



The White Revolutionary: Reflections on Bismarck

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HENRY A. KISSINGER

The White Revolutionary: Reflections on Bismarck

FEW STATESMEN have altered the history of their society so profoundly as Otto von Bismarck. Before he came to power, Prussia—and the rest of Germany—seemed to be undergoing the “normal” evolution toward parliamentary, constitutional rule. Indeed, the crisis that brought him to office in 1862 was the familiar issue of parliamentary control over the budget, which in every other West European country had been resolved in favor of parliament. Five years afterwards, Bismarck had changed the domestic orientation of Germany and the pattern of international relations by solving the issue of German unification which had baffled two generations. His solution had not occurred previously to any significant group or to any major political leader. Too democratic for conservatives, too authoritarian for liberals, too power-oriented for legitimists, the new order was tailored to a genius who proposed to restrain the contending forces, both domestic and foreign, by manipulating their antagonisms.

“People are born as revolutionaries,” the German liberal Bamberger wrote during his Parisian exile in 1862, as he attempted to explain the enigma of Bismarck’s personality. “The accident of life decides whether one becomes a Red or a White revolutionary.”¹ Many years later Bismarck said that Bamberger was one of the few authors who had understood him.

What is a revolutionary? If the answer to this question were not ambiguous, few revolutionaries could succeed; the aims of revolutionaries seem self-evident only to posterity. This is sometimes due to deliberate deception. More frequently, it reflects a psychological failure: the inability of the “establishment” to come to grips with a fundamental challenge. The refusal to believe in irreconcilable antagonism is the reverse side of a state of mind to which basic

transformations have become inconceivable. Hence, revolutionaries are often given the benefit of every doubt. Even when they lay down a fundamental theoretical challenge, they are thought to be overstating their case for bargaining purposes; they are believed to remain subject to the "normal" preferences for compromise. A long period of stability creates the illusion that change must necessarily take the form of a modification of the existing framework and cannot involve its overthrow. Revolutionaries always start from a position of inferior physical strength; their victories are primarily triumphs of conception or of will.

This is especially true when the challenge occurs not in the name of change, but by exposing institutions to strains for which they were not designed. Even the most avowedly conservative position can erode the political or social framework if it smashes its restraints; for institutions are designed for an average standard of performance—a high average in fortunate societies, but still a standard reducible to approximate norms. They are rarely able to accommodate genius or demoniac power. A society that must produce a great man in each generation to maintain its domestic or international position will doom itself; for the appearance and, even more, the recognition of a great man are to a large extent fortuitous.

The impact of genius on institutions is bound to be unsettling, of course. The bureaucrat will consider originality as unsafe, and genius will resent the constrictions of routine. In fortunate societies, a compromise occurs. Extraordinary performance may not be understood, but it is at least believed in (consider, for example, the British respect for eccentricity). Genius in turn will not seek fulfillment in rebellion. Stable societies have, therefore, managed to clothe greatness in the forms of mediocrity; revolutionary structures have attempted to institutionalize an attitude of exaltation. To force genius to respect norms may be chafing, but to encourage mediocrity to imitate greatness may produce institutionalized hysteria or complete irresponsibility.

This was the legacy of Bismarck. His was a strange revolution. It appeared in the guise of conservatism, yet the scale of its conception proved incompatible with the prevailing international order. It triumphed domestically through the vastness of its successes abroad. With a few brusque strokes Bismarck swept away the dilemmas that had baffled the German quest for unity. In the process, he recast the map of Europe and the pattern of inter-

national relations. Like the mythological figures Solon or Lycurgus, he created a society in his image and a community of nations animated by his maxims in their dealings with one another.

Everything about Bismarck was out of scale: his bulk and his appetite; his loves and even more his hatreds. The paradox of his accomplishments seemed embodied in his personality. The man of "blood and iron" wrote prose of extraordinary simplicity, plasticity, and power. The apostle of the claims of power was subject to fits of weeping in a crisis. The "Iron Chancellor" loved Shakespeare and copied pages of Byron in his notebook. The statesman who never ceased extolling reason of state possessed an agility of conception and a sense of proportion which, while he lived, turned power into an instrument of self-restraint.

But the gods sometimes punish pride by fulfilling man's wishes too completely. Statesmen who build lastingly transform the personal act of creation into institutions that can be maintained by an average standard of performance. This Bismarck proved incapable of doing. His very success committed Germany to a permanent tour de force. It created conditions that could be dealt with only by extraordinary leaders. Their emergence in turn was thwarted by the colossus who dominated his country for nearly a generation. Bismarck's tragedy was that he left a heritage of unassimilated greatness.

The Making of a Revolutionary

On May 17, 1847 a tall, powerfully built man mounted the speakers' rostrum of the Prussian Parliament, which had been assembled in fulfillment of a promise made by the Prussian king during the Napoleonic Wars a generation before. A reddish-blond beard lined a face marked by many duels of student days. Proud in bearing, self-confident in expression, the speaker represented the *beau-ideal* of the Junkers, the large landholders who had built up Prussia.

The occasion was trivial. In the course of a debate about agricultural relief, one of the speakers had pointed out that the national enthusiasm of what in Prussia was called the War of Liberation had been due to the bonds forged in 1807 between the Prussian people and its government by a series of reforms. As soon as Bismarck began his maiden speech, an incongruity became apparent. Despite his size, Bismarck's voice was weak and somewhat high-pitched. His

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sentences emerged hesitantly as if each phrase had to tear itself loose from his large hulk. The prosaic words therefore conveyed an impression of immense, barely controlled passion:

I must contradict the proposition that the uprising of the people in 1813 required other motives than the shame of having outsiders command in our country. Our national honor is ill-served by the implication that the degradation suffered at the hands of a foreign autocrat was not enough to subsume all other sentiments in the common hatred of the foreigner.²

Faced with a wave of liberal indignation, Bismarck had great difficulty finishing this passage. (The stenographic report lists loud murmurs after almost every sentence.) One of the most moderate rejoinders denied Bismarck the right to judge a period which he had not experienced. Quickly Bismarck returned to the rostrum. While the enraged liberals hooted and the president vainly called for order, Bismarck turned his back on his colleagues and began to read a newspaper. When order had been somewhat restored, he began again in his irritating, rasping, and yet compelling voice:

I cannot deny of course that I did not live then, and I have always deeply regretted that it was not given to me to participate in this movement. That sentiment is ameliorated, however, by the information which I have just received. I had always assumed that the slavery against which we fought came from abroad. I have just learned that it was domestic and I am not very obliged for being enlightened.

Nobody then in the room in Berlin would have believed it possible that this man, standing so nearly alone, would solve the problem of German unity which had eluded the efforts of two generations. Nor could any have imagined that his ideas—seemingly so incongruous in a century of liberalism and nationalism—would eventually shape the destiny of their country. But not every revolution begins with a march on the Bastille.

A revolutionary must possess at least two qualities: a conception incompatible with the existing order and a will to impose his vision. Bismarck's colleagues in the Parliament could not have been aware of his ideas. Had they understood the road which he had traversed, however, they would have known that they were dealing with an elemental, perhaps even a demoniac, personality.

Otto von Bismarck was born on April 2, 1815, the year of Napoleon's banishment to St. Helena. His parents represented the two pillars of the Prussian state: the aristocracy and the bureaucracy. His family, Bismarck remarked once, were already Junkers when the Hohenzollerns (Prussia's kings) were still an insignificant

South German dynasty. Bismarck's father had served briefly in the army, but neither the disaster of Jena nor the War of Liberation could induce him to leave his ancestral estate again. He had preferred independence to service even when the king took away his commission and he lost favor at the court.

Independence had not proved sufficient for his bride. The daughter of a Privy Councillor, risen from the bourgeoisie, she insisted that her sons live according to the maxims of the Enlightenment and justify themselves by intellectual attainment. "I had always thought," she wrote, "that my greatest happiness would be to have a grown-up son . . . whose calling would permit him to penetrate much deeper into the realm of the spirit than was possible for a woman."³

To penetrate the realm of the spirit meant leaving the ancestral estate in Pomerania and the discipline of the Max Plaman Institute in Berlin. Bismarck never lost his nostalgia for nature or the illusion that his real happiness lay in a bucolic existence. He always spoke of his stay at the Gymnasium with distaste and of the relations with his mother with bitterness.

"I left the Gymnasium," wrote Bismarck sarcastically in his memoirs, "the normal product of our educational system, as a Pantheist and if not a Republican at least with the conviction that a republic was the most reasonable form of government."⁴ Republican or not, all roads were open to the aristocrat. Bismarck planned to enter the bureaucracy because he thought that it would demand a less stringent discipline than the army. Thus the first Bismarck who proposed to serve his king with the pen enrolled at the University of Goettingen. But formal study proved unbearably confining. In rebellion, Bismarck turned himself into the "mad Junker," extravagantly dressed, proud of the ability to drink anyone under the table, always ready to duel, distinguished by linguistic ability and sarcastic wit. Heavily in debt, physically run down, Bismarck left Goettingen after one year, at the insistence of his parents, for the University of Berlin.

