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A Reply to Josef Becker's Response

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The issues raised in Professor Becker's paper bear directly on the claims that the Franco-Prussian War can make for its place as the most critical war of the mid-nineteenth century. These points must be debated, if not resolved, if this subject is to continue to exercise its hold on international historians—as well as, one may add, on non-historians, interested in the past, concerned to know whether the past can help the present, and bewildered by disputes among the experts. Yet there is only so much an expert—or someone vain enough to fancy himself as such—can do. Simply put, to treat this whole subject in a graceful and coherent form within the limits of a single article in a journal of this nature would surpass the capacity of this writer. He can only attempt, as a starter, to sketch out what he takes to be the main thrust and balance of Franco-Prussian relations in the weeks preceding the outbreak of the war of 1870, and to give at least a partial elucidation of the problem by commenting on several aspects of it, without attempting to bring all of these individual comments into one, comprehensive statement.

I wish to begin by again paying tribute to the erudition that is reflected in Professor Becker's paper. As with everything else he writes, the style is sober, the scholarship profound, the sources exhaustive and up to date. Reading his reply to my review has not brought me to regret or to change here a single word of what I said there. What he has produced here is indeed a fine and impressive article, and one that fills a gap of high importance in the historical record of late-nineteenth-century Europe. It is hard to think of anyone who could have brought to the task of writing it the experience, the insights, the sensitivity, and the analytical scrutiny Josef Becker has given the subject. There have been others who have analyzed from a different point of view what he has written about, but few of these have done it as well, and fewer still have brought to the subject the scholarly detachment, the breadth of judgment, the background, and the integrity that have gone into his work. The mastery of many of the materials treated, the boldness of statement, the relative freshness and directness of style, and the subtle undertone of much of the argument—all these are the hallmarks of Becker's scholarship. But here, as in my earlier review of his work, I will, mindful of his outstanding intelligence, literary talent, and scholarly diligence, continue to discuss the places where the two of us differ and where I find his arguments problematic.

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A misdiagnosis of Hohenzollern candidacy is the first of what this writer sees as three serious difficulties in Becker's position. The second serious difficulty of his position is the excessive importance it ascribes to the actions of Bismarck; it makes him the implacable enemy of France, bent on provoking the showdown that could alone complete the unification of Germany. This is Bismarck's propaganda—witness the statement in his memoirs that he always believed that "a Franco-German War must take place before the construction of a united Germany could be realized."[1] The third difficulty in Becker's position is his belief that all the problems in Franco-Prussian relations proceeded overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, from Prussia's, or—to be accurate, Bismarck's—side of the line.

To start with the first difference: Becker's view assumes that the Hohenzollern candidacy was an ideal way to provoke a war with France against Prussia; it would enlist German pride, German national feeling, German sensitivity, and provide a clear *casus belli* for the South German states. The argument is a difficult one for this writer to accept. The candidacy was very unlikely to remain secret and did not do so. It was a secret that the French were waiting to pounce on. They deliberately allowed the scheme to ripen precisely in order to blow it up at the right time—it was no bomb,[2] but confirmation of a long-standing rumor. But beyond this, everyone in Europe assumed that Bismarck was behind it; it was equally assumed by everyone that it represented a dynastic interest for Prussia and not any German national cause; and, not least, that it was an unacceptable challenge to France. The Austrians, for example, saw it as a blunder of the first order that their Bavarian allies should use to reinterpret their treaties with Prussia.[3] The Hohenzollern candidacy was a scheme that France could easily defeat, as it did. Bismarck's calculation that the candidacy would not provoke a war with France turned out to be correct. Leopold withdrew his candidacy on July 12, and the French declared war on Prussia a week later.

Still, in this writer's view, the issue is not whether Bismarck was morally and politically capable of trying to maneuver France into a war (Professor Becker convinces me that he was) or whether he entertained the hypothetical possibility of trying to do so in 1869 under conditions very different from 1870 and against

[1]Bismarck, *Die gesammelten Werke*, 15 vols., 1st ed. (Berlin: O. Stolberg, 1924–35) (hereafter cited as *GW*), vol. 15, 282. As A. J. P. Taylor once remarked, this is evidence of what he thought in 1892, not in 1870; *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 202, note 2.

[2]See Antoine Agénor, duc de Gramont, *La France et la Prusse avant la guerre* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1874), 14; Émile Ollivier, *L'Empire libéral*, 18 vols. (Paris: E. Dentu, 1895–1918), vol. 14, 20; Lynn M. Case, *French Opinion on War and Diplomacy during the Second Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1954), 241. The French had known about the candidacy at least as early as March 1869. David Wetzel, *A Duel of Giants: Bismarck, Napoleon III, and the Origins of the Franco-Prussian War* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 53.

