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GUSTAV BUNSEN: A GERMAN REBEL IN
THE TEXAN REVOLUTION

DOUGLAS D. HALE JR.

The Texan Revolution coincided in time with the first great wave of German mass migration to America, and more than one hundred Germans played an active part in the struggle against Mexico. For most of those involved, the role of revolutionary was an unfamiliar one, but there were a few who brought to Texas experience at insurrection which they had gained in Europe. One such man was Gustav Bunsen, whose brief career in rebellion carried him from the Main River of Germany to the Nueces of south Texas. His life as a rebel is the theme of this paper.

Bunsen was born in 1804 into one of the most prominent families of Frankfurt am Main. His father, as Master of the Mint, was a respected figure in the money-minded city, and his eldest brother was well known for his pioneering efforts in progressive education. At twenty-six, Gustav appeared to be carrying on the tradition of a family already highly regarded for its scientific learning. By the summer of 1830, the swarthy, stocky, and intense young man had finished his medical studies at the University of Wurzburg and had transferred to Heidelberg to complete his requirements for the degree. At this point, however, external events began to shape his career.

The French Revolution of 1830 sent a surge of political excitement through all articulate elements of German society, an excitement which reached its peak of intensity among the academic youth active in the Burschenschaft movement. This organization had been formed in 1815 to promote the ideals of constitutional liberty and German unity, goals quite inimical to the authoritarian and particularistic structure of the German Confederation. Though the Burschenschaft was dissolved by Confederation decree in 1819, political agitation continued in the universities, and the organization was surreptitiously revived. Bunsen played a vigorous and leading role in the Burschenschaft at both Wurzburg and Heidelberg. Like many of his comrades who had earlier advocated a program of gradual and moderate reform, he found himself driven toward the extremes of republicanism and revolution by events subsequent to 1830.

The revolution in France was followed by a successful revolt in Belgium and a Polish war of independence against Russia. Bunsen, having earned his medical degree, traveled to Warsaw in the spring of 1831 and served as a surgeon in the Polish army until captured by the Russians. Released after a short imprisonment, he returned to Frankfurt to find it deeply affected by the general spirit of unrest which then pervaded Germany. By the spring of 1832, the murmurs of discontent had risen to a sustained and ominous roar. Serious riots had occurred in Bavaria, Hesse-Cassel, and Saxony, and outright insurrection threatened the monarchs of Brunswick and Hanover. Relaxation of censorship restrictions in southwest Germany had permitted the sudden appearance of a number of radical newspapers which denounced the reactionary policies of Austria, Prussia, and the Confederation with unprecedented impudence. The collapse of the revolution in Poland sent thousands of Polish exiles streaming through
Germany where they were enthusiastically acclaimed as the bearers of “the sacred fire to western Europe.” In May, 1832, radical agitation culminated in a mass meeting in the Bavarian Palatinate at which some thirty thousand people appeared to denounce monarchical tyranny and extol republican freedom.

Stung into action by these increasingly bold challenges, the Confederation promulgated its notorious “Six Articles” which sharply curtailed freedom of speech and press and imposed severe restrictions upon the liberal state legislatures of southwestern Germany. Radical leaders were arrested and refractory journalists were jailed. This resort to punitive power convinced many of the most ardent democrats that orderly constitutional reform was no longer feasible; outright revolution seemed the only hope.

Bunsen’s home, Frankfurt, was in the midst of the storm. Though it was but one of the thirty-nine separate states in the German Confederation, it had a special significance of its own: it was in Frankfurt that the representatives of the various states met in the Confederation assembly. Moreover, by its very location it dominated the commercial and financial crossroads of central Europe. With only 43,000 inhabitants, Frankfurt was the nearest thing to a capital that Germany had. At the same time, the city lay at the heart of the most radical districts of Germany. Though its government consisted of a solidly conservative mercantile oligarchy, the relative mildness of this regime made Frankfurt a resort of what alarmed minions of monarchical prerogative called “dangerous ultra-liberals, both domestic and foreign, . . . who plot disorder.”

