WDF Thinks #1: Bismarck Episode Part 2

Welcome to WDF Thinks, the Bismarck special, part 2. Last time we introduced you guys to some important defining theories and issues which clouded the judgement or roused the passions of statesmen in France and Prussia in 1870. This time we put these theories to more practical use – how did both parties react when, for example, the Spanish throne was suddenly up for grabs? Let's find out as I take you to February 1870…

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On 17th February 1870, Spanish officials wrote to Prince Leopold of the House of Hohenzollern, offering him the crown. Bismarck was immediately supportive. In a letter he wrote to Wilhelm detailing the benefits, listing both security and economic reasons. In particular, with a friendly monarch on the throne in Spain, France would have to divert troops to the Pyrenees in case of war with Prussia to guard against attack across its Iberian border. But beyond this, Bismarck also knew that such a move would be a strong provocation vis-à-vis France. Napoleon III, was well aware of the possible strategic implications, having stated a "Hohenzollern prince [on the throne of Spain] will be a dagger at the heart of the French nation."[1]

Moreover, and perhaps of more importance to the troubled French regime, a further Hohenzollern success would represent another loss of French prestige, already reeling from being denied compensation following Prussia's success in Austro-Prussian war of 1866. Should France acquiesce, its leaders could be threatened by domestic outrage; should it stand firm, war might result. Bismarck was likely hopeful for either result. To claim that he did not foresee these possible consequences is, as the historian Otto Pflanze argued, to "make the lion of European diplomacy look like a house cat."[2] A gain in Prussian prestige and French instability was certainly an outcome to be appreciated. War, however, was also not entirely unwelcome. War wouldn't just resemble as a chance to deal a blow to French power, it would also aid in the cause of unifying Germany, for as Bismarck would later write:

> "I was convinced that the gulf which in the course of course of history had opened between north and south in our country, because of differences in ways of life an dynastic and tribal loyalties, could not be

[1] David Wetzel, *Duel of Giants: Bismark, Napoleon III, and the Origins of the Franco-Prussian War* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), pp. 76-77.
[2] Otto Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany: The Period of Unification, 1815-1871* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 459

> more effectively bridged than through a common national war against the traditionally aggressive neighbour."[3]

If we accept this and the credit Bismarck was able to make out of the Spanish throne crisis, our earlier explanations of Bismarck's motives and style make arguably still more sense. When Napoleon III discovered Bismarck's ambitions through an accidental leak in Prussia communications, he immediately saw what Bismarck expected – that the situation was, in many ways, lose-lose. The impetus would be upon France to act, unless of course it could acquire satisfaction by diplomatic means. This avenue compelled the French to use their ambassador in Berlin in his capacity as a familiar guest with Wilhelm to wrest the diplomatic concession they desired – one which would confirm that French power *remained* significant enough that it could force its rivals to back down. It was, in many respects, a familiar tactic – the diplomacy of the big stick or gunboat diplomacy, and it had worked many times before. Through its success, Napoleon could save his regime and prove that French influence still counted for something. If Prussia refused to give satisfaction through diplomacy, *then* war could achieve it through arms, by which point Europe would see that Paris had at least tried to avoid it, but that Prussian intransigence had left it with no choice. Bismarck, of course, was able to spin such events to his own convenience. The French were restricting Prussian and German ambitions, not to mention snubbing the Spanish, by preventing the desired candidate from ascending to that throne. France was threatening Berlin and Germans themselves through this interference, while she also represented a threat to German ambitions by preventing their expansion through marriage – a key aspect of the international system and in many respects a sacred tradition of German stately rulers.

