



**Volker Ullrich, *Bismarck: The Iron Chancellor*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London:  
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Volker Ullrich offers the reader the chance to embark on a fascinating, albeit factual journey with one of the most dominant political figures of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Otto von Bismarck. Enriched by a sensible foreword by Prince Ferdinand von Bismarck and benefitting from an exceptional translation performed by Timothy Beech, the book

comprises ten chronologically ordered chapters and a homage in the guise of a final assessment. Last but not least, the notes and the chronology enable the reader to acknowledge the magnitude of the effort, whereas the bibliography, picture sources, and the index seamlessly contribute to the fullness of the work.

As head of the House of Bismarck and a professional lawyer, in the foreword section, Prince Ferdinand asserts the importance his famous forebear had in creating, consolidating, and engendering continuity to the German edifice of power, by unequivocally stating: “The German Reich founded by Bismarck is even today to be seen as the foundation, standard and legal basis of all German policy.”(9) Furthermore, Prince Ferdinand emphasizes the two essential features of his great-grandfather's policy: promoting the balance of power and peace abroad and enacting progressist social reforms domestically. The stability, respect, and prosperity the German state acquired and projected during the time Chancellor Bismarck held office (1862 – 1890) was unparalleled in modern history, and represents, as Prince Ferdinand rightfully affirms, a “benchmark for succeeding chancellors”(9) and, why not, for other contemporary political figures.

To introduce the reader to Otto von Bismarck's life and achievements, Volker Ullrich begins by explaining how Bismarck became a living legend, and how, even after his death in 1898, his personality overshadowed German political figures and thinking to such a large extent. He relies on three well-balanced, important Bismarck biographies in getting this point across, biographies written by Lothar Gall (West Germany, 1980), Ernst Engelberg (East Germany, 1985, published simultaneously in West Germany), and Otto Pflanze (USA, 1990). Ultimately, even if Pflanze's monumental trilogy uses psychoanalytical tools to explore Bismarck's complex, iridescent personality and, hence, his achievements, it may be that one has to adopt an approach grounded in utter common sense, that is “considering him critically within the terms of his own times” (14), as Ullrich rightfully posits, to describe and assess his work. Bismarck is not an idol, he is not a Machiavellian historical figure; he is a man of his times, who put all his effort, physical capabilities, and intellect into the service of the German state, be it the Prussian Kingdom or German Reich. That he was highly successful in his endeavour is without any shred of doubt.

Bismarck was born in 1815, a year that saw the end of the Napoleonic Wars, and the advent of the Holy Alliance and of (Austrian Prime Minister) Metternich-guided politics of European balance of power based on monarchical consensus, as agreed at the Congress of Vienna. His father and mother not only belonged to different social environments (he the landed gentry, and she the highly educated civil service), but they were also separated by an impressive age difference of eighteen years. Hence, the marriage was not a successful one, which impacted Bismarck's formative years and personality. Ullrich gently introduces us to Bismarck's genetic inheritance, associating his physical traits and love of the natural world with family on his father's side, whereas his mother gave him "sharp intelligence and cool rationality, together with his sensitive feeling for language, a certain nervous instability and, above all, the insatiable ambition to escape from the narrow confines of the life of a Prussian country noble." (18) The *insatiable ambition* may have been associated with intellectual curiosity and emergent organisational skills that needed an opportunity to shine, rather than with a repudiation of a way of life he actually enjoyed and protected.

His primary and secondary school years were, obviously, a break with the carefree lifestyle that he pursued as a child at Kniephof, one of his family's countryside properties. Bismarck blamed his mother for the sudden, loveless end of his childhood and the beginning of an education he associated with a Spartan lifestyle without Spartan virtues. Later in his memoirs, he also points to the enlightenment philosophy and liberal, republican ideas that permeated the Prussian educational system of the time, which may have resulted in the liberal ideas German society embraced throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, reflected in liberal parliamentary majorities Bismarck had to deal with as a politician.

After gaining the graduation certificate (Abitur) in May 1832 Bismarck became a law and government sciences student at the University of Göttingen, from where he transferred to Berlin in the autumn of 1833, where he passed the bar exam two years later and acquired a junior position at the Berlin Court of Justice. His career as a civil servant was supposed to be a stepping stone to entering the diplomatic service, after completing the required apprenticeship. He successfully transferred from the legal to the administrative branch in Aachen by completing two essays and passing an oral examination, where his "unusual intelligence" (27) was duly recognised. However, the

bureaucratic requirements of the Referendar position he was assigned to in Aachen in 1836 did not fulfill his aspirations, and a life dedicated to readily available distractions started for him, endangering his professional career. He ultimately resigned from the state service in 1838 and completed one year of military service during which time he also followed dedicated agricultural management science courses at the University of Greifswald.<sup>1</sup> He ultimately decided to embrace his family's way of life and successfully administered, along with his brother Bernhard, the family estates.

