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Bismarck

A Political History

EDGAR FEUCHTWANGER

BISMARCK

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Geoffrey Wawro, *University of North Texas, USA*

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Bismarck was arguably the most important figure in nineteenth-century European history after 1815. In this biography, Edgar Feuchtwanger reassesses Bismarck's significance as a historical figure. He traces his development from a typical *Junker*, a reactionary and conservative, into the so-called white revolutionary who recast European affairs more drastically than anyone since Napoleon. This second edition includes a new preface, taking into account the most recent scholarship on Bismarck, which reflects on Bismarck's legacy in modern Germany – once again the European economic powerhouse for which Bismarck laid the foundations.

Feuchtwanger's lucid account demythologizes the German leader without demonising him. This book leaves the reader with a strongly-etched portrait of one of the decisive makers of the modern world.

Edgar Feuchtwanger studied history at Cambridge, taught British and German history at the University of Southampton and has been visiting professor at the University of Frankfurt. He received the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany (Bundesverdienstkreuz), 2003, for promoting Anglo-German relations. His major publications include *From Weimar to Hitler* (1995), *Disraeli* (2000) and *Imperial Germany 1850–1918* (2001).

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BISMARCK

A political history

Second edition

Edgar Feuchtwanger

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CHRONOLOGY

	<i>Personal</i>	<i>Political</i>	<i>General</i>
1815	birth, 1 April	Battle of Waterloo, 18 June	German Confederation established
1832	enters University of Göttingen	Hambach student festival	first British Reform Act passed
1839	returns to Pomerania to manage estates		
1840		Frederick William IV becomes king	
1847	marriage, 28 July	United Prussian Diet meets	Offenburg meeting issues radical programme
1848	becomes known as ultra-conservative, writes in <i>Kreuzzeitung</i>	United Prussian Diet meets, April; Prussian constitution promulgated, December	outbreak of revolution, February–March
1849	elected to Prussian parliament	Frederick William IV refuses German crown, 3 April	revolution crushed in Germany and Austria
1850	makes important speech on Olmütz agreement, 3 December	three-tier electoral law introduced in Prussia	Erfurt union, promoted by Radowitz, fails
1851	appointed Prussian envoy to Diet of German Confederation in Frankfurt, 8 May	Otto v. Manteuffel is Prussian prime minister	German Confederation re-established by Schwarzenberg
1855	defeats Austrian request for mobilization of	Prussia remains neutral in Crimean War (1853–6)	fall of Sevastopol, 8 September

	<i>Personal</i>	<i>Political</i>	<i>General</i>
	German forces; January, visits Paris, August		
1859	transferred to St. Petersburg, March	'New Era' in Prussia	Italian war between, Austria, France and Piedmont
1862	becomes Prussian ambassador in Paris, May; Prussian prime minister, 23 September	large liberal majority in Prussian elections, May	Prussia rejects Austrian proposals to reform German Confederation
1863	negotiates Alvensleben convention, February; prevents king from attending Congress of German Princes, August	crown prince protests against suppression of press freedom, June	accession of Christian IX of Denmark, November, precipitates Schleswig-Holstein crisis
1864	initiates joint action with Austria against Denmark	Prussian victory at Düppel (Dybbøl), April	Denmark cedes Schleswig-Holstein to Austria and Prussia, October
1865	does not recommend immediate war against Austria at crown council, 29 May; given title of count (Graf), September	Gastein convention, 20 August, divides administration of Schleswig and Holstein between Prussia and Austria	Frankfurt diet votes to back Augustenburg as duke of Schleswig-Holstein, 6 April
1866	proposes elected parliament for German Confederation, April; escapes assassination attempt, 7 May	battle of Königgrätz (Sadowa) 3 July	indemnity law passed by Prussian parliament, September
1867	acquires estate at Varzin	North German Confederation established	Luxemburg crisis, May
1868	warns against expectations of early completion of German unity	elections to Zollparlament fail to produce pro-Prussian majority, February;	Cretan revolt against Turkey

	<i>Personal</i>	<i>Political</i>	<i>General</i>
1870	encourages Hohenzollern candidature for Spanish throne	Franco-Prussian War, 19 July; German victory at Sedan, 2 September	Russia abrogates Black Sea clauses of treaty of Paris
1871	receives Sachsenwald estate with Friedrichsruh; given title of prince	proclamation of German empire at Versailles, 18 January	treaty of Frankfurt ends Franco-Prussian war, 10 May
1872	intensifies Kulturkampf	appointment of Falk as Prussian minister of culture, January	emperors of Germany, Austria and Russia meet in Berlin, September
1873	temporarily cedes Prussian premiership to Roon	May Laws against Catholic church	stock market crashes start, May; Three Emperors' League, October
1874	escapes assassination attempt at Kissingen, 13 July	National Liberal strength peaks in Reichstag elections, January	French indemnity payments completed
1875	withdraws to Varzin, June–November	Era Bleichröder-Delbrück-Camphausen articles, June–July;	'war in sight' crisis, April–May
1876		German-Conservative party founded	Balkans crisis
1877	on sick leave, May to February 1878; Kissingen memorandum, June	negotiations with Bennigsen about National Liberal entry into government	Russo-Turkish war breaks out, April
1878	takes first steps towards protection	assassination attempts on emperor; anti-socialist law	Congress of Berlin, June–July
1879	meets Windthorst at parliamentary soirée, May	tariff law passed, July	dual alliance between Germany and Austria signed, October

