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# THE HOLSTEIN PAPERS

THE MEMOIRS, DIARIES AND  
CORRESPONDENCE OF  
FRIEDRICH VON HOLSTEIN  
1837–1909

## II DIARIES

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)



BISMARCK IN 1885

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# THE HOLSTEIN PAPERS

EDITED BY  
NORMAN RICH & M. H. FISHER

VOLUME II  
★  
DIARIES



CAMBRIDGE  
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
1957

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-17962-1 - The Holstein Papers, Volume II  
Edited by Norman Rich and M. H. Fisher  
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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,  
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521179621](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521179621)

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First published 1957  
First paperback edition 2010

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

ISBN 978-0-521-05317-4 Hardback  
ISBN 978-0-521-17962-1 Paperback

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 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

## CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	. . . . .	<i>page</i> vii
<i>Introduction</i>	. . . . .	xi
<i>Diaries: 1881, 1882</i>	. . . . .	1
1883	. . . . .	25
1884	. . . . .	42
1885	. . . . .	170
1886	. . . . .	274
1887	. . . . .	330
1888	. . . . .	360
<i>Appendix I</i>	. . . . .	385
II	. . . . .	388
<i>Index</i>	. . . . .	395

*The frontispiece shows Prince Bismarck  
 in 1885*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17962-1 - The Holstein Papers, Volume II

Edited by Norman Rich and M. H. Fisher

Frontmatter

[More information](#)PREFACE<sup>1</sup>

WHEN Holstein began his diplomatic career as Attaché in St Petersburg, Bismarck warned him that keeping a diary was incompatible with diplomatic discretion. For this reason, Holstein says, he kept no diary during the early part of his career.

In 1881 Holstein jotted down some of Bismarck's anecdotes in a bound notebook. By 1882 he had begun to use this notebook to record day-to-day events. There are large gaps in the entries. Nothing was written from April to November 1882, and there are no entries at all in the bound notebook after 27 March 1883. Only about half of the notebook was ever filled.

In 1884 Holstein began the custom of sending his diaries to his cousin, Ida von Stülpnagel.<sup>2</sup> These diaries were written on loose sheets of paper, and continue reasonably consecutively from January 1884 through 1887, when they gradually thin out. There are no entries after 11 November 1888. In the letters written by Holstein to Ida von Stülpnagel during the years 1884 to 1888, references are made to these diaries.<sup>3</sup> After 1888 these references cease, and it seems probable that no entries were written after that date.

The Holstein Papers contain a second set of what might be called diaries, dating from 10 December 1901 to 13 November 1902, and 27 October 1906 to 14 December 1907. These are much more fragmentary than the earlier diaries and consist largely of political jottings. Since they lack all continuity in themselves, they have not been published as a body, but, in so far as they are of historical interest, under the appropriate dates with the correspondence.

The diaries form the largest body of Holstein's own writing in the Holstein Papers. They are especially valuable because it is probable that Holstein never revised or cut them. The bound notebook in which he began his diaries is intact, and the loose sheets sent to Frau von Stülpnagel remained in her possession

<sup>1</sup> For a full discussion of the Holstein Papers, see the Introduction to vol. 1 (*Memoirs*).

<sup>2</sup> See pp. 42–3.

<sup>3</sup> Helmuth Rogge, *Friedrich von Holstein. Lebensbekenntnis in Briefen an eine Frau* (Berlin, 1932), pp. 135, 144, 148.

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Edited by Norman Rich and M. H. Fisher

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

until Holstein's death.<sup>1</sup> A few days before he died he asked for the suitcase with papers which he had left at Karlstein, his cousin's estate, with the purpose of looking through them, but he died before they had been sent.<sup>2</sup> Unlike his memoirs, Holstein's diaries therefore represent his contemporary appraisal of daily events without the glosses of hindsight. It is indeed remarkable that Holstein wrote his memoirs without making use of his diaries.