As Ullrich, quoting Pflanze, determines, one can associate Bismarck's life span between 1838 and 1847, when he got married to Johanna von Puttkamer, as "a psychosocial moratorium in his development." (29) Now, this may be true indeed, however one has to consider Bismarck's aristocratic (country gentry) roots and love for open spaces and the natural world, on the one hand, and his professional (academic) education and outstanding intellect on the other, to realise that, at the end of the day, this was a beneficial break for Bismarck, allowing him to assess options and make the best decision given his innate gifts, preferences and associated lifestyle expectations.

In this regard, he was fortunate enough to be introduced in 1843 to a Pomeranian pietistic group by his Berlin university days friend Moritz von Blankenburg, whose members not only offered him the answer to his (as yet unsatisfied) quest of self-discovery but also introduced him to his wife-to-be and to "influential conservative politicians, particularly Ludwig von Gerlach, president of the Magdeburg Court of Appeal, whose brother, Leopold von Gerlach, was one of the king's closest advisers." (36-37) His public career took off, as well as his political career, having been appointed Elbe's dykes superintendent in 1846 and Vereinigter Landtag (Prussian legislative assembly) representative in May 1847. He defended conservative principles with such alacrity and talent that "he had made a name for himself as an uncompromising ally of the crown, extended his influence among the ultraconservative circles of the court party, and made a positive impression on the king himself." (38)

The revolution of March 1848 represented a traumatic time for Bismarck, especially since the King of Prussia (Friedrich Wilhelm IV) himself accepted the results

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Preston Stearns, *The Life of Prince Otto von Bismarck* (Philadelphia and London: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1899), p. 25.

of the upheaval. Eventually, after vacillations due to the uncertainty of the situation, Bismarck apologetically embraced the cause of the conservative forces, and as a result, following the restoration of the full monarchical power in November 1848, he continued his political career under the conservative banner. As an elected representative in the Second Chamber of the Landtag, Bismarck defused a crisis triggered by Prussia's acceptance of the Punctation of Olmütz, which established Austria as the dominant power of the German Confederation, by craftily emphasizing in his speech the importance of following only national self-interest when deciding for war or peace. The result of Bismarck's unwavering defense of the Crown amounted to him being appointed as Prussia's envoy to the Frankfurt Bundestag (Parliament of the German Confederation) in April 1851 which, given the international context, was at that time Prussia's most important diplomatic tenure.

The years between 1851 and 1862, when Bismarck was appointed Prime Minister of Prussia as well as Foreign Affairs Minister, may be deemed another crucial stage in his personal development, this time as a statesman of European stature. He became familiar with German affairs through exposure to the intricacies of inter-German relations as Prussia envoy to the Frankfurt Bundestag, he experienced firsthand Russian politics as ambassador in St. Petersburg (1859-1862), and he re-acquainted himself with Napoleon III during his stint as Prussia envoy to France in 1862. He was now fully prepared to take on more responsibilities, which were granted to him by the new King of Prussia, Wilhelm I, in September 1862.

It is obvious that in addition to his political acumen and his close relations with high-ranking officials like the Prussian Minister of War, Albrecht von Roon, whom he had been acquainted with since joining the Pomeranian piety circle in 1843, Bismarck also relied on his uncanny ability to correctly read people and situations in his quest for ultimate positions of power. This *sine qua non* gift for being a successful statesman might have derived from the experiences he had during his life as a student and Hannovera fraternity member in Göttingen where, according to his own testimony, he successfully defended himself in "twenty-eight swordfights in three semesters." (28) Duels involving student fraternities in Germany of those times (Mensur fencing) involved swords of certain characteristics, protective gear, and strict rules of engagement, where the duel resulted in facial wounds (scars) and character-building

life experiences. It was a means to prove courage and determination, as well as to objectify innate personal traits that family and the community could subsequently rely on.<sup>2</sup> That Bismarck was a master of duels bode well for his performance in the service of the Prussian, and later German state, and his personal life.

It is well known how Bismarck managed domestic affairs and foreign affairs throughout his time in office. Ullrich depicts the intricacies of domestic politics and the quest for stability in the international realm pursued by Prime Minister (and later, Chancellor) Bismarck with poise and elegance, offering the reader a substantial image of the underlying issues and strategic options Bismarck was faced with. According to Ullrich, Bismarck strived to obtain and stabilize German unification under Prussian leadership and also to consolidate his grip on power, with the associated benefits. Even if it seemed at times that Germany experienced a “dictatorship of the Chancellor,” (99) the unique welfare state, business-friendly environment Bismarck promoted, and the international prestige and respect he singlehandedly acquired for Germany fully compensated for the perceived iron grip Bismarck had on decision making at domestic and foreign affairs level.

