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A FLIGHT AT DUSK:
OTTO PFLANZE'S NEW BIOGRAPHY OF BISMARCK

It is a rare and wise old bird that can admit a false start, return to its perch, and then soar off to greater heights. That feat has been adroitly performed by Otto Pflanze, who required nearly a quarter of a century to remedy some manifest defects of the opening installment of his Bismarck biography and to add two further volumes completing the project. The result is a magnificently produced trilogy published by Princeton University Press, which represents on balance the most thorough and satisfactory treatment of the German chancellor available in any language¹.

Beginning in the early 1960s, as Pflanze now acknowledges, a »new departure« in historiography became apparent; indeed, »a revolution began in the interpretation of German history«². An older generation of scholars, like Gerhard Ritter and Hans Rothfels, was succeeded by a younger, in the vanguard of which were Helmut Böhme and Hans-Ulrich Wehler. The elders had stressed the primacy of foreign policy, the skill of Bismarck's statecraft, and the largely positive contributions of his political career. Their juniors dwelled instead on the *Primat der Innenpolitik* (as Wehler provocatively entitled an edition of essays by Eckart Kehr), the inadequacies of Bismarck's social policy, and the essentially negative precedents of his long and formative chancellorship³. It is necessary to reconstruct the historiographical context in this binary fashion in order to define Pflanze's self-perception. His work is intended to perform the dialectical function of reconciling and superseding these two opposing views. Much of Pflanze's effort is devoted to locating conflicting interpretations, deflecting extreme opinions, and establishing a sensible middle ground upon which to adopt a flexible stance. He thereby maximizes the advantage of a transatlantic perspective and the status of a respectful but critical outsider. Throughout, Pflanze remains fully conscious of his role as an unbeholden arbiter: »Truth, as Hegel informed us, is only to be found in the whole«⁴. It is fairly safe to predict, however, that many of those charged with exaggeration by Pflanze will be miffed by his pose of impartiality and that they are more likely to regard him as a loose rapid-firing cannon on the crowded deck of Bismarckiana.

Among contemporary historians about whom Pflanze has little good to say is the young British pair of David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, whose own critique of the Kehrite

1 OTTO PFLANZE, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany*, vol. I: The Period of Unification, 1815–1871, XXX–518 p., vol. II: The Period of Consolidation, 1871–1880, XII–554 p., vol. III: The Period of Fortification 1880–1898, VII–474 p., Princeton (Princeton University Press) 1990.

2 Ibid. vol. I p. XXI.

3 Some of the key works are: Gerhard RITTER, *Europa und die deutsche Frage*, Munich 1948 and *Staatskunst und Kriegshandwerk: Das Problem des »Militarismus« in Deutschland*, 4 vols., Munich 1954–1968; Hans ROTHFELS, *Bismarck und der Osten*, Leipzig 1934 and *Bismarck und der Staat*, Stuttgart 1954; Helmut BÖHME, *Deutschlands Weg zur Großmacht: Studien zum Verhältnis von Wirtschaft und Staat während der Reichsgründungszeit 1848–1881*, Cologne and Berlin 1966; Hans-Ulrich WEHLER, *Bismarck und der Imperialismus*, Cologne 1969; *Das deutsche Kaiserreich 1871–1918*, Göttingen 1973 and *Krisenherde des Kaiserreichs, 1871–1918: Studien zur deutschen Sozial- und Verfassungsgeschichte*, 2nd ed., Göttingen 1979.

