

# Otto von Bismarck

## *Eine Biographie*

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Otto von Bismarck is known as the Iron-chancellor, and for his saying of 'Blut und Eisen'. His notoriety rests on the ultra-conservative stand he took as a young member of the 'Landtag' very active against the revolution of 1848. Nevertheless he is seen as the father of the unification of Germany and thus the midwife of a new stronger and more dynamic 'Reich' in the center of Europe, rewriting its political map, and hence maligned as the precursor to the men of a more aggressive Germany, who eventually brought about a total disaster (and a new subdivision a mere seven decades later with a miraculous healing a further forty years further on). This is the vulgar picture that needs to be repeatedly modified.

True Bismarck initiated three wars in his quest for a unification. The first was against Denmark, with which there was an irregular and complicated situation. Until the mid 19th century Denmark was a powerful player along the German coastlines. Furthermore the German States Schleswig and Holstein were traditionally intimately united, if formally different, the former being an integral part of Denmark, the latter being attached to Denmark by a shared regent, along with the Duchy of Lauenburg. Thus in particular the Danes more or less surrounded Hamburg. In the nationalistic revival of the early 19th century, the predominantly German population in those lands started feeling restless. There was an insurrection of sorts proclaiming a united Schleswig-Holstein, which the Danes put down. The situation came to a head in connection with the succession of a King in Denmark, whose ascension did not comply with the tradition of Holstein. Prussia and Austria then joined forces and fought the Danes, who had no chance against such superior forces (in the former war, Prussia had held itself aloof). The Danes sued for peace and had to suffer great territorial losses, with Prussia and Austria to share the spoils. However, there soon came to renewed friction between the two German super-powers, the source of which went back a long way. Both vied for playing the major role among the German states, a role the Austrians took for granted viewing Prussia as a junior partner. The friction escalated into war, which the Austrians lost, and from then on, Prussia became the leading German power, with Austria reduced to the sidelines. The war with France is somewhat of a mystery. There is the issue of the succession to the Spanish throne and the intensive diplomatic interchange which escalated into a war. According to Kolb, the war was entirely provoked by Napoleon III, backed by a wide-spread anti-Prussian feeling among the population. Napoleon regretted the Prussian victory over Austria and did not cherish a powerful Germany in the center of Europe. The French forces were vanquished and Napoleon himself taken prisoner at Sedan. However, the French refused to see themselves beaten, and resistance continued for some time afterwards, before a peace treaty could be signed. The victory did much to boost German morale, maybe as a definite

vindication of the humiliation of Napoleon I. It also made the southern German states, such as Bavaria and Wittenberg, allies in the war, eager to join into the union<sup>1</sup>. The Germans imposed heavy indemnities on the French, capital which would come in good stead during the economic boom that followed upon the unification, which was formally concluded in Versailles, in January 1871. A gesture the French would find offensive and deeply resent (and almost fifty years later find deep satisfaction of imposing harsh conditions on the German on the very same premises). It has been argued that the territorial loss of Alsace and part of Lorraine, was overly greedy, and something that Bismarck did not approve of but was overruled by generals intoxicated by the triumph. The author claims that anti-Prussian feeling was so rampant and deep in France, that hostility against the new German, would hardly have been mollified by territorial restraint, and if so, why forego it? In fact the way the author presents the French position, one concludes that not only were they fully responsible for the Franco-Prussian war, they were too the driving force for the First World War, long since planned through a strategic encirclement of Germany through the fateful alliance with Russia<sup>2</sup>.

But the wars of Bismarck were of limited duration and with clear purposes. Bismarck was far from being a militaristic adventurer, in fact he loathed war, and for the rest of his tenure, his goal was to maintain the peace on the European continent through masterly international diplomacy. In the end he became the predominant statesman in Europe, to whom all the major capitals looked for advice and reactions. Great as he was as an international player, his reputation as a domestic politician is however tainted, He was no democrat and upheld solid authoritarian ideals, but he knew how to deal with the parliament and did initiate an impressive array of reforms, making Germany the first really modern state in terms of welfare. In the seventies he engaged in a Kulturkampf against the Catholic Church and its political wing, the Center party. The ultimate purpose of his often intransigent measures is still open to speculation. In the eighties he abandoned the hostilities, made peace with the Centrists and left the Catholic Church intact, however, some important secular laws had been put in effect.

Bismarck made the Prussian King into a Kaiser, and his close collaboration with the King was the constitutional basis for his power, as he was responsible to the King and not to the German parliament. Hence when the old King eventually died in 1888, and the successor, was mortally sick only to die a few months later, his position was seriously weakened. He had been in power for a quarter of a century and the political establishment started to tire of him. Thus it was not so surprising that he was sacked by the young upstart Kaiser - Wilhelm II, an event that played out much more in the foreign capitals than it did on German soil. He retired to his estate in Friedrichsruhe, a present from the former Kaiser, and gradually the German public came around to honor their former Chancellor, and he acquired a nimbus which would last until his death almost ten years later. In particular his 80th birthday brought about such elevated celebrations, that the young Kaiser was forced to make at least some formal gestures of reconciliation. Bismarck

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<sup>1</sup> Initially Bismarck had been far more cautious in predicting the final union of German states, thinking that it might take until the turn of the century.

<sup>2</sup> A title to that effect was published by Kennan, and Clark in his book on the beginnings of the First World War comes rather close to endorsing such a view

refused to be buried in Berlin, and none of his family appeared at the memorial service, their reserved places gaping conspicuously empty.

What is not so well-known is that Bismarck was a brilliant writer in German, and his youthful letters to his wife are sometimes held forth as examples of German literature as its very best<sup>3</sup> He was also prevailed upon to write his memoirs, something he did willingly, to settle scores if anything, and which would turn out to be a big commercial success (not necessarily widely read). Some of the more sensitive parts were not published until the 20's. Bismarck was a great lover of the family and the life of the country-squire, including hunts and riding around. He is said to have been happiest by the fact that all his three children survived not only childhood but also adulthood, something which at the time was far from certain<sup>4</sup>. One of his grandchildren lived into the early 1980's. Another grandchild, his namesake Otto, were involved in the circle of the plotters against Hitler, was briefly imprisoned, but survived into the 70's.

He must have been of a strong constitution. Naturally slender as a youth, in late middle-age he had acquired a girth that worried his doctors and he was put on a diet with his health rallying. In early middle age he was struck down by serious diseases, and he did at some periods of his life believe that the end was near. He often complained about insomnia and the sorry states of his nerves, the exhausting political maneuvers no doubt taking their toll. He spent large periods away from Berlin, but never allowed himself to be out of touch. During his final years he was reduced to a wheel-chair, but reportedly his spirit was undaunted.

His skill as a German writer has already been referred to, in addition to that he had a fine command of both English and French, and during a diplomatic stint in St-Petersburg, also picked up Russian. Politicians of such skills are very rare nowadays. However, his early life was not particularly noteworthy, he was a rather indifferent student, more geared towards the social life of the university than its academic, although he would of course make light of his accomplishments in the latter. His first forays into government service were rather listless, with long leaves of absences, one involving chasing a young English woman, with whom he had become infatuated. Yet being well-connected he was given a second chance, allowing him to eventually find his true metier. The rest is history, as the saying goes.

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<sup>3</sup> I recall many years ago hearing translated excerpts being read aloud on Swedish Radio, making me very surprised, this was something I had not expected at all.

<sup>4</sup> Three of Bismarck's own siblings died in infancy, but the three surviving children of the family reached into their eighties.