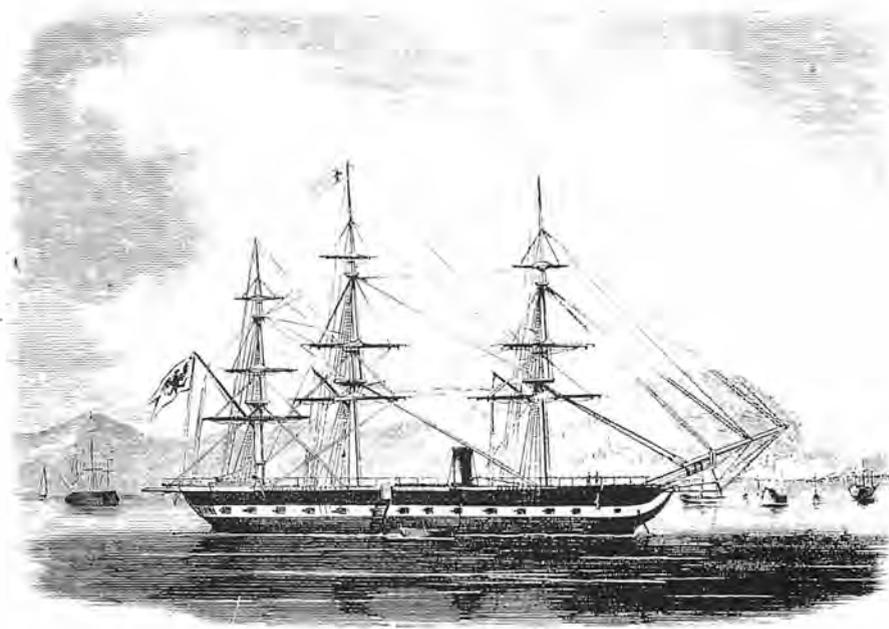


# THE PRUSSIAN EXPEDITION TO THE FAR EAST (1860-1862)

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*The "Arcona" in port at Hong Kong. (From Spiess, Leipzig 1864.)*

When the Americans opened Japan by a show of naval force in 1853/54 the Prussian government as well as German commercial circles closely watched further developments in East Asia. But the Prussian Navy proved unable to send ships on such a long voyage and had therefore to decline the task of imitating the Americans. It was with the change of sovereigns in 1858, when William I, later to become the first German Emperor, succeeded his mentally disturbed brother, that the plans for a naval expedition to the Far East were taken up again. The new liberal government of the so-called "New Era"—the only liberal government in the history of Prussia—encouraged preparations for such an expedition. Modern vessels were built in the shipyard of Gdansk, or rather ordered in England, since the Prussians' skill in shipbuilding was not very advanced. Liberal Prussia tried to follow English liberal patterns and became the advocate of unrestricted industrial development at

home and free trade abroad. This economic programme of the liberal Prussian government was enthusiastically supported by the chambers of commerce of all the other German states. By sponsoring commercial and industrial activities, Prussia, the leading military power, also tried to reach a dominant position in politics, i.e. in the question of German unification.

Furthermore, Prussian government officials as well as officers of the newly enlarged navy had dreamed of obtaining colonies in East Asia in order to keep in line with the established West European states, like England, France, and the Netherlands, and thereby again to demonstrate the new leading position of Prussia within the German Union against the traditional claim of the Hapsburgs.

