

Bismarck: A Life

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The historian G. P. Gooch, writing in 1948, observed that the ‘last word on the Iron Chancellor will never be spoken, not merely because historians will always wear spectacles of different tints, but because with the passing years it becomes ever more difficult to disentangle the consequences of his actions from the impact of his successors and the swirling tide of events’.⁽¹⁾ Jonathan Steinberg has no doubt, however, that the consequences of his actions were fateful indeed: ‘When Bismarck left office, the servility of the German people had been cemented, an obedience from which they never recovered’ (p. 467). A few pages later he adds: ‘Bismarck’s legacy passed through Hindenburg to the last genius-statesman that Germany produced, Adolf Hitler, and the legacy was thus linear and direct between Bismarck and Hitler’ (p. 478). For all their refreshing directness, these bold statements are perhaps the least convincing part of Steinberg’s weighty new biography of the *Reichsgründer*. Few who have studied the increasingly pluralistic and sophisticated political culture which developed in Germany in the decades after Bismarck’s fall will feel entirely comfortable with such assertions; a concession, maybe, to the large non-specialist readership that OUP expects the book to attract. For the most part, however, Steinberg’s volume succeeds in providing both an accessible narrative of Bismarck’s life and a knowledgeable survey of the context in which he worked.

It should be made clear at the outset that this is not a biography based on newly discovered sources or a radically different interpretation of existing information. Its great strength lies in the way it deftly synthesises an extensive body of scholarship – in German as well as English – and in the sparkling quality of its prose. The latter is no doubt one reason why the book was shortlisted for the prestigious Samuel Johnson Prize for non-fiction, and why it has garnered a host of positive reviews on both sides of the Atlantic. It is arguably the most readable biography of Bismarck since A. J. P. Taylor’s *The Man and the Statesman* ⁽²⁾, and Taylor himself would have been proud of some of Steinberg’s colourful turns of phrase: Bismarck

‘regarded the palaces as dangerous places, full of germs, draughts and bossy women’ (p. 138); he ‘retained to the end the tight-fisted pettiness of the impoverished country squire’ (p. 264); and he ‘brandished democracy at the Habsburgs like a cross in front of a vampire’ (p. 241). There are also echoes of Taylor in the playfully punning title of Steinberg’s final chapter: ‘Blood and irony’. Indeed, the numerous ironies which surround ‘one of the most interesting, gifted, and contradictory human beings who ever lived’ (p. 12) provide Steinberg with his main angle: the draft-dodging civilian always in uniform; the ‘hysterical hypochondriac as the symbol of iron consistency’; the anti-Semite and anti-Catholic dismissed for consorting ‘with Jesuits and Jews’; the ‘most supple political practitioner of the nineteenth century’ whose skill ‘had no purpose other than to prop up antiquated royal semi-absolutism – and to satisfy himself’ (p. 479). However the ‘ultimate and terrible irony of Bismarck’s career’, Steinberg concludes, ‘lay in his powerlessness. Contemporaries called him a “dictator” or a “despot” but he knew better’ (p. 480).

These are not novel insights, to be sure, but Steinberg recounts them with style and verve. In particular, his exploration of the ‘psychic triangle’ at the heart of Bismarck’s character is more convincing than one might expect. While other biographers, most notably Otto Pflanze (3), have speculated on the psychological effects of his parental upbringing – ‘One need not be a Freudian to see how the hatred that Bismarck felt for his cold, intelligent, and unloving mother became an obsession’ (p. 469) – Steinberg goes further, seeing a recurring pattern in his later relationship with Wilhelm I and the Empress Augusta:

He had to re-enact day after day, year after year, the agony of his childhood, the little boy at the point of an upside-down triangle and the mercy of the struggle between the threatening woman [Augusta] and weak man [Wilhelm]. His rage, his sweats, his sleeplessness arose frequently from this impotence (p. 469).

In fact Steinberg sees not one ‘psychic triangle’ but two, with Bismarck also locked in a struggle with Crown Prince Friedrich for the King/Kaiser’s favour: a ‘kind of love triangle of two sons for the approval of the father’. Sensing that this may be taking psychohistory a little too far, Steinberg addresses the reader directly: ‘My explanation of how it worked may not convince the reader; that some mysterious personal power worked on the King cannot be denied’ (p. 197).

There are many, of course, who remain deeply sceptical of the biographical approach to history *per se*. As early as 1967, Helmut Böhme wrote that the founding of the German Empire ‘can no longer be written as part of Otto von Bismarck’s biography’ (4), while another leading historian of Germany, Richard J. Evans, claimed in 1983 that ‘the biographical approach in its present form has reached the limits of its usefulness’. (5) Steinberg, however, has no doubts:

This book is ... a life of Otto von Bismarck because the power he exercised came from him as a person, not from institutions, mass society or ‘forces and factors’ ... Only biography can even attempt to catch the nature of that power (p. 4).