4 PFLANZE (see n. 1) vol. I p. XXX.

standpoint he dismisses as »an unfortunate by-product of their separate researches into the grass-roots politics of the German middle class,« adding caustically that »the search for grass roots ought not to end with the discovery of straw men.« While we may »no doubt« (clearly he has some) learn much from such efforts to regard history from below, Pflanze observes in obvious self-justification, »the study of mass behavior can only supplement, never supplant, the study of elites«⁵. Moreover, Pflanze is not enamored of the two recent biographies of Bismarck by Lothar Gall and Ernst Engelberg, who viewed their subject from opposite sides of the Berlin wall before German reunification. Despite ideological differences, Pflanze suggests, both have tended to diminish unduly Bismarck's accomplishments. Thus they reflect all too clearly a deprecatory tendency of scholarship during the past three decades. Having disposed of Blackburn and Eley in a single footnote, Pflanze relegates Gall and Engelberg to a short paragraph, after which he seldom refers to them except for an occasional reproof for their lack of balance. In short, Pflanze does not regard these authors as serious competition because, for one reason or another, they fail to execute the task he has set for himself of overcoming the positive-negative dichotomy of previous biographical treatments. His own reasoning is barely influenced by theirs as he undertakes to set Bismarck's record straight⁶.

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At the outset something needs to be said about the surface characteristics of Pflanze's new study. As a maverick, his prose style is suitably detached. He avoids excessive deployment of technical terms, and his text is usually free of Germanic phrases and formulations. He displays a remarkable ability to render even the most complex teutonic notions into comprehensible English. He is, in a word, accurate. One may note a few slips – the fashionable Berlin suburb is Grunewald (not Grünewald), for instance – but these are inconsequential. He has blessedly curbed his former penchant for alliteration, except to retain the »squire from Schönhausen« and (for Napoleon III) »Caesar on the Seine«; gone, at least, are the »palisades of Paris« and the »wizard in the Wilhelmstrasse.« Otherwise, as before, his writing is consistently sturdy and felicitous. Pflanze manages to convey a huge quantity of information without sounding overly pedantic. He displays a due respect for his protagonist without sycophancy, and he avoids an arrogant posture of omniscience.

Pflanze is scarcely given to theory or ideology. On the most fashionable historiographical trend of the late twentieth century he expends a single parenthetical comment: »the term »deep structure« popularized by the *Annales* school is too static«⁷. Likewise, he brushes aside Marxist dogma, »obviously contradicted by the history of every modern nation,« that politics is basically a function of economics⁸. Nor does he waste much ink on the so-called *Sonderweg*-debate about whether nineteenth-century Germany, for lack of a bourgeois revolution, began to pursue a separate course from the West – although he does venture at one point that Germany came to be »different« by developing a »uniquely »German form« of constitutional monarchy«⁹. Pflanze rarely allows himself to editorialize beyond the strict limits of his evidence; as a rule he therefore declines to address fundamental questions about the continuity or discontinuity of German history. A lone exception deserves direct quota-

5 Ibid. p. XXVI.

6 David BLACKBOURN, Geoff ELEY, *Mythen deutscher Geschichtsschreibung: Die gescheiterte bürgerliche Revolution von 1848*, Frankfurt am Main 1980, revised and translated as *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany*, Oxford 1984; Lothar GALL, *Bismarck: Der weiße Revolutionär*, Frankfurt am Main 1980; Ernst ENGELBERG, *Bismarck: Urpreusse und Reichsgründer* (Berlin 1985) and – too late for Pflanze to incorporate – *Das Reich in der Mitte Europas*, Berlin 1990.

7 PFLANZE (see n. 1) vol. I p. XVI.

8 Ibid. p. XXIX.

9 Ibid. p. 177.

tion: »Bourgeois and aristocrats alike feared that the liberal era had produced in industrial capitalism a monster that would devour its progeny. The crash [of 1873, A. M.] and ensuing depression brought out many latent anxieties – hatred of the Jew, particularly of Jewish politicians and businessmen, *Mittelstand* fears of impoverishment and proletarianization, apprehension over socialist subversion of the economic and social order, suspicion of the wealthy and their ambitions to enrich themselves at the cost of the many – of the kind that in a later age were to culminate in National Socialism«¹⁰.

