

Bismarck

The Man and the Statesman

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Bismarck has left an ominous legacy often evoked by the words of Blood and Iron. As the supreme representative of *Realpolitik* during the 19th century (and with no worthy successor in the 20th) he is treated with respect but without affection due to the tacit resentment of a perceived lack of moral principle and idealistic vision supposedly allowing naked power to be sought freely for its own sake. By the hindsight of history, (and the biography is written in 1955 shortly after the end of the Second World War), he cannot escape the scrutiny of historians as to his role in creating the conditions for the emergence of the Third Reich. Yet any comparison between Hitler and Bismarck is absurd, both as to their political actions and personalities. As to the latter the temperament of a Bismarck was far more closer to that of a Winston Churchill. Both had a weakness for the pleasures of the table meaning food, drink and smoke, both had a flair for literary expression without being intellectuals, both were fickle as to political allegiance¹, both were charming and knew how to manipulate, yet without any close friends outside the sentimentality of the sanctum of inner family. Yet in any direct comparison of the two men, Bismarck inevitably comes out as the larger, and indeed few modern statesman deserve the hackneyed epithet of being larger than life than Bismarck. Churchill *Finest Hour* was having greatness thrust upon him and rising to the occasion with rhetorical flair. His act of defiance had great moral and symbolic value, yet as an actor of the Second World War he was essentially powerless his only true achievement being to bring about the involvement of the United States, which might have come about anyway². Without the opportunity that he seized his reputation in the eyes of posterity would have been that of an obscure alcoholic maverick. Bismarck on the other hand dominated completely Prussian and later German politics for close to thirty years and was the supreme player in International politics, meaning at the time Continental politics.

Like many great politicians his beginnings were inauspicious showing little indication of future merit³. Taylor makes much of the fact that his mother came out of an intellectual family and sought for her children the blessings of higher education, positing it as an explanation of his gifts, as well as the complementary fact that he admired his boorish

¹ while Bismarck stood above party politics Churchill had to adhere to it, changing his affiliations repeatedly

² any counterfactual speculation is free and thus easily spent, so one may as well argue that had the American involvement come later and more indecisively. Hitler may have won or at least prevailed far longer

³ The examples are legion. Churchill is an obvious one, as is Nehru

Junker father and his Junker heritage in opposition to the cleverness of his mother⁴. Although he in later years preferred to dress in military garb replete with the Prussian helmet (ostensibly on grounds of private economy arguing that a worn military outfit looked less shoddy than a worn civilian) he had no fondness for the military or the military life which he had sought to avoid in his youth, just as he later sought to spare his children its rigour. He did his stint at the University getting into predictable scrapes and pursuing women a pasttime he would continue along with horseback riding when being a landlord on his estate. As he was retired and nearing death he claimed that his belief in God had faded along with the flame of his erotic passion, having needed the former to stick to his role as a devoted husband. His political career started out as a radical conservative proposing an alliance with Austria only to relinquish it during his encounter as the Prussian representative with their arrogance at the diet of Frankfurt in 1852 which proved to be a failure of the Austrian Empire to confirm its status among the German states as the undisputed leader.

At the time he was already closing to forty when he was without any previous political or diplomatic experience entrusted with a diplomatic mission. He would never learn the professional trade of diplomacy, his reports while articulating his own views never troubled to report those of others with any ambition of accuracy, furthermore he did not wait to carry out orders but directed his own policies by force of character and will⁵. In a more developed state this would have been unacceptable and his career would have stopped right then and there, at the time there was enough latitude to accommodate the maverick. Anyway he did not rise sharply but was soon deviated to a post as minister to St Petersburg, where he learned to appreciate Russia and even learned Russian, a language he often used as code in his private scribblings. Throughout his life he would always respect Russia not sharing in the Russophobia of his compatriots and often tried to save its face in international affairs.

