

## THE DANISH-GERMAN WAR OF 1864 AND BRITISH POLITICS

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In 1863, Denmark and the German powers found themselves engaged in a series of conflicts that led to the outbreak of the Danish-German War of 1864. The effects of this war were not confined to the countries directly involved in combat, but spread to Great Britain and had a significant effect on British politics. In the face of the growing conflict, lack of a decisive policy by the British Prime Minister, Viscount John Palmerston, caused a great deal of discussion in the press and in public meetings, and finally led to his near censure by Parliament. Even Queen Victoria was affected by the war and her interference was responsible for the Government's lack of a decisive policy.

In order to understand the effect of the war on the British, it is necessary, first, to examine the nature of the Schleswig-Holstein problem. The issues involved are complex and difficult to understand. Viscount Palmerston stated that only three men had understood the problem and all its intricacies: the first was the King of Denmark, who had died; the second was an unidentified Danish Minister, who had gone insane thinking about it; lastly, there was Palmerston himself, who had forgotten it (1). Because of its complex nature, it is doubtful whether very many members of the British public or Government actually understood the true nature of the conflict.

The major cause of the problem was that the King of Denmark was also the Duke of Schleswig-Holstein. The population of Holstein was German, while Schleswig was a border area with mixed German and Danish populations. The claims of the Danish King to the Duchies can be traced back to the time of Queen Margaret in the Middle Ages. After the close of the Napoleonic wars, he was awarded Holstein as a partial compensation for the loss of Norway to Sweden. Since Holstein was a part of the German Confederation, the Danish King was represented in the German Federal Diet at Frankfurt am Main (2).

The problem would have been less dif-

ficult had the matter of succession not entered into the already complex affair. The Duchies were under the rule of the Danish King, as Duke of Schleswig-Holstein, and were not considered a part of Denmark. The Danish Kingdom was under the *Lex Regia* law of succession of 1665, and the royal line could be transmitted through the female branch of the royal family. The Duchies were not, however, under this law, and, thus, the nearest male heirs to the Danish King, the Princes of Augustenburg, had a legal claim to rule over them (2, p. 5).

In January, 1848, King Christian VIII died, thus ending the Danish royal line based on male succession. In March, the new ministry in Copenhagen, installed as a result of the Revolution of 1848, announced that the Duchies were to be united with Denmark under a new constitution. This caused the Germans in the Duchies to revolt and to set up a provisional government at Kiel. There followed a short war between Denmark and Schleswig-Holstein, which had the support of the German Confederation and Prussia (3). The war was ended with the signing of the London Protocol of May 8, 1852 by England, France, Sweden, Denmark, Austria and Russia. This Protocol guaranteed the union of the Duchies, recognized the heir to the Danish throne, Prince Christian of Glücksburg, as sole inheritor, and guaranteed that the Duchies would never become a part of the Kingdom of Denmark (4). As a corollary to the Protocol, Prince Christian of Augustenburg renounced his claims to Schleswig-Holstein (5).

The issue was not solved by the London Protocol and it became a major problem in 1863. A crisis developed on March 30, when King Frederick VII issued a proclamation claiming Schleswig as a part of Denmark proper. On July 6, the German Federal Diet demanded the renunciation of this announcement. On August 28, the Danish King rejected the German demands and proclaimed, on September 28, to a specially called Danish Parliament, the uni-

fiction of Schleswig with Denmark under a new constitution. On the same day, the German states issued a demand that this action be rescinded or the invasion of Holstein would follow. Ignoring the German threat, the Danes approved the new constitution on November 13 (6). Two days later, the king died and Prince Christian of Schleswig-Holstein-Sønderborg-Glücksburg ascended the Danish throne (7).

The new king adopted the proposed constitution and the conflict intensified. The German states claimed that the unification of Schleswig with Denmark and its separation from Holstein under the new constitution was a direct violation of the London Protocol, thereby nullifying it and justifying a German invasion of Holstein and a renewal of the claims of the Prince of Augustenburg. The Federal German troops consequently entered Holstein on December 7, 1863 (5, pp. 170-171). On December 31, Prince Friedrich of Augustenburg proclaimed himself the rightful Duke of Schleswig-Holstein (8).

