

BISMARCK

AFTER
FIFTY YEARS

By
ERICH EYCK



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HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

1948

GENERAL SERIES: G 8

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THIS notable essay by Dr. Erich Eyck, the most distinguished Bismarckian scholar of our day, was written on the invitation of the Historical Association to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Bismarck's death. Dr. Eyck, a German Liberal of the school of Ludwig Bamberger, found his way to England in the early years of the Nazi government, and his massive three-volume *Life of Bismarck*, published in Switzerland between 1941 and 1944, was written mainly in this country. It will no doubt remain the standard biography of Bismarck for many years to come, but, as publishing difficulties make the early appearance of an English translation unlikely, this short reassessment of Bismarck's career and summary of Dr. Eyck's conclusions is particularly welcome.

W. N. MEDLICOTT,

Chairman, Publications Committee.

17 April, 1948

BISMARCK

AFTER FIFTY YEARS

'THAT world history has to be re-written from time to time, about that there remains no doubt in our day. This necessity exists, not because much about what has passed has been discovered since, but because new points of view arise, because the contemporary of an advanced age is led into a position from which the past can be surveyed and assessed anew.'

Thus wrote Goethe one and a half centuries ago. The wisdom of his words is shown by the changes, during the last fifty years, in the assessment of the personality and the achievements of one of the greatest men of world history, Otto von Bismarck. When the ex-Chancellor of the German Empire died on 30 July 1898, his creation, the German Empire, stood splendid in all its strength and power, and the bearer of the German Imperial Crown, which Bismarck himself had called into existence, was considered one of the most powerful and brilliant rulers of the world. Nobody was bold enough to imagine that he would live to see all this changed. Bismarck's glory was then at its zenith. Although his deeds in the last years of his life, as for instance the disclosure of the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia, were open to the very strongest censure, his spell over the German people was almost boundless and no name filled a gathering of German students more quickly with enthusiasm than the name of Bismarck. A whole generation of German historians grew up under the influence of his personality and his enormous prestige, and even the most scholarly and exact among them touched only lightly upon the undeniable faults of his character and the mistakes of his policy: they faded away almost completely behind his glorious achievements.

Twenty-five years later, in 1923, Germany presented quite another spectacle. The formerly victorious German army, which everyone had considered invincible after Sedan, had been defeated in the greatest of all wars and reduced to a mere token army; the German Emperor had been dethroned and exiled; Alsace and Lorraine, the gain in the war against France, had been lost once more; the government of the Reich, now a republic, was in the hands of the parties which Bismarck had stigmatized as 'Reichsfeinde,' had hated with all his heart and persecuted with all his vigour, the Democrats, the Zentrum, nay, the Social Democrats.

A reassessment of the great founder of the Reich was thus unavoidable, and it is understandable that Erich Marcks, who in 1909 had brought out the splendid first volume of his Bismarck biography, never brought out a second. It is not quite so easy to see why not one of the German professors of History who, year in year out, produced detailed studies on this or that aspect of the Iron Chancellor, undertook the task of giving a picture of the whole man, by making use of the masses of new material which had come to light since 1919 from the archives of Europe. These included the German publications,

Die Grosse Politik der Europäischen Kabinette 1871-1914. Sammlung der Diplomatischen Akten des Auswärtigen Amtes (hgg. von Thimme, Lepsius, Mendelssohn. 1922 ff. vol. 1-6.)

Die Auswärtige Politik Preussens 1858-1871 (Dipl. Aktenstücke, hgg. von der Historischen Reichskommission, 1930 ff.)

Quellen zur Deutschen Politik Österreichs (hgg. v H. von Srbik).

Die Gesammelten Werke Bismarcks (Friedrichsruher Ausgabe, hgg. von Thimme, Andreas u.a. 1926 ff.)

and the French publications,

Les Origines Diplomatiques de la Guerre de 1870. (Recueil de Documents publié par le Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, 1909 ff.)

Documents Diplomatiques Français, 1871-1914. (1929 ff.)

and the innumerable books of memoirs of German, French, English, and Russian statesmen and diplomatists.

And now, fifty years after Bismarck's death, there is nothing left of his creation. German unity has been destroyed, at any rate for the time being, and is the object of bitter and fruitless haggling among the powers whose armies are in occupation of German soil. Even if some form of German unity should in the end be restored, it will never be the whole Germany: the eastern part of it is, at least partly, lost, and Königsberg, the cradle of the Royal Crown of Prussia, where Bismarck was a spectator at the coronation of his king, William I, in 1861, is destined to be a Russian town. Even the State of Prussia, which Bismarck had led from success to success and raised to the apex of its power, authority, and size, has ceased to exist. And the 'Führer,' whom the Germans had made their absolute ruler for a dozen years, who had embodied their hope for victory and world-rule? This Austrian agitator who had never done one honest day's work stood for all that Bismarck despised and hated most. When we read to-day his famous speech on colonial policy of 13 March 1885, with the often-quoted peroration about the 'blind elector Hödur who is unable to judge the bearing and consequences of things and allows himself to be misled into slaying his own fatherland' (iii, 419¹), we must think of the millions of irresponsible