Before such threats could be emphasised, Bismarck had to work behind the scenes to get this eventuality to come to pass. According to family law, Wilhelm I, as head of the Hohenzollern household, had to give his permission for Leopold's Spanish scheme, as did Leopold's father Karl Anton, and all were all initially against the idea. The Spanish throne was not exactly the most secure of European institutions, and it wouldn't reflect well on Leopold or the Hohenzollern family if he were subsequently deposed or worse. But with sufficient prodding, all were eventually—if reluctantly—convinced to assent. On 21st June the negotiations were completed for Leopold to ascend the throne of Spain; all that remained was his approval by the Spanish representative body, the Cortes, several days later, and Bismarck would have accomplished a provocative fait accompli vis-à-vis France. Leopold would be on the throne

[3] Cited in Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany*, p. 366.

before Napoleon could even react, thus forcing that French Emperor to formulate a policy on the fly, which Bismarck predicted would be rash. This rash response could of course be spun to the German people as French interference and prevention on a national scale, and a manifestation of the French threat to Prussian-German securities across the continent. In Paris, of course, the French people would see it as the exact same thing, but only one of these regimes was actually under any kind of threat.

It was of no small help that the French Foreign minister, Antoine Agenor, duc de Gramont, was an easy mark. Gramont was variously described as "vain, hot-headed and chauvinistic,"[4] possessing an "ardent patriotism, readily lead into recklessness, more justifiable in a soldier than a statesman,"[5] and as being "no Talleyrand."[6] The provocation thus fell onto fertile soil: in Gramont what you had was an individual who was likely to experience personal outrage, and who was tied tightly enough to Napoleon's regime that he would transfer this anger to his Emperor. After the news broke, the Prussian Ambassador was summoned to an audience with Gramont, and found him inconsolable with rage. Furious at what he saw as Prussian intrigues, Gramont unleashed a tirade of rhetoric, in the process sending out bombastic memos to French diplomatic posts and encouraging the press to stir up nationalist indignation. He was not alone, however. Gramont found a likeminded ally within Napoleon's regime – the French Prime Minister, Émile Ollivier, a man also vulnerable to provocation, whom one historian described as:

> A man who was not disposed to fight a war over the principle of power politics [but] was perfectly disposed to fight a war over the graver and far more emotional issue of national pride.[7]

Alarmed and angry at the news of Leopold's candidature, he also pushed for a forceful response, and in the speech which Gramont delivered on 6th July to the French chamber, Ollivier would be responsible for some of its most aggressive lines. The speech struck a strident tone, warning that should Leopold not withdraw, "we shall know to do our duty without faltering or weakening."[8] This latter declaration in particular excited French domestic opinion; in the words of the historian David Wetzel, "Gramont's declaration produced a great

[4] Theo Aronson, *The Fall of the Third Napoleon* (London: Cassell, 1970), p. 81.
[5] Emile Ollivier, *The Franco-Prussian War and Its Hidden Causes* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1914), p. 439.
[6] Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Invasion of France; 1870-1871* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 51.
[7] David Wetzel, *Duel of Giants: Bismark, Napoleon III, and the Origins of the Franco-Prussian War* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), p. 28.
[8] William Carr, *The Origins of the Wars of German Unification* (New York: Longman New York, 1991), p. 189.

surge of outraged patriotic feeling; all lesser emotions were laid aside."[9] It also found an echo in the indignation it aroused in *German* public opinion, even in the southern states where the popularity of Prussia had previously been slipping. To really reinforce the point though, Bismarck also pushed the German press to stoke the fires even more: "The newspapers… must be rough and as many of them as possible."[10]

The French resolve displayed strength to its people, but this was a rash policy reaction, one which stoked the fires of a conflict which France was outmatched in, while it also raised the stakes significantly. Napoleon could have demonstrated his regime's strength and stability by *not* reacting; by settling the dispute amicably by way of negotiations with King Wilhelm, not a huge fan of the Spanish throne idea, or with Leopold himself. Failing that, direct pressure on the more malleable Spain would have certainly resulted in Madrid's backing down, and a further diplomatic victory could be assured. Instead, the French upped the ante by almost *daring* Berlin to test it further, and through this they not only greatly aided Bismarck by demonstrating the French tendency to react in the heat of the moment, but the tone of the declaration ensured that France would appear the bellicose party, thus losing the support of other European powers, support that could prove useful should conflict occur.

