

2015/6/4: Bismarck as a strategist

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Thoughts about the area of tension of politics and the military in interplay with Chief of General Staff Moltke

Eberhard Birk/Peter Popp

Publications on Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898) have always been in great demand. Depending on the taste of the authors, on the investigated foreign or home political subject, and on time spirit, they oscillate between the apotheosis of a master of (diplomatic) foreign, power or "realistic" politics and perdition, even diabolisation as a reactionary squire, who founded a German "special way". Even in the year of his 200th anniversary he is still fascinating as the "demon of the Germans", although in the beginning nothing hinted at his role concerning the development of Prussia, Germany and Europe in the 19th century. This was valid at least until the 23rd September 1862, the day when he was appointed provisional Prussian Prime Minister, and at this time already it was intended to appoint him Prussian Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs two weeks later on 8th October 1862. No matter how one appraises Bismarck – in retrospect, the 23rd September 1862 was to go down in the history of German parliamentarism as "dies ater". At the same day, the Prussian House of Representatives rejected all disbursements for the military reform. Thus, the Prussian military and constitutional conflict began, and it was on the 30th September 1862 already that Bismarck left no doubts as to how he intended to solve this conflict. In front of the budget commission of the Prussian House of Representatives he said the famous words – which were not directly documented in the shorthand report: "The great issues of the time are not decided by speeches and majority decisions – this was the big mistake of 1848 and 1849 – but by iron and blood". The following years were to prove that not the parliament, but Bismarck determined the military and constitutional conflict. On 3rd December 1850 at the latest, Bismarck was in the limelight of "large-scale politics", when he, rhetorically dexterously, converted a Prussian defeat into a victory: On that day Bismarck defended the Punctuation of Olmütz with which Austria and Russia prevented an expansion of the Prussian empire, which Prussia had tried to gain with the Erfurt Earls' Union. The German Federation, a product of the Viennese Congress, thus persisted thanks to the shared intervention of Austria and Russia, without having been ended before by the revolution of 1848/49 and by the previous Prussian striving for power. In the end Bismarck achieved 1866/67 something in which the Prussian Monarch Friedrich Wilhelm IV. had failed: the neutralisation of the factor "Austria" as an active value in shaping German conditions. Against the background of these "strategic" disputes between Bismarck and General Field Marshal Helmuth Graf von Moltke (1800-1891), the following results can be considered: "Whereas Moltke always classified war and peace as military scenarios, Bismarck classified them in scenarios of applicable politics." In this respect, for Moltke strategy was always genuinely defined militarily, but for Bismarck, on the other hand, the military was one of several factors within the scope of his (foreign) political perceptions of a general strategy.