Hello and welcome history friends patrons all to the AOB episode 3. Last time, we brought the story up to the late summer of 1865, and we watched as the Austro-Prussian relationship markedly deteriorated, thanks in no small part to Bismarck’s behaviour. We learned that a lack of hard cash moved Bismarck to delay the declaration of war, but although Vienna and Berlin were technically at peace, Bismarck was content to wage a merciless diplomatic war. The walls seemed to be closing in on Austria by the second half of 1865, but she did herself no favours as the axe hovered above her. By agreeing to the Gastein Convention in August, Austria placed itself in the same nefarious camp as Bismarck, and appeared to signal to all the world that she intended to annex the Duchies of Schleswig-Holstein, rather than erect an independent Duchy headed by the Duke of Augustenburg. With her name tarnished, Bismarck appreciated that he could still drag Austria along with him, just as he had done before the Schleswig-Holstein crisis. In contrast to that conflict though, Bismarck would only ride this wave of German cooperation for as long as it suited him. Once the money became available, the so-called Brothers’ War would surely erupt. It was not a question of if, but when, Bismarck would pull the trigger. In this episode, we see Bismarck’s very handsome hand hover over this trigger, but there remained time to worsen Austria’s position even further before the great struggle became official. Let’s continue this story then, as I take you to a fascinating scene in late September 1865.

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On the surface, there was nothing unusual about Prussia’s military might converging for September manoeuvres. These manoeuvres were an annual event, attended by the King and Crown Prince, but there was something different about them this time. The whispers of war with Austria, centred on the fate of the Duchies of Schleswig-Holstein, had reached even the Crown Prince, who pressed Bismarck for insights into his intentions. Frederick, the Crown Prince, was married to Queen Victoria’s daughter, and both Frederick and Victoria Jr had already begun positioning themselves as the liberal alternative to Bismarck’s belligerent preservation of the King’s authority – which meant, of course, Bismarck’s authority. The relationship would enter periods of tension and mutual cooperation in the near future, but in 1865, the Crown Prince was in the same camp as many others who wished to know what the IC wanted.

‘Do you want to annex them?’ the CP asked, referring to the Duchies. ‘If possible, yes.’ Bismarck replied, ‘but I do not want to start a European war over them.’ ‘And if one threatens?’ the CP responded. ‘Well, then I confine myself to the February demands.’ Bismarck answered. ‘And if these are not accepted?’ the CP pressed. ‘Prussia needs to fear no war over these,’ Bismarck said; ‘the February demands are our ultimatum.’ ‘And what is happening about Duke Frederick of Augustenburg?’ the CP pressed again, his friendship with the dispossessed Duke coming to the fore. ‘That depends on how the cards fall,’ Bismarck replied, before the conversation took on a ‘violent character’ according to the witness and chief of the Prussian admiralty, Major Albrecht von Stosch, who recorded the conversation.[[1]](#footnote-1)