	<i>Personal</i>	<i>Political</i>	<i>General</i>
1881	prevents marriage of Herbert to Elisabeth v. Carolath	first accident insurance proposal	Three Emperors' League renewed, 18 June
1882		Reichstag rejects tobacco monopoly proposal, June	Triple Alliance between Germany, Austria and Italy signed, May
1883	Dr Schweningen takes over as doctor	health insurance bill passed;	further alleviation of Kulturkampf laws;
1884		third accident insurance proposal accepted	letters of protection for Angra Pequena (Lüderitz Bay, South-West Africa) issued, March
1885		expulsions of Poles and Jews from eastern provinces begin	crisis over Bulgaria flares up, September
1886	Herbert becomes state secretary for foreign affairs, May	tension with France over General Boulanger	new septennial law proposed
1887		cartel elections, January	reinsurance treaty with Russia, June
1888		year of the three emperors: death of William I, 9 March; death of Frederick III and accession of William II, 15 June	Mediterranean agreement between Britain, Austria and Italy, February–March
1889	in Friedrichsruh and Varzin, with brief breaks, June to January 1890	miners' strikes in the Ruhr; old age pensions law passed	proposal of alliance with Britain
1890	resignation, 18 March	large socialist gains in Reichstag elections, 20 February	reinsurance treaty with Russia not renewed

	<i>Personal</i>	<i>Political</i>	<i>General</i>
1892	journey to Vienna for Herbert's wedding, July		
1894	conciliation visit to Berlin, 26 January; death of Johanna, 27 November	Caprivi resigns, October	Franco-Russian military convention, January
1896	reinsurance treaty with Russia revealed, October	Kaiser's Kruger telegramme, January	
1898	death, 30 July	first German navy law	

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Bismarck recast the shape of Europe more completely than anybody since Napoleon. Born on 1 April 1815, just as the Corsican was returning in triumph from Elba, he was less than three months old when Napoleon finally lost at Waterloo. This strange overlap, almost like the handing on of a baton in a relay race, has often been remarked upon. However, in the methods through which they transformed history they differed greatly. At Bismarck's cradle it could no more have been foreseen that he would become the next great transformer of the century than it could have been foretold at the cradle in Ajaccio in 1769.

Even epoch-making figures like Napoleon and Bismarck are dependent on external events to provide them with a launch pad. For Napoleon it was the French revolution, for Bismarck the revolution of 1848 and its antecedents. The Corsican was only twenty when the French revolution started and by the age of forty-six his career had ended at Waterloo. Bismarck was thirty-two when his political career began, forty-seven when he became Prussian *Ministerpräsident*, and seventy-five when he was dismissed.

Great men like Napoleon and Bismarck are like monuments. Changes of perspective, light and distance make them look different. When the original edition of this biography was being written, at the start of the twenty-first century, the image of Bismarck had already greatly changed from the heroic stature he had assumed in the eyes of his countrymen and even in the outside world. Only twenty years after his death the Hohenzollern monarchy had collapsed. Inevitably the question arose of whether Bismarck's work was really as epoch-making as it had seemed.

Facts and documents that had been kept under wraps became public. Some of the shady goings-on, which, hidden at the time, occurred during the foundation of the Reich in 1871, were revealed. Blatant bribery and corruption were used to get the Bavarian king, 'Mad Ludwig', to write the vital letter to Bismarck's own king needed to make the reluctant William I accept the title of German emperor. Only a man utterly devoid of principle could have used such means. Bismarck looked a diminished figure for those willing to come to terms with such revelations and with the implications of Germany's defeat in 1918. Many more believed in the stab-in-the-back myth and began to yearn for the return of a Bismarckian figure.

It should not have come as a surprise that Bismarck was not restrained by any principle. It was well known that one of his favourite Latin tags was from Virgil: *Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo*, which can be loosely translated as: if I cannot do it by moral means, I will do it by immoral ones.

By 1945, less than fifty years after his death, a united Germany, which had seemed to be an even more fundamental consequence of Bismarck's work, had also disappeared. Places like Schönhausen, the ancestral seat of his family fifty miles west of Berlin, or Varzin, the estate in Pomerania, from which he had often ruled Prussia and Europe, were occupied by Russian troops or became part of Polish territory. The contrast between the giant Bismarck had been in his time and what was going on in the present was stark indeed. It was no longer possible to take refuge in myths and illusions, such as had abounded in 1918.

But then, only ten years before I began writing my original edition, Germany was reunited. The most populous nation of Europe (Russia being only partially European) was back in business. Just as the book was going to the printer, the euro was introduced and the euro zone came into being. Germany looked again like the European powerhouse which it had become through the operations of Bismarck.

It could easily be argued that now, in 2014, history is repeating itself. To all and sundry it is even more obvious than in Bismarck's day that Germany is not only the powerhouse but the paymaster of Europe. This is a situation uncomfortable for the German taxpayer, but even more galling to the southern European recipients of German largesse. Resentment, not gratitude, is the reaction.

BISMARCK'S LEGACY AND INFLUENCE

Before Bismarck, German central Europe had been the playground of foreign powers, and Prussia was the weakest of the major powers. Bismarck had made the Second Reich and turned it into Europe's semi-hegemonial power. As time went on, the new Reich's rapid demographic and economic growth made it into the potentially hegemonic power of Europe. Bismarck's powerful Germany had to take its place among the existing major countries. It was going to be a difficult adjustment. Most German historians and commentators have pointed to the contrast between Bismarck's judicious handling of this situation and the cack-handed conduct of his successors.

Bismarck had known how to keep within bounds the alarm felt by other European powers at the precipitate rise of the newcomer. He had known how to keep France and Russia apart. They were unlikely bedfellows, the only major European republic on the one hand, the Tsarist autocracy on the other, but both had been left dissatisfied, Russia by defeat in the Crimea, France by the debacle of 1870.

It became a commonplace of German historiography to argue that immediately after Bismarck's fall his successors let the reinsurance treaty with Russia lapse, thereby allowing the emergence of a diplomatic constellation unfavourable to Germany. It was a simplification, but one that became embedded in many a school history book. Bismarck himself, in his resentful retirement, published the secret reinsurance treaty in 1896. For anyone else it would have been an act of treason and the kaiser briefly toyed with the idea of imprisoning Bismarck, but thought better of it. It was as well not to make him a martyr. As it was, he was the centre of public pilgrimages far more than he had ever been in his days of power. For much of the populace things were going badly for Germany without Bismarck.

