

Bismarck and the German Empire

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The intellectual, especially the academic kind, feels a deep fascination for the man of action, a fascination admittedly both of repulsion as well as that of admiration. Erich Eyck is no exception. A former lawyer turned historian, he turns out a didactically written and carefully presented account of Bismarck as a statesman and a politician, aghast at the lack of moral principle paired with a penchant for duplicity to be seen in the man, but nevertheless not able to repress a spontaneous admiration for that very reckless resourcefulness and energy that the Iron chancellor was able to display well into old age. Bismarck was no intellectual, to him 'Professor' was a term of abuse¹, and he claimed that he often found that his will had been formed before his thoughts had run their proper course. And as we all know retroactive rationalizations are never impossible to construct, especially not for somebody like Bismarck. Eycks concentrates on the official Bismarck, and says almost nothing of the private man, unlike Taylor, who supplies many a charming vignette of titillating human interest. His style comes across as rather naive, more like that of a text-book than a historical monograph. Part of this reason may be that the book is a condensed version of a larger work by the author and as such originally delivered to Oxford students. Thus the didactic touch when he takes the reader into his confidence and takes pains to provide explicit explanations of what may be appear puzzling. The book is thus aimed at a British audience written a few years after the end of the Second World War, and carries an implicit mission to explain the peculiarities of the German system as opposed to that of the British and what relevances those may have had to the Second World War. Implicit indeed, as the Second World War is never mentioned, but there are plenty of references how the Hohenzollern Monarchy came to a sorry end merely twenty years after the death of Bismarck. Furthermore the book is written in English reflecting the authors British exile since 1937 which may account for some of the striking lack of sophistication to be discerned in some of his occasional praise of the subject. He finds it remarkable that someone like Bismarck, or any hardnosed politician for that matter, could write such tender letters to his wife, evocatively filled with astute observations; or that he would take the trouble to regale a recaltrant minister with precise quotations from Schillers 'Wallenstein' to make him toe the line. Remarks certainly worthy to be noted, but phrased in such a simple-minded way as to make the reader smile at his gushing enthusiasm and wonder.

The book concentrates on the twenty-eight years of Bismarcks power from being called into the services of Wilhelm I in 1862 to his fall from grace at the hands of the grandson Wilhelm II in 1890. The background is spottily supplied, the reader does not even learn of his year of birth (neither incidentally of his year of death). His background as a Junker cannot be passed over though, nor his uncompromising stand as a die-hard conservative

¹ As in his disparaging references to 'Professor Gladstone', Lord Beaconsfield being a far more congenial choice

during his days as a deputy to the *Reichtag*. A stand that earned him widespread unpopularity among the general public free to read the speeches delivered, but for which he could not care less. He had friends in high-places, without which no one, even a Bismarck, is able to make a political career. He was called to head the cabinet of Wilhelm I in a crisis brought about by the King wanting to secure the financing of the army in opposition to the deputies who did not want to approve the budget. What was needed was a man who could act unconstitutionally and have no scruples doing so. Bismarck was clearly the man, although the King had taken an initial dislike to him.

The King, however, was a man of scruples, but scruples can easily be overcome given enough incentive and cajoling, and Bismarck knew how to handle the King, whom he likened to a horse, initially shying away from anything new, but with patience able to be brought around. Bismarck had two holds on the King on which he could play, first the King's attachment to his army, and secondly his fear of the sentiments of the revolution of 1848 and the liberal political forces which it had unleashed. The King instinctively took exception to many of the schemes produced by Bismarck, and in addition between the Queen Augusta and Bismarck there was no love lost, and she certainly did her best to counteract Bismarck's influence, yet in the end the King always acquiesced. The reasons are not hard to discern. When there is a contest of will, the one with the strongest will inevitably wins out, especially when supported by an inexhaustible supply of arguments and tricks. Obstinacy certainly can frustrate, but mere stubbornness can never be sustained unless backed by an independent vision, and such the King seldom had.