It is also important to point out the use Bismarck could make from the French repose in another avenue, that of German public opinion. The French stance resulted in a backlash in German media and popular opinion; southern German states that would originally have been difficult to mobilize over the curious issue of a Spanish dynastic succession now weighed in on the side of Prussia. One French official would report back to Paris that, "a hatred of France was being fostered… a contagious hatred, and it would not fail, sooner or later, to become general and sweep over Germany."[11] And Bismarck was quite content to further fan the flames. Consequently, it is difficult to view Gramont's declaration as a rational masterstroke. In the words of another historian, "An emotional spasm, not the dictates of cold logic, lay behind the declaration of 6th July."[12] This French overreaction in the face of outright Prussian provocation through ambition, not to mention Bismarck's evident scheming, meant that Europe would bear witness to a hasty war whose guilt would lay at the feet of France and Napoleon III's regime, as Europe stood aside and Germany unified under

[9] Wetzel, *Duel of Giants*, p. 109.
[10] Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany*, p. 465.
[11] As paraphrased in Wetzel, *Duel of Giants*, p. 153.
[12] Carr, *The Origins of the Wars of German Unification*, p. 190.

Berlin, thus achieving the goal which Bismarck had based his ministry on since the beginning.

However, events did not move so quickly in July 1870 that no opportunities existed to save the pace. We have of course barely scratched the surface of the psychological warfare and intrigue which Bismarck waged on Napoleon III's France even before war was declared on 19th July 1870. There was simply so many layers that I feel it would take an entire podcast to cover them all, or at least a podcast miniseries, and perhaps even a full-blown new podcast. In such a project I would attempt to examine in more detail Bismarck's experiences – his career, his triumphs and his struggles, as well as the qualities which made him a statesman of an incredible calibre. We are not quite finished unravelling the circumstances which led France to declare war; that eventuality is only understandable in light of what we now know about Napoleon's French regime, as we examine the final straw which broke the camel's back – the Ems Dispatch.

It has to be said that the French government did engage in a diplomatic course of action that would be more fruitful: it ordered the French ambassador, Vincent Benedetti, to Bad Ems, where Wilhelm I was convalescing, to press the French case for satisfaction. On 9th July, Benedetti would have the first of several meetings with Prussian king. Wilhelm I, on the one hand, wasn't happy with Gramont's declaration and he now refused to rescind his approval of Leopold's acceptance of the Spanish throne. After some prodding by Benedetti though, Wilhelm indicated that he had been in touch with his wider family members – making them aware of the "excitement" in France – and that he was not totally adverse to Leopold's withdrawal. Notwithstanding Wilhelm's flip-flopping, the Prussian King then admitted to knowledge in the Prussian government of the candidature. Over the following days, Benedetti continued to pressure Wilhelm, and Wilhelm responded that he expected to hear word from Leopold soon. Leopold, however, was away hiking in the Alps, and therefore out of reach. Leopold's father, Karl Anton, was soon to find himself bombarded in Leopold's place by various petitions to renounce Leopold's acceptance, including those implied in messages from Wilhelm that he would not oppose such an action, and he would not be castigated for doing so by the Prussian government. By 12th July, the pressure had finally swayed Karl Anton, and he telegraphed the withdrawal of his son's candidature. In spite of the tumultuous proceedings, it appeared on the surface as though France, as by extension Napoleon III, had acquired diplomatic satisfaction – now there would surely be no need for war.

The French government quickly learned of this victory when it intercepted a dispatch from Karl Anton to the Spanish ambassador in Paris. As Howard observes, "In Gramont's eyes, and those of his supporters, the question of the Candidature itself had thus become second to the more vital point, of obtaining 'satisfaction' from Prussia." In Gramont's mind, affairs in France were at such a level that satisfaction could not be achieved through diplomacy alone, unless the satisfaction was far more total. With this goal in mind Gramont sent word that evening to Benedetti to demand Wilhelm also give his personal assurance as King of Prussia that Leopold would never in the future stand for the Spanish throne again. Obeying his master back in Paris, the following morning a somewhat stressed Benedetti approached Wilhelm I while the latter was out for a stroll. The Prussian King politely declined, making use of his most conciliatory language to do so. As Benedetti began to get somewhat agitated, Wilhelm noted that their conversation was beginning to draw onlookers, so he tipped his hat and withdrew. Throughout the day, Benedetti continued to seek an audience with Wilhelm to further press the issue. This was refused by Wilhelm's staff, but the king engaged in other conciliatory gestures.

