

The Gender Anxiety of Otto von Bismarck during the Age of Prussian Expansion and German Imperial Consolidation, 1866-1898

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Abstract

Building on critical re-examinations of the so-called ‘Bismarck myth’ and the scholarship on the fin-de-siècle crisis of identity in Europe, this article examines key vignettes in the political career of Otto von Bismarck during Prussia’s era of expansion and consolidation circa 1866-1898 through the lens of gender. It finds the legendary ‘Iron Chancellor’ experienced extreme gender-anxiety to the point of social dysphoria until the 1870s. Assigned feminine roles and lacking political decision-making power, Bismarck resorted to tantrums, tears, threats of self-harm and suicide, suffered mental breakdowns, and the kinds of ‘feminine’ intrigue he accused Europe’s royal women of throughout his life. He and contemporaries weaponised misogyny to deflect accusations of femininity away from themselves and onto women at court to stabilize their own identity in the 1870s. Bismarck further claimed to have led negotiations in a masculine manner in the era of Europe’s colonial cabinet diplomacy. After his death, contemporaries studied the shape and measurements of Bismarck’s head to find an explanation for his alleged genius, and marketed the statesman as an example of potent masculinity. Early hagiographic instrumentalizations of Bismarck should be read as part of a wider attempt to legitimize forms of white masculine rule and justify limited political participation in this period.

Key words: Bismarck, gender, social dysphoria, crisis of identity

Wordcount: 14.057

The Gender Anxiety of Otto von Bismarck during the Age of Prussian Expansion and German Imperial Consolidation, 1866-1898*

In 1866, with Austria at Prussia's mercy, Otto von Bismarck implored King Wilhelm I not to treat the Habsburg Empire too harshly. The even-tempered regent exploded, and commanded the minister out of the room. Desperate, Bismarck looked out of a window, contemplating suicide by throwing himself out of it. During war councils in that year, he broke down, fearing for the success of the plans to expand and consolidate Prussian influence in German lands. This was not the only period Bismarck resorted to tears, cajoling, tantrums and emotional blackmail, threats of resignation or self-harm—to name a few tactics historians such as Steinberg, Clark, and Pflanze have identified. On the contrary—such behaviours were the norm in Bismarck's political career, especially from the 1860s onwards into the fin-de-siècle.

Otto von Bismarck has occupied a quasi-legendary position in German history a product of contemporary writing and his (partially self-authored) myth.¹ Late nineteenth-century nationalist-conservative hagiography, the grand claims of Bismarck's best-selling

*I thank Jim Brophy, Eric Kurlander and Brian Vick for commenting on this article at various stages of its development, as well as the organizers and attendees of the 'Devouring Men' conference at the School of English in September 2020 at the University of St Andrews, where I presented an early version of this material in my keynote 'Otto von Bismarck's Devouring Masculinity.' Further thanks to Jo Whaley for helpful advice.

¹ Rolf Parr, *Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach! in meiner Brust!': Strukturen und Funktionen der Mythisierung Bismarcks* (Munich, 1992); Wolfgang Hardtwig, 'Der Bismarck-Mythos. Gestalt Und Funktionen Zwischen Politischer Öffentlichkeit Und Wissenschaft,' *Geschichte und Gesellschaft. Sonderheft 21* (2005): 61-90. Pflanze compares Bismarck's position with those of Napoleon and Hitler. Otto Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany*, Vol. I of III Vols (New York, 1963), xvii.

political memoirs, and active use of the ‘Iron Chancellor’ in politics and marketing from the 1860s, have informed more than 7000 books on him, including 50 scholarly monographs.² Beside the field of Bismarck biographies, historians have come to examine the Bismarck ‘myth’ emerging as political a tool in the 1860s, and the Bismarck ‘cult’ with which Fascistic systems claim historical precedents.³ Critical reassessments of

² Klaus J. Bade, Review of *Review of Gold and Iron: Bismarck, Bleichröder, and the Building of the German Empire*, by Fritz Stern, *The American Historical Review* 82, no. 5 (1977): 1275, Karina Urbach, ‘Between Saviour and Villian: 100 Years of Bismarck Biographies,’ *The Historical Journal* 41, no. 4 (1998): 1141. A helpful overview of existing scholarship: Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany*, Vol., xx-xxxviii. More recently: Urbach, ‘Between Saviour and Villian,’ further Frank Lorenz Müller, ‘Man, Myth and Monuments: The Legacy of Otto von Bismarck (1866—1998),’ *European History Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (October 1, 2008): 626–36 and Hans-Christof Kraus, ‘Mythos und Wirklichkeit des Eisernen Kanzlerns: Bemerkungen zu einer Neuen Bismarck-Biographie,’ *Der Staat* 33, no. 3 (1994): 439-67.

³ Frankel identifies a ‘living legend’ ethos as of 1866. Richard E. Frankel, *Bismarck’s Shadow: The Cult of Leadership and the Transformation of the German Right, 1898-1945* (Oxford, 2005), 19. Parr also identifies mythification as early as the 1860s. Parr, *Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach! in meiner Brust!*. Gerwarth places the emergence of the myth to the later Wilhelmine era after Bismarck’s retirement and death, 1898- onwards. Robert Gerwarth, *The Bismarck Myth: Weimar Germany and the Legacy of the Iron Chancellor* (Oxford, 2005), 12. Müller places the consensus into his retirement years. Müller, ‘Man, Myth and Monuments,’ 626–36. An overview on recent scholarship can be found in: Edgar Feuchtwanger, *Bismarck: A Political History* (London, 2014) 2nd edition, Preface. Important monographic contributions besides Feuchtwanger since 2000 include: Katharine Anne Lerman, *Bismarck* (London, 2014) [originally Harlow, 2003] and Jonathan Steinberg, *Bismarck: A Life* (Oxford, 2011). The latter field on memorialization does somewhat better. Hardtwig, ‘Der Bismarck Mythos,’ 62; Müller, ‘Man, Myth and Monuments,’ and Jörg Schilling, *Distanz Halten: Das Hamburger Bismarckdenkmal und die Monumentalität der Moderne* (Göttingen, 2006). An overview of myth scholarship also in: Hardtwig, ‘Der Bismarck-Mythos,’ footnotes 5-9. All articles in a journal dedicated to Bismarck, the *Friedrichsruher Beiträge*, are now available in a single

Bismarck and examinations of his portrayals themselves serve as useful indicators of both historiographical concerns and political fluctuations in various phases of German history.⁴ Discussions of the Prussian in official memory, in turn, function as pivotal exercises for reckoning with the past.⁵ His myth, cult, hagiographies, and biographies have represented Bismarck as anything between a demonic Hitler-precedent, to a diplomatic ‘genius.’⁶ Irrespective of criticism or celebration, scholarship and mythologizations have suffered from the assumption that this political titan and alleged larger-than-life soldier operated on a sturdy masculine self-image.

volume: Ulrich Lappenküper, *Otto von Bismarck und das ‘lange 19. Jahrhundert’: Lebendige Vergangenheit im Spiegel der “Friedrichsruher Beiträge” 1996-2016* (Paderborn, 2017).

⁴ Parr, *Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach! in meiner Brust!*, 19; Hardtwig, ‘Der Bismarck-Mythos,’ 61. On memorials in Germany: Gerwarth, *The Bismarck Myth* and Schilling, *Distanz Halten*; Frankel, *Bismarck’s Shadow*, Richard Frankel, ‘From the Beer Halls to the Halls of Power: The Cult of Bismarck and the Legitimization of a New German Right, 1898-1945,’ *German Studies Review* 26, no. 3 (2003), 543–60.

⁵ On ‘Black Lives Matter’ and anti-colonial attacks on Bismarck statues and street signs: Michael Hierholzer, ‘Gegen den Rassismus: Wenn Statuen zu Hassobjekten werden,’ *FAZ.NET* <<https://www.faz.net/aktuell/rhein-main/warum-bismarck-statuen-fuer-deutschland-problematisch-sind-16818477.html>> (Accessed 3 June 2021), Natalie Wohlleben, ‘Hamburg eröffnete Debatte über sein Bismarck-Denkmal,’ *Otto-von-Bismarck-Stiftung* (20 November 2020) <<https://www.bismarck-stiftung.de/2020/11/20/debatte-ueber-bismarck-denkmal/>>, ‘Bismarck-Denkmal und Preußen-Statuen mit Farbe beschmiert,’ <<https://www.rbb24.de/panorama/beitrag/2020/07/farbanschlag-charlottenburg-berlin-bismarckstrasse.html>> (Accessed 3 June 2021), Basti Müller, “Aktivisten ändern Schild in Hamburg: Bismarckstraße ist jetzt Black-Lives-Matter-Straße,” *Hamburger Morgenpost* (11 August 2020) <<https://www.mopo.de/hamburg/aktivisten-aendern-schild-in-hamburg-bismarckstrasse-ist-jetzt-black-lives-matter-strasse-37175482>>.

⁶ Steinberg, *Bismarck*, 6, 312.

Two historians in particular have done much to revise this image by drawing attention to the human behind the name. Pflanze in his analysis of Bismarck's health finds the 'Iron Chancellor' to have been a physiological and psychological mess throughout the greatest part of his life, proposing the diagnoses of

neuralgia, rheumatism, gout, migraine headaches, gall stones, and varicose veins, as well as with occasional bouts of grippe, jaundice, shingles, hemorrhoids, gastric disturbances, constipation, and stomach aches and cramps that might have indicated ulcers. From 1866 onward [Bismarck] complained of recurrent facial pains—"as though a sword were being shoved through my cheek, now from the right, now from the left." There was a suspicion of bad teeth, but his physician Ernst Schweningen diagnosed the ailment as trigeminal neuralgia (*tic douloureux*).⁷

Steinberg in turn has engaged with the crucial matters of Bismarck's sexism and anti-Semitism. He notes Bismarck used anti-Semitism 'to crush his enemies irrespective of the consequences,'⁸ and that his sexist views were pronounced even for his time, distorting his political perception. On top of this bigotry, '[h]e persecuted Catholics and

⁷ Otto Pflanze, 'Toward a Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Bismarck,' *The American Historical Review* 77, no. 2 (1972): 433.

