



Volume 4: Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany, 1866-1890
Albrecht von Stosch to Count Alfred von Waldersee on Bismarck's Successor
(January 30, 1890)

Bismarck's forced resignation as German chancellor on March 20, 1890, was preceded by furious machinations on the part of many *éminences grises*. In this letter of January 1890, Albrecht von Stosch (1818-1896), who served as Chief of the Admiralty from 1872 to 1883 until he was ousted by Bismarck, writes to another of Bismarck's leading rivals, Count Alfred von Waldersee (1832-1904), Chief of the General Staff since 1888. Stosch's opening remark – that the time has come to consider Bismarck's successor – is especially piquant. Stosch stood close to left-liberals who had hoped for a new era of reform under Kaiser Friedrich III before his premature death in 1888, and he had once allegedly topped the liberals' list to succeed Bismarck. Waldersee had nurtured close relations with Friedrich's son, now Kaiser Wilhelm II; he was in close contact with anti-Bismarckian *frondeurs* among the Conservatives; and he too was considered prime chancellor material – at least by those on the far Right. Stosch outlines what he believes is required of Bismarck's successor. Despite the uncertain support a new chancellor will receive from the young Wilhelm, Stosch recommends both continuity and a new beginning.

Bismarck's succession must be reflected upon. Since [Franz von] Roggenbach has now told me about having discussed the matter with you once before – I cannot share any of his views, though – and since I quite agree, on the other hand, with the opinion of [Johannes] Miquel, who among us all is the one most familiar with the issues, allow me to be so bold as to convey to you my thinking on the subject, without expecting an answer or response.

1. The Chancellor's successor simply must move into the entirely undiminished position of power that Bismarck holds now, and a reduction in this power over the course of time cannot be contemplated.
2. The successor must be a soldier.
3. He must possess the Kaiser's trust so absolutely that everyone knows it.
4. In order to maintain the balance of Bismarck's political capital, upon succession, a declaration is required in the [Prussian] *Landtag* and the Reichstag stating the intention to stay the course that has been embarked upon.

In elaboration and substantiation of these four points allow me to make the following remarks:

Re. 1. The unity of the German princes must form the cornerstone of a unified Germany, and the German princes would much rather endure a powerful chancellor than a powerful Kaiser. Only if the German monarchs are united does the Reich government have power, particularly vis-à-vis the Reichstag and its more or less liberal tendencies. The Reichstag grants, by way of public opinion (it is the best and most heard voice in the country), the surest means for overcoming particularistic inclinations; however, if the Reich government wishes to remain independent of the Reichstag, it cannot just rely on parliament for the maintenance of its own [i.e., the Reich government's] position. All of the German princes – I think there are no exceptions – have yet to get over their loss of sovereignty. According to the wording of the constitution, they are only allies of the King of Prussia; at the same time, they are subordinate to the Reich, and this subordination is endured in the Federal Council under the chancellor, not in the relationship of the monarchs to the King of Prussia, the Kaiser. If the power of the chancellor in the Federal Council, i.e., in matters of Reich governance, is not a strong one, then the authority of the Reich begins to fray there as well, and the process of dissolution begins. The Kaiser binds the monarchs externally, but they are actually bound by their ministers and their states' interests, and it is the chancellor's responsibility to render them entirely dependent on the Reich. The way in which the chancellor knew, in the past, how to support certain people and to consider the small wishes of the states, to reward and to penalize, can only be alluded to here. The introduction of protective tariffs offered ample opportunity in this respect. Just as the Kaiser heaps favors and kindness on Bismarck today and thereby forces him into a subordinate position, he must adopt the same position vis-à-vis the German princes. By offering equality, he must force them to make their own subordination as evident as possible. Applying brute force is solely up to the chancellor: in individual acts, in challenging public opinion in the press, and especially in the Reichstag.