The reports contained in the British press emphasized the popular support given to the Duke upon his entrance into Holstein. One magazine reported that with the departure of the Danish troops rejoicing broke out and national flags flew from every window (9). Another reported popular demonstrations in favor of the Duke, the covering of the walls with signs welcoming him, and violence against persons with known pro-Danish feelings (8, p. 42). This pro-German attitude on the part of the press soon changed, however, into one violently anti-German.

The reason for this change in attitude was the Austro-Prussian ultimatum to Denmark on January 16, 1864, which demanded the revocation of the new constitution within 48 hours. On January 21, the Federal troops, composed of Saxon and Hannoverian detachments, were joined in Holstein by those of Prussia and Austria (5, p. 169). On February 1, the Prussians entered Schleswig (10), and on February 18 they crossed into Jutland at Kolding (11). Meanwhile, the Danes had withdrawn into the fortress at Düppel, which fell on April 18, after a long Prussian siege, during which time the village of Sonderborg had been bombarded, and one-third of the town destroyed (12).

The Prussian involvement in the war caused a wave of anti-German feeling to sweep England. Most Englishmen forgot about the complexities of the situation and only saw it as a battle between a weak nation, Denmark, and two great powers. One British newspaper stated that all concerned persons should be disturbed to see little Denmark attacked by such a strong combination as Prussia and Austria. A leading magazine maintained that the Danes had done everything possible to avoid war, and that Austria and Prussia had actually attacked Denmark, not because of the failures of the Danes, but because of the demands of the German masses (13). Even *Punch* departed from its usual humor to denounce the Germans for their "plunder and slaughter of the Danes" (14).

The press was not alone in its statements of sympathy for Denmark and condemnation of the Germans. There was an outcry of support of the Danes from many members of the British public. The strongest expression of support for Denmark came from Ireland where a group of "Cent Guards" volunteered their services to the Danish King, who wrote a letter of thanks but declined the offer (15). Other British subjects chose other expressions of support for the Danes. Several groups were occupied in gathering funds for Danish relief. One of the first of these was headed by the Marquis of Clanricarde (13, p. 141). On March 1, the *Times* reported that the "Relief Fund for the Wounded Danes and the Families of the Fallen," under the leadership of A. Westerhale, had sent 2,333 Pounds to the Central Committee for Danish Relief in Copenhagen (16). Another 1,000 Pounds was sent to the Danish capital by the Liverpool Danish Relief Fund (17).

The Prussian attack on Düppel, and the bombardment of Sonderborg that accompanied it, enhanced the development of pro-Danish feeling in England. Even such a Germanophile as Queen Victoria wrote a letter of protest to her daughter, Victoria, the Prussian Crown Princess (18). *Punch* suggested that an artist paint a picture of the "mangled mass of raw flesh and blood" as a fitting memorial to the work of the Austrian Kaiser and the Prussian King. *Punch* informed the monarchs, "Your Majesties cannot conceive the dis-

gust and detestation with which your outrage on Denmark is regarded" (19).

It is a mistake to assume that the pro-Danish movement represented all British subjects. Some were very openly pro-German. In March, 1864, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* carried a letter pleading the German case. The unnamed author expressed the idea that the Schleswig-Holstein problem was the result of an oppressed nationality seeking self-determination, and that if the people of the Duchies were given a chance to choose their ruler they would, without hesitation, choose the Prince of Augustenburg. This writer believed that the affair was not directly the concern of the British, and that it was wrong to consider the possibility of going to war to defend the right of the Danish King to rule over the Germans in Schleswig-Holstein (9, pp. 388-393).

There were also Englishmen who simply advocated a policy of non-intervention. This view found its largest following in the city of Manchester, where the mayor called a meeting to discuss the dispute and to formulate a petition to Parliament. T. B. Potter introduced a resolution stating that the London Protocol of 1852 did not obligate the British to go to war for Denmark and petitioned the Government and Parliament to adopt a course of non-intervention. The resolution was adopted by a large majority and sent to London (20).

