father to press ahead. There was much diplomatic scurrying back and forth in the spring of 1870, but eventually the Prince's father came down against his son's candidacy and Bismarck considered resigning because he was clearly a cross-purposes with his monarch.

The crisis should have ended there, but it didn't. The French ambassador, Count Vincent Benedetti (1817-1900) sought out Wilhelm I who was on holiday at Ems. He insisted that the Prussian king foreswear forever a Hohenzollern candidacy for the Spanish throne. Wilhelm politely refused and later telegraphed Bismarck about the encounter. Bismarck received this famous "Ems Dispatch" while he was dining in Berlin with Moltke. He altered the wording so that the exchange between the King and the French ambassador seemed much more confrontational. Moltke looked at the revised document and stated, "Yes, that will do." Bismarck then released it to the press.

When the French newspapers printed the exchange the next morning (July 14, 1870) crowds gathered in the street and demanded war with Prussia. Napoleon's

cabinet agreed and on July 19, 1870 France declared war on Prussia. What happened next surprised everyone except the Prussian general staff.

Since France had declared war it was not only the North German Confederation that came into combat but the south German states, such as Catholic Bavaria, as well. The French were really better armed (with their *mitrailleuse* and their breach-loading *chassepot* rifles) but the Prussian artillery was superior and so was their generalship. The decisive moment came on September 1870 when an entire French army surrendered at the fortress of Metz. A few days later Napoleon III was captured in person at Sedan. Here's an account (Warowo, pp. 225-26) of what happened then:

As Wimpffen rode back to Sedan among 2,000 broken stragglers...Louis Napoleon dispatched an adjutant under a white flag with a letter for the Prussian king. Flanked by Moltke and Bismarck, who only now knew that the Emperor of the French was with his troops, Wilhelm I directed his son, Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm, to read the letter aloud: "Having failed to die amongst my troops, there is nothing left for me to do but place my sword in the hands of Your Majesty." For the moment there was a "church-like silence" on the height, and then everyone crowded around the Prussian king, shouting congratulations. In his usual businesslike way, Moltke ignored the hubbub, advised the king to grant the cease fire, then sidled away with Blumenthal to compose the next day's orders. Bismarck dictated the reply to the French emperor: 'Regretting the circumstances you find yourself in, I accept the sword of Your Majesty and appoint General Moltke...to negotiate the capitulation of the army that has fought so bravely under your orders.' Offered a flask of brandy by his nephew, Bismarck toasted all present in English—"here's to the unification of Germany"—and drained the entire bottle."

Napoleon III might have surrendered, as well as most of the French army, but not the French. What remained of the French government moved to Bordeaux and raised yet another army of volunteers. The Prussians moved on Paris and the leading republican of the day, Leon Gambetta, escaped the city in a balloon to rally French forces against the foreign invaders. Paris was invested and

Gambetta's volunteers were unable to break the German hold on the city. The town government, when it considered surrender, was overthrown by a socialist regime, and Paris fought on; alone; its citizens reduced to eating rats. Finally, the Germans had the pleasure of allowing Gambetta's forces through their lines to put down the Paris Commune and at last bring the conflict to an end.

- On January 18, 1871, following the surrender of Paris, King Wilhelm I of Prussia was crowned Kaiser Wilhelm I of Germany in a ceremony conducted at the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles with most of the crowned heads of the German states present.
- On May 10, 1871, the Franco-Prussian War was brought to a formal conclusion with the Treaty of Frankfurt by which France was obliged to surrender to the new German Reich the resource-rich provinces of Alsace and Lorraine; pay an indemnity of 5 billion francs; and endure German occupation of French territory (including Paris) until the indemnity had been discharged.
- French forces had already been withdrawn from Rome to save the homeland. The Italian army now marched into the city, confining the Pope to Vatican City where he remains to this day. Pope Pius IX (1792-1878) was not pleased and condemned anyone who supported the Italian secular state. In his encyclical *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) he condemned liberalism, nationalism, and socialism and in 1870 convinced a Vatican Council to resolve that papal proclamations, adopted *ex cathedra* were infallible. The breach between the Italian government and the Papacy would not be healed until Mussolini signed a Concordat with the reigning Pope in 1923.

What had Bismarck created? A nation-state in the heart of Europe with a population of more than 60 million and an industrial base that soon would rival that of Great Britain. It was on paper a constitutional monarchy with two houses, one representing the German states and another (the *Reichstag*) representing the adult male population. As before, however, there was no ministerial responsibility, so Chancellor Bismarck ruled as before. Having enjoyed such

triumphs, his critics were few in Germany and he was determined to maintain the status quo he had done so much to achieve.