¹ This and subsequent page references given in brackets in the text are to Erich Eyck, *Bismarck: Leben und Werk* (Eugen Rentsch Verlag, Erlentbach-Zürich, three vols., 1941, 1943, 1944).

voters who followed Hitler's drum, intoxicated by his grandiloquent promises and his bombastic rhetoric. How had Bismarck thundered against rhetoricians (iii, 363), meaning men like Eugen Richter, the Progressive leader, who in his sense of responsibility, capacity for thinking things through to their logical conclusions, the extent of his knowledge and sobriety of judgment differed as much from Hitler as Odysseus from Thersites! In the jubilant Germany of 1940 Bismarck would have felt as much a stranger as a Liberal who preferred to leave his fatherland to bowing before the swastika.

Thus it is in a fundamentally changed world and in view of a fundamentally changed Germany that we try to appraise anew the figure of the first Chancellor of the German Empire in the light not only of an enormous mass of new material, but also of the political experience of half a century.

Let us take as an example of both these factors in our current judgment the Franco-German war of 1870. The German victory over France was then considered Bismarck's greatest and most glorious achievement, and indeed not only by Germans. Carlyle called it 'the hopefulest fact that has occurred in my time.' Gladstone's apprehension, that the 'violent transfer' of Alsace and Lorraine 'is to lead us from bad to worse and to the beginning of a new series of European complications'¹, would then have been repudiated even by most of his fellow countrymen. Our generation, which has seen Gladstone's prophecy come true, is bound to ask many questions. Was a war against France really the only method of achieving German unity? Who was responsible for the war? Was Bismarck right in yielding to the popular clamour for Alsace and Lorraine?

The question whether German unity could have been achieved peacefully can, of course, never be answered with certainty. But one thing we can say: the strongest obstacle to a peaceful unification was the dominating position which Bismarck had given to the Prussian Crown in the Constitution of the North German Federation of 1867, and against which turned the opposition of the majority of the Southern Germans, not least because they were afraid that it would lead to a militarization of the united nation (ii., 483). Now this prominence and power given to the Prussian Crown is the focus of Bismarck's German programme. In August, 1869, he writes to his most important collaborator, the Minister of War, von Roon: 'The form in which the King (of Prussia) exercises his rule in Germany, was never of special importance to me. But I have put the whole strength that God has given me to the effective establishment of this rule' (ii., 422). The full significance of this programme becomes clear, when we contrast

¹ Erich Eyck, *Gladstone* (Allen and Unwin, 1938), p. 220.

it with the famous phrase, which Ludwig Uhland, Germany's most popular poet, uttered in the National Assembly of the Paulskirche, in January, 1849 : ' No head will shine forth over Germany that is not anointed by a full drop of democratic oil.' That is what Bismarck was resolved to prevent and succeeded in preventing. The German Emperor, who was his creation, was completely free from any democratic contamination. True, Bismarck gave the Germans universal franchise in the North German Constitution, from which it was transferred to the Constitution of the Empire (*Reichsverfassung*). But he did that only in order to outbid Austrian competition, not at all in order to give the German people a share in the government (ii, 152). By taking from the defunct German Bund the old ' Bundestag,' and transforming it, under the slightly changed name of ' Bundesrat' into a council of delegates bound by the instructions of the governments of the single federal states, he counter-balanced the Reichstag elected by universal franchise and nipped in the bud the development of parliamentarism. This became clear in the so-called ' Liberal Era' (1867-1878), for instance, in his peremptory refusal of the liberal motion asking for responsible ' Reichsminister' (Motion Twisten-Munster, 1869) (ii, 417). Many South Germans who read this debate of the North German Reichstag could not help feeling that the rule of the Prussian King over Germany, upon which Bismarck insisted, was not at all the system they wanted for a united Germany.

All this was changed by the common victory over France. So far Bismarck's policy was justified by events. But the question remains whether another constitutional policy would not have made possible a peaceful solution of the problem of German unification.

That brings us to the second question, the responsibility for the outbreak of the war. The great majority of contemporaries had no doubt that this responsibility rested with the Emperor Napoleon III and his ministers. That was not only the opinion of the *Times*, expressed in a thundering leader after the declaration of war, but even of Gladstone. This version was so commonly accepted that Bismarck could venture to say in the Reichstag Debate about the military *Septennat* of 1887, that Napoleon had ' launched into the war against Germany only because he believed that it would strengthen his rule at home.'