⁸ Steinberg, *Bismarck*, 477. The matter of anti-Semitism seems to align according to political convenience. When critics used Bismarck's association to his Jewish banker Bleichröder against him, he defended his banker to defend himself. Yet, when Jewish liberals like Eduard Lasker opposed him in parliamentary politics, he used anti-Semitism to his advantage, and voiced dislike of Jews in positions of power to contemporaries. Fritz Stern, *Gold and Iron* (New York, 2013).

Socialists,' further, 'paid no attention to scientists or historians unless he could enlist them...'⁹

The present article builds on Pflanze' and Steinberg's work with an examination of Bismarck's gendered speech acts throughout the period of Prussian expansion and consolidation.¹⁰ The analysis derives Bismarck's gendered characterization within the hierarchical identity-framework of the time to recover the gendered experience of the subject itself in order to respect the sovereignty of self. Irrespective of alleged objective medical, scientific, or other identity categorizations, this analysis presents us with an approximation of Bismarck's self-account and that of their surroundings as he negotiated his identity.¹¹ Simply put: Bismarck defines himself through accounts of the self (spoken, verbal, through action i.e. speech acts) in observable manners, which the scholar can recover and decode, and must respect.¹² The present method builds on Gayle Salamon's assertion that ideas of embodied gender stability form derive from and feed discourses justification claims to power.¹³ Histories of science and medicine provide further background on the 1860s, when the invention of the two sexes, professionalization, political suffrage, warfare, the shift from the centre of the economy from households to

⁹ Ibid, 479.

¹⁰ On gender as distinct from sex, see: Joan W. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,' *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1, 1986): 1053–75.

¹¹ Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York, 2010).

¹² Paul Gilbert and Kathleen Lennon, *The World, the Flesh and the Subject: Continental Themes in Philosophy of Mind and Body* (Edinburgh, 2005).

¹³ Claudia Kreklau, 'Neither Gendered nor a Room: The Kitchen in Central Europe and the Masculinization of Modernity, 1800-1900,' *Global Food History* (February 5, 2021): 1–31; Nancy Reagin, 'The Imagined Hausfrau: National Identity, Domesticity, and Colonialism in Imperial Germany,' *The Journal of Modern History* 73, no. 1 (March 1, 2001): 54–86,

an industrial marketplace worked together to relegate women to households, and bio-essentialize their labour, unpaid, away from the public sphere.¹⁴

Bismarck did not hold then-contemporary typified ‘masculine’ forms of power nor a clear-cut aristocratic identity. Neither a full Prussian nobleman or *Junker*, nor an active military man, nor a monarch, to his social circle Bismarck was a half-‘bourgeois,’¹⁵ half-*Junker* civilian in uniform,¹⁶ who looked like ‘an ogre’¹⁷ and had a sweet ‘feminine voice’¹⁸ as contemporaries noted, whose gender-ambiguous body let contemporaries wonder whether he was a boy or a girl as a child.¹⁹ His constant ill-health and temper made physician Langenbeck call him ‘as hysterical as a woman’ (*hysterisch wie ein Frauenzimmer*) in 1856—a diagnostic conclusion and clear insult dating to just before the period of this discussions’ study.²⁰ At a time when *Junkertum* and masculinity overlapped in cultural conceptions of power, and aristocrats attached femininity to the

¹⁴ Thomas Walter Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, 1990), Ricardo López and Barbara Weinstein (eds), *The Making of the Middle Class: Toward a Transnational History* (Durham, 2012).

¹⁵ Feuchtwanger, *Bismarck*, xviii. Otto’s ambiguous aristocratic status is a matter in its own right. Two key instances will be mentioned here: born of a bourgeois mother and limited in his finances when young, Bismarck contemplated suicide when faced with the riches of British aristocrats. Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom* (London, 2006), 519; Engelberg, *Bismarck Urpreusse und Reichsgründer*, 144, I, cited in Steinberg, *Bismarck*, 49-51.

¹⁶ Steinberg, *Bismarck*, 19, Pflanze, ‘Toward a Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Bismarck,’ 419–44.

¹⁷ Disraeli, cited in Steinberg, *Bismarck*, 371.

¹⁸ Feuchtwanger, *Bismarck*, 2.

¹⁹ University of St Andrews Martyr’s Kirk Special Collections (hereafter StAMK): DD218.A1K6F21, 11.

²⁰ Otto von Bismarck, *Die gesammelten Werke: Gespräche, hrsg. und bearb. von W. Andreas* (Berlin, 1926), 386. Also: GW, VII, 264-265, VIII, 22, 286, 398, cited in Pflanze, *Bismarck*, Vol. II, 53.

bourgeoisie,²¹ Bismarck's financial limitations compared to British aristocrats, and economic dependency on his father for a greater part of his youth made him insecure, politically ambitious and led him to adopt speech-patterns and behaviours to make himself more masculine through gaining money, prestige, and power.²² Once on the political stage he charmed onlookers when he played the part of a 'man's man' at military parties. Yet, during Prussia's expansion coinciding with his political ascent between circa 1862 and 1871, he mystified contemporaries with his incomprehensible, gendered behaviours: irrational complaints, emotional outbursts, dramatic self-pity.

Bismarck perceived and experienced his political career with fear of the accusation of femininity –then code for powerlessness— to the point of social dysphoria. Bismarck's gendered behavior and speech-acts betray that he felt disenfranchised by the allegedly true power-holders of the time—military and monarchical. The language he and contemporaries used to describe the problems they faced, in turn, aimed in their strategic sexism to attach blame- and associate political problems to women and femininity in order to stabilize their own identities as masculine. When Bismarck experienced powerlessness and abused his position to formulate accusations against women, he hooked into a 'cultural code.'²³ This code or pattern of accepted ideas reified and recognized such accusations, thus sustaining them, even as statesmen like Bismarck fed, fuelled, and exercised this sexist ideational framework. Bismarck's hyper-gendered

²¹ More work is needed on the overlaps of aristocracy and masculinity, and reciprocally the social middle and femininity in the nineteenth century. Martina Kessel, 'The 'Whole Man': The Longing for a Masculine World in Nineteenth-Century Germany', *Gender & History* 15, no. 1 (2003): 1–31.

²² Engelberg, *Bismarck Urpreusse und Reichsgründer*, 144, I, cited in Steinberg, *Bismarck*, 49-51.

²³ Shulamit Volkov, 'Antisemitism as a Cultural Code: Reflections on the History and Historiography of Antisemitism in Imperial Germany,' *The Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 23, no. 1 (January 1, 1978): 25–46.

speech-acts with which he defined himself as masculine contradicted his gendered behaviours. These contradictions emerge in- and destabilize the alleged coherence of his sturdy portrayal in the accounts of contemporaries.

Bismarck's social dysphoric experience was not a product of his anatomy, but of his relations, negotiations, and decision-making processes in political context, informed by his awareness that he held neither monarchical nor military power in a period of imperial rivalries and negotiations. Bismarck operated as a trapped individual within a broken and extreme system of gendered attribution that assumed gendered roles along clear bio-essential lines, even as his textual descriptions suggest the opposite, namely, that women were in power and men lacked control in his era. In his attempts to combat femininity and women in politics, Bismarck further reified the confusion he feared, adopting strategies he attributed to courtly women. The result was a vicious cycle of dysphoric fear within a paradox social complex in which gendered attributions functioned as codes for power-levels, a symbolic battle between strength and weakness in Bismarck's mind, where the masculinity of the individuals involved in Prussia's era of expansion coded Prussia as masculine and German central European lands as feminine.²⁴ It was not until Bismarck gained the title of Prince after 1871 that Bismarck's identity grew both more complex and his political relations more ambiguous. Thereafter, Bismarck portrayed political relations between individuals of different ranks on the basis of a gendered template; he used the idea of courtship as proxy to explain interactions and continued to gender plot lines he had relied on in his interactions with Wilhelm I in the 1860s on into the cabinet diplomacy of the 1880s.

²⁴ StAMK: DD218.A2B5F06, 633. On the feminine gendering of Germany in the 1870s, see: Rebecca Ayako Bennette, *Fighting for the Soul of Germany* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2012).

Bismarck's behaviours match the collective crisis of identities which Le Rider identifies in the fin-de-siècle and others including Dijkstra, Forth, Berenson, Clark and Domeier have found active in the upper echelons of European society.²⁵ This often contradicts the skilful work of Katharine Lerman. 'Otto von Bismarck was one of the most...powerful men in modern European history,' Lerman begins her monograph on the statesman, and argues that he was 'manifestly comfortable with his own masculinity. His attitude to women on one level was equally uncomplicated.'²⁶ Part of the explanation here lies in that our reading modes differ, in that I greatly distrust Bismarck's performed security throughout his life and career, precisely because it broke down in the instances I discuss below. Gallantry and cajoling his wife and other women of his class, such as family-friend Baroness Spitzemberg, I interpret as his intentional reward for what Bismarck assessed as their gender-appropriate behaviours.²⁷ I argue Bismarck's insecurities hummed in the background, intoning his political world from the 1860s, breaking out in crescendos when he could take it no longer. These eruptions occurred on

²⁵ This collective crisis of identity consisted of a perceived disintegration of clear gendered, confessional and racial divisions, manifest in political discussions and artistic representations. Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford, 1986), Jacques Le Rider, *Modernity and Crises of Identity: Culture and Society in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* (New York, 1993); Christopher E. Forth, *Masculinity in the Modern West: Gender, Civilization and the Body* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), Edward Berenson, *The Trial of Madame Caillaux* (Berkeley, 1992), Norman Domeier, 'The Homosexual Scare and the Masculinization of German Politics before World War I,' *Central European History* 47, no. 4 (2014): 737–59; Christopher M Clark. *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London, 2012).