[3]See Paul W. Schroeder, "The Lost Intermediaries: The Impact of 1870 on the European International System," in *Systems, Stability, and Statecraft*, ed. Schroeder, with an introduction by David Wetzel, Robert Jervis, and Jack S. Levy (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 93.

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a danger—a Russo-French war and/or an offensive French-Austrian-Italian alliance against Prussia, neither of which were live possibilities in 1870, as Bismarck knew. The issue is, rather, why Bismarck, after clearly dropping the Hohenzollern candidacy in 1869,[4] suddenly returned to it in late February 1870 and why he would use this extremely fragile, dubious, and dangerous device to provoke a war with France at this particular time—namely, why on March 9, 1870, he threw off a pose of indifference and wrote a powerful memorandum to the king, advising him of the opportunities that awaited Prussia if a Hohenzollern prince were to mount the throne of Spain.

How to account for this change of front? The memorandum to his sovereign is, in the view of this writer, an inadequate explanation. It was written for effect, not to reveal the workings of Bismarck's mind. Thus Bismarck pointed out the economic advantages that would accrue to Prussia if there were an increase in trade with Spain. Aside from this, refusal of the offer risked a turn by the Spaniards to the house of Wittelsbach of Bavaria which would raise the danger of a Catholic league against Prussia. Spain under a German prince might arrest any French aggressiveness in the eastern question. There was also a motive with respect to South Germany, but here, too, Leopold would be a deterrent against France. The French, he pointed out, would be pinned down on their Spanish frontier and thus unable to march on the Rhine. The Hohenzollern candidacy, far from being designed to launch a war against France, would complete the unification of Germany without a war.[5]

In any case, Bismarck's memorandum of March 9, 1870, (anticipated as Becker shows by a document the minister president of the North German Confederation wrote to his ambassador to St. Petersburg exactly one year before) by no means impressed William. In fact, it was dismissed out of hand and virtually passed over in the critical discussion that took place with the Sigmaringens on the evening of March 15. The king's objections to the candidacy centered not on the likelihood that it would result in war with France, but rather on the pain that would be inflicted on the family by the separation from it of one of its proudest sons. The game was, in William's view, simply not worth the candle, and here the king was on solid ground. One cannot understand this

[4]Bismarck did not pursue the candidacy consistently and unwaveringly. When Marshall Prim, head of the Spanish regency, offered the throne to Leopold in September 1869 and the latter turned him down, Bismarck professed himself satisfied with the result. Eberhard Kolb, *Der Kriegsausbruch 1870. Politische Entscheidungsprozesse und Verantwortlichkeiten in der Julikrise 1870* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1970), 23; Hans-Otto Kleinmann, "Die spanische Thronfrage in der internationalen Politik vor Ausbruch des deutsch-französischen Kriegs," in *Europa vor dem Krieg von 1870*, ed. Eberhard Kolb (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1987), 142–43. Gordon A. Craig, *Germany 1866–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 22.

[5]Bismarck to William I, March 9, 1870. Bismarck, *GW,* vol. 6b, 268–71. See also Josef Becker, ed., *Bismarcks spanische* "Diversion" *1870 und der preußisch-deutsche Reichsgründungskrieg*, 2 vols., vol. 1, *Der Weg zum spanischen Thronangebot. Spätjahr 1866–4. April 1870* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2003), vol. 1, 343–52.

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situation unless one understands the immense and hopeless bitterness by which the various Spanish political factions were divided from one another at this time. Between the nobility, the monarchists, and the officer class on the one hand, and the republicans on the other, there was a gulf so profound, so deep, that one can describe the situation only as one of latent civil war. Spanish society had really come apart—in the most serious way. Even among the various elements there was simply no bond of confidence whatsoever. Even the fact that all were Spaniards appears to have meant nothing, except insofar as it made the treachery and duplicity even more heinous than would otherwise have been the case. It is a disturbing experience to read the memoirs of the various Spaniards who were politically active at that time. Such a thing as charity or sympathy or human understanding concerning the judgment of others simply didn't enter into the picture. Political opponents are invariably portrayed as fiends in human guise, devoid of redeeming characteristics. The memoir's author is left as the sole repository of decent instinct, clear vision, and a love of humankind.[6]

To return to the memorandum of March 9, 1870: the most interesting aspect of this curious document—to which the king affixed marginalia expressing disagreement—is what it does not say. It makes no reference to the state of affairs in French politics, but there is good reason to suppose that what was uppermost in Bismarck's mind were developments that had taken place in France. The hardliners in the French government had vividly in mind the disaster of 1866 and wanted no part of responsibility for anything resembling its repetition. An influential group of politicians, including the empress herself, was pressing for an active foreign policy, especially for an Austrian alliance. What concerned Bismarck most in 1869 was not that their plans for foreign policy were dangerous—he knew that they were not—but that they might be strong enough to prevent Napoleon III from adopting a favorable line toward German unification.[7]

