



German History in Documents and Images

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

German Crown Princess Victoria Criticizes Bismarck's Personal Regime as Dictatorial (1887-89)

German Crown Princess Victoria was the daughter of Britain's Queen Victoria and married to Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm (1831-1888), who ruled as Kaiser Friedrich III for a mere 99 days before dying of throat cancer on June 15, 1888. When Friedrich ascended to the throne in March 1888, he was unable to implement significant liberal reforms, not only because of his illness but also because of the powerful network that Bismarck had established to retain his power after the death of Kaiser Wilhelm I. In these letters, Victoria comments on Bismarck's omnipotence and what it has already cost Germany. She admires Bismarck's considerable talents in the diplomatic sphere but believes that he has corrupted the nation's political life. The following excerpts from Victoria's correspondence are not precisely dated. It should be noted, however, that during part of this period – for those 99 days – she was not crown princess but actually German Kaiserin (wife of the Kaiser).

What we have suffered under this régime!!! How utterly corrupting has his [Bismarck's] influence been on his school – his employés, on the political life of Germany! It has made Berlin almost intolerable to live in, if one is not his abject slave!! His party, his followers and admirers are fifty times worse than he is! One feels as if one would like to send up one great cry for deliverance and that if it were answered, one great deep sigh of relief would be given. Alas, all the mischief wrought would take years to repair!! Of course those that only look at the outside aspect of things see Germany strong, great and united, with a tremendous army (in time of war near three millions of men!), a minister who can dictate to the world, a sovereign whose head is crowned with laurels, a trade that is making an effort to outdo all others, the German element making itself remarked everywhere in the world (even if not loved or trusted). They cannot think we have any reason to complain, but only to be thankful. If they did but know at what price all this is bought!

[. . .]

What a fuss has been made about the [. . .] anniversary of Prince Bismarck coming into office! More than one sad and bitter thought fills our mind when one thinks of the means he has used to achieve great things and of the havoc he has made of much that was precious, of good and useful men's lives and reputations, etc., and of the evil seeds he has sown, of which we shall some day reap the fruits.

It is perhaps not his fault, he is *un homme du moyen âge* – with the opinion and principles of those dark days when *la raison du plus fort était toujours la meilleure* and what was humane, moral, progressive and civilized was considered silly and ridiculous, and a Christian and liberal spirit absurd and *unpraktisch*. The young generation see his prestige and his success and are proud of it and like basking in the sunshine of his fame and celebrity. He has done very grand things and has unequalled power and unrivalled strength at this moment! Oh, if they were but used for the good cause, always one would be ready to admire and to bless him! He has made Germany great, but neither loved, free, happy, nor has he developed her immense resources for good! Despotism is the essence of his being; it cannot be right or good in the long run!

[. . .]

What a blessed thing it would be if this regime of Bismarck's omnipotence were not to last forever, if other motives and sentiments and another spirit were to pervade the German government. B. is very great, a man of genius and power, does his best and has done great things for his country. One must be just and grateful, but as you cannot gather grapes of thorns or figs from thistles, so can you not expect from him that which modern Germany lacks and which it thirsts for, and that is peace among its classes, races, religions and parties, good and friendly relations with its neighbors, liberty and the respect of right instead of force, and the protection of the weak against the oppression of the strong.

[. . .]

Prince Bismarck's dodge is always to make the Germans think they are going to be attacked, wronged, insulted, and their interests betrayed if he were not there to protect them. There are many who are silly and ignorant and shortsighted enough to believe all this trash, and who would sacrifice their rights and liberties and their prosperity if only Prince Bismarck would stay and protect them!!! From what? Against what? I really do not think they know!!

[. . .]

Some think when Bismarck is no more that all this party will be scattered to the winds; for as he has no principles he cannot build up. The party have a leader, but no program. They will follow him everywhere and are in constant admiration, but with no firm institutions and principles a party cannot hold together when the leader is gone. Still the mischief will not be over when he disappears, as he has thoroughly corrupted all moral sense in the young men who will come after him. Where is the hand and the mind to take up Bismarck's position and work on the lines of honesty and moderate rational progress for the development of true freedom? I see none.

Source: Frederick Ponsonby, ed., *Letters of the Empress Frederick*. New York: Macmillan, 1930, pp. 220, 246-47, 272, 332-33, 368.

Original English text reprinted in Theodore S. Hamerow, ed., *The Age of Bismarck: Documents and Interpretations*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973, pp. 156-58.