Bismarck has often been likened to a master chess-player in the arena of Realpolitik. Ruthless, but always knowing when to draw the line and adhere to the rules, whatever they turned out to be. Eyck is sometimes surprised with the lack of foresight displayed by Bismarck, but why expect the miraculous even a chess-player can never predict the outcome in advance, the horizon is in fact close by, and the challenge is always to handle new contingencies. Part of the reason he was so successful was, as Eyck notes, the mediocre opposition. Certainly on a scene dominated by indifferent amateurs anyone with some dedication and persistence is bound to make a mark of sorts, however, one should not begrudge Bismarck his inherent skills, will and energy are in matters of human affairs necessary but far from sufficient for success. The notion of social competence is nowadays fashionable and as with all fashionable notions it is not clear what is exactly meant. On one hand empathy is stressed, thus making it a secular version of the good person; on the other hand manipulation seems to be what is really at stake, thus making empathy merely an instrument for ulterior motives, namely those of bending the wills of others to one's own. Bismarck had few close friends and none in politics, he tolerated only subordinates and was excessively jealous of potential rivals whom he sniffed out like so many ghosts. He certainly never courted popularity and appeared indifferent to the opinions of others. But this did not prevent him from reading the minds of others as well as being charming when it paid to do so. One sometimes wonders whether not the ultimate in so-called social competence is not what is with equal imprecision referred to as psychopathology. Anyone who masters the social game must in some sense stand aside from it, and being apart from it means more or less a kind of pathology².

² The notion of a psychopath is one of those imprecise notions that are often thrown around as if it

Bismarck is above all credited with the unification of Germany. This was an idea that obviously predated Bismarck and one with which he was inevitably confronted in his rise as a politician. The subject is a complicated one and although providing one of the main themes of the biography it is far too complicated to be adequately treated within the confines of a single volume. The author does not even treat its prehistory, the first question obviously being as to the temporal depths of its roots. The educated reader guesses that the notion of a politically unified Germany was of comparatively recent origin maybe the result of the Napoleonic wars. Culturally and ideologically maybe no earlier than the end of the enlightenment and beginning of its reaction. Clear is that by the early half of the 19th century there was a wide awakening to the notion of language and race and nation, notions obviously deeply intertwined but confusedly so. Germany like Italy was splintered into parts ranging from the most insignificant of principalities to powerful kingdoms, unified by language but separated by religion and culture. In the history of Europe traditionally dynasty counted for more than nation, as indicated above one may even cast into doubt the existence of national feeling independent of royal allegiance altogether. And while most of the German lands were independent, some of them were subjected to foreign countries. Austria being the prime example, but also Denmark which had the suzerainty of the two Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein (usually referred to in one breath as Schleswig-Holstein) as well as the small duchy of Lauenburg³. In addition to that we should not forget the Germans in Switzerland, but the peculiarity of Switzerland is that it has always managed to stay out of European power politics and can be safely left out of our story. Finally Hannover had an interesting relationship with England. Its Kings after the reign of Queen Anne were Hannoverian Kings, starting with Georg I going through to George IV. Thus Britain and Hannover were united, but this union came to an end with the succession of Queen Victoria, as the Hannoverian constitution did not recognise female succession which resulted in a George V on the Hannoverian throne, a hapless monarch who would indeed play a tragic role in German unification⁴.

After this digression we can return to Austria which was identified with the Habsburg dynasty constituting a quilt of nationalities and ethnic groups of which the German may have been the most significant but far from being the dominating one, and as Austrian power enlarged geographically less and less so. At the advent of Bismarck there were two feasible ways of uniting Germany, referred to as the *Gross-deutsch* and the *Klein-deutsch* respectively. The first would have involved the unification under Austrian tutelage, which on one hand would have meant an expansion of Austrian to encompass more or less the entire central part of Europe from the Baltic down to the Balkans creating a formidable power, on the other hand any such drastic territorial engrossment would invariably change the power itself internally as well, the German part of the dynasty becoming dominant and

carried scientific weight, while it in reality offers no explanatory value

³ Thus Denmark stretched to the suburbs of Hamburg, Altona being a Danish city. Sweden also had possessions in Germany as a heritage of the Thirty years war, but the last of those were given up as bargaining chip after the Napoleonic wars

⁴ Yet the strong ties of blood and marriage between the British and the German Royal families would remain, as the intimate cross-relationships between continental royalty in general, reminiscent of the mutual ownerships of international corporation today

thus overthrowing the balance. The outcome would probably have been a dismemberment of the non-German parts which also happened after the First World War, when Austria disappeared with the removal of the dynasty, and the name stuck to the Germanic rump of the former empire, a rump which at the time desired nothing but union with Germany itself, a course that would have been more than consistent with the very principles of ethnic unity that underlied the ambitious rewritings of the European map, but which were considered politically impossible⁵. Bismarck was farseeing but it is not clear that he saw that far or at least in those very exact terms. Anyway after having initially dallied with the Austrian alternative he then pursued with vigor the second one of a small German, which at the time meant the unification of the Northern predominantly Lutheran German lands situated north of the river Main.

