

Zitierhinweis

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Eberhard Kolb: Otto von Bismarck

Marking the 200 th anniversary of Bismarck's birth, this C.H. Beck paperback is a revised and expanded version of a short volume first published in the 'Beck Wissen' series in 2009 and reviewed for *sehepunkte* by Karina Urbach in 2010. [1] The changes are relatively minor: some text has been added, along with a rudimentary scholarly apparatus (the sources of quotes are now listed at the end of the book), but there are still no footnotes. The book does offer some useful 'extras': a map showing the Bismarck family's properties and estates (186); a family tree, listing Bismarck and his siblings' children and grandchildren (184-5); and a chronology of Bismarck's life (181-3). There are also 17 illustrations. However, the book's structure and main reference points remain unchanged.

After a short prologue, which attempts to contextualise Bismarck's life "in an age of accelerated change" (7), the text is divided into six chronological chapters: 1815-47; 1847-51; 1851-62; 1862-71; 1871-90; 1890-98. The book then closes with a short epilogue, looking at Bismarck's legacy and historical reputation. As this predictable and highly conventional structure suggests, this is not the sort of biography which seeks attention through novelty or provocation. Scholarly controversies are touched on in passing, but this is not a polemical or ideological work. Where reference is made to the critical literature, it is to the 'big beasts' of Bismarck historiography - Pflanze, Engelberg, and above all, Lothar Gall - that Kolb turns again and again. Indeed, the *White Revolutionary* is cited with approval so frequently that this text might uncharitably be characterised as 'Gall Light', although this would overlook the subtle ways in which the author attempts to convey his own interpretations of key events. While the recent English-language historiography, including the biographies by Lerman, Feuchtwanger and Steinberg, is conspicuous only by its absence [2], Kolb is more willing to entertain the views of Bismarck's successors as chancellor in the post-war Federal Republic, with quotes from Konrad Adenauer, Helmut Schmidt and Willy Brandt. From the latter, for instance, we hear that "Bismarck gelang die Einigung nach außen; die Einigung nach innen gelang ihm nicht"; and from Adenauer that Bismarck was "ein großer Außenpolitiker und ein sehr schlechter Innenpolitiker" (130). Does Kolb agree with this "generally accepted" view? "Wie immer empfiehlt es sich auch hier, vor der Formulierung eines pointierten Urteils die Sachverhalte leidenschaftslos zu erfassen", he suggests (131). Later, when assessing whether Bismarck's policies towards the labour movement - the Anti-Socialist law and social welfare legislation - amounted to a 'carrot and stick' approach, his answer is even more ambivalent: "Das ist nicht ganz falsch, aber auch nicht ganz richtig" (146).

Certainly, as one might expect given the nature of Kolb's own research on the Bismarckian era [3], the volume is more convincing on the international dimension than on domestic issues. While the author has interesting things to say about the genesis of the Franco-Prussian War, for instance, his only eye-catching observation on domestic policy is that "[f]ür den Ausbruch des Kulturkampfes trägt auch das Zentrum eine Mitverantwortung" (137). Of course, it is far from easy to synthesize such a large body of research in fewer than 200 pages, and it is understandable that Kolb frequently has to resort to formulations such as "all das ist vielfach geschildert worden und braucht hier nicht wiederholt zu werden" (114) or "Das im einzelnen zu verfolgen, ist hier nicht möglich; wenige Angaben müssen genügen" (138). This book undoubtedly offers a balanced, objective and accurate summary of Bismarck's life and work, in a compact format that will appeal to students and general readers. Others more familiar with the key issues may feel that the author fails to provide sufficient original insight to justify a further addition to an already 'boundless' literature (203), but few will disagree with Eberhard Gothein's observation from 1910, with which Kolb closes his study: "Man

wird mit Bismarck wie mit Friedrich dem Großen und Goethe nie fertig. Jeder gestaltet sich im Grunde von solchen Männern eine eigene Biographie" (180).

Notes :

[1] Karina Urbach: Review of Eberhard Kolb: Bismarck, München: C.H. Beck 2009 in: sehepunkte 10 (2010), Nr. 2; <http://www.sehepunkte.de/2010/02/16260.html>

[2] Edgar Feuchtwanger: Bismarck, London and New York 2002; Katharine Anne Lerman: Bismarck, Harlow 2004; Jonathan Steinberg: Bismarck. A Life, Oxford / New York 2011. The German edition of Steinberg's biography is at least listed in Kolb's bibliography.

[3] Eberhard Kolb: Der Weg aus dem Krieg. Bismarcks Politik im Krieg und die Friedensanbahnung 1870/71, München 1990; *ibid* (ed.): Europa vor dem Krieg von 1870. Mächtekonstellation, Konfliktfelder, Kriegausbruch, München 1987; Klaus Hildebrand / Eberhard Kolb (eds): Otto von Bismarck im Spiegel Europas, Paderborn 2006.