²⁶ Lerman, *Bismarck*, ix, 15. Similarly in Feuchtwanger, *Bismarck*, 1.

²⁷ See also: Lerman, *Bismarck*, 16, 22. Lerman notes Bismarck 'was...at his most innovative and creative during the period of German unification...[a]t the height of his mental powers,' further 'demonstrated his sovereign skills...in cabinet diplomacy' in 1866. Ibid, 114. Feuchtwanger agrees in *Bismarck*, 146.

more occasions than discussed here—Clark, for one, notes that during his dismissal from office on 20 February 1890 by Wilhelm II, ‘Bismarck flew into such a violent rage at this point that the Kaiser reached instinctively for his sabre. Then the old man ‘grew soft and wept’ while Wilhelm looked on, unmoved by the chancellor’s crocodile tears.’²⁸ These must remain outside the present focus on the height of Bismarck’s international career.

Part one examines the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 from Bismarck’s perspective through his memoirs, highlighting two elements of his account’s dramatic literary style: how he contemplated self-harm and suicide as part of his self-less, feminized service to his king, which bled into sublimated homo-eroticism. Part two examines his desperation for success and acceptance during the war against France of 1870 among military personnel, and negotiations following, in which Bismarck allied with generals against alleged ‘feminine’ intrigue and mercy in favour of the Catholic French, only to find that such alliances did not last, nor seal his identity as an accepted military man. Part three examines his legendary cabinet diplomacy, suggesting that here Bismarck used precisely the tools of intrigue of which he accused women at court, even as his own accounts portray Bismarck as the only man among foreign sovereigns and envoys. Here masculine behaviours in political relations characterized consistently in heteronormative bio-essential courtship-models show that masculinity served as a code for power. It further highlights how contemporaries judged political actions not by their value but by the alleged gendered embodiment of those political actors who carried them out. Their behaviour reflected the general gender-anxiety among European power-political participants in the last decades before the Great War. In part three, the article notes that contemporaries used Bismarck’s head and speculations concerning his brain physiology

²⁸ Christopher Clark, *Kaiser Wilhelm II* (London, 2013), 64. Feuchtwanger records Bismarck smashing things in frustration. Feuchtwanger, *Bismarck*, 97.

and placement in his skull to explain his alleged genius which, along with his memoirs and a host of hagiographers, authored an enduring myth. For these authors, the Bismarck's myth functioned as a critical projection-site for legitimizing white, male, protestant rule, in so far as Bismarck's alleged masculinity, strength, militarism and diplomatic genius served as examples—even in our own times—of what a country could achieve with the right kind of captain at its helm.²⁹ During this era after Jewish emancipation, increased visibility of women in urban centres, and the last abolition of slavery in the 1880s coinciding with the European scramble for Africa, ideas of embodied rationality functioned to justify the political status-quo along gendered, confessional, and racial lines.³⁰ A longer conclusion contextualizes these findings within the longer term evolution of gender relations in the nineteenth century.

To clarify: the analysis does not aim to make light of mental health issues, which Bismarck may have suffered from according to at least one contemporary colleague, nor does it aim to belittle the pressures of state office, or underestimate the fears of a parent

²⁹ Frankel, 'From the Beer Halls to the Halls of Power,' further, Gerwarth *The Bismarck Myth*.

³⁰ On the paradoxes of political emancipation and rise in social persecution: Marion A. Kaplan, *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class: Women, Family, and Identity in Imperial Germany* (New York, 1991), Fritz Stern *Gold and Iron* (New York, 2013), 600, Steinberg, *Bismarck*, 389. More broadly: Peter G. J. Pulzer, *The Rise of Political Anti-Semitism in Germany & Austria* (Boston, 1988), 83-97, on Stöcker and the Berlin Movement, and Marion A. Kaplan, *Jewish Daily Life in Germany, 1618-1945* (Oxford, 2005); On blood libel accusations and symbolic deaths: Helmut Walser Smith, *The Butcher's Tale: Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town* (New York, 2002). On colonial violence: Sebastian Conrad, *Deutsche Kolonialgeschichte* (Munich, 2011), Sebastian Conrad and Sorcha O'Hagan, *German Colonialism: A Short History* (Cambridge, 2012), e.g. Ch.4 on expansion, Woodruff D. Smith, *The German Colonial Empire* (Chapel Hill, 2012), Lewis H. Gann, and Peter Duignan, *The Rulers of German Africa, 1884-1914* (Redwood City, 1977), Ch.7. on Heinrich Leist, and Arne Perras, *Carl Peters and German Imperialism 1856-1918: A Political Biography* (Oxford, 2004), 197-211 on abuses of power.

with a child at the front. Rather, it aims to revise our characterisations of the ‘Iron Chancellor’ and deconstruct the untenable myth of a political giant who provided his sovereign with some remarkable achievements, even as he experienced disenfranchisement and powerlessness through the lens of gender. Bismarck experienced social dysphoria as a semi-bourgeois politician with neither crown nor high military rank as his desired identity and his environments’ treatment of him did not align with what he wished for, within a period of increased gendered-flux, anxiety, and military aggression. There is no need to erect a ‘counter-myth’ of a ‘demonic’ statesman to counteract the myth of the ‘superhuman,’ as some have noted.³¹ Bismarck was and is a myth, yet Otto, an individual; the below aims to recover aspects of this complex and contradictory human through his lived experience before that name itself became symbol and code for what we now know to a deeply problematic political ideal.

The Austro-Prussian War 1866: The Gendered Sacrifice of Vassalage

Prussian war experience alongside generals and monarchs socialized Otto into problematizing femininity in politics in 1866. During the war against Austria, Otto expressed several instances of love to soldiers in letters to his wife Johanna. He asked her to send 1000 cigars for the soldiers lying in hospital tents to ease them, and wrote ‘our people are positively kissable’ [lit. ‘Unsre Leute sind zum Küssen’ sic.] ...so brave in the face of death, so obedient...’³² After admiring the men, the minister cautioned Wilhelm from riding into battle, explaining to Johanna, ‘no-one dared to speak to him harshly, as

³¹ Lerman, *Bismarck*, 259-260.

³² Letter 9.7.66, Hohenmauth, to his wife, in Otto Bismarck, Herbert Bismarck, and Horst Rohl, *Fürst Bismarcks Briefe an Seine Braut Und Gattin* (Berlin, 1914), 516.

I did last time, which helped...He can still not forgive me, for undoing his chance to be shot at; “at that point, I had to ride away at all-highest orders” he said yesterday, pointing his angry finger at me. But I do prefer this,’ setting saving Wilhelm’s life before the acquisition of a manly token of war.³³ These interactions set Otto into a fragile gender-economy. To have an excuse for not joining battle, Wilhelm needed to abuse Otto for his caution—a criticism he accepted, as he explained to his wife, willingly as a form of sacrifice to his king. A few days later, it was again Otto’s task to ‘speak with his adventurous Majesty’ when the generals would not.³⁴ Otto portrayed himself as a feminine cautionary and devoted vassal to Wilhelm, and the only voice of reason to dissuade him from risking his life. “Adieu, my heart’ he concluded his letter—‘I must [hasten] to his M[ajesty].’³⁵ The advisory group, according to Otto, assigned him the feminine role of protection and health-care—a role their masculine military command could not provide. Role assignments, despite Otto’s mostly honorary rank of Major after his service in reserves in student years, functioned in gendered terms according to not only military rank but experience.

Despite his expectation of political involvement in the peace negotiations, soon Otto found himself side-lined from military decision-making processes. After Prussia’s victory, Wilhelm I wished to humiliate Austria, and Otto failed to convince his regent to agree to amicable terms of peace with their adversary. ‘If Austria were severely injured,’ Otto feared, it ‘would become the ally of France.’³⁶ On 23 July, ‘a council of war was held, in which the question to be decided was whether we should make peace under the

³³ Ibid, 517. Also: Feuchtwanger, *Bismarck*, 144.

³⁴ Zwittau, 11.7.66, Bismarck, *Fürst Bismarcks Briefe an Seine Braut Und Gattin*, 517.

³⁵ Ibid, 518.

³⁶ Otto von Bismarck, *The Man and the Statesman*, Vol.II, (London, 1898), 49.

conditions offered or continue the war.’³⁷ Physically unwell with no final say in the matter and so very aware of his civilian status among officers, Otto broke down in the adjoining room:

A painful illness from which I was suffering made it necessary that the council should be held in my room. On this occasion I was the only civilian in uniform. ...My nerves could not stand the strain [original: *Eindrücken*, lit. impressions, experiences, CK] which had been put on them day and night; I got up in silence, walked into my adjoining bedroom and was there overcome by a violent paroxysm of tears [original: *heftigen Weinkrampf*].³⁸

The following day, on 24 July, Otto recorded in ‘painful recollection,’ in a discussion over territorial acquisitions he ‘had been obliged to put [his] master,’ ‘whom [he] personally...loved as he did’ into a state of ‘violent agitation’ over the matter, which led Wilhelm to chuck his minister out of the room.³⁹ Otto described the Hohenzollern as ‘excited to a degree [*eine so lebhaftige Erregung*] that prolonging the discussion became impossible; and, under the impression that my opinion was rejected, I left the room with the idea of begging the King to allow me, in my capacity of officer, to join my regiment.’⁴⁰ Otto claimed to seek out death, unable to serve his sovereign in any other manner. More than that: he recorded suicidal thoughts in the light of his shame and failure of service:

³⁷ Ibid, 47.

