

Bismarck, Prussia, & German Nationalism

Edgar Feuchtwanger assesses Bismarck's controversial career and legacy.

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In the beginning there was Bismarck'. This is how a leading German historian, Thomas Nipperdey, opens the second volume of his history of Germany from 1806 to 1918. 'In the beginning there was Napoleon' is the sentence opening the first volume. Few would dispute that Napoleon and Bismarck were the two most important personalities in the establishment of a modern German nation state, though it remains a matter of debate how much importance one can attach to single personalities in interpreting major historical events. Ideologies as well as material circumstances have to be part of the interpretation; and both the rise of German nationalism and the coming of industrial society were clearly necessary factors in the unification of Germany. Nevertheless it is paradoxical that Napoleon was not a German, while Bismarck was above all a Prussian, whose relationship with the idea of Germany was far from straightforward. It is the purpose of this article to explain why Bismarck, a member of the pre-industrial Prussian aristocracy, played so central a role in the creation of the modern industrial German state.

Bismarck's Prussian Apprenticeship

Prussia was, like many European countries before the French Revolution, a dynastic state held together by its ruling family, the Hohenzollerns. In the late eighteenth century its population consisted of almost as many Polish as German speakers. On his father's side, Bismarck came from a long line of Junkers, the landowning aristocracy of the Prussian provinces east of the Elbe. The Hohenzollerns, a dynasty originally from South Germany, had from the seventeenth century taken the Junkers into their service, mainly in the army, and had by this and other means built their scattered territories into a major European power. Many of Bismarck's paternal forebears had, besides running their estates, served as generals in the Prussian army. On his mother's side, Bismarck came from a family of leading officials who had filled important positions under Frederick the Great and subsequent Prussian kings.

Bismarck was therefore destined for a career in the Prussian public service, but he was too self-willed and individualistic to fit into a bureaucratic existence. From the age of 24 to 32 he ran one of the family estates in Eastern Pomerania, but the life of a country squire did not satisfy him either. He was a man of exceptional intelligence, who read widely but unsystematically, and who, like many young men of the late Romantic period, modelled himself on the poet Lord Byron. He had a marvellous command of language and might have become a writer. Twice he fell in love with rich and well-connected young Englishwomen travelling on the Continent, but he eventually married another member of the Pomeranian aristocracy. Through her he got religion, having in his youth been a religious sceptic. Bismarck's God was, like his wife, fashioned for his own convenience, to provide comfort and security in his stormy existence as a dominant political figure. He was a man of imperious and domineering temperament, with an unquenchable thirst for power.

Bismarck sprang to prominence in the revolution of 1848 as a man of the extreme right. He and his associates among the Prussian conservatives wanted to defeat the revolution and restore the absolute monarchical regime that had existed in Prussia and most of Europe before 1848. In this they were largely successful, but the defeat of the liberals was not complete or irrevocable. From 1849 onwards Prussia had a semi-constitutional regime under which executive power remained with the King and the ministers appointed by him, but with strictly limited legislative and taxing powers vested in an elected parliament. The elections were held under a restricted three-tier franchise. The voters were divided into three classes, each paying the same amount of tax and having the same amount of voting power. Thus a very small number of men in the first class had as much voting power as the bulk of the population voting in the third class. Essentially this system remained in operation in Prussia until the overthrow of the monarchy at the end of the First World War. When the unification of Germany under Prussia took place in the 1860s, the Prussian system of having an executive minister responsible to the monarch and not dependent on the support of parliament was transferred to the newly created Reich. It was largely the work of Bismarck,

when he had risen to the top as Prussian Prime Minister, that so much power remained in the hands of the monarchy in an age when the middle classes and even the masses were increasingly participating in politics. It was a feature that before 1914 distinguished Germany sharply from fully parliamentary states like Britain and France.