The idea of a unified Germany was a popular one and a project of the Liberals and in particular coming to the fore during 1848, it was not one that came from the German Princes who naturally would be reluctant to give up their independence. This was recognised by Bismarck, whose political genius lay in hijacking this idea and to control it successfully. Thus he stipulated that a German representation would not be based on the Princes as in the already existing Diet in which the Austrian dominated, but on universal suffrage. Bismarck was not exactly ruled by democratic instincts, he was a man of a deep Conservative bent and no doubt adhering to many of its sentimental principles, although never allowing himself to be hamstrung by such sentimentality when it came to action⁶. Bismarck whose Conservatism was not Capitalistic in temperament but Feudal trusted that voters would not vote as individuals but as their landlords and betters proscribed⁷.

German unification was not brought about by Civil war, as in the case of Italy⁸, but by three military carefully orchestrated campaigns. The first one was directed against Denmark. Bismarck as usual exploited the opportunity brought about by a crisis, this particular one following the death of the Danish King Fredrik VII in 1863. The upshot of it was an alliance with Austria, as well as a reassurance of neutrality from France⁹ and Russia. Britain by itself was powerless as to actual military conventions on the continent, something Bismarck knew but the Danes did not realise, hoping that they as signers of the London Treaty¹⁰ a decade or so earlier would come to the rescue. The war itself in 1864 was a foregone conclusion with the combined Prussian and Austrian armies soon having seized the Duchies occupying land far north into Jutland. What to do with the conquest was another matter. The natural thing was to allow the Duke of Augustenburg to succeed,

⁵ The German *Anschluss* of Austria in 1938 (whose popularity in Austria seems not to be in doubt) as well as the later acquisition of the Sudetenland could then be seen as finishing off Bismarck's unfinished business and derive legitimacy from the principles of the treaty of Versailles

⁶ Bismarck identified with the Junkers, although if circumstances required he would not hesitate to sacrifice their interests

⁷ Such collective ideas of voting were of course taken up by the Socialist movement whose strategy of political ascendancy was based on class identification as a basis of deliberation at the polling station.

⁸ Whose situation was far more complicated with major powers - France and Austria, holding on to Italian lands.

⁹ Napoleon III was in principle sympathetic to unification on ethnic grounds

¹⁰ the effect of which was the recognition of the Danish claim on the Duchies

but Bismarck wanted otherwise, namely the absorption of the Duchies into Prussia, just as some from Prussia disconnected Catholic Rhineland had become part of the Kingdom as a result of the settlements of 1815. The King opposed it, but was eventually brought around, and the Austrians were simply presented with a *fait accompli* as their influence was for geographical reasons secondary to that of adjacent Prussia.

The alliance with Austria formed to pursue a War was naturally dissolved when the purpose was achieved and instead Bismarck formed a temporary alliance with Italy with the blessings of Napoleon III directed against Austria, stirring up patriotic Hungarian feelings for good measure as well. There was a showdown at Kniggrtz at 1866 and the Prussians prevailed proceeding towards Vienna. Austria lost Italian possessions but Bismarck wisely abstained from making any Prussian territorial claims (much to the consternation of the King) knowing well that he would need the strength of Austria as a future ally later. The upshot was that Prussia was given a free-hand in the unification of Germany with Austria rescinding any such pan-German ambitions. Clearly there was not space for two such powerful players on the scene, one of them had to abdicate.