Still, the biography is not without an intrinsic theme, which is announced in the opening lines by a citation from Bismarck: »The stream of time flows inexorably along. By plunging my hand into it, I am merely doing my duty. I do not expect thereby to change its course«¹¹. At first Pflanze only hints at the chancellor's surpassing modesty by commenting that he was »relatively« helpless to affect the course of historical events. But as the trilogy proceeds, that relativity opens into a considerable space for manoeuvre by the man whom Pflanze considers the consummate politician of his epoch. A dynamic tension is thereby created between the impersonal forces of economic, social, and political change and the intrepid willpower of Europe's preeminent statesman. Ultimately the stream of time, if not entirely harnessed by Bismarck, is at least diverted to suit his purposes. This same metaphor is repeated on numerous occasions in the narrative and in its general conclusion. After describing Bismarck's skill in outsmarting Austria in German affairs during the mid-1860s, for instance, Pflanze writes this telling remark: »Here is one of those moments in the processes of history where a single personality, by his capacity to manipulate the forces within his grasp, influenced the course of history and the lives of millions«¹². Later, the defeat of France is assessed in much the same fashion: »The common view of German nationalism as an irresistible current sweeping down the decades to fulfillment in 1870 was a fiction of nationalistic historians.... Only under the stimulation provided by Bismarck for his own political ends did German nationalism generate a popular force capable of overwhelming the many barriers standing in its way«¹³. All of which culminates in a denial that Bismarck was powerless to do more than dip his fingers into the onrushing waters of history: »That contrary currents were demonstrably present in the stream of time gives us the freedom to speculate about what the German future might have been had Bismarck been merely a helmsman and not a builder of dikes and ditches capable of altering the channel«¹⁴. Pflanze comes to see Bismarck, in short, as a prototypical Machiavellian prince, a man of active *virtù*.

Finally, we may select here a few examples of Pflanze's extraordinary talent for deflating and debunking the arguments of other historians. Reading his footnotes is half the fun. One discovers that:

1. Bismarck's religious conversion was not especially consequential, because the milk and honey of Christian charity did not measurably sweeten his inveterate misanthropy.

2. Deductions from Germany's geopolitical circumstance in central Europe are gross simplifications.

3. The Chancellor's alleged »Bonapartism« (regularly in quotation marks) has little explicative value, because he did not require the example of Napoleon III to be manipulative.

4. During the Crimean war Bismarck did not change his policy, as sometimes assumed, since he always had more than one objective in view.

5. The presumed »alliance« of German capitalists with the autocracy and bureaucracy in the 1860s is a misperception.

10 Ibid. vol. II p. 321.

11 Ibid. vol. I p. 3.

12 Ibid. p. 258.

13 Ibid. vol. III p. 434.

14 Ibid. p. 442.

6. The proposition that Bismarck was driven by internal pressures – namely, massive popular support for the German liberals – to yield on matters of foreign policy lacks compelling evidence.

7. The creation of the Zollverein did not assure Prussia's political domination of Germany; to the contrary, it strengthened the determination of smaller states to remain autonomous.

8. During his personal interviews with Napoleon III in 1865, Bismarck did not seek to coax the French emperor into neutrality in the event of a war with Austria.

9. After 1866 Bismarck actually lost interest in the Zollparlament, although Otto Becker »argues unconvincingly the contrary view«¹⁵.

10. »The old orthodoxy«, which claimed that Prussia's »will to Germany« and a desire by the southern states for unification forced Bismarck's hand in 1870, is untenable.

11. The commitment of Reichstag deputies, especially those of the National Liberal party, to big business has been exaggerated by such current scholars as Böhme and Wehler.

12. The thesis (again, by Böhme and Wehler among others) about the primacy of domestic policy has been »misconceived« and »does not suffice« to explain German foreign affairs after 1870¹⁶.

And so on. Pflanze's fellow – or, one is tempted so say, rival – Bismarck experts are certain to challenge many such obiter dicta, but they will need to bring more than righteous indignation to their rebuttals. His stern gaze is a rebuke to conventional wisdom, old and new alike, and many problems concerning imperial Germany will require a reconsideration as the result of his trenchant criticisms of previous scholarship.