After his death in 1898 the preoccupation with Bismarck became obsessive. You can never go far in Germany without finding a Bismarck monument, a Bismarck memorial, a Bismarck tower. It amounted to distortion of German political culture. Max Weber had articulated the idea of charismatic leadership. The Bismarck obsession, alongside even more deep-seated features of the German collective psyche, set up the expectation that only the arrival of another charismatic figure could solve society's problems. The normal operation of politics, such as was offered in the Weimar Republic, could not do it and was despised by large sections of society. It was even claimed that it had been imposed on Germany by her enemies in her hour of defeat, to keep her weak. Thus the stage was set for the arrival of another charismatic leader, Hitler.

If Bismarck had not set the stage in this way, would the terrible twins, Communism and Bolshevism on the one hand, Fascism and Nazism on the other, have disfigured the twentieth century so much? Such historical 'what if' speculations cannot reach any conclusion, but they are worth considering when assessing Bismarck's place in history. Hitler certainly had no hesitation in portraying himself in a line of descent from Frederick the Great via Bismarck and sometimes Hindenburg. There were postcards with the caption: 'what the king conquered, the prince formed, the field marshal defended, has been saved and united by the soldier Hitler'.

Hitler reached the peak of his pre-1933 electoral fortunes on 31 July 1932, when his party polled over 37 per cent of the vote, 14 per cent more than the next biggest party, the Social Democrats. Hindenburg, the president, was faced with the prospect of appointing Hitler Reich chancellor. But could he really bring himself to put 'the Bohemian Corporal', as he habitually called Hitler, into the 'chair of Bismarck'? So he mused with his entourage. It was not just 'the chancellor's chair', but 'the chair of Bismarck'. Hindenburg's family were rather minor Prussian aristocracy, but what they lacked in distinction they made up for in snobbery. In calling Hitler 'the Bohemian Corporal' Hindenburg was displaying snobbery similar to someone calling an Irishman a 'bogtrotter'. Whatever his motives, Hindenburg kept Hitler out of Bismarck's chair for another six months.

When the Bohemian Corporal finally got there on 30 January 1933 the trough of the Depression had passed. It is another 'what if' speculation to ask if Hitler could have maintained himself in power when the Depression was still at its worst. Whatever might have happened, in the minds of Germans high or low, at crucial moments Bismarck was still a looming presence.

Although Hitler had portrayed himself in the early days of his regime as in the line of descent from Frederick the Great through Bismarck, the iron chancellor was not very frequently invoked during the twelve years of the Third Reich. It was a portrait of the Prussian king that hung in Hitler's room in the bunker. When Roosevelt died in April 1945, Goebbels read to Hitler from Carlisle's biography of Frederick the Great. In 1759, after the battle of Kunersdorf, Frederick was facing extinction. Then there occurred the 'Miracle of the House of Brandenburg', the death of the Tsarina Elisabeth in 1762. The anti-Prussian alliance was broken. Goebbels tried to raise Hitler's hopes by suggesting they would now be similarly saved by the death of their great American adversary. It was, of course, a profound illusion.

Thus it was Frederick the Great among the icons of the past, not Bismarck, that figured with Hitler. There were too many aspects of Bismarck that did not sit well with the Third Reich and its ideology. Ideas of race, such as guided Hitler, however spurious they were, did not figure on Bismarck's horizon. The iron chancellor may have shared all the deeply embedded anti-Semitism of the Prussian Junkers, but that did not stop him from relying on Jews like Bleichröder, his banker, to deal with his

most intimate affairs, and through him make use of the intelligence the House of Rothschild could provide. Bismarck was a supreme pragmatist, and ideologues, such as Hitler, were always very suspect to him. He had little time even for those who could be regarded as genuine idealists. As for the Führer, Prussia, the Hohenzollern dynasty, Lutherism, Calvinism, they were an alien world to him. He knew about Catholicism and the Pope as adversaries and his aim was to consign them to the dustbin of history as soon as he would feel able to do so after final victory.

For the general public Bismarck is now a distant figure, remote from contemporary problems. References to him are few and far between. Only historians and commentators occasionally find it useful to invoke his name. For those of us particularly concerned with Bismarck as historians or biographers, as we are in this new edition, we have to view our subject from yet a new perspective. In 1918 and even more in 1945 the transient nature of his achievement was most to the fore. Now some of the consequences of his life and work, but by no means all, look more enduring.

It is a common feature of the historical assessment of Bismarck that he reversed or repackaged some of the trends and tendencies of his age. History seemed to be tending towards liberalism, parliamentarism, free trade, broadly speaking the British model. The setbacks of 1848, when revolution failed and reaction finally prevailed, seemed not to be permanent. In 1860 the free trade treaty between Britain and France was signed. It is often called the Cobden treaty, as Richard Cobden, the apostle of free trade, signed for Britain. The treaty seemed to set the seal on an age of free trade and peace. Differences between nations would be settled by peaceful means or disappear altogether.

It was never the whole story and it was not just Bismarck who changed the direction of history. The 1850s saw two major European wars, the Crimea in 1854 and the war of Italian Unification in 1859. Napoleon III was a major player in both wars. Bismarck, as the Prussian representative at the German Confederation in Frankfurt, had a ringside seat. For Prussian conservatives the new Napoleon was the embodiment of revolution who might re-enact all the horrors of the first Napoleon. It was part of the exceptional perspicacity of Bismarck that he, contrary to most of his political friends, realized that the new Napoleon, dependent as he was on volatile French public opinion, was not simply the reincarnation of revolution.

This was the nub of Bismarck's famous arguments with the Gerlach brothers in the mid-1850s. They were his closest political friends and he

owed his position at Frankfurt largely to them. They were his link to the inner sanctum of Prussian affairs. The immediate focus of his debates with the Gerlachs was the attitude to be adopted towards Napoleon III. To the Gerlachs he was the heir of revolution, nothing else. To Bismarck he was simply one piece on the diplomatic chessboard and you could not play chess ignoring one of the most important pieces. Once Bismarck achieved power in 1862 it was certainly he, more than anyone else, who reversed the trend towards the British model and broke the link between nationalism and liberalism. He not only created new power structures, he redirected what appeared to be well established trends.

