How Did Bismarck Do It?

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The creation of the modern unified German state in January 1871 constitutes the greatest diplomatic and political achievement of any leader of the last two centuries; but it was effected at a huge personal and political price, argues Jonathan Steinberg.

In June 1862 Otto von Bismarck, then 47 years old and not yet minister-president of Prussia, decided to visit London. He had been the Prussian ambassador to St Petersburg since 1859 and for nearly a decade before that served as Prussia’s ambassador to the German Confederation.

His reputation in diplomatic circles was that of a person capable of eccentric and outrageous statements. He lived up to it at a reception at the Russian ambassador’s residence. Bismarck explained his plans to Benjamin Disraeli, the future British prime minister; Baron Brunnow, the
Russian ambassador; and the Austrian envoy, Friedrich, Count Vitzthum von Eckstädt. He told the astounded guests exactly what he had in mind.

Disraeli recorded his words:

*I shall soon be compelled to undertake the conduct of the Prussian government. My first care will be to re-organise the army, with or without, the help of the Landtag ... As soon as the army shall have been brought into such a condition as to inspire respect, I shall seize the first best pretext to declare war against Austria, dissolve the German Diet, subdue the minor states and give national unity to Germany under Prussian leadership. I have come here to say this to the Queen’s ministers.*

On the way home, Disraeli accompanied the Austrian ambassador to his residence. As they parted, Disraeli told Vitzthum: ‘Take care of that man; he means what he says.’ And he did.

Nine years later, almost to the day, the victory parade passed through Berlin after the stupendous Prussian triumph over France in the Franco-Prussian War and the proclamation of a German empire in the euphoria of that success. Bismarck had accomplished much more than he had impudently promised his audience in London. These nine years and this ‘revolution’ constitute the greatest diplomatic and political achievement by any leader in the last two centuries, for Bismarck accomplished all this without commanding a single soldier, without dominating a vast parliamentary majority, without the support of a mass movement, without any previous experience of government, without the charisma of a great orator and in the face of national revulsion at his name and his reputation. This success, the work of a political genius of a very unusual kind, rested on several sets of conflicting characteristics. He played his parts with perfect self-confidence, yet mixed them with rage, anxiety, illness, hypochondria and irrationality.

Ever since I first lectured on Bismarck as a junior research fellow at Cambridge 40 years ago this achievement has puzzled me. How did he do it? Of course previous biographers have asked and answered this question but not as the central issue. They asked what did Bismarck accomplish with what consequences for German and European history. But what fascinates me is how this giant of a man, a rural aristocrat with no military credentials, a reputation for violent statements, reactionary views and irresponsibility, could become the great Bismarck of history?

A few contemporaries saw that Bismarck had an urge, more powerful than any other impulse in his nature, to dominate his fellow human beings. His university room-mate, the American John Motley, saw it in the 18-year-old Bismarck and in 1839 published a novel about him, *Morton’s Hope, or the Memoirs of a Provincial*. This is what Otto von Rabenmarck, the thinly disguised Bismarck, tells the narrator as a new student at the University of Göttingen:

*I intend to lead my companions here, as I intend to lead them in after-life. You see I am a very rational sort of person now and you would hardly take me for the crazy mountebank you met in the street half an hour ago. But then I see that this is the way to obtain superiority. I determined at once on*
arriving at the university, that the way to obtain mastery over my competitors, who were all, extravagant, savage, eccentric, was to be ten times as extravagant and savage as anyone else...

This will to dominate lay behind a delicious, irreverent sense of humour, a warmth and hospitality that captivated even his opponents. They say he ‘bewitched’, ‘enchanted’, ‘charmed’, ‘delighted’ and ‘fascinated’ them. Disraeli, no mean charmer himself, said ‘he talks as Montaigne writes’. As a child Bismarck defended himself against his ambitious, cold mother with lies. He lied all his life. On other occasions, as in London or in his college rooms, he told the truth about his plans so frankly that listeners could not believe their ears. He could be kind and cruel, emotional and cold, sensitive and heartless, honest and devious. His personality had authority and contemporaries used ‘demonic’, ‘diabolical’ or ‘despotic’ to describe it. He had stupendous intellectual powers and a huge capacity to work behind a façade of laziness. His childhood friend, Moritz von Blanckenburg, claimed that, when they were both at school, Bismarck never worked but seemed to know everything without trying.