³⁸ Ibid, (London, 1898), 47-48. Otto von Bismarck, *Gedanken und Erinnerungen*, (Stuttgart, 1898), 44.

³⁹ Bismarck, *The Man and the Statesman*, Vol.II, 53.

⁴⁰ Ibid 51. Bismarck, *Gedanken und Erinnerungen*, 48.

‘On returning to my room I was in the mood that the thought occurred to me whether it would not be better to fall out of the open window, which was four storeys high.’⁴¹ In the light of disempowerment, Otto turned not only to tears of coercion and frustration, but suffered all the symptoms and behaviours associated to women in the period according to mid-century professionalized male-led medicine. He was near-bed-ridden, for which discussions were at times held in his chambers, and responded to the tantrum of his king with self-destructive thoughts—a further symptom of disenfranchisement.

Yet, a dashing prince saved our powerless protagonist in distress in the very next line in a crescendo of kindness and drama in Otto’s own account of the scene. ‘I did not look round when I heard the door open, although I suspected the person entering was the Crown Prince...I felt his hand on my shoulder, while he said: “You know that I was against this war. You considered it necessary, and the responsibility for it lies on you. If you are now persuaded that our end is attained, and peace must now be concluded, I am ready to support you and defend your opinion with my father.”’⁴² The King ceded after a conversation with his son, leading Otto to write: ‘it was to me a joyful release [*erfreuliche Lösung*] from a tedious tension that was becoming unbearable [*der für mich unerträglichen Spannung*].’⁴³ As for the details and veracity of the above-displayed occurrences, Otto admits ‘I do not think I am mistaken as to the exact words, although the document [exchanged at the time, CK] is not accessible to me at present.’⁴⁴

Even decades later Otto’s political reminiscences of the negotiations surrounding Austria’s defeat in his memoirs were drenched in the gendered experience of

⁴¹ Bismarck, *The Man and the Statesman*, Vol.II, 51.

⁴² *Ibid*, 52.

⁴³ *Ibid*. Bismarck, *Gedanken und Erinnerungen*, 49.

⁴⁴ Bismarck, *The Man and the Statesman*, Vol.II, 52.

disenfranchisement. The rhythm of the 1898 London translation of Otto's account, helpful for providing hints at how contemporaries chose to interpret the renditions, bring forth highly gendered interpretive nuances of the experiences. In the original, Otto's references to context and frequent use of five-line, multi-phrase sentences (*Schachtelsätze*) do some work to balance his civilian, disempowered, feminine qualities with consistent references to masculine war councils, rational reasoning, and understated sensible description. When overcome by the tearful paroxysm, he also registers the 'decampment of the war council' in his room next door ('wie ...der Kriegsrath aufbrach').⁴⁵ When seeking out the King to change his mind, he hears reports of the troops stationed in Austria, half of whom only are well enough to fight, notes the threat of Austria or even Hungary in August, cholera, the danger of the 'climate,' a lack of water, as well as the commonness of 'plums and melons' in the area, which might leave to a set of symptoms which Otto fused under the humoral heading of 'dysentery'—the '*Ruhr*'⁴⁶—all rational reasons to accept a peace quickly, before the enemy knows of Prussia's vulnerability. Finally, when the good news of the King's acceptance of the 'humiliating terms'⁴⁷ reach him, he records his reaction to a 'happy solution' ['*erfreuliche Lösung*'] albeit it to 'an unbearable state of tension.'⁴⁸

Three key features remain inalienable in both the original German text and the English translation. First, the British publisher understood the cotemporary text as described above, which suggest that contemporary translators were apt at decoding gendered dynamics and communicating them to foreign readers. Second, Otto's state of physical

⁴⁵ Bismarck, *Gedanken und Erinnerungen*, 44.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 45.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 48.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 49.

weakness and political lack of voice undeniably guides both versions. Neither general nor officer, nor royal nor able to persuade the king as he usually could, Otto's autobiographical portrayal centres on the idea that while entirely able to see solutions, strategically savvy, and entirely comprehending which path is best 'for the Fatherland,'⁴⁹ no-one listened to him. He stood in another room when the war council left for action, excluded from this masculine round. The king did not follow his advice, and there was nothing for the dejected minister to do but to cry, beg, feign to resign, or commit suicide—after considering to restore his own masculine honour by dying in battle in an odd exercise of the actions of heroines in theatre productions, who rather than lift a sword to defend themselves commit suicide to save their honour. Serving the King of Prussia highlighted Otto's social and gendered shortcomings; in this instance it led him to adopt feminine behaviours aimed at influencing his sovereign. But for the prince's admonishment and grudging support, all could have ended in disaster, for the crown heir held the power and secure sway Otto did not. Otto's account here and elsewhere relied on the dynamics of a gendered marriage to guide interactions—deeply sublimated, yet seeping through his retrospective description, wherein his role was to cajole, to influence, to beg. Otto suffers humiliation. The prince, meanwhile, saves the Minister as a literary hero might the damsel in distress, further highlighting the gendered relationship. Third, Otto adopted all the strategies contemporaries accused women of, all the more heightened by the minister's advocacy of pacifism toward Austria—another ostensible feminine attitude that endangered Prussia's goals. Why did Otto and his editorial team include such a humiliating scene in his memoirs? Perhaps the gendered interaction formed part of the expectation of the relationship between vassal and king, further suggesting the veracity of the account, as Otto had nothing to gain from the portrayal. We must conclude the

⁴⁹ Ibid, 49.

gendered dynamic, from his poor physical health, his state of mental agitation, crying, begging, political frustration, dependence on the Prince and devotion to the King all structured the actions of the war council.

Otto often chose the social role of a shrewd wife, seemingly compliant but ultimately decisive, to describe his interactions with King Wilhelm. Years later, Clark notes, Kaiser Wilhelm I sighed ‘it was hard being emperor under Bismarck.’⁵⁰ Wilhelm’s quip made reference to the stereotypical assertion that masculine wives dominated their husbands. Wilhelm, whom historians generally describe as an easy-tempered, kind and ascetic individual, had no need to follow a subordinate’s advice, and yet, chose to, crediting Bismarck with his success. Wilhelm I understood that he had been blessed with brilliant staff, who brought him power, victory, and prestige, and thus followed their advice; he chose to as a husband might with a wise spouse. The relationship was however not free of tension. After the scenes dating from July 1866, Otto noted in his memoirs how he regretted having vexed a sovereign ‘whom [he] personally...loved as he did.’⁵¹ Service meant subversion, and vexing his King, self-destructively, formed part of his sacrifice to him. While the asymmetrical power-dynamic bothered Otto whenever it limited him, the monarchist did not undermine the nature of that relationship in itself but accommodated his service—a gendered act in itself—as devotion to his ‘master’⁵² along class-lines.

Throughout Otto’s service to Wilhelm I, we can make the case that to Otto at least, his political service operated at times in a feminine manner—a dimension his memoirs hint at with the claim of Otto’s ‘hearty attachment’ to his sovereign.⁵³ Moreover, as this

⁵⁰ Clark, *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, 33.

⁵¹ Bismarck, *The Man and the Statesman*, Vol.II, 53.

⁵² *Ibid*, 53.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 315.

account originated with Otto himself, years after the fact, the fluidity of memory may play to the historian's advantage here: rather than downplaying any such complex scenes, Otto chose to narrate these events to his assistant for publication, suggesting that to himself this dynamic represent the norm in a heightened form at a critical point in politics. Neither his assistant nor his editors chose to adapt the scene to eliminate these gendered portrayals. Furthermore in his memoirs, Otto treated Wilhelm's wife Augusta as his political and personal rival. In remembering his anniversary of his service to Wilhelm I in 1885 and printing a long correspondence between himself and the Emperor over his award of the Iron Cross, Otto reported during celebrations of himself that 'Never for a moment did the thought of jealousy towards his servant and subject come to mind, and never for a moment did the royal consciousness that he was master leave him, just as with me all the homage that was paid me...never affected my feeling that I was the servant of my master and was it gladly.'⁵⁴ Wilhelm I's 'approbation' he assured his sovereign in letters, was 'for [Bismarck] the most desirable reward in this life.'⁵⁵ Over several pages of praise and appreciation, Otto reported of Wilhelm's affection for him in his memoirs—a steady run of letters disturbed at the end quite strategically with an interfering message from Wilhelm's wife, which promptly ends the chapter.⁵⁶

To counteract gender misconstruction, Otto made sure to distance himself from the accusation of femininity—as well as similar suspicions from Wilhelm I by weaponizing misogyny. Otto accused Wilhelm I of channelling when 'his arguments were not to the point and illogical.'⁵⁷ Otto recollects, when 'his Majesty opposed [him] not from his own

⁵⁴ Bismarck, *The Man and the Statesman*, Vol.II, 320.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 322.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 321-331.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 314.

conviction, but as a result of repeated feminine pressure, I could see what had happened, When he could not find any more arguments against what I said, then he would end the discussion with the expression: “Ei der Tausend, da muss ich doch sehr bitten” (“Oh, come, I say! Please”). Then I knew that I had met not the Emperor, but his wife.⁵⁸ To stabilize his sovereign’s gendered identity, and adopted a rhetorical hatred for women in order to deflect accusations of femininity towards actual women socially recognized as such, demonising their alleged presence in politics. He bashed, for example, the Queen of Holland, originally from Württemberg. ‘I leave open whether her fretful desire to do politics or a partiality in the Austro-Prussian fight led her to mistreat my Austrian colleague and favour me,’ Otto wrote; ‘Either way, after 1866 I identified her as one of the most dangerous adversaries of my politics.’ With such statements, Otto attempted to drive home the difference between himself and women in international relations.⁵⁹ He claimed to hold the intellect and operate on the finely honed emotional landscape serviceable to Prussian expansion under the rightful king, while queens, especially Augusta, lacking in understanding, endangered his plans in ways ‘more difficult to overcome than those caused by foreign Powers or hostile parties’.⁶⁰ His tearful cramps and suicidal thoughts could be redeemed with loyal military self-sacrifice, devotion to the king, and above all, a superior intellect. Pandering to the nationalism and rise in sexism at the time of publication, his memoir portrayals aimed at a middling audience, who advocated domesticity most strongly from among the social strata.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Bismarck, *Gedanken und Erinnerungen*, 50.

