Summary of previous – established in FF, defines career as opposed to A, tries to make his voice heard but status quo too powerful, would take something like the CW to change this situation and offer B new opportunities, as we’ll see.

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Far away from the exhausting and tiresome debates about A pre-eminence at Frankfurt, or even the dull discussions on the ZV in Vienna, or further talks about B’s future in Berlin, many thousands of miles away, the world was turning towards a conflict which was all-too familiar to those mindful of European history. We don’t need to get bogged down in the CW details, since we have in fact covered it before, but what we should consider is the effect the conflict had further away from its epicentre. The ripples were felt in Germany, where Prussia and Austria now had to make a decision. On 28 March 1854, F and UK declared war on Russia, escalating the ramifications of the conflict in the process – this would not be a case of R squashing the Turks, but a truly significant conflict – the first time Frenchmen had fought Russians in over a generation, and the first time Britons had fought Russians on land in even longer. This presented several challenges to Vienna, assumed by Tsar Nicolas to be R’s greatest friend – he had bailed out their Hungarian problem after all; surely it was only reasonable to expect Austria to return the favour. If we remember the phrase attributed to the late Sch at the time of the Hungarian revolt though – that Austria ‘would astonish the world by the magnitude of her ingratitude’, then we shouldn’t be too surprised by what happened next. In A’s defence, she didn’t pursue that policy because of spite – (explain situation of power balance in Balkans; Wallachia and Moldavia; too close to A sphere of interest; expel R from Danube).

On 20 April 1854, A concluded an alliance with, believe it or not, P. Such a fact may appear strange – (perfect opportunity to attack A with R distracted no? B fumed, but he lacked power remember; policy directed by Berlin not B, as B could only look on in a rage). According to the alliance, P would be required to act in tandem with Austria, by mobilising up to 200k troops if circumstances required, and marching them to the Russian border. Evidently, this alliance was directed against the Russians, and was very far indeed from B desired, but this does not mean B had been left in the dark – in the middle of April, as P policy was being considered, B was invited away from FF and into Berlin to talk strategy. King FW and his entourage must have known that B would provide advise far outside the range of what they were willing to do, but perhaps they believed he could offer some valuable insights nonetheless.

B records in his memoirs how he laid out his vision for what P could gain out of this situation; with all the interested powers – F, UK, R and A – occupied, there would never be a better time for P to raise an army of 100k or more, and perch it on the border with R and A; to increase it to 200k if necessary, and be ready to strike in either direction. B had even accounted for the effects of an English blockade, which he believed would ‘not have been more dangerous than those of the Danes, which we had several times undergone, and which had no less effectually in former years closed our ports’, yet B believed this difficulty would be counterbalanced ‘by the establishment of P and G independence’ to the effect that ‘His Majesty would instantly become the master of the entire European situation, would be able to dictate peace, and to gain in Germany a place worthy of Prussia.’ B dismissed the concerned pleas of several minor German rulers at the time, and he argued that ‘these moods would soon have changed had an energetic Prussian attitude in Upper Silesia demonstrated that neither F nor A was at that time capable of offering us resistance in superior force if we determined to aval ourselves of their denuded and compromised situation.’ After unravelling this master plan to his audience in the King’s presence, B recorded that ‘the king was no insensible to the mood of conviction in which I represented to him the facts and the eventualities of the case’, though he adds that the King did let him and his grand plan down gently with the expression ‘My dear boy, that is all very fine, but it is too expensive for me. A man of Napoleon’s kind can afford to make such master-strokes, but not I.’[[1]](#footnote-1) Indeed, it would take FW’s brother to imagine that P’s situation could drastically change through a war with A; for now, it seemed like too great a leap into the unknown.

Though B was disappointed, he could at least take solace from the fact that neither A nor P became directly involved in the war. What was more, and of even greater importance to him, simply by standing still, P was able to watch as A walked herself into a diplomatic faux pas, with the result that when the CW ended, the hapless MP Buol had managed to alienate both R and F, leaving V in a state of isolation not seen since Napoleonic times. Indeed, by the end of the year, without the knowledge of P, Buol determined that the correct policy would be one which backed the western allies, and he concluded a secret alliance with B and F on 2 Dec 1854. By this point, Buol had already done irreparable damage to the A-R relationship. He had issued an ultimatum in the spring, demanding Russian evacuation from the Danubian Principalities, as M and W were known. This ultimatum was backed by the now 228k men which were A had mobilised on the R border. Buol’s policy was meant to be signal to R that she could not interfere with such a delicate theatre; perhaps a more self-aware Tsar would have realised that charging down south into what had previously been a buffer zone was bound to agitate Vienna. Instead, according to his contemporaries, he became almost ill with rage at the sense of betrayal. Just at the point when the Russians were about to push the Turks back, the signal was received from St Petersburg to retreat; within a few months, and before 1854 was over, Austrian forces had taken the places of the old regimes in W and M.

It is very hard to overstate just how important this enormous blunder was on A’s part. After concluding its alliance with B and F – probably due to its sense of unease following the Tsar’s ringing condemnations – Austrian agents then tried to get the GC to mobilise in line with Vienna, and to effectively follow her lead in foreign policy. From the very beginning, this mission was impossible, and would never had succeeded had B simply stood aside and allowed the utter mess of ambitions, fears, goals and misunderstandings to drive the small German states on. In a correspondence with Leopold von Gerlach, his old conservative Junker ally who had the ear of the king, and who pushed B into politics in the first place, we are given more pieces of information regarding the situation in Germany, thus in mid-October 1854 Gerlach wrote to B saying:

After reading everything, and balancing one thing against another to the best of my power, I consider it very probable that Austria will not fail to get the two thirds [support for war with R]. Hanover is playing a false game, Brunswick’s sympathies are with the Western Powers, the Thuringians equally so, Bavaria is in all frames of mind, and his Majesty the King is a wavering reed…and in addition to all this we have Vienna apparently decided on war…It follows from all this that we must be well on the lookout for any eventuality [Gerlach continued], even be prepared for a war against the WPs allied with Austria, that it will not do to depend upon any of the German Princes, and so on. May the Lord grant that we not be found weak! But it would be an untruth were I to say I place implicit trust in those who guide our destinies. Let us therefore hold fast together. In the year 1850 Radowitz brought us to a point much the same as that to which Buol over there has brought us by letting things drift.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In fact, Buol’s problem was exactly the opposite – rather than let things drift he had, from the beginning, thundered forward, ignoring the Tsar’s verbal promises that he had no ambitions for W and M, and interpreting R’s position as the best chance A would have to push St Petersburg out of the Balkans forever. 1854 proved the defining year of this policy, as the Russians did evacuate from those principalities, changing their entire war plan in the process, and the conflict moved away from the Balkans towards the theatre for which the war gets its name – the Crimean Peninsula. Focus turned away from Europe, but the Tsar’s intense bitterness remained consuming, following him to his grave on 2 March 1855. ‘Austrian ingratitude’, his successor Alexander II was reported to have said, ‘has killed my father.’ But in actual fact, the war had been a strain on the ailing Nicolas for some time, and the more he learned of its horrible impact on the soldiers he sent to fight in Russia’s name, the more he came to despise his decisions and regret the policies which led to them. Already suffering from a history of mental illness, which had affected his brother and father, Tsar Nicolas’s final fight proved to be Crimea, when at one point, he had imagined it would be his crowning legacy.[[3]](#footnote-3)