1867 cartoon making fun of Bismarck's different roles, from general to minister of foreign affairs, federal chancellor, hunter, diplomat and president of the Zollverein parliament.
Bismarck achieved his feats because his powerful personality commanded and disarmed his supporters and his opponents alike for nearly four decades, but not even the most sovereign of selves can operate successfully without help. Four factors created the ‘Bismarck of history’: first, the change in the international balance of power, over which he had no control; second, the institutional structure of the kingdom of Prussia after the revolution of 1848, over which he also had no control; third, the appointment in 1857 of another ‘genius’, General Helmut von Moltke (1800-91), to be chief of the Prussian general staff and his transformation of the Prussian army over which Bismarck as a civilian could by definition have no control; and finally, the support of a small group of influential patrons who rightly saw in Bismarck a genius that would be the key to the preservation of the Prussian semi-absolute, military monarchy in the new political world created by the revolutions of 1848. In this one area, he had not only control but mastery.

International affairs played into his hands. In 1848 he saw that the French revolution of that year offered no threat, as he wrote to his brother Bernhard: ‘The motives of 1792, the guillotine and the republican fanaticism, which might take the place of money, are not present.’ He saw in the 1850s that the empire of Napoleon III would do his job for him. As he wrote to his horrified patron, General Leopold von Gerlach, who regarded Napoleon III as the embodiment of ‘red revolution’:

*The present form of government in France is not arbitrary, a thing that Louis Napoleon can correct or alter. It was something that he found as a given and it is probably the only method by which France can be ruled for a long time to come. For everything else the basis is missing either in national character or has been shattered and lost. If Henri V [of France] were to come to the throne he would be unable, if at all, to rule differently. Louis Napoleon did not create the revolutionary conditions; he did not rebel against an established order, but instead fished power out of the whirlpool of anarchy as nobody’s property. If he were now to lay it down, he would greatly embarrass Europe, which would more or less unanimously beg him to take it up again.*

Napoleon III, imprisoned by the myth of his uncle, Napoleon I, had to liberate Italy. He provoked an unnecessary war with Austria in 1859 and helped to weaken the most important element in the balance of power, the Habsburg monarchy. The incompetence of the Austrian monarch and his advisers did the rest. They owed Tsar Nicholas I a great debt for his intervention in 1848, which saved the monarchy and crushed the Hungarian revolution of 1849. When the tsar asked for Austrian help against the western powers during the Crimean War in 1854, Franz Josef refused it. Austria, caught between Napoleonic France and a disgruntled Russia, had no ally against Prussia. The new tsar, Alexander II, came to the throne in 1855 convinced that Russia’s defeat in the Crimean War showed that serfdom and backwardness threatened the very existence of the tsarist state. The great ‘reform era’ took Russia out of active diplomacy for just long enough for Bismarck to deal with a weakened, isolated and indecisive Habsburg monarchy. He did not create these realities but he exploited them with consummate mastery.
The Prussian state that Bismarck served depended on its army and the compact between the crown and its nobility. When Frederick Wilhelm, the Great Elector, decided in 1653 to have ‘his own forces’ rather than to rely on mercenaries, he began a process which turned Prussia into a military monarchy, ‘not a state with an army, but an army with a state in which it happens to be stationed’. Frederick the Great fashioned that army into the essential element in the social structure. The landed gentry and aristocracy all ‘served’: they went first to the Kadettenanstalten, the military schools, and then to a regiment. As Frederick explained in his Testament of 1752:

The Prussian nobility has sacrificed its life and goods for the service of the state; its loyalty and merit have earned it the protection of all its rulers ... it is one goal of the policy of this state to preserve the nobility.

