

The Reaction of the Austrian Liberal Press to Bismarck's Policies (1886)

Abstract

Neighboring countries, especially Austria and Russia, which had their own Polish territories, followed the Prussian proceedings closely. Here, a liberal Austrian newspaper notes that the deportations created a deep rift in the German political landscape—and that the situation seemed to have rejuvenated Bismarck.

Source

The Polish Drama of January 28, 29, and 30, 1886
(Original Correspondence of the *Neue Freie Presse*)
Berlin, January 31st.

Yet again, a mighty eruption by the most powerful figure our century has seen since Napoleon has rattled public sentiment. In the old, smoke-blackened and dimly lit wooden structure on Dönhoff Square, which a quarter century ago was the scene of the bitter battles of the Conflict Period [*Conflictszeit*], there raged in these days a battle of rhetoric such as that of Prime Minister v. Bismarck-Schönhausen against the Progress Party, but now, risen to the position of Reich Chancellor and Prince, the foe of yesteryear stands in opposition to the much-dwindled band of elderly—but like him, undaunted—foes. Must anyone who compares the two eras not conclude that the selfsame conflict persists between these opponents today, and that what we now see of the former combatants in the Landtag is the paltry remnant left behind after persistent defeats in the battle over the same cause? And yet we know that a goodly portion of them made peace with the happy victor nineteen years ago; that from 1871 to 1879 all without exception walked hand-in-hand with the bitter foes of today, the right wing who sit opposite them, who were the lighthearted allies of yesteryear; that Deputy Rickert, who, if we are to believe Herr v. Puttkamer, has sunk so low, is just one of the allied National Liberals of the 1870s who has changed not the slightest from a liberal or national perspective. And in spite of all this, the most recent struggle is essentially the same one as 25 years ago; it is the same battle for power and liberty as in the thunderous days of the Conflict. However, it is less tragic on the one hand, but sadder from the standpoint of the liberals than in those days.

The opponents are only partly the same as before. What is different now, although one cannot say that it will continue for long, is the attitude of the wealthy and comfortable classes of the bourgeoisie, the expression of which is the majority that accepted the Achenbach motion yesterday. Their representatives occupy the entire right side and part of the left side of the House, namely as far as the National Liberals extend. Back then, the crowd thronging the House of Deputies cheered the leaders of the Left—Waldeck, Virchow, Twesten and Gneist—but gave the prime minister a chilly reception. Today, too, the crowd throngs the House, but solemnly greets the same prime minister, while the deputies hasten quietly into the building. Up to this time, it was never the custom for entire segments of the assembly to rise upon the entrance of the chancellor or some minister to the ministers' bench; it is not common in the Reichstag either, since the prevailing attitude, in keeping with the constitution, was that the ministers, among whom Prince Bismarck is the first among equals, merely do their duty by appearing. After all, the Federal Council [*Bundesrath*] and the Reichstag are equal legislative factors in the Empire, and a similar relationship between the Landtag and the government exists in Prussia, except that here the king is assigned a far higher and more powerful position than in the empire. When, however, the chancellor appeared on

January 28 wearing his dark general's uniform in the chamber, where he had not set foot since February 1881, the right-wing members of the newly elected parliament and with them a segment of the National Liberals arose noisily with deep bows and reverent looks. This entrance, which seemed to astonish the prince himself, who is somewhat shy of mass homages, is consonant with the overall picture of the three-day drama.

Since the chancellor already had the lion's share of the action, the chronicler wishing to record the characteristics described here is in a bit of a quandary about whom he should turn to first, whether to this obsequious majority of Conservatives and liberalism-denying National Liberals, who met not just every strike, but every vehement tone, every contemptuous or challenging gesture of the chancellor's with hoots of jubilation, and responded to even the most solemn, earnest words of the leftist and Center Party speakers only with mocking outcries and wild shouting, or to the nearly always impressive, often terrible but always gripping figure of the chancellor. But honor to whom honor is due. Let us leave this majority, which is reminiscent of the *Chambre introuvable* of the Restoration, and whose relationship to the chamber of the 1860s is much like that of the *Corps legislatif* of the First Empire, fading away in veneration and obedience, to the National Assembly, their cheap triumph, and let us adhere for the time being to our hero.