Now, even to-day, nobody can deny that Napoleon and his government made the silliest and most fateful blunder after Prince Leopold of Hohenzollern's withdrawal of his candidature for the throne of Spain, and that they have to bear the responsibility for its dreadful consequences in common with the French journalists and parliamentarians, who pushed them along the road to ruin.

But that is not the whole story. The story does not begin with July 1870, when the Hohenzollern candidature became manifest, but in the spring of 1869, when Bismarck sent a confidant into Spain in order to prepare the candidature in strictest secrecy (ii, 442). This story will never be known in all its details. But we know much more of it than Bismarck's contemporaries, since the archives have revealed many secrets. We can see now that Bismarck was the moving spirit of the whole intrigue, and we can hardly refrain from agreeing with his most intimate collaborator, Lothar Bucher, that it was ' a trap for Napoleon,' putting deliberately before him the alternatives of either ruining his dynasty or making war. Can Bismarck's admirers plead that in acting thus he only forestalled an offensive prepared by Napoleon and Francis Joseph's minister, Beust? Even that is more than doubtful. There was no French-Austrian-Italian Triple Alliance in 1870, and Napoleon could not hope to conclude it because the surrender of Rome to the Italian Kingdom was the condition *sine qua non* of Victor Emanuel's collaboration and Napoleon did not want to, and could not, sacrifice the Pope (ii, 408). Before the storm broke over the Hohenzollern candidature, French policy was more peace-loving than ever, for the leader of the French government, Ollivier, recognized frankly and publicly the right to unification of the German nation.

Therefore, without absolving Napoleon, we must hold Bismarck mainly responsible for the war.

It is different with the annexation of Alsace and Lorraine. Here Bismarck was not the prime mover. He only yielded to a popular movement, the romantic motives of which he derided, and to the pressure of the king and the generals. While he himself was in favour of the annexation of Strassburg, the population of which spoke German, he was against the annexation of the completely French Metz (ii, 571). But he did not uphold his objection with the same tenacity with which he had opposed the wishes of the king at Nikolsburg in 1866, when the latter wanted to annex Austrian territory. That this was a mistake he not only confessed in later years to the French ambassador ; he knew it even at the time. It had indeed the most fateful consequences. Bismarck's ideal was always to be able to dispose freely of all the squares of the diplomatic chessboard. He was never able to dispose of the French square, much as he wished it in the eighties, because the French could never forget and forgive Strassburg and Metz.

Looking back over three-quarters of a century, we see that Bismarck is primarily responsible for the most dangerous and fateful wound to the peace of Europe and not free from responsibility for its incurability. But that should not blind us to the

quite incomparable statesmanlike qualities by which he conceived his policy and carried it through: the greatness of his conception, his courage and patience, the richness and superiority of his intellect, his almost marvellous understanding of all the persons with whom he had to deal, whether opponents or allies, kings or subordinates, his never failing adroitness in finding a way out of the most difficult and complicated situations. No contemporary statesman could compare himself with him in these aspects, neither Palmerston nor Gorchakov, Gladstone nor Disraeli, let alone Napoleon III. Nothing can match his achievement in 1870, except one of his earlier career, the Prussian solution of the Sleswig-Holstein question against all conceivable objections and handicaps: the opposition of his king, of the Prussian Chamber of Deputies, of the German Bund and—the great powers (i, 578). All this was, of course, secret diplomacy, and we know what is to be said against it. But in a world in which secret diplomacy was the order of the day, Bismarck's achievements stand out as incomparably the most clever, daring, and reckless, as well as the most successful.

Whether the same tribute can be paid to his foreign policy after the victory over France and the foundation of the German Empire, is less certain. It was undoubtedly in the best interest not only of Germany but of Europe that he upheld the peace in the last twenty years of his regime (1871–1890). That does not mean that his ideas about war as an instrument of policy had changed, or that he denied himself the use of the threat of war as an instrument of policy, as, for instance, in the war scare of 1875 (iii, 149) or the struggle for the *Septennat* of 1887 (iii, 459). But he saw quite clearly that the German Empire was 'satiated,' i.e. that it had nothing to gain by a war and that its position among the great powers left nothing to be desired, as every statesman in Europe wished nothing more than to be on good terms with its masterful ruler. Even if he came into antagonism to another power he always knew how far he could go without driving it to extremities. But in reaching conclusions about Bismarck's foreign policy we must never forget its connection with his home policy, which was much closer than earlier historians supposed. An example is his colonial policy, which was an instrument to checkmate his parliamentary opponents, who were very strong in the first half of the eighties, and the Crown Prince, whose imminent succession to the throne was an incessant nightmare to the Chancellor in view of the advanced age of the Emperor (born 1797) (iii, 418).

