



## German History in Documents and Images

Volume 4. Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany, 1866-1890

Werner von Siemens on the Use of New Telephone Models (Letter of October 10, 1877)

This letter from Werner von Siemens (1816-1892) to his brother Karl in London shows the level of innovation and competition that resulted from efforts to enhance communication by means of public infrastructure projects like the telephone. Laying the foundation for a worldwide corporation, Siemens appears to be keenly aware of the need to obtain lucrative public contracts and to stay at the forefront of technical progress. He also seems to understand how civil servants and the public each contribute to the “hype” surrounding such innovations.

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You have probably returned by now and received my letter. Here, we are now in the midst of great telephone hype! At the same time that [Postmaster General Heinrich von] Stephan received our models, he got a couple of American ones from the Englishman (a German-English fellow who was sent here), which work better than the one you produced and better than ours, too. It's a matter of small construction details! Recently, during a dinner at Stephan's home, some trials were conducted with them: with ours in the dining hall and with the American ones between the house and the main postal station. The latter functioned very well with two underground cables. Subsequently, voices and songs, etc., were transmitted quite nicely and clearly, first to Potsdam, then even as far as Brandenburg. Magdeburg was beyond reach though. It is now a fact that distinct voice transmission via a *dual underground line* is possible across ten German miles! That is surprising indeed. Stephan is really wild with excitement, and his officials, too. We are working hard right away, as the entire world wants to get a hold of them. I have already commissioned improvements, which I expect will make quite a difference. Now begins the era of underground lines, and it would be very helpful if you devoted all of your attention to the construction of cheap (thin) cables. The day after tomorrow we are traveling to Kiel with Stephan and his entourage (among them an English engineer from the post office and a *Millitzer* from Vienna) to conduct speaking experiments between Kiel, Berlin, and Frankfurt. After that we are giving a dinner at Bellevue for about 40 guests, with the Provincial Governor and all top civil servants in attendance! The “Indian ink writer” and the new dual stylus (black surfaces exposed) work brilliantly. The latter produces 1,400 words per hour, safely and nicely. Success is at hand.

Stephan plans possibly to provide all Berlin residents with phone lines to each other!

Source: Werner von Siemens, letter to his brother Karl von Siemens in London (October 30, 1877), in Wolfgang Piereth, ed., *Das 19. Jahrhundert. Ein Lesebuch zur deutschen Geschichte 1815-1918* [*The 19th Century: A German History Reader 1815-1918*], 2nd ed. Munich: C.H. Beck, 1997, pp. 70-71.

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