Quite in keeping with this reputation, Frankfurt became the headquarters of the Press and Fatherland Society, the most active of the radical clubs. Though formally disbanded by government order, the members of the society continued to meet secretly, and by the fall of 1832 an inner circle within the group was actively preparing the way for revolution. Three personalities dominated the conspiracy: Franz Garth, Gustav Komer, and Gustav Bunsen. Garth was a twenty-eight-year-old Frankfurt lawyer with a penchant for intrigue and “a certain fanaticism in his eyes.” He had established contacts with Polish exile leaders in Paris and disaffected officers in the Wurttemberg army. His personality was neither magnetic nor pleasant, but, as one of his fellow conspirators put it, “he could make impossible things appear very probable; . . . being convinced himself, he convinced others.”

Komer, on the other hand, was a light-hearted and handsome youth in his early twenties who was still studying for admission to the Frankfurt bar. He was the son of a local book dealer, and like Garth and Bunsen, had a record of active membership in the more radical wing of the Burschenschaft.

The three ringleaders assiduously cultivated their connections with the student movement, for in its ranks they saw the potential nucleus of a revolutionary army. In August, 1832, for example, Bunsen presided at a “birthday party” for the Grand Duke of Baden held by the Burschenschaft at Heidelberg. While the Frankfurt doctor led cheers to a liberated Germany, the besotted celebrants burned the decrees of the Confederation and ceremoniously urinated on the grand ducal colors. By the end of 1832, a substantial number of Burschenschaft leaders at six universities had committed themselves to follow the leadership of the Frankfurt conspirators.
In the meantime, Bunsen had been busy at home. In October, he led a demonstration against the Frankfurt police headquarters. Then, when fined fifteen florin for his affiliation with a prohibited club, he refused to pay. Characteristically declining to go along quietly with the police, he was hauled off bodily to jail, where he spent ten days. By the beginning of 1833, Bunsen was ready for rebellion, and the details of a complicated plot were crystallizing in his mind.

Counting on spontaneous support from the Frankfurt populace, the conspirators planned first to capture the two guardhouses in Frankfurt. Cannon were to be seized from the local armory, the inhabitants of outlying villages would add their numbers to the revolt, and the Frankfurt garrison was expected to come over to the rebels. The conspirators were then to arrest the representatives of the Confederation and confiscate their treasury. In France, 380 Polish officers stood ready to join in the fight for the republic, while units of the Wurttemberg army had been suborned into the plot. By simultaneous revolts in Hesse and Wurttemburg, the rebels hoped to split the Confederation and gain control of western Germany. Six prominent liberals would then be named to a provisional government. They in turn were to summon a national constituent assembly which would create a united German nation under a republican constitution. Thus were the outlines of the plot.

As both liaison man and ordnance specialist, Bunsen worked feverishly during the early months of 1833 to turn this ambitious plan into a reality. He visited several universities and summoned the Burschenschaft leaders to meet in Frankfurt at the beginning of April. He bought 120 muskets and bayonets, 300 pounds of powder, and a quantity of cartridges and rockets. These, with armbands and a banner in black, red, and gold, he secreted in his quarters at the Mint.

On the first two days in April, thirty students and about twenty young professional men began to assemble in Frankfurt. With this little army of fifty, Bunsen and his fellow conspirators intended to overthrow the German Confederation. The force was split into two platoons: one was to storm the Main Guardhouse at the west end of Frankfurt's business artery, while the other was assigned the task of taking the Constables' Guardhouse at the opposite end of the street. Bunsen assembled the first group on the afternoon of April 2 and informed them of the plan to attack on the following night. Though he painted an optimistic picture of several thousand Frankfurters rushing to join their ranks at the first shot, the students were understandably a bit skeptical. Still, when offered an opportunity to withdraw from the enterprise, none did.

On the evening of April 3, the thirty-three young men assigned to attack the Main Guardhouse met in Bunsen's apartment, where weapons and armbands were distributed. By this time, student indiscretion had violated all the major canons of secrecy, and the Frankfurt authorities were fully informed as to what was afoot. Yet previous false alarms made them complacent; rather than expose themselves to possible ridicule, the city fathers took only minimal precautions. They increased the force assigned to the Main Guardhouse from forty-one to fifty-one soldiers, and assembled the 780-man line battalion in its barracks in case the troops were needed.

