THE PORTRAIT OF BISMARCK IN THE GDR

by Ronald D. Asmus

Summary: Since the mid-1970s there have been extensive efforts on the part of East German historians to compose a new "national history" of the GDR. It has been an officially guided exercise in historical revisionism par excellence. Episodes in German history or key historical figures condemned or ignored in the past are now being portrayed in a new light as the SED deliberately expands the store of historical traditions to which it lays claim. These efforts should also be seen in the context of changing official attitudes toward the German nation, and the SED's claim that there exists a separate socialist German nation. East German historians have recently tackled such controversial figures as Frederick the Great and Martin Luther; there are now signs that the party's views on the legacy of Otto von Bismarck are also scheduled for rewriting. This paper briefly examines current attempts in the GDR to deal with Bismarck's legacy in what the SED terms a more "differentiated" fashion.

* * *
Comrades, you must understand! Fifteen streets and squares still bear Bismarck's name, that reactionary and arch enemy of the working class. This cannot go on; the situation is particularly urgent here in Pankow--after all, our President, Wilhelm Pieck, lives just a hundred meters from this square. The municipal council has now been informed that Bismarck Square will hereafter bear the name of our faithful Comrade Kurt Fischer, the founder of our People's Police!

Helmut Lehmann, 1949

Otto von Bismarck is a complicated figure in German history. The man and his policies undoubtedly embodied the reactionary interests of the Junkers. . . . In 1871 Bismarck brought about social progress by creating a bourgeois German national state through a "revolution from above." Although it was of course not the ideal variant of historical progress, it was progress nevertheless. Recognition of this fact, however, does not turn Bismarck into a progressive figure. Whoever wants to understand Bismarck in all his contradictions must also be aware of his reactionary policy against the working class. . . . [Taking into account the progress made by and limitations of this "revolution from above" one must also consider Bismarck's marked realism over questions of foreign policy. In this respect he also strived--in the interests of the bourgeoisie and Junker class, of course--for friendly relations with Russia. . . .

Prof. Walter Schmidt, 1984

Much has changed in the GDR in 35 years of the so-called "first peasants' and workers' state on German soil." One of the most striking changes has been in the official attitudes toward German history and the German nation itself. The founding of the GDR in 1949 was ostensibly intended not only as a legal but also as a spiritual break with the German past and those traditions that had found their culmination in Hitler's Third Reich. German history was neatly divided into its "progressive" component, a role seized by the SED, and a "reactionary" component, a role simply assigned to the Federal Republic. Although there was a brief period in the early 1950s in which the SED toyed with a more flexible "national" policy (a period that ended shortly after Stalin's famous note of March 1952), it is fair to say that in general the East German authorities attempted to build new regime loyalty predominantly founded upon Soviet precepts of "proletarian internationalism" complemented by the traditions of the German labor movement, the republican traditions of various German states, and a recollection of such events as the failed revolution of 1848.

Following major revisions of the official East German attitudes on the German nation and the positing of two separate
German nations: the socialist German nation in the GDR and the capitalist German nation in the FRG, the authorities began in the mid-1970s to formulate new views on certain periods in German history that had previously been condemned or deliberately ignored. It has become increasingly clear that what has been taking place is a conscious revision of the entire course of German history to fit the party's new concept of the nation and a policy that one West German commentator dubbed the Rehistorisierung of the GDR. Some of the most striking examples of this approach have been the SED's changing views on the legacy of Prussia and the remarkable shift in attitudes toward Martin Luther. Equally if not more striking have been recent attempts to deal with the legacy of Otto von Bismarck.

A Weighty Legacy

Otto von Bismarck is without question one of the dominant and most controversial figures in modern German history. Born in 1815 to an old Brandenburg Junker family, he made his mark in the diplomatic service and the Prussian Landtag, before becoming Prussia's Foreign Minister and Prime Minister in 1862. Following three successful wars—the Danish War of 1864, the Austro-Prussian war of 1866, and the Franco-Prussian War of 1871 he succeeded in unifying the various German principalities under Prussian hegemony (the so-called kleindeutsch solution), seeking to solve the problem of Germany's unity through "iron and blood." 