The most debateable point in Bismarck's foreign policy in this period is his alliance with the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in 1879 (iii, 315). There can be no doubt that he was right in

declaring that the preservation of Austria's position as a great power was a vital German interest. But did it follow that Germany had to make an alliance with her which must necessarily antagonize Russia? We know to-day that this alliance involved Germany in the end in the catastrophe of 1914, which proved fatal to both empires. Bismarck's admirers assert that he would never have allowed Austria to take Germany in tow, that under his leadership Germany would always have remained in the saddle of the Austro-Hungarian horse. That was certainly Bismarck's own idea, and nobody can doubt that he was the man to carry it through. But alliances sometimes outlive even the greatest statesmen who conclude them, and it is in their nature that they are invoked by each partner in his own specific interests. That Bismarck himself developed some doubts about the value of this alliance is shown not only by his very guarded comments in his *Reflections and Reminiscences*, but more still by his conclusion of the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia in 1887, less than eight years after the ratification of the Austrian alliance.

The Reinsurance Treaty of 18 June 1887 was for a long time applauded as Bismarck's diplomatic masterstroke (iii, 477). Even now many historians call it the key-stone of the system of treaties which he concluded in the second half of the eighties in order to strengthen Germany's position in any emergency. But it is not only open to very serious criticism from the point of view of public morality and of the law of nations; it was ineffective and did not in fact help to improve Russo-German relations. That it was secret diplomacy with a vengeance, nobody can deny. It had to be kept secret, because one partner, Bismarck, had to hide it from his allies, Austria-Hungary, Italy, and Rumania, and the other partner, the Czar, had to hide it from his people. In order to conclude this treaty, Bismarck was compelled to betray the Emperor of Austria and to reveal the secret treaty of the Austrian alliance to the Russian ambassador, Paul Shuvalov. He gave to international diplomacy an example of double-dealing which others did not scruple to follow. When the Italians concluded, in 1902, a Reinsurance Treaty with France, in spite of their partnership in the Triple Alliance, they cited Bismarck's Reinsurance Treaty as a welcome precedent.¹

As to the effectiveness of the treaty, its admirers claim that it prevented an alliance between Russia and France. This alliance was, indeed, only concluded after Caprivi had refused to renew the secret treaty with Russia in 1890. But would the Reinsurance Treaty have prevented the Czar from concluding an alliance with France? Not more than the alliance with Austria had hindered

¹ Erich Eyck, *Das Persönliche Regiment Wilhelms II* (Eugen Rentsch Verlag, Erlenbach-Zürich, 1948), p. 369.

Bismarck from concluding the Reinsurance Treaty. More important still is the fact that the relations between Russia and Germany were hardly at any time less satisfactory and the Czar's mistrust of Bismarck never greater than during the three years, 1887-1890, when the Reinsurance Treaty was in force. In the year 1888 Germany increased her army enormously. In his famous speech of 6 February 1888, for this army bill, Bismarck declared before the Reichstag and the whole world (iii, 491): 'We do not court for love, neither in France *nor* in Russia. The Russian press, the Russian public opinion have shown the door to an old, powerful and reliable friend, which we have been; we do not obtrude ourselves on anybody. We have tried to reconstitute the old confidential relations, but we run after nobody.' This was six months after the conclusion of the secret treaty with Russia. At the same time Bismarck conducted his campaign against the Russian public funds (prohibition of the projected loan by the Reichsbank, 10 November 1887) and drove Russia, urgently in need of capital, into the arms of France, which was well provided with it. The high esteem in which the Reinsurance Treaty is held is explicable only by the fact that it was never put to the test. One can suppose that even Bismarck was not certain whether it would stand it. For in the same Reichstag speech he proclaimed: 'No great power can stick permanently to the text of a treaty in opposition to the interest of its own people.'

But the worst was still to come. In October 1896, six years after his dismissal, the former Chancellor of the Empire revealed to the world the secret of the Reinsurance Treaty (iii, 626). He did not give the exact facts, so that it was generally supposed to have been concluded in 1884. But he revealed enough to let the world know that he had concluded this treaty behind the back of his allies and while the alliance with Austria was in full force, and he reproached his successor, Caprivi, with having dropped 'the wire to St. Petersburg.' He offended not only against public morality, but even against the written law of the Empire he himself had created. In the whole of modern history there is no statesman of equal importance who has been guilty of a similar betrayal. That the government of the day nevertheless declined to institute proceedings against Bismarck, is completely understandable; not even his most embittered opponents would have liked to see Bismarck as a defendant in a criminal trial. But the whole episode had very deplorable consequences for the political morality of the German people, which we see now much more clearly than did former generations. It learned to consider lack of morality as a quality of a great statesman. The machiavellian doctrine of the *raison d'état*, which justifies every infringement of written and unwritten law, began to spread and to take deeper

roots until even Hitler's broken treaties and brutal cruelties were accepted not only as excusable, but as proofs of his greatness. There was no Lord Acton among German historians to warn the German people of these consequences of uncritical hero-worship.