These preparations had not gone unnoticed, and Bunsen realized there was little hope of success. Still his ludicrous little army plunged ahead. As one of the young men put it,
We were all of the firm conviction that even if our step failed... we still had to act... We were convinced that failure would be but a superficial defeat, for... no deed springing from a free, manly, self-sacrificing decision can be denied its intended results."

Promptly at 9:30 p.m., in a downpour of rain, Bunsen led his detachment toward the square in which the Main Guardhouse stood. At the command to charge, he raced ahead into the ground floor of the building. The officer in charge of the guard fled through a window, and the soldiers in the guardroom upstairs were unable to defend themselves; their arms had been stacked on the ground floor. A sergeant was shot, Bunsen and Korner were slightly wounded, but the attackers were soon in control of the building. The whole thing had happened so quickly that opera-goers in a nearby theater remained undisturbed throughout the attack."

Bunsen now appeared before the curious crowd which had gathered in front of the Guardhouse. "Down with the German Confederation! Long live liberty!" he cried, urging muskets on the spectators and calling upon them to join their brothers in rebellion. They merely laughed at him.

Abandoning this unrewarding effort, the young doctor rejoined his squad at the Constables’ Guardhouse, six hundred yards down the street. Its garrison of fifteen soldiers had already surrendered to his comrades. While most of the rebels tried vainly to break through the heavy doors of a nearby armory, Bunsen took a dozen men and ran to the Cathedral in the heart of the Old City. According to plan, he was to summon the country people into Frankfurt by ringing the tocsin from the Cathedral tower. And indeed, about seventy-five villagers stood with drum and banner at the north gate, waiting for their signal. Racing up the steps of the tower, Bunsen urged his men “on to the great bell! All the gates are occupied!” But to his acute embarrassment, he did not know how to ring the bell. It had to be struck; pulling the bell rope produced but a weak tone too feeble for the villagers at the gate to hear. They dispersed and went home.

When Bunsen returned to the Constables’ Guardhouse he found his friends besieged at the door of the armory by a superior force of Frankfurt troops of the line. The soldiers had already retaken the Main Guardhouse, and though Bunsen called repeatedly to his comrades to stand fast, the revolution rapidly dissolved in the rain. In the space of thirty minutes it had claimed the lives of two rebels, six soldiers, and one innocent bystander.

Bunsen was the last man to escape. Cursing himself for leading the students into a fiasco, he fled exhausted to his brother’s home. Though nineteen of the rebels were shortly arrested, Bunsen remained in hiding for five weeks. When the police finally overcame their reluctance to search the homes of Frankfurt citizens and inspected the Bunsen premises, the doctor was able to conceal himself in his sister-in-law’s bed long enough to evade his pursuers.

