

\* Read, annotate + answer 2 Qs:

## Reviews & Responses



Q1: What are the characteristics of the "political climate Bismarck created in "Wilhelmine" Germany?"

Q2: Why would OVB be considered a "political genius"?

Authoritarian rulers who adopt some aspects of democracy while keeping power in their own hands are following in Bismarck's footsteps.

The Leadership Secrets of Bismarck    *Michael Bernhard*    150

Africa Unleashed    *Edward Miguel*    155

How Central Is Land for Peace?

*Oded Naaman and Mikhael Manekin; Elliott Abrams*    161

Manufacturing Globalization

*Richard Katz; Robert Z. Lawrence; Michael Spence*    166

Point of Order    *Amitai Etzioni; G. John Ikenberry*    172

Recent Books on International Relations    177

## Review Essay

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# The Leadership Secrets of Bismarck

## Imperial Germany and Competitive Authoritarianism

*Michael Bernhard*

*Bismarck: A Life.* BY JONATHAN STEINBERG. Oxford University Press, 2011, 592 pp. \$34.95.

Over the last two decades, a distinctive regime type has emerged across the developing world, one that scholars have come to call competitive authoritarianism. This sort of political system allows for the contestation of power among different social groups, but with so many violations of electoral fairness and so little regard for liberal norms that it cannot be called a true democracy. From Russia to Peru, Cambodia to Cameroon, such regimes are now located in almost every region of the world, and how they develop will determine the shape of the twenty-first century.

One of the best ways to gain insight into the future paths of these political systems, ironically, is to look backward rather than forward, because the past can be prologue.

Wilhelmine Germany is a particularly interesting point of comparison, because it had many similar characteristics. Like many of these regimes, it, too, experienced late, rapid growth and social transformation. It, too, developed a competitive form of politics that fell short of full-blown democracy. And potentially like some of today's emerging powers, Germany had a domestic political crisis that was capable of shaking the world.

The larger-than-life figure who presided over Germany's rise was Otto von Bismarck, foreign minister and minister-president of Prussia during the 1860s, architect of German unification in 1871, and chancellor of a unified German empire from 1871 to 1890. Given Bismarck's role in German history, a vast amount has already been written about him, so one might question what more there is to say. However, in

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### *The Leadership Secrets of Bismarck*

*Bismarck: A Life*, Jonathan Steinberg, a respected historian with a long career at Cambridge University and the University of Pennsylvania, has produced a first-rate biography that combines a standard historical narrative with an intriguing account of Bismarck as a personality.

Incorporating reflections from the man himself, as well as from his friends, enemies, and coworkers, *Bismarck* offers a fresh and compelling portrait of a fascinating character. Steinberg shows how the German political climate Bismarck fostered—marked by deference to authoritarianism, an aversion to compromise, and reactionary antimodernism—contributed to the country's disastrous course in the decades after Bismarck's fall from power. And in doing so, he indirectly sheds light on the prospects of competitive authoritarian regimes in the contemporary era. The thing to keep an eye on, it turns out, is less the character of the classes rising from below than the willingness of elites at the top to loosen their grip on power.

#### **BISMARCK'S POLITICAL GENIUS**

Bismarck was born in 1815 to that stratum of Prussian nobility, the Junkers, that combined hardscrabble farming in the rye belt east of the Elbe River with an ethic of disciplined and often militarized service to the Hohenzollerns, Prussia's ruling family. He was educated, witty, and highly intelligent (although not an intellectual). Like many Junkers, his politics were reactionary; he was antidemocratic, antisocialist, anti-Catholic, and anti-Semitic.

Bismarck first rose to prominence during the revolutions of 1848, when nationalist and democratic uprisings challenged Europe's political status quo. As a new member of the Prussian legislature, he

forcefully defended the monarchy's desire for unfettered executive power. Thanks in part to his maneuvering then and later, the dynasty survived the tumult and went on to rule for seven more decades—a period during which Prussia unified Germany around it and blossomed into an industrial and military powerhouse.

Germany's economic development was relatively late by European standards. Social scientists such as Alexander Gerschenkron and Barrington Moore have noted that its embrace of capitalist modernity and rise to power were predicated on a new pattern of authoritarian development—in Moore's words, a "revolution from above." This meant using industrial policy to push development in those sectors that enhanced state power and simultaneously suppressing or co-opting all political opposition. In order to catch up with the more advanced economies of the West, the government protected heavy industries essential to the nation's military strength, as well as Junker agriculture, with tariffs.