There was certainly an opposition party in Prussia which could make trouble for Bismarck, notwithstanding the authoritarian nature of the Prussian state. The Landtag, with its archaic election processes, still produced enough Liberal politicians to complicate Bismarck’s plans, and they received tacit support from the Crown Prince and his English wife. Until he sidelined the Liberals with his dazzling triumphs, Bismarck was forced to confront their influence in the Prussian Landtag, and such efforts could impede his free hand against Austria. Even Bismarck’s banker, Gerson Bleichröder, was opposed to an Austro-Prussian war, as were Bleichröder’s colleagues in business and the Prussian commercial class. Yet, this did not stop Bleichröder from faithfully serving his master. He willingly funnelled four hundred thousand thalers to Hungarian dissidents within the Habsburg lands – hardly the act of a pacifist.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This was representative of the Prussian political body; at this stage they could present stiff resistance to Bismarck’s policy, yet they could also be pressured into acquiescence, were vulnerable to Bismarck’s political intrigues, and could be wooed through a triumphant campaign. Although we’re not greatly concerned with domestic Prussian politics, it is important to clarify some details before we go further, because the situation in 1865 and particularly later in Bismarck’s career show the extent to which he was concerned about domestic politics. Much like foreign policy, Bismarck’s tactics of divide and conquer were successful in domestic politics most of the time, even if they made him few friends. Perhaps Bismarck’s greatest foe during this period were a broad church of Prussian statesmen referred to as the Liberals. In 1865 Liberals had been divided over Schleswig-Holstein’s future. The principle of self-determination had moved them to support the liberation of the Duchies from the Danish yolk, but now that they were under Austro-Prussian control, it was less easy to decide whether this principle should entitle the inhabitants of these Duchies to potentially undermine German unity. Surprisingly, the cause of the Duke of Augustenburg was still the majority wish of the Duchies; Schleswig-Holsteiners were frustratingly resilient, though Bismarck was optimistic that in time, they would see things Prussia’s way. But for now, the question loomed: should the interests of the few in the Duchies be permitted such outsized influence? Not so, insisted some liberals, who argued that notwithstanding the importance of the self-determination principle, German interests were more immediately important. As Otto Pflanze discerned:

To go on record for annexation meant capitulation to the principle of ‘power over right,’ violation of the principle of self-determination, and surrender to the Bismarck cabinet on a vital issue. To reject annexation was to deny Prussia her reward for military success, increase the number of small states, sacrifice the project of Prussian naval power, and lose the chance for progress towards German unity through the expansion of Prussia. The liberals divided according to which of these considerations they gave the greater value.[[3]](#footnote-3)

It was while they were so divided, that Bismarck could conquer these domestic enemies, though it would probably be more apt to deem them irritants, since Bismarck would never have allowed native Prussian figures to stop him when he had the King’s ear. But this appeal to might over right was a guiding theme of Prussian political dissent, and it had a paralysing impact on the liberals who, one liberal editor lamented, had split into ten or twenty little factions, rather than a single united party. The parliamentary session of 1865 was long and intense for these figures, and Bismarck may have intended it this way. Like his foreign policy, his domestic policy aimed at wearing down opposition with endless frustrations and prevarications. But he could also uncoil his rage against those colleagues who refused to fall in line. When one liberal criticised him during a speech in June 1865, Bismarck did not hesitate to challenge that politician to a duel. Though no bullets were fired, many liberals were aghast at this attack on parliamentary freedom. Yet, somehow, perhaps by the force of his personality or the success his policy had brought, Bismarckianism was spreading in the liberal camp. ‘The Bismarck madness is spreading here with every passing day,’ complained a leading liberal, who concluded that there was now only a single question that mattered: ‘for or against Bismarck.’[[4]](#footnote-4) Pflanze, again, captures the sense of exhaustion and hopelessness which the opposition deputies grappled with:

As the years passed, parliamentary life seemed less and less realistic. While the cabinet submitted bills which had no chance of becoming law, the opposition deliberated endlessly upon amendments which had no chance of acceptance by the crown. While the deputies resolved and petitioned, the ministers governed the country independent of every parliamentary influence. Most discouraging of all was the revelation that Bismarck had been right in declaring that the government could carry on war with or without parliament’s consent. What did it achieve to declare ministers liable for the unconstitutional disposal of public funds, when the house possessed no means with which to bring them to account?[[5]](#footnote-5)

What indeed. In retrospect, there does seem to be something futile about the way these parliamentarians deliberated, in the shadow of Bismarck. They were always capable of getting on his nerves, but as he had proved during his conduct of the Schleswig-Holstein war after the dissolution of the Landtag, he did not need them. And if he did not need them, he had no reason to respect any of the vaguely defined prerogatives they possessed, as laid down in the 1848 constitution. Indeed, we have already seen that Bismarck authorised the sale of railways shares without so much as a whisper to the Landtag, despite their supposed responsibility for public money. When in July 1865 Bismarck presented the budget, preapproved by the King, which included increases in funding for the navy, the presentation had the appearance of a royal decree, which those in attendance in the Landtag could not stop even if they had wished to.[[6]](#footnote-6)