Wherein lay his greatness? The unification of Germany is an obvious answer. On the other hand the unification of Germany seems more or less a foregone conclusion that surely would have come about without the intervention of Bismarck. However, the very form it took certainly owes much to his machinations. A unification of Germany could never be a solely German affair and thus could not be separated from the wider context of international politics. A brief historical resumé cannot be out of place. At the beginning of the 18th century France was the supreme Power. Germany and Italy were splintered into toy-states, the former having not recuperated from the devastations of the Thirty Years War. In the East three states were in ascendancy. Russia having wrested the precariously mighty Sweden of its power, Prussia and Austria - the eastern flank of the Habsburg dynasty, whose Spanish flank had gone into rapid decline. Throughout the century small

⁴ He would, according to Taylor, always harbour resentment against intellectuals especially the female kind. He is reported to have said that bad women are bad but good women are even worse. Such attitudes do not necessarily dull a mans erotic passions, on the contrary they rather sharpen them.

⁵ As he himself would be in position to order diplomats, his instructions were often haphazard and incomplete leading not infrequently to blunders. No doubt this reflected his lack of articulated premeditation and his penchant for the spontaneous and intuitive decision, often referred to by the phrase 'playing by the ear'

wars were being fought like formal dances, each bringing about incremental advantages of territory and prestige. Britain stayed aloof by virtue of its maritime orientation acting on the principle of always supporting the second most powerful power in the interest of balance. In practice this meant ties with Prussia and other German states to counter French dominance⁶. The end of the century saw the division of Poland between the three eastern powers consolidating their positions. Had this been allowed to continue it is natural to believe that Prussia having gone as far East as possible would then start to expand westwards and south, maybe checked by a similar Austrian expansion unless the latter had been solely diverted towards the declining Ottoman Empire and the emerging tidal shore of the Balkans, where interests would inevitably clash with those of Russia. All of this was interrupted by the rise of Napoleon, an unpredictable consequence of the French Revolution, and the subsequent untoppling of traditional empires. Especially Prussia was humiliated⁷. The Congress of Vienna in 1815, incidentally the same year as that of Bismarck's birth, constituted a resurrection back to the normalcy of the 18th century, and the European theatre of the 19th century, in which would provide the setting for Bismarck, was essentially in formal diplomatic ways indistinguishable from that of the century before, in particular with the same players France, Prussia, Austria and Russia, with England assuming a marginal role. Of the five Prussia was clearly the weakest and definitely in terms of the German question a junior partner to Austria. However the Napoleonic interlude had changed the scene in many fundamental ways as regards social structures. Serfdom still reigned among the Eastern powers, but it was on its way out; revolutionary fever, as testified by the events of 1830 and 1848 (the latter profoundly influencing Bismarck), had been stirred, and there were widespread demands of popular representation and socialism, as well as national reawakenings putting intrinsic value on individual languages and cultural identities and a concomitant ambition to give those political aims. And last but far from least a burgeoning industrialization as well as a globalization of trade, the tide of which was at loggerheads with many of the other trends. Those developments did not particularly concern Bismarck although he was unable to neglect them but had to react appropriately. Yet his main role was to be that of a chess-player of international diplomacy, a role that would have suited him just fine in the previous century and which he now had to conduct in the present replete with the frustrations brought about by the added complexity of the social situation. But as we all know constraints are not only sources of frustration but opportunities to sharpen your wit, and it is quite likely that it was this added challenge that brought out the best in Bismarck.

The kind of *Realpolitik* that Bismarck is attributed to have played with such consummate skill is often likened to chess. The metaphor is both illuminating as well as misleading if pushed too far. In many ways it can be seen as an abstract game of finding useful configurations, thinking up strategies as well as buttressing them with tactical tricks, but for those engaged in it, it usually does not appear that way, and when it does, they invariably

⁶ One is reminded of the imported Hannoverian kings. Furthermore the natural affinity between Germany and England has been obscured by events of the centuries that would follow, although at times the mist has intermittently cleared.