In his earlier diary entries, Holstein remained faithful to Bismarck's warning about diplomatic discretion, with the result that they reveal very little about German diplomatic activity or Holstein's own ideas. Even after Holstein began sending his diaries to his cousin, he noted in his entry for 16 February 1884 that he preferred not to speak in his diaries of 'current policy'. Happily for the historian, Holstein's discretion fell away as his disapproval of German policy mounted, so that by 1886 he was not only writing freely about German foreign policy but about his own secret diplomatic activity. On 4 August 1885 he had written to his cousin: 'Your question as to whether I have written my [diary] notes solely for my own satisfaction I interpret as wondering whether I ever intend to publish them. You can calm yourself on that score. Publication is out of the question for by far the greater part of the contents.'<sup>3</sup>

The editors have cut the diaries very little. Some of the Bismarck anecdotes recorded by Holstein have been omitted because they are already well known through Bismarck's own publications. A number of Holstein's anecdotes about historically unimportant people, some repetitions, and a few unintelligible jottings have also been omitted. All omissions have been marked thus: [...]. Spelling and punctuation have been standardized. Wherever necessary, the text has been elucidated by reference to the files of the German Foreign Ministry, to printed documents or memoir literature, or to works based on unpublished documents.

Microfilms of the full manuscript text of the diaries, together with a corrected typewritten transcript, will be placed at the disposal of scholars by the Foreign Office in the Public Record Office in London, and by the Department of State in the National Archives in Washington with the publication of this volume.

<sup>1</sup> Holstein did, to be sure, pay a quick visit to Karlstein in September 1906, the first such visit in twenty-four years. Before his arrival he asked his cousin to have the 'suitcase with papers' placed in his room. (Rogge, *Friedrich von Holstein*, p. 263.) As he was at this time collecting evidence to counter attacks made against him in the Press, which related to a later period of his career, he probably looked through his correspondence, not through his diaries which show no sign of having been tampered with in any way.

<sup>2</sup> Rogge, *Friedrich von Holstein*, pp. 340, 343, note 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 136.

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Edited by Norman Rich and M. H. Fisher

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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The editors wish to express their warmest thanks to Mrs Joan Spencer for preparing the English translation of the present volume and to Mrs Joan Rich, who made the index.

We also wish to thank Professor Werner Frauendienst for his generous co-operation in the publication of the German edition. Professor Frauendienst has written a separate introduction to volume I of the German edition, and has made many valuable suggestions which have been incorporated in the present volume. Every effort has been made to preserve the maximum uniformity between the two editions.

NORMAN RICH  
M. H. FISHER

*January 1956*



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Frontmatter

[More information](#)INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

**D**URING the years covered by his diaries, Friedrich von Holstein served as Senior Counsellor (*Vortragender Rat*) in the Political Division of the German Foreign Ministry in Berlin. Holstein had entered the Prussian diplomatic service in 1860 under the aegis of Otto von Bismarck. In succeeding years Bismarck furthered his career in numerous posts abroad, and it was Bismarck who brought him to Berlin in 1876.

Whatever special influence Holstein enjoyed during his early years in the Foreign Ministry resulted from his personal relations with Bismarck. On numerous occasions he served as the Chancellor's secretary during his extended sojourns in the country, and in Berlin he was called on for personal reports more frequently than most Counsellors. Holstein had a capacity for work extraordinary even by Prussian standards. In a short time he mastered the files of the Ministry, remembering what he had read with astonishing accuracy. With the Chancellor's approval, he maintained an extensive private correspondence not only with members of the diplomatic service, but with officials of other Ministries and influential figures in court, parliamentary, financial and Press circles. This correspondence often enabled him to provide the Chancellor with information about delicate political or personal questions which did not ordinarily find its way into official communications. Bismarck had in Holstein not only a tireless, but an unusually well-informed assistant.