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Although framed as a trilogy, Pflanze's account of Bismarck actually falls into two parts, the second of which fills the final two volumes. It is indicative that they have a common introduction. This arrangement has important methodological implications insofar as Pflanze maintains that the national unification of 1870–1871 constituted »a greater caesura« than the alleged »refounding« of the Kaiserreich at the end of that decade¹⁷.

But initially we should compare the new edition of the first volume with its now superannuated predecessor. Several cosmetic changes are immediately striking. The book's cover is no longer that dreadful orange but a more sober grey. Photographs and political cartoons abound, particularly a selection of clever illustrations from the satirical journal *Kladderadatsch* by Wilhelm Scholz, the Garry Trudeau of his day. Pflanze has used the opportunity to firm up an occasional flabby sentence (what a luxury to have the chance to correct one's youthful prose!). And German royalty has been rebaptized: thus William now becomes Wilhelm and that strange »Louis« of yore returns as the more familiar Ludwig II of Bavaria.

Other alterations are substantive. There is a fuller treatment of Bismarck's physical and psychological health (of which more later). Greater attention is paid to Germany's material development, such as the construction of railways, and to central Europe's economic and social evolution. A new section is introduced, for instance, on workers and businessmen, plus an additional chapter about the parliamentary struggles of the late 1860s. Footnotes have frequently been augmented to accommodate the vast historical literature that has accumulated during the past two decades as well as to record some archival references.

Thereby we may detect a distinct metamorphosis. Whereas the 1963 text was based entirely on memoirs, published documents, and secondary accounts, in the meanwhile Pflanze has paid his dues in the German archives, manifestly devoting long hours to research in Potsdam,

15 Ibid. vol. I p. 398.

16 Ibid. vol. II p. 246.

17 Ibid. vol. III p. XI.

Merseburg, and Berlin-Dahlem. He has also touched base at the Bismarck family archive in Friedrichsruh, though to less apparent effect. Curiously missing from his scholarly itinerary, however, was a foray to the Auswärtiges Amt in Bonn. Certainly that omission can be justified on the grounds that no diplomat of the nineteenth century has had more of his memoranda and dispatches published than Bismarck; Pflanze could therefore continue to rely for his analysis of foreign policy on the *Grosse Politik* and the *Gesammelte Schriften*. Yet it is paradoxical that precisely this aspect of the chancellor's life comes least under reconsideration and that the 1990 version of the first volume is refurbished principally for domestic affairs.

The capstone of Bismarck's early career was of course the war with France in 1870 that culminated with the proclamation of the Kaiserreich in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. Basically Pflanze holds to his original interpretation, but a few subtle amendments suggest the kind of revision he found imperative some twenty-five years later. He had earlier written this passage: »His favorite garment was never the strait-jacket, but the reversible overcoat. Never did he commit himself irrevocably to a specific course of action long in advance of the necessity for decision«¹⁸. The new version reads slightly otherwise: »Bismarck's favorite garment was not the straitjacket, but the reversible overcoat. He was reluctant to commit himself irrevocably to a course of action long in advance of the necessity for decision«¹⁹. This less categorical formulation better accords with Pflanze's contention that, once the war with Austria became certain in 1866, Bismarck was determined to annex the southern German states, whose autonomy he no longer considered viable. The only open question was whether another war would be necessary to achieve that objective – hence Bismarck's impatience with the dithering of southern statesmen and with the recalcitrance of public opinion below the Main. His handling of the Hohenzollern candidacy for the Spanish throne is consequently described by Pflanze, with admirable consistency, as a deliberate provocation and not merely as a defensive measure against French bellicosity: »Bismarck was determined, in brief, to force the issue; France must either bend or be broken.« To which Pflanze adds: »In Paris a like mood prevailed«²⁰. In sustaining this judgment, Pflanze leaves himself somewhat at odds with the work of Eberhard Kolb and sides with the Augsburg historian Josef Becker²¹. He also relies on Becker's meticulous research to correct a few errors in his own original account. Bismarck's editing of the famous Ems dispatch, for example, was apparently dictated and not, as Pflanze had more colorfully imagined, written by hand: »the Junker drew out his pencil and went to work«²². Far more importantly, Pflanze now appends a comment that places this episode into a larger context and points toward his sequel: »the true significance of the Ems dispatch was that, coupled with the war fever in Paris, it converted what would otherwise have been a mere dynastic into a national issue«²³.