As ungrateful as A had apparently been, she was not finished disappointing A yet – by the end of 1855, more ultimatums began to come from Vienna, to the effect that R had better agree to the allied terms or else A would, for real this time, march her army of nearly 250k into the Russian interior. For Tsar Alexander II, never a fan of his father’s war to begin with, this was the last straw, and he pulled the plug on the CW shortly thereafter, though peace negotiations would drag on for some time afterwards.[[4]](#footnote-4) By and large, though it achieved very little for the victorious belligerents, by the time of its full conclusion on 30 March 1856 the world itself seemed to have gained a different axel to turn on. Russia became consumed with change for the next decade, abolishing serfdom and embracing limited liberal ideas under its reforming Tsar. For B and F, the major story was the involvement of its media, which had first loudly advocated the war, and then recoiled in horror when it was discovered that war wasn’t actually all that nice. Reforms in how officers were appointed, how soldiers were trained, how rations and provisions were supplied – all of these spheres of the military came under review in London, while N III could claim that he had launched an effective war, and avenged the loss of 1812. Still, satisfied though the French people were to emerge victorious, they had little to show for it in the end, gaining no conquests and receiving no indemnity from the Russian court. What was more, that was only one down – there remained two of Napoleon’s foes who had to be taught a lesson. B might be harder to reach, but surely something could now be arranged with A? In fact, as the beleaguered A MP Buol was to quickly discover, the major result of the CW for Vienna was that everyone seemingly now wanted a piece of FJ’s Empire.

A had been bombarded with requests to intervene in the CW by B and F; by disappointing them she found herself isolated; Buol’s decision to rush to occupy the D Ps also exposed his momentary friendship with the allies as little more than an opportunistic smash and grab. Indeed, if the optics of his policy towards the allies was bad, then the impact of the betrayal of Russia appeared to have not merely changed things, but ended an epoch in international affairs. The Holy Alliance of 1815 had been shot dead once Buol sent his ultimatums, and the new Tsar would never be able to swallow the intense feelings of resentment towards the opportunistic Habsburgs, who kicked R just at the time when she was down and in need of a friend – had Russia acted similarly in 1848, the Tsar would have fumed, Vienna wouldn’t be a power anymore, and would be beholden to all manner of Magyar demands! While Russia and F gave V the cold shoulder, the G states had also been unimpressed with A efforts to bully Germans into supporting her policy in the war. While war was never declared, Germans had been given a frightful taste of what life under Vienna would be like – whose to say that, caught between F and R in the future, Vienna wouldn’t make such a grave policy error again? Certainly, it’d be wrong to note that these mistakes drove the likes of B, S or W into P’s arms, but it certainly made them think twice about A’s reputation for quality leadership and consideration of all the Germans.

And what about the Prussian position? In spring 1856, B was close to marking his fifth anniversary of his appointment at FF, but he had done little indeed to merit this new improvement in P’s position. By squandering her advantages alongside her friends, A had done B’s work for him. Everything which B did after this moment was made possible by the A blunders in the CW – B never could have imagined, when he first learned of the crisis in mid-1853, that it would work out so completely in P’s favour. Indeed, it’d be fair to say that P emerged from the Crimean mess with the squeakiest of clean reputations, and compared to the other great powers, she had neither betrayed her friends nor expended resources to make threats. The question now was not whether everything had changed, but what B could or would do in these new circumstances. How long would it take him to put into motion the policy which he now believed was the only one for P – direct competition and eventual war with Austria.

In fact, B hadn’t waited for the CW to end before investing more time in his anti-Austrian plans. In the summer of 1855, circumstances worked in B’s favour, because Paris was ablaze with the Industrial Exhibition, N III’s answer to London’s Great Exhibition of 1851. N had wanted his world fair to display the best and brightest of F culture and achievements, which included breakthroughs in industrial technology, as the name suggested. All told, the initiative lasted from Feb to Nov in 1855, and provided a nice distraction from the final salvos of the CW; it’s estimated that over 5 million visitors arrived to witness all that F had to offer, and B, so he claimed, intended to be among this number.

No less a visitor than Victoria arrived to see for herself what the French capital had to offer, in a move that was designed to bolster Anglo-F relations in the final push of the CW; in the previous April, N had been on show himself in London, so it was time for V to return the favour. V arrived in P on 19 August, and a week later a state ball was given in V’s honour at Versailles. In the course of this ball, B was introduced both to the royal B couple, and to the imperial F. ‘The Prince’, that being, Prince Albert, husband to V, was ‘handsome and cool in his black uniform’, according to B, and he ‘conversed with me courteously’, but B noted that in Albert’s tone there was a ‘malevolent curiosity’, which B put down to Albert’s knowledge of B’s influence on the king. What influence, we may ask? According to B, all of P’s diplomatic personnel were of the view in 1855 that B would soon be given a ministerial post, this despite the fact that all evidence had shown how opposed B was to the official policy both of the king and of Manteuffel, the MP. ‘In the eyes of the Prince’, B continued, in his analysis of Albert…

…I was a reactionary party man who took up sides for Russia in order to further an absolutist and Junker policy. It was not to be wondered at that this view of the Prince’s and of the then partisans of the Duke of Coburg [Albert’s German House, and now the designation given to B’s royal family] had descended to the Prince’s daughter, who shortly after became Crown Princess.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Indeed, as we’ve said, the Crown Princess of B, also called V, arrived in early 1858 to marry Prince F of P, and it was their union which produced the more infamous progeny of Kaiser Wilhelm II. B maintains, with good reason, that the CP never liked him, and saw in him a reactionary vassal of Russia, then B’s sworn enemy. This impression had likely been imprinted by Albert, though V was not much warmer to Otto when they met in person. ‘At that ball at Versailles Queen Victoria spoke to me in German’, B wrote, adding:

She gave me the impression of beholding in me a noteworthy but unsympathetic personality, but still her tone of voice was without that touch of ironical superiority that I thought I detected in Prince Albert’s. She continued to be amiable and courteous, like one unwilling to treat an eccentric fellow in an unfriendly way.

