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Bissing, Moritz Ferdinand Freiherr von

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Bissing, *Moritz* Ferdinand von
Prussian senior officer and politician
Born 30 January 1844 in Bellmannsdorf, German Empire
Died 18 April 1917 in Trois Fontaines, Belgium

Moritz von Bissing was born on 30 January 1844, in Bellmannsdorf, Silesia, then part of the German Empire. He served as governor general of the Prussian Army from December 1914 until his death on 18 April 1917 in Trois Fontaines, a village in German-occupied Belgium.

Table of Contents

- [1 Family background](#)
- [2 Military Career](#)
- [3 Political Career](#)
- [4 Governor General of German-Occupied Belgium](#)
- [5 Flemish Policy](#)
- [6 The Exploitation of Belgium](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

1. Family background

Moritz von Bissing (1844-1917) was the sixth child of [Moritz von Bissing \(1802-1860\)](#) and his first wife [Dorothea von Bissing \(1800-1847\)](#), née Freiin von Gall. He married [Myrrha Wesendonck \(1851-1888\)](#) in 1872, who bore him one son, [Friedrich Wilhelm von Bissing \(1873-1956\)](#). After her death, Bissing married [Alice von Königsmarck \(1867-?\)](#) in 1888; she gave birth to his second son, [Wilhelm Moritz von Bissing \(1891-1975\)](#).

2. Military Career

In 1857 Bissing entered the Knights' Academy (*Ritterakademie*) in Liegnitz and began his military career as a sergeant (*Avantageur*) in the 1st Squadron (*Eskadron*) of the 2nd Silesian Dragoon Regiment no. 8. In 1865 he passed the officer's exam at the war school in Neiße, Silesia, and he completed his military training at the War Academy in Berlin in 1870. He participated in the Prusso-Austrian War (1866) and the war against France (1870-1871). He served as orderly officer under [Friedrich, Crown Prince of Germany \(1831-1888\)](#) - later Friedrich III, German Emperor - in 1869, followed by an appointment as aide-de-camp under [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#) in 1888. In 1893 Bissing was promoted to major general, then general lieutenant in 1897 and commanding general of the 7th army corps in Münster in Westfalia. After having preemptively informed his troops that he would be replaced by a younger officer in an official corps order, Bissing was reprimanded by the Kaiser; he subsequently submitted his resignation, which was accepted on 12 December 1907.

During his tenure as commanding officer, Bissing issued a secret corps order proposing the immediate arrest of social democratic members of the *Reichstag* in the event of war. He was the first commanding officer of the entire German Reich to issue such an order. The revelation of his action created a serious political row in 1910. Still, Bissing regained his command on 2 August 1914, at the outbreak of World War I, and was promoted to senior general (*Generaloberst*) on 24 December. From 4 December he served as governor general in Belgium.

3. Political Career

After his retirement in 1907, Bissing was summoned to the Prussian House of Lords (*Herrenhaus*), where his remit focused primarily on education and rural development policy. He advocated the rural further education school (*ländliche Fortbildungsschule*) become the intermediate step between school and compulsory military service. He became a board member of the *Jungdeutschland* (Young Germany) movement, which was conceived as a German version of the British "Boy Scouts." In May 1914 he proposed a motion to the House for the introduction of sex education as a preventive measure. He later adapted this motion for the administration of [Belgium](#), as he did with his other political ideas.

4. Governor General of German-Occupied Belgium

Bissing was appointed governor general of the [Kaiserliches General-Gouvernement in Belgium](#) on 27 November 1914, when he was nearly seventy-one years old. His predecessor, [Colmar von der Goltz \(1843-1916\)](#), seized the opportunity to return to active military command as the future commander-in-chief of German troops in Turkey. With this move, Goltz may have also simultaneously forestalled his removal, especially after the Prussian War ministry and military leaders (*Oberste Heeresleitung*) had severely criticized him for being too lenient towards Belgium in

the case involving Belgian war contributions. By contrast, Bissing's reputation made him seem a nearly ideal example of the martial, tough, and strong-nerved "Wilhelminist"; in other words, ideally suited for the post of the highest German occupation officer in Belgium.

