A Map of the Schleswig-Holstein Area
A Convoluted Affair: Great Britain and Schleswig-Holstein, 1848 and 1864

Lynneth Miller

Lynneth Miller is entering her senior year as an Honors student with a History major and English minor. A member of Phi Alpha Theta, Sigma Tau Delta, and Alpha Chi, Lynneth has served as president of the Honors Advisory Council along with multiple other officer positions in other honors societies and service clubs. She was named the recipient of the Dean’s Award for the History Department in the spring of 2012, an Outstanding Delegate in the Southwest Region Model Arab League Conference, the first place winner in the Phi Alpha Theta Regional Conference Non-American History Undergraduate paper category, and the second place winner in Oklahoma Christian University’s Colloquium. She has also performed in several campus musicals and with the Symphonic Band.

“Gentlemen, In that small and despised Schleswig-Holstein not only the Honour, but likewise the most vital Interests of our country are at stake!”¹ So began one of many pamphlets imploring British action in the Schleswig-Holstein Crisis of 1864. Disraeli’s speech to the House of Commons in 1848 summarizes the common cause of this recurring crisis:

“The German Confederation. . . contend that, by ancient acts and recorded transactions, Schleswig is united to Holstein, and must, by treaty, follow Holstein. . . The Danish Government, on the other hand, pretends that it has a right to require that Schleswig shall follow the line

¹ “An Old Englishman's opinion on Schleswig-Holstein and Germany: being a practical evidence for the justice of their cause, given after a 50 years' residence in Germany”, Foreign and Commonwealth Office Collection, (1864) JSTOR: 3.
of succession in Denmark.”

However simple this summary may seem, the crises themselves were extremely complex, and British opinion on who was in the right and who was in the wrong equally nuanced. The conflict between the Queen, supporting the German nationalists, and the political leaders, supporting the Danish nationalists, created divisions within Great Britain that led to the inept handling of Schleswig-Holstein Crises of 1848 and 1864.

The first crisis in the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein occurred in 1848. The distinct characteristics of the duchies, different from both Germany and Denmark, helped fuel this crisis. The Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein had been under the Danish crown since 1460, but their geographical isolation, the preoccupation of the Danish crown with wars with rivals Sweden and Russia, and poor communication had allowed the duchies to keep their own culture and patterns of society, marked by local particularism. Tensions between Germans and Danes in Schleswig and Holstein grew apparent after the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in the early 1800s, when Prussia, under Frederick the Great, attempted to annex Holstein into a unitary German state- an attempt the Danes stopped. In 1820, the Great Powers guaranteed that the duchies

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2 Benjamin Disraeli, “England and Denmark: Speech of Mr. Disraeli in the House of Commons, the 19th April 1848, on the Danish Question”, Knowsley Pamphlet Collection (1848): 26.
4 Ibid., 35.
would belong to Denmark, making any Prussian intervention difficult due to the power of the British navy.\textsuperscript{5} By 1846 and 1847, tensions between the Danish crown and the residents of the duchies escalated to the point that the king used force against the German residents of the duchies, and several referendums calling for the king to respect the rights of the citizens of Schleswig-Holstein were presented and summarily rejected.\textsuperscript{6} At this point, although Schleswig-Holstein was allied more closely with Denmark, attempts by the Danish crown to annex the duchies drove the German residents to draw closer to Germany, creating deep social divides along lines of nationality.\textsuperscript{7}

The ascension of the childless Frederick VII to the throne of Denmark in 1848, and the overthrow of Louis Philippe, the French king, led to the peak of tensions over Danish policy in the region, and to the creation of a constitution that attempted to guarantee the independence of the duchies. However, the chaos led the national liberals, who desired an alliance with Germany, to become more strident in their demands.\textsuperscript{8} Frederick VII’s coronation created an opening for Prussia to attempt to bring the duchies into the German confederation, as the duchies adhered to the German Salic Law, preventing female inheritance, while the Danes allowed females to ascend the throne. Frederick VII’s lack of heirs meant