Berlin wrought no fundamental change, however: "I live here like a gentleman," he wrote to a friend in Goettingen, "and gradually adopt an affected behavior. I speak a good deal of French, spend much time getting dressed, the remainder making visits and with my old friend the bottle. In the evening I sit in the first tier of the opera and behave as rowdily as possible."⁵

Only once was his nihilism interrupted by three aphorisms trac-

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ing Bismarck's future: "Constitution inevitable; in this manner to outward glory; but is it necessary to be inwardly pious besides?"⁶ The first two thoughts were reasonable predictions. The third outlines a dilemma that Bismarck never solved. He always understood the requirements of success, but was less clear about whether to approach his task with a certain sense of reverence for the finiteness of the human scale. A statesman who leaves no room for the unforeseeable in history may, however, mortgage the future of his country.

Advised to leave the University of Berlin, Bismarck prepared for the state examinations with the aid of a private tutor. At last he was ready for his first governmental post with the President of the Province of Aachen (Aix-la-Chapelle). Appropriately enough, this official was a friend of Bismarck's mother.

But the routine of a civil servant proved intolerable. So Aachen grew to know the "mad Junker" who preferred foreigners to his stodgy compatriots, a splendid conversationalist whose love affairs and gambling debts soon became notorious. One year later he left Aachen without leave. Nothing is known of the sudden decision except Bismarck's cryptic account:

I had every prospect for what is called a brilliant career . . . had not an extraordinarily beautiful Briton induced me to change course and sail in her wake for six months without the slightest leave. I forced her to come aside; she lowered the flag, but after possession of two months I lost the booty to a one-armed colonel fifty years of age with four horses and 15000 dollar revenue.⁷

The deeper reason for giving up his governmental career was not to be found in Bismarck's love affair, however. Bismarck gave the best explanation in a letter to a friend who had questioned his decision by appealing to his patriotism:

That my ambition is directed more towards not having to obey than towards giving orders is a fact for which I can give no reason save my taste. . . . The Prussian official is like an individual in an orchestra. Whether he plays the first violin or the triangle he must play his part as it is set down whether he thinks well of it or ill. *I however want to make music as I consider proper or none at all* [emphasis added].

Besides patriotism was probably the motive force of but a few of the famous statesmen particularly in absolutist states; much more frequently [it was] ambition, the desire to command, to be admired and to become famous. I must confess that I am not free of this passion and many distinctions . . . of statesmen with free constitutions, such as Peel, O'Connell, Mirabeau (etc.), won as a participant in energetic political

movements, would exert on me an attraction beyond any abstract consideration. . . . I am less allured however by the successes to be attained on the well-worn path through examinations, connections, or seniority and the good will of my superiors.⁸

This self-portrait was only deepened by a lifetime of public service. It was extraordinary for a member of the aristocracy of a state built on the notion of duty and service to assert that the chance to command was a more compelling motive than patriotism. The insistence on identifying his will with the meaning of events would forever mark Bismarck's revolutionary quality. Neither the sense of reverence for traditional forms of the conservative nor the respect for intellectual doctrines of the liberals was part of Bismarck's nature. He could appeal to either if necessary, but aloofly, appraisingly, and with a cool eye for their limits. It was no accident that the three statesmen whom the letter described as worthy of emulation represented either rebellion or a break with the past: O'Connell, the Irish revolutionary using the rules of the House of Commons to paralyze it; Peel pushing through the Corn Law *against* his own party and splitting it in the process; Mirabeau presiding over an attempt at legal revolution.

Bismarck was back on the ancestral estate now. Restless, he read voraciously: Shakespeare and Byron, Louis Blanc and Voltaire, and always Spinoza. His escapades multiplied. After another broken engagement, Bismarck left on a journey through England, France, and Switzerland. He even made tentative plans to serve with the British army in India. But "my father wrote me a letter moist with tears which spoke of lonely old age (seventy-three years, widower, deaf), of death and meeting again. He ordered me to return. I obeyed. He did not die."⁹

At this point in his life, Bismarck received a provisional answer to the question about the need for piety. Though the solution was more in the nature of a diplomatic pact with God than the mastering of a spiritual dilemma, it sufficed to bring about the measure of balance that enabled Bismarck to give direction to his elemental energies.

In a personality that reduces everything to a manifestation of the will, the spiritual and the sensual are never far apart. Thus Bismarck came to a degree of belief through two women.

Marie von Thadden came from a family of "Pietists," a fundamentalist sect believing in the most literal interpretation of the Bible. This group was significant because it contained many of the

most influential members of the aristocracy, including Leopold von Gerlach, later the adjutant of the king and Bismarck's principal sponsor at court. They combined rigid orthodoxy in religion with inflexible conservatism in politics. No group less likely to appeal to Bismarck could be imagined. "Of Cromwell's famous phrase 'Pray and keep your powder dry,'" he mocked, "they forget the second and most important half."¹⁰

Marie von Thadden was beautiful and passionate. When in 1843 she became engaged to his friend Moritz von Blankenburg, Bismarck stopped at her estate to make her acquaintance. Marie von Thadden was attracted to Bismarck who seemed to her "a great and interesting man of the world with a brilliant appearance." She decided to save the soul of this "Pommeranian Phoenix known as the epitome of wildness and arrogance."¹¹

Two days later Bismarck returned to Marie von Thadden's estate. Once more they discussed religion. After he left, Marie von Thadden invoked her fiancé's assistance. But three letters from Moritz von Blankenburg full of maudlin exhortation remained unanswered. A direct confrontation proved equally unsuccessful.

Married now, Marie von Thadden continued her efforts. She introduced Bismarck to her closest friend and fellow Pietist Johanna von Puttkammer, who also attempted to convert him. But pressure was not the way to reconcile Bismarck with his Maker. It took an event of elemental power to teach Bismarck the meaning of finality, if not a sense of limits. For on November 10, 1846, Marie von Thadden died.

Marie von Thadden was the victim of an influenza epidemic that had already claimed her younger brother and her mother. From the deathbed of her mother, Marie had written to Bismarck asking him to come to see her as quickly as possible. When he arrived, she had fallen ill herself. Even now she was still concerned with the salvation of his soul and sent him a message pleading "with the utmost earnestness" that now was the moment for conversion. This caused Bismarck to pray for the first time since his sixteenth year not *to* a God, much less to a theology, but *for* a person. For once he confronted a situation, however, which was beyond his power: "This is the first time," he wrote to his sister, "that I have lost someone . . . close to me and whose parting created a profound and unexpected void." To his widowed friend, he said: "This is the first heart that I lose of which I truly knew that it beat for me. . . . Now I believe in eternity—or God has not

created the world." Otto von Bismarck came to God on the basis of strict diplomatic reciprocity whereby God in return for faith guaranteed the permanence of a profound passion.

Marie von Thadden's death had another and more immediate consequence: Bismarck's engagement with Johanna von Puttkammer. Two months before he had written to Moritz von Blankenburg that he did not yet trust his feelings. But four weeks after Marie's death, Bismarck spoke to Johanna von Puttkammer about marriage. She encouraged him to ask her father's permission. To convince the forbidding, dour, intensely religious, old Heinrich von Puttkammer that the "mad Junker" was a fit husband for his daughter would have discouraged a man less bold.

The result was Bismarck's first major diplomatic document, a letter asking for permission to visit the Puttkammer estate to put his case in person. As he was to do so often, Bismarck confounded his opposite number by complete frankness and with a sweep unknown in the unimaginative circle of Bible Readers. Bismarck's letter began:

It may appear presumptuous that I whom you have met but recently . . . ask of you the strongest proof of confidence which it is in your power to grant. I also know that I . . . will never be able to give you in my own person those guarantees for the future which would justify the pledge of so dear a collateral on your part, unless you make up through confidence in God what cannot be supplied by confidence in man.

Here was the case against Bismarck stated more powerfully than Heinrich von Puttkammer would ever have been able to, only to be transformed into an appeal to the Pietist's deepest conviction. Bismarck did not ask for Johanna's hand because he was worthy of God—this would have seemed presumptuous to a Pietist in someone far more religious—but because only God could make him worthy. To reject him would have indicated not lack of faith in the suitor, but an absence of trust in God. On this plane, the subsequent account of Bismarck's fall from grace accentuated the merit of his redemption:

At the time of my sixteenth birthday I had no other faith than a naked deism which did not remain long without Pantheist overtones. About this time, I stopped praying, not out of indifference but as the consequence of ripe reflection. . . . I told myself that either God produced everything, including my own thoughts—in which case He was praying to Himself; or that my will was independent of God's—in which case it would be presumptuous and indicate a doubt . . . in the perfection of the

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Divine decrees, to believe that one could influence Him by human entreaties.

