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Jonathan Steinberg, *Bismarck: A Life*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011. Pp. x, 577. ISBN 978-0-19-997539-6.

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Prince Otto von Bismarck was a giant—physically, metaphorically, and historically. He stood six feet, two inches tall and weighed at least two hundred and twenty pounds most of his adult life. As a statesman, he “held office for twenty-eight years and transformed his world more completely than anybody in Europe during the nineteenth century with the exception of Napoleon, who was an Emperor and a General. Bismarck did it while being neither the one nor the other” (4). He continues to cast a large shadow on history.<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Steinberg (Univ. of Pennsylvania) is, therefore, venturing onto well-traveled and hotly contested ground in his magisterial, *New York Times* bestselling biography of the “Iron Chancellor.”

Steinberg analyzes in painstaking detail a man he sees as a living contradiction: “a hypochondriac with the constitution of an ox, a brutal tyrant who could easily shed tears, a convert to an extreme form of evangelical Protestantism, who secularized schools and introduced civil divorce. He always wore uniform in public after a certain stage in his career but he was one of the few important Prussians who never served in the King’s regular army” (5). Steinberg well captures this magnetism and uncanny ability to control others, perceptively writing that Bismarck never had “sovereign power but he had a kind of ‘sovereign self’” (3). He remains resolutely focused on Bismarck throughout the book, with only short explanations of the background of the many pivotal events in which he played a role.

The biography takes a roughly chronological approach, beginning with five substantial chapters on Bismarck’s early life. For example, we see the future chancellor as a petulant child who craved his mother’s attention. Steinberg often quotes extensively from Bismarck’s diaries, letters, and memoirs and those of the major figures in his life. Here, Bismarck candidly describes his relationship with his mother in an 1847 letter to his wife, Johanna: “She wished that I should learn much and become much, and it often appeared to me that she was hard and cold. As a small child I hated her; later I successfully deceived her with falsehoods. One only learns the value of the mother for the child when it is too late, when she is dead” (29).

We follow Bismarck from his meteoric rise to power, through the unification of Germany, his assault on the Catholic Church and the Socialists, to his final dismissal by Wilhelm II. Steinberg writes with great eloquence and the utmost ambivalence about the “deep ironies in the career of Otto von Bismarck: the civilian always in uniform, the hysterical hypochondriac as the symbol of iron consistency, the successes which become failures, the achievement of supreme power in a state too modern and too complex for him to run, the achievement of greater success than anybody in modern history which turned out to be a Faustian bargain” (478). Steinberg never falls into the admiring trance that many of Bismarck’s biographers have succumbed to. While recognizing his genius, he paints him as egotistical, uncharitable, power-hungry, immature, and, ultimately, the cause of many of Germany’s woes in the twentieth century. He was a man with no principles for whom *Realpolitik* was less a matter of rational governance than of expedience. Steinberg always stresses the blend of brilliance and small-mindedness in his subject: “Furious and commanding he could be but Bismarck always managed to evade responsibility when things went wrong. He had lied to his mother from early childhood and continued to lie all his life” (470).

*Bismarck: A Life* is not a book for the casual reader. Exhaustive and meticulously researched, it demands the reader’s full concentration. It also presupposes considerable background knowledge and prior understanding of the events discussed. Steinberg does succinctly contextualize major historical events, but not in the fine detail given to the main subject of his book. The long quotations from the private papers of

1. A keyword search at worldcat.org for “Otto von Bismarck” yields more than eighteen hundred results.

the Bismarcks, their friends, enemies, and many others who passed through their lives can be ponderous, but they furnish intriguing perspectives on the man. Steinberg, for example quotes at length from a novel by Bismarck's American college roommate.<sup>2</sup> The book itself has slight literary or historical value, but Steinberg reveals that its main character, Otto von Rabensmark, is a "thinly disguised" Bismarck. At one point, Rabensmark says "I intend to lead my companions here, as I intend to lead them in after-life" (41). Steinberg's sometimes wry prose provides moments of levity. As an illustration of "the scale of Bismarck's way of life," Steinberg, citing a Bismarck assistant's diary, lists the items on the massive dinner menu of 22 January 1878, commenting that, "The huge chamber pots [in Bismarck's bedroom] corresponded to the incredible quantities of food served and consumed at the Prince's table" (345).