⁶⁰ Bismarck, *The Man and the Statesman*, Vol. II., 315.

⁶¹ Le Rider, *Modernity and Crises of Identity*; Christopher E. Forth, *The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood* (Baltimore, 2004).

Contemporary accounts worked hard to claim that Bismarck was free from feminine influence. Onlookers echoed the logic, such as a British edition of his life from 1895: ‘the name of woman [sic] rarely ever crossed the latter’s lips. His private life was spotlessly pure. ...He was little subject to feminine beauty, hated clever women, and married a lady...well born, yet plain unpretentious, and country bred...Apart from his only daughter, ...his wife was the only woman who was ever able to exercise a subtle influence in politics and personal questions over him.’⁶² These accounts aimed at image-management for German politics in Britain operating within sexist codes of masculine virtue successfully supported the myth of the masculine Iron Chancellor, yet, only form part of an era of gender-anxiety, in which individuals like Otto aimed desperately to stabilize their own identities and claims to power. In these early years of his state career, the gendered dynamics underlying Otto’s service only hum. Yet, as time passed, the hum grew to a mutter, to a roar.

The Franco-Prussian War 1870: Identity Breakdown

Otto raged against femininity in politics. He loathed Queen Victoria of Britain, whom he accused of incest, the Empress Augusta, and the Empress Frederick, the latter of whom he identified in his memoirs among his greatest enemies.⁶³ Contemporary admirers in Britain made sure to claim the opposite, arguing that ‘with Queen Victoria...he was greatly charmed, as with ‘one of the wisest statesmen of the time.’ Yet it was the masculine more than the feminine element in the mind of her Majesty which captivated

⁶² StAMK: SDD218.3L6, 8.

⁶³ Ibid, 36.

the Iron Chancellor,⁶⁴ and the record contradicts such tempered interpretations. Instead, Steinberg notes that Otto

turned his life into a physical and psychic hell because he so implacably despised the Queen/Empress August and the Crown Princess Victoria. Again and again the 'strong woman' played the role of evil enchantress in his psyche. These seemingly all-powerful women dominated their weak husbands and threatened Bismarck from all sides. He sensed conspiracies everywhere. The women caused all his difficulties. He imagined their influence as malign and pervasive to a degree that can fairly be called paranoid.⁶⁵

Otto obsessed over powerful females and their sexuality, accused the Prussian crown princess of treason in 1848, while, as Feuchtwanger points out, the opposite was the case as Otto had tried to convince Augusta to act against her father-in-law in the absence of her husband Wilhelm, who had fled to Britain.⁶⁶ Overall, Otto portrayed women in politics as desperate meddlers in his memoirs, yet, this appears to have been a strategic choice, to weaponize sexism and allege feminine qualities into rival female figures, in order to stabilize his own gender-identity when Otto perceived that it came under scrutiny.

67

⁶⁴ Ibid, 8.

⁶⁵ Steinberg, *Bismarck*, 469.

⁶⁶ Feuchtwanger, *Bismarck*, 49.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 35-6.

Discursively, Otto's professed aversion for women in politics reached a climax during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. He was ill in March, and left to his home in Varzin on 4 April until 24 May, already setting him on poor physical footing. On 13 May 1870, regarding the question of the succession to the Spanish throne which would lead Prussia into war with France, he wrote with in-character anti-Catholic and misogynistic language: 'The Spanish affair has taken a miserable turn. The undoubted reasons of state have been subordinated to princely private interests and ultramontane, feminine interests. My annoyance about all this has heavily burdened my nerves for weeks.'⁶⁸ Otto here constructed affinities between Catholicism and femininity through this accusation levelled at Queen Augusta and her humanitarian concerns regarding war. While weak, ill, and stressed, Otto chose to deflect problems away from himself onto the Queen in writing. Three years later, this 'ultra-montane' anxiety would fuel the war against Catholicism in the German Empire.

While his body seemed to give way under him in the early summer, Otto continued to adamantly blame political failures on women and their meddling. After having jaundice, he left work again on 8 June. He stayed in Varzin despite a threat of war with France in July 1870.⁶⁹ On 13 July 1870 Otto left Varzin to return to service over the Spanish Succession and found the King in his negotiations with France under the influence of 'the Queen.'⁷⁰ The Queen 'implored her husband with tears' in order to 'avert war,'⁷¹ adopting a favourite strategy of Ottos. Any retreat before such behaviour from a woman, while

⁶⁸ Johannes Willms, *Bismarck: Dämon der Deutschen: Anmerkungen zu einer Legende* (Munich, 1997), 223, in Steinberg, *Bismarck*, 284.

⁶⁹ Steinberg, *Bismarck*, 285

⁷⁰ Bismarck, *The Man and the Statesman*, Vol.II, 95.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

comprehensible, Otto found dishonourable: ‘Against the opposition of his consort, due to her natural feminine timidity and lack of national feeling, the King’s power of resistance was weakened by his knightly regard for his lady and his kingly consideration for a Queen.’⁷² Mercy, hesitance to destroy human life, above all, Otto argued, were dangerous feminine sentiments undermining the honour of the House of Hohenzollern and its state. Nothing threatened Prussia more, in Otto’s renditions of the events leading up to the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, than women’s involvement in politics.

Through the portrayal of Prussian politics as failing due to femininity, Otto coined himself (though physically in a desperate state) as the masculine saviour of the situation to officers and diplomats. Otto found it paramount to intervene—and celebrated his masculinity in dinner meetings with high-ranking masculine officials like Roon and Moltke, to sturdify his gender and strengthen their alliance. And yet, unable to find sure footing quickly, Otto soon resorted to his long-favoured tactics: he threatened to resign, twice, on 12 and 13 of August.⁷³

In this period, the close circle of military officers surrounding Otto, the King, and his war council relied on each other for the forging- and upkeep of their gendered identity. They awarded it to each other as a form of approval through bellicose decision-making, reciprocally gendering future Prussian and German politics. In his memoirs, Otto reported, when the King seemed to cower before diplomatic messages, all the military men at dinner lost their appetite. To bow to diplomacy was too feminine a choice to accommodate their characteristic masculine voracity.⁷⁴ Yet, in Otto’s account, true

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid, 93 and 95. While travelling he claimed he had no ‘hot meals in two days’ in August and lacked sleep. StAMK: DD218.A2B5F06, 596.

⁷⁴ Bismarck, *The Man and the Statesman*, Vol.II, 95.

masculine Prussian manliness, kingly and warlike, saved the Fatherland's honour yet again: Roon, Moltke, Bismarck and the king finally agreed that France threatened Germany with a gendered 'submission' and therefore 'a humiliation', which amounted 'to a wound to their 'national sense of honour [and thus] compelled [them]...to go to war.'⁷⁵ Employing the language of duels, Bismarck interpreted 'French arrogance' as a 'corroding injury', a 'slap in the face' from which they could not recover 'with honour' without 'war'.⁷⁶ For once, Otto praised Roon's decision-making in these days, though this did not last long.⁷⁷

In good military company, the King made the only decision Otto could justify to his imperialist, gender-anxious readers in the 1890s: '[W]hen he was free from feminine influence, the sense of honour of the heir of Frederick the Great and of a Prussian officer always remained paramount.'⁷⁸ Otto portrayed gallantry, albeit a weakness, as a forgivable manly flaw allowed to reside in the victorious king. Other contemporaries adopted the same vein of argumentation. With the war mostly won, save the Parisian fortress, Waldersee glossed the capital's bombardment on 23 October 1870 with the arch remark: 'Without a doubt there are women intriguing in the background, and on this occasion, for a wonder, the Queen and the Crown Princess are of one mind. In the press a strenuous effort is being made to brand a bombardment as a ruthless proceeding.'⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Ibid, 97.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 95.

⁷⁷ StAMK: DD218.A2B5F06, 161. Feuchtwanger, *Bismarck*, 175.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 95.

⁷⁹ Versailles, 23 Oct. 1870, Count Alfred von Waldersee, *A Field Marshal's Memoirs: From the Diary, Correspondence and Reminiscences of Alfred, Count von Waldersee* (Westport, Conn., 1978), Ch.2. See also: Alfred Waldersee, *Denkwürdigkeiten des General-Feldmarschall Alfred Grafen von Waldersee*, ed. Heinrich Otto Meisner, Vol.I: 1832-1888 (Osnabrück, 1967), 102-4, cited in Steinberg, *Bismarck*, 297-8.

Similarly, regarding the armies besieging Paris, Otto wrote to Johanna that he wondered whether they, like powerful and masculine ‘Thor,’ were ‘hindered from walking ahead by the wearing of a feminine dress.’⁸⁰

In distinguished company celebrating Prussia’s military victory over France, Otto feasted on his high masculine status and success. On 2 December 1870, Odo Russell wrote, to Edmund Hammond, permanent undersecretary in the Foreign Office, that Otto played the part of the grand entertainer in December and impressed the guest.