One further correction modifies, if it does not diminish, Bismarck's responsibility for the Franco-German conflict's most conspicuous consequence, the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine.

18 OTTO PFLANZE, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany. The Period of Unification, 1815–1871*, 1st ed. Princeton 1963, p. 437.

19 PFLANZE (see n. 1) vol. I p. 451.

20 PFLANZE (see n. 18) p. 450 and IDEM (see n. 1) vol. I p. 464.

21 Eberhard KOLB, *Der Kriegsausbruch von 1870: Politische Entscheidungsprozesse und Verantwortlichkeiten in der Julikrise 1870*, Göttingen 1970 and – not in time for Pflanze to use – *Der Weg aus dem Krieg: Bismarcks Politik im Krieg und die Friedensanbahnung 1870/71*, Munich 1989; Josef BECKER, *Der Krieg mit Frankreich als Problem der kleindeutschen Einigungspolitik Bismarcks, 1866–1871*, in: Michael STÜRMER (ed.), *Das kaiserliche Deutschland, 1870–1918*, Düsseldorf 1970, pp. 75–88; DEM., *Zum Problem der Bismarckschen Politik in der spanischen Thronfolge 1870*, in: *Historische Zeitschrift* vol. 212 (1971) pp. 529–607, and DEM., *Bismarck, Prim, die Sigmaringer Hohenzollern und die spanische Thronfrage*, in: *Francia*, vol. 9 (1981) pp. 436–471.

22 PFLANZE (see n. 18) p. 456.

23 PFLANZE (see n. 1) vol. I p. 490.

Pflanze's initial version contained this sentence: »During the first three weeks of the war, demands for annexation were sparse in the German press«²⁴. But in the recently revised text the opposite obtains: »During the first three weeks of the war, there were many allusions in the German press to the justice and necessity of annexations«²⁵. Here Pflanze joins Kolb, Gall, and Josef Becker in rejecting the contention of Walter Lipgens that Bismarck's press campaign was largely to blame for the surge of popular annexationist sentiment in Germany during the early autumn of 1870²⁶. Yet the truth remains, in Pflanze's unaltered opinion, that acquisition of the former French territory compelled the chancellor the stress to popular – that is, national – character of the war and to draw attention away from Bonapartist dynastic ambitions as its immediate cause. This explanation blends well into the scenario after 1871 in which the traditions of Hohenzollern autocracy and Prussian discipline were joined by German nationalism.

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Bismarck's success exacted a serious toll on his health. In the decade after Sedan his condition wavered between bad and worse, to the point that he was forced to contemplate early retirement and perhaps a premature death. He ate, drank, and smoked to excess, and his weight ballooned from 230 to over 270 pounds. He slept badly – as he once said, he lay awake at night hating – and his doctors allowed him to have morphine or opium to relieve his senses. Exorbitantly interested in such matters, Pflanze has reconstituted in his concluding two volumes the most elaborate record extant of the chancellor's monumental hypochondria. He repeatedly takes Bismarck's temperature, combs through his medicine cabinet, and checks the status of his real or imagined ailments. Besides a chronically painful leg injury, the result of a fall from horseback, Bismarck's record included at least the following: thrombosis, embolism, pneumonia, facial neuralgia, gout, migraine headaches, varicose veins, phlebitis, grippe, influenza, jaundice, shingles, sciatica, lumbago, hemorrhoids, and gastric disorders of various sorts.

