

Jonas Flöter. *Beust und die Reform des Deutschen Bundes 1850-1866. Sächsisch-mittelstaatliche Koalitionspolitik im Kontext der deutschen Frage.* Köln, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2001. 565 S. (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-412-08901-6.



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In recent years, historians of nineteenth-century Germany have increasingly directed their attention to the “Third Germany” and have thus gone far beyond older narratives that focused on the Austro-Prussian dualism and the details of *Grossmachtpolitik*. The result has been a spate of studies and textbook chapters on various, heretofore neglected aspects of the Confederation of the Rhine and the German Confederation from 1806 to 1866. As a consequence, scholars have, at long last, also been devoting more serious attention to the medium-sized and smaller members of both confederal bodies. This massive study, originally a dissertation at the University of Leipzig, represents a useful contribution to that continuing intellectual and conceptual reorientation. By using the formidable figure of the Saxon politician Friedrich Ferdinand Freiherr (later Graf) von Beust (1809-1886) as the book’s organizing center, Jonas Floeter is able to reflect simultaneously on the problem of Confederal reform and on Saxony’s place in the German state system after the revolutions of mid-century.

Although he was a native of Saxony and served that kingdom for several decades in various capacities, Beust is probably best known for his career as Austrian chancellor and foreign minister from 1866 to 1871. In that capacity, according to most accounts, Beust sought aggressively to counter the growing influence of Prussia in

Central European affairs; indeed, it has often been argued that Beust urged a policy of revenge upon Austria after its humiliation in 1866. As Alan Sked and others have noted, however, this is not true. Beust’s policy was instead “to assert Austrian leadership over the south German states in order to retain a tripartite division of Germany.”[1] In this context, Floeter’s analysis redirects historians’ attention to Beust’s earlier career in Saxony and shows that his efforts as Saxon foreign minister before 1866 were consistent with Sked’s descriptions of his post-1866 activities.

After the failures of the Dresden uprising and the *Reichsverfassungskampagne* in the spring and early summer of 1849, the author contends, Beust consistently—even relentlessly—attempted to achieve an *Interessenausgleich* between existing governments and liberal-national aspirations in the German-speaking lands. In Beust’s view, the Confederation remained an indispensable guarantor of peace and stability, but it had to be renewed and reformed in response to the shifting circumstances of the European state system, especially after 1854 and again after 1859 and 1863-64. Beust’s ideas first became evident at the Dresden conference in 1850-51, when he realized that he could not count on the support of the two great Central European powers for his project of Confederal reform. Thus he was obliged to propose a “coalition of the medium-sized states” within the German Confedera-

tion: in other words, what amounted to a so-called “trias” solution with the middle states of the “Third Germany” acting in concert for their own and the common German good. Such a solution could in turn advance the cause of substantive Confederal reform (e.g., by incorporating elements of popular representation) while maintaining the Confederation’s international, peace-preserving function in the heart of Europe. As Floeter writes, critical to the Saxon foreign minister’s project was a “gemeinsame Politik der Mittelstaaten”: “Im Rahmen von periodisch tagenden Ministerkonferenzen sollten die mittelstaatlichen Regierungen gemeinsame Standpunkte in aktuellen politischen Fragen erarbeiten. Darueber hinaus hoffte Beust, dass sich die deutschen Staaten zweiten Ranges langfristig auch auf eine institutionelle Reform des Deutschen Bundes verstaendigen wuerden” (p. 226). The author devotes an enormous amount of attention to the array of conferences at which the Saxon foreign minister attempted to achieve his goals, from the Bamberg conference of 1854 to the Wuerzburg conferences in 1859 and 1860 and, finally, the Frankfurt *Fuerstentag* of 1863 and the Nuremberg and Augsburg ministerial conferences in 1863 and 1866.

Among the book’s most useful contributions is its analysis of Beust’s various written proposals to reform the German Confederation. Beust’s first great *Denkschrift* appeared in 1856, followed by another in 1857 and a third in 1861. The author’s discussion of these documents sheds important new light upon Beust’s policies, and requires us at least partially to revise the frequent depiction of the Saxon foreign minister as “a vain and self-important man, who never forgot a witticism or compliment.”[2] Beust may indeed have been vain and self-important, but as the author shows, his ideas were not quixotic. Given Saxony’s relatively small size, central geographic location, and growing economic significance, Beust had to walk a precarious political tightrope throughout his long career as Saxon foreign minister, and in doing so he was more skillful than has often been realized. Among other things, the author shows that there was no contradiction between Beust’s proposals and the concerns of Saxon industry and of Saxon business leaders. A consistent supporter of a *grossdeutsch* program of Confederal reform, Beust articulated what the author convincingly describes as a realistic and “moderate-conservative” reform course. That reform course was, of course, a failure; but the author suggests that Beust was confounded by forces that were outside his control, not least of them Bavarian reluctance to support the various Saxon proposals for a coalition of the medium-sized pow-

ers. Bavaria had its own aspirations and its own agenda. For his part, Beust could never rely on a firm core of supporters within the Confederation; and, as a result, he had to depend on shifting coalitions of interests that in the end undermined his political effectiveness.

Although rather “traditional” in approach and methodology, this study can usefully be read in conjunction with other recent studies that have deepened our understanding of the “Third Germany” in the years after 1848. (One thinks especially of Abigail Green’s splendid work on Hanover, Saxony, and Wuertemberg.[3]) The author of this study has combed nine archives and has thoroughly reviewed the available literature, as his thirty-nine-page bibliography demonstrates. One wonders, however, if such a display of erudition is entirely necessary or appropriate, even in a published dissertation. Of course, a representative of one distinctive academic culture should always be wary of criticizing the product of another, especially in an international forum like H-German. Still, it is impossible to imagine a monograph of this dimension being published in the Anglo-American world these days; and, to this Anglo-American reviewer, it seems that the author would have been better served had he wielded a sharper editorial scalpel. This book could have been cut quite substantially. The result would have been a more tightly focused study that would certainly have reached a significantly wider readership. As it is, it is hard to imagine that many scholars, including students of the nineteenth century, will read it from cover to cover. That is too bad, for the picture that the author presents both of Beust and of the fluidity of the political situation before the 1871 *Reichsgruendung* is illuminating.

Notes

[1]. Alan Sked, *The Decline and Fall of the Habsburg Empire, 1815-1918*, 2nd ed. (Harlow: Longman, 2001), p. 246.

[2]. Otto Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany*, vol. 1, *The Period of Unification, 1815-1871* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 386.

[3]. Abigail Green, *Fatherlands: State-Building and Nationhood in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). H-German review by Tuska Benes at <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=40431067119867>.

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