He first sent a copy of Karl Anton's letter to Benedetti's hotel, but when this proved insufficient for the French ambassador, he instructed him to tell his government in Paris that Napoleon III had his personal assurance that Leopold would not stand for the Spanish throne. Again, it seemed, French satisfaction had been achieved. Surely Napoleon III and his ministers could not argue that their country's national honour demanded war when the King of their rival stated his willingness to comply – surely this signified that French power was supreme, that it was respected and that it wasn't in doubt? Indeed, given the council's decision, the crisis should have been over. The French side had not only achieved its goal of terminating Leopold's candidature, it had also succeeded in wringing an official approval thereof from the Prussian King. If the story had ended here, not only would Bismarck's schemes come to naught, they would have resulted in a diplomatic defeat for a Prussia that had stood down in the face of French pressure. That the story did not end there has everything to do with the intervention of Bismarck at this critical juncture.

Making the decision to journey to Bad Ems where Wilhelm remained in his estates, Bismarck learned on the journey there on 12th July that Leopold had in fact withdrawn his candidature on the Spanish throne. Since a large reason for his travelling there had been to persuade Wilhelm to break off relations with French ambassador Benedetti, this news seemed to signal defeat for him and his plans. He met the following night in a dark mood with his peers,

determined to implement some damage control on what had occurred and perhaps find a way to elicit a condemnation of French behaviour. Surrounded as he was by arguably his closest allies, Helmut von Moltke and Albrecht von Roon, the Prussian Chief of Staff and Secretary for War respectively, Bismarck conversed with them about the recent defeat and how to come back from it, when a telegraph arrived from Ems describing the morning's encounter in the park between Wilhelm I and Benedetti. Importantly, the telegram also contained a rider that authorized its publication. After asking his guests as to the state of the military should war come with France and receiving an encouraging answer, Bismarck set to creating in this telegram the casus belli which he needed to hand to France.

By removing key lines, what was a relatively harmless description of the meeting between the Prussian monarch and French ambassador was morphed into a tale designed to raise the ire of both French and German readers. For example, the original draft had stated that the German king had chosen "not to receive Count Benedetti again, but to let him know through an aide-de-camp that His Majesty had now received from the prince confirmation of the news which Benedetti had already had from Paris, and therefore had nothing more to say to the ambassador." A straightforward and inoffensive summary all in all. Yet, under Bismarck's pen it became, "His Majesty thereupon refused to receive the French ambassador any more, and instructed the aide-de-camp on duty to say that His Majesty had nothing further to communicate to the ambassador."[13] The historian William Carr noted on the transformed document which would become known as the Ems Dispatch that:

> …all references to the king's conciliatory gestures had been excluded…[the]encounter had been transformed into a brusque confrontation between an ambassador who had overstepped the bounds of propriety with his importunate demands and a highly incensed monarch who had rightly refused further dealings with him.[14]

Yet it was Moltke who put it best when he remarked "it sounded before like a parley; now it is like a flourish in answer to a challenge."[15] And indeed, a challenge is precisely what the Ems Dispatch came to represent. Demonstrating a profound and deep understanding of the French psyche, Bismarck knew that by handing them such a challenge, the French would be compelled to answer it, and he suspected that affairs had by now reached such a point that diplomacy in Paris and to Napoleon III would no longer suffice. As Bismarck himself put it,

[13] Emil Ludwig, *Bismarck: The Story of a Fighter* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1927), p. 355.
[14] Carr, *The Origins of the Wars of German Unification*, p. 198.
[15] Otto von Bismarck, *The Memoirs*, vol. II (New York: Howard Fertig, 1966), p. 101.

the telegram would "have the effect of a red rag upon the Gallic bull…it is important that we should be the party attacked, and this Gallic overweening and touchiness will make us [that]…'[16] Bismarck then set to work ensuring that the dispatch would be free to peruse by publishing it within his favourite newspaper for all of Germany, and of course France, to see.

