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Robert Gerwarth. *The Bismarck Myth: Weimar Germany and the Legacy of the Iron Chancellor.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. 216 S. $85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-928184-8.

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WWBD? (What Would Bismarck Do?): Bismarck Iconography in Twentieth-Century German Politics

Although a 1998 poll showed that 53 percent of Germans do not even know who Otto von Bismarck was, Robert Gerwarth's well-researched, comprehensive and highly readable book informs us that this was certainly not always the case (p. 170). In fact, a wide range of German political groups and politicians claimed Bismarck as their token savior for political gain throughout the twentieth century. In a thorough study that examines the preeminent position of Bismarck in Germany's political iconography during the twentieth century, Robert Gerwarth skillfully investigates ways that Bismarck's image has been alternately exploited, evoked in political campaigns, negated, revived and radicalized. Gerwarth documents various parties and politicians who, if they could not rely on historical fact, resorted to hypothesizing Bismarck's projected actions or judgments of political situations to lend support and legitimacy to their own political decisions. Crafting answers based only loosely on fact, these groups or individuals fortified their political messages with the stalwart image of the Iron Chancellor.

Central to Gerwarth's book, as the title indicates, is not Bismarck the man, but rather Bismarck the myth, which the author defines as a "certain interpretation of the past that transcends historical reality" (p. 6). If Bismarck personified Germany, then, as Gerwarth states, "the public debate on Bismarck thus mirrored the fundamental lack of any basic political and ethical consensus within Weimar's fragmented political culture" (p. 177). Throughout the book, Gerwarth demonstrates (with abundant historical citations from newspapers, speeches and private papers) the ways in which the Bismarck myth constantly underwent changes of content, making it politically useful in a variety of different contexts. As can be expected from so many varied groups claiming Bismarck as representative of their patriotic, hard-line or hands-off policies, heated controversies developed over factual interpretations of his political lessons on leadership and patriotism. These controversies lay at the foundation of the Bismarck myth.

In his slim, yet extremely comprehensive book, Gerwarth traces the development and politically motivated transformations or exploitations of the Bismarck myth through the rough transition periods that define twentieth-century Germany. In particular, Gerwarth ex-

amines how the myth was used to undermine democracy during the Weimar period, and therefore laid the groundwork for the acceptance of the Third Reich's authoritarian rule. Any attacks aimed at Bismarck revealed a lack of national spirit deemed necessary for rebuilding a strong German nation. Consequently, the Bismarck myth developed as one that no good, patriotic citizen should question. Following this model, according to Gerwarth, the Third Reich could establish a system of government that no one should oppose. Because political groups or parties who claimed Bismarck as a figurehead subscribed to the common philosophy that hero worship helps to stabilize political order, Bismarck emerged as a heroic cult figure that embodied the value system of those longing for national integration.

Despite the book's subtitle, "Weimar Germany and the Legacy of the Iron Chancellor," the study in fact moves beyond the scope of Weimar Germany to include chapters on "The Bismarck Myth in Wilhelmine Germany" and "Bismarck between the 'Seizure of Power' and Reunification (1933-1990)." As the author guides the reader chronologically through the twentieth century, he demonstrates how Bismarck's image was converted from political weapon to guiding star to film star–to name just a few creative transformations. For each of these, Gerwarth expertly describes how the exploitation of Bismarck's legacy shaped current German politics as well as wide-ranging interpretations of the German past. In fact, according to the book, the still contested Bismarck figure aptly parallels Germany's fragmented and conflicted twentieth-century political profile.

A brief overview of the book's chapters helps to show in more detail how Gerwarth presents a broad and well-structured history of numerous interpretations of the myth from 1890-1990. In chapter 2, "The Bismarck Myth in Wilhelmine Germany (1890-1918)," Gerwarth provides copious and well-researched background information that skillfully leads into his main focus on the Bismarck myth during the Weimar Republic. During this period, Bismarck's public image steadily gained popularity against the then-current political backdrop–a trend that Gerwarth names "retrospective idealization" (p. 13). Emphasizing the at times diametrically opposed interpretations of the myth, chapter 3, "After the Collapse," emphasizes by contrast how groups could utilize the myth as a way of underscoring the wrong way to govern. For example, the push at this time involved leaving the concept of *kleindeutsch* in the past and surmounting the narrowness of Bismarck's Reich (pp. 34-35). Although controversy existed among different factions concerning Bismarck's true image, all parties seemed to agree that Bismarck defined the terms "patriotic German." In chapter 4, "Fragmented Society–Divided Memory," Gerwarth turns to the thrust of his book, the Bismarck myth during the Weimar Republic. Now more than ever, German society was in need of a guiding star, "based on the belief in a national leader figure [who] guided the country with a strong hand" (p. 43).