The reliance on the intimate writings of Bismarck and his contemporaries lures Steinberg into psycho-historical byways that will trouble some readers. Referring to a woman he calls Bismarck's "forbidden" love, he writes that "the beautiful, clever woman—like his mother—could never be achieved and hence in order to survive and put an end to his loneliness he had chosen a plain and limited one" (69). He explains Bismarck's troubled political relationship with the Kaisers partly through psychohistorical speculation: "Again and again the 'strong woman' played the role of evil enchantress in his psyche. These all-powerful women dominated their weak husbands and threatened Bismarck from all sides. He sensed conspiracies everywhere. The women caused all his difficulties" (469). Such explanations of Bismarck's eccentric behavior are intriguing, if not always convincing.

There is little in the book by way of in-depth discussion of key issues in the Wilhelmine period (the reform of the military, the *Kulturkampf*, the Anti-Socialist laws, antisemitism), which appear only through Bismarck's eyes and those of his contemporaries and disappear when they cease to concern them. This is a consequence of Steinberg's strict concentration on his true subject. One German diplomat, describing Bismarck's treatment of his associates, said that "to him they are ... just post horses with whom he travels to the next stop ... From him I am saddled and ready to meet the blackest ingratitude" (473). The reader encounters critical moments in history as Bismarck himself did; then Steinberg moves on to the next crisis or conflict.

One area the reader might like to know more about is the question of Bismarck's antisemitism, but, like much about the man, his true feelings remain unclear. Steinberg astutely notes the equivocal nature of Bismarck's position: "[he] shared and often expressed loathing and disdain for Jews but he himself took no part in the extreme anti-Semitism of the [historian Heinrich] Treitschke kind. On the other hand, he did great damage to Jews in Germany indirectly, because he took no steps to enforce the laws or protect Jewish citizens during the crisis of 1880" (476).

Bismarck's legacy to Germany is mostly negative. As Steinberg reminds us, his genius created a complex and unwieldy system of governance that only an extraordinary leader could manage. This had disastrous consequences for the new nation once Wilhelm II dismissed him. Bismarck had created a "toxic environment" both professionally and at home. He ill-used his hardworking, loyal subordinates and turned his rage against anyone he believed had slighted him. At home, he crushed his son Herbert by refusing to allow him to marry the woman he loved because she came from a family of Bismarck's "enemies." More importantly for the history of Germany and Europe, Bismarck laid the foundations of the coming totalitarian state—he "smashed the possibility of responsible parliaments" and "destroy[ed] moderate bourgeois liberalism" (479).

Bismarck's assaults on liberalism and representative government and his Bonapartist manipulations of mass politics to precipitate political crises that he alone could resolve had far-reaching repercussions. Although Steinberg avoids the historical theory of a *Sonderweg* (special path) from Bismarck to Hitler, the National Socialist future lurks constantly in the background of his book and he does not shrink from suggesting how the Mad Junker set the table for the Bohemian corporal: "When Bismarck left office, the servility of the German people had been cemented, an obedience from which they never recovered. The upper reaches of society had been debased ... and they too never recovered" (467). Steinberg ends by paint-

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2. John Lothrop Motley, *Morton's Hope: or, The Memoirs of a Provincial*, 2 vols. (NY: Harper, 1839).

ing the last freely elected President of Germany, Paul von Hindenburg, as a sort of throwback to the Iron Chancellor.

*Bismarck: A Life* is a scholarly achievement of the first order; it belongs in the library of any serious student of German or, more broadly, European history in the nineteenth century. It will stand the test of time as the standard one-volume biography of the man who settled disputes with “blood and iron” and dramatically altered the course of European history for at least a century to come.