Interesting to imagine what V and A made of this very eccentric, driven, ambitious and perhaps just a little bit arrogant Prussian Junker. Having dealt with a plethora of self-important courtiers, in B and elsewhere, the young B couple likely gave their best impression of patience and tolerance, completely unaware that within a decade, this self-important, determined man would stand atop the P government, and soon thereafter, atop the G state. He hadn’t greatly impressed the B royals then, but B hadn’t gone to P to see them – he had gone to sound out N, and had used the exhibition only as a cover. This was part of his anti-Austrian policy, to meet with a potential ally in N and see what his inclinations were, and whether P could make use of him. It was a cold, calculated act of political espionage, making use of the excuse of the exhibition to get as close to N as possible.

There was no indication at this early stage that B would later break the F Emperor’s heart; at this point, B needed F to use as leverage against A, so he could put across the impression that he wished for P and F to be best of friends; as soon as this was no longer necessary, however, B would demonstrate a breath-taking lack of consideration for N and his regime. It was, in B’s mind, just business, that being the business of statecraft. In this meeting with N, B proved remarkably adept at getting to the root of who this man was. According to B’s own record, N assured him that F and P were as close as could be to natural allies; in further conversations it seemed only to confirm B’s intentions to use N to P’s advantage, and he would harness the lessons learned in his meetings with Napoleon to effectively lay down his political and strategic manifesto in letters to his mentor, Leopold von Gerlach, a few years later, as we’ll see. In winter 1855, then in the presence of the P King FW, B was asked for his views on N by the King himself. ‘It is my impression’, B declared to his king,

That the Emperor Napoleon is a discreet and amiable man, but that he is not so clever as the world esteems him. The world places to his account everything that happens, and if it rains in eastern Asia at an unseasonable moment chooses to attribute it to some malevolent machination of the Emperor. Here especially we have become accustomed to regard him as a kind of genius who is forever only meditating how to do mischief in the world. I believe he is happy when he is able to enjoy anything good at his ease; his understanding is overrated at the expense of his heart; he is at bottom good-natured, and has an unusual measure of gratitude for every service rendered him.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Such an account sounded more like reviewing an applicant for a job than providing his judgment of one of the most powerful absolutist rulers in the world. At its core though, this judgement from B was sympathetic, and nowhere close to the alarmist interpretations which many had drawn from N – which claimed he intended to break and remake the world as his uncle had done. The more extreme views of N III, and the revolutionary intentions which were attributed to him, seemed to B an unnecessary barricade against a sensible P policy.

B left Paris impressed with F culture and the splendour of Paris, but also more convinced than ever of the need to approach F and make sure A knew it, even if no alliance was the result. Having options, B insisted, was the best P could now do, and he believed this even more so when the peace negotiations for the CW seemed to result in P towing the A line, rather than being seen to stand on her own two feet. If nothing was done, B believed, then soon enough the impression across the world would be that P was little more than a vassal state of Vienna, and could be expected to fall in line with whatever policy she adhered to. The newly hostile R threw a wrench in this idea, because the new Tsar clearly resented Vienna more than Berlin, but it was still important, B believed, for P to be seen to act independently. Thus B also believed that F was soon to be in R’s arms, and that an anti-Austrian entente would be result, which P should certainly join. While in summer 1855 F and R had still been at war, B insisted that he had gleaned the impression from Parisians and others that the CW was unpopular, and that Frenchmen generally had no hatred for the R Empire. Thus, the time was soon ripe for a revolution in diplomacy, and B believed genuinely that an announcement would be made to this effect soon – N’s wide ambition but lack of options in the current format of IR, B said, made this revolution essential. If N didn’t do this, then his other plans would be for naught.

Not so, insisted his superiors. F was the ultimate foe of P Junkers and P culture generally, and N III was no different from his father, in that he intended to transform Europe in a revolutionary image, thus threatening the status quo which had been established with so much blood from 1813. A was by no means a perfect friend, and she had acted against P interests before, but she, along with R, was at least a traditionalist, conservative power, and did not threaten the old order. Furthermore, she was German, and to side against her alongside F seemed anathema to all true Junkers. There was also some doubt, well founded as it turned out, that as far as the P King found it to imagine teaming with F, the still more conservative Tsar would be even less likely to join hands with N. To this, B would have argued that the reforms underway in R made it more, rather than less likely that R would seek foreign friends, and that a deal with N could secure the Tsar from several angles.

In March 1857, B had time to visit Paris again, as a negotiator in a dispute between P and Switzerland which we don’t need to get into here. The long and short of the dispute was that a mediation was held in Paris, which gave B another chance to get to grips with N’s character. This time, unlike their first meeting two years’ before, the two men seemed to click. According to B, N regarded him as something of a rising star, and as a statesman who was soon to hold considerable power in Berlin. Thus, he was useful to F, and in return for favourable treatment, might help F out in the future. B says he ensured N had no illusions in this regard, but we imagine that he would have done little to dissuade N from thinking thoughts which might have benefited him. It was unfair, N said, that foreign observers accused F of coveting the left bank of the Rhine; this expansion would add millions of foreign subjects to the F realm, and could only secured with further expansion into the Low Countries, which would obviously arouse foreign condemnation, and thus couldn’t be done.

What B says happened next though, is of great interest, considering what transpired within a few years. ‘Perhaps’, B wrote what N told him, ‘in certain circumstances, to soothe national pride he [N III] will desire [a small rectification of the frontiers], but [N III] will be able to live without it.’ B then adds that N intimated to him the following juicy nugget:

If he should again need a war, he would prefer to seek it in the direction of Italy. Yet on the one hand that country had always had a great affinity with France; on the other, the latter was rich enough in land power, and in victories by land… As the result of a war in the near future, he contemplated for Italy a condition of intimacy and dependence towards France, and for himself perhaps the acquisition of a few points on the coast. It formed part of this programme that Prussia should not be opposed to him. France and Prussia supplement one another; he considered it a mistake that Prussia in 1806 did not side with Napoleon like other German powers. It was desirable to consolidate our territory by the acquisition of Hanover and the Elbe duchies, and thus lay the foundation for a stronger Prussian navy. There was a lack of maritime powers of the second rank, who, by the union of their active forces with those of the French, might put an end to the present oppressive preponderance of England. There could be no danger therein, either to them or to the rest of Europe, because they would by no means be taking part in one-sided selfish undertakings of the French, but only in freeing the seas from the preponderance of England. His first wish was to secure the neutrality of Prussia in the event of his incurring a war with Austria on account of Italy. I might sound the King about all this.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Indeed, it was something which king FW would surely be interested in, but would the King actually go for it? B, revolutionary in diplomacy though he wanted to be, did not think so, and he told N the truth. N thanked him for this frankness, and the two parted on good terms, with little indication of the storm to come. Following this visit, B engaged in arguably one of his most important exercises – he wrote down, in as clear a manner as we might hope for, how he viewed the world and P’s options within it. B had to rally against the norms of P conservativism, but he also had to fight against ideas of legitimacy, which insisted that N’s regime now and his uncle’s before were illegitimate, and that dealing with N would compel other revolutionary movements to spring up. B fought against these ideas by arguing that all regimes were established through revolution and violence, and that the effects of working with N in this respect were seriously exaggerated. B was then accused of sacrificing his principles, a charge he denied. All in all, these disagreements over the best future policy for P, and where her best interests lay, moved B to return to a correspondence with LvG, his mentor. In the spring of 1857, while B was in FF, he articulated his views and vision, and as a result we are left with a fascinating series of declarations and assertions, which amounted to a manifesto of B’s views on foreign policy. Coming five and a half years before B would be made MP, these communications show what kind of revolutionary ideas B intended to apply to P diplomacy, and what this would mean were he ever permitted to reach these pinnacles of power. In spite of what B might have claimed at this point, he was very far away indeed from any ministerial post, and one factor which counted against him was these contrarian views.