The official position of the Government was unclear. Viscount Palmerston at first seemed to take a pro-Danish stand. After the Germans issued their demands, he made a speech in Parliament in support of the Danes and stated that if Germany adopted a policy of force "it would not be Denmark alone with which they would have to contend" (21). Palmerston's strong statement led many to believe that the Government would stand behind the Danes and was quoted many times in the debate over the Government's policy.

The major criticism of the Government was that it did not inform the public of its position. One magazine expressed the feelings of many when it stated, "We seek in vain for the guiding principle of British foreign policy (9, p. 383)." This complaint found its way into Parliament and a long debate took place over the delay in publication of the record of the diplomatic cor-

respondence concerning the affair. The major leader of the opposition was Benjamin Disraeli who, in a speech in the House of Commons on February 22, demanded that the Government inform the people of its position and cease all delay in the publication of the records. Disraeli took the position that it was the duty of the members of Parliament to seek information on the subject and that it was also their right to receive it (21, CLXXXIII, col. 873). In response to the criticism against its policy, the Government held that a publication of the diplomatic correspondence would harm the chances of the ministry to carry on successful negotiations. The Government maintained that its policy toward the war should not be a matter open to parliamentary debate (21, CLXXXIII, col. 1618).

Some members of the Parliament, reflecting the opinions of their constituents, demanded drastic actions. Typical of this school of thought was Lord Cambell, who demanded that the British fleet be sent into the Baltic as a demonstration of British support for the Danes (21, CLXXIV, col. 732). Lord John Russell, Foreign Minister, answered for the Ministry with a statement that, before action of this nature should be taken, the Government needed to make a serious study of the situation (21, CLXXIV, col. 755). Russell also pled the presence of ice floes on the Baltic as a major reason why Cambell's plan would not work (21, CLXXIV, col. 760).

The debate in Parliament reached its conclusion on July 4, when Benjamin Disraeli gave a speech in which he denounced the Government for a complete lack of determination and stated that its policy had been completely inadequate. He charged that this impotence was responsible for a major lowering of British prestige in the eyes of the rest of Europe. Disraeli concluded his attack with a motion of censure on the Government for its failure in "upholding the integrity and independence of Denmark" (21, CLXXVI, col. 743). The debate lasted three nights and repeated all the charges and countercharges of the last several months. On July 8, the Government won the vote by 313 to 295 (21, CLXXVI, cols. 750-751). The fact that the Ministry won by only 18 votes demonstrated the depth of discontent with its policy.

Palmerston's policy was rejected by the House of Lords. On July 8, James Howard, the Third Earl of Malmesbury, introduced a motion of censure during a speech in which he condemned the Prime Minister for his failure to "make up his mind to any policy whatever (21, CLXXXVI, col. 1300)." The debate centered around the charge that Palmerston's statement of 1863 had falsely assured the Danes of British support in the event of a war with the German Powers. The Government countered this charge by denying it, and Russell claimed that, regardless of the Government's action, the situation would have been completely out of its control (21, CLXXXVI, col. 1088). The final vote was 177 for censure and 168 against, thus showing once again the depth of discontent with the Ministry's policy (21, CLXXXVI, col. 1177).

One might be led to ask why Palmerston failed to carry out a policy of strength as was indicated by his statement of 1863. This question is especially pertinent after an investigation of the British press and of the debates in Parliament. After all, would not Palmerston have been much more popular had he met the German challenge with a show of strength? The answer lies in the attitude of Queen Victoria. The Queen believed that Germany and England should have "... a good and friendly understanding between them" (22).

Palmerston tried to adopt a strong policy toward the question, but was prevented by the influence of the Queen on the cabinet. As early as September, 1863, he sought French aid in protecting the rights of the Danish King. In this effort he was stopped by the intervention of the Queen, who forced him to rewrite his note in such terms as to dilute any strong effect it might have had. In November, Foreign Minister Russell tried to send a series of notes to the German states warning of the danger of war as a result of the German threats to Denmark. Because of the insistence of Queen Victoria the notes were submitted to the Cabinet for approval. Before the meeting took place, Victoria sent General Grey to lobby the members to vote against the correspondence. When the Cabinet met on November 25, the dispatches were rejected (23).