The Austrian government had originally taken the lead in exploring the Far East for the Germans. The frigate "Novarra"

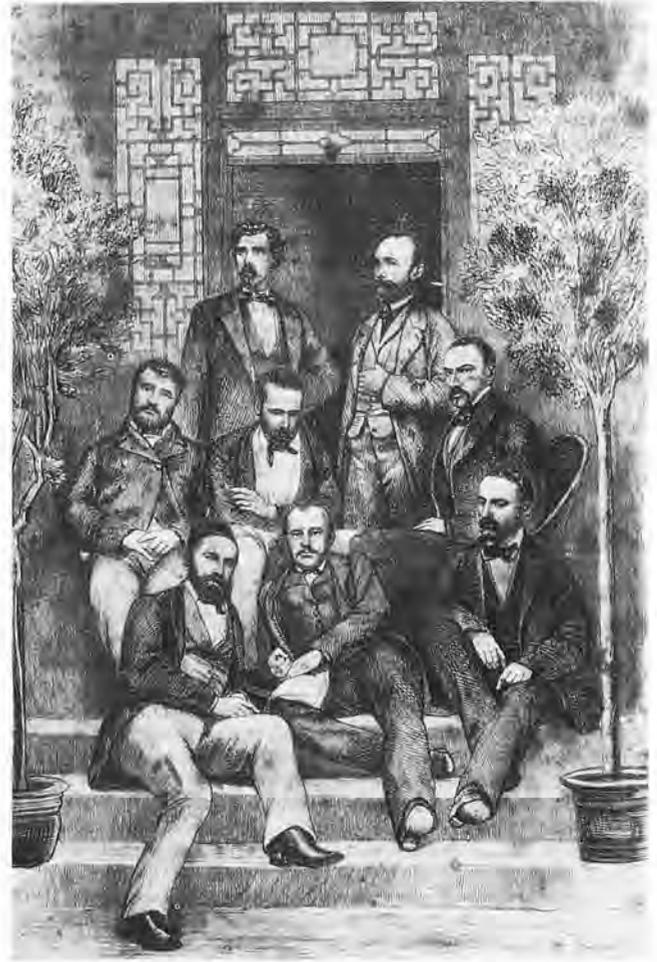
was to be the first German warship to sail round the world between 1857 and 1859. The Austrian ship called at the port of Shanghai where it received a frenetic welcome by the local German merchant community. The Viennese, and not the Prussian government in Berlin, were looked upon as the future protector of German trade in the world. The Austrian ship even had orders to reconnoitre suitable sites for a Hapsburg overseas colony for the settlement of convicts. The Nicobar Islands in the Indian Ocean and some smaller islands of the Dutch East Indies attracted the Austrians most. The Prussian-Austrian dualism over the question of German unification thus reached a worldwide dimension. But the Austrians' plans had to be dropped in 1859 after the humiliating defeat of the Hapsburg monarchy in the war against France in northern Italy, and the task of representing the Germans in overseas countries was now left to the Prussians.

On 18th August 1859 a decision of the Prussian cabinet "to send an expedition to the Chinese waters" was given royal assent. This mission was to conclude commercial and navigation treaties with China, Japan, and Siam. It was to be carried out by the two biggest and most modern armed vessels of the Prussian navy together with a supply schooner. Soon a fourth ship, a commercial sailing vessel, was chartered for the conveyance of industrial and technical samples—a kind of exposition of German industry and commerce.

Prussia was, in addition, to negotiate and conclude treaties on behalf of all the members of the German Customs Union—from which Austria was excluded—and, what was even more important, in the name of the three Hanseatic towns, Hamburg, Bremen and Lübeck, which were proud of their traditional political and commercial independence.

The expedition was to serve scientific purposes as well. Three renowned experts in the field of botany and zoology received the royal order to join the diplomats on the ships. In the final paragraph of the cabinet paper vague colonial plans were outlined. The expedition was to explore the coastlines of South America and Africa for suitable places to hoist the Prussian flag.