Prince Bismarck spoke somewhat differently than he did in years past. With the exception of his mustache, which had only become historic after the Conflict, his tall figure, rendered slimmer and more flexible by the Schweninger method, may recall the Bismarck of the 1860s. Although his sentences otherwise now hesitate and now gush forth quickly, his rapid and uninterrupted rhetorical torrent lasted more than one- and one-half hours on the first day and more than one hour on the second; in fact, on the first day his famous throat clearing was not even audible. Particularly in the great speech on Thursday, however, his voice sounded wearier than usual, except in the sentences that were deliberately spoken in an elevated tone or in the heat of the moment. Bismarck's most recent speeches also differed in form from many of his previous ones. As a rule, the chancellor's addresses are responses, whose structure closely follows the diligent notes that he throws onto paper during the deputies' speeches in the familiar gigantic, upright script using his incredibly long Bismarck pencil, and it is also well known that he is far less skilled at giving speeches prepared for him. In the most recent debates, however, he spoke well and with preparation, the first time on the basis of a carefully compiled dossier, which he had his head of chancellery Rottenburg hand to him, the other time based on Windthorst's speech of the previous day. The Thursday speech was masterfully structured. The prince got to the point in his very first sentence, without his usual reference to the previous speaker, then gave an overview of Hardenberg's and Zerboni's lenient policy towards Poland, which he condemned, then contrasted it with Flottwell's stricter policy, which followed it, and Grolmann's plans for Germanization, and this section was immediately followed by a biting satire on the liberal sympathies for Poland of the 1840s. This laid the foundation for the representation of his own policy, which prepared the ground for German action, the characterization of his progressive opponents' shortsightedness in the Conflict Period and Polish efforts at restoration. It was only after this that he presented his own plans for a campaign against the Poles, and the thrilling end was a challenge to his opponents and the chancellor's habitual appeal to a sense of national unity, accompanied by a gloomy outlook towards the future; a rhetorical weapon that, although recently referred to with subtle irony by the experienced and eagle-eyed Bamberger as the "horse of empire and state," never misses its mark, being exciting and rousing for the wholehearted admirers whom Heine dubbed the "Pharisees of nationality," and in any case intriguing for the critical listener, who cannot wholly resist the passionate rhetorical force of the most powerful man of our time. It is hard to recall an earlier speech by the prince that seemed so much of a piece. While he parried every interjection with a sharply-worded response, and frequently interrupted himself with charming recollections and anecdotes, he never allowed such exclamations, as he usually does, to interrupt his train of thought. If one is familiar with the peculiarities of this remarkable orator, one can only

explain this deviation from his usual habit as an unrolling before us of a series of thoughts that had become familiar to him through decades of practice.

During the chancellor's speech the house was also the scene of the most vivid movement; for although the Liberals behaved more quietly than usual and the Poles were quite startled by the outbreaks of elemental hatred that rained down upon them, the Center Party, whose leader was the main focus of all the chancellor's attacks, was in a constant uproar, and tempestuous interruptions, and irritated, mocking responses flew back and forth between the Center and the Right and the segments of the Left occupied by the National Liberals; from time to time the chancellor took up one of these remarks, a vividly agitated picture, without however reaching the level of the fiercest passion that we observed at the height of the *Kulturkampf*.

Source: *Neue Freie Presse*, February 3, 1886, p. 2. Available online at:

<http://anno.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/anno?aid=nfp&datum=18860203&zoom=33>

Translation: Pamela Selwyn

Recommended Citation: The Reaction of the Austrian Liberal Press to Bismarck's Policies (1886), published in: German History Intersections,

<<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/germanness/ghis:document-229>> [July 12, 2025].