Bismarck's mantle was a heavy one not only in the realm of foreign policy but also in terms of domestic policies. For a country such as the GDR, which prides itself on being a "workers' state," the Iron Chancellor's domestic policies and his anti-socialist legislation (his banning of the SPD) must of course have been an anathema. Given this, it was no surprise that for many years Bismarck was particularly scorned in official East German scholarship. He earned such uncomplimentary titles as "aristocratic parasite," "oppressor of the workers," and "the precursor of Adenauer and the NATO imperialists."

In recent years, however, there have been clear signs of an attempt to view the Iron Chancellor as a more complicated figure, taking into account not only his "reactionary" policies but also his "progressive" achievements. The more favorable treatment he has been receiving should not be viewed as an isolated case; he belongs to an array of controversial historical figures whom the SED considers worth reappraisal (two other prominent examples being Federick the Great and Martin Luther). East German historians have been striving to uncover the progressive lineaments of the historical figures in their national gallery.

One of the first signs of this partial rehabilitation of Bismarck came in mid-February 1983 when an interview with the East German historian Heinz Wolter on the Iron Chancellor appeared in the official youth daily Junge Welt; under the title,
"A Stateman of Great Stature." Bismarck, according to Wolter, was "not the infallible master of the art of statesmanship, showing the German people the path to glory and greatness, as he is often made out to be." Nor was he, however, "that great villain who is to be personally saddled with the responsibility for the fatal course of Prusso-German history." Wolter claims instead that Bismarck must be viewed in the context of "the class struggle of the time," the "objective circumstances" under which he operated, and, most importantly, his ability or inability to shape factors in the historical process of his age. Viewed in these terms, Bismarck was undoubtedly a "statesman of great stature" and an exceptional figure in the Junker class of the Prussian military state. Wolter concluded that a new encounter to Bismarck's legacy was "conceivable" in the light of the GDR's more balanced attempts to deal with German history.

The interview with Wolter in Junge Welt created a stir in the West, especially when it became clear afterwards that his comments on Bismarck had not been an isolated event. Since then several other historians have taken up Bismarck's legacy, always stressing his reactionary policies but also insisting that certain aspects of his policies were "objectively progressive." What are, in the eyes of those East German historians, Bismarck's worthy accomplishments? First there is Bismarck's establishment of the Second German Reich in 1871. Although the establishment of German unity through "iron and blood" was not the "most ideal" solution to the problem of German unity, it was nonetheless progressive, the argument runs, since it had ended the century-old fragmentation of the German principalities and had paved the way for the full blossoming of capitalism in Germany. The fact that unity had been imposed through a "revolution from above" and not by the democratic decision of a sovereign people had constituted, of course, a "considerable burden on the future development of the German people." At the same time, however, this move had led to the creation of a national market, the standardization of currency and commercial legislation, favorable conditions for the development of capitalist methods of production, and last but certainly not least, "the prerequisites for the rapid development of a modern industrial proletariat and improved opportunities for the socialist workers' movement to organize on a national basis."

The second aspect of Bismarck's legacy singled out for praise by East German historians has been his foreign policy, above all his "realism" and cultivation of close ties with czarist Russia. This point was made not only by historians but also by SED Politburo member Kurt Hager. Speaking at a conference in mid-December 1983 devoted to setting the SED's ideological and propaganda priorities in the social sciences, Hager specifically took up Bismarck's case. While repeating the standard line that there are criticisms of Bismarck that have to be made, Hager also claimed that there were positive aspects that were particularly pertinent in the current international situation. The SED Politburo member then referred to Bismarck's sense
of realism, his "sober" calculations in terms of foreign policy, and, above all his advocacy of good relations with Russia. According to Hager, the ability of a conservative figure like Bismarck to think in such "realistic" terms at a time when conservative circles in the West were bent on a course of confrontation with the Soviet Union should be underlined. Indeed, when he asserted that Western politicians should note Bismarck's realism and not allow themselves to be coopted into the adventurist course allegedly being pursued by the Reagan administration, Hager seemed to be implicitly presenting Bismarck as a model, perhaps for the FRG. He said that