While the technical and naval preparations were speeded up, the former Prussian Consul-General in Warsaw, Count Fritz zu Eulenburg, was nominated "chef de mission" and promoted to the rank of plenipotentiary extraordinary of the Prussian king. In the eyes of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, no trained diplomat seemed suitable to lead the mission. The selection of a commercial expert, like a Consul-General, again stressed the main task of the expedition to promote German trade in East Asia. Having neither experience in diplomatic negotiations nor in talks with Asiatic delegates, Eulenburg after his nomination immediately went to Paris in March 1860 in order to consult with both the French and the British chief negotiators of the Tientsin treaties. Lord Elgin promised the Prussians all British help in China to obtain a treaty on the basis of the terms of the Tientsin arrangements which, incidentally, had not been ratified by the Chinese government at that time. The French Baron Gros even encouraged the Prussian envoy to annex the island of Formosa as a Prussian colony. The French seemed very keen on having the Prussians as their allies in colonial adventures in



*Diplomatic members of the Prussian expedition to the Far East, from a contemporary photograph taken in Tientsin. The chef de mission, Count Fritz zu Eulenburg, is seated at the far right in the middle row. Front row, L to R: Dr. Lucius, mission medical officer; Lieut. Count zu Eulenburg, attaché; Dr. Th. von Bunsen, attaché. Middle row: Wilhelm Heine, artist; Lieut. Max von Brandt, attaché, later Ambassador to China; Count Fritz zu Eulenburg. Back row: Gustav Spiess, author of the book on the expedition from which these illustrations are taken, published in Leipzig, 1864; August Berg, artist.*

Southeast Asia. While French troops were to invade the kingdom of Cambodia the Germans should occupy Formosa and thus hinder both the British and the Chinese from interfering with France's colonial acquisitions. The idea of Formosa as a German colony under Prussian administration remained a visionary goal until the Japanese took over the island in 1895.

After some sharp quarrels between the Navy Ministry and the Admiralty that reflected the rivalry between civilian and military authorities in Prussia, the ships left their Baltic home harbours in December 1859. However, the pride of the Prussian navy, the steamship "Arcona," had to dock in England

for repairs. The ships left England individually at the end of February 1860, called at a few ports in South America, and then sailed directly via the South Atlantic and the Indian Ocean to Singapore, where they met in September. Again the ships had to undergo thorough repairs with the help of British experts.

Count Eulenburg, a bon vivant and by no means a military man, abhorred the discomfort of a long and strenuous sea voyage. He was allowed to travel to Singapore the shortest way, on the so-called "land route" via the Mediterranean, Suez, and the Indian Ocean. Before his departure he received a final order from the king authorizing the expedition to use military force should the necessity arise and to participate in the campaigns of the European powers against the obstinate Peking government. But the idea of Prussia becoming a military ally of Britain and France in the war against China bordered on the ridiculous, considering that Eulenburg had just about 740 men, and not all of them trained soldiers, at his disposal.

When Eulenburg received information in Singapore, where he finally had to embark on the small Prussian warships, that the war situation in China had not changed yet, the cautious diplomat decided to continue the voyage to Japan and avoid military adventures in China.

Having lost the small supply ship in a heavy typhoon, the expedition anchored in the bay of Edo in early September 1860. Diplomatic talks were opened immediately, but the weak shogunate government bluntly refused to sign any further treaty with Western nations which could provoke further xenophobic reactions by the Japanese people and so strengthen rising nationalist opposition. It was only with the assistance of the American and French diplomatic colleagues that Eulenburg finally succeeded in signing a commercial agreement and a treaty of friendship between Prussia and the shogun's government. The original aim of Prussia concluding a treaty on behalf of all the members of the German Customs Union so as to show her leading position also in international relations was blocked by the Japanese negotiators. Pretending to have no idea of the complex situation of the German states and the German Union they would consent to no more than a formal agreement between the two monarchies. A treaty between Prussia and Japan was finally signed on January 24, 1861.

The mission left Japan for the commercial capital of China, Shanghai, where one of the ships ran aground and had to be towed into deep waters, again with British and French help. Because of the Chinese refusal to succumb to the humiliating treaty of Tientsin, British and French troops entered Peking and, as an act of "revenge," looted the city. The small Prussian expedition was unable to take part in defeating the Chinese. It was forced to wait for the outcome of the war, from which it might gain some profit. In the talks with the Chinese government, which were taken up in the spring of 1861, Count Eulenburg insisted that Prussia should be granted the same privileges which the Western powers had achieved by military victory. Negotiating a treaty with the Chinese authorities, requiring both cunning and patience, proved the most difficult task Eulenburg had to take on.