Pflanze is able to chart how Bismarck's frequent and often extended absences from Berlin were connected to his furious bouts with illness. Yet he is unable totally to surmount two nagging problems. One is to establish the precise relationship between personal health and public policy. A parallel is implicit: when Bismarck was well he was energetic and positive; when sick, reclusive and cynical. At times Pflanze suggests that other historians have underestimated the importance of Bismarck's physical state, but he himself cannot demonstrate how specific decisions or actions were determined by it. For all of the details about Bismarck's pills, drops, shots, powders, and ointments – in addition to his own favorite remedy of champagne – we remain uncertain about cause and effect. Thus Pflanze is left to speculate: »That his health improved temporarily in the fall of 1880 may have stemmed from excitement over the new vision that opened before him«²⁷. And later: »Bismarck's mental and

24 PFLANZE (see n. 18) p. 475.

25 PFLANZE (see n. 1) vol. I p. 485.

26 Walter LIPGENS, Bismarck, die öffentliche Meinung und die Annexion von Elsass und Lothringen 1870, in: *Historische Zeitschrift*, 199 (1964) pp. 31–112; Josef BECKER, Baden, Bismarck und die Annexion von Elsass und Lothringen, in: *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins*, 115 (1967) pp. 167–204; Lothar GALL, Zur Frage der Annexion von Elsass und Lothringen 1870, in: *Historische Zeitschrift*, 206 (1969) pp. 318–356; Eberhard KOLB, Bismarck und das Aufkommen der Annexionsforderung von 1870, in: *ibid.* 209 (1969) S. 318–356. That the three critics of Lipgens by no means constitute a united front, however, was revealed by a symposium – ignored by Pflanze – in which Gall and Kolb attacked Becker's view of Bismarck's provocation of France: Eberhard KOLB and Elisabeth MÜLLER-LUCKNER (eds.), *Europa vor dem Krieg von 1870: Mächtekonstellation – Konfliktfelder – Kriegsausbruch*, Munich 1987.

27 PFLANZE (see n. 1) vol. III p. 158.

physical health may have improved during the last half of 1886 not because of [Dr.] Schweningen's treatment and the cures at Kissingen and Gastein but because of an international crisis and the opportunity it offered him in German politics²⁸. From such statements we may presumably infer a psychosomatic tendency to perk up whenever a political opening beckoned or a good fight was in prospect. This inference verges on self-evident verity when Pflanze writes: »As he neared the age of seventy-two, Bismarck, his health restored by a sure-fire issue, dealt the Reichstag the hardest blow in its history«²⁹. Yet one must wonder whether any biographer can offer sufficient evidence to remove such assertions entirely from the realm of conjecture. Do political issues, however certain, actually restore good health?

The other apparently insuperable difficulty concerns Bismarck's emotional make-up. Pflanze's lengthening interest in the psychobiographical dimensions of his topic arrives already well advertised. He continues to maintain that »some insight can be gained from a psychoanalytical model«³⁰. But that approach is marked with imponderables, and Pflanze concedes that he has been led to revise some of his earlier confident assertions. At one juncture he cites Anna Freud and Martin Wagh about the »evocation of a proxy« – that is, the projection of personal ambition onto a higher entity, in Bismarck's case the Prussian state³¹. Yet one hardly needs such fancy terminology to account for a common phenomenon of politics, and it is unremarkable to read that »some of Bismarck's habits and attitudes in later years may have stemmed from these early experiences«³². The central psychological conundrum, of course, lies in the degree of explanatory force a biographer is willing to ascribe to infantile experiences in determining adult behavior. Bismarck's mother was a cold fish, from all accounts, and his father was too weak to afford the precocious Ottochen much support. But can we with total assurance swallow Pflanze's conclusion that »through gluttony the adult Bismarck compensated for the emotional starvation he experienced as a child«³³? Even if this statement does not lack plausibility, there is an evident and inescapable danger of reductionism about it. When Bismarck gained a better grip on his health in the 1880s and his weight declined, should we conclude that the impact of his formative trauma had receded, or simply that he was more inclined to accept medical advice as he aged? Was Bismarck's flagrant narcissism as a grown man unalterably prefigured in his comportment as a youth? If more questions are thereby raised than definitively answered, it is nonetheless to Pflanze's credit that he has so carefully explored the hidden recesses of his protagonist's pathology and has exposed its possible relevance to public life.