To fully grasp B’s character and his motives during this time, and to appreciate why the way *he* saw the world was so radical, it is worth delving into this correspondence between B and G now. B himself gives them significant space in his memoirs, where they take up nearly 30 pages, despite the correspondence itself running for only two months, in May and June 1857. We will do our best to analyse these revolutionary letters now, wherein B’s thesis for running P foreign policy was laid down in its clearest, starkest form yet. We’ll also do our best to analyse them without this seeming like merely a recap of what the two men wrote; I do think that the contents of these letters make reading them out here worthwhile, as you’d be hard pressed to find another occasion where B lets loose his beliefs and vision, without fear of censorship or consequence. For better or worse, B felt he had to share his views, after all he had seen in Paris, and what he had felt during the CW and while working in FF. Now armed with this first-hand experience, could he persuade a dyed in the wool conservative Junker like L v G to see sense? Let’s find out.

‘Much as I agree with you in regard to internal policy, I can enter but little into your conception of foreign policy, which I find fault with in general, because it ignores the reality of things’, B began in a letter sent from FF on 2 May 1857. For the next ten pages of his memoirs, B expresses in this letter the fundamental tenets of his vision for P foreign policy.[[8]](#footnote-8)

France interests me only in so far as she reacts upon the condition of my country, and we can only deal politically with the F which exists, and this F we cannot exclude from the combinations. A legitimate monarch like Louis XIV is just as hostile an element as Napoleon I… France counts for me, without regard to the person at its head for the time being, merely as a piece, though an unavoidable one, in the game of political chess -- a game in which I am called upon to serve only my own king and my own country. I cannot feel it right, either in myself or in others, that sympathies and antipathies with regard to foreign Powers and persons should take precedence over my sense of duty in the foreign service of my country; such an idea contains the embryo of disloyalty to the ruler or to the country which we serve. But especially if any one wants to cut his standing diplomatic relations and the maintenance of our understanding in time of peace, after this pattern, he immediately ceases to be a politician, and acts according to his personal caprice. In my opinion, not even the king has the right to subordinate the interests of the country to his own feelings of love or hate towards foreigners, but if he does so he is responsible to God and not to me, and therefore I am silent on that point.

(analyse this extract – that B renounced ideology, in order to deal with the F that existed; that B saw it as pol chess, and that even the king had to put the country first, which an arrangement with F would represent). Maybe, B asked, G was unhappy because B was moving on from the idea that P would always be an enemy of F? Was G aware, B pondered, that in F they did not view P the same way? Why should P thus cut itself off from F; it wasn’t due to hard feelings on the F side, and N evidently wanted to make an approach to P work out. B then proclaimed to G that he did not have all the answers, but that even the theory of IR dictated that all options should be kept open, and all opportunities for advancement in the state should be realised:

Nor do I wish to pretend that I know how [to return P to predominance such as she enjoyed before 1848]; but there is no doubt much in this: we have no alliances and carry out no foreign policy -- that is, not actively -- but content ourselves with picking up the stones that fall into our garden and brushing off, as well as we can, the mud that is flung at us. When I speak of alliances, I do not mean alliances offensive and defensive, for peace is not yet imperilled; all the shades, however, of possibility, probability, or purpose, in the event of war, of concluding this or that alliance, or belonging to this or that group, still form the basis of such influence as a state can at the present day wield in time of peace. Whichever finds itself in the combination that is weaker in the event of war is inclined to be more yielding; whichever completely isolates itself renounces influence, especially if it be the weakest among the Great Powers. Alliances are the expression of common interests and purposes. Whether we have any purposes or conscious aims at all in our policy at this moment, I do not know; but that we have interests others will remind us fast enough. Yet up to the present we have the probability of an alliance only with those whose interests most traverse and contradict ours -- that is, with the German states and Austria. If we desire to regard our foreign policy as being limited to that, then we must also become accustomed to the idea of seeing our European influence reduced in time of peace to a seventeenth part of the voices of the smaller council in the Bund, and in the event of war of remaining behind by ourselves in the Taxis Palace, with the Federal Constitution in our hand.

The message was clear – friendship with the GC would only get P so far; she needed to use all means at her disposal, which included surprising but powerful alliances, to increase her influence and leverage her position. Or else in wartime, she would find she had fewer options, and that the world would regard her merely as an Austrian tool. B then moved to the more controversial section of his letter, where he explained how A and the smaller G states were probably the powers least likely to work for P’s benefit. Thus, replacements or additional friends would have to be found – P could never be secure with solely German focus:

I ask you whether there is a cabinet in Europe which has a more innate and natural interest than that of Vienna in preventing Prussia from growing stronger and in lessening her influence in Germany; whether there is a cabinet which pursues this design more zealously and cleverly, which on the whole takes more coolly and cynically its own interests alone as a guide for its policy, and which has given us, the Russians, and the Western Powers more numerous and striking proofs of perfidy and untrustworthiness as a member of the same federation? Does Austria in any way stick at entering into any foreign alliance that is to her advantage and openly threatening even members of the German Federation on the strength of such relations? Do you consider the Emperor Francis Joseph to be in general of a nature to make sacrifices or to yield, and with regard to non-Austrian interests in particular?

Having criticised the A option, B then moved to attack the notion that all G states would work for the good of P, or that P was somehow a natural ally of these G. How many of these G states, B asked, with some justification, truly wanted to see a powerful P, and how many would sacrifice all that much to defend P in the event of a war launched not against the traditional, predictable, revolutionary F enemy, but in the name of some G interests, or of P interests?

I continue my questions, and beg that you will not put me off with an evasive reply. Are there, besides the Austrian, any governments which feel less call to do something for Prussia than the German middle states? In times of peace they feel the necessity of playing some part in the Bund and in the Zollverein, of making their sovereignly a perceptible force on our frontiers…while in war their conduct towards us is regulated by fear or distrust, and no angel can talk the distrust out of them so long as there exist maps at which they can cast a glance. And now another question. Do you then believe, and does his Majesty the King still really believe in the German Bund and its army in the event of war? I do not mean in the event of a French revolutionary war against Germany in league with Russia, but in a war of interests, in which Germany, Prussia, and Austria would have to stand on their own legs. If you believe in it, I cannot of course go on with the discussion, for our premises would be too divergent. What, however, could justify you in the belief that the Grand Dukes of Baden and Darmstadt, the King of Wurtemberg, or Bavaria, would play Leonidas for Prussia and Austria when the superiority of forces is not on the side of these Powers, and no one has the slightest ground for believing in unity and confidence between them?