Holstein's ability to get on with Bismarck was perhaps even more unusual than his capacity for work. He seems to have been one of the few men who never bored the Chancellor. Part of his success with Bismarck undoubtedly lay in his unique ability to draw him out. Another frequent guest in the Bismarck household described it as 'a particular art, which led to some of the most gripping descriptions of the Chancellor's life'.<sup>2</sup> Holstein was himself a lively raconteur, and was particularly stimulating when talking about political subjects. Indeed, his political conversation is said to have been considerably more persuasive than his writing.

<sup>1</sup> When not otherwise stated, all quotations in the introduction are taken from the diaries.

<sup>2</sup> Ernst von Dryander, *Erinnerungen aus meinem Leben* (Bielefeld and Leipzig, 1922), p. 166.

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Edited by Norman Rich and M. H. Fisher

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

With Bismarck's family, Holstein was on the friendliest terms. He was a great favourite with Princess Bismarck and the boon companion of the Chancellor's sons. His close relationship with the two sons was especially significant, for Herbert and Wilhelm von Bismarck were to become increasingly important political figures in their own right. They alternated with Holstein as their father's personal secretary, and while Bismarck lived in the country their correspondence with Holstein in Berlin often served as the main unofficial link between the Chancellor and the Foreign Ministry.

The origin of the gradual change in Holstein's personal relationship to the Bismarck household may be found in the marriage of Marie, the only daughter of Otto von Bismarck, to Count Kuno zu Rantzau on 6 November 1878. Rantzau became a *Vortragender Rat* in the Foreign Ministry, and soon joined the trio of Herbert, Wilhelm (Bill) and Holstein on temporary service as the Chancellor's personal secretary in Varzin and Friedrichsruh. The appointment of Herbert and Bill to posts outside Berlin and the birth of children to Marie Rantzau—the first Bismarck grandchildren—were to make her husband something of a fixture on Bismarck's staff in the country. This in itself would not have been important had Holstein maintained the same relationship with him as he did with Herbert and Bill. But Holstein never felt drawn to Rantzau and did not ordinarily correspond with him while the Chancellor was in the country. Herbert complained about the situation in a letter of 22 February 1884: 'When I was with my father in the past years, you for the most part kept me informed; you don't seem to be doing this with Rantzau. Thus only the regular incoming documents reach my father, and at best short numbered political reports, though even these are rare. In this way contact, not to mention an intimate acquaintance with affairs, cannot be maintained when he stays away for six or seven months. [...] How is my father to form a correct estimate of certain situations, when it is often a question of the shading of specific points, if he only receives official communications? The countless nuances, which can be decisive, cannot be expressed in them, but they can be expressed in private letters to the acting secretary.'<sup>1</sup>

Herbert's letter had no effect on Holstein's attitude to Rantzau. By 1884 he had almost given up his visits to the Bismarcks' house because of his distaste for their son-in-law. In May of that year he took offence at Rantzau's manner and challenged him to a duel.

<sup>1</sup> *Holstein Papers. Correspondence.*

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Edited by Norman Rich and M. H. Fisher

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Holstein's quarrel with Rantzau does not seem to have affected his personal relationship with the Chancellor or his sons. His status in the Foreign Ministry itself had meanwhile greatly risen with the appointment of his friend, Paul von Hatzfeldt, to the State Secretaryship in 1881. From 1881 to 1885, when Hatzfeldt gave way to Herbert von Bismarck, Holstein was the most influential adviser to the head of the Ministry. This did not mean that Holstein, or Hatzfeldt himself for that matter, in any sense directed German foreign policy, for in this realm Bismarck excluded every other initiative, but Holstein did play a steadily increasing part in its execution. He also established a political partnership with Hatzfeldt which was to have considerable significance in the future.

