

The Continental Consequences of the Assassination of August von Kotzebue

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Background Information:

- In 1815, the German Confederation was formed after Napoleon destroyed the Holy Roman Empire. Germany was divided into thirty-nine autonomous states, most of them ruled by monarchs.
- Nationalist students, many of them veterans of the Napoleonic wars, called for liberal reforms and a unified German nation-state.
- August von Kotzebue was a conservative playwright who had ties to the Russian Tsar. He was critical of the nationalist students and their political ideas.
- On March 23rd, 1819, the student Carl Sand, stabbed Kotzebue, calling him a “traitor to the fatherland.” Sand was venerated by some liberals as a hero, but conservatives used the assassination as a pretext for cracking down on universities and liberal organizations throughout Germany.
- The reports of the British envoys in Germany (held in the National Archives in London) provide a window into German political and diplomatic thinking in the years after Kotzebue's death. Much of this correspondence has never been published or analyzed.



Assassination of August von Kotzebue, 1819

Results:

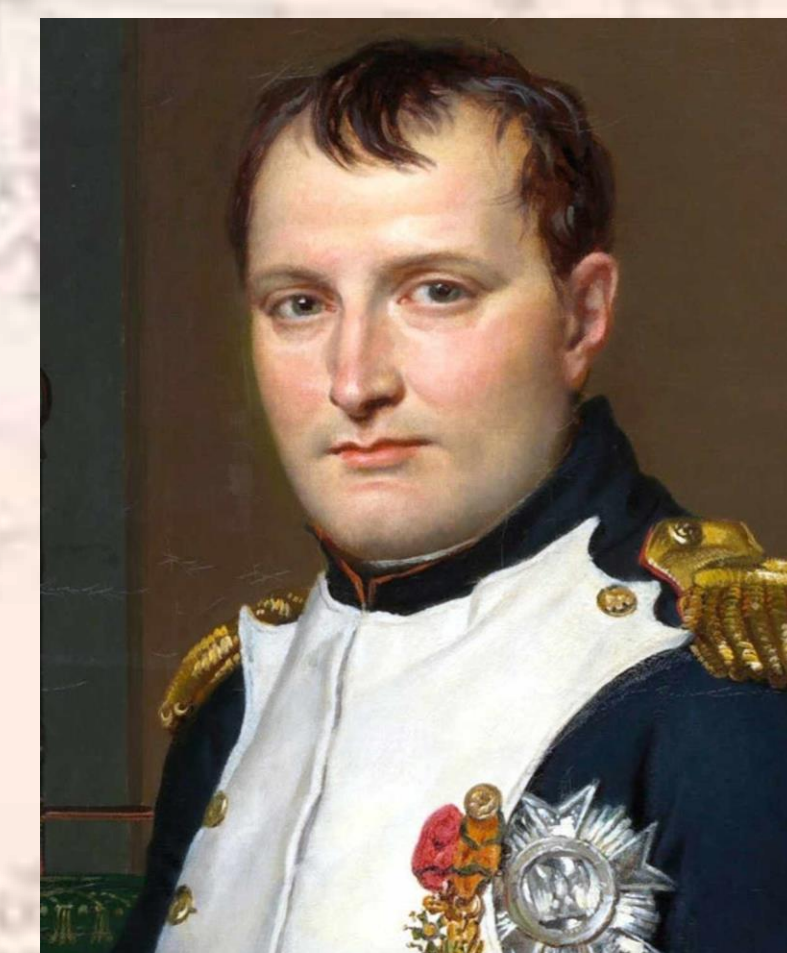
- After the murder of August von Kotzebue, Austria and Prussia tightened control over universities in their territories. Meanwhile Metternich and other top officials met in Carlsbad to discuss measures for combating the dangers of revolutionary unrests.
- The resulting "Carlsbad Decrees" (ratified in September 1819) called for: tighter government oversight of universities; heightened press censorship, banning of student nationalist groups, and an investigating committee (located in Mainz) that would uncover the sources of political unrest.
- As the envoy correspondence demonstrates, there was wide concern over further revolutionary activity in the German lands. In addition, there was considerable worry that France itself was accelerating in a dangerous direction, with revolutionary forces growing rapidly in the absence of effective oversight or restraint.

Research Objectives:

- Our work hopes to close gaps in knowledge surrounding political extremism in Post-Napoleonic Germany, highlighting the attitude of the leading German rulers and officials towards the dangers of radical political violence and the actions needed to combat it. In particular, we are interested in the degree to which officials supported implementation of the Carlsbad Decrees, which led to press censorship, crackdowns on dissent, and restrictions on universities across the German Confederation.
- By examining the correspondence of the British envoys in the German lands, we aim to provide greater insight into the attitude of leading European statesmen and diplomats concerning political developments in the German lands in the post-Napoleon wars.



August von Kotzebue



Napoleon Bonaparte



Klemens von Metternich

Conclusions:

- These results provide insight into the plots and conspiracies that took place in universities in the late 1810's. It also reflects the presence of rebels within German society who tried to break away from the monarchist norms.
- Research around domestic terrorism and political extremism in 19th century Germany is still ongoing. There are many additional documents, correspondence, and other forms of communication that await study and analysis.
- This research reveals many events that transpired in Germany during this time, bringing to light the motives and interests behind the policy changes that followed the assassination of August von Kotzebue.
- It is strongly suggested that future research is conducted on Kotzebue's assassination, as well as additional instances of domestic terrorism that occurred in and around the region during the 1800s.
- Further research will work to uncover more details of the root causes behind the liberal nationalists' will to stand for a constitutional monarchy, involving a parliament that can offset the will of the monarch.

Methodology:

Main subjects:

- August von Kotzebue, Karl Sand, Clemens von Metternich, Robert Stewart and Viscountt Castlereagh.

Methods:

- We transcribed diplomatic correspondence from the National Archives in London, focusing on reports from the German Confederation in the years 1815 to 1830.

Materials:

- For non-English documents, we used Google dictionary to decipher foreign vocabulary. We also used Transkribus, an AI-powered platform that converts handwritten and historical documents into searchable, editable text.

Procedures:

- These tools were used to create original annotated transcriptions to understand the perspectives of German officials and British diplomats on the German political situation after 1815.

Data analysis:

- We transcribed and annotated the envoy reports from Germany, taking note of important individuals and events mentioned in the documents with titles of nobility.



Map of German Confederation 1815-1866

Resources:

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