Indeed, there was little chance that any of the G states, high on ideas of all G culture, would stand at Thermopylae and defend P ground to the last man. P would have to rely on its own power to defend itself, and beyond that, to look to equally self-interested allies who had a vested interest in seeing P strong. F, due to its strategic interests in keeping A down, would want this turn of events to take place, so surely F was the natural choice – we should play F off against A, and use F support to our advantage, B said in effect. Alternatively, B said, the choice was between one of continued isolation, or of kowtowing to A’s every desire:

If we desire to go on living in such isolation, unheeded and occasionally bullied, I have of course no power to change it; if, however, we desire to come once more into consideration we cannot possibly attain that aim by building our foundation solely on the sand of the German Bund and calmly awaiting its collapse. As long as each of us is convinced that a portion of the European chess-board will remain closed against us by our own choice, or that we must tie up one arm on principle while every one else employs both his to our disadvantage, this sentimentality of ours will be turned to account without fear and without thanks.

Again, this is B rallying against the idea that principles like opposing a neighbouring power simply because they have a different government to yours, or refusing to deal with someone because they have a leader you don’t like. These ideas, B said, closed to European chess board to P diplomacy, and if this was what Berlin had in mind, then the king may as well send the bulk of his diplomatic service home, since what could these individuals hope to achieve against the prevailing mood of intolerance and intransigence supported by the King? B then went on something of a rant about A’s lack of good faith displayed towards P, comparing A took an unfaithful wife, which had been tolerated too long:

If we wish not to hear laughter when we speak of Austria's help in any matter of importance to ourselves, we must go to Berlin. And even in Berlin I know only a proportionately very small circle in which a feeling of bitterness will not betray itself as soon as our foreign policy is mentioned. Our prescription for every evil is to throw ourselves upon the neck of Count Buol and to pour out our brotherly heart to him. When I was in Paris a certain count sued for a divorce after having caught his wife, formerly a circus-rider, in [the course of an affair] for the twenty-fourth time; he was held up to the admiration of the court by his lawyer as an example of a gallant and indulgent husband, but his magnanimity is nought compared with ours in regard to Austria.

Had A truly betrayed P’s trust 24 times? Perhaps not, but B wasn’t speaking into the wind here – he was trying to persuade his mentor G that the time had come to see F, A and P’s position in the world differently, or Berlin would never move on from its current state as a second Vienna, obediently tugging along the Habsburg flag at a moment’s notice. And because B was writing to G here, he took the time to address and even challenge him directly.

You, my most respected friend, are well acquainted with our policy; can you name a single aim that our politicians have set themselves or even a plan followed for a few months? Even granted a position of affairs, do they know what they really want? Is there any one in Berlin with that knowledge, and do you think that a like void of positive aims and ideas is to be found in the leaders of any one other state? Can you moreover name a single ally upon whom Prussia could count if war came this very day or who would speak in our behalf in matters that touch us nearly…or who would do anything whatever for us either because he reckons upon our support or fears our hostility? We are the best-natured and most harmless of politicians, and yet no one in reality trusts us; we are regarded as unsafe allies and harmless foes, precisely as if we behaved like Austria in foreign affairs and were as rotten at home… we shall amicably allow ourselves to be stripped of the Zollverein by Austria, because we have not the resolution to say simply No. I am surprised that we still possess diplomatists in whom the courage to hold an idea or the ambition to achieve something is not dead already, and I shall be just as content as the rest of my colleagues with simply executing my instructions, attending the sittings, and divesting myself of any interest in the general progress of our policy; this is better for one's health and one wastes less ink.

This almost sounded like B, in despair at the official policy or lack thereof, was throwing in the towel, but looks could be deceiving. B, here was only being dramatic – it was simply not within him to behave as he described in those final sentences. As this letter made clear, whether it saved ink or his health or not, B felt he simply had to speak his mind. By laying this out for G, B also showed that he was not privy to discussions taking place in Berlin, where P policy was developed. In spite of his appearance of having influence, and our assumption that a man like B would surely be regularly consulted, at this point of his life B was not considered important enough to include. For that reason, he could conclude to G that:

I do not know whether the government has a plan (with which I am unacquainted) -- I do not think so; if, however, we repel the diplomatic advances of a great Power only on account of antipathies or sympathies for conditions and persons which we cannot and would not alter, and if we regulate our political relations with two other great Powers on the same basis, then I am within the mark if I say that as a diplomatist I do not comprehend this, and consider that with the adoption of such a system in foreign relations the whole profession of diplomacy down to the consular service is superfluous and practically cashiered. You tell me that the man is our natural enemy and that it will soon be proved he is so and must remain so; I could dispute this, or say with equal justice: "Austria, England, are our enemies, and that they are so has long ago been proved, -- naturally in the case of Austria, unnaturally in that of England." But I will let that rest as it is, and, assuming that your contention were correct, I cannot even then regard it as politic, while peace still exists, to betray our apprehensions to others and to France herself; but I consider it expedient, until the breach foreseen by you really occurs, to go on allowing people to believe that we are not necessarily doomed to a war sooner or later with France, that it is at least nothing inseparable from the position of Prussia, and that the tension with regard to France is not an organic defect, an innate weakness of our nature, upon which every one else can speculate with safety. As soon as we are thought to be on cool terms with France my Federal colleague here will cool towards me.

This latter extract is very important, because here B wasn’t just stating that an alliance with F could be useful, he was also insisting that leading other states to believe that F and P were negotiating towards this end would be useful – a new level of realpolitik, which B was later to hone in on. And as if to spell it out at the end, B explained that once it was known P was out of step with F, the G states and A herself were less likely to fear what P was capable of, since they understood P to be on her own. If this impression could be expelled, and it could be somewhat uncertain whether F and P would come to some agreement, B maintained that a wealth of options would be open to P which wouldn’t have been there otherwise. This was the first of many letters between the mentor and the student, but we don’t have need to continue quoting from them, as we’d be here all day if we went down that rabbit hole.

G, for his part, did not contest the idea that A wasn’t looking out for P’s interests, but challenged B by noting that F hardly cared for P either. He mounted a serious challenge to B’s presentation of N as docile, harmless and essentially the same as any other potential ally. N, G asserted, was a child of the revolution, and if B truly was an enemy of the FR, then he would do well to remember that. The two men essentially went around in circles for the next two months, as B insisted N wasn’t a revolutionary zealot, and was only interested in bettering F, but G insisted N *was* that zealot, and that B shouldn’t underestimate him.