As a result it draws heavily on Bismarck’s own voluminous writings – which Steinberg rates highly for their literary merit – as well as those with whom he came in contact:

The method is to let those on whom the power was exercised, friend and foe, German and foreign, young and old, anybody who experienced the power of Bismarck’s personality close up and recorded the impact, tell the story (p. 9).

In this, at least, the book resembles John Röhl’s biography of Bismarck’s nemesis, Wilhelm II (6), with numerous extended quotes, sometimes running to half a page or more. Some of these come from the usual

suspects – Theodor Fontane, Baroness von Spitzemberg – but others, from Bismarck’s American student friend John Motley or the diplomat Odo Russell for instance, offer fresher insights too.

In terms of structure, the book traces its subject’s life in a conventional narrative arc. Following a short introductory chapter, chapter two looks at what it meant to be ‘born Prussian’. It argues, in the vein of Bismarck’s East German biographer Ernst Engelberg (7), that the Iron Chancellor was an *Urpreusse*, Prussian to the core, but makes the important observation that the ‘Prussian legacy defined but never contained [his] aspirations’ (p. 27). A long third chapter covers all of Otto’s early life up to his entry onto the political stage in 1847, while chapter four examines the pivotal period of revolution and reaction when Bismarck first made his name: ‘He had no experience, no credentials, and no obvious credentials, but he was Bismarck’ (p. 70). It was at this point that the two essential elements in his career came together: ‘the certainty that he could master political bodies and the favour of the King’ (p. 84). As Steinberg rightly observes, these two constants remained in place from September 1847 to March 1890; as soon as he lost the latter, his fate was sealed. Chapter five, which looks at Bismarck’s unexpectedly successful career as a diplomat between 1851 and 1862, finds Steinberg on characteristic form, observing that the German Confederation’s Final Act of 1820 has ‘the charm and clarity of the Lisbon Treaty of the European Union of 2007’, although in the Confederation ‘nobody pretended that it represented the “people”’ (p. 112). He is similarly excoriating about Bismarck’s character faults: his habitual lying and bullying; his gigantic ego and petty vindictiveness; his ‘use and discard’ approach to friendship; his monstrous gluttony, hypochondria and incessant self-pity. No one could accuse this biographer of identifying too closely with his subject. Indeed, one minor episode in 1872 sends Steinberg close to apoplexy: ‘The sheer effrontery of this farrago of evasion of responsibility and irrelevance really shocked me the first time I read it’, he admits (p. 339).

The dark and malevolent aspects of Bismarck’s character are further emphasised by the overwhelmingly sympathetic character sketches provided of his long-suffering friends and enemies. Thus Wilhelm I is described as ‘a kind, decent, honourable, and unpretentious man’ (p. 432); the Empress Augusta a ‘remarkable lady [and] a willing listener’ (p. 266); General von Moltke ‘that rare human being, a universal man’ (p. 137); the early socialist Ferdinand Lassalle is ‘charismatic and flamboyant’ (p. 199); the liberal Eduard Lasker is ‘courageous [and] incorruptible’ (p. 477); even the reactionary General von Roon ‘had an inner integrity and decency which high office, fame, and success never spoiled or corrupted (p. 379). The author saves his most fulsome praise, however, for Centre Party leader Ludwig Windthorst, Bismarck’s antipode in every almost every respect. ‘Central casting could not have found a person more different from Bismarck’, Steinberg observes, before cueing up the theme music from *Rocky*: ‘the main bout was that between the 250-pound giant Bismarck, sweating and swaying, and tiny, blind Windthorst with his green glass spectacles’ (p. 322). Few would dispute Steinberg’s assertion that the ‘consistency, integrity, and sheer courage with which Windthorst fought Bismarck’s authoritarianism ... deserve to be better known and honoured in the Federal Republic of Germany’ (p. 375), but to reduce the fundamental political issues of the day – the *Kulturkampf*, the social question, the women’s question – to little more than a series of personality clashes, does begin to grate after a while. It is as if the author has set out to prove, once and for all, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s famous dictum ‘there is properly no history, only biography’.