⁷ It is symptomatic that at the time humiliations were directed at states and their heads, not so much at the population at large

lose their grip. Bismarck was never able to provide any useful motivations for his actions when called to do so in his memoirs, most likely because he never was aware of any. The expert player works intuitively unable to codify his motivations into algorithms. As such we may think of it as the usual social game humans are engrossed in but writ large. Most likely Bismarck himself would have had little patience with abstract reflections on the powerplay of politics, although he certainly was not short of *bon mots* (the saying that politics is the art of the possible is supposed to be ultimately attributed to him) and he is often quoted for having said to the effect that history is not shaped by individuals all they can do is to jump on its coattails, but would have insisted that the Devil is to be seen in the details, of which he certainly was fond to elaborate and improve upon in his old age.

Palmerstone is said to have claimed that a nation has no friends only interests, and this certainly characterized international politics in the 18th century as well and survived into the 19th century. An alliance between two powers was a matter of expediency to achieve a certain practical goal, and once that goal was achieved, usually as the result of a limited military campaign, the mission was completed and the alliance dissolved. Such considerations suited Bismarck well. The alliance of 1864 with Austria had as a goal to wrest from Denmark the duchies of Schleswig-Holstein and Lauenburg without international intervention⁸, the alliance with Italy in 1866 was directed against Austria, which was decisively beaten⁹. Bismarck renounced any territorial gains, much to the consternation of the Prussian King and the victorious generals, the point was simply to establish the supremacy of Prussia north of the river Main, something that had in the past in vain been sought diplomatically¹⁰. After the war there were no hard feelings and future alliances with Austria were not ruled out as events soon enough would prove. This provided a watershed in history as it made sure that German unification would be a Prussian affair not conducted under the auspices of Austria. One may also argue that unification under Prussian tutelage was much more natural. Austria was a multi-ethnic empire in which the German nationals constituted a minority even if admittedly a cultural and politically dominant one. What would really have been the nature of a united Germany under Austria? Would Germany just have been gobbled up by the Austrian empire becoming a predominating part much to the resentment of the rest of the empire? Or would a unification on those lines brought about a splitting up? Either scenario is riddled with intractable practical problems. Finally the war against France in 1870 is a riddle, and Taylor does not contribute much to clarifying the issues. Clearly neither Napoleon III or Bismarck wanted war. As noted above Bismarck resorted to it as a last resort when he found that diplomacy had run its course? Taylor presents some obscure story concerning the Spanish succession involving political embarrassment and a 'forged' telegram from Ems, ingredients worthy of an Operetta (which might not be so inappropriate in the 19th century setting). Bismarck later was anxious that the war with France should appear as a premediated move, while as Taylor argues, it was nothing of that sort, just

⁸ As had been the case in the past, and which the hapless Danes had counted on.

⁹ The Prussian army was well-organised but above all it could due to superior infrastructure (railways) be mobilized much faster than the Austrian

¹⁰ Bismarck never an intellectual seems not have been aware of Clausewitz, this did not prevent him from masterly adhering to the principle that war is indeed a continuation of diplomacy but by other means

a taking advantage of fortuitous circumstances. The war was succesful as wars goes, the French early on suffered a devastating defeat and Napoleon III was taken prisoner along with his surviving army. The mopping up took some longer time including a siege of Paris, and here Bismarck was out of control, military matters handled by the professionals, of which he had (with the possible exception of the older Moltke) a low opinion. Somehow the end of the war meant the complete unification of Germany, i.e. meaning also the southern Catholic states south of Main. The ceremony of German unification was held early in 1871 in Versailles of all places¹¹. How it actually brought about the unification is not very well explained by Taylor. The war itself had necessitated military alliances with the still independant states, did its succesful outcome simply carry such momentum? But just like all moral calculations based on utility are meaningless due to no natural restrictions of horizons, the ultimate consequences of a succesful military campaign can be very hard, not to say impossible, to estimate. Bismarck, lauded by Taylor alluding to the words of Goethe *in der Beschrnkung zeigt sich erst der Meister*¹², was well aware of the pitfalls of a decisive victory against the French, prophesizing that such would only sow resentment. Thus Bismarck disapproved of the territorial ambitions set at the onset, and would have been more than willing to abstain, at least from the acquisition of the French speaking regions. Unlike the case of Austria, which had suffered no territorial losses, there were hard-feelings, obviously not mollified by the imposition of harsh reparations¹³.