To the pious von Puttkammer, this could have seemed as nothing short of the voice of the devil, but it only served to heighten the power of the moment of conversion:

About four years ago . . . I came into closer contact with Moritz von Blankenburg and I found in him what I had never had in life: a friend. . . . Through Moritz I also became acquainted with the [Thaddens] and their circle. . . . That hope and peace were with them did not surprise me, for I had never doubted that they accompanied faith. But faith cannot be given nor taken away and I was of the opinion that I would have to wait resignedly until it was vouchsafed to me. . . . What had stirred within me became real when at the news of the fatal illness of our deceased friend . . . the first fervent prayer tore itself from my heart, without any concern about its reasonableness, together with a stinging sense of my unworthiness to pray and with tears as had been unknown to me since childhood. God did not grant my prayer then, but he also did not reject it, for I did not lose again the capacity to appeal to Him and I feel if not peace, at least a confidence I never knew before. . . . Daily I entreat God to be merciful to me . . . and to awaken and to strengthen my faith.¹²

What could a pious man reply? Bismarck was demanding of Heinrich von Puttkammer no more than what by his own description he was daily asking from God. And because this was the letter of a man who had made his peace with his Maker, there was in it nothing of an apology to mortals, so that even Bismarck's catalogue of sin became a manifestation of his defiant pride.

Having won the moral terrain, Bismarck followed the letter with one of the lightning moves which were always to accompany his careful preparation. He reported to his brother:

Around Christmas I wrote to the father who was extraordinarily horrified because the idea that his daughter might marry frightened him in any case, but in particular in connection with a man of whom he had heard a great deal of ill and little good. Upon my return home I received a letter from him which contained in essence nothing but a few quotations from the Bible with which he had consoled himself in his sorrow and a dubiously phrased invitation to Rheinfeld [the Puttkammer estate]. There I found . . . a disposition for prolonged negotiations, of doubtful issue, had I not moved the whole affair to a different plane by a decisive embrace of my bride, immediately upon first seeing her, to the greatest astonishment of the parents.¹³

To the moral conquest was thus added a *fait accompli*; many a

later opponent of Bismarck might have been less astonished by his tactics had he known of his courtship.

The episode achieves an additional dimension through the conclusion of Bismarck's letter to his brother:

I have had a great and no longer expected stroke of fortune because I am marrying, speaking quite cold-bloodedly, a woman of rare spirit and nobility. . . . In matters of faith we differ, somewhat more to her sorrow than to mine, if not as much as you may think . . . for events . . . have produced certain transformations in me. . . . Moreover I love Pietism in women.

Ever since these letters became public, German historians have debated the degree of Bismarck's sincerity. But if Bismarck was insincere, it did not necessarily have to be in the letter to his future father-in-law. In any event, sincerity has meaning only in reference to a standard of truth of conduct. The root fact of Bismarck's personality, however, was his incapacity to comprehend any such standard outside his will. For this reason, he could never accept the good faith of any opponent; it accounts, too, for his mastery in adapting to the requirements of the moment. It was not that Bismarck lied—this is much too self-conscious an act—but that he was finely attuned to the subtlest currents of any environment and produced measures precisely adjusted to the need to prevail. The key to Bismarck's success was that he was always sincere.

Bismarck's new-found relationship to God played the crucial role in the formation of his public personality. Until his introduction into the Thadden circle, Bismarck's naturalism had led to virulent skepticism. In a world characterized by struggle, death was the most recurrent phenomenon and nihilism the most adequate reaction. This had produced the restless wandering of Bismarck's early years, the seeming indolence, and caustic sarcasm.

God provided the mechanism to transcend the transitoriness of the human scale: "I am a soldier of God," he wrote now, "and I must go where He sends me. I believe He will mould my life as He needs it."¹⁴ "God has put me at the place where I must be serious and pay my debt to the country," he wrote to his wife upon receiving his first diplomatic appointment in 1852. "I am firmly decided to do His will and if I lack wisdom I shall ask it of Him; He gives plentifully and never presents accounts."¹⁵

Bismarck's faith thus represented a means to achieve a theological justification of the struggle for power; its distinguishing characteristic was not acceptance, but activity—Darwinism sanctified

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by God. God became an ally by being subjected to Bismarck's dialectic; for would He permit what had not found favor in His eyes? Bismarck's fatalism, erstwhile so hopeless, now found a sense of direction. "With confidence in God," he wrote to his bride, "put on the spurs and let the wild horse of life fly with you over stones and hedges, prepared to break your neck but above all without fear because one day you will in any case have to part from everything dear to you on earth, though not for eternity."¹⁶

After his introduction to the Thadden circle, there was about Bismarck a new sense of purpose and a calculation of the main chance. Following his father's death in 1845, he even left the Kniephof and moved to the other ancestral estate, Schoenhausen on the Lower Elbe. The reason was eminently practical: There existed a good prospect of a vacancy in the position of Deichhauptmann, the officer in charge of building and repairing the dikes. When the incumbent failed to resign as expected, Bismarck saw to it that he was relieved by bringing charges of unauthorized absences. Deichhauptmann was a position of great prestige since the welfare of the predominantly agricultural region depended on it. It was not surprising, therefore, that the Estates nominated Bismarck as an alternate to the Parliament in Berlin. It only increased his sense of mission that the regular deputy fell ill and he was elected as his replacement.

This, then, was the man who stepped to the rostrum on May 17, 1847. He had sown his wild oats. He had spent nine years in the solitude of his ancestral estates and had emerged hardened, extremely well read, and infinitely more imaginative than his fellow Junkers. Once embarked on a public career, he lived for little else. Though he appeared as the defender of traditional Prussia, he needed only the opportunity to demonstrate that he gave this conviction an application which would revolutionize the map and politics of Europe.

The Nature of the Challenged International Order

The stability of any international system depends on at least two factors: the degree to which its components feel secure and the extent to which they agree on the "justice" or "fairness" of existing arrangements. Security presupposes a balance of power that makes it difficult for any state or group of states to impose its will on the remainder. Too great a disproportion of strength undermines self-

restraint in the powerful and induces irresponsibility in the weak. Considerations of power are not enough, however, since they turn every disagreement into a test of strength. Equilibrium is needed for stability; moral consensus is essential for spontaneity. In the absence of agreement as to what constitutes a "just" or "reasonable" claim, no basis for negotiation exists. Emphasis will be on the subversion of loyalties rather than on the settlement of disputes. Peaceful change is possible only if the members of the international order value it beyond any dispute that may arise.

The statesmen who met at Vienna in 1815 to end the Napoleonic Wars had been taught this lesson through twenty-five years of nearly uninterrupted struggle. They had learned that the peace of Europe depended on a balance of power that removed the temptation of easy conquest, especially by France. They tried to create "great masses," to use Pitt's phrase, in Central Europe to remedy a state of affairs which had enabled four generations of French rulers to exploit Germany's dissensions for purposes of conquest. Russia, in turn, had used each conflict to advance farther into Europe.

Conditions in Germany, therefore, were the key to European equilibrium. If Germany was too centralized or too powerful, it would bring about a combination of expansionist France and Russia to counterbalance it. If Germany was too divided, it would tempt constant pressure. The peace of Europe depended on three factors: (a) an over-all balance of power in which the states of Central Europe—primarily in Germany—would be sufficiently strong to resist pressures from East and West; (b) a special equilibrium *within* Germany that would create among the German states a structure strong enough to resist attacks from both East and West, but not so powerful as to disquiet Germany's neighbors, sufficiently unified to be able to mobilize for defense, but not so centralized as to become an offensive threat; (c) a moral consensus which caused most disputes to be settled by recourse to a superior principle rather than to force. The balance of power was to be a last recourse, not the sole arbiter. This is what came to be known as the "Metternich system" after the Austrian Foreign Minister who was instrumental in devising it and who was its principal manipulator until he was overthrown in 1848.

No element of the Metternich system was more intricate than the arrangements for Germany. The constitution of the German Confederation was as subtle as the membership was complex: Austria belonged to the Confederation only with its German third, and

the Confederation did not include the Polish provinces of Prussia. On the other hand, the Netherlands was represented because of its possession of Luxembourg, and Denmark was included because its king was also ruler of Schleswig-Holstein. Prussia, the largest purely German state, had only one vote out of seventeen. It was theoretically possible that a grouping of states comprising less than a quarter of the population or resources of Germany could outvote the major powers, Austria and Prussia.