I am charmed with Count Bismarck, his soldier-like, straightforward frank manner, his genial conversations, are truly fascinating, and his excessive kindness to me have won my heart...At dinner and breakfast he takes the head of the table with his under-secretaries on each side—then come the Chief Clerks—then the junior clerks situated at the end of the table—everybody in uniform. When I dine there I sit between the Count and the Permanent Under-Secretary...who plays the piano divinely after dinner while we smoke. The conversation is in German and the questions of the day are discussed with perfect freedom, which makes them deeply interesting and instructive.⁸¹

Yet, such identity-victories were short lived and crashed as soon as Otto found that the military victories did not bring him more control. Only days later, when peace under

⁸⁰ StAMK: DD218.A2B5F06, 624. 7 December.

⁸¹ Odo Russel, 2 December 1870, to Edmund Hammond, permanent undersecretary in the Foreign Office, cited in Karina Urbach, *Bismarck's Favourite Englishman, Lord Odo Russell's Mission to Berlin* (London, 1999), 69, cited in Steinberg, *Bismarck*, 299.

Prussian terms seemed less easily concluded than Otto desired, the minister was so affected by his identity-breakdown, that he alarmed contemporaries. Paul Bronsart von Schellendork noted on 7 December:

Bismarck really begins to be ready for the mad house. He complained bitterly to the King that General Moltke had written to General Trochau and claimed that this as a negotiation with a foreign government belonged in his competence. When General Moltke as representative of the Supreme Command of the Army has written to the Governor of Paris, the matter has a purely military character. Since Count Bismarck claims in addition that he had declared to me that he considered the letter extremely questionable, whereas the opposite is the case, I then submitted a written report to General von Moltke, in which I demonstrate the falsehood of the assertion and requested in future not to be asked to carry out verbal instructions with the count.⁸²

Here, Otto may have felt betrayed by the military commander, with whom only weeks earlier he had seemed to forge such functional bonds. His son meanwhile served in Rouen; telegrams to Johanna provided near-daily updates that his son Wilhelm—called Bill—was alive and well, paired with letters of the same nature on the same day.⁸³

When Otto and his masculinity broke down, he turned to alcohol and tobacco, as if to return to the classical bonding practices of masculine brotherhood he had exercise while

⁸² Paul Bronsart von Schellendorf, *Geheimes Kriegstagebuch 1870-1871*, ed. Peter Rassow (Bonn, 1954), 212, cited in Steinberg, *Bismarck*, 300.

⁸³ StAMK: DD218.A2B5F06, 625, 627. 24 December.

at university student—yet, here, entirely alone.⁸⁴ Waldersee recorded in his diary while at Versailles on 26 December 1870:

Yesterday Bismarck sent word that he wanted to see me. I found him in his room which serves as a living and bed room and was dreadfully overheated. He sat in a long dressing gown, smoked a big cigar, looked as if he were really suffering. He was visibly upset... Then he began to talk in the following way, 'Every thing [sic] is made as difficult as possible for me. There, to begin with Grand Duke of Baden and the Duke of Coburg intrigue with the Crown Prince and are on the way to making a mess of the German question... The General Staff refuses to inform me of the most important things; events, which are of the greatest importance for me, on which I have to base my decisions, are concealed from me. I shall have to ask the King to change all that.' He grumbled about this chapter, which I know well, with the greatest violence. His eyes grew bigger. Sweat formed on his brow. He looked seriously disturbed. I fear that he will become dangerously ill because this kind of excitability is not natural. In addition to the heavy cigars that he smokes, I saw from the bottle that he offered me that he drinks very strong wine.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ John Lothrop Motley, *Morton's Hope: Or, The Memoirs of a Provincial* (New York, 1839), 139.

⁸⁵ Diary, Versailles 26 December 1870, Alfred Waldersee, *Denkwürdigkeiten des General-Feldmarschall Alfred Grafen von Waldersee*, ed. Heinrich Otto Meisner, Vol.I: 1832-1888 (Osnabrück, 1967), 116-8 cited in Steinberg, *Bismarck*, 301-2.

In such situations, Otto learned that his membership in the hypermasculine and military aristocratic circle was conditional. Coaxing reassurances from his son that he was indeed alive at the front, Otto wrote to his 18-year-old son: ‘So—[you say] I must send you geese if I want you to write to me? Well, I still have some of that bribing material and send it to you, along with 100 Th. If you need more then write.’⁸⁶ Showering his son with high-class food and a good bit of money was the only sure manner to get him to write, confirming his well-being; young son Wilhelm, barely 18, was stationed in France, as was Herbert, who turned 21 that month, adding to Otto’s mental strain.⁸⁷

It was in such moments where Otto’s subjective political experience aimed to counteract the accusation of femininity to the point of social dysphoria. Otto feared an emasculated, even feminine social and political experience. To be treated like a brilliant woman, characterized at its core by powerlessness, drove him to tears, fury, self-violence through excessive smoking and drinking, as he cajoled, begged, and threatened the central European sovereign he served, at times wearing him down until he ceded, much as at other times, needing to be rescued by a prince, as in 1866. Otto was safe, however, captured in a male body, which led him into political spheres in the first place and kept him from explicit accusations of femininity while there, even as he lived in fear of his own shortcomings, and loathed women and femininity in politics to recoin his own diplomatic and domestic machinations and intrigues as inherent to them. Instead, contemporaries suggested the madhouse, as he did not behave in line with his prescribed identity.

Thundering against women and their intrigues formed part of Otto’s political environment and the negotiations in the winter of 1870. His environment echoed Otto’s

⁸⁶ StAMK: DD218.3W5, 17.

⁸⁷ Lerman, *Bismarck*, 149. Both fought in Mars-La-Tour in September. Feuchtwanger, *Bismarck*, 172, 40.

express identification of women and femininity as primary faults and dangers. ‘Women [we]re forbidden’⁸⁸ at Versailles during the negotiations, because the import of ‘wives as well as daughters’ would bring with them ‘abhorred domesticity.’⁸⁹ Otto wrote to both his sister and wife to justify not inviting them to join him. Victory songs played in turn, in celebration at Versailles, portrayed Germany as a feminine ‘Bride of Victory’ (*Siegesbraut*) and in stark contrast to an alleged masculine Prussia.⁹⁰ Throughout the Franco-Prussian war, therefore, Prussian decision-makers worked to exclude women and their alleged femininity from the forging of their empire—applying the rejection of female character also to themselves, working to define themselves as masculine Prussians through identifying German lands as a feminine prize, mixing gendered metaphors into political conquest.

Diplomacy 1876-1889: ‘Feminine’ Intrigue and Meddling

During Otto’s years of active cabinet diplomacy, political relations between individuals of different rank operated in gendered terms. In his memoirs, Otto portrays the rulers and ambassadors of Europe after 1876 as a group of insecure, back-stabbing feminine plotters heavily reliant on- but distrustful of- his emotional attachment. Otto remembers negotiations in Budapest 8 July 1876 preceding the Berlin Congress of 1878, where his enemy the Russian diplomat Prince Gortchakoff ‘was...anxious to prove to his Emperor that my devotion to him...was insincere, or at least “Platonic” [sic]’⁹¹ using romantic language to frame the political relation. Otto highlights the interpersonal elements crucial

⁸⁸ StAMK: sDD218.A2A8K7, 160. 4 January 1871.

⁸⁹ StAMK: DD218.A2B5F06, 630. 4 January 1871.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 633.

⁹¹ Bismarck, *The Man and the Statesman*, v. II, 233.

for his negotiations with the Tsar, indignant at the accusation, counterintuitively, of a lack of dedication to a foreign monarch. Some of the more complex nuances of Otto's relationship with Alexander III, which based themselves on the template of courtship, complicated the matter further. The conflict of interest is clear. In the meantime, Otto 'begged' Wilhelm I to act on ambassadorial appointments, likely, to give him more freedom to manoeuvre in the matter of the Balkans, while Otto teamed up with the Ambassador to Austria von Schweinitz

to preserve the friendship between the great monarchies...If, to our sorrow, this was not possible between Russia and Austria, then, we could endure indeed [that] our friends should lose or win battles against each other, but not, that one of the two should be so severely wounded and injured that its position as an independent Great Power taking its part in the councils of Europe would be endangered.⁹²

To Otto's chagrin, Gortchakoff succeeded in leading Alexander III to test the insincere, 'the Platonic character of our love,' by meeting with Austria and forging a treaty with Francis Joseph lasting until 15 January 1877, to stabilize relations between Austria and Russia. Otto, in turn, defined '[t]his treaty, and not the Berlin congress' as 'the foundation' of Austrian possessions in the Balkan and their relationship with Russia. Not only did Otto take credit for establishing a treaty he was not officially involved in and therewith laying the groundwork for future negotiations after 1876, but justified every point of his decision-making with love, his own superior attachment and competence, gendering Alexander III in particular, and Austria by extension, as feminine. Otto held

⁹² Ibid, 234.

more power in this period than ever before, and even regents depended on him in his account, making him the guiding man to a host of rival women with competing political desires. After his elevation to the rank of Prince in 1871, in effect, Otto's identity and his political interactions shifted gendered roles along lines of power distribution in the international sphere.

