



Bismarck

James Headlam

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Well was it for Germany that Bismarck had not allowed her to fall into the weak and vacillating hands of a Parliamentary government. Peace has its dangers as well as war, and the rivalry of nations lays upon them a burden beneath which all but the strongest must succumb. The future was dark; threatening clouds were gathering in the East and West; the hostility of Russia increased, and in France the Republic was wavering; a military adventurer had appeared, who threatened to use the desire for revenge as a means for his personal advancement. Germany could no longer disregard French threats; year by year the French army had been increased, and in 1886 General Boulanger introduced a new law by which in time of peace over 500,000 men would be under arms. Russia had nearly 550,000 soldiers on her peace establishment, and, against this, Germany only 430,000. They were no longer safe; the duty of the Government was clear; in December, 1886, they brought forward a law to raise the army to 470,000 men and keep it at that figure for seven years. "We have no desire for war," said Bismarck, in defending the proposal; "we belong (to use an expression of Prince Metternich's) to the States whose appetite is satisfied; under no circumstances shall we attack France; the stronger we are, the more improbable is war; but if France has any reason to believe that she is more powerful than we, then war is certain." It was, he said, no good for the House to assure the Government of their patriotism and their readiness for sacrifice when the hour of danger arrived; they must be prepared beforehand. "Words are not soldiers and speeches not battalions."

The House (there was a majority of Catholics, Socialists, and Progressives) threw out the bill, the Government dissolved, and the country showed its confidence in Bismarck and Moltke; Conservatives and National Liberals made a coalition, the Pope himself ordered the Catholics not to oppose the Government (his support had been purchased by the partial repeal of a law expelling religious orders from Prussia), and the Emperor could celebrate his ninetieth birthday, which fell in March, 1887, hopeful that the beneficent work of peaceful reform would continue. And yet never was Bismarck's resource so needed as during the last year in which he was to serve his old master...

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