Usually, however, the interests of Austria ran parallel with those of the minor states. Austria and the minor states were interested in maintaining the *status quo*: They were concerned with preventing Prussian hegemony, but wanted to achieve this goal without open conflict. The Assembly of the Confederation meeting in Frankfurt was therefore designed to inhibit decisive action except in case of overwhelming foreign danger. The very complexity of its procedures was well suited to delay, to ameliorate, to evade. Moreover, Austria controlled its proceedings to a considerable extent. The Austrian representative was *ex officio* president of the Assembly of the Confederation. The Assembly met in the Austrian Legation at Frankfurt; its secretariat was under Austrian control; and until 1848, the seal of the Confederation was the Austrian seal. In these circumstances, it was not too difficult to transform the Assembly of the Confederation into a diplomatic congress bound by the instructions of its member governments.

Nevertheless, the Confederation was not simply a diplomatic congress. To begin with, it owned directly five fortresses facing France. It could receive as well as accredit ambassadors. It had the power to declare war. It was possible, therefore, for a German state to pursue two contradictory policies at the same time: one as an independent power, the other in its capacity as a member of the Confederation. As happened during the Crimean War and again during the Schleswig-Holstein crisis, it was even possible for three different foreign policies to be pursued concurrently in Germany: that of Austria, that of Prussia, and that of the minor states. Such a structure could act in union only when confronted by an overwhelming common danger—a threat sufficient to menace the European equilibrium. It was not likely to be able to generate consensus on positive aims; it would not itself be able to threaten the European balance.

Had the Metternich system been maintained only by considerations of power, it would not have lasted fifty years. Prussia ac-

cepted a subordinate role—far smaller than its power would have justified—because its rulers became convinced that they had more to fear from liberalism domestically than they could gain by relying on Prussia's strength abroad. They therefore placed an alliance with Austria above their political and strategic opportunities within Germany. Similarly, Russia was restrained from expanding into the Balkans at least in part by the doctrine of the unity of conservative interests. For a generation, the Holy Alliance of Russia, Austria, and Prussia acted as a brake on domestic upheaval. It also restrained two expansionist powers—Prussia and Russia—by appealing to their moral inhibitions.

The unity of conservative monarchs survived even the Revolution of 1848. The Prussian king refused the crown of a united Germany when it was offered by the National Assembly in Frankfurt, because he believed that only Austria had a historical claim to it. Russian troops assisted Austria in suppressing a rebellion in Hungary, and Russian threats helped Austria to re-establish her dominance in Germany. When another Napoleon came to power in France, the revolutionary threat of the previous generation seemed to reappear, and the three Eastern courts drew closer still. In the early 1850's, the Metternich system appeared destined to dominate European politics for the indefinite future.

The Challenge: The Postulate of Prussian Uniqueness and Invulnerability

At this precise moment, a theoretical challenge developed that unexpectedly came not from the liberals, but from a man who owed his public career to the Prussian conservatives' conviction that he epitomized their values. Appointed Prussian Ambassador to the German Confederation in 1852, Otto von Bismarck almost immediately attacked the Metternich system. Bismarck did not accept the fundamental axiom that Prussia's domestic structure was so vulnerable that it could be protected only by rigid adherence to the unity of conservative monarchs. On the contrary, Bismarck insisted intransigently on the postulate of Prussia's uniqueness and invulnerability.

This conviction was not without foundation, for Prussia was not simply another German state. Its rigid domestic policy could not eradicate the consciousness of nationalism brought to Germany by the French occupation nor eliminate the prestige acquired by Prus-

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sia through its tremendous efforts during the Napoleonic Wars. To be sure, for a generation after the Vienna settlement, Prussia's policy of repression was even more effective than that of Austria because it was not leavened by Austrian inefficiency. The very shape of Prussia—athwart Germany from the partly Polish East to the Catholic and somewhat Latinized Rhineland—made it the symbol of the quest for German unity. Even liberals looked to it for the attainment of their objectives. Prussia, which in the seventeenth century was an idea before it became a reality, accomplished the even more extraordinary tour de force in the nineteenth century of becoming an idea *contrary* to its reality.

For over a generation after the Congress of Vienna, however, Prussia seemed paralyzed by the vastness of its challenge. As long as nationalism was identified with liberalism, Prussia was able to realize its German mission only by giving up its historic essence. It remained for Bismarck to challenge this identification. He insisted that nationalism and liberalism need not be parallel phenomena. They could be separated, and traditional Prussia could play a national role:

If someone, in the name of German unity, presses for a parliamentary union I should like to warn him not to confuse two concepts: German unity and the right to deliver parliamentary speeches from a German rostrum. For me the two concepts are far apart.¹⁷ . . . There exists nothing more German than the development of rightly conceived Prussian interests.¹⁸

If this was true, Prussia could perform its German mission only if it preserved its historic essence. Far from adapting to the liberal trend, Prussia had to overcome it—all the more so as parliamentary institutions were not required to guarantee Prussian liberties:

Prussia has become great not through liberalism and free-thinking but through a succession of powerful, decisive and wise regents who carefully husbanded the military and financial resources of the state and kept them together in their own hands in order to throw them with ruthless courage into the scale of European politics as soon as a favorable opportunity presented itself. . . . It is undoubtedly just that every Prussian should enjoy that degree of liberty which is consistent with the public welfare and with Prussia's career in European politics but no more. This degree of liberty is possible even without parliaments and at the present stage of Prussia's intellectual development, the abuse of royal power belongs to the most improbable contingencies.¹⁹

Bismarck saw no point in political constructions that destroyed Prussia's identity. In 1848, he resisted the attempt of the liberals

to achieve German unity through a democratic constitution. “[Our] people has no desire to see its kingship dissolved in a ferment of South German indiscipline. Its loyalty is not to the paper head of an Empire . . . but to a living and free king of Prussia. . . . I hope to God that we shall long remain Prussians when this piece of paper [the German constitution] will be forgotten like a dried-up autumn leaf.”²⁰ Bismarck wanted to preserve the existing order in Prussia so that Prussia could overthrow the Metternich system within Germany. Thus, he opposed even the liberals’ offer of the Imperial Crown to the king of Prussia:

I would prefer that Prussia remain Prussia. As such it will always be in a position to prescribe its laws to Germany and not to receive them from others. I therefore feel duty-bound to oppose a motion designed to undermine the edifice cemented by the blood of our fathers. The crown of Frankfort may seem very brilliant but its luster is to be obtained by smelting it with that of Prussia and I do not think that this will succeed.²¹

Theories of popular sovereignty could only weaken Prussia’s international role: “The Prussian army will always be the army of the king and seek its honor in obedience. . . . Prussia’s honor does not consist of playing the Don Quixote for vexed parliamentary celebrities all over Germany. I seek Prussia’s honor in that Prussia never admit that anything occur in Germany without its permission.”²²

German unity, in short, was to be justified by the facts of Prussian power. It was made necessary not by doctrines of liberalism, but by the security requirements of a state whose very shape inhibited equilibrium. Prussia, spread across the North German plain in a series of enclaves with frontiers following no natural boundaries, needed the resources of Germany for its own defense. Prussia should absorb Germany, rather than the opposite. This conception seemed so incredible to both liberals and nationalists that the stenographic report notes “hilarity” at the end of this passage. It was not the first time that revolutionaries succeeded because their opponents could not believe in the reality of their objectives.

Had the Prussian conservatives who admired Bismarck listened closely, they would have realized that he was separated from them by a gulf scarcely less wide. Bismarck’s aphoristic phrases, like the statements of French President Charles de Gaulle—the leader who most resembles him in our century—had meanings not understood by his supporters. Bismarck was defending not a principle, but a fact; not a doctrine, but a reality. “I do not consider the Prussian

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constitution the best of which history informs us," he said on one occasion; "its chief advantage is that it exists."²³ Bismarck attacked liberalism not because it violated *universal* history, but because it ran counter to *Prussian* traditions. He sought to rescue Prussia's uniqueness from dissolution; the conservatives were interested in defending general principles. Bismarck fought domestic upheaval because he wanted Prussia to focus on foreign policy; his allies wanted to defend legitimate rule as such.