Bismarck’s king, Wilhelm I (r. 1861-88), followed the model of Frederick the Great. He worked hard, avoided display and saw himself first and foremost as a soldier. In one respect he differed from his predecessors. He had the self-confidence to delegate, entrusting his civilian affairs to Bismarck and in 1866 surrendering command of his army to Moltke. From 1866 to 1870 Prussia had a unified military command structure under the greatest military strategist of the modern era. Moltke had developed a range of sophisticated war strategies and manoeuvres, including a plan for the use of railway transport to get large armies to the right places on time and for their deployment – Getrennt marschieren, gemeinsam schlagen (march separately, fight together). Slender, cultivated, modest and calm, Moltke became the idol of his troops. One of his staff officers wrote of him: ‘We all feel happy in his company, and absolutely love and worship him.’
The other man who transformed the army and played a vital part in Bismarck’s career was Lieutenant General Albrecht von Roon (1803-79). He had been impressed by Bismarck when he employed him as an undergraduate to help him with military surveying. Without Roon Bismarck could have had no career in the Prussian monarchy; he had tried to get out of compulsory military service, because he hated taking orders (as documents omitted from the official publication of papers between the two world wars show) and he had no military credentials beyond a year as a reserve officer in a modest regiment. He did not attend a Kadettenanstalt but went to a bourgeois gymnasium and then to university. He was, as Baron von der Osten sneered in Theodor Fontane’s novel Irrungen Wirrungen (1894), ‘nothing but a pen pusher’.

Roon was the opposite, an upright soldier of modest origins and no private means; he and his wife Anna lived on his salary. He commanded unfashionable regiments in remote outposts. But the new king knew something about Roon that mattered. He was not just an exceptionally able field officer but had the courage to tell royalty the truth even if it might cost him his career. In 1848 Roon, a junior officer, had turned down the personal invitation of the Crown Princess Augusta to become military tutor to her son, the future Emperor Frederick III. Unlike the agile, socially polished and equally penniless Moltke, who used royal service as his route to the top, Roon declined the invitation on principle. He told Her Majesty, whom he knew to have liberal sympathies, that he was much too reactionary for her and then added that he disapproved of how the crown prince and princess were raising the young prince. They kept him at court and not in service where he could learn the essential Prussian virtues of discipline, duty and austerity. The crown prince and princess both wrote to congratulate him on his honesty and to express their appreciation that this able, upright officer had spoken his mind, irrespective of career considerations. Roon’s regiment was stationed near the crown prince’s residence in the 1850s and he became part of the prince’s inner circle. In 1857 Crown Prince Wilhelm inherited the throne from his brother Frederick Wilhelm IV, who had suffered a stroke. On June 25th, 1858 the new regent asked Roon to draw up plans for the reform of the army and in 1859 appointed him minister of war. Roon provided what Bismarck lacked: immediate access to the king. Roon pressed the king to appoint Bismarck and continued to do so until the crisis between crown and parliament over the cost and nature of Roon’s army reforms threatened a constitutional crisis. In September 1862 Roon arranged for Bismarck, then Prussian ambassador to Paris, to be in Berlin so that Wilhelm I could summon him to be minister-president, the Prussian term for prime minister, heading a government that would solve the crisis. He told Bismarck that the army could never be a parliamentary army and, if it needed reform, he demanded that Bismarck find a way to get it through parliament without the sacrifice of any element of that independence.

Roon had made Bismarck’s career possible, but he also acknowledged Bismarck’s qualities. In a letter of 1864 to his friend Clement Theodor Perthes, he wrote:

*Bismarck is an extraordinary man, whom I can certainly help, whom I can support and here and there correct, but never replace. Yes, he would not be in the place he now has without me, that is a historical fact, but even with all that he is himself.*

Without Roon, who served Bismarck until his death in 1879, no Bismarck of history. When Perthes accused his friend of appointing a man ‘who calculates so coldly, who prepares so
cunningly, who has no scruples about methods’, Roon replied that Bismarck could ‘assess the nature and weight of the effective forces, which one cannot know precisely, that is the work of the historic genius’.