What is most puzzling though is the war with France. Why was it needed? One obvious answer would be the German speaking populations of Elsass and Lorraine whose inclusion in the unification seems natural. That might have been part of the official war-aims, but privately Bismarck was not interested in acquiring disloyal subjects, something discussed poignantly by Taylor, but not mentioned by Eyck. Before the war Napoleon III had been taunted by suggestions. One was the gift of Luxembourg extracted from the Dutch, with the Prussians willing to evacuate a garrison used for their protection, something that eventually came to fruition. Another one, more speculative, was the concession of the Catholic Rhinelands to the French, territory only tenuously attached to Prussia as noted above¹¹. But maybe above all a suggestion that France incorporated the French speaking part of Belgium, the state after all but being an artificial construct of the Vienna Congress. Napoleon was at a drawback in all those negotiations, although intelligent he lacked the crucial gift of a politician, namely that of being able to make decisions. The explanation of the actual war remains rather shadowy both in Taylor's account and also in the more careful one of Eyck. The gist of the latter appears that Napoleon was simply tricked by Bismarck to declare war, the ostensible reason being the question of succession on the throne of Spain by a Hohenzollern Prince, a suggestion that backfired but whose failure Bismarck skillfully exploited through what is known as the telegram from Ems¹². The upshot of it was the unification of Germany declared in Versailles. The War with France had necessitated a military alliance between the North German States, meaning Prussia, and the Southern notably Bavaria. An alliance naturally on Bismarck's terms. The Bavarian King, known to posterity as the Mad King Ludvig, was very reluctant to join the union and give up his Kingdom. In the end he was, susceptible through his extrav-

¹¹ The claiming of the Rhinelands from Germany was something that the French negotiators in 1919 more or less seriously contemplated, arguing that those people, although speaking German were more French in character and temperament than they were Prussians. A distinction many of them probably would find flattering today.

¹² A rather tortuous story involving diplomatic tact of first and second order an excellent plot for an operetta

agance, bribed through funds acquired at the deposition of George V of Hannover, referred to previously. By the unification of Germany Bismarck acquired enormous popular appeal and support, which he was to exploit during the remaining two decades of his reign.

Having acquired his goal his main preoccupation became its consolidation and the maintaining of the peace in Europe which was a prerequisite. The biggest threat to European peace was the volatile situation in the Balkans brought about by the declining Ottoman Empire bringing about a vacuum of power eagerly exploited by the Russians with their Pan-Slavic ambitions as well as their pursuit of free access to the Mediterranean, something that was already deeply disturbing to the British and their colonial hegemony¹³; as well as by the Austrian empire whose expansion naturally was directed where the opposition was softest. As to Germany, Bismarck claimed that it had no interests whatsoever in Danubian lands. Still the situation was fraught with difficulties. Austria was a natural ally, and a definite reapproachment was made in 1879, but Bismarck also wanted to preserve good relations with Russia, but as both Austria and Russia entertained conflicting interests on the Balkan the situation was delicate. Bismarck also fished around for a British alliance, and Disraeli was quite willing, yet Bismarck instructed his Minister in London - Münster, to call it off, once he realised that an understanding, if secret, could be made with Russia.

Counterfactual speculations are always very tempting in any historical account, and when the forming of actual policy the contemplation of possible alternatives, necessarily speculative in nature, is unavoidable. Eyck cannot abstain from regretting that opportunity that was lost in 1879 (and as we all know, and especially emphasized by Bismarck, lost opportunities in history do not reappear a second time, which of course does not prevent people from hoping). A British-German alliance surely would have prevented the First World War. German and British affinities being much closer to each other than either are to the French the popular basis of such a one would be quite natural. But after all Bismarck decided against it, and his reasoning can convincingly be reconstructed. To Bismarck the three monarchies of Germany, Austria and Russia provided a bulwark against the liberal and socialist waves. He also feared, probably justifiably, that such a triple alliance would have much better prospects at permanence, than one concluded with Britain whose foreign policy was subjected to the whims of public opinion and its manifestations in the Parliament. While he may have enjoyed excellent relations with a Disraeli he knew that those would not have been continued with a Gladstone. On the other hand Taylor stresses the reluctance of Bismarck to enter into permanent alliances based on sentimentality and his instincts always to keep his options of actions as large as possible. According to Taylor he always regretted the close ties with Austria, having already in his youth warned against tying the seaworthy vessel of the Prussians to the moribund one of the Austrians. Anyway what happened in the eighties was that the ties with Czarist Russia were weakened although initially regularly renewed. The King had entertained excellent personal relations with his nephew the Czar Alexander II, relations which were naturally severed by the assassination of the latter. The new Czar was naturally suspicious of Bismarck, knowing that the latter had easily tricked the Austrian emperor and might easily trick himself as well. Then there came about a financial breach when Russian bonds were no longer honored

