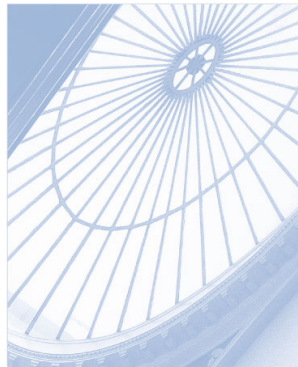


Zitierhinweis

Blanning, Tim: Rezension über: Wolfram Siemann, Metternich. Strategie und Visionär. Eine Biografie, München: C. H. Beck, 2016, in: German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol. XXXVIII (2016), 2, S. 96-100, DOI: 10.15463/rec.2057096073

GERMAN HISTORICAL INSTITUTE LONDON

Bulletin



copyright

Dieser Beitrag kann vom Nutzer zu eigenen nicht-kommerziellen Zwecken heruntergeladen und/oder ausgedruckt werden. Darüber hinausgehende Nutzungen sind ohne weitere Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber nur im Rahmen der gesetzlichen Schrankenbestimmungen (§§ 44a-63a UrhG) zulässig.

WOLFRAM SIEMANN, *Metternich: Stratege und Visionär. Eine Biografie* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2016), 983 pp. ISBN 978 3 406 68386 2. €34.95 (Hardback)

This is the book historians have been waiting a long time for: ninety-one years to be precise or, in other words, since Heinrich Ritter von Srbik published his massive two-volume biography of Clemens von Metternich. As Wolfram Siemann points out, every subsequent biographer has relied on Srbik to a greater or lesser extent, discouraged from further research by the consoling thought that it had all been done. It is with a mighty sigh of relief that we can now consign Srbik's turgid volumes, with their rambling sentences and interminable paragraphs, to the charity bookshops. Has anyone actually read every one of his roughly half-a-million words? Siemann probably has, but he himself needs only two-thirds of that number to deliver ten times more and, moreover, to do it fluently, lucidly, and engagingly.

Not the least of the problems with Srbik, as Siemann points out, was his racist *Weltanschauung*, leading him to assert that for Metternich, too, the 'overriding' concept was race, although, alas, he was also guilty of occasional 'unGerman' lapses and a general tendency to underestimate the moral energies of the German *Volk*. It comes as no surprise to discover that Srbik joined the NSDAP in 1938 following the *Anschluss*, a course of action, it can be assumed with confidence, his subject would not have endorsed. From the other end of the political spectrum, Metternich has always been pilloried for imposing black reaction on Europe after 1815, in a vain attempt to turn the clock back to the old regime.

Siemann assaults these positions root and branch in a sustained revisionist exercise. He brings to bear on his multiple targets the heavy-calibre ammunition he has assembled from the '*Acta Clementina*', Metternich's voluminous personal *Nachlass* located in the National Archive in Prague, together with the Metternich family archive also to be found there. With very few honourable exceptions, previous biographers have relied heavily on the eight volumes of memoirs and papers edited by Metternich's son Richard and published in French, German, and English in the 1880s. If only occasionally unreliable, they represent only a fraction of the whole. Among those whose factual errors and interpretative misjudgements are now cor-

rected by Siemann are Adam Zamoyski, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Alan Palmer, Paul Schroeder, and Matthias Schulz (the last-named is treated with special severity).

The old legends are still being repeated, by Manfred Rauchensteiner, for example, who in his contribution to a sumptuous volume published to mark the bicentenary of the Congress of Vienna, asserted that Metternich was largely responsible for Austria's catastrophic decision to declare war on Napoleon in 1809. Like so many before him, he was just repeating the verdict of Srbik, who had declined to investigate the archival material dealing with this episode because it was 'simply vast' (*schier unermesslich*). Yet, as Siemann points out, Manfred Botzenhart had done the necessary work in the Viennese and Prague archives back in 1967 and had shown that Srbik's assertion was completely unfounded and the opposite of the truth.

This demolition and site clearance form only a small part of the project. Siemann is, in fact, generous to most of those he criticizes, recognizing the achievement of Paul Schroeder, for example, and even finding some laudatory words for Srbik. His main task, however, is to recreate the Metternich revealed by the sources, not the ogre demonized by his opponents, past and present. The reconstruction begins in the family home with the rehabilitation of Metternich's father. Intelligent, learned, good-natured, and enlightened, Franz Georg von Metternich gave his son the best possible start, always treating him with affection and taking care that he received the best possible education from his tutors. Often away from home on Habsburg business, he wrote frequently, ending his letters with 'my dear and excellent Clemens, you are my friend, my confidant, and I cannot say how happy I am to have you as my child'. On his death in 1819, he was eulogized by his son as 'the best father and the truest friend'.

It was thanks to this excellent relationship that the younger Metternich acquired early practical knowledge of the world of politics and diplomacy. At the tender age of 7 he accompanied his father to the election of the Habsburg Archduke Max Franz as coadjutor to the Archbishop of Cologne. After 1791 he was often in Brussels, where Franz Georg had the thankless task of trying to run the Austrian Netherlands in the face of internal unrest and external aggression. By then, Clemens had already experienced the French Revolution at first hand in Strasbourg, where he was a student from

1788 to 1790. He was an eyewitness when the town hall was stormed 'by a drunken mob which saw itself as the people', as he put it. Hostility to revolution inside France was intensified mightily by direct experience of the revolution exported by French armies after 1792.

