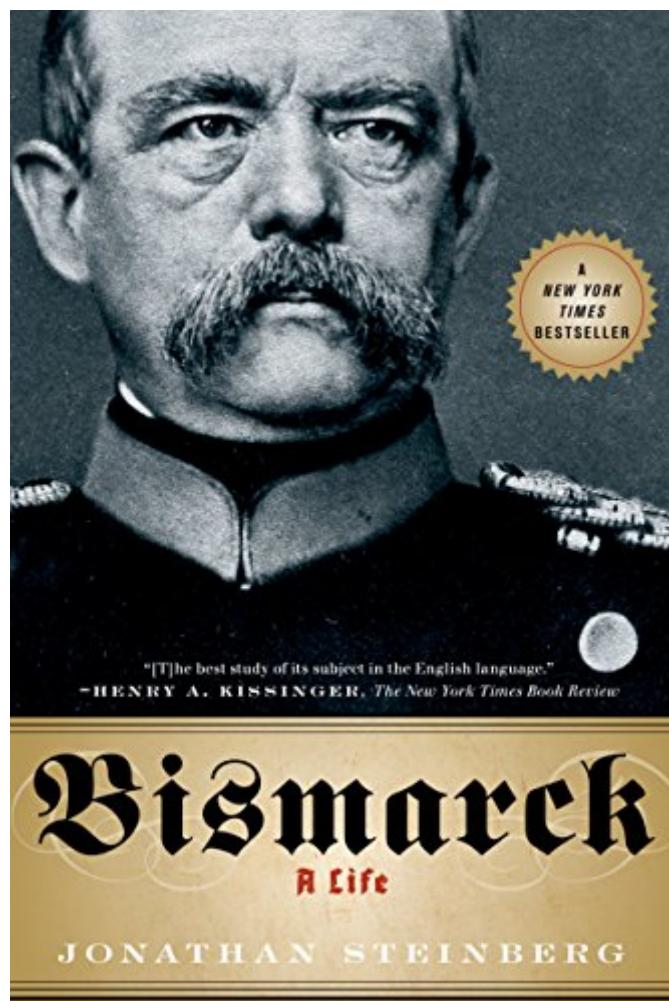


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Bismarck: A Life



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

I was really looking forward to reading this book. It had received a great review in "The New York Times Book Review", and it sounded so good, that I pre-ordered it from that same Sunday. In addition, this is a period of history I have become interested in lately and it sounded perfect. Bismarck is truly a disappointment and it fails on many levels. As a previous reviewer noted, the author doesn't like or admire Bismarck. Steinberg literally calls Bismarck "monstrous" at one point in the book. All of Bismarck's triumphs are mitigated with a remark, implying it was an unintended consequence or someone else would have done better or sooner or faster. All of Bismarck's failures and weaknesses are thoroughly examined, and these traits are then parceled out among Prussian society. It is ironic then that the picture Steinberg paints of Bismarck is strikingly similar to the life of Winston Churchill. The book is difficult to read. The relentlessly negative tone gives the narrative a ponderous feel. The text is not well organized. Characters come and go nearly at random. For example, Ludwig Windthorst is introduced and developed on pages 272-4, ca. 1867 and then dropped like a stone on p.275, not to return for another twenty years. On top of this, Steinberg is not very skilled at setting up the context of particular events. (I had to resort to Wikipedia several times to understand things.) Non-Prussian characters are only sketchily treated. There are no maps in book. The author jumps excessively back and forth in time. For one amazing passage, in the space of two pages (p. 142-143), the author moves from ca. 1858, forward to Nazi Germany, recedes back to 1846, and then forward to 1848.

I have read four biographies of Bismarck and consider him one of the two or three most fascinating and important people in the 19th century--and almost as significant in the 20th century insofar as he created several of the mechanisms that would ultimately produce the two world wars. I was therefore very excited to see the appearance of this volume and the very good early reviews it received. Reading the thing, however, has brought real disappointment. The book is not devoid of insights; Steinberg does an unusually good job, for instance, explaining why Bismarck was so focused on securing the German hinterland as a hedge against Austrian intrigue and in showing how he turned the working classes against the middle-class liberal movement. But one must read a lot of pages to find such gems, considerably more than in other biographies of great statesmen and women. There is also the problem Kissinger noted: Steinberg's obvious contempt for Bismarck, which colors his treatment of the subject. Many readers would doubtless reach the same

conclusion, but surely they should be given the opportunity to do so from an independent examination of the evidence rather than being told constantly what to think. Stylistically, the book is turgid. Steinberg includes scores of long quotations from other books--often two or three paragraph-length excerpts on a single page--and many of these don't really support his argument. The reader thus finds himself saying, "okay, but why is this quotation here at all?" and then going back to rediscover the point that the author was previously trying to make. For a few pages midway through the book I tried in frustration to skip the long quotations and follow only Steinberg's actual text in the hope of finding a more coherent thread.

Simply put, it fails on almost every level. Too short to provide a definitive account of the man (and wasting too much space on character assassination to permit much detail to be afforded to the well-known and the lesser known events of his career). Too cursory to be academic and too purposeful to be good popular history. Bespeckled with irritating mistakes like the constant misspelling of Field Marshal. He cherrypicks anecdote and comment to demonstrate that Bismarck is an anti-Semite, ignoring evidence of improvement in Jewish life during his career and treating dismissively his extensive professional contacts with prominent Jews and what seemed to be a personal affinity for many of them. He devotes less than a page and a half to social security legislation and dozens of pages to partisan warfare, designed to prove that Bismarck was petty and vindictive. The analogies to contemporary events are strained and unnecessary. The extrapolation from very limited evidence of important character traits, such as libido, is unbecoming a serious attempt at biography. At the end of the day Steinberg simply cannot assess Bismarck on his own terms, he has to treat him as the linear ancestor of Hitler. Countless events and personalities intervened between Bismarck's fall and Hitler's rise, and to pin the latter on the former is patently unfair. Bismarck was anti-Semitic, to be sure, but some rather disgusting statements and his indifference before the mob are all that Steinberg can muster to prove that he was hostile to the Jews and that he helped pave the way for what came later. That is to ignore the time period in which Bismarck operated, one in which Russian pogroms were taking place and the Dreyfuss Affair was bringing out a great deal of ugliness in French public life.

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