When Herbert von Bismarck became head of the Foreign Ministry in 1885, Holstein's status did not appreciably change, but his day-to-day contact with Herbert made him increasingly critical of his old friend's arrogant and inconsiderate behaviour in his high position. It was at this time that Holstein began to have serious reservations about the conduct of German foreign policy. Until now he had done his share of carping, yet in 1884 he could still write: '[Bismarck's] little foibles would dwindle to nothing if they could be set against his great qualities.'<sup>1</sup> During Herbert's first months as acting State Secretary, Germany suffered what Holstein considered to be a humiliating diplomatic defeat by Spain in a dispute over the ownership of the Caroline Islands. Holstein did not regard this setback as serious in itself except as an indication of the decline of the Chancellor's powers and an inspiration to Germany's enemies. What he did consider potentially disastrous was Herbert's pro-Russian policy.

Holstein rejected out of hand Bismarck's plans for solving the Balkan problem by dividing the region into spheres of influence between Russia and Austria. The firm establishment of Russian power in Bulgaria would not end the agitation of the Russian Pan-Slavists, but only give it added momentum. Any increase in Russian power or prestige, Holstein felt, might make the eastern colossus an irresistible magnet to neighbouring weaker Powers, including Turkey. With the whole of south-eastern Europe and the Near East in her sphere of influence, Russia could seize any favourable opportunity to crush Austria, while the greater portion of the German army was bound to the line of the Vosges. Even if Germany succeeded in eliminating France as a major Power, she would in the end find herself alone facing the Russian might in the east.

<sup>1</sup> Diary entry for 16 February.

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978-0-521-17962-1 - The Holstein Papers, Volume II

Edited by Norman Rich and M. H. Fisher

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

In Holstein's opinion, every extension of Russian power had to be prevented, and Austria given every support. Since Germany, with the French menace on her flank, could never throw her entire weight on the side of Austria, Holstein used his influence to build up a diplomatic coalition against France and Russia which would include Austria, Italy, Great Britain, and perhaps even Turkey, the Balkan States and Spain.

Aided by Count Hatzfeldt, now the German Ambassador in London, Holstein secretly tried to stiffen the backs of Austria and Britain against moves by Russia to extend her sphere of influence. In pursuing a secret policy with Hatzfeldt, Holstein reasoned that he was doing no more than establishing a counterweight to the pro-Russian influence of Herbert, and that he, not Herbert, was conducting policy in accordance with the real intentions of the Chancellor. 'Whereas Herbert would go through thick and thin with Russia and would gladly sacrifice to Russia every other alliance', Holstein wrote on 3 November 1885, 'his father told Hatzfeldt that the links now being forged between the House of Orleans, Denmark and Russia, combined with the increased royalist temper in France, were such as to make us cautious. We should have to arrange things so that, if the worst happened, we could play off an Austro-Anglo-Italian alliance against a Franco-Russian alliance. Well, we will not remain in a position to do so for very long if Herbert has his way.' On 13 January 1886 Holstein wrote: 'For the first time in twenty-five years I mistrust Bismarck's foreign policy. The old man is led by his son, and the son is led by vanity and the Russian Embassy.'<sup>1</sup>

By 1887 a loose entente between Britain, Austria and Italy had in fact been established, and Holstein claimed no little credit for its inception. On 8 May of that year he wrote in his diary: 'Now that the Austria-Italy-England bloc has been welded together, the sooner this grouping comes to blows with Russia the better.' Holstein reverted frequently to this idea in succeeding months. 'If I seem to be talking lightly about war', he wrote on 11 January 1888, 'it is because I regard it as inevitable. The only question is whether it will break out at a moment favourable to us or to our enemies.'

As in his personal relations, Holstein's preference in diplomatic affairs lay in clearly defined, precise alignments. Other Powers should be regarded and treated as either friendly or hostile. In

<sup>1</sup> The criticisms Holstein made in 1898 of Bismarck's pin-prick policy towards Russia (*Memoirs*, Chapter VII) may be interpreted as an attempt to show that German-Russian antagonism antedated the dropping of the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia in 1890 after Bismarck's dismissal.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17962-1 - The Holstein Papers, Volume II

Edited by Norman Rich and M. H. Fisher

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Holstein's opinion, Bismarck's method of encouraging now Russia, now Austria, now Britain, or even France, only exposed Germany to the suspicion of all parties.

