



Volume 4. Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany, 1866-1890
Original and Edited Versions of the Ems Dispatch (July 13, 1870)

In June 1870, the throne of Spain was offered to Prince Leopold of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen (1835-1905), a relative of King Wilhelm I of Prussia. Leopold accepted the candidacy, which was ultimately withdrawn on July 2 after the French government protested. In mid-July, Wilhelm I was taking the waters at Bad Ems. There, he met with the French ambassador Count Vincent Benedetti (1817-1900), who, in an interview, requested Wilhelm's guarantee that the candidacy of a Hohenzollern to the Spanish throne would never be renewed. Wilhelm rejected the request politely, and a telegram reporting this was sent to Bismarck in Berlin by Heinrich Abeken (1809-1872), a member of the North German Confederation's legation in Paris. Bismarck, intent on provoking war with France, consulted with War Minister Albrecht von Roon (1803-1879) and Prussian Chief of Staff Helmuth von Moltke (1800-1891). Before releasing the report of the king's conversation with Benedetti to the newspapers, Bismarck edited it in a manner certain to provoke the French. France declared war on July 19 and the Franco-Prussian War began. Bismarck succeeded in his plan to make Prussia appear the victim of French aggression; this, in turn, contributed substantially to the decision of all the German states to join the conflict and then later, in January 1871, to join the new German Empire. Below we see the texts that caused all the fuss. Facsimiles of both are included among the images in this volume.

[Telegram from Privy Councilor Abeken to the German Chancellor Count Bismarck]*

Ems, July 13, 1870.

His Majesty the King writes to me:

“M. Benedetti intercepted me on the Promenade in order to demand of me most insistently that I should authorize him to telegraph immediately to Paris that I shall obligate myself for all future time never again to give my approval to the candidacy of the Hohenzollerns should it be renewed. I refused to agree to this, the last time somewhat severely, informing him that one dare not and cannot assume such obligations *à tout jamais*. Naturally, I informed him that I had received no news as yet, and since he had been informed earlier than I by way of Paris and Madrid, he could easily understand why my government was once again out of the matter.”

* Propyläen Weltgeschichte (Berlin, 1930), VIII, 248. Heinrich Abeken was German Councilor of Legation at Paris.

Since then His Majesty has received a dispatch from the Prince^[*] [Charles Anthony]. As His Majesty has informed Count Benedetti that he was expecting news from the Prince, His Majesty himself, in view of the above-mentioned demand and in consonance with the advice of Count Eulenburg^[**] and myself, decided not to receive the French envoy again but to inform him through an adjutant that His Majesty had now received from the Prince confirmation of the news which Benedetti had already received from Paris, and that he had nothing further to say to the Ambassador. His Majesty leaves it to the judgment of Your Excellency whether or not to communicate at once the new demand by Benedetti and its rejection to our ambassadors and to the press.

[Abeken]

[Official Press Release, edited by German Chancellor Count Bismarck]

After the reports of the renunciation by the hereditary Prince of Hohenzollern had been officially transmitted by the Royal Government of Spain to the Imperial Government of France, the French Ambassador presented to His Majesty the King at Ems the demand to authorize him to telegraph to Paris that His Majesty the King would obligate himself for all future time never again to give his approval to the candidacy of the Hohenzollerns should it be renewed. His Majesty the King thereupon refused to receive the French envoy again and informed him through an adjutant that His Majesty had nothing further to say to the Ambassador.

Source of English translation: Louis L. Snyder, ed., *Documents of German History*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1958, pp. 215-16.

Original German text printed in Otto von Bismarck, *Die gesammelten Werke* [*The Collected Works*], ed. Gerhard Ritter and Rudolf Stadelmann, Friedrichsruh ed., 15 vols., vol. 6b, no. 1612, pp. 369, 371. Original German text reprinted in Ernst Rudolf Huber, ed., *Dokumente zur Deutschen Verfassungsgeschichte* [*Documents on German Constitutional History*], vol. 2, 1851-1900, 3rd rev. ed. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1986, pp. 324-25.

[*] [Namely, the Prince Charles Anthony von Hohenzollern-Singmaringen]

[**] [Count Friedrich zu Eulenburg (1815-81) was the Prussian Interior Minister from 1862-78.]