Unfortunately, the real wisdom of Bismarck's foreign policy was neither understood nor followed by his successors. How sane and reasonable appears to us now his policy of limited liability in comparison with the world-wide aims of William II and the conquering madness of Hitler. What he knew and they did not know was that the aims of the foreign policy of a state must never exceed its power of maintaining them. However highly he rated Germany's strength, he never considered it overwhelming enough to challenge a combination of the other great powers. He was careful not to antagonize them in points which were to them a matter of life and death. He did not hesitate to oppose them in certain concrete questions, where he knew they were able to give way without permanently losing their position. Even his colonial policy shows that. He did not disdain exacerbating in a quite unnecessary way the dispute with the British government, because it was the government of the hated Gladstone; he did so both in his dispatches and in his Reichstag speech against Lord Granville (2 March 1885). But he knew when it was time to come round, and on the day after this speech he sent his son Herbert to London, to bring about an amicable arrangement. From reasons of party politics he went so far as to foment anti-English feeling in Germany. But he knew that the momentary weakness of Great Britain was only a passing phase due to the occupation of Egypt (1882); a few years later he offered an alliance to Lord Salisbury (1889). He would never have consented to the naval policy of William II. For he would have seen that a powerful fleet of battleships a few hundred miles from the English coast was bound to be viewed by the English as a grave threat to their existence, which they could tolerate under no circumstances in the long run and which would make Anglo-German friendship impossible. At least he would have inferred from this situation that Germany was the more compelled to be complacent about Russian susceptibilities and not to cross her path in the Near and Middle East. The difference between Bismarck's and William's policy comes quite clearly to light in the question of the Bagdad Railway. It was, for instance, clear to Baron von Marschall, the German ambassador in Constantinople and the foremost advocate of this policy, when he wrote in 1899: (Bismarck's famous words, that the whole Orient is not worth the bones of one Pomeranian grenadier, may become an interesting historical reminiscence, but cease to be an actual reality).¹ At this time

¹ *Ibid*, p. 244.

many Germans would have been disposed to agree with Marschall. The following decades have shown that Bismarck was right and Marschall was wrong.

It was formerly usual to praise Bismarck's foreign policy because of its alleged independence of home policy and to call it the realization of Ranke's doctrine of the 'Primat der Aussenpolitik.' This assessment is bound to be qualified to a considerable extent to-day. True, in the period of his great struggles against France and Austria (1864-1870) he had not the smallest scruples about winning supporters for his foreign policy wherever he could find them. While he fought in Prussia for the king's rights and the monarchical idea against the Progressive Prussian Landtag, he incited the Hungarian revolutionaries against their king. In 1870 he tried to win the support of Garibaldi and Mazzini, and—most characteristically—he used for his confidential communications with them Karl Blind, the stepfather of the young man who had attempted to murder him in May 1866.

But, on the other hand, Bismarck's home policy frequently influenced his foreign policy, particularly in the period after the foundation of the German Empire. He himself shows this quite clearly in the twenty-ninth chapter of his *Reflections and Reminiscences*. Here he writes that his foreign policy was influenced decisively by his belief in the idea that a struggle between 'the system of order on the basis of Monarchy' and the 'social (socialistic) Republics' was bound to come. That is not at variance with his policy of supporting the republican form of state in France and with his conflict with the ambassador in Paris, Count Harry Arnim, whom he reproached with having opposed this policy (1874) (iii, 135). For his reason for this policy was his conviction that France would not be able to find an ally so long as she was a republic. Moreover in many cases his policy was influenced by his concern about a possible strengthening of the liberal movement in Germany. This concern is expressed by his fear that a German 'Gladstone Cabinet' was waiting for a chance to overthrow him, presumably with the help of the heir to the throne and his wife, the Crown Princess Victoria. During the *Septennats* crisis of 1887 he compelled the German Ambassador in Paris, Count Münster, to withdraw a report to the Kaiser (*Immediatbericht*) which denied the danger of French aggression, because it would make it impossible for his government to proceed with the *Septennat* Bill, which was motivated by this alleged aggression (iii, 455). Here it is not the foreign, but the home policy, which has the *Primat*.

Bismarck's home policy has always been more open to criticism than his foreign policy. Even his most ardent admirers could not help finding fault with some of its acts. For instance, the

Kulturkampf could not be defended whole-heartedly after Bismarck himself had abandoned it in a manner not at all consistent with his former statements. The irritation which the Vatican Decrees and the declaration of Papal Infallibility (1870) excited in those days is hardly comprehensible to the present generation. Nevertheless, it was quite a real one, deeply felt not only in Germany but in this country, too, as Gladstone's pamphlets about the Vatican Decrees and Lord (John) Russell's applause for Bismarck's policy show. Bismarck knew to perfection how to exploit this feeling, and when he exclaimed in the Reichstag: 'We shall not go to Canossa!' (*Nach Canossa gehn wir nicht*) he not only aroused reminiscences of Germany's most dramatic past history, he became the unrivalled hero of the whole Protestant world. But in fact he did not care so very much about this great spiritual antagonism. His real aim was to make the Pope pliant, in order to induce him to put the Roman Catholic deputies at the disposal of his government. He was quite willing to discontinue the *Kulturkampf* when he saw that no laurels were to be won by it and when Windthorst, the very clever leader of the Centre Party, was ready to support his new protectionist policy in 1879.

