

# The return of the Bismarck cult

Peter Schwarz  
1 April 2015

Otto von Bismarck's two hundredth birthday on April 1 has produced a wave of enthusiasm in Germany. The stream of articles, interviews and meetings go far beyond merely paying tribute to a man who shaped three decades of German policy in the nineteenth century. The "Iron Chancellor" is portrayed as a role model for Germany today, above all with regard to its foreign policy.

The Germany History Museum (DHM) and the Otto von Bismarck Foundation are jointly holding a two-day symposium under the title "Realpolitik for Europe: Bismarck's Path."

On March 26, *Die Zeit* published a column by its editor, Josef Joffe, under the title "Where is Bismarck?" Joffe complained that the birthday of the arch-reactionary Prussian Junker was not being celebrated with as much exuberance as the birthday of Abraham Lincoln, six years his senior, who abolished slavery in the American Civil War and ranks among the most progressive figures of the modern period.

*Der Spiegel* secured a two-hour interview with Gerhard Schröder on the topic of Bismarck. The former Social Democratic Party (SPD) chancellor, whose office is adorned with an original portrait of Bismarck by Franz von Lenbach, outed himself in the interview as an admirer of the Reich Chancellor, whose example he steadfastly followed during his active political life in the SPD.

Schröder dismissed as mere trifles Bismarck's antisocialist laws, on the basis of which more than 11,000 social democrats were handed prison sentences, additional thousands were thrown out of their homes and their families robbed of their livelihoods, while countless social democratic associations, meetings, and printed material and newspapers were banned. He did not say a single word about the heroic struggle carried out by the SPD under August Bebel.

"Bismarck was certainly a devourer of socialists, but on the other hand he also had a social democratic side," said Schröder. "In the end, he was the creator of social security systems. One of the biggest in German history." It was left to *Der Spiegel* to inform Schröder that Bismarck introduced social security to "stabilize the monarchy and not, for example, to modernize Germany."

Schröder explicitly referred to his "Agenda 2010 policy," the most comprehensive program of social cuts since the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany, as "the continuation of Bismarckian social legislation...because without agenda reforms, it would no longer be possible to finance the social state."

Schröder also openly admits that he admires Bismarck's authoritarian style of rule, and that the circumstances under which Bismarck made policy were preferable to "those under which I had to make policy."

"What did Bismarck need? The trust of the Prussian king and the German Kaiser. That was all," he said. However, Schröder said that he himself is "enough of a democrat to know that that is not now possible."

Schröder admires Bismarck most for his reactionary foreign policy. He shares this view with Joffe. Although Bismarck declared in 1862 that the major questions of the time would be decided "not with speeches and decisions of the majority, but with iron and blood," both of them praised him as a peacemaker.

"The Bismarck system maintained peace for forty years—masterly leadership," said Joffe. Schröder did not deny that Bismarck "was a conservative through and through with reactionary traits." However, he added: "But I maintain that his foreign policy was careful and calculated at every stage. Every alliance he formed as Reich Chancellor was of a defensive nature."

Both recommend Bismarck's foreign policy as a role model for today.

"Why should we remember Bismarck with somewhat more generosity? For example, because he created the blueprint for foreign policy in the Federal Republic," writes Joffe. What goes for the German empire under Bismarck goes "also for Berlin today, which wants to lead 'from the centre,' to control its own power, and tries to balance the conflicts of interest in Europe and between west and east."

Schröder also said that Bismarck pursued policies of leadership "from the centre, as one would say today."

"Leadership from the centre" is the official slogan under which the German government is pursuing a return of militarism and aggressive German great-power politics. Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen opened the Munich Security Conference on February 6 with a speech on this topic. And the most recent book by the Berlin political scientist and government advisor Herfried Münkler, which makes an explicit plea for German dominance over Europe, carries the title *Power in the Centre*. (See: "Berlin professor sees Germany as the 'taskmaster' of Europe")

The fact that Joffe and Schröder place "leadership from the centre" in continuity with Bismarck betrays a great deal about the content of this phrase. Bismarck's foreign policy was anything but peaceful or defensive. Even if the offspring of the Junker generation did not bear direct responsibility for Hitler and his crimes, there is nevertheless a direct line from Bismarck to the First and Second World Wars and the crimes bound up with them.

Only in light of the failed revolution of 1848 is it possible to understand how Bismarck went from being an unstable youth with a passion for gambling and drinking to becoming a statesman.

When the democratic revolution belatedly broke out in Germany in 1848, the contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the working class had already developed to such an extent that the "third estate" could no longer unite against the nobility and the clergy as it had in 1789 in France. The liberal bourgeoisie stabbed the revolution in the back out of fear of the working class and reached an accommodation with the nobility. The democratic petty bourgeoisie was "more frightened of the least popular movement than of all the reactionary plots of all the

German Governments put together,” as Friedrich Engels put it.