Because of the recent ratification of the Tientsin treaties in October 1860, hostilities in Northern China had stopped but the whole political situation remained unstable. The Chinese emperor and his court had fled from the invading Western troops to the summer palace in Jehol. The task of dealing with the "barbarians," with help from the newly established Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Tsunqli Yamen), was left to Prince Kung in Peking. Contrary to the wishes of their governments, the French and British diplomats were rather reluctant to offer any help to the Prussians. They even tried to persuade Eulenburg not to proceed from Shanghai to Tientsin. The appearance of a fourth great European power in Peking, where Russian, British, and French diplomatic missions had already been established, might endanger the pro-Western circles within the Chinese government and eventually lead to the overthrow of Prince Kung by traditionalist court circles. On the other hand the Western powers in China feared the Prussian (- German) competition, because the Germans—without colonial strongholds—were highly regarded by the Chinese, and in those days controlled the coastal shipping trade in China almost entirely. More than 200 German sailing vessels, mostly coming from German sea ports like Hamburg and Bremen, were chartered together with their German crews, bringing great profit to Chinese merchants.

Contrary to the advice of his Western colleagues, Eulenburg sent one of his attachés, Max von Brandt, later to become German ambassador in China, to Tientsin to start negotiations with the Chinese central government. But the local High Commissioner of the northern treaty ports, Ch'ung Hon, refused even to transfer a letter from Eulenburg to Prince Kung in Peking. The Chinese desperately tried to negotiate with the Prussians at a lower level in order to avoid the Peking government's getting involved at all. They were ready for no more than a commercial treaty applicable only to three northern treaty ports. When the German envoy insisted on an official treaty and on Prussia's right to establish a permanent legation in the capital, the negotiations almost broke down. Eulenburg ordered Brandt to proceed to Peking to force the central authorities to consent to Prussia's wishes. But Prince Kung was offended by the unauthorised visit of the German attaché and forced him to leave the city. Prussia would certainly have failed to obtain a treaty had not the Western powers finally given substantial help. The Eulenburg mission, with only the flagship "Arcona" anchoring near the Taku forts, disposed of no military means to force its political demands upon the Chinese as the English and French had done before.

The French especially, after first supporting the Chinese claims, now adopted a pro-Prussian policy and gave all the support they could to the Prussian case. It can be assumed that the French consul in Tientsin and the legation in Peking did so because they had orders from Paris. The French government still wooed the Prussians as a future colonial partner in East Asia against the dominating British. When the French started to back the Prussian demands the British could not stand back. The Chinese, still trying to play off the barbarians against each other, delayed the talks by refusing to present the credentials of the envoys and continuing to refuse a formal political agreement. Not until July, after four months of unpleasant talks, did the

Chinese central government finally give in. Possible threats from the French and the British, as well as the Chinese fear of having to conclude separate treaties with thirty single German states later instead of just one now, with Prussia on behalf of the Customs Union, may have helped to change the minds of the officials and of Prince Kung. The following dialogue between Eulenburg and Ch'ung Hon during the final phase of the negotiations demonstrates the resignation of the Chinese as much as the self-assurance of the Prussian envoy:

- Ch'ung : If an expression does not make sense to us, we have got to change it. The English and the French forced us to accept a treaty in their own version.
- Eulenburg : As long as expressions are concerned I shall do my best and give in. However, there is nothing substantially unreasonable in the treaty.
- Ch'ung : This question could best be answered by Kwei Lian who was forced to sign those treaties. I would rather have my head cut off than sign such a treaty.
- Eulenburg : In that case we had better break off negotiations.
- Ch'ung : The Emperor would be right asking me why I granted to Prussia what England and France forced us to accept only after several wars.
- Eulenburg : I cannot but repeat that I shall not conclude any treaty unless it is based on the terms of the most favoured nation.
- Ch'ung : This is how one country after the other is trying to exert political pressure upon us so that in the end nothing will be left of China.
- Eulenburg : China is completely free to act the way she wants. If you do not want to conclude a treaty with Prussia on the terms we are offering, then do not. I now want you to answer my question precisely: Are you or are you not willing to grant me the same rights you have granted to the other powers?
- Ch'ung : We cannot grant anything but what sounds reasonable.
- Eulenburg : Your answer does not stick to the point. What I am asking for is only reasonable.
- Ch'ung : You are trying to force upon us something we cannot consider reasonable.

Finally, on 12th August, the treaty was drafted according to the Prussian demands. The Imperial seal was fixed two days before the Emperor died on 21st August. The signing ceremony took place in Tientsin on 2nd September 1861. Eulenburg had gained a splendid diplomatic victory. This time the treaty was signed not with Prussia alone, but with all members of the German Customs Union. In profiting from the Western victories Prussia succeeded for the first time in representing the German states in an overseas country.

Meanwhile, with the Prussian government's growing pride in the results of the expedition, the discussion was opened



*Officers on the quarterdeck of the Arcona. Left to right, front row: Lt. Struben, Baron von Schleinitz, Count Monts, Commodore Sundewall, Lt. Schelle, Lt. Butterlin, Baron von Imhoff. In the rear: Fähnrich Kühne, Lt. Krause.*

again for a permanent foothold, such as the Western powers had, in East Asia. A royal order from Berlin pointed at the Solomon Islands and Formosa (Taiwan) as the most suitable places for a German colony for the settlement of convicts and emigrants from Prussia. However, Count Eulenburg could not feel easy with the idea of Prussia becoming an equal colonial partner of the British or French. He warned his government that any colonial acquisition in East Asia might result in a diplomatic estrangement between Prussia and the Western powers and would certainly endanger the recently concluded treaties with China and Japan. In order to stress his arguments Eulenburg reported that the island of Formosa was in no way suitable for any kind of western colonization due to its intolerably hot and humid climate. Notwithstanding the protest of Prince Adalbert, Admiral-in-Chief of the Prussian Navy, who strongly favoured a military invasion of Formosa, the mission was ordered home by the civilian government.

On their way home, they were supposed to call at the capital of Siam, to conclude a treaty of friendship and commerce there. The impending arrival of the Prussian expedition had been announced to the Siamese authorities by letter from China. When the second ship of the convoy, the frigate "Thetis," an-

chored in the coastal waters of Bangkok on 22nd November 1861, everything was ready to welcome the first German warship and her crew in the capital. The captain and his officers gladly accepted the offer to lodge in a small palace which had been assigned as the official residence for the German envoy, and to stay until Eulenburg himself appeared. The advance party of the Prussian delegation was asked to pay a formal visit to the two leading ministers, the Phraklang, as minister of the treasury responsible for all external affairs, and to the Kalahom, the so-called first minister in charge of military affairs. On the next day, the fourth day after their arrival, the Prussian naval officers were granted a private audience by the first king, Mongkut, in the private chambers of the royal palace. The Germans, accustomed to the strict etiquette at the Prussian court in Berlin, were puzzled by the King of Siam personally entertaining his guests and serving each of them a glass of sherry.

The Prussians felt greatly honoured with this preferential treatment, which was not altogether due to the natural amiability of the Siamese but had some political motives too. Only ten years before, in 1852, King Mongkut and his political advisers had closely watched the second Anglo-Burmese war, which was fought over the legal status of British traders and which ended by Lower Burma becoming a British colony. In order to counter the British menace from the west and from the south-east, from Singapore (acquired in 1819), the Siamese had softened the English by giving in to their commercial demands, thus signing the first unequal treaty with a Western power.