\textsuperscript{6} Carr, 267.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 271.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 276.
that after his death, the throne must, by necessity, pass to the offspring of his paternal aunt or to other women within the royal family.\textsuperscript{9} Due to these rising tensions, by March 24, 1848, Schleswig had been annexed as part of Denmark, sharing in the Danish constitution as a provincial state, but Holstein had been given a constitution befitting an independent state. German members within both duchies immediately mobilized to “show the German fatherland by our staunch demeanour and dignified bearing that the spirit of true patriotism fills the hearts of those who live in Schleswig-Holstein.”\textsuperscript{10} By the end of April, the Danes had been driven out of Schleswig, and Schleswig-Holstein had joined the National Parliament in Frankfurt as a part of the German Confederation.\textsuperscript{11}

However, the Great Powers intervened to keep the balance of power in Europe the same, resulting in a temporary settlement in the Convention of Malmo in August of 1848. A conference in London to fully resolve the conflict failed, establishing renewed tensions. The conflict continued until 1850, when the Treaty of Berlin returned autonomy to Denmark. The London Protocol of 1852 involving Austria, France, Prussia, Russia, Great Britain, Denmark, and Sweden gave international recognition to Denmark, guaranteeing that the Danes would

\textsuperscript{9} Goldstein, 6.
\textsuperscript{10} Carr, 291.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 293.
retain possession of the duchies and that their line of succession would be recognized.\textsuperscript{12}

British opinion on who was in the right in the Schleswig-Holstein Crises of both 1848 and 1864 was divided, with most of the members of Parliament and of the Queen’s Cabinet supporting the Danish while the crown supported the Germans. In 1848, one of the most outspoken of the pro-Danish party in Great Britain was Benjamin Disraeli, a rising politician in the House of Commons with conservative views. A member of the Tory party, Disraeli believed strongly that England should defend Denmark, seen as the poor defenseless underdog. He expressed these views in a speech given in the House of Commons on April 19\textsuperscript{th}, 1848, in which he announced that Britain should either help the Danes or “must practically announce. . . that England no longer respects guarantees.”\textsuperscript{13} Disraeli described Denmark as “an ancient kingdom, inhabited by a brave and independent race of people, dwelling in a land which from its physical configuration must necessarily exercise a considerable influence upon some of the principal nations of Europe, especially in case of war.”\textsuperscript{14} He utilized the widespread agreement throughout Britain with these views of Denmark to argue that the British should maintain the terms of the Congress of Vienna, in which:

\textsuperscript{12} Goldstein, 8.
\textsuperscript{14} Disraeli, 2.
The position of Denmark—a country often and again dismembered at the peace—was settled by the treaty of Vienna in this manner:—It was to consist, in the first place, of those celebrated islands upon one of which, Zealand, Copenhagen is built. . . and, in the second place, of adjoining possessions it had also long enjoyed—the Scandinavian duchy of Schleswig, and the German duchy of Holstein, by virtue of which last territory the King of Denmark had always been a German prince.\footnote{Ibid., 3.}

This led Disraeli to argue that “Now, by the treaty still in force, England has guaranteed this Duchy of Schleswig, its peaceable and complete enjoyment, to the King of Denmark.”\footnote{Ibid., 15.} Disraeli’s high opinion of the Danish people and his belief that England had guaranteed the existence of Denmark in its current state helped form his pro-Danish position.

Disraeli, and those allied with him, was acutely aware of the nationalism that lay at the root of the crisis. Disraeli stated that:

Holstein, the German duchy, declined to be incorporated with the other states, because they regarded the new constitution to be one which, in its tendency and effect, would absorb them in a Scandinavian population, and terminate the connexion which they always wished to cherish with their German brethren. . . The German party, which of course predominated in Holstein—\footnote{Ibid., 5-6.} in which in fact there was no Danish population—were extremely anxious to exercise an equal influence in the neighbouring Duchy of Schleswig, in which from its contiguity to Holstein there had gradually grown up a certain amount of German population.