After 1870 Bismarck fought a great battle against the Catholic Church and the Vatican, the *Kulturkampf*. Bismarck's more recent biographers, who no longer have any need to be hagiographical, have recognized that it was never necessary to fight such a battle. Bismarck fought it because he believed it would pre-empt any moves in the Catholic parts of the country hostile to the new Reich. He was shocked when the Centre party, the *Zentrum*, captured around a fifth of the vote in the first Reichstag elections of 1871. The party seemed to be a collection of his enemies. With all the nervous sensibility and consciousness of fragility that was so much part of his make-up he saw a threat to his new creation. He determined to go on the offensive.

Ultimately the *Kulturkampf* was futile. The same can be said of Bismarck's other great domestic battle, the fight against the Social Democrats. Perhaps it was a more necessary or even an inevitable battle, but the way Bismarck conducted it was also futile. Bismarck fought his domestic battles as if they were fights against a foreign enemy. It may be possible to annihilate a foreign enemy or damage him sufficiently to keep him out of action, but annihilation is never an option with a significant part of your own population. Bismarck sought conflict and confrontation and believed it would clear the air. Sometimes it did not.

The fight against the socialists was also one of the motives for Bismarck's social policies of the 1880s: accident and health insurance, and finally old age pensions. It was one of his most creative initiatives, a model for other nations, including Britain, even if for him it was above all an anti-socialist stratagem. It received no mention in his memoirs.

In my original edition I dealt with Bismarck's family background and its impact on his personality in so far as it seemed to me necessary in what was a historical biography primarily concerned with his political career. No one writing on Bismarck can avoid remarking on the contrast between

his relatively insignificant Junker father Ferdinand and his 'strong' mother Wilhelmine Mencken from a bourgeois family. One is bound to remark on the dislike, hatred would probably not too strong a word, Bismarck felt for his mother. One can debate with Ernst Engelberg,¹ Bismarck's most prominent biographer in the former East Germany (unfortunately not available in English), whether the Mencken family with its many royal connections can really be regarded as 'bourgeois', but there can be no doubt that Bismarck hated his mother for what she expected and imposed upon him.

RECENT REASSESSMENTS OF BISMARCK

For Jonathan Steinberg, the author of the most recent and most important Bismarck biography in English,² the psychological problems caused by his 'divided' background are the key to his personality. Steinberg claims that the parental dichotomy, weak father, strong mother, inflicted fundamental damage on Bismarck's psyche. The more successful he became, the more his health, temper and emotional life deteriorated. 'His vices grew more vicious; his virtues less effective the longer he exercised the sovereignty of his powerful self' says Steinberg. He quotes a letter which Roon, the man who had played a vital role in propelling Bismarck into power, wrote to his friend Moritz von Blankenburg in March 1866, a crucial moment in the confrontation with Austria: 'Our friend Otto Bismarck in Herculean day and night efforts has worn down his nerves . . . The day before yesterday he suffered such hefty stomach cramps and was as a result so depressed, so irritable and annoyed – apparently by little things – that I am today not without anxiety, because I know what's at stake . . .'³

Steinberg points out that no statesman of the nineteenth or twentieth century fell ill so frequently, so publicly, and so dramatically as Bismarck. His will to power was colossal, his fury and hatred of those who opposed him was gargantuan. It was the paradox of his position that his aim was to preserve and enhance the Prussian monarchy, yet within that monarchy there were some of his most inveterate enemies, whom he was powerless to remove: Augusta, the queen and later empress, the crown prince and above all his wife Vicky.

Thus Steinberg claims that the parental situation that inflicted so much damage on Bismarck's psyche repeated itself in his relations with his sovereigns. There was the kindly but weak Wilhelm, king of Prussia and

later German emperor, dominated by the evil and malevolent Augusta, princess from the liberal court of Saxe-Weimar. Bismarck and Augusta were not on speaking terms. And then the situation repeated itself once more: Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm, in 1888 for fifteen weeks Emperor Frederick III, was totally dominated by his English wife Vicky, Queen Victoria's eldest child.

Steinberg quotes Baroness Spitzemberg, Bismarck's confidante, who relates a visit to the Bismarck household on 1 April 1888, the great man's seventy-third birthday: '[Bismarck said] My old Master was aware of his dependence. He used to say, "help me, you know how hen-pecked I am", and so we operated together. For that this one [Frederick] is too proud but he is dependent and submissive to an extent that is not to be believed, like a dog. The painful thing is that one has to remain perfectly polite instead of intervening with a "damn it all!" This battle wears me down and the Emperor. He is a brave soldier but on the other hand he is like those old moustached sergeants whom I have seen creep into their mouse-holes in fear of their wives . . . The worst was . . . "Vicky. She was a wild woman". When he saw her pictures, she terrified him by the unrestrained sexuality, which speaks through her eyes. She had fallen in love with the Battenberger and wants him near her, like her mother, whom the English call "the selfish old beast", holds on to her brothers, with who knows what incestuous thoughts.'⁴

In my original edition I dealt briefly with the affair of Sandro, Alexander von Battenberg, who was for a short time, with the support of Russia, the ruler of Bulgaria. Sandro's marriage to Victoria, known as Moretta, daughter of Frederick and Vicky, was strongly supported by her mother and by Queen Victoria. It was fiercely opposed by Bismarck, who in his more paranoid moments saw Sandro as a rival who might supersede him. Sandro and the possibility of his marrying Moretta surfaces in the politics and diplomacy of the mid-1880s like an uninvited guest. It was nothing short of bizarre that during her brief spell as reigning empress in 1888 Vicky tried to revive this project, when Sandro had already transferred his affections elsewhere. It made an easy stick for her opponents to beat her with.