So fruitless were these parliamentary deliberations that some of the more radical conservatives in Bismarck’s circle even plotted for a coup d’etat, which involved nothing less than the destruction of the 1848 constitution and a resumption of absolutist rule. King Wilhelm was in favour, as were other conservatives who scoffed at the wasteful procedures of pontificating liberals. Bismarck might be expected to lead this charge, as it would surely grant him even more powers. He had already seen to the steady exclusion of liberals from all positions of importance, and made life miserable for those liberals with business interests. Companies owned by liberals were passed over when it came time to procure military supplies, and Bismarck even managed to arrange for liberal judges to be paid less than their conservative counterparts, a move which even some cabinet colleagues objected to. But regarding a coup, it was Bismarck who held back. While conceding that Prussia’s constitution was in need of amending, and was far from ideal, he was not yet ready to terminate it altogether. In fact, as we will see, Bismarck had something even more ambitious in mind – a new constitution which would take Prussia’s mastery of Germany into account. But this, of course, would have to wait until Berlin had achieved this mastery by defeating Austria on the battlefield.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Interestingly, contemporaries did agree that whatever the future of the Duchies, this future must be favourable to Prussia, and many journals took the February Conditions of 1865 as the basis for their positions. These conditions, we’ll recall, had detailed the circumstances in which Bismarck claimed he could tolerate a medium level of Schleswig-Holstein independence. Until the Gastein Convention signalled the imminency of annexation later in the year, the February Conditions presented several attractive propositions, including the empowering of the Prussian fleet at Kiel, which many liberals wished to see realised. It may surprise us to learn that Augustenburg himself instructed his supporters to accept these conditions in March 1865, despite the fact that he had rejected them when Bismarck was presented them to him in person the previous summer.

Perhaps, Augustenburg had come to terms with the likelihood of his limited independence. But his cause continued to wither, in Otto Pflanze’s view, as Bismarck continued to chip away at his position. An audacious ruling by Prussia’s Crown Syndicate judged that the King of Denmark had been in fact been the lawful ruler of the Duchies, and since he had ceded these rights to Austria and Prussia in the peace agreement, this meant it was for Berlin and Vienna to decide on the Duchies’ future. This stunning legal argument directly contradicted the original cause of the Schleswig-Holstein war, which had been fought to combat the Danish King’s violation of treaties which had provided the Duchies with nominal independence. I know, I know, we’re back to the nitty gritty of Schleswig-Holstein again, but the details are less important that the consequences. The above legal exercise had in fact been undertaken to sooth King Wilhelm’s conscience. Wilhelm would now be assured that he was acting within the bounds of legal propriety, however true that actually was in reality.[[8]](#footnote-8) For Bismarck, this veneer of respectability was important if he was to maintain the support of his King. It was less important to be respectful when dealing with Austria itself.

Early in 1866, with Austro-Prussian tensions increasingly drawing foreign comment, Bismarck was visited by a ghost from his past – Ludwig von Gerlach. We met the Gerlachs in our BR series, but for a refresher course, in his earlier days, Bismarck had relied upon the connections and advice of the Gerlach brothers, who represented the far right of the Conservative King’s party in the Landtag. The Gerlachs were joined by other high-ranking Prussians who had adopted Pietism, an evangelical Christian sect, and were influential figures in Wilhelm’s court. Seeing in their energetic protégé both a sincere faith and an inherent conservatism which they believed could be useful to their political interests, the Gerlach brothers realised too late that Bismarck was not the man he had once seemed, if he had ever been that man in the first place. As Leopold had since passed away, it was up to his brother Ludwig to meet with Bismarck, and to remind him of the true imperatives of a conservative Prussian statesman, not to mention the imperatives of his faith, before it was too late.[[9]](#footnote-9)