As a result, the postulate of Prussia's domestic invulnerability proved the prelude to a proposition unimaginable to the conservatives: that Prussia could afford to adapt its domestic institutions to the requirements of foreign policy. Once the royal authority had survived the Revolution of 1848, Prussia not only had nothing to fear from liberalism, but could even use it as an instrument of foreign policy. Bismarck reported during the Crimean War:

Towards my colleagues I use privately the following language: Prussia has adopted a policy of peace on behalf of Germany in the process risking the enmity of half of Europe. . . . Should the other German states desert Prussia, however, it must think of its own security. . . . No choice will be left to us but to join the enemies of Russia. But such a shift toward the West can win the confidence of Britain and France only if implemented by a more liberal government which, carried by the Westwind of public opinion, would soon outdistance Austria.²⁴

Once in office, Bismarck carried out these prescriptions. During the Austro-Prussian War of 1866, he attempted to foment a revolution in Hungary; only the rapid victory kept his plans from being carried out. Under his stewardship, Germany was the first continental country with universal suffrage, albeit with a constitution that sharply limited the powers of Parliament.

For four decades Prussian policy had been stymied by the paradox that it could achieve hegemony in Germany only by allying itself with forces believed to be contrary to its domestic structure. Bismarck showed that the paradox was only apparent. Prussia's sense of cohesion was sufficiently strong for it to combine a repressive policy at home with revolutionary activity abroad. Even liberal institutions could be used to strengthen the king's authority:

The sense of security that the King remains master in his country even if the whole army is abroad is not shared with Prussia by any other continental state and above all by no other German power. It provides the opportunity to accept a development of public affairs much more in conformity with present requirements. . . . The royal authority in Prussia

is so firmly based that the government can without risk encourage a much more lively parliamentary activity and thereby exert pressure on conditions in Germany.²⁵

Just as de Gaulle's brutal cynicism has depended on an almost lyrical conception of France's historic mission, so Bismarck's matter-of-fact Machiavellianism assumed that Prussia's unique sense of cohesion enabled it to impose its dominance on Germany. Like de Gaulle, Bismarck believed that the road to political integration was not through concentrating on legal formulae, but emphasizing the pride and integrity of the historic states.

There is one important difference, however. In the contemporary world, France is only one of several medium-sized states of roughly equal strength. Within nineteenth-century Germany, Prussia was by far the strongest purely German state. Bismarck did not, therefore, depend entirely on the persuasiveness of his arguments and would have been doomed to failure had he done so. Unlike de Gaulle, he could impose his convictions on the other contenders by force—provided international conditions were favorable. Thus, a great deal depended on Bismarck's conception of international affairs.

The Art of the Possible

It is fortunate for posterity that Bismarck was in the relatively subordinate position of ambassador for ten years. Appointed Ambassador to the Assembly of the Confederation in 1852 and to St. Petersburg in 1858, Bismarck's principal means of influencing public policy was through reports to his superiors. The result was a flood of memoranda passionate, brilliantly written, remarkably consistent—the outline of Bismarck's later policy. Increasingly Bismarck urged that foreign policy had to be based not on sentiment but on an assessment of strength. Prussia had to abandon the self-restraint that had characterized its policy since 1815:

We live in a wondrous time in which the strong is weak because of his moral scruples and the weak grows strong because of his audacity.²⁶ . . . A sentimental policy knows no reciprocity. It is an exclusively Prussian peculiarity. Every other government seeks the criteria for its actions solely in its interests, however it may cloak them with legal deductions.²⁷ . . . For heaven's sake no sentimental alliances in which the consciousness of having performed a good deed furnishes the sole reward

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for our sacrifice.²⁸ . . . The only healthy basis of policy for a great power . . . is egotism and not romanticism.²⁹ . . . Gratitude and confidence will not bring a single man into the field on our side; only fear will do that, if we use it cautiously and skillfully.³⁰ . . . Policy is the art of the possible, the science of the relative.³¹

Policy depended on calculation, not emotion. The interests of states provided objective imperatives transcending individual preferences. "Not even the King has the right to subordinate the interests of the state to his personal sympathies or antipathies."³² When, early in Bismarck's career, his Austrian colleague in Frankfurt made a personal appeal to stop his harassing tactics in the Assembly of the Confederation, he replied:

It is my task to conduct Prussian policy just as it is yours to vindicate that of Austria. That these do not aim for the same results is a necessity produced by history and it cannot be eliminated either by ourselves or our Cabinets. If you constantly keep this in mind I am inclined to believe that our relationship can be freed of the painful impressions you describe even in the face of more substantial divergencies.³³

The Metternich system had insisted on the closest ties between Prussia and Austria in order to defeat the revolution in Germany and, if necessary, in the rest of Europe. Bismarck, however, not only argued that Austria was not needed to control the domestic situation within Prussia, but contended that it was an obstacle to Prussia's real vocation. It was not a fraternal but a foreign country: "Our policy has no other parade ground than Germany and this is precisely the one which Austria believes it badly requires for itself. . . . We deprive each other of the air we need to breathe. . . . This is a fact which cannot be ignored however unwelcome it may be."³⁴

The idea that Prussia should separate itself from Austria gave way in short order to the proposition that a wise Prussian policy would seek to evict Austria from Germany—a proposition which would have been inconceivable even five years previously when the Prussian king believed that only the Austrian emperor was "entitled" to the crown of a united Germany. Moreover, the German Confederation, far from being a natural forum for Prussian policy, was an obstacle to it:

The secondary states . . . find in the Assembly of the Confederation a pedestal from which they can discourse about the affairs of Germany and Prussia, indeed even about European policy, more loudly than would be permissible were they in immediate contact with world af-

fairs. . . . It is not surprising that they are interested in developing an institution in which with a minimum of effort they obtain not only security but an accretion of influence. Thus in case of war, Hesse-Darmstadt has the right to claim the assistance of the Prussian army and in return assists Prussia with 6,200 men.³⁵

If Prussia wished to remain a great power, it could not submit to an illusory consensus of the German states. It should seek instead to utilize the resources of the secondary German states for its own ends. The justification for German unity was not nationalism, but Prussia's requirements as a great power: "A great power desirous of conducting its own foreign policy based on its intrinsic strength can agree to a greater centralization of the Confederation only if it assumes its leadership and insists on the adoption of its own program."³⁶

Since Austria would never accept Prussian hegemony in Germany, Bismarck argued, Prussia had to seize every opportunity to weaken her. Within three years of being sent to Frankfurt as the best guardian of the unity of conservative interests, Bismarck counseled that Prussia use Austria's embarrassments during the Crimean War to attack her: "Could we succeed in getting Vienna to the point where it does not consider an attack by Prussia on Austria as something outside of all possibility we would soon hear more sensible things from there. . . . We should march into Austria, quickly and unexpectedly, while Bohemia is still without troops."³⁷ During Austria's war with France and Sardinia, Bismarck wrote: "The present situation once more presents us with the great prize if we let the war between Austria and France become well established and then move south with our army taking the border posts in our field packs not to impale them again until we reach Lake Constance or at least the limits where the Protestant confession ceases to predominate."³⁸

Nothing illustrates Bismarck's revolutionary quality more dramatically than his advocacy of a Prussian attack on Austria for no other reason than the auspicious moment. Even in the heyday of the Metternich system, it was not unusual for a state to seek to improve its position; but every effort was made to endow change with the legitimacy of a European consensus. Pressures for change without even lip service to existing treaty relationships or to the Concert of Europe involved a revolution in prevailing diplomatic method. Heretofore the major outlines of the Vienna settlement had been treated as inviolate; its legitimacy was a key aspect of its stability.

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Bismarck proposed to base the Concert of Europe on precise calculations of power; when they conflicted with the existing order, the latter had to give way or be forcibly overthrown.

To be sure, the difference was one of degree. The Metternich system did not ignore considerations of power even while seeking adjustments through European congresses. Bismarck, in turn, would have been the last person to reject the efficacy of moral consensus: He would have treated it as an important attribute of power, as one factor among the many to be considered. But the stability of the international order depended on this precise nuance.

The Metternich system had been inspired by the eighteenth-century notion of the universe as a great clockwork: Its parts were intricately intermeshed, and a disturbance of one upset the equilibrium of the others. Bismarck represented a new age. Equilibrium was seen not as harmony and mechanical balance, but as a statistical balance of forces in flux. Its appropriate philosophy was Darwin's concept of the survival of the fittest. Bismarck marked the change from the rationalist to the empiricist conception of politics.

The Empiricist Assessment of the International Order

In 1854, during the Crimean War, Bismarck wrote:

We have three threats available: (1) An alliance with Russia; and it is nonsense always to swear at once that we will never go with Russia. Even if it were true we should retain the option to use it as a threat. (2) A policy in which we throw ourselves into Austria's arms and compensate ourselves at the expense of perfidious confederates. (3) A change of cabinets to the left whereby we would soon become so "Western" as to outmaneuver Austria completely.³⁹

Here was the distillation of the new diplomacy. The same report listed as equally possible an alliance with Russia against France, an arrangement with Austria directed against the secondary German states and presumably against Russia, and an understanding with France (the purpose of the "Western" course domestically) directed against Austria and Russia. The ultimate choice depended strictly on considerations of utility. Hence the apparent Russophile was discussing an arrangement with France, then at war with Russia. The seeming reactionary found it possible to envisage a shift to the left. Domestic policy was manipulated for the purposes of foreign policy.