In order to emphasize the wide range of political interpretations, Gerwarth details the interest of highly diverse parties in the Bismarck myth. The Weimar Right embraced the Bismarck myth in its hope for a new leader to draw the country together, with the slogan "Back to Bismarck" (p. 52). While Catholic and liberal forces used Bismarck to prove national trustworthiness, the divided Left also relied on the Bismarck image to unite it against the current system. As Gerwarth emphasizes again and again, the timing of political events played a large role in the transformation of the myth. In chapter 5, "Fighting the Enemies of the Reich," Gerwarth names the French occupation of the Ruhr as a prominent case in point. Particularly at this turning point, the contradictory and fragmented image of Bismarck comes into fuller focus. Bismarck's image was invoked to justify opposite solutions to the crisis and groups even changed their own perception of the former chancellor based on the changed political context.

During the elections of 1924, political candidates advanced Bismarck into the new role of Election Campaigner (chapter 6). With renewed calls to go "back to Bismarck," politicians aimed to reestablish Bismarck's political system as a fitting model for current conditions. It was clear that strategists relied on certain symbolic associations, as Bismarck's pictures appeared on campaign posters with increasing frequency. Reinforcing the understanding of Bismarck as a figure whose character was consistently disputed, Gerwarth writes that instead of a battle between political candidates, the campaigning instead became "a battle for Bismarck's heritage" (p. 83). Film media emerged as a highly effective way to revive previously perpetuated images of Bismarck and to propagate national values with an attractive and attention-getting method (chapter 7, "In the Shadow of Stabilization"). As Gerwarth interprets it, film aimed to "make them conscious of what they have lost" and to promote "overwhelming public enthusiasm" (pp. 111-112). Consistent with this renewed public fervor for a great leader of the past, more Germans longed for a new Bismarck by the end of the 1930s.

Gerwarth describes these and other trends in chapter 8, "Towards the Abyss: Bismarck and the Dissolution of the Weimar Republic." Germany again found itself demanding a "saviour-like charismatic leader," which Bismarck was to embody (p. 129). Not only was Hitler content with praising Bismarck's past accomplishments, but he also suggested that Bismarck would have wanted subsequent leaders to continue and complete what he could not. Providing his carefully crafted and propaganda-laden answers to the question "What Would Bismarck Do?" Hitler played on their similarities as charismatic leaders in order to exploit the Bismarck image into an influential political device.

In chapter 9, Gerwarth outlines trends involving the Bismarck myth between 1933 and 1990. With the idea of the towering charismatic leader in mind, leaders in Third Reich referred to their current efforts as simply reestablishing historical continuity–that is, picking up where Bismarck had to leave off. Gerwarth describes the connectedness of the two leaders in this way: "[The] Bismarck myth helped to create a political climate which smoothed the way for Hitler's success" (p. 143). Attesting to his success as drawing strong connections between Bismarck and himself, Hitler's victory was viewed as the victory of the "ideas of 1871" (p. 144). Hitler used the question of what Bismarck would do and claimed to implement Bismarck's policies as he would have wanted.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the outbreak of World War II ushered in yet another revision of the myth: that Bismarck, or at least his policies, helped to lay the foundation for the Third Reich (p. 157).Although no one would have spoken of a return to Bismarck in the immediate postwar period, the image recovered critical damage in the 1950s. Predictably, however, the image of Bismarck as the guiding star lost ground after the initial years of the *Wirtschaftswunder*. Seconding the opinion that Bismarck's image had permanently lost its prominence, the director of the German Historical Museum Christoph StÃ¶lzl emphasized in 1990 at the opening of the Bismarck exhibition "that no one was interested in promoting uncritical or even heroic images of Bismarck any longer" (p. 169). Perhaps this late-century lack of interest in promoting a singular heroic figurehead led to the inability of over 50 percent of Germans even to recognize his name just eight years later.

Gerwarth persistently and capably reminds us, however, that Bismarck held a dominant position in the collective consciousness of Germans *and* influenced the strategies of German politicians for nearly one hundred years. Gerwarth not only achieves his goal of showing Bismarck's image as a fragmented, disputed and constantly reconstructed one, he also emphasizes the centrality of the Bismarck myth in Germany's distinctive political development. For anyone interested in this enigmatic German leader and his far-reaching effect on politics of the entire twentieth century, Gerwarth's clearly written and informative *The Bismarck Myth* is an essential read.

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