Holstein's commentaries on Bismarck's policy after 1886 not only reveal his increasing disagreement with the Chancellor's diplomacy, but his failure to understand it. Now, as later, he lacked the feeling for the *imponderabilia* of international politics. Bismarck's intricate network of alliances represented for Holstein nothing more than an old man's love of finessing and intrigue, and his fear of taking clear-cut decisions. Even before the conclusion of the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia, Holstein wrote on 11 January 1887: 'Our policy with its criss-cross of commitments [...] resembles the tangle of lines at a big railway station. The chief pointsman thinks he can click everything into its proper place and hopes particularly that the greater the confusion the more indispensable he is.'

With all his criticism of the Chancellor's failings as a statesman and a human being, Holstein wanted Bismarck to remain in office. He fully appreciated the continued value of his prestige for Germany's international position, but the primary consideration was the prospect of the imminent death of the old Kaiser and the succession of his liberal-minded son. Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm was well known to favour a more liberal form of government for Germany, and had frequently expressed his dislike of Bismarck's authoritarian methods. The Crown Prince received firm support for his political views from his wife, the eldest daughter of Queen Victoria of England, an outspoken champion of liberalism and a passionate partisan of her native land. To German liberals, the coming reign represented the hope of the future, the opportunity to see their theories at last translated into practice. For this very reason men of conservative views like Holstein were filled with apprehension about the future.

In 1881 Kaiser Wilhelm I was eighty-four years old, and the succession came to dominate German political activity with daily increasing insistency. Holstein's concern with the problem is revealed in his earliest diary entries. He was convinced that Bismarck would have to stay in power at least during the first years of the new reign to avoid domestic upheaval or prevent Germany from waging war on behalf of Britain. Holstein therefore favoured the Chancellor's various moves to strengthen his political position within Germany: the negotiations to end the struggle with the Catholic Church (the *Kulturkampf*), to make it at least possible to gain the backing of the powerful Catholic

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978-0-521-17962-1 - The Holstein Papers, Volume II

Edited by Norman Rich and M. H. Fisher

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Centre Party; the establishment of a German colonial empire, in order to undercut a popular item in the liberal programme; the contact with moderate Liberals, who might form a Ministry under Bismarck acceptable to the next Kaiser. 'I have no illusions about the Chancellor's humanity', Holstein wrote on 16 April 1884, 'but as an institution I think he is the best thing the German Reich possesses, and neither one man nor many could replace him. A proof of this is the way he has made all preparations to steer the ship of state through the stormy days of the succession that lies ahead.'

Holstein's efforts to smooth the personal relations between the Crown Prince and the Chancellor, to remove at least the minor sources of irritation, form a prominent theme in his diaries. He established working relationships with like-minded members of the Crown Prince's court, and used his influence and ingenuity to get allies into key positions there. His most notable success was the appointment of his friend Count Hugo von Radolinski as Court Chamberlain.

Holstein's knowledge of the views of the Crown Prince added to his fears about Herbert von Bismarck's pro-Russian attitude. 'If this is not changed we shall in a couple of years have, not a Three Emperors' Alliance, but a Two Emperors' Alliance, and Austria will seek support elsewhere', he wrote on 24 October 1885. 'That will certainly not accord with the Crown Prince's policy.'