This cynicism as to method has given rise to the argument that

Bismarck was above all an opportunist. The charge of opportunism, however, begs the key issue of statesmanship. Anyone wishing to affect events must be opportunist to some extent. The real distinction is between those who adapt their purposes to reality and those who seek to mold reality in the light of their purposes.

Bismarck—as all revolutionaries—belonged to the latter group. To be sure, his policy had a streak of opportunism. Yet pure opportunism tends to be sterile; it absorbs more energy in an analysis of where one is than of where one is going. A policy that awaits events is likely to become their prisoner. The flexibility of Bismarck's tactics was the result of a well-developed conceptual framework. It grew out of the conviction that the "Metternich system" stifled Prussia's natural role; it was animated by a clear picture of the new international order that Bismarck wanted to bring about. Bismarck sought his opportunities in the present; he drew his inspiration from a vision of the future.

Obviously, Bismarck's conception could not be put to the test so long as the key pillar of the Metternich system—the unity of the conservative courts of Prussia, Austria, and Russia—remained unshaken. Unexpectedly, the Holy Alliance disintegrated, because Austria, unable to comprehend its peril, lost the masterly touch with which Metternich had conducted its affairs until 1848. Except for Schwarzenberg, who died prematurely in 1852, Austrian policy was in the hands of mediocrities. Like many men of limited vision, Metternich's successors confused maneuver with conception and sought to hide their timidity by restless activity. As a result, Austria abandoned the anonymity that was one of the tactics which enabled Metternich to deflect major crises from his rickety state. Henceforth, Austria found itself increasingly at the center of European disputes. Its vacillations made the Crimean War inevitable. Its confusion caused Russia to see it as a principal obstacle to St. Petersburg's designs in the Balkans. During the Crimean War and after, Austrian policy suffered from the inability to define priorities. Its measures took so long to conceive that they were irrelevant by the time they were executed; the Imperial Cabinet was so afraid of recklessness that it left itself no room for maneuver, save in sudden fits of panic which had the same effect as recklessness. As its position grew more desperate, its measures became more fitful. The Austrian government sought to compensate for each lost opportunity by redoubling its energies when it finally brought itself to act—which was usually at the wrong moment. "Austria wants to garner

all the fruits across which it stumbles on the road which fear forces it to take," Bismarck wrote sarcastically. "I doubt that Buol [Austrian Foreign Minister] has a clear goal unless it is that Austria pocket everything it can obtain by sleight of hand."⁴⁰

The Prussian calculator in Frankfurt understood that the significance of the Crimean War resided not in the terms by which it was settled, but in the diplomatic revolution it brought about: "The day of reckoning is sure to come even if a few years pass. . . . Austria has put itself as a barrier in Russia's way. The latter's policy will henceforth be directed against this barrier. . . . Through this transformation of the constellation of the powers we can only gain in freedom of action."⁴¹

Thus the most important document of the Crimean War was a report that found its way into the file of the Foreign Ministry of Berlin with marginalia indicating that its author had not succeeded in convincing his superior. Shortly after the conclusion of the Crimean War, Bismarck set down his analysis of the new situation in a memorandum that assumed the perfect flexibility of international relationships limited only by the requirements of national interest. German historiography has justly called it the "Prachtbericht"—the master report—for here in one memorandum was assembled the essence of the new diplomacy, although its novelty robbed it of immediate impact.

The report began with an exposition of the brilliant position of France upon the conclusion of the Crimean War. All the states of Europe were seeking Napoleon's friendship, but none with greater prospect of success than Russia. "An alliance between France and Russia is too natural that it should not come to pass. . . . Up to now the firmness of the Holy Alliance . . . has kept the two states apart; but with Tsar Nicholas dead and the Holy Alliance dissolved by Austria, nothing remains to arrest the natural reapproachment of two states with nary a conflicting interest."⁴² Nor could Austria escape its dilemma by anticipating Russia in establishing closer relations with France. In order to maintain the support of his army, Napoleon required an issue capable of supplying at any time "a not too arbitrary and unjust pretext for intervention. Italy is ideally suited for this role. The ambitions of Sardinia, the memories of Bonaparte and Murat, furnish sufficient excuses and the hatred of Austria will smooth its way."

This acute prognosis of the immediate future was preliminary to a discussion of Prussia's position. If a Franco-Russian alliance

was inevitable and a Franco-Austria conflict probable, where lay Prussia's safety? According to the Metternich system, Prussia should have tightened its alliance with Austria, relied on the German Confederation, and established the closest relationships with Great Britain.

Bismarck demolished each of these elements in turn. Britain would have difficulty maintaining control of the seas against a resurgent French navy aided, perhaps, by the United States. In any event, Britain's land forces were so negligible that the central powers would have to bear the brunt of the conflict. The German Confederation would add no real strength:

Aided by Russia, Prussia, and Austria, the German Confederation would probably hold together, because it would believe in victory even without its support; but in the case of a two-front war toward East and West, those princes who are not under the control of our bayonets would attempt to save themselves through declarations of neutrality, if they did not appear in the field against us. . . . With a million troops of the Holy Alliance behind it, the German Confederation may seem durable; in the present situation it is unable to resist a foreign danger.

What about the alliance with Austria, for over a generation the cardinal postulate of Prussian policy? Not only was Austria a weak ally, Bismarck replied, but an incongruous one. "If we remained victorious against a Franco-Russian alliance for what would we have fought? For the continuation of Austria's predominance in Germany and the miserable constitution of the Confederation . . . for that we cannot possibly risk our existence or bleed to death victoriously." On the contrary, Austria was the chief obstacle to Prussia's growth:

Germany is too small for the two of us . . . , as long as we plough the same furrow, Austria is the only state against which we can make a permanent gain and to which we can suffer a permanent loss. . . . For the past thousand years the German dualism has regulated its internal relationships through a war every 100 years and in this century too, no other means will be able to make the clock of history tell the proper time.

Thus Bismarck resolved whatever contingency he considered into an argument that Prussia break its confederate bond to Austria.

How then could a power survive in the center of the Continent? After 1815, Prussia's answer had been adherence to the Holy Alliance almost at any price. Bismarck's solution was aloofness. He proposed to manipulate the commitments of the other powers so that Prussia would always be closer to any of the contending parties

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than they were to each other. If Prussia managed to create a maximum of options for itself, it would be able to utilize its artificial isolation to sell its cooperation to the highest bidder:

The present situation forces us not to commit ourselves in advance of the other powers. We are not able to shape the relations of the great powers to each other as we wish, but we can maintain the freedom to utilize to our advantage those relationships which do come about. . . . Our relations to Austria, Britain and Russia do not furnish an obstacle to a rapprochement with any of these powers. Only our relations with France require careful attention so that we keep open the option of going with France as easily as with the other powers. . . . I believe that our position loses weight to the degree that the chance of an alliance with France is eliminated from the range of possible options for Prussia. . . . This may be regrettable, but facts cannot be changed, they can only be used.

Facts can only be used—this was the motto of the new diplomacy which sought to keep the situation fluid through the dexterity of its manipulations until a constellation emerged reflecting the realities of power rather than the canons of legitimacy. Such a policy required cool nerves because it sought its objectives by the calm acceptance of great risks, of isolation, or of a sudden settlement at Prussia's expense. Its rewards were equally great—the emergence of a united Germany led by Prussia.

A call to greatness, however, is often not understood by contemporaries. Prussian hegemony in Germany meant little to the Prussian legitimists if it was obtained through an alliance with Napoleon. A unified Germany was unacceptable to the liberals if it occurred in the name of Prussia's greatness. It was inevitable, therefore, that Bismarck should stand alone and that his most bitter battle should be fought against his former allies, the conservatives, who reacted with incredulous horror at the policy he unfolded. They may have had a premonition that Prussia would lose its essence even while it increased its power. Whether their motive was a limited horizon or instinctive wisdom, the conservatives were met with ever-increasing sharpness by Bismarck's eloquent denial that any state had the right to sacrifice its opportunities to its principles.

The Relativity of Legitimacy

Nobody in the states which had experienced French occupation could see in the emergence of a new Napoleon anything but a threat. The nationalists feared foreign bondage, and the conservatives, as always, dreaded domestic upheaval.