In January this situation suddenly changed when Napoleon III, crowning his liberal expedients, summoned to the head of his government Émile Ollivier, the leader of the opposition and, more important, a man whose sympathy for German unification was marked and pronounced.[8] Bismarck knew this and,

[6]See, for example, Ildefenso Antonio Bermejo, *Historia de la interinidad y guerra civil de España desde 1868*, 3 vols. (Madrid: R. Labajos, 1875–77); Wilhelm Lauser, *Geschichte Spaniens von dem Sturz Isabellas bis zur Thronbesteignung Alfonsos*, 3 vols. (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1877); Antonio Pirala, *Historia contemporánea*, 6 vols. (Madrid: F. Gonzalez Rojes, 1875–80), vol. 2, *Guerra civil* (1876). An excellent modern treatment is to be found in Javier Rubio, *España y la Guerra de 1870*, 3 vols. (Madrid: Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Secretaría General, 1989). All the diplomats of Europe were aware of the anarchy. See, for instance, Dubsky (Madrid) to Beust, February 9, 16, and 22, 1869, vol. XXVI, Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv. Politsches Archiv, Vienna.

[7]István Diószegi, *Österreich-Ungarn und der französisch-preußische Krieg 1870–1871* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1974), 13–22; also valuable: Émile Bourgeois, *Rome et Napoleon III, 1849–70, Études sur les origines et la chute du Second Empire* (Paris: A. Colia, 1907).

[8]Theodore Zeldin, *Émile Ollivier and the Liberal Empire of Napoleon III* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 172.

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quick to demonstrate his goodwill, on January 24, 1867, blocked the appeal of Baden—the most liberal of the four states south of the Main River, for membership in the North German Confederation, a stroke of policy that, incidentally, brought down on his head a storm of criticism from nationalists and militarists.[9] Bismarck was unmoved. He said to his minister in Karlsruhe, "You know how firmly we have kept our common goal [of German unification] in view, but you also know how carefully considered the motives are by which we choose our course and measure our pace."[10]

Over the course of the next two months, events stood this view of French policy on its head. On May 8, a plebiscite invited the French voters to evaluate the liberal reforms introduced by the constitution of 1870, and the vote could hardly have been more gratifying to Napoleon III, as even Ollivier bore witness when he wrote, "The strength given to the government by this vote is such that the emperor can with impunity commit any possible mistake and remain unshaken on the throne."[11] This prospect to the realization of which Bismarck could not have been more adamantly opposed was soon followed by another. In the spring of 1870, Napoleon III dismissed Count Napoleon Daru, his cool-headed foreign minister, and replaced him with Antoine Agénor, the duc de Gramont, a formidable and flamboyant figure, an advocate of a hard line, and a staunch supporter of an alliance with Austria (of which and of whom more later). To Bismarck, the implications could not have been clearer. It was now a matter of the utmost urgency to discredit in their infancy the tendencies of the new chauvinistic French government. This the Hohenzollern candidacy would accomplish.[12]

This objection to Becker's picture of the Hohenzollern candidacy is closely linked to a second, more important, one—namely, that of Bismarck's personality. Becker's interpretation of Bismarck's aims makes him not the vigorous, shrewd, politically skillful *Realpolitiker* of 1862–67, carefully exploiting opportunities others created for him, always leaving himself room for maneuver, delay, and even, if necessary, retreat, never closing off alternatives until he had to, but instead a reckless gambler risking everything on the throw of the dice. Instead of the wily diplomat using the foibles of others to his end, it makes him a kind of

[9]Adam Wandruszka, "Zwischen Nickolsberg und Bad Ems," in *Reichsgründung 1870/71. Tatsachen, Kontroversen, Interpretationen*, ed. Theodor Schieder and Ernst Deuerlein (Stuttgart: Seewald Verlag, 1970), 51–52.

[10]Bismarck to Fleeming (Karlsruhe), February 28, 1870, Bismarck, *GW,* vol. 6b, 261–62.

[11]Amédée Achard, *Souvenirs personnels d'émeutes et de révolutions* (Paris: M. Lévy Frères, 1872), 266.

[12]Pierre Renouvin, *Histoire des relations internationales*, vol. 5, *Le XIXe Siècle, vol. 1, De 1815 à 1871* (Paris: Hachette, 1954), 378–79. And, one might add, Bismarck had good reason to suppose that Napoleon III would never go to war. His record over the previous fourteen years supports this conclusion. He had disappointed his allies by pulling out of the Crimean War prematurely after making what his allies considered an unsatisfactory peace. He had done the same thing in the Austro-Sardinian War of 1859. He had come close to war in 1866, but had shrunk from it. See Norman Rich, "Bismarck and the War of 1870" (unpublished paper, Brown University, 1963); Wetzel, *Duel*, 94.

