

Workshop series "Recontextualising Bismarck"

Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg - Ministry of Culture and Media, Department for Museums

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„Bismarck. Bismarck? Who is actually being honoured here? Different perspectives on the political figure Otto von Bismarck“

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Better than Bismarck - a plea.

I am speaking here as a modern historian who deals with tendencies and historical streams in German, European and global history of the 19th and 20th centuries - with lines of development from which Bismarck cannot be erased, whether we like it or not. You are also being addressed by an academic teacher who has had an irritating experience in her seminars. Today's students are certainly interested in Bismarck. They do it because they suspect that as history teachers they will not get around him. They want to know what they can talk about with their students when debates like the one in Hamburg move the feuilletons and the minds, or when they happen to live in Zweibrücken, where the city has recently added a plaque on the local Bismarck monument in order to contextualise it properly (this is not Hamburg style, of course, which is good!).

Hardly any science is as dependent on the objections of a critical public as historical science. Nevertheless, there are a few assured findings from the ivory tower that we hold on to, at least for the duration of this evening. What do historians in the not-so-early 21st century say about Bismarck? Exactly. They say surprisingly little. He is not the centre of attention. If anything, he is very much on the sidelines. As a historical figure, he, like others before and after him, has migrated to the waxworks of history. Although cultural history is rightly also interested in wax figures. Otherwise, there are other and more important things to do than to turn over every stone in the Altmark, in Pomerania, in Berlin or Friedrichsrüh over which Bismarck set his very large foot indeed. There are more pressing questions. How did the Landfürsten scramble to form the nation-state that Bismarck did not compose, at most conducted? How did the chains of command function? How did the mechanisms of oppression in the German colonies work, which Bismarck and his consorts had given the term "protectorates" a cynicism that could not be surpassed? How were the socialist-minded workers, who were quite well insured by European standards but were not allowed to assemble? How did it feel for the women, some of whom denounced the cult of the strong men, some of whom supported it, and quite a few of whom silently hated it? How about the Catholics in the Prussian-dominated Empire? How about the citizens of the Jewish faith, who fought into the trenches of the First World War for recognition from people like Bismarck, because only this recognition counted in a state whose differentiated description historians are still struggling to find. Still? No, recently more so. It was the anniversary of the unification of the German Empire and the feuilletons were full of stories about the German Empire. But people tended to give Bismarck a wide berth, that's worth noting. Admittedly: Traditionally, historical scholarship is not exactly quick to jettison time-honoured convictions. Certainly, biographies are still being written about Otto von Bismarck today. And sure: one could leave that alone. But, seen as a whole, as a guild, we are working on it, I promise.

Tonight's leading question is: "Who is actually being honoured here?". My answer is: the question is wrong. And doubly wrong. Firstly, the word "actually" makes everyone queasy who has ever heard of Leopold von Ranke, of historicism and of the immediacy of every era to God. For all those who were allowed to miss this proseminar experience: we can gladly clarify this in the discussion. Secondly, the honour thing is utter nonsense. Really. Not really, not un-really either, just nonsense. Historians have long been concerned with showing that "honour" is not an absolute category, but a historically mutable one. It may be that they do it too quietly, too fiddly, too interwoven into the categories of their emotional-historical approaches, granted. "Honour" is a complex attribution and it always has a tendency to tip over. At worst, into "shame". At best, into "humiliation". Asking about potential honours and attaching the irritating word "actuality" to them is, excuse me, dear Hamburg Cultural Office, quite backward. But I assume for once that it was not meant that way. Rather, it was the template that we are supposed to climb up on the podium.

So let's keep it simple: Of course, in 2021, no one who is seriously interested in history and/or Hamburg will "honour" Bismarck. Those who do are not invited to podiums like these, and rightly so.

Which brings me to the plea. Let's not ask untimely questions, but let's go in search of timely answers. And let's do it in a contemporary way, not as conformism, which Nietzsche denounced for good reason, but by rising together for a brief moment above the great debate about the terribly monumental Bismarck.

The problem is: they exist, the Bismarck admirers. Even today. And there are even those who venerate the murals in the bunker. Today again. Couldn't it be that they will get their advantage when Bismarck-devotees and Bismarck-historicists fight each other until only one triumphs in the end? The stone old man in the Elbpark, with a monument protection law chiselled in stone under his arm.

So let's use the findings of historical science for a change. Let's not honour Bismarck, let's expose him. Let us leave him on his pedestal, this historical dwarf who acted like a giant. But let us dethrone him by upholding an understanding of freedom in our dealings with him that the Roland figure of 1906 had to lack. Let us break his aimlessly wandering light by reflecting it - maybe even with those mirrors which we use to reflect upon him. Let's not suppress it completely, otherwise it will smoulder and flare up again sooner than we would like. Let's think about it: About solutions - physical, structural, artistic - that put the Bismarck high above the Elbe in the shade, and in such a way that it can also be noticed from the landing stages. Speaking of light and shadow: Where does the stone Bismarck actually cast its shadow when the sun shines in Hamburg, which it will probably do more often than we would like in the future? Can anything be made of it? And if not, who can think of something better?

The past cannot be cleared away, even if we would like to. It can be rebuilt. This reconstruction may sometimes resemble the Tower of Babel, where everyone speaks his own language. Bismarck was regarded as a man of foreign exchange, as a grumpy old man, as someone who snapped at people when he thought he was misunderstood. Dialogue was not his forte. Let's be better than Bismarck.

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