

Bismark: A Life

By Jonathan Steinberg

Reviewed by Ian Shields

In his endorsement on the dust cover, Christopher Clark, author of the excellent *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600 – 1947* describes Jonathan Steinberg's new life of Bismark as a "three-dimensional" – and this really is the way to consider, tackle and understand this weighty biography. For weighty it is in every sense: over 570 pages of fairly small text, including nearly 50 pages of notes and a further 10 page bibliography. It is not an easy read and could be described as both exhaustive and exhausting, but that said the rewards for those who can persevere are worth the effort.

Steinberg is, without any doubt, a true expert on the life and times of Bismark, and his research for this biography is both immense and impressive. He draws very extensively on letters and diaries written not just by Bismark, his immediate circle or his admirers, but by those who may have come across Bismark (or been influenced by one of Bismark's decisions or directives) with the result that we are faced with a rich, almost overwhelming kaleidoscope of images, thoughts, impressions and (frequently contradictory) evidence. The resulting text is not easy to follow: one has to concentrate carefully to keep track of the plethora of names and relationships that are paraded in front of the reader – think of the *dramatis personae* of *War and Peace* and you start to get some impression.

Once you have tuned in to Steinberg's approach you do really start to get this three-dimensional understanding of Bismark that appears to be Steinberg's aim. For this is no simple telling of the man's life, his achievements or a history of the period: the author is determined to understand the "why" far more than the what or the when – he takes you on a journey to get under Bismark's skin, to see what made him take the courses and actions that he did, rather than just listing his achievements.

The resulting volume will not be to everyone's tastes. It is complicated, frequently confusing and frankly quite hard work. Steinberg is such an expert, has delved so deeply into the archives, that at times the story itself is lost in the detail. There is no doubt that Steinberg's passion for his subject shines through, and one cannot fault his knowledge, but only once one has mastered this somewhat idiosyncratic approach can one start fully to understand Bismark and appreciate the complexity of the man and better understand the decisions he made, and see their shadow stretching down even to this day. Indeed, Steinberg (perhaps betraying some of his own prejudices) has the odd swipe at the EU along the way!

The book itself follows Bismark through his life in chronological order, with the chapters dealing with his early life vital as scene-setters for later events, and form the bedrock of understanding Bismark the man that is vital to the latter stages of the book. Steinberg explains, in terms of events of the time and subsequent decisions that Bismark took, at each step, building up as complete a picture of his subject as it might be possible to assemble. Steinberg examines previous biographies of Bismark at each juncture, comparing other views with the facts that the archives have revealed, correcting where he believes corrections are due, supporting where his analysis, or the bare facts, demand support. But do not expect a biased, faltering view to emerge, for Steinberg invariably maintains a commendable balance in his appraisal, and shows Bismark, with all his complexities and contradictions, "warts and all". Although it cannot stand alone, for one has to read the remainder of the book fully to understand the nuances of the closing argument, the final chapter where Steinberg considers Bismark's legacy is a masterpiece of succinct analysis and prose.

Overall, then, this is not a straightforward read. Steinberg has set himself an immense challenge in trying both to understand and explain Bismark the man, and thus fully appreciate the decisions that the Iron Chancellor made. The book is dense and full of detail, lacks maps and a list of the players, is thin on photographs and as complex as the subject matter. I would be reasonable to suggest that Steinberg has, possibly, got too close to his subject, but that would be to belittle what is a masterpiece of research and a rich, compelling and ultimately rewarding account of one of the most influential and misunderstood figures of the nineteenth century, whose shadow still falls over contemporary Europe.