On January 1, 1864, the Queen wrote a formal letter to Russell and instructed that

it be called to the attention of the Cabinet. The Queen believed that Denmark had violated the London Protocol and that the German powers had a right to take action, even to the extent of a declaration of war, in order to force the Danes to respect the rights of the Germans in Schleswig-Holstein. She sided with the Prince of Augustenburg and informed her ministers that she would never allow England to go to war to protect the Danes (23, p. 274). In her efforts to keep the Government from siding with the Danes, the Queen relied on Lord Granville, the Lord President of the Council, as her chief spokesman. Russell and Palmerston attempted to send a series of dispatches to Berlin, Vienna, Paris, and St. Petersburg expressing support of Denmark. These were not sent, however, because of the work of the Queen through her supporters in the cabinet. (23, pp. 270-272).

When the threat of Prussian invasion was first imminent, Palmerston wanted to go to the aid of the Danes. When Victoria heard that Palmerston had informed the Prussian Minister to London, Count Bernstorff, that Britain would aid the Danes, she sent Palmerston a letter informing him that England could not be committed to support Denmark, and that she would oppose war over the matter (24). After the Prussian invasion of Jutland, Russell and Palmerston urged that the British fleet be sent into the Baltic as a show of force in favor of Denmark. Once again the Queen stepped in and stopped the Government from taking action (23, p. 274). When it seemed possible that the Austrian fleet would sail through the English Channel to the Baltic, Palmerston demanded that the Government take action to prevent it. Upon hearing of this, the Queen directed Sir Charles Phipps to write a letter to Palmerston informing him in clear terms that the sole policy of the Government must be to avoid the involvement of England in a war over Schleswig-Holstein. A debate took place in the Cabinet and it was decided not to take any action then (24, p. 387). By this time, events had progressed to the point where it was practically impossible for the British to take any action short of military intervention.

The attitude of the Queen toward the affair soon became public, and she was

severely criticized for her policy. *The London Review* charged that Victoria had illegally exerted her authority on the matter by coercing the Government to follow her wishes (23, pp. 278-279). Lord Ellenborough, in the House of Lords, on May 26, charged that the Queen had forced the Ministry to disregard the welfare of England by adopting a pro-German policy (21 CLXXV, col. 609). Victoria reacted to the criticism by writing a letter to Palmerston stating that she was motivated completely by her desire to do what was best for England and would not allow herself to be influenced by "obscure newspapers" (24, p. 389).

Meanwhile, the Prussians and Austrians had brought Denmark to her knees. An attempt at negotiations, in London, met with failure, and it was not until July 12 that Denmark and Austria and Prussia entered into direct negotiations. The Duchies were awarded to Austria and Prussia in a treaty signed at Vienna on October 30, 1864. The claims of the Duke of Augustenburg were rejected by the German powers and Austria was given administration over Holstein, while Prussia was given Schleswig in the Treaty of Gastein of August 14, 1865. A dispute between Austria and Prussia was to lead to war between the two monarchies in July, 1866 (4, pp. 134-138).

Therefore, the effects of the German-Danish War of 1864 were not confined to Schleswig-Holstein, but also caused dissension in Great Britain. At the beginning of the crisis, the press reports were somewhat favorable to the cause of the German majority in the Duchies. After the intervention of Prussia and Austria, and the bombardment of Düppel, many Britishers felt that it was the duty of their country to come to the aid of the Danes in their fight against the powerful German states. This spectrum of public support for Denmark ranged all the way from the Irish "Cent Guards" to the Liverpool Danish Relief Committee. During the entire crisis it appeared to those outside the cabinet that Palmerston remained detached and refused commitment to a definite course. This seeming refusal to adopt a definite policy led many to speak out against him and, finally, to his near censure by Parliament. Yet, the real reason for Palmerston's posture was the influence exercised by Queen Victoria over the Cab-

inet, which forced Palmerston to refrain from any decisive action.

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