Bissing took up residence in the castle of Trois Fontaines, northeast of [Brussels](#), near the small town of Vilvoorde. There, he led a life similar to a monarch who had a court until his death in April 1917. But Bissing's administration also showed unmistakable traits of the "personal regiment" (*Persönliches Regiment*), that he experienced daily in the presence of the German emperor Wilhelm II since the 1890s. His leadership style was revealed especially in the single-mindedness with which Bissing began to reorganize the administrative organs of the [occupation](#) to his advantage: a civil administration (*Zivilverwaltung*) and a general military administration, similar to a military administration. Bissing, who was subordinate only to the Kaiser, relied on his right of initiative to exercise the competence guidelines for the civil administration, which was subordinate both to the governor general as well as to the "Ministry of the Interior" (*Reichsamt des Innern*) in Berlin. At the expense of the *Zivilverwaltung*, Bissing created several new occupation bodies (subordinate to him directly and more and more free from control of civilian leaders of the German Reich in Berlin); with their help and the additional help of committees, commissions, and personal commissioners (*Persönlichen Beauftragten*), Bissing dominated German occupation policy in Belgium.

Moreover, the occupation power was confined to acting as a supervisory administration when the Belgian monarch [Albert I, King of the Belgians \(1875-1934\)](#) and the cabinet of ministers formed a government in exile in the French harbour town of Le Havre in autumn 1914. The official body of the ministries in Brussels and above all the local governments continued working throughout the entire occupation. Well-timed violence, with the purpose of deterrence, skirted and consolidated Bissing's rule over Belgium. Repeatedly, death penalties, arrests, and hostage-taking (between 12,000 and 13,000 civilians were deported temporarily as hostages to Germany until February 1915) earned Bissing not very flattering titles like "the butcher of Belgium" and served to fix the experience of his rule strongly in Belgium's collective memory.

5. Flemish Policy

The long-term objective of Bissing's occupation policy was to annex Belgium after a German Reich victory. (This was in contrast to the German chancellor, and the ministries in Berlin, who favored the model of indirect control over Belgium through economic penetration.) [Flemish policy](#) and economic policy would be the instruments to create a "*fait accompli*" during occupation, so strong that it would impede any Belgian return to power. The occupation policy was also meant to immunize German control against France and England's influence as bulwarks on the western border of the German Reich. The Flemish policy was pursued by Bissing in harmony with the [civil government in Berlin](#) and military leaders until the spring of 1917. They enforced the Belgian pre-war legislation concerning school and official speech; they also reopened the [University of Ghent](#) as a Flemish university, in the face of resistance by Walloon professors. (Bissing's son, Friedrich Wilhelm, a well-known German

Egyptologist, acted as an expert in this field and as personal commissioner of his father.) Bissing and his governmental allies also decreed the “separation of administration” (*Verwaltungstrennung*): the separation of the Belgian ministries into Flemish, and Walloon sections in Brussels and Namur. Their aims were a new structure for the official government corps, which had been French-dominated, and Belgium's transformation into a federal state with only a few small central functions. Eventually, they wanted to completely partition Belgium into Flemish and Walloon states.

6. The Exploitation of Belgium

In the economic sphere, Bissing counted on a revival of important Belgian industry (which met little success), accompanied by a strategy of economic penetration (favored also by the civil government in Berlin). Against Bissing's will and resistance, the new German military leaders [Paul von Hindenburg \(1847-1934\)](#) and [Erich Ludendorff \(1865-1937\)](#) instigated workers' deportations in October 1916. As a result, the German occupiers began plundering the occupied territory as a means of economic warfare, which continued through the end of the war. In total, 120,000 Belgians were deported to work as [forced laborers](#) in Germany or near the frontline in “civil workers battalions.” After the Hindenburg Program was extended to occupied Belgium in February 1917, the majority of Belgian industry was closed down and many factory buildings were disassembled and transported to Germany to reuse the [raw materials](#). This was the final death blow to Bissing's style of occupation policy.

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