The transformation of a largely agrarian and rural society into an industrial and urban one always involves major changes in social structure. Social change, in turn, almost inevitably leads to the rise of new political actors demanding a voice and a share of power. Although Steinberg does not dwell on the larger socioeconomic or theoretical picture, he does a good job of presenting the specifics of how this story played out in the German case. The success of the German economy led to the expansion of three groups: the bourgeoisie, the middle class, and the working class. These groups challenged Junker dominance through the Catholic Center Party, various liberal parties, and the Social Democratic Party. Ultimately, following Germany's

defeat in World War I, these parties would abolish the empire and declare a republic. But Bismarck, by playing these forces off one another and selectively granting policy concessions, managed to keep them at bay for decades.

Nondemocratic regimes that try to manage their publics by simulating democracy have to walk a fine line. Establishing a veneer of democratic institutions, such as elections, can allow traditional or dictatorial rulers to incorporate rising groups into the political process without fully empowering them, thus stabilizing an existing regime and giving it some popular legitimacy. If elections are too obviously a sham and legislatures too obviously impotent, however, their hollowness can spur demands for progress toward real democracy, increasing rather than decreasing the regime's political problems.

The imperial German political system grappled continuously with this tension. It featured a monarch, the kaiser, who appointed the chancellor, the head of government. But it also featured a bicameral parliament, with the powerful lower house, the Reichstag, elected competitively through universal male suffrage. It was here that new social forces in Germany could give voice to their concerns. During his two decades as chancellor, Bismarck reported directly to the sovereign rather than the public at large, but he needed the consent of a majority in the Reichstag in order to pass budgets and other legislation.

The politics that played out in the Reichstag were real. The monarchy could not count on automatic support for all of its policies. It lost battles from time to time, and it was forced to compromise with legislative factions. Despite these constraints, Bismarck outmatched all his

competitors in domestic politics, as in foreign policy, by practicing a style of politics similar to that used in competitive authoritarian regimes today.

#### **SUPPRESSION AND CO-OPTATION**

Bismarck's strategy was to weaken his opponents through authoritarian suppression while building temporary political coalitions in order to enact his preferred legislation. The skillful execution of this strategy allowed him to keep control over the legislative agenda for 20 years, despite his lack of a natural parliamentary majority and the growing power of the middle and working classes.

His favorite move was to divide and conquer, turning his ire on the Catholics, the liberals, and the Social Democrats in turn. The first of these maneuvers, the Kulturkampf of the 1870s, was directed against the third of the Prussian population that was Catholic. Bismarck saw Catholics and the clergy as potential fifth columnists who could be manipulated by Catholic Austria (which he had kept out of the empire) and the Vatican. He was able to put strong anticlerical measures in place by securing the support of conservatives and liberals. This worked for a while, but in the long run, the Center Party's strength continued to grow, and many of its leaders came to believe that constitutional democracy would protect their interests better than the monarchy.

The Kulturkampf was followed by the Anti-Socialist Laws. After two failed assassination attempts on the kaiser in 1878, Bismarck was able to convince both conservatives and liberals to pass restrictions on the rapidly growing socialist movement, denying socialists the right to publish or assemble. Even as he pressured the working

### *The Leadership Secrets of Bismarck*

class' formal political representatives, however, Bismarck tried to gain the support of workers themselves by sponsoring an array of pioneering social welfare legislation—health insurance (1883), accident insurance (1884), and retirement pensions (1889). He was among the first to understand, in other words, that authoritarian regimes can legitimize themselves by lifting their citizens out of poverty and providing some security against economic uncertainty. Here, too, the strategy worked in the short run but failed over time, as the Social Democrats continued to grow, becoming Germany's largest political party in 1912. In 1890, following Bismarck's dismissal, the Reichstag allowed the Anti-Socialist Laws to lapse.