Despite these nationalistic opinions, Disraeli asserted, “There is probably no event in modern history more unjustifiable than the conduct of Prussia
under these circumstances.”\textsuperscript{18} He argued, “Up to this moment not a single rational cause has been alleged for the erratic conduct of the Court of Berlin- no case of justification has been put forward. . . the pretext for this extraordinary proceeding is German Nationality.”\textsuperscript{19} Disraeli clearly viewed the rise of German nationalism as a change dangerous to the stability of Europe, and the German nationalistic movement as not in keeping with political reality.

Other British supporting the Danes in the conflict shared Disraeli’s concern with maintaining a just equilibrium in Europe. Lord Palmerston, the Foreign Secretary in the queen’s cabinet in 1848, expressed equal concern with keeping the balance of power in Europe; although the queen and prince consort felt like Palmerston was being too conciliatory towards the Danes, the British people at large fully supported Denmark.\textsuperscript{20} These concerns led Palmerston and Disraeli to agitate for British military intervention, if necessary. While British military interference seemed impossible, the British mediated between the Danes and the Prussians from 1848 to 1850; the British eventually changed from stated neutrality to an anti-Prussian policy, mainly because of Russia’s extreme disapproval of the Prussian actions in the duchies.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{20} Sandiford, 25.
Russia, as one of the Great Powers, helped force Great Britain to take a
decisive stand on the issue, despite conflict within Great Britain.\textsuperscript{21}

While most of Parliament and many members of the Queen’s
own cabinet supported the Danes, the royal family favored the German
position in the conflict. Initially, due to the aggressive policies of both
the Danish crown and the German confederation, Prince Albert spoke
against possible annexation of the duchies by either power, supporting
instead the development of a constitution that would keep them separate
from Denmark or the Confederation, but still under the Danish crown.\textsuperscript{22}

While Albert articulated various concerns, his German ethnicity provided
the main impetus behind his position against Danish annexation in the
Schleswig-Holstein conflict of 1848. Queen Victoria shared Albert’s
concern with the actions of the Danish crown and wanted to preserve the
peace through preventing Danish annexation of the duchies; she saw the
Danes as the main cause of the conflict and sided with the Germans,
going against the opinions of her ministers.\textsuperscript{23} Victoria believed, and
expressed to her ministers, that the people of the duchies had the right to
choose their ruler. Thus, the German nationalist movement, in her mind,
was justifiable, and the British should not intervene, but rather allow
events to transpire naturally. She and Albert expressed more concern

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 26.
\textsuperscript{22} Carr, 274.
\textsuperscript{23} Sandiford, 30.
with the aggression of the Danes than the aggression of the Prussians.\textsuperscript{24}

By 1850, authority had been returned entirely to the Danes, to the satisfaction of the majority of the British people and government, who had expressed in the London Protocol of 1850 their desire to see the integrity of the Danish monarchy retained through creating a new order of succession. This new order of succession satisfied Queen Victoria and Prince Albert through avoiding the issues to which Prince Albert had objected. Essentially, this led to a return to the pre-conflict state; however, the conflict between the Germans and the Danes still remained.\textsuperscript{25}

The Schleswig-Holstein Crisis of 1864 involved the same basic points of conflict as 1848, but occurred under slightly different circumstances. King Frederick VII attempted to solidify Danish control over Schleswig and Holstein throughout the rest of his reign; in 1863, he issued a new constitution that treated the duchies as separate entities. When he passed away two days after parliament approved the new constitution on November 13\textsuperscript{th}, 1863, the inauguration of his cousin Christian IX on November 15\textsuperscript{th} gave Prussia another opening to try to seize the duchies.\textsuperscript{26} An Englishman, living in Germany at the time, expressed his view of these events: “Suddenly the 15\textsuperscript{th} November 1863

\textsuperscript{24} Richard Aldous, \textit{The Lion and the Unicorn: Gladstone Vs. Disraeli} (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 78.
\textsuperscript{25} Carr, 299.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 9.
cut through and did away all those violated and incomplete diplomatic patchwork attempts, and then the case all at once recovered its inherent clearness.”