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puppeteer pulling the strings, fully confident that he could make others respond just as he wished.[13]

In glancing, for the moment, at the subject of Bismarck's personalia it may be well to note a quality of his that runs contrary to widespread popular notion. Bismarck was not strictly speaking a German nationalist. He was a loyal servant, albeit a talented and high-powered one, of the Prussian crown under which he was born and to which he conceived himself to owe allegiance. When he opposed the views of the monarch, as he did on this occasion, he did so on behalf of what he considered the true interest of the monarchy. The new North German Confederation was a political arrangement he found necessary to create in order to assure what he believed to be Prussia's place in the central European scheme of things. Once created, the North German confederation had to be protected, and it was to this protection—against a nightmare of possible losses, such as the loss of Bavaria and with it South Germany to Austro-French influence, interference, and intervention, to take just one example—that Bismarck's diplomacy was directed.[14]

In any case, Bismarck was always too keen a diplomat to wait for a crisis to blow up behind his back, and if he really foresaw war in 1870, he would never have left Berlin, where he controlled the situation. Instead, he remained far away at Varzin, his estate in east Prussia, four hundred miles from the capital, from April until July 12, except for three days in May when he addressed parliament and two in June when he and William hosted a visit to Prussia by the Tsar of Russia. At this meeting there was no talk of a coming war—no appeal for Russian support from the Prussian side, no promise of help for the Prussians from Russia. Instead France was crossed off the agenda entirely.[15]

Still, the most important and critical difference between Becker and myself is his failure, in my view, to take under detailed scrutiny the decisions of the senior authorities at the Paris end. Central to his argument is the charge, often made by others, that in designing, organizing, and putting into motion the Hohenzollern candidacy, Bismarck was seeking to draw down upon the head of the French government a humiliation from which its officials could escape only by launching a war against Prussia. But surely this is lopsided. If the French wanted to avert war they could easily have done so—by directing their wrath at Spain, the wise rule in cases like these.[16] Alternatively, they could, as will be shown, have used

[13]Paul Schroeder makes the compelling case that Bismarck "was gambling less to gain a prize, the unification of Germany, than to avert a loss, the possible defection of Bavaria to Austria." See P. W. Schroeder, "International Politics, Peace, and War, 1815–1914," in *Europe, 1789–1914: The Nineteenth Century*, The Short Oxford History of Europe, ed. T. C. W. Blanning (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 180.

[14]Ibid., 180.

[15]What dominated the meeting was Alexander's desire for a plebiscite in North Schleswig, where the Danes were a majority. Bismarck, *GW*, vol. 6b, 315–17.

[16]The British did this all the time—e.g., in Portugal (1833); Greece (1850).

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the candidacy to strengthen their relations with the states of South Germany—this was precisely the course being urged upon them by the Austrians. But from start to finish the object of French policy, or rather those who gained the upper hand in directing it, was to force a confrontation with Prussia, not to avert a Hohenzollern king of Spain.

Among the architects of this policy there was none for whom this aim was more definitive, more final, and more sweeping than Antoine Agénor, the duc de Gramont, mentioned above. One marvels that a paper so scholarly, so meticulous, so well-informed on the source material as Josef Becker's undertakes to analyze the Hohenzollern candidacy and crisis of July 1870 without a single reference to what this writer sees as the great seminal event of the drama—namely, the Gramont declaration of July 6. In my years of studying the origins of the Franco-Prussian War it has been borne in upon me to what overwhelming extent the determining phenomena of those days and indeed the Franco-Prussian War itself were the products of that declaration, unquestionably the major component out of which the fateful situation of 1870 was constructed. It is to this declaration and its effect on the supremely sensitive matter of relations between France and Prussia that the following paragraphs are addressed.

Outstanding among the declaration's characteristics were its threats, insults, and intimidations too numerous for recapitulation here, but its climactic ending was given in words so vivid and striking that they must be quoted at length.

> We do not believe that respect for the rights of a neighboring people obliges us to endure that a foreign power seating one of its princes on the throne of Charles V may upset to our disadvantage the present equilibrium in Europe and place in jeopardy the honor and the interests of France. . . . We shall count on the friendship of the Spanish people and *the clear-sightedness of the German people*. If it should prove otherwise, fortified by your strength, gentlemen, and that of the nation, we know how to fulfill our duty without hesitation or weakness.[17]

Here was a clear, public, affirmation that Prussia was behind the candidacy and that France would fight if Prussia did not get Leopold to withdraw his acceptance.