When he became minister-president in 1862 Bismarck inherited the Prussian Constitution of 1850, a hybrid compromise between modern representative government with civil rights and the remains of the absolutism of Frederick the Great. The parliament established by the Constitution of 1850 had no power over military or civil appointments. It thus preserved a part of the absolute power of the monarchy. Ministers served the king and had a right to seek an audience at any time. However, the Cabinet Order of 1852 required that those who wished to have an audience with the king needed the permission of the minister-president first. Bismarck used this ruling to his advantage for the next 26 years until Wilhelm II came to the throne in 1888. The young king saw himself as the successor to Frederick the Great. No old man (Bismarck was by then 73) could stop him from consulting ‘his’ ministers. The great Bismarck would fall on the issue of cabinet government, an ironic end for the man who ruled Germany as its ‘Iron Chancellor’.
Bismarck, the puppet-master, manipulates the Prussian king, Wilhelm I (from L'Eclipse, 1870).

On the other hand parliament had the power of the purse and soon represented the growing commercial and industrial middle class. A House of Lords represented the ruling aristocracy. The king’s powers rested uneasily among the branches of government. Here, too, Bismarck had not created the conflict between crown and parliament over the army, but he used the disaffection between chambers of parliament – in effect, conflict between the landed aristocracy and the new urban middle classes – as leverage to place himself at the exact point of balance between them. In a speech to the lower house in 1863 he explained his view of political conflict: ‘Constitutional life is a series of compromises. If these are frustrated, conflicts arise. Conflicts are questions of power, and whoever has power to hand, can go his own way.’
In the Reich Constitution of 1871 Bismarck reproduced the semi-absolute features of the
Prussian Constitution of 1850. He made certain that in the national government, as in the
government of the largest federal state, he alone had the power of decision over everything from
war and peace to stamp duty on postal transfers. He brooked no contradiction, terrified his
subordinates and had no advisers.

As early as 1870, Roon saw how impossible he had become. He wrote to Moritz von
Blanckenburg:

*Bismarck treats business, even the Prussian, more or less as he did years
ago. He is in cabinet meetings lively, speaks almost all the time and falls into
the old error that through intellectual liveliness and personal charm he can
overcome all the difficulties in the way. He will flirt with the National
Liberals and ignore old friends and political comrades. He believes that he
can win everybody over by diplomatic dialectic and human cleverness and to
be able to lead them by spreading bait. He talks conservative to the
conservatives and liberal to the liberals and reveals in this either so
sovereign a contempt for his entourage or such incredible illusions that it
makes me shudder. He wants to remain in office at any cost, for the present
and the future, because he feels that the structure he has begun will collapse,
making him a laughing stock to the world, as soon as he takes his hand away.
That is not entirely incorrect but the means to that end! Are they sanctified
for his sake?*

At root, Bismarck’s constitutional role depended on the king’s pleasure. A moment of royal
exasperation and his career would have ended. Here lies part of the answer to the question: how
did Bismarck do it? His power rested entirely on the good will, patience and, yes, love that
Wilhelm I brought to his relations with his first servant.

Bismarck used his gifts to manipulate and control a rigid, stubborn, reactionary old man. If the
king had had the decency to die at the biblical ‘threescore years and ten’ in 1867, Bismarck’s
creation, the North German Federation, might have eventually absorbed the south German
kingdoms without a devastating war. But Wilhelm did not die until 1888 when he was 91 and
that longevity gave Bismarck 26 years in office. During those years he repeatedly forced the king
to do his bidding by means of temper tantrums, hysteria, tears and threats.

