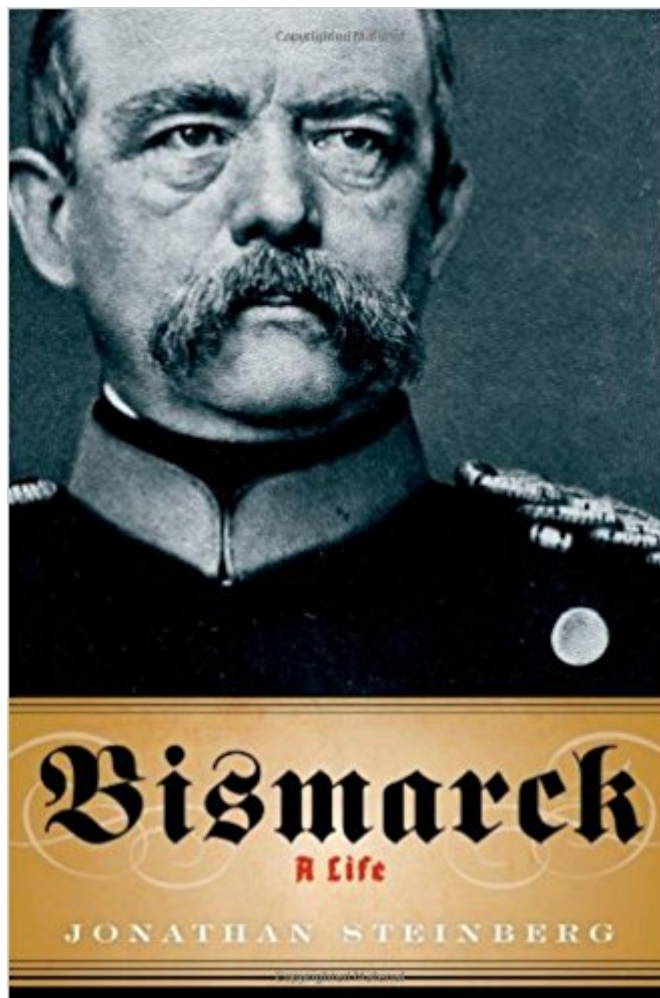


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Bismarck: A Life



Synopsis

This riveting, New York Times bestselling biography illuminates the life of Otto von Bismarck, the statesman who unified Germany but who also embodied everything brutal and ruthless about Prussian culture. Jonathan Steinberg draws heavily on contemporary writings, allowing Bismarck's friends and foes to tell the story. What rises from these pages is a complex giant of a man: 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. Bismarck may have been in sheer ability the most intelligent man to direct a great state in modern times. His brilliance and insight dazzled his contemporaries. But all agreed there was also something demonic, diabolical, overwhelming, beyond human attributes, in Bismarck's personality. He was a kind of malign genius who, behind the various postures, concealed an ice-cold contempt for his fellow human beings and a drive to control and rule them. As one contemporary noted: "the Bismarck regime was a constant orgy of scorn and abuse of mankind, collectively and individually." In this comprehensive and expansive biography--a brilliant study in power--Jonathan Steinberg brings Bismarck to life, revealing the stark contrast between the "Iron Chancellor's" unmatched political skills and his profoundly flawed human character.

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. For over two decades the study of Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898) has been structured by the seminal multivolume works of Lothar Gall and Otto Pflanze. Steinberg (Yesterday's Deterrent), a professor of modern European history at the University of Pennsylvania,

brings a fresh perspective to the subject in a single volume whose insights and presentation make it no less canonical than its predecessors. Steinberg's Bismarck is a man whose power came not from the external "forces and factors," as stated by Gall and Pflanze, but from "the sovereignty of an extraordinary, gigantic self." He embodied Hegel's concept of a world-historical figure: shaping events and people by the potency of his intellect, the force of his character, and the strength of his will. Yet Steinberg demonstrates that Bismarck's rise and survival depended on his relationship to King William I. Serving as prime minister at the pleasure of William I, Devoid of any principle beyond the exercise of power, defining politics as struggle in domestic and international contexts, he singlehandedly "brought about a complete transformation in the European international order." As Steinberg relates, he fostered enmity in order to resolve conflict. The results were a restless Reich, an antagonistic Europe, and eventually a world war. B&w photos. (Apr.) (c) Copyright PWxyz, LLC. All rights reserved.