Here we come to the point that must seem to us the most important after the experience of half a century. The lamentable and tragic failure of the Germans to find in the comity of nations a place worthy of their intellectual capacity and unparalleled laboriousness, is intimately connected with their inability to govern themselves. There was a time in German history when the German people was homogenous enough and rich enough in political talent to learn this most difficult business. After the unification of the German people under Prussian leadership public opinion, particularly among the educated classes, was overwhelmingly liberal, and the National Liberal Party, the representative of this opinion, had a galaxy of first-class parliamentarians in the Reichstag, men like Bennigsen and Forckenbeck, Miquel and Bamberger, Lasker and Stauffenberg. They were quite willing to acknowledge Bismarck's superiority and to leave to him the monopoly of the conduct of foreign policy, and even to acknowledge the exalted position of the Prussian Crown, little as it fitted into their original political conception. An alliance between these Liberals and the Crown, i.e. Bismarck, would have given to the political development a stability which was conspicuously absent, particularly after the fall of Bismarck. It would have produced an élite of German politicians, experienced in the art of government and accustomed to take responsibility.

A development of this kind seemed to be a possibility during the so-called 'Liberal Era' (1867-1878), when the National Liberal Party was Bismarck's main support in the German Reich-

stag and the Prussian Landtag (iii, 41). But the designation, 'Liberal Era,' is, in fact, an exaggeration. The influence of the Liberals was restricted to legislation about economic questions, where their help was in any case indispensable to Bismarck, because they represented the commercial and industrial part of the population. It never reached, for instance, the political administration, so important in a country like Prussia. Here Bismarck had always taken good care that it remained in the hands of the Conservatives or of his personal followers. Nor did he at any time allow the Liberals to have their way in military questions.

These questions were, during the whole Bismarck period, intimately connected with the question of parliamentary control over the budget. It was over this question that Bismarck had fought and defeated the Liberals in the era of the Prussian Constitutional Conflict (1862-1866) (i, 458). But the budgetary competence of the Reichstag was not less involved in the period after the unification of Germany. For Bismarck never allowed parliament to vote the military estimates *annually*, as is the case in parliamentarily governed countries. He always insisted that the number of men to be called to the colours (*Friedenspräsenz-Stärke*) was to be fixed by law for a longer period, seven years as a rule (*Septennat*). That meant a restriction, almost a negation of the budgetary competence of the Reichstag, as the army budget amounted to about nine-tenths of the whole Reichs budget. The Liberals were, therefore, by their constitutional principles, obliged to oppose this form of military legislation. But Bismarck compelled them to give way, even in 1874, when the Liberal Era seemed to be at its zenith (iii, 71). As an intelligent and critical English observer, Sir Robert Morier, saw it, he considered the army as the talisman, the possession of which he wanted to preserve with all his might to the executive, i.e. to the king, or, for his own lifetime, to himself. What the Liberals from their own point of view considered indispensable, Bismarck regarded as a parliamentary infringement of the rights of the king, and therefore absolutely inadmissible. He knew that these questions were much less well understood by the people than by the leading parliamentarians, and he therefore concentrated on these issues to drive a wedge between them. His demagogic master-stroke in this direction belongs to a later period. When the Army Bill of 1887 was before the Reichstag, its majority was quite willing to vote 'every man and every penny.' But that would not do for Bismarck. What he wanted was a dissolution of the Reichstag. He knew that the strong 'Deutsch-Freisinnige Partei' (Radical Liberal Party) was obliged by its programme to oppose a vote for seven years, while it was ready to vote the army estimates for three years. Bismarck insisted on the seven years' period all the more strongly, as his

aim was to destroy this party before the ninety-year-old Kaiser William I died and was succeeded by his son, the Crown Prince Frederick William. For the 'Freisinnige Partei' was known as the 'Kronprinzen-Partei' and Bismarck suspected the Crown Prince, and still more the Crown Princess Victoria, of intending to form with the leaders of this party the so-called "Gladstone Cabinet" that would replace him. He probably considered Prince Alexander von Battenberg, the former Prince of Bulgaria, whose rule in that country he had done his best to destroy, to be the future Chancellor of Victoria's choice (iii, 447). He knew that Alexander was high in Victoria's favour, and he thought that as a general in the Prussian army and as the much-acclaimed victor in the Bulgarian defeat of the Serbs at Slivnitza (1885) he would have enough prestige, with the German people, to serve as a figurehead in this abhorred 'Gladstone Cabinet.' These were the dangers which Bismarck wanted to avoid by the dissolution of the Reichstag. Again he succeeded. The 'Freisinnige Partei' was beaten decisively and became completely unable to form the nucleus of a non-Bismarckian government. As a few months later the mortal illness of the Crown Prince became apparent, the last hope of a Liberal German government under the Empire disappeared for ever.