The events of July had ensured that French officials and public opinion were already on edge, but Bismarck's handiwork added massively upped the ante. PM Ollivier tells us that as he was in the throes of, incidentally, drafting a pacifying message to the legislature, Gramont confronted him: "My dear fellow," Ollivier later quoted Gramont as saying, "you see before you a man who has just been slapped in the face." Gramont gave the impression of a man gravely shocked and insulted. It did not take long before Ollivier himself was also overwhelmed by the same passions. A meeting of the imperial council was called, while the mob surged restlessly outside the chamber, having themselves read and been made aware of the Dispatch. Somehow the assembled officials managed to maintain some clam, deciding to call for a congress of Powers that would settle the crisis, restore French prestige, and avoid war. But such moderation couldn't last in the prevailing atmosphere. Ollivier, upon returning home, was confronted by the opposition of friends and family; Napoleon III faced the wrath of his empress, and began to deeply feel the pressure on a personal level. News of the Ems telegram had also spread through Paris: "a howling mob surged through the boulevards shouting, 'To Berlin!', 'Down with Prussia!', and singing the forbidden 'Marseillaise.'"[17] Both Ollivier and Napoleon subsequently changed their minds on the feasibility of a European congress given popular opinion, and yet another meeting was called. By the following morning the choice had been made for war, and the call for war credits was enthusiastically given in the great wave of emotion washing over the French legislative body.

The popular response was one of great enthusiasm. "The certainty of war was greeted with a roar of approval by the Paris crowd… the city was in a state of delirium."[18] At one point the crowds even sought to storm the Prussian embassy – 'the outburst of national feeling had become uncontrollable." As one witness to the crowds in Paris observed, "The really fine thing…is that there are no longer any party distinctions in Paris…in the Place de la Concorde there more than three thousand people who danced around the column crying, 'vive

[16] *Ibid*.
[17] Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany*, p. 468.
[18] Lawrence Dinkelspiel Steefel, *Bismarck, the Hohenzollern Candidacy: And the Origins of the Franco-German War of 1870* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 208-09.

l'Empereur!'"[19] 'Anyone who mentioned caution', noted the historian Theo Aronson, 'was simply shouted down.'[20] It was above all Bismarck's provocation which transformed a French diplomatic success into an outrage requiring satisfaction. What began as an issue of Leopold's candidature was converted into a different conflict altogether: "a mere withdrawal of the candidature was not enough: Prussia, who had tried to humiliate France, must herself be humiliated."[21] After Bismarck's timely intervention, it was no longer of consequence that the issue itself was settled; French attention in the public, governmental and imperial sphere, became fixated upon immediate satisfaction, and no other option but the blind rush to war became possible.

Blinded by rage and passions in their drive to obtain satisfaction, the French side was overly confident in the face of the risks that war would bring. In a turn of phrase that would haunt him later, Ollivier famously proclaimed that the declaration of war was made "with light hearts."[22] In the original take for the FPW episode 5 years ago, I misunderstood the true reason why Ollivier used such words; the incredible truth is that he spoke in this way because he believed with supreme confidence that victory would be with France, and thus the decisions which led to war need not overly tax its officials – she could proceed with a light heart and light conscience because the ensuing war would be worth it. As Aronson observes, "On July 18—the day of the formal declaration of war—the senators and deputies [were] all aglow with optimism…"[23] When war came, the French government was prepared neither militarily nor diplomatically; they were isolated on the continent and across the world, they were without allies, and they faced a foe that had meticulously calculated its plan of attack. An attack which they had helped fulfil through their desperation for immediate satisfaction, quest for national honour and the vulnerability to manipulation by Bismarck which resulted. The French would have had good reasons to maintain a strong faith in their martial prowess and history of military traditions. However, considering what was at stake, the willingness of the French Emperor and state to proceed alone is remarkable. Consumed by passions, blinded by calls for revenge and bolstered by positive feelings of military superiority, the FPW would erupt amidst scenes strikingly out of odds with the reality of the situation. It was a situation which sucked in Emperor, statesman and citizen alike, and it was a situation almost singularly crafted and manipulated into being, by Otto von Bismarck.