No one should be surprised when we refer to such views [those of Bismarck], views that certainly were based on very different class interests but nonetheless have special significance at a time when much depends upon whether the policy of the ruling circles of the imperialist states will be determined by those who are guided by a sense of reality and reason or by those possessed by adventurism and megalomania. For that reason, our recalling of Bismarck, albeit within clearly defined limits, is certainly in keeping with the times.8

Interested Observers

The SED's recent reappraisals of Bismarck have not surprisingly attracted a considerable amount of attention in the Western press. The newspapers interest in the GDR's "discovery" of Bismarck has been particularly strong in the FRG. One can assume that the GDR's Eastern neighbors have taken notice of these developments. Particularly interesting would be to know the reactions of the Poles toward the East German discussion of Bismarck's "progressive" accomplishments, given Bismarck's notorious anti--Polish sentiments.9 In the past, Polish historians have not hesitated to make their own views on such historical figures known; witness their reaction to the SED's revision of Frederick the Great and Prussia's legacy.10

The amount of attention that these statements on Bismarck have aroused in the West has already led the SED to issue a public denial that anything really new or major has taken place. East German historians blandly state that the current official image of Bismarck has long been part and parcel of East German historiography and dismiss the interest of the Western press in the SED's "discovery" of Bismarck as "absolute nonsense." Rejecting the notion that renewed interest in Bismarck among East German historians was telling, one East German journal explained that it was completely natural. Given the 100th anniversary of Karl Marx's death in 1983, it said, one should also deal with his contemporaries, including his opponents. The same article went on to try to disprove the claim that anything new was involved in listing a number of works on Bismarck that had been written in the past. The adamant conclusion reached was that
The only new fact is that the fruits of long-standing, scholarly efforts have been maturing for some time and are now finding increased expression in books, brochures, and magazine articles on Bismarck.11

The article observed the possibility of further works on the topic being written. Other articles sought to deflect attention from the "discovery" in the same way, referring to past works on Bismarck by Soviet historians such as A.S. Yerusalimsky on Bismarck or stressing the fact that Bismarck's memoirs had long ago been published in the Soviet Union. In his interview with Junge Welt, Wolter noted how much pleasure he had had in reading Bismarck's writings and observed the possibility of their eventually being published in the GDR.

Such energetic protests should not, however, obscure several basic facts. It is true that East German historians in the past did not ignore Bismarck. They did, however, treat him quite differently, never attempting to highlight his alleged "progressive" accomplishments in the way they are today. One need only recall that as late as 1959 the SED had found it necessary to send special shock troops of SED and Free German Youth members to destroy the castle of that "archenemy of the working class," Otto von Bismarck, at Schoenhausen near Tangermuende. Similarly, a 1953 DEFA film on Bismarck presented him as a wholly dark and brutal reactionary. The 1984 picture of the history and heritage of the GDR is clearly different.

Further notes could be added to reveal the difficulties that the SED has had in coping with a figure such as Bismarck. One could point out that although East German historians now refer to the fact that Bismarck's memoirs were published in the USSR in 1940, they fail to mention the fact that this took place at the time of the alliance between Stalin and Nazi Germany. Even more ironic is the fact that East German historians now praise so loudly the cultivation of ties with St. Petersburg by Bismarck; it was precisely these policies that reaped only scorn from the glorious forefathers of the SED, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, as well as of a host of other leading German socialists, for czarist Russia was viewed by them as the most reactionary of all European powers. (Both Marx and Engels did, however, have a positive view toward Bismarck's unification of Germany under Prussian hegemony.)