¹³ A preliminary showdown already having occurred in what is known as the Crimean War

in German financial markets. The result was that the Russians had to seek their loans elsewhere and the French willingly stepped in¹⁴. Bismarck had always been disdainful of economics, such affairs having been handled by the very capable Delbrück, and probably did not fully appreciate the consequences of mere economic matters on the game of Foreign Policy. What resulted was the fateful alliance between France and Russia¹⁵

In domestic policy Bismarck had problems with the Reichstag, as was only to be expected, the fact that he did manage them to his satisfaction is a minor miracle and in no small measure due to the prestige he could muster. He exploited the constitutional ambiguities resulting from a non-parliamentary system¹⁶ by his total command of the German Emperor¹⁷, a command he was despairing of when the Crown Prince would eventually replace the ageing monarch¹⁸, as well as allying himself with the Liberal party getting the more or less automatic support of the Conservative ones. The situation was not ideal from the point of view of Bismarck, who desired to marginalize the Social Democrats and the Catholic Center. Against the Social Democrats he enacted punitive legislation, however with not much electoral effect¹⁹ as well as trying to undercut their popular support by enacting long-ranging social legislation well ahead of its time. While his campaign against the Socialist only roused luke-warm liberal support and eventually led to the desired split between the more moderate and the radical wing, (the latter led by the very able Lasker); his *Kulturkampf* against clericalism found more enthusiastic fervour among the liberals. Bismarck did eventually tone down the anti-Catholic campaign trying to come to terms with the Pope trying to induce him to curb the German Centerparty, and he was not above trying to come to some political agreement with them, in spite that he had earlier professed to hate their leader Windhorst more than any other man²⁰ Economically Bismarck

¹⁴ In spite of rather severe reparations imposed on them after the war they had rebounded quickly. The period itself saw a universal economic boom during the period.

¹⁵ Named so by George Kennan in a book by that title, and seen by him as the crucial prerequisite for the First World War.

¹⁶ One should keep in mind that in countries like Sweden a parliamentary system was implemented in the 20th century without being written into the constitution (in Sweden actually not until 1974). Such developements were possible due to the discretion of the monarchs.

¹⁷ Incidentally not the Emperor of Germany (or was it the other way around?) as desired by the King.

¹⁸ As it turned out the Crown Prince developed cancer of the throat and only survived as a regent for a few months after the death of his father.

¹⁹ When the Emperor was seriously wounded in an attempt at his life, Bismarck jumped at the news seeing its political potential as an excuse for the dissolution of the Reichstag as well as a rallying point for anti-Socialist measures, (something which reminds us about contemporary anti-terrorist laws) while initially completely impervious to the physical situation of a person he had after all associated with on an almost daily basis for a quarter of a century, and on whose trust he had built his entire political career. One may once again be reminded of the notion of psycho-pathology, although a more fitting explanation would be that Bismarck managed to compartementalize his emotional life successfully.

²⁰ Bismarck once said that a man needs to love (in his case his wife) and to hate (in this case he mentioned Windhorst). As to socialists he claimed to have thought highly of Lassalle, especiallt valuing his conversation, while he despised Lasker and did not accept American congressional condolences on the death of the latter.

pursued a policy of high-tariffs, partly Eyck speculates, to promote his own interests as a landed estate-owner. It certainly was in spirit of his general conservative, not to say feudal attitude, and it did, according to the author, foster a sense of national pride and self-sufficiency, presumably with disastrous consequences.

The downfall came eventually. The new *Kaiser*, incidentally a grandson of Queen Victoria, was a vain and immature fellow, young in years and scant of experience, who, according to most commentators, let his position rise to his head. Although initially well-disposed towards Bismarck²¹, a rupture turned out to be inevitable. Bismarck did not take it lightly, he had expected to be at the reins of power until his death, and to be succeeded by his son Herbert, whom he had groomed for the position. He finally got his revenge, albeit an ineffectual kind, at his death his letter of resignation eight years earlier was published, a letter written with consummate skill, according to Eyck, being a powerful indictment against the Emperor.

Twenty years after his death, the second Reich he had created was in shambles. It would make a brief and shameful re-incarnation a few years later, the responsibility for which surely must be laid at other doors.

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²¹ Who must have considered his ascendancy as a relief from the apprehensions he had entertained about the rule of his father. Eyck speculates that the German experiment in Colonialism in the 80's, was conducted by Bismarck solely as a stratagem of provoking conflicts with the British in order to counter-act an excessively pro-British attitude of the heir apparent