In the accounts of the undertakings and affairs of the two governments in the wake of Gramont's declaration, we will find at every hand evidences of growing division and polarization of opinion, approaching at times dimensions of a massive official schizophrenia and occasioning suspicions and antagonisms of the most tragic intensity. But it is questionable whether anyone, confining himself to the limits of a single article, could do justice to the incredible

[17]There are many sources for Gramont's declaration. The present writer follows the one in Pierre de la Gorce, *Histoire du Second Empire*, 6 vols. (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1894–1905), vol. 6, 227. Note that Gramont makes the invidious distinction between the *friendship* of the Spanish people and the *wisdom* of the Germans. My italics here and above.

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welter of suspicions, accusations, reticences, blackmailings, evasions, and dramatic moments that went to make up this extraordinary document. This writer, in any case, has no such pretensions. But again, a word or two of comment may nevertheless be useful to the reader at this point.

First, the Gramont declaration was a dramatic public gesture delivered before the tribune of the French parliament; its brazen challenge to Prussia had the effect of shutting off or rendering ineffective private diplomatic communications. If, as Bismarck claimed, the matter was a family affair, what better time to embarrass him than by asking him to use its good offices to bring about Leopold's withdrawal? But beyond that the reader will note that Gramont raised the stakes ruthlessly and dramatically almost to the point of no return—either withdraw the candidacy or face war with France.

Second, the declaration effectively undercut the French case, very strong hitherto, at the courts of Europe. In the words of the British foreign secretary, Earl George Granville, "Her Majesty's Government very much regret the language by the duke of Gramont and wonder whether so strident a tone will lead to complications more serious than the incident itself."[18] As in London, so in St. Petersburg. On July 7, the French minister, General Maurice Fleury, had received secret instructions from Napoleon III to bluster—in effect, to warn Tsar Alexander II and his minister, Alexander Gorchakov, that if Prussia insisted on going through with the candidacy, "this means war." Napoleon III hoped that this threat would bustle the Russians into action against Berlin. The hope was disappointed. Fleury minuted, "Prince Gorchakov has told me that while, understanding the sensitivities of France, he very much regrets the communication made to the chamber by the duke of Gramont and believes that it will widen the gulf between France and Prussia and add to the difficulties of accommodation."[19]

Third, it was precisely because of Gramont's declaration that France became the egocentrical, the embattled empire, and Gramont became the victim of his own militant propaganda. He then tended to attach to the French cause an absolute value that distorted his own vision of everything else. France's enemy became, in his eyes, the embodiment of evil. His own side, on the other hand, was the center of all virtue. The contest came to be viewed by him as having a final, apocalyptic quality. If France lost, all was lost, life would no longer be worth living; there would be nothing to be salvaged. If France won, then everything would be possible; all problems would become soluble; the one great source of evil—her enemy—would be crushed; the forces of good would then sweep forward unimpeded; all worthy aspirations would be satisfied—this was precisely how

[18]La Vallette to Gramont, July 17, 1870, *Les Origines diplomatiques de la guerre de 1870–1871*, 29 vols. (Paris: Le Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, 1895–1918), (hereafter cited as *OD*), 28: 102.

[19]Fleury to Gramont, July 11, 1870, ibid., 221.

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Gramont viewed the Hohenzollern candidacy.[20] The verdict is indeed harsh but surely not unjust. The Gramont declaration was a tactlessness of gigantic dimensions: a gratuitous affront to a sensitive people, not even warranted from the French standpoint, and bound to burden further a relationship already grievously encumbered with bitter memories and resentments.[21]

Gramont's appalling professional and personal deficiencies were everywhere at hand in the sequel to the declaration—namely, the negotiations between Edouard Count Vincent Benedetti, his ambassador to Berlin, and King William of Prussia—that took place at Ems from July 9 to 13. There stood in these a real opportunity to resolve the crisis. Benedetti was a diplomat of superior mind and character, eager to engage the king and bring the nightmare to an end. William, on this side, had disliked the scheme all along and wanted to wash his hands of it. Bismarck was, for his part, far away at Varzin and had virtually given the candidacy up for lost. But what of Gramont? How did he deal with the compelling and lucid messages of his ambassador? He dealt with them quite simply—either by ignoring them or dismissing them as insignificant for the larger purpose he wished to achieve all along: a resounding humiliation of Prussia. Let us take a few instances.