Prussia Versus Austria

Bismarck was duly rewarded for the role he had played as one of the leading younger men of the conservative faction in the stormy years from 1848 to 1850. In 1851 he was appointed Prussian envoy to the diet of the German Confederation in Frankfurt. It was a key post in the making of Prussian policy, especially in relation to the future shape of Germany. The attempts to establish either Grossdeutschland (Germany including Austria) or Kleindeutschland (Germany without Austria led by Prussia) had failed during the years of revolution and in 1850 the Confederation of nearly 40 German states called into being in 1815 was simply revived. Austria, as the premier German country, resumed the presidency. In the eight years he spent in Frankfurt between 1851 and 1859 Bismarck began to see clearly that this revived Confederation had no future. It proved impossible to restore the cooperation of the three conservative powers, Austria, Russia and Prussia, which, linked to the personal ascendancy of the Austrian chancellor Metternich, had until 1848 dominated the Confederation and Europe as a whole.

It became Bismarck's overriding preoccupation in Frankfurt to counteract Austria's attempt to continue her leading role in Germany and to assert Prussia's right to equality. He moved away from the views of his conservative Prussian associates who had sponsored his appointment to Frankfurt. They thought the fight against revolution was still the priority and that it required the solidarity of the conservative European powers once enshrined in the Holy Alliance. Although Prussian patriots, they respected the historic role of Austria and her Habsburg rulers in German affairs. They were legitimists, believing in the divine right of monarchs to rule, whether they were Prussian, Austrian or minor German princes. Bismarck, on the other hand, thought that the rivalry of Austria and Prussia might sooner or later have to be resolved by war. To him international relations were a matter of power and not ideology. He tried hard to persuade his mentors in Berlin that Prussia might have to consider an alliance with France, now again under Bonapartist rule. To the Prussian legitimists Napoleon I had been revolution incarnate and his nephew Napoleon III no less so.

Towards the end of his time in Frankfurt Bismarck also began to change his views about German nationalism. He had often in his letters referred to it contemptuously as 'the nationality swindle', but now he thought that the German national movement could be manipulated in the interests of enhancing Prussian power. The middle-class liberals who were the mainstay of the German national movement might become useful allies of the monarchy and the aristocracy. As the events of 1848 had shown, they were as afraid of the masses as the aristocracy. Bismarck's strength was his brutal, cynical realism that made short shrift of all illusions and was sceptical of all idealism; his weak-

ness was that he thought everything and everybody could be manipulated for the purposes of Prussia, and ultimately his own, power.

The 'New Era'

In 1858 Prince William of Prussia, later the German Emperor William I, took over as Regent for his incapacitated brother Frederick William IV. It was the beginning of the 'New Era', when a slightly more liberal regime would prevail, compared with the repressive one installed after the failure of the revolution. Prussia would play a more positive role in reforming the German Confederation and meeting the aspirations of the German national movement. The reputation of being an ultra-reactionary still clung to Bismarck. Frederick William IV had once written against his name: 'to be used only when bayonets rule without restraint'. In the more liberal 'New Era' he was moved from Frankfurt to St. Petersburg, as Prussian ambassador to Russia, a promotion on paper but in fact a relegation. The next three years, 'in cold storage on the Neva', were a period of frustration for him. For years he had been talked about as a possible Prussian foreign minister, but nothing had ever come of it. For all his professions to the contrary, he was greedy for power.

Yet the 'New Era' rested on insecure foundations. The Regent, who became King on the death of his brother in January 1861, was not really prepared to weaken the prerogatives of the Prussian Crown, particularly in regard to its direct power of command over the army. It was through their army that the Hohenzollerns had been able to punch above their weight and make Prussia into a European great power. A constitutional conflict arose over the control of the army between the liberals in the Prussian Lower Chamber and the King. In spite of successive dissolutions of the chamber the number of liberals elected increased and a new and more assertive liberal party, the Progressives (Deutsche Fortschrittspartei), was founded. It wanted further liberalisation at home and progress in the unification of Germany abroad, and it was not prepared to surrender the powers over taxation and expenditure which gave it considerable control even in military affairs. The King thought his military powers were essential to Prussian kingship, which would otherwise become a parliamentary puppet. On the other hand, he was not prepared to accept the advice of the reactionaries in his entourage to overturn the constitution by a coup d'état. This, he feared, would result in civil war and bloodshed. He was on the point of abdicating, which would have brought to the throne his more liberal son, who was married to the daughter of Queen Victoria. Instead he was persuaded to appoint Bismarck prime minister and foreign minister, as the man who would be able to ride out this intractable situation.