He had long since made up his mind what his next refuge would be: America. One consequence of the rising discontent of recent years had been the emergence of a widespread interest in emigration to the United States. By the spring of 1833 the vanguard of a massive German migration was on its way across the Atlantic and up the Mississippi, inspired by the dream of creating a “new Germany” on the American frontier. Bunsen and his friend and fellow
insurgent, Adolph Berchelmann, slipped out of Germany by way of Strasbourg and joined the exodus. [29] The two exiles made their way to St. Clair County, Illinois, where a number of their former Frankfurt acquaintances had bought land in the verdant valley of Silver Creek. They took up bachelor quarters with German friends and began the difficult task of adapting themselves to a new land and a new language. In June, 1834, Bunsen’s eldest brother arrived with his family. In this party came Augusta Berchelmann, whom Bunsen married upon her arrival. [30] But a rustic domesticity in Illinois held little appeal for the former revolutionary. “This lively spirit,” wrote a friend of Bunsen, “can never be without ambitious plans—and he also has the ability to work for their realization.” [31] Leaving his bride behind, Bunsen moved to Cincinnati, the newly emerging center of German culture on the Ohio. [32] That very autumn, events in Texas began to stir the sentiments of the people of the Ohio Valley. Shortly after the outbreak of the Texan revolution against Mexico in October, 1835, General Sam Houston’s appeal for volunteers against Santa Anna appeared in the papers, and young Cincinnatians read with interest the offer of the Texan provisional government: We invite you to our country—we have land in abundance, and it shall be liberally bestowed on you . . . Every volunteer in our cause shall not only justly but generously be rewarded. [33] While his fellow citizens of Cincinnati sent two iron cannon to Texas, Bunsen sent himself. [34] He enlisted in Captain James Tarlton’s company of Louisville volunteers and set out for Texas in the middle of November. After a trip down the Mississippi aboard the steamboat Baltic, the little band of thirty-six riflemen marched overland from Natchez to Nacogdoches, where they were welcomed like heroes. Bunsen and his fellow volunteers then hurried on toward San Antonio to join the Texans besieging the Mexican army of General Cos. But the company was delayed by swollen rivers, a bit of undisciplined brawling, and a bout of general drunkenness. It was December 27 before the Louisville volunteers arrived at San Antonio. [35] What Bunsen found there was disappointing in the extreme. In the first place, the fight was over: the Mexican garrison had surrendered more than two weeks before, and most of the Texan colonists who had participated in the successful siege had already gone home. Approximately 460 men, volunteers from the United States for the most part, remained on the scene uncertain as to their next move. In the second place, the nominal government of Texas was hopelessly crippled by a monumental quarrel between Henry Smith, the Governor, and the General Council. Central to the dispute was the disposition of the volunteer force at San Antonio. The Governor, with the concurrence of Sam Houston, commanding general of the army, favored complete independence for Texas and a defensive strategy. The troops should be used to garrison Goliad, they believed, in order to maintain control of the vital supply route from Copano Bay to San Antonio. The majority of the Council, however, still counted upon aid from Santa Anna’s liberal opponents in Mexico; their ultimate objective was not the independence of Texas but the restoration of the Mexican Constitution of
1824. As a logical corollary to this end, the Council advocated an offensive march into Mexico, the capture of Matamoros, and a juncture with the liberals south of the Rio Grande. Advocates of the Matamoros expedition argued that by taking the city, Texas would gain control of its port revenues and carry the war to the enemy. The quarrel between Governor and Council soon reached an impasse; Texas was deprived of any effective government at all between the middle of January and the first of March.32

Into this vacuum of authority stepped Dr. James Grant and Colonel Francis White Johnson, the most influential proponents of the Matamoros expedition among the volunteers at San Antonio. Grant, a forty-two-year-old Scottish physician, had come to Mexico in 1823. He had acquired extensive and valuable holdings near Parras, Coahuila, but his opposition to Santa Anna necessitated his flight to Texas. He had participated in the siege of San Antonio, and was very popular with the men. Quite naturally, Grant opposed an independence for Texas which would cut him off from his property in the south. As a result he vigorously promoted the drive on Matamoros.33

Grant succeeded in winning Johnson, the elected commander of the volunteers, to his project. In his mid-thirties, the ambitious Johnson had come to Texas ten years earlier and became an active leader of the war party prior to the revolution. As a result of his prominent role in the storming of San Antonio, he had succeeded Ben Milam as commander of the volunteers. Johnson successfully frustrated the Governor's attempt to bring these troops under Houston's authority and appeared personally before the Council at San Felipe to promote the Matamoros enterprise. Having authorized the expedition on January 5, the Council ordered Johnson to unite his forces with those of Colonel James W. Fannin at Goliad. Confusion remained, however, as to who was to be in actual command of the expedition.34

While Johnson intrigued at San Felipe, Grant led the united body of volunteers to Goliad, the first stage on the road to Matamoros. Arriving on January 9, they found the little settlement deserted; neither Fannin's reinforcements nor the sorely needed supplies had arrived. General dissatisfaction prompted many of the troops to desert, and Bunsen's company was broken up. The doctor enlisted in an artillery company led by Captain Thomas K. Pearson, a New Orleans actor. Here at least Bunsen found a congenial companion. His first sergeant was a young German lawyer, William Langenheim, who had settled on Aransas Bay as a member of Power's and Hewetson's Colony. He had distinguished himself as an artilleryman during the siege of San Antonio and became Bunsen's close friend.35