Meanwhile, the French ruler Napoleon III, who after overthrowing the republican government had made himself Emperor of France, was looking for political success in foreign affairs to stabilize the situation in France. Colonial conquest and prestigious warlike expeditions to exotic countries seemed to him a suitable means. The French, therefore, took part as Britain's ally in the Second Opium War against China (1857-1860) and, in 1859, annexed Saigon as their first stronghold in Cochin-China. Since this territory officially belonged to Cambodia, which was regarded as part of the Kingdom of Siam, the French had actually encroached upon Siamese sovereignty for the first time and furthermore were preparing to extend their influence over the whole of Cambodia.

Two weeks before the arrival of the first Prussian warship the French Consul-General had handed to the Siamese government an official note enquiring about the legal status of Cambodia. The French military supported this diplomatic *démarche* by occupying some islands off the Cambodian coast. As a further demonstration of France's advanced military and naval power the French warship "Formosa" steamed up the Menam River and anchored in the middle of Bangkok with her guns pointing at the city. Since no foreign armed vessels were allowed to enter the capital, the authorities tried to fine the French commanding officer. King Mongkut pointedly left the city in order to avoid having to receive a French delegation. Relations between Siam and France were thus tense and even further strained when the French actually occupied Cochin-China in 1862.

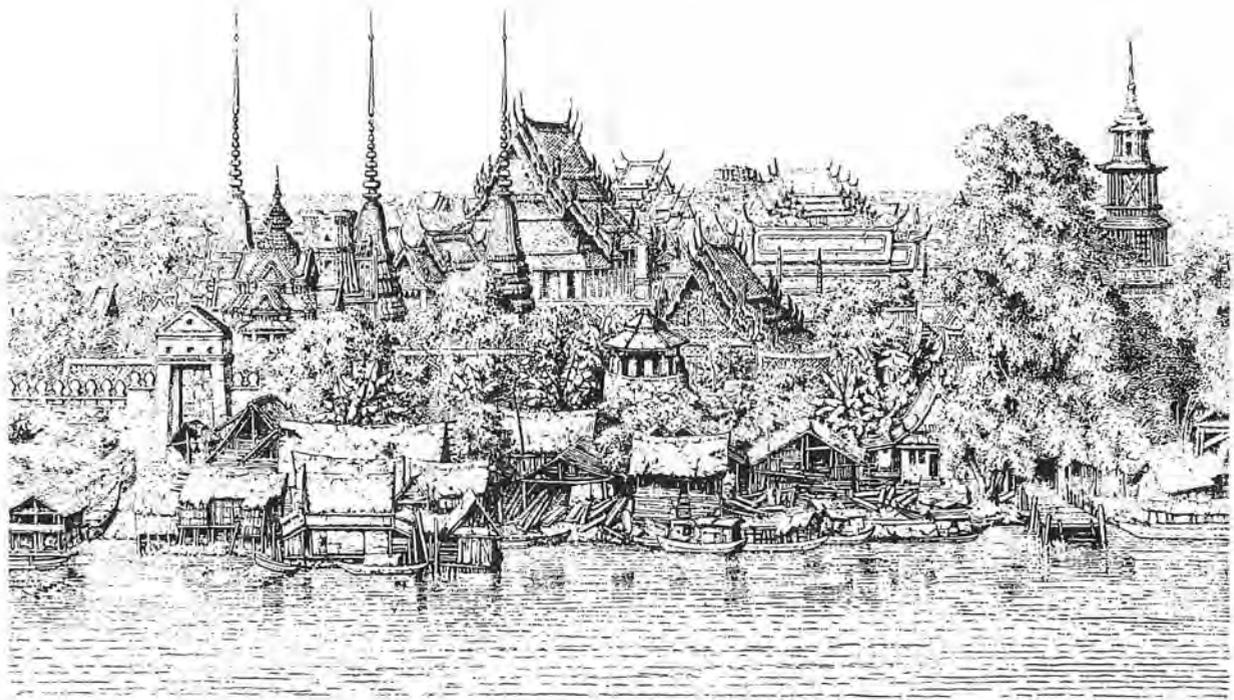
Therefore the Prussians, who apparently had no colonial ambitions in Asia, were regarded as potential allies by the