The Kaiser's position of power can only be termed discretionary, and it may be deemed capable of positive acts only in the military sphere. As unfavorably as particularistic circles may have viewed the deployment of troops in Darmstadt, not a single voice was raised in opposition. Therefore, such military initiatives on the part of the Kaiser must always be characterized as welcome. The Kaiser's pronouncement about "my *Reichslande* [Alsace-Lorraine] also caused aggravation among some of the monarchs, but people shied away from complaining. The Kaiser's foundation is a strong Prussia and the complete harmony of Prussia's efforts with those of the Reich. Nothing is more dangerous for the unity of the latter than any particularism on the part of Prussia. In those days, Bismarck tried to lighten his load by allowing [Albrecht von] Roon to become Prussian minister president. Bismarck soon realized his mistake and reversed it in short order. The uncertainty as to whether the Prussian vote [in the Federal Council] was unconditionally available to the chancellor made him weak. The Reich chancellor must be Prussian minister president if he is to be the unifying force in the Reich. And the discretionary nature of the Kaiser's authority, especially, makes it imperative that the constitutionally determined strong position of the chancellor remains intact if the particularistic and revolutionary elements – with which the Center Party is attempting to ally – are to be prevented from reaching their objective: the destruction of the Reich. For that reason, too, the notion of Reich ministers is

to be rejected. The enemies of German unity are much too strong to allow several heads at the top of the government. The only thing possible would be a Reich ministry of war, because in that regard the unity of the Reich is ensured by the constitution; however, if one established a Reich army supreme command, unity would be fulfilled without the individual war ministers being able to cause any damage. The independence of the foreign office is absolutely inadmissible, because this is the very place where, even during peacetime, the power and unity of the Reich are constantly exerted, not just in foreign policy but also with respect to the federal states of the Reich.

Today's position of power is a necessity for the Reich.

Re. 2. The military caste has always ruled the world. Therefore, it is astounding that we have a civilian governor in Alsace; but that is not at issue here. The German Reich presents a military face to the outside world, and it is not accident that Bismarck has always presented himself to the world as a soldier. The soldier as such is also closest to the Kaiser. Moreover, the soldier stands above the parties, not only in the Reichstag but also in the Federal Council, in the ministry. Particularly in light of the great power concentrated in the office of chancellor, the latter ought not to come from those parliamentary and bureaucratic elements striving for power, but only from among the Kaiser's people.

Re. 3. Only if the chancellor is the Kaiser's man is his great power tolerable and possible. If this keystone of German unity, the chancellor, is secure and unshakable in his position, only then is the edifice of the Reich strong enough to withstand all the assaults that target it. If it were possible to scheme with the Kaiser against the chancellor, if one could assume that in the case of draft legislation the Kaiser and the chancellor were not in complete agreement, then the latter is powerless and would have to be removed promptly.

Re. 4. The unshakable relationship between the Kaiser and a new chancellor would also supply the necessary stamp of approval on those measures deemed essential to provide Bismarck's successor with broad support among public opinion. Without that, his authority would prove rather shadowy.

Despite all of the continuing appreciation for Bismarck's services in the past and for the future, in recent years the chancellor has lost public support; his subordinates have also become less willing to toe the line, because he has become an obstacle to the domestic development of Prussia and the Reich. Age has made him egotistical and work-shy. Where his own interests come into play, for instance with regard to changing the income tax, he holds things up. Where a subordinate's assistance is required to draft a piece of legislation, he displays a hostile attitude because he fears that the person he recruits might cast a shadow on him. For example, the creation of a civil code unifying Germany's legal system is not getting anywhere. – If Bismarck's successor immediately applies the wand of power to these neglected issues and yearnings, he can be certain that his appointment will receive enthusiastic approval from well-meaning circles in Germany.

Source: *Aus dem Briefwechsel des Generalfeldmarschalls Alfred Grafen von Waldersee* [*From the Correspondence of General Field Marshall Alfred Count of Waldersee*], ed. Heinrich Otto Meisner. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1928, vol. 1, pp. 336-38.

Original German text reprinted in Hans Feske, ed., *Im Bismarckschen Reich 1871-1890* [*In the Bismarckian Reich 1871-1890*]. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978, pp. 451-54.

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