To be fair, Steinberg guides the reader through the diplomatic and military history of the ‘Wars of Unification’ with aplomb (chapters seven and eight). The domestic politics of the German Empire are covered in less detail, but Bismarck’s paranoia and frustration are amply documented: ‘Nobody understood him, nobody carried out his wishes properly, and nobody could be trusted’ (p. 312). Bismarck’s battles with those he labelled ‘enemies of the Empire’ are covered in chapters nine and ten. He may have remained Imperial Chancellor for 19 years, but as the title of chapter nine makes clear, ‘The decline begins’ as early as 1871. Arguably the most original aspect of the book is its focus on Bismarck’s complex relationship with German Jewry. This takes centre stage in chapter ten, which takes its title from a nickname given to the Reichstag in the early 1880s: ‘The guest house of the dead Jew’. Although Bismarck got on well with Disraeli and thought highly of individual Jews such as Lassalle, Eduard Simon and Ludwig Bamberger, Steinberg argues that he shared ‘the visceral hatred of Jews’ typical of the Prussian Junker class. He also welcomed the rise of popular anti-Semitism which accompanied the end of the liberal era in the late 1870s.

This may have been for tactical rather than ideological reasons – anything which undermined the ‘dumb Jew boy’ Lasker and the Progressives was grist to his mill – but Steinberg believes Bismarck nevertheless shares some of the blame for later tragedies in German history: ‘The legacy was so pervasive at the time and afterwards that one has not got to look hard to find its traces’ (p. 398).

Other aspects of Bismarck’s long period in office are inevitably dealt with in less depth. Germany’s short-lived colonial era, for instance, which was ushered in by Bismarck in 1884 and which has attracted considerable historiographical attention in recent years, is dismissed in a single perfunctory paragraph, while his social welfare legislation merits less than a page. Indeed, the 1880s pass by at a veritable gallop, and before long it is ‘Three Kaisers and Bismarck’s Fall from Power’, the last substantive chapter. As Steinberg rightly observes, the ‘unanimity from left to right in the press’ which welcomed the Iron Chancellor’s departure, ‘gives an indication of how much his political status had eroded and how little he understood that’ (p. 448). Rather than dwell on the intrigues of Bismarck’s swansong years – for which Manfred Hank’s 1977 book remains the standard work (8) – Steinberg uses the final pages of the book to assess his legacy. He also considers the ‘demonic’ aspects of his subject’s character, which were commented on by many contemporaries and which gave Johannes Willms the title of his 1997 study, ‘The Daemon of the Germans’. (9) It may well be that ‘Bismarck’s power – and his ability to hold on to it – had something inhuman to it’ (p. 465) but historians who emphasise his ‘unearthly’ powers clearly run the risk of constructing a negative mirror image of the nationalist ‘Bismarck myth’. For the most part Steinberg avoids this trap, although the frequent references to his ‘genius’ and ‘greatness’ are perhaps misplaced. To be sure, Bismarck was ‘an irresistible political figure and a disastrous one’ (p. 480), but – as Steinberg’s own account makes clear – he was also a very lucky one.

Notes

1. G. P. Gooch, *Studies in German History* (London and New York, 1948), p. 339.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. A. J. P. Taylor, *Bismarck. The Man and the Statesman* (Harmondsworth, 1995, first published 1955).
[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. O. Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany, vol. 1, The Period of Unification 1815–71* (Princeton, NJ, 1990).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *Die Reichsgründung*, ed. H. Böhme (Munich, 1967), p. 8.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. R. J. Evans, ‘From Hitler to Bismarck’, in *Rethinking German History* (London, 1987), p. 89.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. J. C. G. Röhl, *Young Wilhelm. The Kaiser’s Early Life 1859–1888* (Cambridge, 1998) and *Wilhelm II. The Kaiser’s Personal Monarchy 1888–1900* (Cambridge, 2004).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. E. Engelberg, *Bismarck. Urpreuße und Reichsgründer* (Berlin, 1985).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. M. Hank, *Kanzler ohne Amt: Fürst Bismarck nach seiner Entlassung 1890–98* (Munich, 1977).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. J. Willms, *Bismarck. Dämon der Deutschen. Anmerkungen zu einer Legende* (Munich, 1997).[Back to \(9\)](#)

Other reviews:

Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/mar/19/bismarck-life-jonathan-steinberg-review> [2]

Telegraph

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/8418498/Bismarck-a-Life-by-Jonathan-Steinberg-review.html> [3]

Tablet

<http://www.thetablet.co.uk/issue/1000250/booksandart> [4]

New Statesman

<http://www.newstatesman.com/books/2011/03/bismarck-germany-europe-hitler> [5]

Literary Review

http://www.literaryreview.co.uk/blanning_02_11.html [6]

Wall Street Journal

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704013604576247050771310390.html> [7]

New York Times

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/03/books/review/book-review-bismarck-by-jonathan-steinberg.html> [8]

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[4] <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/issue/1000250/booksandart>

[5] <http://www.newstatesman.com/books/2011/03/bismarck-germany-europe-hitler>

[6] http://www.literaryreview.co.uk/blanning_02_11.html

[7] <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704013604576247050771310390.html>

[8] <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/03/books/review/book-review-bismarck-by-jonathan-steinberg.html?pagewanted=all>