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In a brief compass it is impossible adequately to convey the richness of Pflanze's rendition of Bismarck's two decades as chancellor. Specialists will attentively follow the analysis of familiar themes like the Kulturkampf, the Arnim affair, the shift to protectionism, the emergence of »rye and iron,« the Polish question, the onset of colonialism, the carrot-and-stick policy of social welfare legislation and anti-Socialist laws, and so on. These pages are leisurely in pace, brimming with information, moderate in tone. Pflanze devotes more space to these matters than Lothar Gall or Ernst Engelberg, and he can justifiably be said to offer the most judicious and balanced biographical version of the post-unification years.

Two overarching hypotheses emerge. First, Pflanze forever buries the molting canard about Bismarck's »dictatorship.« If words have any relative weight, this one is simply the wrong

28 Ibid. pp. 217–220.

29 Ibid. p. 231.

30 PFLANZE (see n. 1) vol. I p. 42 and OTTO PFLANZE, *Toward a Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Bismarck*, in: *American Historical Review* 77 (1972) pp. 419–444.

31 PFLANZE (see n. 1) vol. I p. 56.

32 Ibid. p. 38.

33 Ibid. p. 56.

measure for imperial Germany. The examples are many, and they are unpacked one by one in fastidious detail. Bismarck's travail with the liberals dated back to 1848 and dogged him throughout his career. Albeit divided and weakened, they remained a factor after 1870. In fact, the only political figure to appear in Pflanze's pages as a worthy opponent of Bismarck is the liberal Eduard Lasker, whose tenacious opposition and intermittent cooperation did not suggest a demeanor of submission to some omnipotent ruler. Much the same was true of the Catholic leader Ludwig Windthorst, whom the chancellor once characterized in a famous quotation as the counterpart of his own wife Johanna: Bismarck had his spouse to love and Windthorst to hate. The Kulturkampf proved to be a fiasco, and its inglorious conclusion betrayed the limitations on Bismarck's compulsive will to power. Likewise, Bismarck's attempt to create a Reichseisenbahn was blocked, to his intense frustration, by the reticence of the medium German states, notably Bavaria and Saxony. As a consequence, Prussia was forced to become a major player in the railway industry, thereby creating further impediments to nationalization and central control. Nor did Bismarck have his way in establishing a unitary program of social legislation under tight state supervision. His favorite bill on accident insurance was initially rejected by the Reichstag and was later passed in a form less preferred by the chancellor, which left much of its financing and administration in the hands of workers and their employers. Furthermore, Bismarck was repeatedly thwarted in his attempts to establish a state monopoly on certain forms of indirect taxation (e.g., tobacco) and thereby to achieve a greater budgetary independence for the Reich.

In all of these regards, and more, Bismarck's authority was successfully challenged and thus the notion of a dictatorial regime seems downright inappropriate. Pflanze's summary comment on Bismarck's confounding setbacks is curiously formulated: »But the greatest disappointment lay in the failure of the Reichstag ... to become the subservient instrument he had expected«³⁴. In other words, it was the *success* of the Reichstag in asserting its constitutional role within the imperial establishment that bothered Bismarck and led him to contemplate a coup d'état that might remove parliamentary restraints from executive rule. But the situation never came to that, and Bismarck's dismissal by young Wilhelm II in 1890 once again belied the theory and practice of »dictatorship.« These events are convincingly related by Pflanze without quite falling into the excessive optimism of Manfred Rauh's contention that »parliamentarization« of the Reich was the main political development in Germany after 1870, almost as if Bismarck had purposefully set his nation on the path to democracy³⁵.