As the self-appointed liberators swept across Europe, they revealed the Janus face of the Revolution—sublime objectives pursued by inhuman means, culminating in Napoleonic world war and unprecedented physical devastation and loss of life. As Siemann reveals so clearly, what made this rupture so painful for Metternich was the depth of his attachment to the Holy Roman Empire. As the scion of an ancient Rhenish aristocratic dynasty, his inherited belief in the eternal validity of imperial laws and institutions was outraged by the destructive intrusion of raw power red in tooth and claw. Principled offence was heightened by private affliction, for the French conquests robbed the Metternichs of much of their property. Only the Bohemian estate of Königswart kept them afloat in the dark days following the invasions and allowed Clemens to win the hand of the well-connected and rich Eleonore von Kaunitz.

In 1794 he went to England for the first time, as a member of an Austrian delegation seeking a loan. He was well prepared, having studied the English language at Strasbourg. Siemann argues that the importance of this visit has not been given the recognition it deserves. Srbik allotted one short (for him) paragraph to the episode; Siemann gives it thirty-five pages, labelling the section 'The Journey to Great Britain: The Keystone in the Young Metternich's Political Cosmos'. If he did not arrive as a *tabula rasa*, he argues, it was the experience of English institutions, especially Parliament, and English political philosophy, especially Burke's, that turned him into the conservative Whig he remained for the rest of his days. In 1819 he told Dorothea Lieven that if he had not been what he was, he would have liked to have been an Englishman. Arriving in London in 1848 after an absence of thirty-five years, he commented that it felt as though he had never been away, adding 'this great country is, as it has always been, strong because of its impregnable conviction of the value of the law, order and that form of liberty which can only truly exist if it rests on these pillars'.

Napoleon claimed that he, too, believed in the need to temper liberty with law and order. Metternich was well placed to see how

fraudulent was the Napoleonic project. From 1806 to 1813 the two men were in constant contact, indeed, no other non-French person was so close to Napoleon for so long, or, one might add, brought such dry-eyed objectivity to assessing him. Always ready to acknowledge his enemy's charm, charisma, and even genius, Metternich could also spot the worms that were to devour the bud. He also had the patient intelligence to wait until they had done their work before orchestrating the *coup de grâce*. Siemann finds the perfect illustration to summarize his strategy in Brecht's story of a Mr Egge, who is forced to provide hospitality for a brutal invader, who asks: 'Will you serve me?' Mr Egge does not reply but stoically provides everything demanded for seven years, by which time his uninvited guest has grown so obese that he keels over and dies. It is then that Mr Egge answers 'No'.

Siemann makes a convincing case that it was Metternich who played the decisive role in forming and then maintaining the coalition which finally destroyed Napoleon. Especially illuminating is his account of the patience and skill needed to keep onside the mercurial but indispensable Alexander I, a loose cannon if ever there were one. After reading Siemann's gripping, masterly account of the decline and fall of the Napoleonic Empire, one has to conclude that it would not have happened without Metternich's guiding hand. Not for nothing did Castlereagh call him 'the prime minister of the world'. Yet his role in the campaign of 1813 has been 'either totally ignored or only patchily acknowledged (*punktuell betrachtet*), and always underestimated and misinterpreted'. Strikingly original is Siemann's rediscovery of Metternich as military commander, especially before and during the climacteric battle of Leipzig.

These are only some of the many important revisions Siemann has made. They continue into the period after 1815. It is here that the rehabilitation of his hero may prove most controversial, although he certainly scotches the black legend of liberal and nationalist historiography. As Siemann observes, seeing the situation through Metternich's eyes makes for a more sympathetic understanding of his policies. Karl Sand's brutal stabbing of August Kotzebue in the presence of the victim's 4-year-old son was only one of many acts of political terrorism across Europe. As the Emperor Francis I warned, Metternich was at the top of the list of targets. It was a spectre which followed him for the rest of his life. When he learned in his English exile

in 1848 that the Austrian Minister of War, Count Baillet von Latour, had been lynched and hanged from a lantern in Vienna, he commented: 'Murder is a bad weapon; blood cries for blood, and its nature is to pollute not purge whatever it touches. May God help poor humanity!' He was opposed neither to civil liberties nor national representation, although the experiences of 1789 to 1815 convinced him that they must be compatible with order—his last recorded words were 'a rock of order' (*un rocher d'ordre*).

Due attention is also paid to Metternich's private life, to his relations with his three wives and numerous lovers. It was typical of his kindly good nature that he should have remained on good terms with the latter even after physical relations had ceased. Repeating the good example set by his own father, he also took good care of his numerous children, acknowledging the daughter he had with Princess Bagration and bringing her to live with the rest of his family. His broad intellectual interests are also recounted, including his correspondence with Joseph Haydn, whom he met several times in London in 1794; his acquisition of a copy of Canova's 'Cupid and Psyche' by the sculptor's own hand; and his interest in the natural sciences, which went well beyond the level of a dilettante. More surprising is the revelation that Metternich was a successful industrial entrepreneur, developing his Bohemian estate at Plaß (Plasy) into an iron manufacturing business, turning out rails, wheels, and various household goods and employing several hundred miners and foundry workers.

So rich is this wonderful book in insight and information, so brilliantly does it illuminate Metternich's exciting times, that no review can hope to do justice to its author's achievement. Every general history of the period between the outbreak of the French Revolution and the revolutions of 1848 will need to be rewritten. It is a long book but consistently stimulating, entertaining, even enthralling. It is earnestly to be hoped that an English translation will be forthcoming.

TIM BLANNING is Emeritus Professor of Modern History at the University of Cambridge and Fellow of Sidney Sussex College. His most recent book is *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia* (2015). He is currently completing a short life of George I.