The first major crisis Bismarck faced as Prime Minister was associated with the military budget and the army modernization question Prussia was compelled to act upon, following the dismal performance of the Prussian army when called for duty throughout the 1859 Franco-Austrian war,<sup>3</sup> which eventuated in the defeat of Austria by the combined French and Piedmontese forces. Bismarck had to contend with a liberal-dominated Parliament and decided eventually to rule without a “legally prescribed budget,” (62) acquiring in the process the nickname of “conflict minister.” (63) He was helped in influencing the Prussian public opinion in his favour by an emerging international crisis, in the form of the Schleswig-Holstein conundrum, when Denmark attempted to take over the two provinces. In the end, the leading forces of the German Confederation, Austria, and Prussia, with a mandate from the German Federal Parliament (Bundestag) in Frankfurt, defeated Denmark and, as stipulated by the

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<sup>2</sup> “The Traditional German Sword Fighting Art Called Mensur,” *Danny Dutch*, accessed 26 April 2022, <https://www.dannydutch.com/post/the-traditional-german-sword-fighting-tradition-called-mensur>

<sup>3</sup> George Benjamin Eaton, “Theory, Ideals, and Reality: Military Theory and the Ideal and Real Roles of the Prussian Army, 1830-1871” (MA Thesis, University of Minnesota, 1990), pp. 52-53.

Vienna Peace Treaty (October 1864) assumed the administration of the two principalities.

However, due to the ongoing rivalry between Prussia and Austria in the context of German and European affairs, Bismarck (as quoted by Ullrich) realised he could not “put off the decisive settling of accounts with Austria” (72) for too long. Hence, the Prussian Prime Minister isolated Austria diplomatically by obtaining Russia’s neutrality, the mutual support of Napoleon III of France, and the effective support of Italy in exchange for the Veneto region.<sup>4</sup> Hence, when in June 1866 Austria started hostilities by requesting the Bundestag to mobilize the German Confederation army against Prussia, it faced a war on two fronts which she quickly lost. Prussia became the dominant power in Germany, created the North German Federation under its aegis, and acquired new territories in the process. The Prussian parliamentarian (budget) crisis was diffused by the passing of the Indemnity Bill in September 1866, and a North German Federation Constitution was passed in August 1867 by the newly-created legislative assembly, the Reichstag. The only remaining obstacle to the emergence of a German national state under de facto Prussian leadership was the agreement of the Southern German states to join such an enterprise. According to Bismarck, who was faced with the hesitancy, not to say the mistrust of these German states, the agreement could only be obtained at the expense of France.

The 1870 war between Imperial France and Prussia that eventuated in the defeat of France and the creation of the German Reich with Prussian King Wilhelm I as Emperor, represents the zenith of Bismarck accomplishments, even if it includes in it the seeds of the eventual dissolution of the German Empire. What follows is an exceptional display of Bismarck real politick that succeeds in offering stability to the newly-created statal entity, the German Reich, by wisely forging alliances with the European great powers of the day, and by strictly controlling the domestic political layout. Ullrich acknowledges the unwanted results of Bismarck's heavy-handed domestic politics, positing that “Bismarck’s exclusion of those with different political views as ‘enemies of the Reich’, the gagging of parliament and political parties, the

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<sup>4</sup> Marie de Bruchard, “October 1865: The Biarritz Meetings,” *History of the Two Empires*, accessed 26 April 2022, <https://www.napoleon.org/en/history-of-the-two-empires/articles/october-1865-the-biarritz-meetings/>

subordination of the press, the reactionary makeup of the civil service, his flirtation with the idea of a coup, and finally his anti-Semitic prejudices – these were burdens that were to have fateful consequences for German politics.”(129)

He nevertheless offers a justification for Bismarck's views and actions related to domestic politics, which were apparently rooted in “the traumatic experiences of the revolution of 1848, when he had seen the whole political and social order in which he had grown up and from which his sense of identity derived placed under threat.”(129) Irrespective of reasons, Theodor Mommsen, the celebrated historian quoted by Ullrich, alludes that through his domestic policies over the years Bismarck “had broken the (German) nation’s backbone.”(129) As history taught us, the consequences were to be devastating.

A more rounded understanding of Bismarck’s strategic thinking in his quest to achieve and consolidate German unity leads to what Ullrich might as well have decided to examine in more depth, that is, Bismarck's choice to keep the Austrian Empire, an obviously anachronistic, structurally destitute, internally unstable concoction of culturally and linguistically different populations, alive following its defeat at the hands of Prussia in 1866. To this effect, Bismarck (quoted by Ullrich) did his best to persuade Wilhelm I that Prussia “must regard the Austrian state as a useful piece on the European chessboard, and the renewal of good relations with it as a possible move we should keep open for ourselves.”(76) So, instead of achieving the culmination point of victory after vanquishing the Austrian army in the battle of Königgrätz by removing the Habsburg dynasty and taking over the German state of Austria, Bismarck went against specialist advice (and even against his Sovereign wishes) and inadvertently created (over time) multiple problems for the (soon to emerge) German Reich. The reader might have indeed benefitted from an exhaustive analysis of this particular foreign politics-related strategic decision, in the same way, they benefitted from the comprehensive analysis of the heavy-handed domestic politics pursued by Bismarck, as described primarily in the closing chapter of the book.

Saying that, the wealth of information compressed in a little bit more than one hundred pages, the sensibility with which Ullrich portrays the genial German statesman, the factual and logically linked personal and historical determinants that result in a complete depiction of Bismarck’s personality, actions, and socio-political



environment, amount to a wonderful, wholly accessible, easy to read a piece of literary craftsmanship.

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