Siamese in their struggle for maintaining independence. Prussia, the third of the European great powers to appear in Siam, had so far kept a neutral position in Europe and was expected to mediate between the interests of the colonial powers, the British and the French on the one hand and the legitimate rights of Siam on the other. The court, therefore, could hardly wait for the arrival of the Prussian plenipotentiary, Count Eulenburg. When his flagship, the "Arctona," finally reached the roadstead of Bangkok on 15th December 1861, the reception he received resembled the greeting of a personal friend of the king.

All the members of the mission were astonished at the cordial welcome by the Thai authorities and the presents and the variety of food they were immediately offered by the royal palace. Compared to Japan and China, the negotiations in Siam went on smoothly and without any complications. From the very first day the Thai officials warned the Germans not to imitate the Western colonial powers, since colonies meant rivalries among the great powers and finally war—a prognosis which was soon proved right by the imperialistic struggles over China and the so-called punitive expeditions against the Chinese, like the Boxer rebellion. The whole atmosphere in Bangkok seems to have been very easy-going and peaceful, just the opposite of what the Prussian soldiers and diplomats were accustomed to.

King Mongkut received Eulenburg and the official members of the Prussian delegation for the first time in a private audience on 24th December 1861 in order to find out the political views of his would-be allies. When asked about the colonial plans of the Prussian government, Eulenburg, having just disobeyed an order from Berlin on this score, diplomatically replied that Prussia would in no case look for colonies in tropical areas. The king seemed relieved and commented on the answer by saying that he felt the more delighted to have won a new unselfish friend, since the old friends had recently become troublesome. Then His Majesty made some profound remarks on the nature of Western colonialism: "First, ships are sent out to explore the unknown parts of the world. Then other ships follow for the purpose of trading. Then merchants settle down, who are either fought by the natives or who try to subjugate the native population. In short, wars emerge out of guilt and misunderstanding on both sides. The foreigners keep extending their influence until entire empires belong to them. Nowadays there is hardly any country left for new colonies, except Oceania (i.e. the Pacific) and the islands of the South Sea. The Asian countries have been in a disadvantageous position since the norms of Western international law have not been applied to them."

On the occasion of the official audience three days later, the court unfolded all its royal splendour in order to impress the Prussians. The guests were amazed at the exotic spectacle but—like the Prussian soldiers they were—noticed signs of disorder within the military guard of honour and the ragged uniforms the Siamese soldiers wore. In the reception hall the nobles, all of them in formal attire, and the children of the king were lying on a heavily carpeted floor while the monarch and the Prussian envoy stood up from their chairs in order to exchange the royal



*One of the scenes of Bangkok among the 32 prints which were included in the official report of the Prussian expedition to the Far East.*

letters. Addressing the king in English, Eulenburg asked for friendly relations between the two countries and expressed the desire of the Prussian government to conclude a formal treaty. While opening the letter from his royal Prussian friend, King Mongkut enquired whether the German and the English languages had much in common. When Eulenburg politely confirmed this royal assumption, the King directly asked his guest about the relationship between Britain and Prussia. He was also curious to know whether they (i.e. the English and the Prussians) would assist him if further difficulties arose between Siam and other countries. Eulenburg of course grasped the hint at the French menace. Responding as a diplomat he could not but offer the friendly services of his royal sovereign should such a case arise. King Mongkut seemed pleased. In his official reply he consented to the Prussian wishes: "We shall nominate qualified persons in order to deliberate upon and finally conclude a treaty similar to those which have been signed with the monarchs of other European countries." In order to stress his earnest desire to come to terms with Prussia as soon as possible, the king sent a general to Eulenburg the following day. The military man again stressed the importance of friendship between neutral Prussia and Siam in her struggle with the two neighbouring colonial powers, thereby greatly admiring and praising the Prussian military as a potential future protector.