Perhaps because we know that B would destroy N’s regime within 15 years, reading this correspondence is especially fascinating, particularly to note the amount of foreshadowing which occurs. On one occasion, G asks B how long he believes N will rule for, obviously unaware, as was B surely, that Otto would answer that question definitively as MP, and that the answer would be just shy of 18 years.[[9]](#footnote-9) Demonstrating an understanding of N’s character which would later prove correct, B explained that the French Emperor’s resolution, ideology and policy were relatively straightforward, and somewhat weaker than others may believe:

The impulse [for conquest] does not seem to dominate Napoleon III as an instinct; he is no captain, and in a war on a great scale, with big results or risks, the eyes of the French army, the prop of his sovereignty, could scarcely fail to turn to a fortunate general rather than to the Emperor. He will therefore only seek war when he believes himself compelled to it by dangers at home. A compulsion of this kind would, however, exist from the outset for the legitimate King of France if he now came to the throne. Neither the remembrance of his uncle's passion for conquest nor the fact of the unrighteous origin of his power justifies me therefore in regarding the present Emperor of the French as the sole representative of the Revolution and as an object to be singled out in the fight against the latter.[[10]](#footnote-10)

This again was B’s attempt to rally against G’s view of N, but judging by G’s reply it had little effect – B and G were bound to see things differently, a fact which contributed to their gradual falling out by the late 1860s. Thus B would move on from the Gerlach brothers, the duo who had proved so pivotal in his entrance into politics. For B, it was evidently more important to put P, and thus his own career, before such relationships – he could not mindlessly support his mentor when he patently disagreed with him on so many things. Finally, in our last extract from these letters, we look at an entry from early June 1857, where B puts forward what amounts to his manifesto regarding A and the GC; both issues, B insisted, limited P’s options and therefore its power, and alternative measures for increasing both would have to be sought if P was not to be in terminal decline:

You say, "France will not do more for us than Austria and the middle states;" my belief is that no one does anything for us, unless he can at the same time serve his own interests. The direction, however, in which Austria and the middle states at present pursue: their interests is quite incompatible with the tasks which are vital questions for Prussia, and a common policy is quite impossible until Austria adopts a discreeter system towards us, of which there is so far little prospect. You agree with me that we must show the small states the superiority of Prussia, but what means have we for doing so inside the Act of Confederation? Little can be done when we have but one voice among seventeen and Austria against us.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Thus, B saw P as being limited by the current system she was in – the only way to improve her position was to break out of these systems, or to break them full stop if they couldn’t be escaped from. By having access to more options, B believed this could be done, and he had now convinced himself, so that nothing would change his mind. At the end of the final letter from LvG, B notes in the margin, ‘I had no reasons for continuing by a reply this correspondence, aimless in itself.’[[12]](#footnote-12) Indeed, it was aimless for B to consider A and the GC anything other than constraints on P’s power, or tools which should be used to P’s advantage if she had more options and leverage. Either way, something would have to change, and B evidently wished to be the agent of that change.

The end of the CW brought whispers from Manteuffel in Berlin that the King was considering B for a ministerial post – a common song at this point which B was only too happy to sing. How realistic was it that the hesitant king was about to appoint such a reactionary, and by all accounts unliked figure to the government? Not to mention the fact that B was still inexperienced compared to his peers, and his contrarian views had alienated him from the traditional cabal at the centre of government. But B did have one thing of his side – his undeniable talent for diplomacy and for advancing P interests. In spite of his inexperience, having spent just over five years in his proper position at this stage – he had made something of a name for himself, both in the P government and in the other G courts where he frequently travelled. From the moment he had spoken, let’s not forget, a decade before, B had distinguished himself as a dynamic, capable speaker with a rare spark, a spark which the king can’t have been able to ignore. Until B was confirmed as MP in autumn 1862, he would grapple repeatedly with such rumours, as the indecisive Prussian kings, who always had the last word on these appointments, struggled to make up their mind.

By now B had met N III twice, both times making a good impression. His sympathy for F, at least compared to his peers, led to his reputation as something of a Bonapartist, though B explicitly rejected the label. If nothing else, this surely recommended him to serve as ambassador to F once his stint in FF ran out. 1857 was destined to be a busy year; having visited Paris earlier in March, by August B was visiting another European dynasty which he would later humble – Denmark. ‘I took advantage of the recess in the Federal Diet to make a hunting excursion into Denmark and Sweden’, B explains, adding that on August 6 1857, he had an audience with the Danish King. ‘He received me’, B recalled, ‘in uniform with his helmet on, and entertained me with exaggerated sketches of his experiences in various battles and sieges at which he had never been present.’ King Frederick VII of Denmark was something of a buffoon, it seems, but this monarch was deadly serious about the good governance of his country. Denmark, like its neighbours, had endured revolution in 1848, whereupon a new constitution had been promised by Frederick VII’s father, a constitution which directly affected Denmark’s German possessions – the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein.

In 1864, as we’ll see later, B would engage in a war with the Danes for the sake of these duchies, which had a majority German population. Yet, in 1857, even B was forced to admit that the nobles of these duchies he conversed with didn’t see themselves as German. ‘They would not hear of a little German state’, B wrote, ‘for the morsel of European status at Copenhagen was still dearer to them.’ How much respect B afforded to these preferences is demonstrated when, 7 years later, he made war to implement them into Prussia’s sphere of influence. Much as he had done earlier in the year in his Paris visit, B’s tendency to engage in these exercises in foreshadowing represent a historian’s dream. By the end of 1857 he had visited and made a favourable impression on two of his future victims, but he remained frank and renowned regarding his opinion of his third victim, the Austrians, who were under no illusions about how B felt about them.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Also in August 1857, B was unfortunate in that he suffered a hunting accident, falling over a corner of rock and grievously injuring his shin. The wound would subsequently give him a great deal of trouble, but for now, B effectively ignored it. He was more than occupied by news of change underway at the top of P’s government, starting with the king himself. Following a meeting with Emperor FJ in early July, FW had then travelled to Saxony, beginning a tour of the smaller G states, before he suffered what appeared to be a stroke in the middle of the month. Edwin Manteuffel, FW’s MP, was anxious to ensure that the King was protected from the bad influences of ambitious courtiers gunning for his job, and so ensured FW was whisked back to Sans Souci, the royal P palace built by F the Great. While there though, rumours of the king’s mental illness grew, but he continued to perform his duties. He met with the Tsar in a train carriage in early October, which B believed made matters worse, because the carriage was badly ventilated, and was filled with tobacco smoke.