The series of treaties which emerged in these years are well known, yet, their gendered nuances must be mentioned. Otto's often-admired strategizing in the period of congresses and treaties between 1878 and 1888 may have been a product in part of his emotional education in politics and assessment of human behaviour within it, in an era when he finally could cajole feminized regents into connections of his making. After the Treaty of Berlin blocking Russian advancement in the Balkans, Otto's alliances against Russia with Austria-Hungary in 1879 (then secret),⁹³ Austria-Hungary and Russia against Turkey in 1881,⁹⁴ and Austria-Hungary and Italy against France 1882⁹⁵ all famously identified an alleged common enemy rather than positive mutual aims, isolated France, tied the recently-defeated Austria more closely to the new German Empire, and eased tensions between Russia and Austria-Hungary—Turkey played the role of general villain here—so as to avoid a war on Otto's eastern front. Otto followed a secret deal with Russia against Turkey in 1887 with the publication of the 1879 alliance with Austria-Hungary in 1888 and the 1887 reinsurance treat in 1896 after retirement.⁹⁶

⁹³ Theodore S. Hamerow, (ed.), *The Age of Bismarck: Documents and Interpretations* (New York, 1973), 272-75.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 279-81.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 285-87.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 287-89. Feuchtwanger, *Bismarck*, xiv.

We can, as others have, read genius in the alleged complexity of this pre-Great War web.⁹⁷ Yet, in so far as we may credit Otto with the architecture of these treaties, we may read in them equally an uncertain, negative system, intentionally designed to sow discord and distrust among major rival powers, characterized less by complexity than two simple interests.⁹⁸ One, that any conflict that might arise might damage the German Empire's enemies; two, that expansionism might evolve to the detriment of individuals in Africa and the Balkans, but not within the individual imperial states as the German Empire joined in the Scramble for Africa from 1884. Otto's duplicitous machinations with Russia,⁹⁹ Austria and Italy against France and the Ottoman Empire in this era, his apparent lack of dedication to these alliances and treaties, which have led some to admire the web of mutual assurance and dependence he constructed in the preamble to the First World War, took on positive social and political meaning due to the identity categories contemporaries and later onlookers selected for him—military, aristocratic, masculine.

Ironically this scheming was precisely the great flaw Otto attributed to the supposed dangerous women at the Prussian and German court such as the Queen Augusta, whom he accused of treating the government as 'her ministry' and endangering relations with Austria with her poor 'mood'.¹⁰⁰ His decision-making involved the intention or expectation of emotional reactions in his treaty-holders when learning of rival treaties at his chosen point in time—particularly Russia, which was meant to feel uncertain of the

⁹⁷ Lerman, *Bismarck*, 212, 214.

⁹⁸ Clark's recent assessment reemphasises Bismarck's temporal models allowed for steering, but not for control. Christopher Clark, *Time and Power: Visions of History in German Politics, from the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich* (Princeton, 2019).

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 218-219.

¹⁰⁰ Bismarck, *The Man and the Statesman*, Vol.II, 310, 311. Emphasis in original.

German Empire's loyalty at all times. The effect certainly was the desired one—to build Otto's reputation and place the German Empire at the centre of diplomatic negotiation.

His relationship with Russia in particular, suggests that Otto at the very least *suspected* insecurities, indignance, fear and jealousy to play a central part in the decision-making processes of diplomats and statesmen allegedly as rational and level-headed as himself. Even more likely, his actions and recollections allow us to intuit that he built on the *active expectation* of insecurities among the great powers, in the knowledge that their choices built on uncertainties in an era of rapid and intense shifts in power. Otto read feminine fears in the sovereigns and envoys he liaised with, and treated his series of treaties as a mechanism with which to exploit their weakness and make gains, stabilizing and destabilizing relations strategically in a highly gendered manner.

Otto remembered this era in the 1890s as one in which duplicitous machinations were necessary to avoid a war 'on three sides' with rivalling powers, whom he portrays as jealous lovers vying for attention and gifts.¹⁰¹ The gendering of language also applied to Gortchakoff, whom he accuses to expect from him 'as a lady from her admirer, that I should guess at and represent the Russian wishes without Russia having herself to utter them.' Alexander in turn voiced his disdain through his Empress that German "'friendship is too platonic,'" which Otto explained within the framework of courtly service as the impossible demand of lady Russia of master Prussia to be completely 'at the service' of her aims.¹⁰² The Triple Alliance he portrayed, in turn, as his wise decision to 'decline' the option 'between Austria and Russia' to preserve the peace, as though the two empires vied for attention in a love-triangle.¹⁰³ Otto portrayed himself in the 1890s recollections

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 239.

¹⁰² Ibid, 238.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 250.

as the only level-headed man dealing with a feminine foreign powers, over whose destinies he held the reigns even as they accused him of insufficient love.

Bismarck's Head: Myth and Medical Fascination

Medicine and science successfully tied ideas of rationality bio-essentially into a masculine, specifically-embodied form in this period.¹⁰⁴ Within Otto's contemporary gendered cultural code, an act was not necessarily gendered within itself—the question was, what kind of gendered body carried said act out. The Bismarck myth relied on the image of a corporeal rationality, the assumption that when an individual socially recognized as male like Bismarck acted, it must be indicator of great genius. Otto thus served as alleged historical proof of ultimate genius, justifying the perpetuation of political leadership through the qualities he allegedly embodied—elite, militaristic, and above all masculine, in European and German politics to date. This myth in turn forged the legend of superior cabinet-diplomacy during the age of empire, constructing enduring gendered and colonial legacy. The very idea of the statesman-genius built on the image of Otto's clever strategizing in this period precariously rested on the idea of his masculinity—which, for Otto, had been a matter of profound insecurity throughout his life.

After the establishment of the German Empire, contemporaries resorted to the language of heroes, gods, and demi-gods to describe the chancellor as hypermasculine in strength and intellect. To them, he was a 'Teutonic' hero who struggled in 'the labours of a Hercules'—'Bismarck's position was unique, just as the products of his power are almost unparalleled. ...he was unparalleled nearly in every way. The modern Plutarch

¹⁰⁴ Christopher Lawrence and Steven Shapin, ed., *Science Incarnate: Historical Embodiments of Natural Knowledge* (Chicago, 1998).

will have to compare him...with a hundred other heroes before he can bring out all the striking points of his strong individuality,'¹⁰⁵ contemporaries asserted. He was a 'German Prometheus who, chained to his forest rock, spent all his bitter time in exclaiming against the ingratitude and injustice of the new Teutonic gods.'¹⁰⁶ To listeners he held 'the body' of 'the great hero of the century.'¹⁰⁷ He was an 'Achilles,' a 'Ulysses,'¹⁰⁸ who appeared in a simple major's uniform yet looked 'like the god Jupiter.'¹⁰⁹ He as Atlas held up the German Empire in a cartoon of 1875 in the *Kladderadatsch*, was a Wotan in the Austrian *Figaro* in 1890, and a Germanic mythological hero of legendary masculine might on his way to Valhalla in 1898.¹¹⁰

Biographers as early as 1873 celebrated Bismarck as a messianic figure in German history. Supremely loyal to king and fatherland, singularly able to save the Prussian parliament from itself in 1862, Bismarck made 'the enemies' of the liberals with their anti-patriotic blockade of parliamentary increases in the military budget, sabotaged the king's foreign policy, deeply affecting the contemporary writing of history.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁵ StAMK: SDD218.3L6, 4.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 10.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 13.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 274, 301.

¹⁰⁹ Count Seherr Toss, Königgrätz, 8 Jul. 1866, reported in Charles Lowe, *Bismarck's Table-Talk* (London and Philadelphia, 1895), 101. Feuchtwanger notes Bismarck held the rank of Major, while Steinberg notes Otto only served briefly and very reluctantly in the Prussian reserves. Feuchtwanger, *Bismarck*, 143, Steinberg, *Bismarck*, 19, 50.

¹¹⁰ *Kladderadatsch* (April 1875), *Figaro* (March 1890), *Kladderadatsch* (August 1898).

¹¹¹ Krieger, writing in 1873, even defined nationalist opposition to Bismarck as dangerously 'sentimental' (*Schwärmerisch*) when these prioritized liberal constitutionalism over royal absolutism. Ernst Krieger, *Kleine Mittheilungen aus der Jugendzeit des Fürsten Bismarck* (Bielefeld and Leipzig, 1873), 199.

Otto added to the mythologization with his own writings after retirement. Dismissed from service in 1890, Otto chose to highlight his alleged genius in his memoirs, and provided the public with a two-volume account of his version of history, shaping the vision and view of the German public and even historians. As Lerman notes, Otto cared profoundly about how history would remember him.¹¹² In writing his memoirs portraying his control over German and international politics, Otto ‘preferred to rely primarily on his memory.’¹¹³ Working by dictation, the retiree told his life-story in terms of anecdotes, leaving it to his 73-year-old secretary Lothar Bucher to arrange these chronologically, and to the professor Horst Kohl to fact-check the claims.¹¹⁴ All volumes appeared posthumously. Writing in the context of the fin-de-siècle crisis of identities, the retired politician provided the public with a specific vision of German unificatory history, deeply marking our historical understandings of the period. One of the main features of this myth was that of the strategist, the male genius, who embodied valour and tradition, patriotism and honour even as he participated in maps-and-chaps games of international grand-power machinations, as the European states divided up the world between them between 1884 and 1914.¹¹⁵

These memoirs provided historians with a problematic backbone of historical narrative that served in great part to forge the image of a genius-statesman, German patriot, and royalist loyalist after the fact, feeding into the myth of Bismarck the aristocratic, hypermasculine, military man, bellicose and pensive, superior in intellect and decked in achievements—the ‘Heros’ of Germany, as sculpturist Gustav Eberlein portrayed him. In

¹¹² Lerman, *Bismarck*, 252.

¹¹³ Pflanze, *Bismarck*, V.III, 414

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 415-417.