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[19] Theo Aronson, *The Fall of the Third Napoleon* (London: Cassell, 1970), p. 86.
[20] *Ibid*.
[21] Aronson, *The Fall of the Third Napoleon*, p. 83.
[22] Ollivier, *The Franco-Prussian War and Its Hidden Causes*, p. 350.
[23] Aronson, *The Fall of the Third Napoleon*, p. 87

If we come back to the issue which opened our coverage of the outbreak of war – that of anger and how it compels one to do rash and reactionary things, it's worth asking to what extent every actor that professed outrage actually felt thus anger deep down, and if anger at what had been communicated in the Ems Dispatch was the actual reason for war. In short, the question is one of whether the French officials like Gramont and Ollivier chose war because the conflict would be in their interest – the strategic interest of France, or whether war was launched for the emotional reasons we've encountered. Coming to a concise conclusion on this question either way is perhaps the most difficult issue, as we do not have direct access to their thoughts and feelings, and realistically, the true motives for war were probably a mixture of the two concerns of prestige and strategic interest. If one examine the expressions of outrage at the elite level, with Gramont and Olivier being the most prominent examples, it is possible to discern a level of genuine anger which supports the theory that the FPW was launched by France for mostly emotional reasons. A strong argument can be made that both French statesmen, on the basis of their private interactions with one another after the receipt of the infamous telegram, for instance, *did* experience sincere personal outrage. Interestingly for us though, they also chose to declare their outrage more publicly. Such open displays suggest that even if they did not initially feel outrage, they very likely perceived strong social and normative expectations that it should be felt, important political incentives to appear so, or both. This ties into what we mentioned earlier about the importance of getting the population on side, and how such domestic wrangling was critical in order to launch a popular war, which as we know the FPW initially was in France.

We saw how French statesmen debated in the chamber about going to a congress to achieve satisfaction, but circumstances had do deteriorated, along with, perhaps the patience of the French people, that war seemed the most logical, honourable and sensible result. This says as much about Napoleon III's regime as it does about Bismarck's wiles. We know that the Chancellor was able to manipulate the French statesman and citizen by providing him with so profound an insult that only the most severe response could possible assuage the national anger which resulted, and achieve satisfaction. Bismarck never would have been able to do this had he not been able to fully grasp the nature of French politics at this time, the disappointments of the French people or the pressures which its statesmen felt. With his background work thus complete, Bismarck had literally the perfect circumstances for his war – the French people were bombastically positioning themselves to invade Germany, and their

government displayed such naked aggression that it seemed only rational for Prussian and German citizens to join forces against such a rapacious enemy.

Bismarck's genius is found not merely in his understanding of the French psyche, or of his appreciation for how the French governmental system required grand displays of power for the sake of national satisfaction. Those aspects are of course vital, but in my view the Chancellor's true masterstroke was that he was perceptive enough to know precisely when the right time would be to release the Ems Dispatch. That he knew it would so insult French prestige and pride at just the time when the French felt they could least afford such insults; this is what made his diplomatic policy so remarkable. His explicit aim had been to goad France into war, and to manipulate his adversary to achieve a stunning victory and unification of the German people under Berlin. In this, he was utterly successful. It was a victory scarcely imaginable when Bismarck assumed office in 1862, but by the time of his resignation in 1890, it was clear that he had not been one to adhere either to contemporary expectations or the limitations of his office. He was a singularly pivotal character, whose mark on German, European and world history is seems impossible, in its entirety, to fathom; soon though, as per the plans of the Patreon $1k goal which guarantees the release of some form of Bismarckian series, be it in a brand new podcast or ambitious miniseries, I hope to give it a try.

Thanks for joining me in this two-part deep dive examination into the circumstances which brought Napoleon III and Bismarck to war, and I hope you'll join me for the next episode of WDF thinks…whenever in this REM project that may be. My name is Zack and I'll be seeing you all, soon.