Following these incidents, what B describes as an apoplectic fit ensued. As the P physicians struggled with the question of how to cure the king, FW’s younger brother Prince William was brought forward. With FW effectively incapacitated, the show had to go on – the king’s absolutist powers meant that several day to day functions couldn’t be performed unless they had someone to stand in for him. As heir to the childless FW, W fit this bill perfectly, and he began to assume more duties in P governance. This was of course troubling to Manteuffel, who represented the older King and a ministry from an age which now seemed to have been passed by. Around this time B went to meet with Prince W, who had a long talk with him about the pros and cons of upholding the constitution or being rid of it. This constitution, don’t forget, allowed for the upper and lower houses of the P parliament, and therefore limited the powers of the king. W, as future king, wanted to know if he would have to abide by these limits too, or whether there would have been grounds for starting afresh with good old-fashioned absolutism. But W soon realised, after conversing with B, that putting the genie back in the bottle was impossible, and that it would send a message of instability to P’s neighbours and G rivals. B records what he said to Prince W:

…that questions of constitution were subordinate to the necessities of the country and its political position in G, and that there was no urgent necessity to touch ours at present; and that for the time being the question of forces and internal self-reliance was the chief thing.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Whether W heeded this advice, or simply came to see things this way on his own, we do not know, but either way, W refrained from changing how P was governed for the moment. There would be no abrupt return to the old days if W assumed power. When B then travelled to Sans Souci to see how King FW was doing in early October 1857, he found Manteuffel anxious, and fully in the know about B’s conversation and long walk with Prince W. Was B angling to replace M at the top of the P greasy pole? M certainly seemed to think so, and he asked B why he hadn’t gone to his post, meaning FF, at a time like this, to which B replied that he was very much needed here. Whether or not the beleaguered royal family did have need of this ambitious ambassador is hard to say, but B certainly believed it, and by virtue of this self-confidence he ensured his name remained known. (grave challenge thrown in his way on 23 Oct 1857, when Prince W was charged with acting in the name of King FW for the next 3 months – this would be renewed 3 more times, until in October 58 when Prince W was made Regent, and it became a matter of time when FW would pass away, officially handing the crown to his younger brother).

B was not well-liked by the Regent W; there was no indication at this point that B would one day work with W as King, and make him into the first Emperor or Kaiser of Germany. At this point, W regarded B as a wild reactionary, and once he took power officially, it was likely that he would replace him in FF with someone who was more pliable and docile, and less likely to stir up trouble. Furthermore, it was unlikely that Manteuffel would be allowed to stay on, since W wasn’t a great fan of his either. B believed that W, like his son Frederick, who had married Queen V’s firstborn daughter V junior, was under liberal influences, and became anxious at the possibility that he might have to serve as minister in a liberal P cabinet, beholden to English opinion and influences. It was a great misfortune of B’s that he hadn’t made some effort to woo W from an early stage, especially since the law of succession stipulated that W would succeed his childless brother one day. But B didn’t see eye to eye with W, who had his own ideas about P government, and he certainly held a grudge against Augusta, W’s wife, and she against him, for suggesting back in 1848 that W should abdicate in favour of her son.

These were anxious times, but the years between 1857 and 1861 when Prince W became King were doubly anxious because it was always possible that FW might make a recovery, though it was unlikely. Further, this wasn’t merely W who was ascending to the throne, his family was as well – W as king would mean that his son F was the heir, and as bad as B and W’s relationship was, B’s relationship with F was worse still. W was supposedly sympathetic to liberal reform, but F, with his English wife, seemed to embody that vision of P government, and it was a vision which B could not tolerate. It would surely transform P into little more than a British satellite. No, it would be intolerable to allow these influences to dilute P independence, and thus reduce his opportunities for acquiring a fulfilling ministerial post. But the facts were against B – there was no indication now that W, whose brother had collapsed from mental illness, would die a few weeks shy of his 91st birthday.

At this point, the 60-year-old W appeared little more than a caretaker king, who would rule for perhaps a decade before paving the way for the rule of F, who was in his prime in his late 20s during this crisis. A betting P man, in other words, considering the durability of P monarchs at this time, would have bet that F would have succeeded to the P crown before his 40th birthday. If this occurred, as many expected, then P would enjoy a liberal king the likes of which it had never experienced before, and in combination with the strong English links, a complete reimagining of P policy at home and abroad would have been possible. In such an arrangement there would be no room for a reactionary Junker like B, who would surely have nothing in common with a liberal pro-British ministry under King F and Q Victoria. This perhaps explains why B was only expecting to rule as a minister for ten years, before retiring, as we noted earlier, to grow fruit trees. Maybe he imagined that his political window was only large enough to contemplate a brief period of rule, owing to the facts of the royal line. Interestingly, it was against B’s character to change tack, and embark on a campaign of flattery towards either Prince W or his son F; instead he seems to have accepted that the ascension of W to the throne would radically reduce his options.

Indeed, the fact that everything was soon to change, and change against him, caused B profound anxiety, particularly over 1858, in what proved to be his final year as ambassador to FF. While in this capital of G culture and international intrigue, B had learned an enormous amount, and he had come to terms with his abilities, and his limits. It was an invaluable education, just as King FW had imagined it would be. On 6 Nov 1858, Edwin von Manteuffel was officially dismissed as MP by Prince W. This was a troubling omen for B; while he had never been particularly loyal to M, M had been good to him, and had provided an invaluable amount of support while in FF. Now, his old protector gone, B would have no safety net, and he must have imagined that he was living on borrowed time in FF. What began under W’s direction was the so-called New Era in P government, with W at its head, and a new face, Karl Anton von Hohenzollern, whose grand surname underlined his status as cousin to the P king, took over as MP. Karl Anton would hold this position for nearly three years, before resigning in 1862 in the midst of a crisis over the military budget, a crisis which, as we’ll see, proved essential in bringing an even fresher face, that of B’s, abruptly and somewhat unexpectedly into the halls of power. Of import to note for us is that neither Karl Anton, as MP, nor Schleinitz, the new FM, had much love for B. So long as they held their posts, B was unlikely to get a seat in the P government.

Though power as MP was only a few years away, for the depressed and dejected B, it seemed like an outcome from another alternative universe. B quickly encountered signs that, far from being kept close by the Prince, he was to be sent as far away as possible. While attending a ball in early January 1859, B learned from various gossips that W intended to steal him from FF, and post him to the remote ambassadorship in St Petersburg. To serve as P’s ambassador to Russia was surely a great honour, but to B, the appointment stank. What followed was a breath-taking confrontation between the presumptive 43 year old B and his future King, and B records it in his memoirs, how on 26 Jan 1859 he ‘betook myself to the Regent’ [meaning William] where he… ‘…said openly that I heard that I was to be transferred to St Petersburg, and begged permission to express my regret, in the hope that it could be reversed. The first counter-question was “Who told you that?”’