1. After sending Benedetti a conciliatory dispatch couched in the language of diplomacy on July 7,[22] Gramont later that same day fired off to his ambassador a message with instructions that undercut to the letter those he had just given a few hours before and, a more important point, ones that could not have been more explosive. "It is absolutely vital that you obtain from the king a *categorical* declaration that flows from the force of the present circumstances. The Government of His Majesty is to declare that it no longer approves of the candidacy and disavows it. No equivocation or delays are to be permitted, and in case of refusal, *c'est la guerre*."[23]

2. Two days after the dispatch of this message, William I saw Benedetti in his palace at Bad Ems and spoke to him with much frankness and earnestness about the state of Franco-Prussian relations. He was obliged to see in Napoleon III a man who did not want war, but the same could not be said of some of the leading members of the French government. He admitted, as Benedetti had expected he would, that he had, as head of the house of Hohenzollern, not as king of Prussia, approved of Leopold's decision. Twice during this interview, Benedetti reported, William had notified the Sigmaringen princes of the war

[20]See the devastating justice to the declaration by Albert Sorel, *Histoire diplomatique de la guerre franco-allemande*, 2 vols. (Paris: E. Plon et cie., 1875), vol. 1, 77–78. Master historian that he was, he was only too aware of the seeds of danger this so obviously misguided and self-destructive chauvinism carried within itself.

[21]Ibid., 172–23.

[22]Gramont to Benedetti, July 7, 1870, *OD*, 28: 89.

[23]Benedetti to Gramont, July 7, 1870, ibid., 91.

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scare to which Leopold's acceptance of the Spanish throne had given rise, and promised to keep him, Benedetti, informed of developments as they unfolded.[24] Benedetti, a man deeply committed to the successful resolution of the crisis, was not discouraged by what he heard. He telegraphed to Paris on July 9, "I see for my part nothing objectionable for the king first to take soundings of the Hohenzollern princes before making their decision known to me."[25]

Gramont's reaction was curt and ill-humored: "The negotiations are off to a bad start."[26] Gramont's opinions and prejudices, once formed, were not easy to shake. But Benedetti was surely on solid ground when he gave it to his government as his own opinion that William had been exposed to so much abuse by the French press—this itself a direct result of the declaration of July 6 and one, one may add, that was easily foreseeable—that he had to take care not to be seen as surrendering to French pressure and threats.[27]

3. This did not matter to Gramont. At 1:25 on the afternoon of July 10, he put a new message on the wire to Benedetti: "Send me as soon as possible some communication that I can deliver to the floor of the chamber that the king of Prussia has *explicitly authorized* the acceptance of the throne by the prince of Hohenzollern and that he has requested your good offices in negotiating with him."[28] In other words, Benedetti was instructed to furnish information that could be used not for diplomatic purposes but for domestic political ones.

4. On July 11, Gramont, his policy crumbling in his hands, rounded on his ambassador and descended to personal abuse: "Up to the point at which we have now arrived, I cannot hesitate to inform you that your language has, with relation to firmness of tone, not represented the position assumed by the emperor's government. Make it more emphatic. We cannot admit the distinction between the king and his government that has been suggested to you. We demand that the king forbid the prince to persist in the candidacy."[29]

The decisive moment was reached on the morning of July 13 when Benedetti stationed himself in the path on the Brunnenpromenade, that long stretch of street on which William took his daily morning walks, and presented to the king Gramont's demand for guarantees for the future: not only must William secure Leopold's withdrawal of the candidacy—something on which he had been laboring mightily all along—he must promise the French government that it would never be renewed. The details of the conversation that followed are too well known to require recapitulation here. For our purposes what

[24]Benedetti to Gramont, July 9, 1870, ibid., 151–52.
[25]Ibid.
[26]Gramont to Ollivier, July 9, 1870. Gramont Papers. Forty-five Archives privées. Archives nationales, Paris.
[27]Vincent Benedetti, *Ma mission en Prusse* (Paris: H. Plon, 1871), 322.
[28]Gramont to Benedetti, July 10, 1870, *OD*, 28: 184.
[29]Gramont to Benedetti, July 11, 1870, ibid., 222.

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mattered most was not the morning conversation but an event that took place later on that afternoon. William, wishing as ever to appear sensitive and high-minded, dispatched an aide to Benedetti's hotel with a message of crucial significance. Benedetti reported to Paris, "The king has authorized me to tell you in his name that he gives his approval *entière et sans réserve* to the resignation of the prince of Hohenzollern; he is unable to do more.[30]

If the French had wished to end the crisis, this statement from the king—expressed in words that could hardly have been more straightforward or precise—would have enabled them to do so. William could not guarantee the future, but his approval of Leopold's withdrawal could not have been more emphatic or unconditional—exactly what Gramont had demanded in his letter of instructions to Benedetti on July 7. Benedetti's message produced an uproar in Paris. Its effect was to cause a break at the joint between the senior officials of the French government. Ollivier, for example, greatly heartened and excited by this news, believed that it opened the door to a peaceful resolution of the crisis and later claimed he knew that there were at least four other ministers who felt the same way.[31] But strong and unsatisfied impulses still gnawed at the hardliners, and these were the ones who ended up getting the upper hand. Outstanding among them, it will not surprise the reader to learn, was Gramont who belittled William's concessions as a triviality. He complained to Ollivier, "The king has communicated the Hohenzollern letter to us and says he has approved, but what does that amount to?"[32]