A policy favourable to Russia accorded still less with the views of the pro-English Crown Princess, whose antagonism to Bismarck was a good deal more intense than that of her husband. The tension was further heightened in 1884, when the Crown Princess began a campaign to marry her second daughter to Alexander von Battenberg, the Prince of Bulgaria. In this project she faced the steady opposition of Bismarck. As ruler of Bulgaria, Prince Alexander had incurred the active hostility of Russia. His marriage to a Prussian princess would have implied German support for his policies and might well have forced Germany to take up an anti-Russian position. Bismarck had no intention of allowing such a policy to be thrust upon him. Holstein tried to turn this situation to advantage. He secretly encouraged British and Austrian support for Prince Alexander as part of his programme to block an extension of the Russian sphere of influence. At the same time he worked with Hatzfeldt for closer co-operation between Germany and Britain, leaving the way open for possible accord between Bismarck and the Crown Princess over foreign policy.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This programme is revealed in Holstein's correspondence as well as his diaries for 1886.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17962-1 - The Holstein Papers, Volume II

Edited by Norman Rich and M. H. Fisher

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Count Radolinski wanted to go a step further. He asked Holstein whether he should advise Herbert von Bismarck to advocate the Battenberg marriage, which in Radolinski's opinion would come to pass sooner or later anyway. Herbert would thereby establish for himself an impregnable position at the Crown Prince's court. Failing that, Radolinski wondered what was to prevent the Crown Prince from sanctioning the marriage despite the objections of the Kaiser and the Chancellor.<sup>1</sup> Here Holstein drew the line. He thought there was no chance of the Chancellor conceding the marriage voluntarily. 'Your question about the pros and cons of the possible creation of a *fait accompli* I would prefer not to answer', he wrote on 6 October 1886. 'Put yourself in my position. I have sometimes gone beyond the intentions of the Big Chief, have occasionally even used *my* ways in reaching *his* goals. But I have never consciously gone directly counter to his intentions. And since I don't know in advance how my advice would turn out—in case I should sit myself down to think the matter through thoroughly—I prefer to keep my hands off.'<sup>2</sup>

All this activity suggests that Holstein may have intended to secure a safe niche for himself in the next reign whether Bismarck remained in office or fell, but there is no actual evidence on this point. Holstein of course avoided all outward signs of currying favour with the Crown Prince in order not to arouse the antagonism of the Bismarcks. Yet even in his diaries and personal letters there is no mention of personal hopes for the future. Nor is there a hint of any plan, which might have been expected under the circumstances, to groom a favourite candidate for the Chancellorship in the event of Bismarck's sudden dismissal by the next Kaiser. Holstein appears to have remained convinced, even in the days of his bitterest criticism, that there was no alternative to Bismarck.

What Holstein's activity does reveal is an overpowering urge to play a creative part in German politics, a role that ill accorded with his own views of the position he occupied. 'The responsible *Vortragender Rat* has so far not been invented', he wrote in an essay on Heinrich Abeken in 1898.<sup>3</sup> 'The Minister alone bears all the responsibility. The *Vortragender Rat* who knows his place and does his job well is not concerned with the direction of policy, but must justify the policy framed by his Minister with the most valid arguments available.' It is clear that Holstein, from whatever

<sup>1</sup> Letters to Holstein of 2, 4 and 5 October 1886 (*Correspondence*).

<sup>2</sup> *Correspondence*.

<sup>3</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 54.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17962-1 - The Holstein Papers, Volume II

Edited by Norman Rich and M. H. Fisher

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

motives he may have acted, did not know his place. He wished to concern himself with the direction of policy, although after Bismarck's dismissal he stated that he would not accept promotion to a post which would have given him the concomitant responsibility.

All the planning, the bargaining, the intrigue that had taken place in preparation for the reign of Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm were suddenly reduced to futility when it was learned in 1887 that the Crown Prince was mortally ill with cancer of the throat. As Kaiser Friedrich III, he was to rule his country for only ninety-nine days. His heir, Prince Wilhelm, proclaimed a warm admiration for Bismarck and gave every sign of continuing in the traditions of his grandfather.