But Eulenburg did not fancy Prussia getting involved in political entanglements of the great powers in remote countries such as Siam. He therefore carefully avoided giving any advice.

Instead of discussing world politics with his Thai hosts, he looked for Prussia's commercial advantage. Siam's new Prussian friend behaved from the very beginning rather like the old friends, the colonial European powers. Eulenburg lent his ear to the German merchant community in Bangkok and their proposals to improve trade relations to their own benefit. When the negotiations officially started on 9th January 1862, the Prussian envoy confronted the unsuspecting Thai delegation with two new demands. He insisted on quasi-legal terms of employment for Thai people working for German merchants and thus interfered with the traditional social order in Siam. After short deliberation the Thai delegation gave in on this point but steadfastly refused to grant to the Germans the right of acquiring landed property wherever they wanted. So far the acquisition of land by Westerners had been limited to certain districts of the capital. As neither side seemed ready to compromise, the decision had to be left to the king. In order to counterbalance the French demands over Cambodia with a treaty with Prussia, the king finally had to give in. The treaty was drafted on 23rd January and formally signed two weeks later, on 7th February. According to the most favoured nation clause of the other treaties Siam had been forced to sign before, the new rights granted to the Germans were automatically bestowed on the other nations too. Now all Westerners were allowed to buy land in a country where traditionally all the soil belonged to the king and native subjects could but rent it for their houses.

On the occasion of the farewell audience for his Prussian guests on 17th February, King Mongkut symbolized the weakness of his country by explaining his own feeble position: "I have no power. I am absolute. If I point the end of my walking stick at a man, whom being my enemy, I wish to die, he does not die, but lives on, in spite of my 'absolute' will to the contrary." The Prussian delegates ignored this remark of a king whose status and whose country they did not accept as an equal partner of Prussia and her monarch. In the eyes of the Prussians the Thai, although friendly and patient, remained inferior natives like the Japanese and the Chinese. Before leaving the country the civilian members of the expedition went for an excursion into the countryside in order to fetch some exotic animals and plants for the zoo and the botanical garden in Berlin.

Via Singapore and the Cape of Good Hope, the ships returned to their Baltic home ports, which they reached in late autumn 1862. Casualties altogether were high, but the experience the few navy officers and sailors had gained on this long voyage proved indispensable for the strengthening of the modern German Imperial Navy after the Reich had been founded. Most of the officers were promoted to the rank of admiral and later held key positions in the German navy. Some of them even returned to the Far East when the navy finally seized some Chinese territory in 1897, and the port of Tsingtao thus became the first German colony in East Asia under the administration of the navy.

Concerning the political and commercial consequences of the Prussian expedition to the Far East, the results were rather meagre. The liberal government in Prussia had to resign because of the constitutional conflict over the army reorganization. The liberal interlude in the history of Prussian government to promote a foreign policy on a large scale was immediately blocked by the new Prime Minister, Otto von Bismarck. For him the unification of the German states with the help of "iron and blood" ranked before colonial experiments. Count Eulenburg, the reluctant leader of the mission, became Minister of the Interior. Instead of occupying remote islands in the Pacific he now had to fight Bismarck's opponents.

German trade with the three Asian countries was little stimulated by the commercial treaties. German industry and commerce, primarily interested in a united market at home, supported Bismarck's political aims. When this domestic market could no longer be expanded, controlling colonies and leased territories again became means in themselves in the age of imperialism. Unlike the English custom, it was always the colours that were hoisted first, in 1861-2 with the Prussian expedition as much as in 1897 with the seizure of Tsingtao by the Germans. German trade followed the flag only very slowly and reluctantly.

The Prussian expedition to the Far East established for the first time formal diplomatic relations with the governments of Japan, China, and Siam—contacts that have endured to the present day if not always to the benefit of the respective peoples.

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*Another of the prints of Bangkok which were part of the official report of the expedition.*