In the original *Collected Works of Bismarck*, published between 1924 and 1934, five volumes cover the years 1862 to 1870, while only one volume deals with the years from 1870 to 1890. The new edition (*Neue Friedrichsruher Ausgabe*),⁵ publication of which began in 2004, deals more fully with the years after 1870 and shows Bismarck in a much less heroic

and more questionable light. The earlier editors had left out documents which might have detracted from Bismarck's stature. Steinberg uses the new edition where applicable.

In 2005 Richard E. Frankel, of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, published a study about the impact of the Bismarck cult on the German Right, *Bismarck's Shadow: The Cult of Leadership and the Transformation of the German Right, 1898–1945*.⁶ On the cover of the book there is a poster used by the Deutschnationale Partei, the DNVP, Hugenberg's party, in the Reichstag elections of July 1932. It is simply an image of Bismarck with the caption 'vote list 5 Deutschnational'. Across the whole right-wing political spectrum, including the Nazis, the invocation of Bismarck was commonplace. Frankel then traces the declining potency of the Bismarck cult in the Third Reich. At the beginning the establishment of a sense of continuity and legitimacy was still important. There was the famous 'Day of Potsdam', 21 March 1933, when Hitler portrayed himself as the heir of the Prussian military tradition, bowing deep in front of Hindenburg. Bismarck was never far away. Increasingly, however, the Führer established his own cult, clinched by his own ever more sensational successes.

The point at which Bismarck was well and truly relegated was the Anschluss in March 1938. It was now a very common reaction, even among those who had doubts about the Third Reich and all it stood for, that Hitler had achieved what Bismarck had failed to achieve and had done so without firing a shot.

Hitler then outdid Bismarck even more thoroughly. The defeat of France in 1870 had been less conclusive than it seemed at the time of the Battle of Sedan. There was a long drawn out and messy sequel. France bounced back all too soon and by 1873 had paid back the war indemnity. In 1940 the total defeat of France took little more than a month and there was no comeback. Hitler went to Paris, victor and tourist at the same time. The famous picture of him with the Eiffel Tower in the background remains a reminder of France's darkest hour. There never had been such a triumph for Bismarck.

The fraught relationship between Bismarck and the Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm and his wife Vicky forms the staple diet of all Bismarck literature and has already been frequently alluded to in these pages. A book published in 2011 casts fresh light on this subject: Frank Lorenz Müller, *Our Fritz: Emperor Frederick III and the Political Culture of Imperial Germany*.⁷ It is a long established and still widely held view that if Friedrich Wilhelm

had come to the throne earlier, the history of Germany and Europe would have turned out very differently. The first missed chance seemed to have occurred in September 1862, when King Wilhelm might have abdicated and his son might have taken over. Steinberg shows in his biography that Wilhelm did not intend to abdicate and merely used the threat of it to enable him to call on Bismarck, in face of the many obstacles particularly within his own family. Not only did his wife Augusta abhor Bismarck, his son-in-law Friedrich, Grand Duke of Baden, the most liberal German state, did not want to see him come to power.

An early low point in the relations between Bismarck and the crown prince occurred when the latter publicly criticized the repressive press ordinance, promulgated by Bismarck, in a speech in Danzig in June 1863. The king wanted to impose harsh disciplinary measures on his son, but Bismarck restrained him from making him into a martyr. The crown prince never again spoke out so courageously. On the other hand the crown prince gave valuable support to Bismarck when after the victory at Sadowa in 1866 he restrained his father from marching on to Vienna. Often, however, Bismarck's treatment of the crown prince and his wife was dire. In 1884, for example, when Friedrich Wilhelm's accession seemed to be imminent, Bismarck did all he could to isolate the crown prince and to infiltrate officials into the court of the crown prince and his wife who could act as spies. Rumours were spread of an affair between Vicky and her chamberlain Götz von Seckendorff. It is clear from Müller's book and other sources that after the conservative turn of 1879 it would have been increasingly difficult to change to a more liberal course.

Müller provides evidence that Friedrich Wilhelm was less likely to be the man to carry out such a change of course than has been traditionally assumed. Even his friends regarded him as weak. The author Gustav Freytag expected little more of his reign than 'quaintness, court frippery and decorations'. A less friendly verdict came from Bismarck's son Herbert: 'measureless personal pride and the most complete lack of judgment'. There was a good deal of truth in the 'measureless personal pride' accusation. For the crown prince, the House of Hohenzollern was the holy grail and he despised the other German dynasties. It is reasonable to speculate that one major policy would have been different had Friedrich Wilhelm had a more prolonged innings: it is unlikely that he and Vicky would have built the navy that his son built, and that did more than anything to turn Germany and Britain into enemies.

Müller provides plenty of examples of this weakness on the part of the crown prince. Nothing illustrates more completely Bismarck's utter lack of magnanimity than his reaction to the death of Eduard Lasker in 1884. Lasker and Windthorst were Bismarck's most intrepid opponents. Someone with a more balanced psyche than Bismarck would have been able to confront such opponents in his own inner self with something more than sheer naked hatred. Bismarck could not bring himself to refrain from showing undisguised hatred in public even when an opponent such as Lasker died. Famously Bismarck ordered the message of condolence of the United States House of Representatives, in which Lasker was praised for 'his firm and constant exposition of and devotion to free and liberal ideas' to be returned to Washington. He ordered all official representatives to stay away from Lasker's funeral. It should have been an occasion when the crown prince might have shown he was his own man, but he was warned not to provoke the chancellor's wrath. Müller quotes from the diary of the crown prince: 'E. Lasker was buried in the Jewish cemetery today with great participation of the public' and added lamely that he 'joined them in spirit'. A few days later the crown prince told Ludwig Bamberger, that other leading Jewish liberal, that he always thought highly of Lasker, 'but it had been strictly forbidden from above to show any form of sympathy'.⁸ As always, there was a good deal of political calculation in Bismarck's bluster at a crucial moment of party realignment in the Reichstag.