Pflanze's second principal thesis about the imperial period is likely to be the most contested aspect of his entire work – particularly, one suspects, in the forthcoming survey of the same terrain by Hans-Ulrich Wehler³⁶. It is Pflanze's assumption namely that, whereas Bismarck's record in domestic matters after 1870 was »dismal«³⁷, he was brilliantly successful in foreign affairs. For reasons already explained, the first half of this proposition can be readily elaborated, but such a favorable estimation of Bismarck's diplomacy necessarily rests on some exceedingly generous axioms. First, we must grant that the chancellor's intentions were as defensive as he claimed: neither his vigorous efforts to intimidate and isolate France, nor his alliance with Austria-Hungary, nor his military bills, nor his consent to launch colonialism can be allowed to ruffle the surface of Bismarck's self-avowed equanimity. Second, we would need to posit that there was no deep contradiction between the Mediterranean Agreement and the Reinsurance Treaty in 1887, even though the one in effect opposed the Russian ambition to

34 Ibid. vol. III p. 3.

35 Manfred RAUH, *Die Parlamentarisierung des Deutschen Reiches*, Düsseldorf 1977. Rauh's »pious legend« is sharply attacked by Hans-Ulrich WEHLER, *Wie »bürgerlich« war das Deutsche Kaiserreich?* in: Jürgen KOCKA (ed.), *Bürgertum und Bürgerlichkeit im 19. Jahrhundert*, Göttingen 1987.

36 Thus far, in the first two of four projected volumes, the evolution of German society has been traced from 1700 to 1849 by Hans-Ulrich WEHLER, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, Munich 1987.

37 PFLANZE (see n. 1) vol. III p. 3.

transgress the Bosphorus and the other supported it. Pflanze prefers to interpret this critical moment in international relations as the clinching example of »a consistent policy capable of counteracting dangers on two potentially intersecting fronts«³⁸. Finally, it follows that we are asked to believe that Bismarck continued to the day of his unsought retirement to exercise a calming influence on the heartland of Europe and to conduct a steady policy of conciliation amid the Reich's quarreling neighbors. »Germany became a menace to European stability,« Pflanze maintains, »only when its foreign policy assumed an offensive edge under Wilhelm II«³⁹. However, as the author doubtless recognizes, that statement is not beyond dispute – and it is certain to be contested⁴⁰.

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When Otto Pflanze was a youngster growing up in Tennessee, a picture of his illustrious namesake hung on the walls of his parental home. We can imagine the boy, another Ottochen, pausing now and then to wonder about the kind of man who lurked behind that glowering countenance (Bismarck never posed smiling). Now he knows, and consequently so do we. Pflanze did not learn fluent German as a child, but he eventually acquired the tools of his trade by dint of persistent effort, finishing his doctorate at Yale, teaching at the universities of Minnesota and Indiana, and serving with real distinction as editor of the *American Historical Review*. To persevere through it all with his Bismarck project, recasting his conception and patiently exploring its many ramifications, was an act of immense personal courage. Pflanze's finished portrait of Bismarck is more complete, more nuanced, more palpable than that of any other biographer. If certain flaws are still visible and some issues remain unresolved, they are mostly inherent in the biographical mode. Withal, Pflanze has struggled mightily to do justice to the most complex and controversial figure of the nineteenth century, and he has succeeded in a manner that cannot fail to stir our admiration. The owl of Minerva has departed at last.

38 Ibid. p. 249.

39 Ibid. p. 444.

40 Although Pflanze was a student of Hajo Holborn, the American historian to whom he most frequently refers and arguably to whom he bears the closest resemblance is William L. Langer. There is a noticeable similarity between Pflanze's appreciation of Bismarckian foreign policy in his final two volumes and that of William L. LANGER, *European Alliances and Alignments 1871–1890*, 2nd ed. New York 1956.