Under these circumstances, Bismarck, a representative of the landed aristocracy—the most reactionary class in Germany—took up the task that could no longer be postponed of uniting the loosely bound small states of Germany into a single national state. He bound “the agrarians and the industrialists together by military victories, gold indemnities, high profits, and the fear of the proletariat,” Trotsky later wrote.

Bismarck’s cynicism and ruthlessness made him peculiarly suited to this task. The birth of Bismarck’s empire had an enormous impact on life in Germany, from the political persecution of the workers movement, to the glorification of Prussian militarism and the dominance of the Junkers over many areas of social life.

Its foreign policy did not have a fundamentally different character from its domestic policy, as Schröder would have us believe. They were cast from the same mould and complemented one another.

The unification of Germany was not the result of a democratic revolution, but was carried out with “iron and blood” in the successive wars against Denmark, Austria and France. The empire that developed in this way could not make an appeal to the democratic ideals of the European people as the French republic had once done. Bismarck made France into its “hereditary enemy” through the provocative crowning of the German Kaiser in the palace at Versailles.

Bismarck’s empire was too large and too economically strong to play a subordinate role in Europe. But it was not strong enough to dominate all of Europe. Therefore, Bismarck directed his policy toward playing Germany’s rivals against one another so that they would not unite against Germany. In the frequently quoted “Kissinger Diktat” of 1877, Bismarck formulated the goal of a “universal political situation in which all the powers except France need us and, by dint of their mutual relations, are kept as much as possible from forming coalitions against us.”

Only those like Joffe and Schröder, who pursue similar aims today, can refer to such policies as “defensive” or “peaceful.” Bismarck’s policies consisted of intrigue, secret treaties, constant sabre-rattling and the fuelling of conflicts in the periphery of Europe, which kept Germany’s rivals on tenterhooks. His role in the 1878 Berlin congress, which divided the Balkans among the great powers, was partially responsible for setting in motion the chain of events that led to the First World War.

Bismarck’s foreign policy could only work as long as the German empire declared itself “saturated” and made no territorial or colonial claims—that is, so long as it was occupied with its domestic consolidation and the long economic crisis that followed its founding.

At the end of the 1880s, the conditions on which Bismarck’s policies were based reached their end. Domestically, the SPD had grown massively in spite of brutal repression. It doubled its share of the vote in 1890 and, with a fifth of the votes cast, was the strongest party in the Reichstag parliament. Bismarck wanted to crush it with violence, but the new Kaiser, Wilhelm II, thought that this was too risky.

The German economy was no longer “saturated.” The economic crisis ended, the economy quickly grew, and Germany began to look for its “place in the sun,” for export markets, raw materials and colonies. The seed sown by Bismarck began to grow. He resigned in March 1890 and spent the last eight years of his life on his country estate.

His popularity grew, however, and reached new heights after his death. Bismarck became the hero of the German petty bourgeois, whose own enthusiasm for naval construction, militarism and

colonialism found apt expression in the Bismarck cult. Bismarck monuments funded by donations sprung up across Germany—700 of which still exist today. The largest overlooks the Port of Hamburg, a 35-meter granite colossus created in 1906.

A hundred years ago Bismarck’s birthday centenary was celebrated with great pomp in the middle of the First World War. Hundreds of flags adorned the streets of Berlin and other German cities aimed at stirring up enthusiasm for the war. Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg and Kaiser Wilhelm declared Bismarck to be the “personification of German strength and determination.”

Another hundred years on, the German elites are once again reviving the cult of Bismarck because they face the same problems. Almost 70 years after defeat in the Second World War, they are resuming the imperialist politics of the former German Empire.

German imperialism, which is dependent on the whole world as a market for its products, once again senses that it is too big for Europe, but too small to play an independent role in world politics. Therefore, according to an official website of the Foreign Ministry, it is pursuing the path of leading Europe in order to lead the world.

Currently the military strength of German imperialism does not match up to its economic power. As was already the case with Bismarck, the government in Berlin must ensure that its European and international rivals do not unite against Germany. This is what Joffe means when he asserts that Berlin is restraining itself, and seeking to balance the conflicts of interest inside Europe, and between West and East.

The military build-up is nevertheless continuing apace. In Munich, Defence Minister von der Leyen asked, “Do we understand by leadership, leading with the spiked helmet?” and then replied “No!” After several increases in the defence budget and the revival of the Bismarck cult, she should revise her answer. The Chancellor of the German Reich has no problem sporting the spiked helmet of a Prussian officer.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**