27 The Prussians saw the new constitution as a violation of the 1852 London Protocol, and the change of kings as a period of instability within the Danish government which could be taken advantage of; thus, Prussia, under the aggressive Otto von Bismarck, the Minister President of Prussia, proposed that the German confederation take control of the duchies until the Danes returned to the supposedly violated terms of the 1852 agreement. 28 A statement in a pamphlet clearly expresses why the Germans saw the new constitution as a treaty violation: “Why, the first act of their new King was to strike Germany in the face by sanctioning the long prepared Incorporation of Schleswig. Now this was a rupture of the Peace treaty with Germany, as well as of the special condition under which Austria and Prussia had acceded to the London treaty.” 29 When the Danes rejected the Prussians’ suggestion, Prussia and Austria invaded in February 1864. 30

While the crisis still centered on the identity and alignment of the duchies, the 1864 crisis differed in the fact that Bismarck’s realpolitik merged with the national liberal desire for unification of

27 “Old Englishman,” 19.
28 Goldstein, 9.
29 “Old Englishman,” 20.
30 Goldstein, 9.
Germany. Between 1848 and 1864, the concept of the German state as a corporate and autonomous personality, that needed to be unified and could only be unified under the Prussian State had emerged; all other considerations had to be subordinated to this desire for unification. As one pamphlet stated:

It was the overwhelming influence of a case so uniquely clear and just, which performed the miracle of putting an end to long-inrooted divisions, and of bringing the just and chivalrously-noble aspirations of the German nation to Unity. The Germans feel the liberation of their kindred country, imposed upon them as a religious duty.

The German residents of Schleswig, embroiled in the midst of the crisis, expressed their nationalism in a series of addresses to the Prussian ruler:

“Germany’s active expression of sympathy in our cause has saved us. With longing hearts do we await, at the hands of your Highness, our emancipation from the foreign yoke.” Thus, the solidification of German nationalism contributed to the development of the 1864 conflict.

Nationalists pushing for a separate and autonomous Schleswig-Holstein used the distinct differences between Denmark and the duchies to justify their demands for the severance of ties with Denmark and

31 Carr, 20.
32 Ibid., 18.
33 “Old Englishman,” 22.
34 “Addresses of allegiance presented by the corporations and inhabitants of the duchy of Schleswig to His Highness Duke Frederick VIII., of Schleswig-Holstein: with an appendix, containing the resolutions transmitted to the Dano-German conference in London, by a joint deputation from the duchies of Schleswig-Holstein”, Foreign and Commonwealth Office Collection (1864) JSTOR:12.
establishment of a separate state. Bismarck saw the break of ties with Denmark as desirable because it would leave the duchies open to annexation into his German state.\textsuperscript{35} Most Germans saw “Schleswig-Holstein is a distinct and independent country, composed of 2 Duchies united “forever undividable” (formerly usually comprised under the name simply of Holstein, or the German Duchies [provinces, lands] of the King Duke).”\textsuperscript{36} The German residents of the duchies took the same view of their nationality:

> The population of Schleswig, in spite of the iron-handed despotism in operation for fourteen years, and of the means employed to substitute a Danish nationality for our own, will, from the Eider to the Konigsau, be and remain German, and that the Schleswigers, with the same joyful acclamation as the Holsteiners, will recognize in your Highness their sole and legitimate Duke.\textsuperscript{37}

Statements such as these neglected to acknowledge the Danish roots and extensive Danish population of the Duchies.