Dealing with Historical Inheritance

Despite the ambivalence of the stance, one must conclude that the SED's present position on the legacy of Bismarck is just the most recent (but certainly not the last) example of some considerable shifts in official East German historiography. This wider resorting of material was evident in a recent article by two East German historians who have long played a leading role in
manipulating the official attitude about German history. Published in the monthly theoretical journal Einheit [Unity], the article presented a kind of balance sheet of party policy in this area that emphasized two key points. First, the authors reiterated the SED's current line that the historical picture of the GDR must be colored by all of German history and not merely the events of the German labor movement, the traditions of 1848, or the republican experiences of various German principalities and city-states. Indeed the authors went so far as to claim that the reduction of the history of socialism on German soil to these few traditions would be a fully "alien" concept (despite the fact that this was more or less the SED's line throughout most of the 1950s and the 1960s).

Secondly, the authors went on to claim that this wider perspective was not only desirable but increasingly possible, because the development of the socialist society in the GDR had created the preconditions for "a more mature, more differentiated, and more precise mode of analyzing our historical inheritance in its entirety." This is the same argument that the SED used in justifying its Prussian renaissance, that the pillars of state power have become secure enough to tolerate a more open encounter with the past. The fact that the authors go on to claim that East German historians must be uninhibited in dealing with "everything that can be made useful for the development of a socialist nation" raises the tantalizing question of what further departures can be expected in East German historiography. The authors quote what they describe as the rather "slovenly aphorism" of the East German author Gerhard Branstner, "History unfortunately does not have any cleaning women; nor is there a garbage dump. All the trash must be processed." In view of this statement, many observers in both East and West must be wondering which figure will be next to be repainted by the historians.

* * *

1 From a speech given by SED member Helmut Lehmann at a 1949 party meeting in Berlin, defending the renaming of Bismarck Square in the Pankow district of that city. This passage from the speech was quoted in an article in Bayern Kurier, 24 September 1983.

2 Prof. Walter Schmidt is Director of the Institute for the History of the German Labor Movement. The quotation is taken from an interview conducted by the Academy of Sciences published in the Free German Youth monthly Junge Generation, no. 6, 1984.

3 See Ronald D. Asmus, "The GDR and the German Nation: Sole Heir or Socialist Sibling?" International Affairs (London), Summer 1984.

5 The phrase comes from a famous speech delivered by Bismarck on 30 September 1862 in which he stated: "The position of Prussia in Germany will be determined not by its liberalism but by its power. Bavaria, Wuerttemberg, and Baden may indulge themselves in liberalism, but no one will assign them the role of Prussia; Prussia must concentrate its strength and hold it for the favorable moment, a moment that has already been missed several times. . . . Not through speeches and majority decisions are the great questions of the day decided--that was the great mistake of 1848 and 1849--but through iron and blood." As quoted in Koppel S. Pinson, Modern Germany (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1954), p. 128.

6 Heinz Walter is the author and co-author of several books on Bismarck. The interview appeared in Junge Welt, 10 February 1983.

7 As quoted in Information (Bonn), no. 14, 1983.

8 See Hager's speech in Neues Deutschland, 16 December 1983.

9 Bismarck's anti-Polish feelings were renowned and based on fears that an autonomous Poland could become the base of a national movement demanding the restoration of Poland to its extent in 1772. Even the most remote possibility of a Polish revival evoked strong feelings in Bismarck. He feared that the loss of Danzig, West Prussia, and Posen would cut the "best sinews" of the Prussian monarchy. In a letter to his sister in 1861 he wrote: "Hit the Poles so hard that they despair of their life; I have full sympathy with their condition, but if we want to survive, we can only exterminate them; the wolf, too, cannot help having been created by God as he is, but people shoot him for it if they can." As quoted in Hajo Holborn, A History of Modern Germany 1840-1945 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 164.


11 See the article in Boersenblatt fuer den Deutschen Buchhandel (Leipzig), no. 23, 7 June 1983.


-end-