As for the liberals, Bismarck repeatedly sought their help for his moves against the Catholics and workers, but his larger relationship with them blew hot and cold, particularly on the issue of free trade (which they supported and he did not). And toward the end of his term, he turned against them, too, using rising anti-Semitism as a weapon. Like many Junkers and conservatives, Bismarck rejected modernity and capitalism as a Jewish plot to gain power and upset the natural order of society. Over the course of the third quarter of the century, this sort of anti-Semitism gathered steam in Germany. Bismarck did not drive the movement, but he was happy to profit from it, permitting attacks on prominent Jewish liberals as a way of weakening and cowering liberalism as a political force.

Bismarck's success in domestic political combat enabled him to remain in control of the Reich and enact the foreign and industrial policies that ensured Germany's status as a great power. His example seemed to show that illiberal politics could achieve results that matched or exceeded the results

of liberal political institutions elsewhere in the West—and his contemporaries took note, making "revolution from above" an attractive option for other autocrats, not unlike the so-called China model today.

#### **IS COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIANISM SUSTAINABLE?**

Many ambitious politicians in developing countries today, such as Vladimir Putin in Russia and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, have adopted some aspects of democratic political systems, allowing parties, elections, constitutions, and the like, while harassing their opponents and finding ways to keep power in their own hands. This might well end up being the outcome of the political turmoil in many of the countries that experienced the Arab Spring, such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. And even some democracies have slid backward in their practices, with leaders such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey using their power to throw unfair obstacles in the way of their political rivals. Some relatively stable authoritarian regimes, meanwhile, such as China, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam, owe their success in part to their ability to enhance the welfare of their populations. Whether they realize it or not, all these regimes are following in Bismarck's footsteps.

Lifting populations out of poverty is clearly a good thing. In the second half of the nineteenth century, as Germany became an economic and military powerhouse, the country's standard of living rose appreciably, and it became a world leader in science, the arts, technology, and education. But in creating a powerful and authoritarian state to attain his goals, Bismarck retarded the political development of the society around it. Through his

continuous and contemptuous manipulation of parliament, suppression of dynamic new political forces, and intolerance of all independent sources of intelligence and authority, he denied Germany exactly what it needed to govern itself successfully over the long term: a well-developed parliamentary tradition and robust political parties capable of providing effective leadership. The sociologist Max Weber's classic analysis of Germany's limited democratic prospects at the end of the empire, which Steinberg appropriately highlights and appreciates, should be sobering reading for fans of competitive authoritarians in the developing world today.

To be sure, there are also some grounds for optimism. In her important study *Practicing Democracy*, the historian Margaret Anderson offers a significantly less gloomy interpretation of imperial Germany's ultimate political trajectory. She paints a picture of a country in which 40 years of competitive politics produced a thriving civil society, a well-established party system, and a vibrant public sphere. Anderson argues that Germany may well have evolved naturally in the direction of real democracy were it not for World War I and the Carthaginian peace that followed. And other scholars have made similar points about less than fully democratic political development in mid-nineteenth-century France and contemporary Africa and other cases with similar features.

The crux of this debate is whether competitive authoritarianism can serve as a useful halfway house toward a better political future—whether institutions that offer some form of open contestation, even if seriously flawed, inculcate good habits that eventually facilitate the emergence

of liberal democracy or whether they constitute a detour away from it.

Here, too, the German case has lessons to teach, if one extends the discussion from Bismarck's era to the decades that followed, and particularly to World War I itself. Anderson, for example, may be correct that Germany was on a path to evolve in a democratic direction in the early decades of the twentieth century. But many would argue that it was precisely in order to head off such an outcome that conservative German elites were prepared to act so aggressively during the run-up to war and accept the terrible risks of an expansionist foreign policy. Bismarck's wars of German unification had helped stymie the reformist impulses of the liberals, after all, so it was not crazy to think that a new round of expansionism might cause the opposing parties to fall into line this time around—which, in fact, they did for the first three years of the war, until the full economic brunt of failure began to be felt.

Competitive authoritarian political systems, like imperial Germany's hybrid of monarchy and parliamentary rule, might contain the seeds of future democracies. However, for this to occur, the elites that benefit from competitive authoritarianism need to be willing to let the electoral process play out to its conclusion. They have to accept a loss of control over the outcome of elections, the need to compete fairly with newly empowered political forces, and the prospect of ultimately sharing or even losing power. The willingness of local elites to cope with the uncertainty of fully competitive politics will thus be the ultimate factor in determining whether competitive authoritarianism proves a way station in democratic development or a safe house for autocrats. ●