Disillusioned by the ineffectuality of the Texan government and anxious to move on, the volunteers voted to march to Refugio, thirty miles nearer Copano Bay and Fannin's expected point of arrival. There they set up camp in a hunter's paradise abounding in geese, turkey, and deer. But still they received no news, orders, or supplies. The restless volunteers were at the point of moving against Matamoros on their own when, in the middle of January, Sam Houston rode into the Refugio camp.36

Though the Council had removed him from formal command over the volunteers, Houston resolved to dissuade the men from what he regarded as a rash and foolhardy venture. Addressing the assembled troops, the general argued with
all the force of his frontier eloquence that the Matamoros expedition would entail “a needless sacrifice of Texan blood for a city which has no value for us and which lies outside the boundary of our territory.” It was illusory to hope that significant numbers of Mexicans would support the Texan cause. “Texas,” he declared, “must be a free and independent state.”

Noting that Houston’s speech was having its intended effect on the wavering troops, Bunsen’s commanding officer, Captain Pearson, stepped forward to answer the general. He protested that the army had already lain idle too long. “I call upon all of you who are in favor of an immediate departure for Matamoros,” he said. “Colonels Johnson and Grant and Major Morris are for the expedition and will participate in it. Once again, let us no longer delay. All who are of my opinion, on to Matamoros by noon today!”

Pearson’s rhetorical talents were no match for those of Houston, and only sixty-four men elected to follow the bolder course under Johnson and Grant. Bunsen and Langenheim were among them. That very day the little band set out for San Patricio, the Irish settlement on the Nueces, which lay forty miles nearer to Matamoros. The rest of the volunteers remained at Refugio to await the arrival of Fannin with supplies and reinforcements; in little more than two months, most of these men would die at Goliad.

After leaving Refugio, Johnson and Grant led what amounted to their own private army. Since it was patently too small to realize the Matamoros project by itself, they planned to use it to fortify San Patricio and commandeer horses for Fannin’s troops. Arriving in the Irish village on January 22, Bunsen and his comrades scoured and reconnoitered the surrounding countryside. They captured a small force of Mexicans and mounted their two cannon in the town. On February 9, Johnson left a few men behind in San Patricio and pushed on about sixty miles to Santa Rosa Ranch, near present-day Sarita. At this point, Grant took a portion of the men and rode out in search of horses. Returning to Santa Rosa with mounts for more than a hundred men, the Scottish adventurer was ready to go raiding again. But Johnson, realizing by this time that the Mexicans had launched an offensive, was reluctant to risk it. With thirty-four men, Johnson returned to San Patricio, while Grant and the remainder of the force ranged to the southwest toward the Rio Grande and the Camargo ranches.

Reaching San Patricio on February 25, Johnson once again divided his command. About twenty men were quartered in the town, while a dozen were detailed to Julian de la Garza’s ranch, three miles distant, to guard the horses so laboriously collected. The horse guard consisted of Bunsen, John Spiess, a young Swiss who had come all the way from Kentucky in his company, and two Pennsylvanians, George Copeland and Phineas Jenks Mahan. William Williams and Edward H. Hufst, in addition to six or seven friendly Mexicans, completed the group. Langenheim was placed in charge. With the onset of a severe norther, the sergeant made his men as comfortable as possible in the corral.

In the meantime, Santa Anna had poised an army of six thousand men on the Rio Grande. General Jose Urrea, commander of the right wing, crossed the river at Matamoros on February 18. With 350 dragoons and Yucatan infantry he moved north in pursuit of the Johnson-Grant party. By the time Johnson returned to San Patricio on the twenty-fifth, Urrea, having missed the Grant detachment in his advance, was only a few miles behind. Though delayed by
rain and the numbing cold which accounted for the death of six of his soldiers, Urrea moved forward with a vanguard of two hundred men and crossed the Nueces above San Patricio. The general first sent a force of thirty dragoons under Captain Rafael Pretalia to attack the horse guards at Garza’s ranch. He then fell upon Johnson’s unwary volunteers in San Patricio at 3:00 a.m. on February 27.3