Since there are a passel of Bismarck biographies, Steinberg recognizes that a new portrait requires a new approach. He adopts one of expansive quotation from Bismarck's correspondence and from observations of him by contemporaries, which well suits the style of power Bismarck wielded from 1862 to 1890. It was personalistic, entailing domination of his nominal sovereign, Kaiser Wilhelm I, and of subordinate and rival Prussian officials. If Bismarck's will to power conveys the reputation for unprincipled ruthlessness reflected in his sobriquet, the Iron Chancellor, it also belies human qualities in the man who engineered three wars by which he united Germany. He could be witty and convivial, he adored a handful of relatives and friends, and, less positively, he grumbled about pedestrian inadequacies in his food and housing. But the salient characterization emerging from this presentation is that of a cynic ruled by wrath. If scholars and history buffs want to meet Bismarck in flesh and blood, they need go no further. Steinberg's integration of psychological insights and Bismarck's political strategies yields a worthy biography. --Gilbert Taylor

I was contemplating for sometime whether to buy this book or not. The reason for my hesitation was that while experts very much prized the book, the readers were far more critical. After reading this book I can say that this is a serious reading that requires some concentration. There are some parts of the book with a bit too many details about Bismarck's contemporaries and are more difficult to read. On the other hand the book offers a lot of interesting historical facts and is very analytical, which makes it an excellent reading. Also I wouldn't agree with some observations that Mr.

Steinberg was all too negative of Bismarck's character. I think that he wanted to judge Bismarck in a quite objective way, as a man of "such contradictions in that it could be experienced as positive or negative - angelic or demonic - sometimes both at the same time". Overall my impression is that this book is a good one but it certainly requires reader's attention and perseverance.

Steinberg did a wonderful job of presenting a very complex life -- Bismarck -- in a clear and impassioned manner. It was well researched and brought together divergent conclusions of other biographers and historians. Depending on individual tastes, the book was a quick read in sections and a deliberate read in other sections. Being a comprehensive work, it did take time to read and comprehend but was very illuminating about a man and a country. Many of the factors leading to the two world wars are plainly evident as one reads. One can't help but wonder why those that were present at the time didn't see these signs. I will probably reread this biography in a couple of years to glean even more from it. Well worth the read.

I bought this for a friend for his birthday. He is an enthusiast for the state of Prussia and enjoys reading about that era. He was very excited to be getting this book about Otto von Bismarck. This is said to be one of the best biographies on the man.

The book is worth reading for the wealth of information and primary source material it supplies. However, whenever Steinberg inserts his own "insights" and opinions the book loses value. As other reviewers noted, he is certainly no Bismarck fan. That fact does not bother me. What bothers me is the shockingly mundane, inane, pathetic and simple-minded comments and conclusions Steinberg inserts throughout the text. I cannot believe this man is a Penn scholar. For example (page 169) when discussing how Bismarck and Roon were having difficulty in contacting each other, he ends the paragraph with this amazing insight; "How the cell phone simplifies arrangements?" Really? The cell phone aides communications? His attempts at psychoanalyzing Bismarck are hysterical in their lameness. The good news is that once you accept the limited original thinking ability of the author, the hundreds of letters quoted and insights of the actual 19th century figures are worth reading, and I did learn from them, not Steinberg.

Excellent book, but a very dry read. Author could have fewer excerpt of correspondence and more narrative. However the book does great job of describing the man and his actions over half a century in creating the German state

It is difficult to sympathise with those that give this book five stars. It clearly has the merit of extensive research but is marred by the author's failure to portray Bismarck and his times with acumen and insight, and to capture the extraordinary genius of this conservative nation-builder and authoritarian, particularly in foreign affairs. The writing style is pedestrian and hard to read, and (as others have observed) the author's personal comments are oddly disingenuous and out of place. The structure of the book is cumbersome - among other things, the author introduces some key players and events in passing and without suitable perspective. That said, the author's somewhat negative view of Bismarck and his impact on German political life is well presented in the summing-up given in the 'Conclusion', and adds a useful further dimension to the many conflicting assessments of Bismarck that have been made in the past century or so. Finally, a small point - the index is unsatisfactory, being arranged only by name. A good editor could have put this right. Indeed all in all OUP could have greatly improved the book by providing a strong and resourceful editor, which it clearly did not do.

the best collections, research, and outlook on one of the greatest politicians of the centuries

Steinberg's treatment of Bismarck gives an excellent example of a politician successfully dividing a country in order to achieve his own political objectives. It is a grand view of how one person can divide and conquer to no one's benefit but their own, and what happens when a nation without a political will succumbs to the well defined (not hidden) but totally misunderstood directions of its political leadership. Read "Bismarck: A Life" and you will see America today ...same problems, same use of international relationships and incidents to achieve internal national objectives. Easy to read. Easy to understand. Good starting point to understand the international political landscape of the 20th century and on into the present time. Bismarck is the total embodiment of Machiavelli's "Prince". Steinberg does a masterful job in bringing it all to light.

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