Had the king been strong, Bismarck could not have used the remnants of royal absolutism to
make his will felt through the entire political system. Bismarck depended on the old man’s health
(excellent), his willingness to be bossed by him (limitless) and the tensions of the king’s
marriage (weak husband – strong wife) to rule Germany. Yet in his relationship with the king
and queen (whom he loathed) Bismarck re-enacted the patterns of his childhood with his cold,
ambitious, frightening mother and his feeble, old father who exercised power over him. There is
in this triangle of husband, wife and ‘adopted son’ a key to the power that Bismarck deployed
and also an explanation for the terrible toll that this power dynamic took on his physical and mental health.

The tension between Bismarck and the queen/empress produced absurd reactions. Describing how Bismarck, claiming a last minute attack of lumbago, had ducked out of a dinner invitation from the British ambassador at which etiquette would demand he sit next to the Empress Augusta, Lady Emily Russell, wife of the British ambassador, wrote to Queen Victoria:

*Your Majesty is aware of the political jealousy of Prince Bismarck about the Empress Augusta’s influence over the Emperor, which he thinks stands in the way of his anti-clerical and National policy, and prevents the formation of responsible ministries as in England. The Empress told my husband he [Bismarck] has only twice spoken to Her Majesty since the war.*

Bismarck’s rage and irritability got worse as he got older. Robert Lucius von Ballhausen became a member of his inner circle in 1870 and after 1879 was a cabinet minister in the Prussian state ministry. He saw Bismarck frequently and recorded the deterioration. From 1875 he wrote increasingly anxious entries in his diary:

*February 22nd: It is a remarkable feature of Bismarck’s character, how intensively he nurses thoughts of revenge and retaliation for real or imagined slights that he has suffered. In his morbid irritability he feels as a wrong what from the other person was never intended to be that...*  
*March 4th: the domestic situation changes kaleidoscopically quickly... Bismarck handles all questions from his own personal point of view, is clearly not about to give up much of his personal influence and changes his mind from day to day. When he himself does not want to do something, he barricades himself behind the Kaiser’s will, when everybody knows that he gets his way on anything if he really wants it.*

When he fell from power in 1890 Roon’s prophesy began to realise itself. The institutions ceased to work. The new, young Kaiser Wilhelm II wanted to enjoy ‘personal rule’ and found a group of dedicated courtiers who encouraged his megalomania. The levers that Bismarck had left failed and the kaiser took the blame. By that stage, though embittered in his retirement, Bismarck had become an icon, the all-wise, all-knowing statesman, a view of himself he did not challenge.

The Iron Chancellor embodied and manifested the greatness of Germany. His image hung in every schoolroom and over many a hearth. Yet this image became a burden to his successors. Germany had to have a genius-statesman as its ruler. Kaiser Wilhelm II outdid the Iron Chancellor in military display but failed the test. He could not control himself, still less the ramshackle structure that Bismarck had left him. The First World War destroyed much of Bismarck’s Germany and defeat ended the monarchies in all the many German states.
Bismarck paid a terrible personal price for the power he wielded, suffering hypochondria, hysteria, illness, sleeplessness, rage and over-eating. He destroyed much of his social life, the happiness of his children, the friendships of his youth and his peace of mind, but he dominated his society so utterly that contemporaries called him a dictator. He destroyed more than just his health. He had a disastrous effect on Germany. Under his rule political opponents became ‘enemies’ and had to be crushed. He destroyed German liberalism and tried to stamp out the Catholic centre party. He outlawed social democracy and wanted to deprive socialists and trade unionists of their votes. He helped the worst elements of the old ruling class to survive, so that in 1933 they could give the office that the Iron Chancellor had created to a ‘Bohemian corporal’ who destroyed what remained of Bismarck’s Germany.

In the words of the great sociologist Max Weber, writing in 1918, Bismarck

... left a nation totally without political education ... totally bereft of political will, accustomed to expect that the great man at the top would provide their politics for them. And further as a result of his improper exploitation of monarchical sentiment to conceal his own power politics in party battles, it had grown accustomed to submit patiently and fatalistically to whatever was decided for it in the name of ‘monarchical government’.

Jonathan Steinberg is the author of Bismarck: A Life, published by Oxford University Press.

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