Despite Bismarck’s intent to bring the Duchies into the German Confederation as a step towards a united Germany, he was anxious to avoid a war perceived as a mere quest for territory over the duchies and worked to keep public opinion from painting the actions of the German Confederation as such. If Prussia and the German Confederation could not justify the war as more than a pursuit of territory, it would lead to conflict with Great Britain and the other Great Powers, hindering, if not

\textsuperscript{35} Carr, 27.
\textsuperscript{36} “Old Englishman,” 8.
\textsuperscript{37} “Addresses,” 14.
killing, all hopes of a unified German nation-state.  

Thus, through careful maneuvering, Bismarck antagonized the Danes into the conflict in 1864 prior to invading and initiating war. Bismarck issued demands he claimed were part of the 1852 agreement, then used their inability to meet these demands as an excuse to invade. He carefully led the European powers to believe that he only intended to restore the terms of 1852 through removing the new Constitution.

When the crisis resurfaced in 1864, the deep divisions over both Danish and German nationalism within the British nation, and particularly between the Queen and her ministers, remained. Lord Palmerston, now serving as Prime Minister, saw Prussia’s moves of aggression as part of a plan by Bismarck to expand Prussian and German power; Lord Russell, a Whig and the Foreign Secretary in 1864, seconded Palmerston’s view. However, Queen Victoria’s concern to maintain neutrality at any cost led her to restrain Lord Russell and Lord Palmerston from defending the Danes.  

Although Palmerston wanted to intervene on the Danes’ behalf, he believed war to defend the Danes was both unnecessary and unfeasible, since the British were not prepared for war and since the Treaty of London should still protect the duchies. Bismarck, however, had no intent to abide by this treaty, and the

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38 Carr, 315.
Prussians continued to humiliate the Danes.\textsuperscript{40} In the eyes of Palmerston, Russell, and Disraeli, again serving in the House of Commons but now the acknowledged leader of the Conservative party, the issue in 1864 was still nothing more than German nationalism. They saw King Christian IX, the king of Denmark, as the indisputable duke over the duchies, and believed that the Confederation had no right to meddle in the affairs of Schleswig-Holstein.\textsuperscript{41} The German nationalism exhibited in the aggression used to secure the duchies gained the condemnation of almost all of the British, but Great Britain still did not act to stop the spread of nationalism or the unification of Germany.\textsuperscript{42}

A fear of losing power provided further impetus for some to support the Danish cause. Palmerston felt that England’s non-policy over Schleswig-Holstein, and her failure to support her promises to Denmark, led to England’s humiliation in the eyes of the continental nations and encouraged Bismarck’s expansion of power.\textsuperscript{43} A letter from Napier, serving as ambassador to Russia in 1864, expresses how the continental powers of Europe viewed Britain, due to her weak response:

Prince Gortchakoff, in my humble judgment, believes that Her Majesty’s Government will swerve from the principle of a military frontier in Schleswig, just as they are ready to swerve from the Treaty of 1851 [sic] and the integrity of the Danish

\textsuperscript{40} Sandiford, 117.
\textsuperscript{41} Carr, 315.
\textsuperscript{42} Sandiford, 135.
\textsuperscript{43} Marriot, 196.
Monarchy. The political necessities which have conducted England to the first concession will conduct her to the second.\textsuperscript{44}

Napier’s letter confirms Palmerston’s fears about the apparent weakness and untrustworthiness of the nation that Britain’s bungling of the crisis seemed to expose.