But it was already too late to make Bismarck the posterchild of pious Prussian conservativism. Even by 1857, Bismarck had apparently dispensed with the Gerlachs after disagreements over Prussian foreign policy, among other issues. The traditionalist Gerlachs had long upheld the threat posed by revolutionary France, yet Bismarck, almost from the beginning, rejected these conventions. What was more important, Bismarck asserted, was the interests of the Prussian state, and how she could arrange combinations of powers that might compliment those interests, inclusive of France. Such sentiments were representative of a new diplomatic style, *Realpolitik*, and it is worth reminding ourselves of the contents of one letter in particular which Bismarck sent to the Gerlachs on 2 May 1857, wherein the guiding principles of this new ideology were effectively set down. Bismarck wrote:

France only interests me as it affects the situation of my Fatherland, and we can only make our policy with the France that exists. Sympathies and antipathies with regard to foreign powers and persons I cannot reconcile with my concept of duty in the foreign service of my country, neither in myself nor in others. There is in them the germ of disloyalty to the lord or the land which one serves. As long as each of us believes that a part of the chess board is closed to us by our own choice or that we have an arm tied where others can use both arms to our disadvantage, they will make use of our kindness without fear and without thanks.[[10]](#footnote-10)

This was the essence of Bismarck’s diplomatic style which generations of historians have found so fascinating since. To even suggest accommodation with Napoleon’s France when the Napoleonic Wars were still fresh in the mind was itself revolutionary, but Bismarck understood that if Berlin was to seize the mantle of Germany from Vienna, she must not restrict herself in seeking allies elsewhere. This correspondence between the Gerlachs and Bismarck continued, until Leopold von Gerlach was urging Bismarck to visit him, so that they might resolve their differences. It does appear that the Gerlachs genuinely wished to retain Bismarck’s friendship, but Bismarck’s showed his coldness even when much love was expressed by the Gerlachs for his person. Three years after the above letter, Bismarck sent another on similar subjects in May 1860, saying:

You want to have nothing to do with Bonaparte or Cavour as a matter of principle. I want to avoid France and Sardinia, not because I think it wrong, but because in the interests of our security I consider them very dubious allies. Who rules in France or Sardinia, once the powers have been recognised, is absolutely unimportant to me, a matter of fact not right or wrong. France would be of all possible allies the most questionable, although I must keep the possibility open, because one cannot play chess if 16 of the 64 squares are forbidden from the beginning.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Leopold’s death in 1861, from a cold he caught at the late King’s funeral, did not move Bismarck either, and he remained icy towards his former mentors. Much like Bleichröder, the Gerlachs do not receive a mention in Bismarck’s memoirs, despite their role in securing Bismarck his postings to Frankfurt and probably St Petersburg. Bismarck, the thankless student, felt no obligation, even out of a sense of respect, to humour these beliefs. He had a destiny, and a state to run, and nothing could come in the way of these imperatives. So we return to the scene in early 1866, when Ludwig von Gerlach tried again, this time in person, only to come away more assured than ever that the old pupil had changed. The years spent climbing the political ladder and leading Prussia had changed Bismarck, Ludwig lamented:

He was tense and passionately worked up. I warned him against so deeply disastrous a war…and I pleaded with him to continue our personal relationship, a plea he ignored. There was an air of restless desperation about him. He spoke of God and of prayer: the matter was one between God and himself, not between friends and political associates.[[12]](#footnote-12)

By God, Crankshaw discerned, Bismarck meant destiny. Ludwig decried the change in his old protégé; Bismarck’s faith was now gone, replaced with a cold, calculating ruthlessness, and he had seemingly replaced God with the pursuit of raw power. Bismarck was forever to deny that he was anything but a Christian, but he did keep his faith far removed from his political career. Ludwig, as leader of Evangelicals in Prussia, must have found this an immensely painful pill to swallow. But for Bismarck, the act of severing his old acquaintances seems to have barely fazed him; he burned those bridges which had helped him rise from a country Prussian Junker into the most powerful man in Germany, and he did not even stop to glance to the other side, to reflect for a moment on those who had brought him to such heights of power. On the eve of this great test of wills with the great Austrian nemesis, Bismarck broke these final links to his old life, and in his mood, he prepared the ground for war. Otto Pflanze summarises the situation for us by this point:

For more than two years Bismarck had exploited the Austrian desire for cooperation with Prussia, repeatedly tricking and forcing Vienna into abandoning its vital interests, while he steadily advances, step by measured step, those of Berlin. Constantly aggressive, he invariably depicted himself as on the defensive; always injuring, he continually assumed the role of the injured; ever working for the upset of the status quo, he steadily posed as a genuine conservative. For Austria it was a long story of futility and frustration. Her protests were met by declarations of innocence and indignation, her attempts to temporize and delay by the threat that Prussia would act alone, her efforts to halt Prussian encroachments by the charge that they endangered the monarchical cause. But at last in the winter of 1865-1866 Bismarck reached the line of hard resistance. What he could not achieve through popular will in the duchies and further capitulation in Vienna, he now resolved to acquire through violence.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Bismarck’s activity in the opening months of 1866 demonstrate the extent to which he was prepared for this final extremity. Sufficient cash had now come in, and the Austrian alliance had outlived its usefulness. There remained to sever the final links between the two states, and increase the temperature still further, to see what else could be gained. The first opportunity, as was now customary, came in the Duchies. Specifically in Holstein, where the Austrian governor unwisely permitted a pro-Augustenburg demonstration to take place. Bismarck reacted violently to this news, and on 23 January, sent off a harsh note which was as close to an ultimatum as had yet been seen. It demanded Austria ceases with its aggressions, and that those democratic and revolutionary displays be quashed in Holstein, or Prussia would consider its alliance with Vienna at an end. The Austrian reply on 7 February was apologetic, but negative, and a few days later the Austrian ambassador in Berlin reported an ‘ominous stillness’ in the Prussian court. Considering the months of loud public agitation, this silence was certainly unnerving, and suggested that the Prussian planning had kicked into high gear. ‘The polemic between Vienna and Berlin,’ Bismarck was reported to have said, ‘is now at an end.’[[14]](#footnote-14)

On 15 February 1866, Lord Augustus Loftus presented his credentials to the Prussian court. As the new British ambassador to Berlin, he could be expected to have an important role in the preservation of a German peace, which London had, for now, an interest in preserving. But Loftus was not optimistic. He left his friendly meeting with Bismarck, reporting that the atmosphere was ‘loaded’ and ‘smelled of powder.’[[15]](#footnote-15) He was more correct than he could have imagined. Barely a fortnight later, a Crown Council meeting of 28 February gathered to discuss the looming storm Bismarck had fanned into being. If ever a Crown Council meeting could be described as a war council, this was it. Perhaps the starkest anecdote came when King Wilhelm spoke to the assembled notaries. As Pflanze discerned, Wilhelm’s remarks demonstrated ‘how well he had learned the lessons Bismarck had drilled into him.’ Bismarck was only too happy to agree. Prussia’s mission was the leadership of Germany, and Vienna had repeatedly blocked this cause. War was now only a matter of time. But, where once such talk would have put everyone’s backs against the wall, now the reception was one of acceptance, with a tint of resignation.

One cabinet member helpfully pointed out that a victorious war would shatter the liberal opposition once and for all. This was a good by-product, Bismarck replied, but was not the main motive for an Austro-Prussian war. Revealingly, among those assembled only Crown Prince Frederick spoke in favour of avoiding hostilities. But, all this being said, there was room for optimism in the peace party. As Bismarck admitted, anything could happen in the next few months, and although the King was in favour of war, he was not advocating its imminent declaration, but for Prussia to act as though war was coming soon. It was possible that the French Emperor could pull a rabbit out of a hat. Austria might capitulate again, removing the need, and also, the excuse, for war. Efforts to secure an Italian alliance could also fail, which would throw a wrench in Bismarck’s strategic plans to distract Austria in the south while he attacked in the north. This was also a pressing concern for Moltke, who would be responsible for conducting the war, and understandably wanted to seize upon every potential advantage.[[16]](#footnote-16)