Bismarck thrived on crises especially international crises where the object was to get as much advantage as feasible by as little exertion as possible. Often a stand of neutrality was enough. This did not prevent Bismarck from playing a more active role as a so called honest broker, especially as regards to the activities of the Austrian and the Russians whose interests clashed in the Balkans. It was to this effect he offered an alliance with Austria to ease tension in the Balkans and thereby reassure the Russians. A rather high order complication. A treaty that was also secretly supplemented with a non-aggression pact between Russia and Prussia, united in interest by the Polish division and their common cause during the Napoleonic War. But as Taylor remarks traditional alliances were formed for definite purposes and where hence of limited duration, while the alliance with Austria was based on the preservation of peace and hence committed until peace eventually would be broken. As furthermore it was seen as an alliance not of expediency but based on friendship and affinity, it served a moral purpose and as such it became a restriction on freedom of action. Bismarck had always thought of it as temporary and regretted the developement towards permanency. It ushered European politics into a new era away from frivolous flexibility towards exalted permanence. After the disappearance of Bismarck from the scene it led to the disruption of an equally natural connection of interests to Russia

¹¹ Slightings tend to perpetuate themselves living on far beyond their time of relevance. That the Germans were humiliated by the treaty in Versaille is of course no coincidence, just as the French had to sign their capitulation there two decades later

¹² It is through constraint that the master reveals himself

¹³ McMillan in her 1919 claims that the economical compensations demanded by the victorious Germans were much harsher than those meted out to the defeated Germans almost fifty years later. Having not seen the exact figures I can of course not decide this one way or another, but it seems that the economical consequences for the French were far less exacting than those of the Germans after the First World War

and instigated, what Kennan refers to as the fateful alliance between Russia and France, whose ultimate consequence was the First World War. Now one should be very careful to set up such chains of cause and effect in history, but it is noteworthy as Taylor reminds the reader that the planned wars of Bismarck killed people in the thousands, while the moral wars of the 20th century killed them in the millions. Not to confuse politics with morality, often seen as cynical, is after all a very good point of Bismarck¹⁴.

A successful foreign policy often means an inactive one in the sense of keeping a country from interference by outsiders or from commitments overseas. A domestic policy in order to be successful means on the other hand activity. While Bismarck easily managed to have a free rein as to his handling of foreign policy to handle the domestic was a different matter, nevertheless he managed to dominate this as well in a manner which would have been impossible in a modern 20th century constitutional democracy. The constitution of Prussia and later the German Reich was split between a monarch and a parliament *Reichtag*. The obvious strategy was to play one against the other. To Wilhelm I Bismarck was a bulwark against the liberalism of the parliament based on universal suffrage; and of course to the parliament Bismarck could claim that he upheld democratic values against the old monarchical order. He oscillated in his commitment between the liberals and the conservatives, while considering the Centre party, with its Roman Catholic backing, and the Social Democrats as *Reichfeinde*¹⁵, yet he was unable to ignore them. Bismarck claimed a Lutheran identification and as such harbored a deep suspicion against the Papists, which was partly the basis for his *Kulturkampf* i.e. an early cultural revolution against the power and traditions of the Roman Catholic Church. Eventually he let this fade out after having wrought appropriate concessions from the Centre, as well as forcing the pope Leo XIII eventually to do his Canossa instead of the other way around¹⁶. When it came to the Socialist threat he kept contacts with some of the leading revolutionaries like Lassalle and dropped them, much to their consternation, when they were no longer useful to him. His idea of universal suffrage was not one of individual votes cast at secret ballots, but one in which voters were represented by their betters, incidentally an idea not so different from those espoused by Western Socialist parties dealing with collective memberships and block votes, natural aberrations of the principle of enfranchisement. Bismarck effected some far-reaching social reforms well ahead of their times. Those are often seen as a way of undercutting the political power of the Socialist appeal, and clearly such tactical considerations were probably not far from his mind, on the other hand one should grant him his sincerity, after all his background as a conservative was one of feudalism in which the landlord looks out for the welfare of his subjects. The Social Democrats were originally a Revolutionary movement, its transformation into a Parliamentary one probably owes much from its experience in the greater Germany.