His first steps as Chancellor of the Reich were faltering. Bismarck decided to launch a *Kulturkampf* against German Catholics, suspecting that the south Germans, now part of the Empire, were not as loyal to the house of Hohenzollern as their northern counterparts. He:

- Outlawed the Jesuits.
- The education of priests was to be monitored by the state.
- Appointments to bishoprics were to be state-approved.
- All public grants to the Catholic church were suspended.

Those actions played well in northern Germany, but the Catholics rallied and created the Center Party and the new Pope, Leo XIII, sought conciliation. Bismarck, facing a rising tide of working class resentment, yielded and in time came to rely on the Center Party as part of his ruling coalition in the Reichstag.

He needed those Catholic voters because as Germany industrialized the number of industrial workers soon came to outnumber the rural population and they agitated for state action to rescue them from the misery of life in factory towns. Karl Marx had foreseen this development and had declared in his 1848 *Communist Manifesto*:

The essential condition for the existence, and for the sway of the bourgeois class is the formulation and augmentation of capital; the condition for capital is wage labor. Wage labor rests exclusively on competition between the laborers. The advance of industry, that the bourgeoisie involuntarily promotes, replaces the isolation of laborers, due to competition, by their revolutionary combination, due to association. The development of modern industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own gravediggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.

Marx went into exile in London for such incitements. Another University of Berlin intellectual, Ferdinand Lassalle (1825-1864) went to jail for endorsing them. Prior to the revolutions of 1848, Lassalle had busied himself with such publications as The Philosophy of Heraclitus the Obscure but the uprisings of that year drew him into politics and even collaboration with Karl Marx. Once he was released from a Prussian prison, he became a much sought-after speaker before labor groups throughout the kingdom and his speech to the Berlin Artisans' Association in April 1862 has been called "the birthday of German Social Democracy." In this address he departed from Marx and declared that the function of the state is "to help the development of the human race towards freedom." As one historian (Laidler, 227) observed, "such a state can be attained, he asserted, only through rule by majority, based on universal and equal suffrage." We might have heard much more of Lassalle had it not been for his early demise in a duel over a woman fought with a Bavarian diplomat, Prince von Racovitz.

But German voters heeded Lassalle call for organization and in time created the Social Democratic Party, which Bismarck tried unsuccessfully to outlaw. Failing that, in 1881, he announced to the Reichstag that the Reich:

...would cultivate the view among the propertyless classes of the population, those who are the most numerous and the least educated, that the state is not only an institution of necessity but also one of welfare. By recognizable and direct advantages they must be led to look upon the state not only as an agency devised solely for the protection of the better-situated classes of society but also as one serving their needs and interests.

Further in 1884 he stated to the Reichstag:

Is it not rooted in our entire moral relationships that the individual who comes before his fellow citizens and says, 'I am physically fit, ready to work but can find no job,' is entitled to say 'Give me a job!' and the state is obligated to provide a job for him?"

From these words came the following legislation approved by the Reichstag:

- 1881 – industrial accident insurance for individual workers.

- 1883 – Sickness insurance Act which in its funding anticipates our Social Security Act (1933).
- 1889 – Old age and incapacity insurance

All of this legislation would be extended in the years ahead, but it can be maintained that the Prussian *Junker*, Otto von Bismarck, was one of the leading founders of the modern welfare state.

While an innovator at home, Bismarck's foreign policy was quite conservative. His chief objective, of course, was to maintain the diplomatic isolation of France, brooding under its shocking defeat in 1870-71. In this endeavor, he was remarkably successful.

- He helped create the "*Dreikaizerbund*," (1873) an informal agreement among the Hapsburgs, the Romanovs, and the Hohenzollern monarchs whose aims were to contain the revolutionary forces abroad at the moment. Prompting this arrangement was a letter Bismarck wrote to the Czar stating: *In view of the elements, not only republican but distinctly socialist, that have seized power in France, the firm closing of the ranks of the monarchist and conservative elements of Europe is all the more desirable.*
- In order to entice the Czar Alexander into this understanding, Bismarck let it be known that Germany would not oppose the Russian abrogation of the 1856 treaty which forbade its introduction of naval forces into the Black Sea. The Czar happily agreed.
- Regarding Great Britain, Bismarck sought to keep the newly-born German state out of imperial affairs. Let Britain rule its empire, but keep out of European affairs. It was a posture agreeable for some time to both sides. In fact, Bismarck presided over the Congress of Berlin (1885) that divided up much of Africa between the powers, accepting only modest space for Germany (modern Tanzania and the Cameroons). He supported French imperialism since it was bound to cause conflict between the Republic and Great Britain.

So isolated were the French diplomatically that in 1886 they donated the Statue of Liberty to the United States as an expression of their historic solidarity. Designed by Frederic Bartholdi it was entitled, "Liberty enlightening the World," suggesting solidarity among the world's two most prominent republics.