An inescapable theme of all Bismarck biographies, including my own, is the paradoxical position of the chancellor's most entrenched enemy, Vicky, the crown princess and later Empress Frederick. From her first appearance in Berlin after her marriage to Frederick William in January 1858 she made it quite clear that she thought everything in Prussia, from the state of the royal palaces to the political arrangements, was far inferior to how these things were done at home in England. Tact was hardly Vicky's most conspicuous virtue and she proclaimed her opinions without compunction. It was not a very acceptable position for a future queen of Prussia and, as it turned out, empress of Germany, to take. It made her immensely unpopular. In 1888, she actually was empress, if only briefly. Then more than ever she became the focus of hostility and intrigue. As she tried, with admirable courage, to put a brave face on the situation, comments became ever more bilious. A member of the household wrote 'I cannot describe how this woman is getting on my nerves. I cannot bear

the permanent smile on her face any longer; this woman has smiled every bit of sanity out of her house.⁹

There is a copious literature about the years leading up to Bismarck's fall and about the years of his resentful retirement. The works of Christopher Clark and John Röhl particularly spring to mind.¹⁰ A useful short synthesis was published in 2004 by Katharine Anne Lerman.¹¹ Frankel's *Bismarck's Shadow* has been mentioned earlier. It was impossible for Bismarck to relinquish power, but it was becoming all too obvious that he was simply clinging to power for its own sake. The political scene became a hornets' nest of intrigue. Among the principal characters crowding the stage were Alfred von Waldersee, the chief of the general staff, Friedrich von Holstein, the *éminence grise* of the foreign office, Stoecker, the promoter of anti-Semitism as an antidote to socialism, as well as long established figures like Ludwig Windthorst, Bismarck's great Catholic opponent. Bismarck had long been haunted by the fear of what would happen when the crown prince and Vicky ascended the throne. He had gone to extraordinary lengths to plant spies, like Count Hugo von Radolinski, into Friedrich Wilhelm's household.

As the news about the crown prince's throat cancer became clear, this was no longer Bismarck's fear. He set about making himself agreeable to the next in line of succession, Prince Wilhelm. He went about this task with his usual skill and charm (when he chose to deploy it), encouragement and warning carefully graded. Queen Victoria, aware of the intrigue and calumny that was engulfing her daughter in her dire situation, decided to go to Berlin herself to support Vicky. The date was 24 April 1888, as it turned out, nearly the half-way mark of Frederick and Vicky's short reign. The visit was not welcome to Bismarck's government. As for the queen, Bismarck had for many a year been a *bête noire* for her. The visit turned out better than might have been expected. The queen allowed the chancellor to sit and they avoided the subject of the Battenberg marriage, which was by then a dead issue anyway.

For the last fortnight of his life the emperor was moved to Potsdam, where he died on 15 June. Immediately the royal standard on the *Neues Palais* was lowered to half-mast. Wilhelm II knew he was now emperor. At his behest troops surrounded the palace. Not even the widowed empress was allowed to leave, and desks and cabinets were rifled for documents. The trough of suspicion and intrigue, into which the political scene had descended, was shown up in the crassest possible way.

BISMARCK AND THE KAISER

The coexistence between the new kaiser and Bismarck was never going to be harmonious. If Stoeker is to be believed, Prince Wilhelm had told his intimates: 'For six months I will let the old man catch his breath, then I will rule myself'. As we have seen, both men suffered from deeply wounded psyches arising from their broken relationships with their respective mothers. The case of the kaiser has always been well known and much written about, beginning with the arm damaged at birth. Bismarck's case has been more recently highlighted by Steinberg. Even without any Freudian analysis it is obvious that neither of them was a personality firmly grounded.

The external circumstances worked strongly against any prolonged harmonious cooperation. There was the generational gap between the seventy-three year old chancellor and the twenty-nine year old kaiser, the missing link now gone. You did not have to be an enemy of Bismarck to see that there was a void, an emptiness in the continuance of his rule. He was clinging to power without aim or purpose, simply because it was psychologically impossible for him to give it up. He still used the old confrontational tactics and absented himself from Berlin for prolonged periods, leaving his son Herbert to mind the shop and keep an eye on the emperor. Although he had long foreseen that his relations with the new kaiser might be problematical, Bismarck could not really grasp that he was no longer indispensable and that he might be dismissed.

The major issue that emerged and caused the final breach between emperor and chancellor was the wave of industrial unrest that engulfed the Ruhr and other mining areas. It was an issue Bismarck was not well equipped to deal with. He was essentially a man of the pre-industrial era. It was the beginning of industrialization that had helped to bring him to power. His policies then gave industrialization and commercialization an enormous fillip. Nevertheless, it was a world which was never his own. His youth had been spent on his family's country estates; in his days of power he spent long months at places like Varzin, deep in the country.

With the kaiser it had been rather different. Efforts had been made when he was a young man to show him something of the industrial world over which he would eventually rule. In this respect the future was with the kaiser and not with Bismarck. In due course, as growth of the Social Democratic Party proved unstoppable, the kaiser also spoke of shooting

the strikers, but at the beginning of his reign he wanted to shine by showing compassion. The chancellor still thought the wave of strikes could be used to serve his political purposes, as he had manipulated so many events in the past. He was prepared to use sheer repression as a political stratagem or to demonstrate his indispensability. At other moments it seemed to him a good tactic to use the disorders, even bloodshed, surrounding the strikes to instil fear in the bourgeoisie and bring their representatives in the Reichstag to heel.

In the narrow political world, and to some extent beyond it, the departure of Bismarck was greeted with relief. Too many people had been trampled on, and for too long Bismarck and his family and hangers-on had treated affairs of state as if they were their private business. Bismarck was no dictator, as his dismissal shows. There was always much opposition, but his prolonged regime and pervasive presence had created an atmosphere that had something in common with a dictatorship.