Holstein did not share the initial unbounded enthusiasm of the Bismarck party for Prince Wilhelm, fearing that he was under the pro-Russian influence of Herbert. 'Now, when a young Kaiser will join with Herbert in sometimes forcing old Prince Bismarck's hand', he wrote on 17 May 1887, 'the situation is fraught with great danger.' Holstein was much relieved when he learned that the Prince was by no means dominated by Herbert, but had a will of his own. 'However strange this may sound coming from me', he wrote on 4 February 1888, 'I hope sincerely that the Prince's "backbone" will also make itself felt in our foreign policy. We may perhaps strike a good middle course between his policy and the Chancellor's policy of backing down.'

Wilhelm II came to the throne on 15 June 1888. The diaries carry the story only into the early months of his reign, but Holstein's letters from numerous document collections show that he continued to hope for this 'middle course'.<sup>1</sup> His criticism of Bismarck went on unabated, and he freely admitted to his cousin that his sympathies were all on the side of the young ruler.<sup>2</sup> But he was forced to recognize that Bismarck's prestige value for Germany remained enormous, especially in this time of transition, and that he still had the occasional great idea. Holstein also began to have doubts about the Kaiser's judgment and seriousness of purpose.

Long before Prince Wilhelm became Kaiser, Holstein had seen the hope for future collaboration between him and Bismarck menaced by the Chancellor's inconsiderate, schoolmasterish

<sup>1</sup> Especially Holstein's letters to Karl von Eisendecker, found in the Foreign Ministry files (*Correspondence*), and his letters to Ida von Stülpnagel (Rogge, *Friedrich von Holstein*, pp. 148–52). Even Holstein's letters to Waldersee admit this interpretation. (*Aus dem Briefwechsel des Generalfeldmarschalls Alfred Grafen von Waldersee*, edited by Heinrich Otto Meisner, vol. 1 (Berlin and Leipzig, 1928).)

<sup>2</sup> Letter of 15 October 1888. Rogge, *Friedrich von Holstein*, p. 151.



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17962-1 - The Holstein Papers, Volume II

Edited by Norman Rich and M. H. Fisher

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

methods in dealing with the young man. In Berlin he saw support for the Bismarcks melting away on account of Herbert's arrogant and overbearing manner towards all people with whom he came into contact. Holstein urged Bill to come to Berlin to act as a moderating influence on his brother.<sup>1</sup> As late as January 1890 he warned Herbert of the forces undermining his father's position and advised him not to draw the bow too tight in relations with the Kaiser.<sup>2</sup> For if it came to a test of strength between the Kaiser and Chancellor, Holstein was in no doubt about which power would be victorious.

It was soon obvious that all warnings had been in vain. In a letter of 5 March 1890 to Prince Reuss, the German Ambassador in Vienna, Holstein mentioned the inconsiderate way the Chancellor was speaking about the Kaiser before a group of foreign diplomats. 'In the beginning I argued and wrote as best I could to ameliorate matters. Now I refuse to meddle any longer. I don't think the two powers will ever again be on cordial terms, but I don't believe in an imminent crisis, either.'<sup>3</sup> Holstein's prediction was wrong. Bismarck was dismissed on 18 March 1890, and a new phase in Holstein's career began.

<sup>1</sup> Letter of 18 October 1887, from the Varzin archives. Quoted in Hans Goldschmidt, 'Mitarbeiter Bismarcks im aussenpolitischen Kampf', *Preussische Jahrbücher*, vol. ccxxxvi, pp. 48–50.

<sup>2</sup> Letter of 24 January 1890, from the Friedrichsruh archives. Quoted in part in Arnold Oscar Meyer, *Bismarck* (Stuttgart, 1949), p. 639. A copy of the letter was found in the Holstein Papers (*Correspondence*).

<sup>3</sup> *Berliner Monatshefte*, vol. xv, part 1, pp. 327–8.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17962-1 - The Holstein Papers, Volume II

Edited by Norman Rich and M. H. Fisher

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

# DIARIES