To return to the 'Liberal' Era of the seventies. None of the eminent leaders of the National Liberal Party became a minister as long as Bismarck ruled. Miquel had to wait till Bismarck's dismissal to become the most important minister of finance that Prussia had had for a long time¹. True, the leader of the party, Rudolf von Bennigsen, was at one time (1877) offered a place in the government by Bismarck (iii, 203). But the negotiations failed, because Bennigsen was unwilling to enter the government alone and insisted on taking two friends, Forckenbeck and Stauffenberg, with him. This condition was declined by Bismarck for reasons which to-day are quite obvious. Three highly competent National-Liberal ministers would have been a political force and would have developed a will of their own—while Bennigsen alone, surrounded by a majority of obsequious instruments of the Chancellor, would—earlier or later—have been compelled either to follow him or to resign with a considerable loss of prestige. During his negotiations with the liberal leader Bismarck made to a confidant a highly characteristic remark. He reproached the National-Liberals with their lack of 'subordination.' What he wanted was not a partner with independent political views, who took part in the counsel and the responsibilities of the government, but a subordinate, who would be obliged to follow him and, at the same time, be a hostage for the good behaviour of his party, which

¹ *Ibid*, p. 48.

was then indispensable for a parliamentary majority. When he found that Bennigsen was not ready to play this rôle, but wanted a share of the political power, he coolly turned to the man, whom until then he had fought with the help of the National-Liberals and against whom he had stirred up the fury of the majority of the German people: Ludwig Windthorst, the leader of the Centre Party. When he inaugurated his protectionist policy, in 1879, he could choose between Bennigsen and Windthorst. Both were ready to support this policy, and each made his support dependent upon certain conditions. Bismarck preferred Windthorst and accepted his conditions. Bennigsen was quite taken aback. But Bismarck's choice was quite logical from his point of view: Windthorst could never have the ambition of being a partner in the government. This was what the National-Liberals had wanted, and this was in Bismarck's eyes a mortal sin, never to be forgiven.

His anti-socialist policy, too, was meant as a blow against the National-Liberals. When he heard about the attempt of Nobiling (2 June 1878), who had wounded the old Emperor by pistol shots, his first words were not a question about the health of his old master, but the cry: 'Now we dissolve the Reichstag!' ('Jetzt lösen wir den Reichstag auf!') (iii, 227). He did not wait to see whether the National-Liberals would now vote for the Bill against the socialists, which he had resolved to propose. He wanted to weaken them first, and then to compel them to vote as he wished. This does not mean that he was not in earnest about the suppression of the Social Democrats. But that part of his programme was for him less an end in itself than a means to a higher end, the defeat of parliamentary opposition. In 1890, when he felt his position threatened, he wanted to exploit the question of the anti-socialist law for a *coup d'état* and the abolition of the universal franchise (iii, 570). He himself had given universal franchise to the German people but as its results did not satisfy him he felt no scruple about taking it away. He even considered the dissolution of the Reich by an act of the German monarch as an appropriate and admissible way to achieve this object.

All these facts show that Bismarck was absolutely opposed to a development of German political life in the direction of parliamentary government. He had entered politics in 1847 as a Junker and a Conservative of the most uncompromising reactionary type, and a Junker he remained at heart during the whole of his life. The Revolution of 1848 had in him one of its most bitter enemies, who even played with the idea of an armed counter-revolution. He was, of course, too great a statesman and possessed too independent and critical a mind not to see in the course of time the weakness and limitations of the doctrine of the old Prussian

Conservatives. Nor was it in his nature to be bound by any doctrine at all. A born ruler, as he undoubtedly was, he saw in doctrines as well as in persons no ends in themselves, but means for his personal ends. Only two classes of persons existed for him: persons who could be used for his ends, and persons he could not use. It was not very different with political doctrines. He was therefore able to ally one day with one party and the other with the one opposite. He had differences and conflicts also with the Conservatives, for instance, over the German question and during the *Kulturkampf*. As he was never tolerant of opposition and always suspected personal motives, he fought these differences through with his usual vehemence. But nevertheless he always considered the Conservatives as his natural allies and took it as a matter of course, when they returned to their old allegiance in 1879 with his protectionist policy. It was very advantageous to the landed interest, which was in a high degree identical with the interests of the land-owning Junkers, a class to which he himself belonged as the owner of large landed property acquired with the help of the rich gifts (*Dotationen*) with which a grateful king and country had endowed him after his enormous successes in 1866 and 1871. Thus, for the rest of his rule, the Conservatives were the core of his political and parliamentary army. On the other hand, he understood the Liberals much better after 1866 than at the beginning of his political career; but as soon as they aspired to political power they were in his eyes no better than the revolutionaries of 1848. At a time when even the most radical Liberals were true monarchists, he tried to stigmatize them as republicans. The greater his difficulties with the opposition majority of the Reichstag (1881-1887) became, the more he proclaimed himself as the champion of the rights of the King and the more he identified his policy with 'the policy of the King and Emperor.' He not only produced time and again personal messages of the old Emperor William I in support of his policy: he even went so far as to declare in the Reichstag that in Prussia the King personally was and remained in fact the real President of the ministry (24 January 1882).