Yet the basic postulate of Bismarck's policy was that the fear of a possible Franco-Prussian alliance would be a far better tool for increasing Prussia's influence than reliance on Austrian good will. It took considerable daring to suggest that the state which in 1860 had nearly shared the fate of Poland should use its erstwhile conqueror to bring pressure on its closest allies. Thus the conflict between Bismarck and the conservatives turned on ultimate principles. Bismarck asserted that power supplied its own legitimacy; the conservatives argued that legitimacy represented a value transcending the claims of power. Bismarck believed that a correct evaluation of power would yield a doctrine of self-limitation; the conservatives insisted that force could be restrained only by superior principle.

This conflict found expression in a poignant exchange of letters between Bismarck and his old mentor, Leopold von Gerlach, the military adjutant of the Prussian king. Leopold von Gerlach had grown up during the wars of the French Revolution and had experienced Napoleon's occupation of Prussia. Bismarck was born in the year of Napoleon's banishment to St. Helena; to him Napoleon and the French Revolution were personally distasteful, but not beyond sober calculation. Throughout their exchange, Gerlach appears stodgy and at a distinct disadvantage intellectually. Yet his very unimagination lends pathos to their correspondence, for Bismarck owed everything to Gerlach: his first appointment and his access to the court. The extent of Gerlach's misunderstanding is also the measure of Bismarck's revolutionary quality.

It was only natural that the exchange between Gerlach and Bismarck should have its origin in the "master report" with its recommendation that Prussia develop an option toward France. Bismarck sent this report to Gerlach with a covering letter which placed the principle of utility above that of legitimacy: "I cannot escape the mathematical logic of the fact that present-day Austria cannot be our friend. As long as Austria does not agree to a delimitation of spheres of influence in Germany, we must anticipate a contest with it, by means of diplomacy and lies in peace time, with the utilization of every opportunity to give a coup de grace."⁴³ Gerlach, however, would not accept the proposition that Prussia's future justified its seeking support across the Rhine. On the contrary, he argued that Prussia should bring Austria and Russia closer together and restore the Holy Alliance which had enforced France's isolation.⁴⁴

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The spring of 1855 found Bismarck in Paris. He had gone there to divine the character of the statesman who most fascinated him among his contemporaries, Napoleon III. The French Emperor was a symbol of the revolt against the treaties of 1815, the cardinal principle of Bismarck's policy. Since Bismarck wanted to use Napoleon to demonstrate Prussia's superior maneuverability, he proposed to Gerlach that Napoleon be invited to attend the maneuvers of a Prussian army corps: "This proof of good relations with France . . . would increase our influence in all diplomatic relations."⁴⁵

The suggestion that a Napoleon participate in Prussian maneuvers produced an outburst by Gerlach: "How can a man of your intelligence sacrifice his principles to such an individual as Napoleon—Napoleon is our natural enemy."⁴⁶ Had Gerlach seen Bismarck's cynical marginalia—"What of it?"—he might have saved himself another letter in which he repeated the principles that had animated the Holy Alliance for over a generation:

My political principle is and remains the war against revolution. Bonaparte is a revolutionary because his absolutism, just as that of the first Napoleon, is based on popular sovereignty and he understands this as well as his predecessor. Prussia's policy must be anti-revolutionary not only in principle but in practice so that at the proper time the vacillating powers such as perhaps Austria and Britain will know what to expect of it. For only he is reliable who acts according to principle and not according to changing concepts of national interest.⁴⁷

It is difficult to escape the pathos of Gerlach, being forced, at the end of his life, into a theoretical defense of his values by the protégé whom he sponsored as the best defender of the very principles now at issue. Gerlach's frustration was compounded because Bismarck, with his marvelous diplomatic skill, immediately transferred the dispute to a plane on which Gerlach was at a distinct disadvantage both intellectually and morally.

Bismarck began by denying that his proposal was motivated by a personal weakness for Napoleon: "The man does not impress me at all. The ability to admire men is in any case only moderately developed in me and it is a fault of my eye that it is more receptive to the weakness of others than to their strengths." On the other hand, Gerlach's insistence on the unity of conservative interests was incompatible with Prussian patriotism. The interests of states transcended abstract principles of legitimacy:

As for the principle I am alleged to have sacrificed, if you mean a principle applicable to France and *its* legitimacy, I admit that I sub-

ordinate this completely to Prussian patriotism. France interests me only insofar as it affects the situation of my country and we can make policy only with the France which exists. . . . As a romantic I can shed a tear for the fate of Henry V (the Bourbon pretender); as a diplomat I would be his servant if I were French, but as things stand, France, irrespective of the accident who leads it, is for me an unavoidable pawn on the chess-board of diplomacy, where I have no other duty than to serve *my* king and *my* country [Bismarck's emphasis]. I cannot reconcile personal sympathies and antipathies toward foreign powers with my sense of duty in foreign affairs; indeed I see in them the embryo of disloyalty toward the Sovereign and the country I serve.⁴⁸

What could a traditional Prussian reply to the charge that the principle of legitimacy was inconsistent with Prussian patriotism, that upholding traditional rule involved the possibility of disloyalty toward the legitimate king of Prussia? Lest Gerlach should seek refuge in asserting the identity of the claims of legitimacy and of national interest, Bismarck anticipated his argument:

Or perhaps you find the principle I violated in the fact that Prussia must always be an enemy of France. . . . I could deny this—but even if you were right I would not consider it politically wise to let other states know of our fears in peace time. Until the break you predict occurs I would think it useful to encourage the belief that a war between us and France is *not* imminent . . . that the tension with France is not an organic fault of our nature on which everyone can count with certainty. . . . Alliances are the expression of common interests and goals. . . . But we have indicated our willingness for an alliance precisely to those whose interests are most contrary to ours: Austria and the other German states. . . . If we consider this the last word of our foreign policy . . . we must get used to the idea that in case of war we shall stand alone in the palace of the Assembly of the Confederation holding in one hand the German Constitution. . . . I want nothing else than to take away the belief of others that *they* can ally themselves with whom-ever they please while *we* would rather lose our skin piecemeal than to defend it with the aid of France. When I advocate this . . . I expect that I am shown that these advantages are illusory or else that I am given a better plan into the combinations of which the semblance of good relations with France does not fit.

Gerlach had no better plan. What was at issue between him and Bismarck was not a policy, but a philosophy. To Gerlach an alliance with Napoleon was contrary to the maxims of morality and the lessons of Prussian history; to Bismarck it depended entirely on political utility unencumbered by moral scruples. Gerlach tested policy by an absolute moral standard; Bismarck considered success the only acceptable criterion. Gerlach sought fulfillment in

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commitment; Bismarck sought it in dexterity. Because he was of a generation which had known disaster, Gerlach was obsessed by the risks of a power in the center of a continent. Because disaster indicated to Bismarck only a false assessment of forces, he saw primarily the opportunities of the central position.

Thus the exchange between Bismarck and Gerlach had reached an impasse, even though Gerlach was reluctant to admit it. Gerlach invoked Bismarck's great days as the spokesman of the conservatives and repeated his maxim that Prussia would be the weaker partner in a Franco-Prussian alliance. Prussia would lose the confidence of the other German states and therefore Bismarck's policy lacked principle and objective.⁴⁹

Bismarck understood that their disagreement reflected not "misunderstanding," but incompatible values. He therefore proceeded to demonstrate that the maxims of legitimacy, so self-evident to Gerlach, were themselves only relative.

How many governments exist in the contemporary world which do not grow on revolutionary soil? Take Spain, Portugal, Brazil . . . Sweden or England which still prides itself on the Glorious Revolution of 1688. . . . Before the French Revolution not even the most Christian and conscientious statesman ever conceived the idea to subordinate all his political efforts . . . to the fight against the Revolution . . . and this despite the fact that the American as well as the British Revolution represented the same principles which brought about an interruption of legal continuity in France. I cannot believe that there should not have existed before 1789 a few statesmen equally Christian and similarly conservative as we and just as capable of recognizing evil.⁵⁰

This cynical paragraph demonstrates both Bismarck's strengths and weaknesses. To be sure, foreign policy in the eighteenth century had been cold-blooded and seemingly indifferent to domestic upheaval. But neither the British nor the American Revolution had claimed universal applicability. As long as European governments felt secure at home, they were able to ignore internal upheavals abroad. When these conditions no longer existed, Europe learned the "truth" of the postulate which Bismarck derided—that opposing systems of legitimacy are likely to clash if one of them claims general validity.

The debate was resumed two years later by Gerlach. By then he was in retirement and Bismarck had become Ambassador to St. Petersburg. Gerlach's letter has been lost and a page is missing in Bismarck's reply which heightens its abruptness. Impatiently em-

phasizing the gulf between them, Bismarck proclaimed that the inhibitions of the generation of 1815 had become irrelevant:

Who rules in France or Sardinia is a matter of indifference to me once the government is recognized and only a question of fact, not of right. I stand or fall with my own Sovereign, even if in my opinion he ruins himself stupidly, but for me France will remain France, whether it is governed by Napoleon or by St. Louis and Austria is for me a foreign country. . . . I know that you will reply that fact and right cannot be separated, that a properly conceived Prussian policy requires chastity in foreign affairs even from the point of view of utility. I am prepared to discuss the point of utility with you; but if you pose antinomies between right and revolution; Christianity and infidelity; God and the devil; I can argue no longer and can merely say "I am not of your opinion and you judge in me what is not yours to judge."

