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***Bismarck: A Life*. By Jonathan Steinberg. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2011. viii + 577 pp. £25 (hardback).**

At first glance this biography of Germany's first chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, exudes an air of blandness. The nondescript title vanishes in the sea of ink that has been spent on Bismarck in the last hundred years, thus placing the book at a disadvantage vis-à-vis a host of high-quality and more suggestively named biographies on the market, cases in point being Lothar Gall's seminal *Bismarck: Der weiße Revolutionär* (Frankfurt/Main, 1980) and Ernst Engelberg's *Bismarck: Urpreuße und Reichsgründer* (Berlin, 1985). On closer inspection, however, the reader soon discovers that the author has some genuinely thought-provoking things to say. Drawing on published material and internet sources, Jonathan Steinberg paints a rich picture of Bismarck's personality as an individual and as a statesman. He explores how the chancellor exercised his personal power and elucidates the reactions of contemporaries based on a broad range of eyewitness accounts.

Steinberg's is not a 'great statesman' biography in the conventional sense, though, as Weberian notions of political authority are discarded in favour of a critical but objective engagement with the 'sovereignty of an extraordinary, gigantic self' (p. 4). At issue here are the transformation of Prussian society in the nineteenth century and the way in which Bismarck used his personal power to govern with, but most of the time against, the Hohenzollern court, parliaments, the masses and economic forces. This dialectic approach allows Steinberg to deliver a multi-faceted reading of the chancellor's interaction with society. Most noticeably, the attempt to link the prevalent hatred of Jews among the

Prussian nobility to Bismarckian politics makes Steinberg one of the first biographers to do so in a sustained manner. He deftly traces the roots of antisemitism in the conservative milieu of the Junkers and the later popularization of antisemitic sentiments in the highest social circles with the help of reputed contemporary historians and theologians. Although Bismarck got on well with individual politicians of Jewish extraction such as Ferdinand Lassalle, Eduard Simon and Benjamin Disraeli, he found antisemitic rhetoric to be a useful weapon against the Progressive Party and as a result did nothing to protect Jewish citizens against extreme antisemitism of the Treitschke variety. Hence, by manipulating the latter for his own purposes, Bismarck contributed directly to the legitimization of excesses against Jews, which were to have such terrible consequences for Jewish–Gentile relations after the First World War.

A great strength of Steinberg's analysis lies in its attention to the nuances and contradictions of Bismarck's character. It reveals a man with prodigious intellectual talents and the capacity for far-sighted diplomacy but also petty vindictiveness, thirst for power, and a subconscious need to re-enact psychological triangles patterned on the relationship with his parents. That said, Steinberg's decision to focus on Bismarck's 'sovereign self' has the drawback of marginalizing structural factors that led others to support or oppose his policies. The short segment on the Franco-Prussian War is an instructive example. Bismarck's clash with the General Staff over the timing of the bombardment of Paris comes over in the narrative as the case of an overbearing politician who was meddling in the affairs of the army. Yet the conflict may in fact have owed more to the peculiarities of the Prussian political system than the quirks of Bismarck's personality. From the outset of his tenure as minister-president of Prussia, Bismarck committed himself to upholding the semblance of personal rule by the emperor, and since he never held formal authority independent of the king's grace, turf wars became inevitable at the interstices of defence and foreign policy, where military and civilian interests competed for royal endorsement. That the chancellor ultimately failed to assert his supremacy in principle left room for the generals to increase their political influence at the expense of his weaker successors, perpetuating one crucial 'triangle of leadership' (Stig Förster) that would have merited more attention in Steinberg's analysis.

The same caveat applies more generally to the complexities of the Second Empire's constitution and the relationship between the central political actors. Steinberg writes '[w]hy [Wilhelm I] chose to be overruled on matters by his Chancellor remains one of the most mysterious and yet important themes of Bismarck's career and hence of this book' (p. 350). Next to the larger-than-life figure of Bismarck, however, the emperor remains strangely one-dimensional. Even if one accepts the thesis that he succumbed to the personal magnetism of his chief minister, the biography provides more than enough evidence of Wilhelm I's good sense, yet few concrete answers as to why he put up with Bismarck's constant resignation threats and slipping grasp of both the domestic and the foreign political situation after the late 1870s. Moreover, given the chancellor's prolonged absences from Berlin, readers are left guessing why it took his opponents at court and in the army until 1890 to eject him from the seat of power.

Biographies invariably necessitate selectivity in the choice of themes and modes of narration. Steinberg's study testifies to the inescapable dilemmas that arise from trade-offs between conciseness and comprehensiveness, but the elegant prose (though marred by poor editing on the publisher's part) and lucid argument make *Bismarck: A Life* an important contribution to the literature on the Iron Chancellor. Reminiscent of Sebastian Haffner's essayistic style in places, the narrative weaves together facts, figures, contemporary ego-documents and the author's interpretation of the evidence to offer a sophisticated appraisal of the statesman responsible for the 'greatest diplomatic and political achievement by any leader in the last two centuries' (p. 184)—the unification of Germany despite Prussia's constitutional peculiarities, despite national revulsion at Bismarck's ultra-conservative reputation and, last but not least, despite the opposition of two great powers.

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