While English sympathies were largely with the Danish in 1864, due to a fear of German aggression and the 1852 treaty, the Queen’s political stance still varied from that of her ministers and her people. Queen Victoria preferred a steadfast policy of neutrality, in accordance with the policy of “splendid isolation” and if forced to choose a side in the debate sided with the Germans rather than with the Danish.\textsuperscript{45} Her pro-German bias was well known, and discussed in one of the pamphlets attempting to influence English opinion in the crisis:

I believe we have to thank our most worthy Queen Victoria for seizing the helm at the last extremity, and thus saving our country. You say Her Majesty thinks ‘German’ in the Schleswigholstein [sic] case? I hope the time will soon arrive where you’ll see that German in this case is synonymous with thinking justly and honourably- therefore by no means un-English I trust.\textsuperscript{46}

Bismarck expressed to a British ambassador named Buchanan that he believed the terms of the 1852 Treaty of London had been broken, and that Prussia did not thus need to abide by the terms; Queen Victoria agreed with Bismarck’s view on this, and sided steadfastly with the

\textsuperscript{44} Lawrence Dinkelspiel Steefel, \textit{The Schleswig-Holstein Question} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932), 354.
\textsuperscript{45} Marriot, 100.
\textsuperscript{46} “Old Englishman,” 36.
Germans regardless of the arguments of her ministers. William Gladstone, a Liberal serving as Chancellor of the Exchequer at this time, commented on Queen Victoria’s view on Schleswig-Holstein on January 4th, 1864, noting the strength of her views on the Crisis:

> Often as I have been struck by the Queen’s extraordinary integrity of mind... I never felt it more than on hearing and reading a letter of hers on Saturday (at the Cabinet) about the Danish question. Her determination, in this case as in others, not inwardly to ‘sell the truth’.... overbears all prepossessions and longings, strong as they are on the German side, and enables her spontaneously to hold the balance, it seems to me, tolerably even.

This observation by Gladstone both reveals the Queen’s decidedly pro-German stance, similar to the positions she and her husband had held in 1848. However, with her ministers against her and desirous to avoid war at all costs, Queen Victoria officially assumed and maintained a position of neutrality that hindered her ministers’ attempts at any sort of action, effectively aiding the German cause.

The British declared the end of their involvement in the crisis in June of 1864, giving the Prussians a clear shot at the duchies. Meanwhile, although promising a return to the terms of 1852, Bismarck sought to bring the duchies under Prussian control, which would help to move towards a united Germany centered in Prussia. The gain of the

47 Steefel, 200.
48 Marriot, 102.
duchies gave Prussia a territorial and strategic advantage against Austria
and established Prussian dominance over the German Confederation.\textsuperscript{50}
The Danish king signed rights to the duchies away in August of 1864,
giving the duchies to Bismarck and the Prussians.\textsuperscript{51} By 1867, Bismarck
had succeeded in annexing Schleswig-Holstein and uniting North
Germany through entirely diplomatic methods, partially due to the
British reluctance to intervene in 1864.\textsuperscript{52} This triumph of German
policies, leading towards the creation of a united German nation, marked
a changing balance of power in Europe.\textsuperscript{53}

These divisions within the government and within the country at
large crippled Great Britain in both 1848 and 1864, tarnishing the
reputation of the Great Power and allowing a massive shift in the balance
of power in Europe. Lord Stanley, a member of the House of Commons,
revealed the state of Great Britain following the conflict when he wrote
that Britain’s blunderings had left “France alienated, Germany insulted,
Denmark abandoned, and Poland encouraged and left to perish.”\textsuperscript{54} Great
Britain’s deeply rooted divisions mirror the equally deep divisions within
the Duchies themselves, and demonstrate the power of the rising tide of
nationalism. The unification of Germany, aided by the annexation of

\textsuperscript{50} Dennis E. Showalter, \textit{The Wars of German Unification} (London: Arnold, 2004), 121.
\textsuperscript{51} Sandiford, 118.
\textsuperscript{52} Carr, 316.
\textsuperscript{53} Aldous, 149.
\textsuperscript{54} Sandiford, 133.
Schleswig and Holstein, would have lasting implications on both the balance of power and Great Britain, and the inaction of Great Britain in 1848 and 1864 helped to speed this unification.