Even this bitter declaration of faith paled before a wounding reminder of Gerlach's role in Bismarck's career couched in the religious categories of Gerlach's Pietism:

I did not seek the service of the King. . . . The God who unexpectedly placed me into it will probably rather show me the way out than let my soul perish. I would overestimate the value of this life strangely . . . should I not be convinced that after thirty years it will be irrelevant to me what political successes I or my country have achieved in Europe. I can even think out the idea that someday "unbelieving Jesuits" will rule over the Mark Brandenburg together with a Bonapartist absolutism. . . . I am a child of different times than you, but as honest a one of mine as you of yours.⁵¹

This was the last letter exchanged between Bismarck and Gerlach.

The Revolutionary Tragedy

With the exchange with Gerlach, the main lines of Bismarck's thought were established. One by one, he had attacked the assumptions on which the "Metternich system" was based. He had declared the German Confederation a fetter to the development of Prussia's power. He had seen in the Holy Alliance a means to perpetuate an unjustified subordination of Prussia to Austria. Austria, the traditional ally, had been asserted to be Prussia's antagonist and France, the "hereditary" enemy, was considered a potential ally. The unity of conservative interests, the truism of policy for over a generation, had been described as subordinate to the requirement of national interest. The state transcended its fleeting embodiments in various forms of government.

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The significance of Bismarck's criticism did not, of course, reside in the fact that it was made—the tenuousness of the Metternich system was a shibboleth of the mid-nineteenth century—but in the manner by which it was justified. Heretofore the attacks on the principle of legitimacy had occurred in the name of other principles of presumably greater validity, such as nationalism or liberalism. Bismarck declared the relativity of *all* beliefs; he translated them into forces to be evaluated in terms of the power they could generate.

However hard-boiled Bismarck's philosophy appeared, it was also built on an article of faith no more demonstrable than the principle of legitimacy—the belief that decisions based on power would be constant, that a proper analysis of a given set of circumstances would necessarily yield the same conclusions for everybody. It was inconceivable to Gerlach that the principle of legitimacy was capable of various interpretations. It was beyond the comprehension of Bismarck that statesmen might differ in understanding the requirements of national interest. Because of his magnificent grasp of the nuances of power relationships, Bismarck saw in his philosophy a doctrine of self-limitation. Because these nuances were not apparent to his successors and imitators, the application of Bismarck's lessons led to an armament race and a world war.

The bane of stable societies or of stable international systems is the inability to conceive of a mortal challenge. The blind spot of revolutionaries is the belief that the world for which they are striving will combine all the benefits of the new conception with the good points of the overthrown structure. But any upheaval involves costs. The forces unleashed by revolution have their own logic which is not to be deduced from the intentions of their advocates.

So it was with Bismarck. Within five years of coming to power in 1862, he had solved the problem of German unity along the lines of the memoranda he had written during the previous decade. He first induced Austria to separate herself from the secondary German states and to undertake a joint expedition with Prussia against Denmark over the status of Schleswig-Holstein. With Austria isolated from its traditional supporters, Bismarck brought ever increasing pressure on her until in exasperation she declared war. A rapid Prussian victory led to the expulsion of Austria from Germany. Prussia was now free to organize North Germany on a hegemonic basis.

Shortly after taking office, Bismarck had obtained Russian good will by adopting a benevolent attitude during the Polish rebellion of 1862. Napoleon was kept quiet by the lure of gains now in the Rhineland, now in Belgium, now in Luxembourg—prospects that always proved elusive when Napoleon sought to implement them. When Napoleon sought compensation for his miscalculation that Austria would win the Austro-Prussian war, he found himself outmaneuvered. When his mounting frustrations led to the Franco-Prussian war, German unification became a reality at last in 1871.

This united Germany was far from the ideals of those who had urged it for nearly two generations. It was a federation of the historical states and came into being not through the expression of popular will, but through a diplomatic compact among sovereigns.

The very magnitude of Bismarck's achievement mortgaged the future. To be sure, he was as moderate in concluding his wars as he had been ruthless in preparing them. The chief advocate of reason of state had the wisdom to turn his philosophy into a doctrine of self-limitation once Germany had achieved the magnitude and power he considered compatible with the requirements of security. For nearly a generation, Bismarck helped to preserve the peace of Europe by manipulating the commitments and interests of other powers in a masterly fashion.

But the spirits once called forth refused to be banished by a tour de force, however great. The manner in which Germany was unified deprived the international system of flexibility even though it was based on maxims that presupposed the infinite adaptability of the principal actors. For one thing, there were now fewer participants in the international system. The subtle combinations of the secondary German states in the old Confederation had made possible marginal adjustments which were precluded among the weightier components of the modern era.

Moreover, once the resources of Germany became subject to central direction, pressures toward rigid coalitions increased. In trying to deal with its worst nightmare—an alliance between France and Russia—Germany made this alliance inevitable. As German defense policy was geared to coping with a two-front war, it presented an increasing threat to all its neighbors. A Germany strong enough to deal with its two great neighbors jointly would surely be able to defeat them singly. Thus Germany tended to bring on what it feared most. During the period of the German Confederation, joint action was only possible in the face of overwhelming danger.

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The uncertainty of these arrangements was one of the reasons why Bismarck had insisted on German unification under Prussian leadership. But he paid a price. What had been a remote contingency became at first a nightmare and then a reality.

These tendencies were reinforced because, with the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine by Germany, France disappeared from the list of potential German allies. The irreconcilable hostility of France meant the elimination of the French option, which in the 1850's Bismarck had considered essential. Henceforth French enmity was the "organic fault of our nature" against which Bismarck had warned in the 1850's. This precluded the policy outlined in the "master report"—of remaining aloof until the other powers were committed. With France available as a potential ally to an opponent of Germany, Bismarck had to attempt to forestall isolation by superior adaptability. But only four great powers remained available for Bismarck's subtle combinations, of which one—Great Britain—was tending toward isolation. Obviously the fewer the factors to be manipulated, the greater is the tendency toward rigidity.

To be sure, while Bismarck governed, these dilemmas were obscured by a diplomatic tour de force based on a complicated system of pacts with Germany at their center. But the very complexity of these arrangements doomed them. A system which requires a great man in each generation sets itself an almost insurmountable challenge, if only because a great man tends to stunt the emergence of strong personalities. When the novelty of Bismarck's tactics had worn off and the originality of his conception came to be taken for granted, lesser men strove to operate his system while lacking his sure touch and almost artistic sensitivity. As a result, what had been the manipulation of factors in a fluid situation eventually led to the petrification of the international system which produced World War I.

Bismarck's less imaginative successors failed even when they strove for "calculability" or "reliability." These qualities seemed more easily attainable by rigid commitments than by the delicate, constantly shifting balancing of Bismarck's policy. Thus Germany wound up with the unconditional commitment to the "worm eaten hulk" of Austria which it had been the whole thrust of Bismarck's policy to avoid.

In this manner it became apparent that the requirements of the national interest were highly ambiguous after all. Bismarck could

base self-restraint on a philosophy of self-interest. In the hands of others lacking his subtle touch, his methods led to the collapse of the nineteenth-century state system. The nemesis of power is that, except in the hands of a master, reliance on it is more likely to produce a contest at arms than self-restraint.

Domestically, too, the very qualities that had made Bismarck a solitary figure in his lifetime caused his compatriots to misunderstand him when he had become a myth. They remembered the three wars that had achieved their unity. They forgot the patient preparation that had made them possible and the moderation that had secured their fruits. The constitution designed by Bismarck magnified this trend: The Parliament was based on universal suffrage, but had no control over the government; the government was appointed by the Emperor and was removable by him. Such a system encouraged the emergence of courtiers and lobbyists, but not statesmen. Nationalism unleavened by liberalism turned chauvinistic, and liberalism without responsibility grew sterile.

Thus Germany's greatest modern figure may well have sown the seeds of its twentieth-century tragedies. "No one eats with impunity from the tree of immortality,"⁵² wrote Bismarck's friend von Roon, the reorganizer of the Prussian army, about him. The meaning of his life was perhaps best expressed by Bismarck himself in a letter to his wife: "That which is imposing here on earth . . . has always something of the quality of the fallen angel who is beautiful but without peace, great in his conceptions and exertions but without success, proud and lonely."⁵³

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