Pretalia’s attack came as a complete surprise to Bunsen and his comrades. Huddled together in the corral, their heads covered against the rain, the Texans were all asleep. The Mexicans fired directly into their midst, wounding Spiess and Hufty. Williams, who succeeded in climbing over the corral, was “literally chopped up” by sabers and lances. As Bunsen struggled clumsily to remove the cover from his rifle, the second volley struck him in the head and chest. The German adventurer died within the day and was buried in the Garza family plot near the banks of the Nueces.4

The survivors in Langenheim’s squad surrendered and joined those who had been taken by Urrea in the village of San Patricio. Only Johnson and four of his men escaped. Four days later, Grant’s detachment was ambushed on Agua Dulce Creek and all but six of him men were killed or captured.5 Thus ended the ambitious Matamoros expedition, the first in that train of disasters which would culminate in the fall of the Alamo and the massacre at Goliad.

Bunsen’s luck, which had carried him through abortive rebellions in Poland and Germany, had run out at last. With the same audacity that inspired the Frankfurt Insurrection, he had thrown himself into the Matamoros expedition. But daring alone, without practical planning and united effort, had proved as futile in Texas as it had in Germany. Thus Bunsen remains one of the many forgotten casualties of revolution. One wishes that he had been spared at least long enough to witness the final act of the Texas drama.

NOTES


4Allgemeine deutsche Biographie (56 vols., Leipzig, 1875-1912), XLVII, 369; R. Schwemer, Geschichte der Freien Stadt Frankfurt am Main (1814-1866) (3 vols., Frankfurt, 1910-1918), II, 562-563. Robert Wilhelm Bunsen (1811-1899), the father of physical chemistry in Germany, was Gustav Bunsen’s cousin, and Christian Charles Josias Bunsen (1791-1860), the noted diplomatist and scholar, was a distant relative.

Protokolle der deutschen Bundesversammlung (hereinafter cited as PdB), 1835, supplement.

1Heer, Geschichte der Deutschen Burschenschaft, 183 and passim.

2Schwemer, Geschichte der Freien Stadt Frankfurt am Main, II, 563; H. J. Ruetenik, Beruhmte deutsche Vorkämpfer für Fortschritt, Freiheit und Frieda in Nord-Amerika von 1626 bis 1888 (Cleveland, 1893), 180.

3Schwemer, Geschichte der Freien Stadt Frankfurt am Main, II, 492.


5Count Golz to Count Bernstorff, Frankfurt, September 28, 1819, quoted in Schwemer, Geschichte der Freien Stadt Frankfurt am Main, II, 31.


7McCormack, Memoirs of Gustave Koerner, I, 201.

8"Ibid., passim.


10Schwemer, Geschichte der Freien Stadt Frankfurt am Main, II, 538-546, 563.


15"Zur Geschichte des Frankfurter Attentats," QDGB, V (1920), 133-144; Schwemer, Geschichte der Freien Stadt Frankfurt am Main, II, 567-570; Allgemeine Zeitung (Augsburg), April 8, 1833.

16Körner, quoted in Heer, Geschichte der Deutschen Burschenschaft, 298.


18McCormack, Memoirs of Gustave Koerner, I, 227-228; Allgemeine Zeitung (Augsburg), April 8, 1833.


20"Ibid., 841-842.
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Allgemeine Zeitung (Augsburg), April 16, 1833.

"Darlegung der Hauptsultate," PdB, 1839, 842; Heer, Geschichte der Deutschen Burschenschaft, 301.


Neuhoff and Berchelmann, Affidavit, Belleville, Ill., May 5, 1856, L. W. Kemp Collection, Archives, University of Texas Library.

"Quoted in E. C. Barker, ed., “Journal of the Permanent Council (October 11-27, 1835),” Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association (hereinafter cited as QTSHA), VII, no. 4 (April, 1904), 273.


"Narrative of C. B. Shain of Louisville" and Muster Rolls of Tarlton’s Company, H. Davenport, "Texas Volunteers from the United States" (unpublished research collection, Archives, University of Texas), I, 1-3.


H. Ehrenberg, Der Freiheitskampf in Texas im Jahre 1836 (Leipzig, 1844), 95; R. M. Potter, "The Prisoners of Matamoros," Magazine of American History,