Bismarck in Power

Bismarck's appointment was arguably one of the great turning points in history. He now proceeded along the lines he had foreshadowed in the innumerable letters and reports which he had showered upon monarch, ministers and courtiers in Berlin

during his time as a diplomat. He, who had once been seen as an unreconstructed Junker reactionary, had begun to look like an unprincipled opportunist ready to make a pact with the devil for the sake of power.

What he now hoped to do was to make progress on the German question through a Prussian policy of strength and thereby to reconcile the Prussian liberals to the uncompromising stand of the King on the question of military control. This was the purpose of the famous 'iron and blood' speech, which he made within a week of taking office. What he meant to say was that if Prussia was to fulfil her role in leading Germany towards greater unity, it could not do so without an efficient army, such as the King's government was seeking to build. But the speech badly misfired, for to most liberal German nationalists such blood-curdling talk from a notorious Junker counter-revolutionary seemed an intolerable provocation. Heinrich von Treitschke, liberal-nationalist historian, later an unqualified admirer of Bismarck, wrote: 'When I hear such a shallow Junker like this Bismarck talk of iron and blood, through which he intends to bring Germany under his yoke, it seems to me not only base, but, even more than that, ridiculous.'

From such inauspicious beginnings Bismarck worked his way, in the next eight years, through masterly diplomacy and the prowess of the Prussian armies, to sensational triumphs. What had triumphed, however, was not German nationalism, let alone liberalism, but the Prussian military monarchy and with it Bismarck himself. Against the odds and in defiance of the spirit of the age, a semi-authoritarian system was perpetuated and foisted on the whole of Germany. But Bismarck was not really a man suited to old-fashioned monarchist absolutism. It was the half-way house that had come into existence after 1848 in Prussia that had given him his chance and it was a similar half-way house that he institutionalised in the constitution of the North German Confederation set up in 1867 and then extended to the German Reich in 1871. It was a complicated balance between monarchical and parliamentary power, between federalism and unitary control, which rendered Bismarck himself virtually indispensable as the only man who could master the system. In foreign affairs, too, he was a man who stood between the old-fashioned cabinet diplomacy that had controlled affairs in the past and the new-fangled intrusion of public opinion and the press, of what has been called the political mass market. The three wars he unleashed in 1864, 1866 and 1870 were limited wars with limited objectives, such as had always been used in the past to adjust European power relations. In the age of modern technology that was just dawning they became impossible to control.

The Bismarckian Paradox

Bismarck remained in power for another 20 years after the establishment of the German Reich. He was such a dominant figure that some historians have called his rule charismatic and bonapartist. As the heroic founder of the empire he had a charisma which no other public figure could match and which he could use to get his way. There is evidence that he was influenced by the way in which Napoleon III, whom he eventually

toppled, ruled in a fast-changing society racked by tensions between bourgeoisie and proletariat. Bismarck included in his constitution for the Reich a parliament (the Reichstag) elected by universal male suffrage, with no control over the executive but with the power to make laws and vote money. It existed alongside the parliament of Prussia, elected on the restricted three-tier franchise, and the parliaments of the other smaller German states. It has been called a system of killing parliamentarism through an excess of parliaments. It was meant to be the half-way house to keep Bismarck in control. In fact the Reichstag, representing the nation as a whole, quickly became the focus of German politics and Bismarck had to resort to increasingly desperate devices to stay on top of the game. He had set out to enhance Prussian power by making it a Greater Prussia which controlled all German land bar Austria. In fact it was the new German Reich that now engaged the loyalty of its population, and much of the old Prussia was swallowed up by the new empire. For this many of Bismarck's former friends among the Prussian Junkers found it hard to forgive him.