Now that he was gone it was as if a great oppressive weight had been lifted. The atmosphere is well summed up in the diary of Chlodwig zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst. As it turned out, this Bavarian grandee was to become Bismarck's successor in 1894, after Caprivi. He was talking to Albrecht von Stosch, a general who became the first head of the German admiralty, a man who had frequently crossed swords with Bismarck. Hohenlohe says Stosch was as chirpy as a wren now that he could speak openly and the great man was no longer to be feared, and that this comfortable feeling was universal. 'The meek inherit the earth', says Hohenlohe.¹² The sense of relief proved short-lived.

Soon the old man in the Sachsenwald became the focus of mass enthusiasm in a way that had never been the case in his years of power. Bismarck quickly learnt to exploit his popularity by creating a highly effective propaganda machine. An essential part of this machine was the production of his memoirs, with the final title *Gedanken und Erinnerungen*¹³ (Reflections and Reminiscences), which became an immediate bestseller and remained so for generations to come. It gives a highly slanted account of his career and particularly of the events surrounding his dismissal. The period from the death of Frederick III covers about 150 out of some 800 pages. It could only be published in full after 1918 and then against the wishes of Bismarck's heirs.

For the kaiser and his chancellors, Caprivi and Hohenlohe, the resentful looming figure of Bismarck was a great and inhibiting burden, a heavy

mortgage on their ability to pursue a sensible policy. This was difficult enough anyway during what came to be called the kaiser's personal regime. It was characteristic for Bismarck that he played out his role without the slightest regard to what damaging effect it might have on Germany's future.

The kaiser and his ministers were thoroughly frightened by Bismarck's exploitation of his mass appeal. It became most obvious when Bismarck went to Vienna in 1892 for his son's wedding and was greeted everywhere on his journey by great popular enthusiasm.

The efforts of the kaiser and his ministers to isolate or contain Bismarck were clumsy and fruitless. When all else failed they tried to stage a public reconciliation. Bismarck's visit to Berlin in 1894 was meant to show that normal relations had been restored, and there was also a return visit. Genuine reconciliation there never was, as is shown by Bismarck's publication of the reinsurance treaty in 1896.

The most comprehensive reassessment of Bismarck's foreign policy published in Germany since 2002 is by Konrad Canis.¹⁴ Here we meet again the often paranoid sense of precariousness that haunted Bismarck and gave him nightmares. Canis argues that there was a brief moment in 1875 when, plagued by illness and in a highly nervous state, the chancellor became disenchanted with the burdens of office and contemplated retirement, but perhaps he was again only testing possibilities, as he did so often. It was around the time of the 'war in sight' crisis, provoked by Bismarck himself, part of a highly complicated game aimed at incorporating France in a German hegemonial system. Canis points out again that with Bismarck all policy areas were always interconnected, so that the *Kulturkampf* and the fight against socialism were elements of foreign as well as domestic policy, and also part of his ongoing efforts to maintain himself in power.

Canis goes beyond previous analyses in showing that the semi-hegemonial position, with which Bismarck hoped to maintain stability after the power revolution that he himself had brought about, was already beginning to be superseded long before Bismarck fell from power. The rapid economic and demographic development of the new Reich was putting Bismarck's creation so much further ahead of the existing great powers that they were bound to feel threatened. Russia had in many ways been the hegemonial power until the Crimean War weakened her. Now Russia was left far behind in societal and economic development by her western neighbour. Austria-Hungary was increasingly an anachronism in

the age of nationalism and fighting a losing battle on many fronts. The dual alliance was actively promoted by Bismarck in 1879 and at that point fitted well into the various internal, external, political, economic and personal problems that he faced. That this alliance might in due course become a liability could not be foreseen at the time. As for France, she had not only been defeated on the battlefield, she also could not keep pace with her eastern neighbour in many of the areas that make a nation powerful. Even Britain, so long economically dominant, became alarmed by the competition from Germany.

Thus Bismarck had to adjust himself increasingly to a situation in which the Reich was moving from a semi-hegemonial position to becoming a potential European superpower. This incrementally developing ascendancy became a problem more difficult for Bismarck's successors to cope with than for the iron chancellor himself. Canis, like all other commentators, concedes that Bismarck was far superior to his successors in dealing with such problems. Nevertheless, the rise of Germany to supremacy in Europe was a continuous process that began in 1870 and was bound to create alarm among the great as well as among the lesser powers of Europe.

CONCLUSION

It is no easier now than it was in 2001, when the previous edition was completed, to sum up what the meaning of Bismarck's life and work was. To a large extent, economic and technological developments are independent of the political framework and it is always possible to argue that the impact of even the greatest personalities is marginal. Without such leaders much of what took place would have occurred sooner or later anyway. In the last decade and a half, since the previous edition was in preparation, much has changed rapidly and profoundly.

There is globalization and it has proceeded apace. It means that the whole world has more than ever become one interconnected system. There are very few, if any, places left that are not affected by what goes on in the rest of the world. Almost everywhere people can see on television, more recently on the internet, how life is lived elsewhere. In the poorer parts of the world they may think that their lives might be improved if they moved to richer, more advanced areas of the globe, for example from somewhere in Africa to Europe. Often they fall into the hands of people-traffickers, who take them in overcrowded, dangerous boats across the Mediterranean.

Illegal immigrants are generally not welcome in Europe, but when hundreds of desperate migrants drown, there is a public outcry.

When the previous edition was being prepared, a new currency, the euro, was about to be introduced in many countries of Europe. It was a process for which the example of Bismarck might have been relevant. He created a strong political centre, the Second Reich, which stood behind the introduction of a new currency. No such coherent political unit stands behind the euro and this has caused many still continuing problems.

These problems have been aggravated by the crises that have occurred in many parts of the now closely interdependent international economic system. There were banking collapses in many parts of the world, beginning in 2007. They were caused by injudicious lending by banks in boom times, often encouraged by governments. The United States, the United Kingdom and the countries of the eurozone were all affected. In Bismarck's day, in 1873, there was also a great market collapse, which radically changed expectations. As usual he exploited it for his own political purposes. He was, however, operating in an environment very different from today. In Bismarck's time, governments were not expected to have any more control over the economic climate than they had over the weather.