As for Bismarck, he was, as of July 12, still at his estate in Varzin, frustrated and ill. His behavior at the time was far from his later claims to a far-sighted policy, as he himself bore witness when on, July 15, with war certain, he read a sentence of Luther's and underlined it in his family Bible: "In this affair no sword can advise or help. God alone must create here without human effort."[33]

On the night of July 13 Bismarck at last made his appearance on the public stage with his famous editing of the telegram that William had sent him about his encounter with Benedetti at Ems earlier that day. Bismarck's manipulation of the Ems telegram was one of the great set pieces of which he and his family never wearied, and Bismarck's version of what happened improved with each telling. Becker, using as support the work (among others) of William L. Langer, is of the view that Bismarck's version of the Ems telegram is entirely fictitious.[34] This writer could not agree more. But he is not aware of any

[30]Gramont to Benedetti, July 10, 1870, ibid., 307.

[31]Ollivier, brown notebook, n.d. (probably from 1872), Ollivier Papers, privately held, La Moutte and Paris.

[32]Gramont to Ollivier, July 13, 1870, *OD*, 28: 309.

[33]Psalm 44:7 and Hosea 1:7.

[34]William L. Langer, "Bismarck as a Dramatist," in *Studies in Diplomatic History and Historiography in Honour of G. P. Gooch, C.H.*, ed. A. O. Sarkissian (London: Longmans, 1961), 209.

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assertion by Langer that supports Becker's conclusion that "the switches were set in Berlin for war" by July 12. The crucial point Langer makes in a second article, entitled "The Red Flag on the Gallic Bull: The French Decision for War in 1870," is that the Ems telegram played no serious role at all in the deliberations of the French government, and that the document and the uses to which it was put by Bismarck were considerations that the French brought in afterward to justify what had already been decided. An examination of the evidence available with regard to the source and authenticity of Langer's belief would itself constitute a scholarly exercise of major proportions and would far surpass the scope of this inquiry to which it is (really) only incidentally related. Suffice it to say that the Ems telegram was an unquestionable affront to France. But, and here I think Becker would agree, to move from this to the assumption that the French, in the actions that they took after the telegram, were acting solely or even primarily under the influence of this document, is surely to go too far. By the time they had learned of the true version of the telegram—there were, swirling in the heated capital on the night of July 14 at least five of them (by this writer's count)—their minds had been made up: they were bent on war.[35]

I cannot leave the subject of the Gramont declaration without drawing attention to the great political formation it unleashed in an area of Europe crucial to French success—namely, the states of South Germany. The declaration played into Bismarck's hands; it effectively estranged from France those states at the very time that they were threatening to break themselves free of Prussian control. The most damning indictments of the Gramont declaration—and indeed Gramont's whole policy—are not the ones most frequently heard: that it united both North and South Germany against France, that it convinced Bismarck that the French were bent on a public humiliation of Prussia, and that it therefore allowed Prussia to present itself as defender of the German national cause (though, of course, it did all of these—and more). It is rather that Gramont could well have used the Hohenzollern candidacy to consolidate the French position with the states of South Germany at a time when opposition to Prussia was running at an all-time high—when the Patriots who controlled the Bavarian *Landtag* had repudiated the military budget, when Bavaria's finance minister was claiming that Bavaria had no money, when the democrats of Württemberg were calling for citizen-style militias to take the place of the army, when the liberals of Baden were vilifying Bismarck as a traitor, when the treaties that bound the South German states to Prussia were being everywhere roundly denounced, and when many of the diplomats of Europe were

[35]William L. Langer, "Red Flag on the Gallic Bull: The French Decision for War in 1870," in *Europa und Übersee. Festschrift für Egmont Zechlin*, ed. Otto Brunner and Dietrich Gerhard (Hamburg: Verlag Hans Bredov-Institut, 1961), 135–54. The article argues that the French, not the Prussians, caused the war of 1870.