The Iron Chancellor, as he was often called, continued to be most successful in foreign affairs. Having taken Prussian power as possible, he declared the new Germany a satisfied power after 1871. He had no wish to make Germany into the predominant country in Europe, so long as her security was safeguarded. Nor was he interested in attaching to the Reich the many Germans, particularly in Eastern Europe, who remained outside the state established in 1870. The desire for hegemony in Europe and for world power were, however, precisely the aims of that strident German nationalism to which the creation of the Bismarckian Reich gave rise.

Lothar Gall, Bismarck's leading modern German biographer, gave the section of his book dealing with the period after 1870 the title 'the sorcerer's apprentice': he remembered the magic formula for bringing forth the flood, but forgot the words for calling it off. The Prussian Junker, who even as Chancellor spent months on end on his country estates, seeking refreshment in a way of life to which he felt he belonged, had laid the foundations of a powerful industrial society, with an ambitious and wealthy middle class and a vast working class milling in its ever expanding cities. Rule by charisma always reaches a limit and it can be disputed that Bismarck's methods were really bonapartist. He never sought to found his own political movement and went out of his way to avoid becoming dependent on any of the parties in the Reichstag. At the end of the day his power depended on retaining the confidence of his monarch, the system of rule in Prussia for generations. The old Emperor William I might complain that it was 'difficult to be emperor under such a chancellor', but the bond between him and his overmighty subject was never broken. Within less than two years of William's death, his grandson, the brash young Kaiser William II, dismissed the chancellor.

Legacy

Even in old age Bismarck's greed for power was such that he spent most of his remaining years seeking revenge. He was his own best propagandist and in his reminiscences he paints a pic-

Timeline

1815	(1 April)	Otto von Bismarck born on family estate of Schonhausen Prussia receives Rhine provinces at Congress of Vienna German Confederation founded
1840		Frederick William IV becomes King of Prussia
1847		Bismarck elected to the United Diet of Prussia
1848	(March)	revolution breaks out in Berlin
	(December)	after crushing of revolution King imposes a constitution
1849	(April)	Frederick William IV refuses imperial German Crown offered by Frankfurt Parliament
1850	(December)	Punctation of Olmutz ends Prussian attempts to unify Germany
1851	(May)	Bismarck appointed Prussian Envoy to the Diet of the re-established German Confederation in Frankfurt
1854-6		Crimean War
1858	(October)	Prince William of Prussia becomes Regent in place of his incapacitated brother
1859	(January)	Bismarck appointed Prussian Ambassador to Russia
	(July)	Peace of Villafranca ends Franco-Austrian war in Italy
1862	(September)	Bismarck becomes Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Prussia
1864		Prussia and Austria at war with Denmark over Schleswig-Holstein
1866		War between Prussia and Austria
1867		North German Confederation inaugurated
1870		Franco-Prussian War
1871	(18 January)	German Empire proclaimed at Versailles
1879		Bismarck drops free trade and introduces protective tariffs
1888	(March)	death of William I
	(June)	William II becomes Emperor
1890	(March)	Bismarck forced from office
1898	(30 July)	death of Bismarck

ture of how he single-handedly saved the House of Hohenzollern from descending into the quagmire of constitutional monarchy or even revolution. The disenchantment with his autocratic rule, made rigid by old age, that had enabled the Kaiser to dismiss him, was soon forgotten. More than ever he acquired heroic stature and Bismarck monuments were erected all over Germany.

Yet the Reich founded by him survived his death by only 20 years. The semi-constitutional system of government that he perpetuated proved ill-adapted to the needs of a modern industrial urban society. On the eve of the First World War Germany had the largest socialist party in Europe, which was also the largest party in the Reichstag, yet it was excluded from any share in power. It is just one indication of the extent to which the economic and social development of Germany, which was by contemporary standards very advanced, was out of phase with its political development. Bismarck's sensational success in unifying the country blinded most of his countrymen to the political retardation he had imposed upon them.

Further Readings

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