This absurd doctrine proved a boomerang to its author. It was all very well for Bismarck to proclaim it when the king was a very old and tired man who left practically everything to his great Chancellor. But matters looked quite different when a young man ascended the throne, bent on making his own policy, immature and unstable though his ideas were. Only *one* policy could be the 'policy of the Kaiser.' Then one of them had to give way, and as the monarch was immovable, the Chancellor had to go. It is not in order to excuse William II's behaviour, to state the issue of the conflict in these simple terms. It is only to show

that Bismarck reaped what he had sown, that the conflict was inevitable just on account of Bismarck's own policy. So long had he preached to the German people that the confidence of the Kaiser was the only basis of his government, so effectively had he destroyed every other possible basis, that his dismissal was unavoidable when he lost this sole basis of his power, the confidence of the Emperor. But his responsibility extends even further. He laid the foundation of the political system that William II practised. Sharply and mercilessly as Bismarck criticized its practice, it was nevertheless his own creation. The young Kaiser would have been quite unable to venture upon his personal régime if Bismarck had not, with his enormous prestige, taught the German people that the German Kaiser and Prussian King alone had to hold the reins of the government in his hands. We now know the fruits of this personal régime: this is one of the principal reasons why we must assess Bismarck's policy differently from observers fifty years ago.

In spite of all this criticism Bismarck remains the greatest and most important figure of his time. If the age in which he lived can be associated with the name of one person, there can be no doubt that it is the Age of Bismarck. There was nobody whose speeches were heard with the same attention by the whole world, or whose despatches were studied with the same care and respect in every Foreign Office of Europe. And they were, indeed, worth this care and attention. No man was able to express and argue his views in such a masterly fashion and to clothe his claims and grievances in such telling words. If we read one of his great dispatches now, when the questions he dealt with have been dead for more than fifty years, we are deeply impressed by his personality and feel that no other man could have written them in quite the same way. The phrases he coined in his speeches and writings became household words (*Geflügelte Worte*) often quoted even by persons who hardly know of his existence. For he was one of the greatest masters of the German language.

We see this not only in his official utterances. His personal letters, particularly those to his wife and sister, are gems of letter-writing. The letters of his earlier years show personal qualities which one would not have expected from his political activity: an intensity of feeling, expressed in a language worthy of a great poet, a wit, a humour and satire, which remind one of Heinrich Heine. True, the longer he held power the weaker this feeling became, and in his later years Lord Acton's famous words come to mind: power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. This is shown, for instance, in his behaviour to his son Herbert, whom he compelled by every possible, even brutal,

means to renounce the marriage with his beloved, because she was related to a family the Chancellor hated.

The outstanding product of his pen is his *Reflections and Reminiscences*. George Gooch puts it 'at the top of the list of political autobiographies, not merely because he is the greatest man who ever wrote a full-length narrative of his life . . . but because its value as a manual of statecraft is unsurpassed.' But he quite rightly warns the reader: 'Every statement of fact has to be verified, every judgment of men and events to be checked.'¹ Bismarck was not able to do justice to an adversary, even if the differences were only slight—and he did not at all care to do so. The passage of years did not mellow his judgment. He had no respect for the majesty of truth, and did not shrink, for instance, from repeating the old lies about the Hohenzollern candidature, although they were already publicly disproved before he wrote his reminiscences. Whoever desires to know what really happened ('wie es eigentlich gewesen ist,' to use Ranke's famous phrase) should not turn to this book. But the critical reader, whose interest is to know the version which Bismarck wished to impress on posterity, will be richly compensated. He will not only find reflections about the duty of the statesman or the problems of Europe which are worthy of the closest attention. He will admire the art of narration, which even the greatest historians, a Macaulay or a Mommsen, have never surpassed, as for example, in his story of his difference with the King at Nikolsburg in 1866, or of the Ems telegram in 1870.

This book will keep Bismarck's memory alive even for a generation which knows the weaknesses and black sides of his personality and has ceased to admire his greatest achievements.

¹ G. P. Gooch, *Studies in Diplomacy and Statecraft* (Longmans, 1942), p. 261.

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