But Moltke need not have worried. As February 1866 gave way to March, Bismarck authorised two important initiatives. The first was for King Wilhelm to write to Napoleon III, and offer up a limited Franco-Prussian entente. There wasn’t much flesh on the bones of this idea, but it was worth presenting it in Paris, should Napoleon surprise Berlin with another change in mood. In fact, Napoleon was under increasing pressure to act by his own courtiers, particularly his wife. The offer was not given much consideration in Paris, but Napoleon would return this offer with a request of his own in the coming weeks. More important than these French dalliances was the strategic imperative of an alliance with Italy.

Efforts to this end had been made before, but the Italians tended to demand a high price, namely a rigid commitment which assumed upon the imminent eruption of war. Before 1866, Bismarck wasn’t quite ready for such a stringent commitment, not least because King Wilhelm had yet to be convinced. But the early spring of 1866 demonstrated that the King had been persuaded of Austrian perfidy. In fact, time would tell that Bismarck’s persuasion offensive had been too effective, and he would have to work very hard when the fighting ended to rein his monarch in. On 14 March, the Italian general Giuseppe Govone arrived in Berlin, and entered the Wilhelmstrasse, which happened to be across the road from the Austrian embassy. The Austrian ambassador, Count Karolyi, watched anxiously out his window as the Italian came and went, likely wondering what it all meant, but surely fearing deep down that his darkest fears of Habsburg encirclement could soon be realised.

Had Count Karolyi known the truth – that Bismarck had entirely co-opted Italian support for the war to come, complete with a timetable, which stipulated that if Prussia went to war within three months, the Italians would join them – then he may have had a nervous breakdown.[[17]](#footnote-17) By formalising such an alliance, Bismarck had taken the most important step towards pushing the snowball down the hill. In the months that followed, it was only to be expected that this snowball would grow in speed and size, until it became an avalanche that drowned Austrian efforts to preserve peace. Vienna had been approached through several avenues in previous years, and as recently as the previous summer, had rejected an offer of 500,000 francs in return for Venetia. Similarly, pressures to concede Holstein, to sell it to Berlin, had been repeatedly floated, yet Austria refused to relent, seeing these transactions, rightly, as symptoms of weakness.

But a display of weakness was surely better than a catastrophic defeat. Indeed, by cementing this alliance, complete with its countdown clock, Austria would now be forced to choose. Would it preserve its Italian possessions, or its German position? Could it possibly do both? Emperor Franz Josef deluded himself into believing that Austria could manage a two-front war, so long as France and Russia remained aloof. This was a supreme mistake, in Crankshaw’s view, and to Otto Pflanze, yet it is understandable, and also representative of Habsburg attitudes towards concession and disgrace, which were tragically maintained right up to 1914.[[18]](#footnote-18) In the next episode, we will continue our analysis of these intense days of confrontation, as the clock continued to count down towards the German brothers’ war. Until then though, thanks so much for listening to and supporting this show. I have been Dr Zack, and I’ll be seeing you all soon.

1. Recorded in Steinberg, *Bismarck*, p. 235. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Stern, ‘Bleichröder,’ 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Pflanze, *Bismarck*, vol. 1, pp. 268-269. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid*, p. 275. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid*, p. 275. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid*, pp. 275-276. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid*, pp. 276-277. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Crankshaw, *Bismarck*, p. 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Steinberg, *Bismarck*, pp. 193-194. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Quoted in *Ibid*, p. 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Quoted in *Ibid*, p. 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Quoted in Crankshaw, *Bismarck*, p. 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Pflanze, *Bismarck*, vol. 1, p. 261. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Pflanze, *Bismarck*, vol. 1, p. 261. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Ibid*, p. 284. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Ibid*, pp. 284-285. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Crankshaw, *Bismarck*, p. 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Crankshaw, *Bismarck*, p. 174; Pflanze, *Bismarck*, vol. 1, p. 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)