Evidently B was correct, the rumours were true and he was destined to be packed off to the Russian capital to begin a new phase in his career. A new phase which he did not want. B was happy in FF, and if he wasn’t to be given a post in W new government, then he’d prefer to stay where he was, where the other G states knew him well, and where he had settled into something of a routine. B couldn’t see the sense in uprooting him, since he wouldn’t just be replacing someone in St P, but someone would be replacing him in FF, and B didn’t believe they’d be able to do as good a job in the capital of the GC. The way B makes his case in his memoirs stuns the reader all the more when we remember that B was apparently making this case to W in person. B claims he declared:

I thought that in FF, the Federal Diet’s own earth, with the exits and entrances of which I had become acquainted down to the very soil-pipes, I could render more useful service than any possible successor, who would first have to learn the very complicated position due to relations with numerous courts and ministers. I was personally acquainted with every German prince and every German minister, and with the courts and capitals of the princes of the Confederations, and I enjoyed, as far as it was attainable for Prussia, an influence in the Assembly of the Confederation and at the separate Courts. This fund of Prussian diplomacy, after its acquisition and conquest, would be ruined to no purpose by my recall from Frankfort.[[15]](#footnote-15)

B’s successor in FF was to be a fellow by the name of Karl von Usedom, who B regarded as little more than a ‘cretin’ with an ‘impossible wife’. Usedom was a liberal, and more ‘a gossiping courtier’ than a statesman. His wife would embarrass P at FF, to which W replied, if Usedom’s wife was so embarrassing, surely she would embarrass P no matter where she went, so it make no difference placing the couple in FF. to which B replied that if only he had married a tactless woman as Usedom had, he would now have a better claim to his FF position. This seems to have been too much even for the evidently tolerant W, who chastised B:

I do not understand how you can take the matter up so bitterly; St Petersburg has surely always ranked as the highest post of P diplomacy, and you should accept it as proof of high confidence that I am sending you there.[[16]](#footnote-16)

This was a good point on W’s part, but B did not take the message, instead he moved to provide his honest opinion not only his replacement in FF, but on the entire ministry which W was planning to appoint. ‘Your royal highness’, B began, ‘has not a single statesman-like intellect in the whole ministry, nothing but mediocrities and limited brains’, to which W replied with admirable restraint, whether B considered the newly appointed minister for war as a limited brain. ‘By no means’, B replied, ‘but he cannot keep a drawer in order, much less a ministry, and Schleinitz [the new FM] is a courtier, but no statesman.’ At this, W became irritated, and asked B outright ‘Do you perchance take me for a sluggard? I will be my own foreign minister and minister of war, that I comprehend.’ W’s outburst served to remind his outspoken subject that whoever held the reins of power, it was he, as the king in waiting, who had the final say in all that transpired, and B would do well to remember that. B says that he next apologised, before explaining his position:

At the present day the most capable provincial president cannot administer his district without an intelligent district secretary, and will always rely upon such a one; the Prussian monarchy requires the analogue in a much higher degree. Without intelligent ministers your Royal Highness will find no satisfaction in the result.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Nor was B finished here, and he went on to belittle the abilities and potential of virtually all of W’s other picks. Where did B get off behaving like this? It is worth asking whether he spoke like this to W at all, certainly this question is posed by Steinberg, who wrote:

Whether B actually said all that we cannot know. The conversation in question took place 35 years before B wrote his memoirs. Had he taken notes at the time? Yet the text itself still startles me. The idea that a 43-year-old ambassador could slander the entire cabinet and insult the Regent with impunity suggest either that B could, and did, get away with anything or that the Royal Prussian Court practiced a tolerance rather unusual among monarchs. Nobody would have dared to say anything like that to Queen Victoria or Napoleon III.[[18]](#footnote-18)

That B could behave like this certainly gels with how he later behaved when at the height of his powers; his love-hate relationship with King W was the key to his success, and he bulled and battered W on regular occasions until both men were reduced to tears. But during his time as MP, W would virtually always give way to B, and perhaps in this case, if we believe B wasn’t telling a bare-faced lie, interactions like these give an indication of what to come in the relationship between master and subject. Certainly B left the audience with W on 26 Jan 1859 feeling more contented than when he entered. He wrote in his memoirs that:

The Prince acknowledged the limitations of the rest [of his ministry]. On the whole he stuck to his endeavour to make me regard my mission to St. Petersburg in the light of a distinction, and gave me the impression of feeling relieved that by my initiative the question of my displacement, by no means cheering to him either, had been kept out of the conversation. The audience terminated in gracious form on the Regent's part, and on my side with the feeling of undisturbed attachment to the master and heightened contempt for the wirepullers to whose influence, supported by the Princess, he was then subject.[[19]](#footnote-19)

It was not the Regent’s fault, B claims – instead W was subject to evil influences, those wirepullers, who had the goal of shunting him off to a far flung post like St Petersburg, where he could not influence the king or hold any meaningful ministry post. On 29 January, his position as the next ambassador to R was confirmed. It was a stunning graduation from the German stage at FF to the world stage of St P, especially for a man who had been in politics less than a decade, and who now embarked on only his second official position. It is equally surprising that the ungrateful B seemed to think only of the cons, rather than seeing his move as a promotion, courtesy of the man who would soon be king. Rather than simply cashier him, and force him into retirement, W had decided, even though he did not trust B, to make use of him in a theatre which could really benefit from his frankness, his evident talent for people and languages, and his single-mindedness in pursuing Prussia’s interests. It’s also worth considering W’s own objectives, since B, a known opponent of A, was now to be sent to a place where, in R, he could cultivate a P-R understanding based on, potentially at least, undermining the A influence.

Whatever the motive had been, even if it had simply been to get him out of the way as B suspected, he would have to obey his master, and he returned to FF in a gloomy mood to pack his things and prepare for the trek to St Petersburg. On 6 March 1959, B left FF for good, never to return to the city which had proved so essential in making him into the politician and realist of such great fame. It would be fair to say that B had grown up in FF; his views had become more nuanced and refined, his abilities given a chance to shine, and his reputation became impressive in itself. He possessed all the qualities required for promotion and advancement, and FF had demonstrated that this official could be directed towards other troubling tasks, to great effect. The FF adventure, often forgotten in considerations of B, represents something of a bygone age in itself – for while B benefited immensely from the experience, few of his successors would ever enjoy such a practical education. Ironically enough, it would be due to B’s own policies and ambitions, that the status of FF changed, and the GC would be reimagined as something far more supreme and impressive – the GE.

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1. Bismarck, *The Man*, pp. 106-108. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibid*, pp. 113-115. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cranckshaw, *Bismarck*, p. 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Taylor, *Bismarck*, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bismarck, *The Man*, vol. 1, pp. 163-164. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid*, pp. 169-170. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid*, pp. 213-214. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The letter is covered in its entirety from Bismarck, *The Man*, vol. 1, pp. 171-180. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See *Ibid*, p. 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibid*, p. 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Ibid*, pp. 202-203. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Ibid*, p. 210. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Ibid*, pp. 215-216. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Ibid*, p. 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Ibid*, p. 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Ibid*, p. 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Ibid*, p. 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Steinberg, *Bismarck*, p. 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Bismarck, *The Man*, vol. 1, p. 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)