

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Bismarck and the Ems Dispatch

### Part A.

**Directions:** Read the following selections from Otto von Bismarck's autobiography, and list reasons why Bismarck altered the telegram.

... During our conversation [with Count Moltke] I was informed that a telegram from Ems, in cipher, if I recollect rightly, of about 200 "groups," was being deciphered. When the copy was handed to me it showed that [Heinrich] Abeken [Councillor of the Legation of the North German Confederation] had drawn up and signed the telegram at his Majesty's command, and I read it out to my guests, whose dejection was so great that they turned away from food and drink. ...

In view of the attitude of France, our national sense of honor compelled us, in my opinion, to go to war; and if we did not act according to the demands of this feeling, we should lose, when on the way to its completion, the entire impetus towards our national development won in 1866, while the German national feeling south of the Main, aroused by our military successes in 1866, and shown by the readiness of the southern states to enter the alliances, would have to grow cold again. ...

... All these considerations ... strengthened my opinion that war could be avoided only at the cost of the honor of Prussia and of the national confidence in it. Under this conviction I made use of the royal authorization communicated to me through Abeken, to publish the contents of the telegram; and in the presence of my two guests I reduced the telegram by striking out words, but without adding or altering. ...

After I had read out the concentrated edition to my two guests, Moltke remarked: "Now it has a different ring; it sounded before like a parley; now it is like a flourish in answer to a challenge." I went on to explain: "If in execution of his Majesty's order I at once communicate this text, which contains no alteration in or addition to the telegram, not only to the newspapers, but also by telegraph to all our embassies, it will be known in Paris before midnight, and not only on account of its contents, but also on account of the manner of its distribution, will have the effect of a red rag upon the Gallic bull. Fight we must if we do not want to act the part of the vanquished without a battle. Success, however, essentially depends upon the impression which the origination of the war makes upon us and others; it is important that we should be the party attacked, and this Gallic overweening and touchiness will make us if we announce in the face of Europe, so far as we can without the speaking tube of the Reichstag, that we fearlessly meet the public threats of France."<sup>1</sup>

1. Why did Bismarck choose to have the telegram altered?

<sup>1</sup>Otto von Bismarck, *Reflections and Reminiscences*, ed. Theodore S. Hamerow (New York: Harper & Row Torchbooks, 1968), 185-88.



**Part B.**

**Directions:** Compare the two versions of the Ems dispatch. Be prepared for class discussion.

**Text from Abeken**

July 13, 1870

His Majesty the King writes to me: "M. Benedetti [the French ambassador to Germany] intercepted me on the Promenade in order to demand of me most insistently that I should authorize him to telegraph immediately to Paris that I shall obligate myself for all future time never again to give my approval to the candidacy of the Hohenzollerns should it be renewed. I refused to agree to this, the last time somewhat severely, informing him that one dare not and cannot assume such obligations *à tout jamais*. Naturally, I informed him that I had received no news as yet, and since he had been informed earlier than I by way of Paris and Madrid he could easily understand that my Government was once again out of the matter."

Since then His Majesty has received a dispatch from the Prince [Charles Anthony]. As his Majesty informed Count Benedetti that he was expecting news from the Prince, His Majesty himself, in view of the above-mentioned demand in consonance with the advice of Count Eulenburg and myself, decided not to receive the French envoy again but to inform him through an adjutant that His Majesty had now received from the Prince confirmation of the news which Benedetti had already received from Paris, and that he had nothing further to say to the Ambassador. His Majesty leaves it to the judgment of Your Excellency whether or not to communicate at once the new demand by Benedetti and its rejection to our ambassadors and to the press.

**Altered Text from Bismarck**

After the reports of the renunciation by the hereditary Prince of Hohenzollern had been officially transmitted by the Royal Government of Spain to the Imperial Government of France, the French Ambassador presented to His Majesty the King at Ems the demand to authorize him to telegraph to Paris that His Majesty the King would obligate himself for all future time never again to give his approval to the candidacy of the Hohenzollerns should it be renewed.

His Majesty the King thereupon refused to receive the French envoy again and informed him through an adjutant that His Majesty has nothing further to say to the Ambassador.

1. What was altered?

2. How did the changes made by Bismarck affect the meaning of the dispatch?