There were other far-reaching changes in the globalized world. Perhaps the most important was the rise of China, a country with a considerable part of the world's total population. In the late twentieth century China was still virtually isolated from the rest of the world. It is now a country interwoven with the globalized world and what happens in China affects everybody else.

It is possible to say with reasonable confidence that whatever the future holds, some of the ills that Bismarck inflicted on Germany no longer plague the Germany of today. No-one in the political mainstream is looking for a saviour. The remark of the liberal Georg von Bunsen, quoted at the end of the previous edition, 'Bismarck made Germany great but the Germans small', is no longer meaningful.

INTRODUCTION

Bismarck dominated Germany and Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century. In creating a unified German state he carried out a revolution from above comparable in historical importance to the French Revolution. His stature was, for many contemporaries and for the generations immediately following, that of a hero who had won legendary triumphs and achieved sensational successes. The German empire of 1871 proved, however, a short-lived construction and survived for only twenty years beyond Bismarck's own life. By 1918 the Hohenzollern monarchy he had fought to preserve was no more. The powerful position he had established for Germany in Europe had vanished. What followed thereafter was even more unstable and catastrophic. By 1945 hardly anything of his legacy was left. Prussia, to the aggrandisement of which he had devoted his life, had ceased to exist. Eastern Pomerania, where he grew up, became part of Poland, the nation whose revival he had always feared as a mortal threat to the Prussian state. Varzin, the estate in eastern Pomerania which he bought in 1867 with the money given to him by a grateful nation and from where he controlled the affairs of Prussia, Germany and Europe for many a long month, is no longer German soil. When Schönhausen, his family's ancestral home on the east bank of Elbe, 50 miles west of Berlin, was about to be occupied by Russian troops in 1945, his niece Sibylle, who had married his younger son Bill, her cousin, shot herself.

BISMARCK – IMAGE, MYTH AND REALITY

Such drastic reversals of fortune have brought about equally drastic reassessments in the historiography of modern Germany as a whole and of Bismarck's place within it. The interpretation of Bismarck's role has veered from unashamed triumphalism to outright condemnation. There was a gap between Bismarck the mythical figure – half Wotan, half Siegfried, as many Germans saw him – and the real man. Physically he was a big man, who towered over most of his contemporaries, given to corpulence in later life, brought on by immoderate eating and drinking. As chancellor he more often than not appeared in uniform, but though his political triumphs gave him the rank of general some of his bitterest battles were fought against his own generals and the horrors of war genuinely shocked him. The public image of Bismarck, the giant with sword sheathed but ready for battle, was a mask. The impression of stolidity was false, for he was a man of extraordinary passion, which he had to struggle to keep under control. For most of his life the passion was consumed by politics and left room for little else. He lay awake at night hating his enemies. He became a pure politician, who subjected everything, situations, countries, personalities, to a friend–foe calculus. Those who opposed him he hammered into the ground. He was incapable of magnanimity to his foes and could not recognize that they might be motivated by principles. He was a supreme realist, to the point of cynicism, he suspected idealism, had little sense of justice or feeling for freedom as a general good. His realism was grounded in pessimism, and even at moments of the greatest triumph he was not tempted by hubris. His pessimism extended to human nature and often reached the point of misanthropy. He preferred his dogs, the large German mastiffs that added to the monumental image the public had of him. To a visitor, who saw him in August 1878, when he was about to make a crucial political turn, he said 'three times, he cared nothing for political parties, conservative or liberal, they were all the same to him; he was going on his way, he who went with him was his friend, he who was against him was his enemy – to the point of annihilation.'¹ It was an attitude that deformed German political culture.

There was another, softer side to him, an almost poetic quality that made him a wizard with words and a brilliant and fascinating conversationalist. When he spoke his voice was high and thin, almost feminine, and his personal charm, when he chose to turn it on, was great. Diplomats were seduced by it, when they ought to have known better. As a public speaker

he was not stentorian or a demagogue, rather a man who weighed his words carefully, delighting in sarcasm and irony, a parliamentary polemicist who hardly ever used a script and whose speeches still read well. To his family, his wife and three children, he was totally devoted, but he expected their complete submission to his needs. His enemies were their enemies and their task was to form a phalanx around him against the hostile outer world. Rarely were so many contrasting qualities concentrated in such profusion in a single individual. Genius is more difficult to define in politics than in art. Bismarck claimed that politics was an art, and if there is such a quality as political genius then he had it. But opinions diverge diametrically when it comes to deciding whether his was a genius that produced beneficent results.

BISMARCK'S CAREER

We can now see that Bismarck's extraordinarily powerful impact owed much to the fact that he was a man who could thrive in the halfway house between absolute monarchy and parliamentary institutions that existed in Prussia after the revolution of 1848. He entered politics as a conservative Prussian *Junker* in 1847. The Junkers, the name customarily given to the landed aristocracy in the Prussian provinces east of the Elbe, were regarded by most of the world as reactionary backwoodsmen. Bismarck came to early prominence because, unlike most politically active members of his class, he was able to master the techniques required in a parliamentary assembly. He was on a steep learning curve and soon realized the maintenance of the conservative order required more than a dogmatic adherence to monarchical legitimism. His performance as a spokesman for the conservatives in the period after the failure of the revolution gave him the reputation that enabled him to leapfrog into a key diplomatic position in 1851, at the age of 36. He was appointed the Prussian envoy to the diet of the German Confederation at Frankfurt. It was a capital vantage point for observing what was going on within and between the nearly forty German states that made up the Confederation.

The relations between the two major German powers, Austria and Prussia, were naturally the main preoccupation of the Prussian envoy. Beyond the German Confederation there was the European power system, of which Bismarck gained an intimate knowledge from his position at Frankfurt. Like the domestic politics of Prussia and many other European