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still wringing their hands over a crisis from which there appeared to be no escape.[36]

But Gramont threw it all away. At no time did he consider using the crisis as a means of strengthening the states of South Germany against Prussia—a key factor in driving them into Prussia's arms. But this was precisely the policy that was being urged upon him by Friedrich Ferdinand von Beust, chancellor of Austria-Hungary, and Otto von Bray-Steinberg, prime minister of Bavaria, referred to above. But their counsel was brushed off by Paris, and it is no exaggeration to say that no serious effort was ever made by Gramont and his colleagues to weigh and hear on its merits the case they sought to present. As Paul Schroeder has pointed out, one can only note the striking contrast between the determination with which the rulers of Bavaria and Württemberg struggled to maintain their independence between 1800 and 1820 and the speed with which this determination melted away in the July heat of 1870.[37]

A man more concerned for the state of Franco-Prussian relations, or one inclined to allot a higher priority to diplomatic considerations in relation to domestic-political ones, might have taken Beust's and Bray's warnings at their true worth. Gramont did not do so. His bluster, the parliamentary declaration of July 6, his more extreme demands for guarantees six days later, the demands that led to the Ems telegram, and finally a demand that William apologize to Napoleon III for having caused the crisis—all these threatened South Germany far more than they did Prussia, whatever Bismarck might say. For their effect was to make war all the more likely, and all the more likely, too, the prospect that these vital actors, upon whose independence France's security had for centuries depended, would be swept away in the ensuing violence, chaos, and destruction. Gramont, in other words, cut the ground out from under the feet of the very men who had fought union with Prussia and who had risked everything to prevent it. Hence the bankruptcy of his policy. As for Bismarck, his problem was not so much to bring the states south of the Main River into the North German Confederation—that he thought would happen in any case. It was rather to ensure that they entered as members loyal to the house of Hohenzollern, not on a basis of popular enthusiasm.[38] That

[36]Max Spindler, *Handbuch der bayerischen Geschichte*, vol. 4 (Munich: Beck, 1967), 268–69; Dieter Langewiesche, *Liberalismus und Demokratie in Württemberg zwischen Revolution und Reichsgründung* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1974), 420–23; Heinz W. Schlaich, "Bayern und Deutschland nach dem Prager Frieden," in *Gesellschaft und Herrschaft. Forschungen zu sozial- und landesgeschichtlichen Problemen vornehmlich in Bayern. Eine Festgabe für Karl Bosl zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Richard van Dülmen (Munich: Beck, 1969), 301–308; Wolf D. Gruner, "Bayern, Preussen und die süddeutschen Staaten 1866–1870," *Zeitschrift für bayerische Landesgeschichte* 38 (1974): 799–927.

[37]Schroeder, "Lost Intermediaries," 91.

[38]Benedetti was convinced to the end that Bismarck and William would not provoke a crisis by crossing the Main. They would let the states of South Germany come to them. Benedetti to Daru, February 25, 1870. *OD*, 26: 318.

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he was able to turn the tables on Gramont and to break the resistance of the South is testimony to his diplomatic genius. It is by no means uncomplimentary to that genius to say that it was the historic blunders of the French statesmen in July 1870 that brought him this success.[39]

This is not to suggest that the French statesmen had clear, hard choices to make. Obviously any French policy in July 1870 had to be carried out with both steel and velvet. And, of course, there are limits to speculation. All one can do is to point out that, with respect to the crisis of July 1870, there was an alternative to the policy followed by the French rulers, that that alternative was on offer, that it would clearly have been the wiser course, and that it would have produced dramatically different results. The value of counterfactual reason is not, to cite Paul Schroeder yet again, to elucidate what might have happened but to find out what did.[40] In any case, this paper contends that the motives of Bismarck in July 1870 were somewhat different from those Josef Becker and others sometimes ascribe to him. It is admittedly dangerous to speak with too much confidence when dealing with Bismarck's intentions, but the argument made here is surely more plausible than the one often made—and made by Bismarck at the end of his life—that, after 1866, war between France and Germany was inevitable. Belief in the inevitable was not characteristic of Bismarck. The inevitable, in any case, rarely happens in the world of real life.

So much for the differences between Becker and me. But I do wish to end by making it clear that I regard him, as have so many others, as a truly great and remarkable scholar. What I said in my review I must be allowed to repeat here. My disagreements with him are secondary; my admiration for what he has achieved in his tremendous documentary collection, decisive. His paper here reflects the qualities that make up that achievement. It has purveyed to us an extraordinary amount of evidence. Josef Becker has unearthed it, pondered it, and presented it in a lucid and coherent form. It reflects the wisdom of a conscientious scholar, accumulated over many years of intimate involvement with Bismarckian affairs—as editor, commentator, and educator. Were there to be an official body of senior historians of Bismarck, Josef Becker would certainly be a charter member. For this, and for the concern he shares with so many thoughtful people, his work not only deserves the attention of the serious reader but will, one may safely predict, continue to be regarded as a model and a challenge.

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[39]Schroeder, "Lost Intermediaries," 91.

[40]Paul W. Schroeder, "Embedded Counterfactuals and World War I as an Inevitable War," in Schroeder, *Systems, Stability, and Statecraft*, 158–60.

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