The last years of his reign were the best of his time in power. He had achieved much and seemed to have gained complete control of the constitutional elements, when this all was upset by the whims of the new Emperor Wilhelm II the grandson of Queen Victoria.

¹⁴ This does not of course mean that politics should be pursued immorally, only amorally

¹⁵ enemies of the state

¹⁶ i.e. in medieval times the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire had to bow to the authority of the Pope, Bismarck reversed it as far as the Second Reich was concerned

While Wilhelm I had always trusted him and needed him even when opposed to his policies, such implicit trust was not to be found by the successor¹⁷ in 1890 Bismarck, much to his chagrin was dismissed, he who had expected to be at the reigns until his death. He retired at the height not only of his powers but also, as he claimed, his health. Life without a mission was boring to him and his hopes of a future reconciliation never completely died. Bully health, yet within a few years he had to relinquish riding and soon thereafter finding himself confined to a wheel-chair. He finally succumbed in 1898 clear-minded until the very last.

Taylor gives a few intriguing vignettes of Bismarck as a person. In spite of a most unwholesome life involving a lot of smoking and drinking not to mention eating¹⁸ making him absurdly fat but no doubt adding to his prestige¹⁹, he was never seriously ill until his late sixties when his teeth started to give him troubles resulting in tremors of the face he vainly sought to hide by growing a full beard. Yet he was given a new lease on life brought about by a new physician - Schweningen, involving a more moderate lifestyle. The effects were spectacular, he lost weight, his skin resumed a new lustre and his energies soared, yet as Taylor reminds the reader, even when Bismarck was ill, or rather especially when he was ill, he was a formidable opponent thriving as he did on crisis.

The literary accomplishments of Bismarck are often hailed by his biographers, especially the letters he wrote to his betrothed Johanna. Taylor even claims hyperbolically, that in matters of German prose he had no equal save that of Luther and Goethe. Still, as note above, he was no intellectual. His residence was filled with unread books given to him, he tastes in literature were restricted and clearly formed in his youth, involving in addition to the generally adored Scott also Shakespeare and Schiller. He had a romantic attachment to the role of the Junker and retired to his estates often for months on end thereby paralysing political processes. There he used to ride and meditate, but, as Taylor notes, much as he idealized country living he easily got bored relishing the dispatch.

The connection with the Second and Third Reich is a delicate one to which Taylor returns briefly at the end. He does identify a Bismarck party, or rather senility, as exemplified by Thomas Manns exalted views of the German *Geist* as opposed to Western Civilization. As the Third Reich came in power they did neither actively promote it nor oppose it trusting that they would in the end control it. In the end they acted too late. Their great mistake, Taylor argues, was to believe that one could have a *Reichstaat* without genuine democracy, and that many of them would have considered Nazism tolerable, had it respected the rule of law and been shorn of its anti-semitic element. It is clear that many of those who despised Hitler still revelled in the glory the Germans achieved initially and that the major motivation of the would be assassins was to preserve German Pride by achieving a honorable Peace. But clearly by that time things had simply gone too far.

¹⁷ Wilhelm II was not the immediate successor to Wilhelm I, in the interrim there was the short reign of Frederick III

¹⁸ at times as much as fourteen cigars was smoked during a single day, his residence in Berlin was filled with bottles and he had a special penchant for 'Black Velvet' concoction of stout and champagne of his own making. Taylor also gives a 'snapshot' of him at a Berlin Congress when he was stuffing himself with shrimps with one hand and cherries with the other.

¹⁹ It is hard not to think of Kohl

Yet there is a need for many observers to isolate and identify the Good Germans, not the meek ones, but those who were instrumental in her military success, thus the idealization of people like Rommel. But the question of what personal responsibility Bismarck had for the rise of Hitler is clearly not a well-posed one, and any attempt to make a connection is highly speculative. What better word to end than those already alluded to. It is in constraint the true Master reveals himself. The epitomy of the praise that Taylor bestows on the Iron Chancellor.

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