¹¹⁵ On embodied rationality, see: Lawrence and Shapin, eds., *Science Incarnate*.

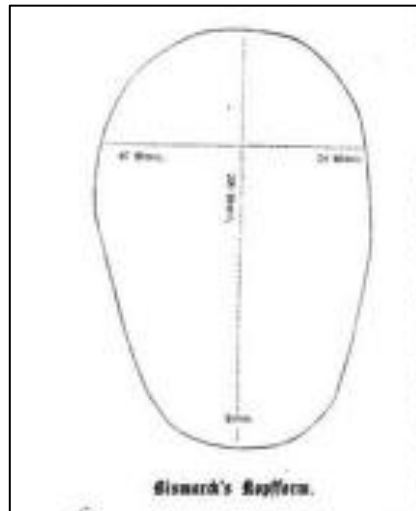
Germany's increasingly nationalistic, militaristic, and aggressively expansionist political phase under Wilhelm II, contemporaries appropriated Bismarck when alive and when dead, feeding his image into the then contemporary-image of Germany as a World-power with a long and ancestral historical, mythical heritage.

After years of desperate health, eight years after leaving the helm of the German Imperial ship, Otto succumbed to the effect of life-long ailments.¹¹⁶ While his demise was an agonizing consequence of years of suffering and illness before, newspapers immediately worked to encode genius into his dead body to bio-essentialize his achievements into a stable male, masculine, Prussian and white-race form. 'The great chancellor is passed away!' the costly middling publication *Illustrirte Zeitung* reported on 11 August.¹¹⁷ 'Bismarck was dead! Germany's greatest man, the best German had been raptured from earth!'¹¹⁸ The term 'raptured' (lit. *entrückt*), which reports used, carried explicit eschatological connotations, coining Bismarck as a saint, while the report insisted on his manhood, and used the term 'titan' yet again, to suggest the age and proto-Olympian generational divinity of a father figure.

¹¹⁶ On his death, see: Lothar Machtan's *Bismarcks Tod und Deutschlands Tränen. Reportage einer Tragödie* (Munich, 1998). Machtan identifies careful image-management throughout Otto's life, and during his demise.

¹¹⁷ *Illustrirte Zeitung* (hereon IZ): 11 Aug. 1889, 194.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*



Caption reads: 'Bismarck's Head-shape'¹¹⁹ (*Bismarck's Kopfform*) Public Domain.

Examinations of the '1815-born mortal,'¹²⁰ sought to find physiological predisposition and evidence for the greatness of the statesman. In line with the skull-obsession of the colonial age, newspapers reported on Otto's head size and shape. Seeking to exploit and endorse the idea of a large cranium and a superior genius, the newspaper reported: 'Prince Bismarck had a head-breadth of 62 cm, that is 6cm more than the average breadth of other mortals.'¹²¹ The head was further 220mm in length. The 'genius man' Bismarck in the immediate discursive memorialization, in these portrayals, had a 'more developed' right side to his tremendously large head.¹²² The print language sanitized the potential malformations, more likely due to the neuralgia Otto's physician Schweniger had diagnosed years before, and provided readers with a sketch of Otto's head, then available for examination after his demise. The reported insisted on his genius as an embodied property of the statesman, operating within the physiological, racialized, and gendered

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 195. Public Domain.

¹²⁰ StAMK: DD218.3W5, 31.

¹²¹ IZ: 11 Aug. 1989, 195.

¹²² Ibid.

determinism of its age. This popular exercise of pseudo-science buttressed the idea of an embodied rationality inherent to the largeness and masculinity of the statesman—whose size and evident genius could be read in a body predisposed to such qualities. The myth they therewith contributed to forge in turn, erected a racialized and gendered monument for later generations to point to justify political participation and exclusion in a period where British and US-American medical and popular journals took great interest in his life, health, and brain.¹²³ These fixated on his diet, his size, greatness and weight, how much he drank, what he smoked, and attempted to explain his behaviours and identity as paired with his head-shape and brain-positioning within his skull.¹²⁴

Otto's head served contemporaries as a projection site for male power-specific fantasies of body-specific superiority and legitimate power-holding in white-race physiological manifest destiny. This identity-reduction corrupted the history of Otto's frustrating political experience and brushed over the great ambiguities of his class, civilian, and especially gendered identities while alive during Prussia's age of expansion. It not only effaced Otto's own gendered experience but warped the historical record, portraying the Iron Chancellor's career as far less precarious than Otto thought it was. His elevation to *Fürst* and likely holding three offices in the German Empire, and the gender-ambiguities in diplomatic relations that came with them, as well as his head as object of curiosity suggest that masculinity as code for power were not an obvious and self-evident property to the Prussian Minister, German Chancellor and chief diplomat.

¹²³ In Britain: 'The Health of Prince Bismarck,' *The British Medical Journal* 2, no. 872 (1877): 388–388, 'Prince Bismarck As A Patient,' *The British Medical Journal* 1, no. 1538 (1890): 1437–38. In the Americas: 'Bismarck's Regimen,' *Scientific American* 63, no. 8 (1890): 119.

¹²⁴ 'Curiosities of Bismarck's Brains,' *Scientific American* 40, no. 17 (1879): 264.

Masculinity was an elusive prize to Otto, awarded to him by a King he claimed to love, whom he had made Emperor.¹²⁵

Studying ‘the historiography of Bismarck’ since then, as Kraus has noted, is in some ways to retell ‘the history of Germany history writing about the modern period in the last one hundred years.’¹²⁶ Pflanze remarks in the post-war period as ‘older generation of German scholars gave way to the younger, the predominant’ interpretations of the statesman and his legacy ‘shifted from positive to negative. ...Bismarck-the-good-genius (Rothfels, Ritter) gave ground, first, to Bismarck-the-bad-genius (Wehler) and, then, to Bismarck-the-diminished-genius (Gall, Engelberg)’¹²⁷ while Erick Eyck aimed to provide a liberal account of his political career, and ‘marveled’ at the genius while remaining critical at every turn.¹²⁸ ‘The real Bismarck,’ as Steinberg calls him, ‘violent, intemperate, hypochondriac, and misogynist, only appeared in biographies late in the twentieth century.’¹²⁹

Conclusion

Gender relations, sexism, homophobia, and gender anxiety fluctuated throughout the nineteenth century, in part triggered by women’s contestation of their subordinate roles in households, society, and politics from 1800. The Enlightenment era c.1780-1830s saw elite women take centre-stage in salons and middling women manage economic activities

¹²⁵ Gravestone reads: ‘A loyal German Servant of the Emperor Wilhelm I,’ IZ: 11 Aug. 1889, 194.

¹²⁶ Kraus, ‘Mythos und Wirklichkeit des Eisernen Kanzlern,’ 439.

¹²⁷ Pflanze, *Bismarck*, Vol.I, xxxviii.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, xx.

¹²⁹ Steinberg, *Bismarck*, 478.

in households—then, still pivotal units of a broadly agriculture area of Europe.¹³⁰ Working and rural poor women, their plight inflected by class, experienced comparatively more sexual vulnerability, which some protested against 1848-1850.¹³¹ The period 1840-1860s generally saw some improvements for working women as literacy rates rose, and women came to form part of some skilled workplaces, though guild-exclusion and a diverse range of political and economic rights across central Europe still limited women generally speaking to service, foodwork, care for children, the sick or the vulnerable, or writing for other women.¹³² Lynn Abrams rightly points out that by the 1840s female independence and authority in the household informed marriage-partnership ideals, in which economic dependence of the wife on the husband represented a problem for a

¹³⁰ Respectively: Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), Anne-Charlott Trepp, *Sanfte Männlichkeit und selbständige Weiblichkeit: Frauen und Männer im Hamburger Bürgertum zwischen 1770 und 1840* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), Isabel V. Hull, *Sexuality, State, and Civil Society in Germany, 1700-1815* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), Rebekka Habermas, *Frauen und Männer des Bürgertums: eine Familiengeschichte (1750-1850)* (Göttingen, 2000).

¹³¹ Claudia Kreklau, “‘Eat as the King Eats’: Making the Middle Class through Food, Foodways, and Food Discourses in Nineteenth-Century Germany,” (PhD Diss., 2018), chapter 4. While elite and middling women of course also experienced the risk of sexual assault, their embeddedness in elite and middling social networks could provide some dissuasion against attacks against of marriage, deflecting violence towards maid or sex workers.

¹³² Ann Taylor Allen, *Feminism and Motherhood in Germany, 1800-1914* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1991), Ute Frevert, *Women in German History: From Bourgeois Emancipation to Sexual Liberation* (Oxford, 1990), 78, 80.

happy union.¹³³ The 1860s saw a downturn in women's work opportunities during and after the German Wars of Unification 1866 and 1870—even as majority-confessional male members of society came to fear unmarried women and moralists critiqued women's visibility in cities.¹³⁴

From this time, le Rider and others identify a gender identity crisis in the European fin-de-siècle.¹³⁵ Contemporary 'anxiety about women out of place' in 'mental pursuits or political action' caused 'arts and sciences [to] collude[] to produce images of women that served to discredit or even to disarm the feminine during a period of perceived gender crisis' and caused a policing of gender boundaries.¹³⁶ Bram Dijkstra finds this phenomenon active and unprecedented around 1900 in its extent, overlapping with anti-

¹³³ Lynn Abrams 'Companionship and Conflict: The Negotiation of Marriage Relations in the Nineteenth Century,' in Lynn Abrams and Elizabeth Harvey (eds), *Gender Relations in German History: Power: Agency and Experience from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Durham, N.C., 1997).

¹³⁴ Kreklau, "'Neither Gendered nor a Room'", Catherine Leota Dollard, *The Surplus Woman: Unmarried in Imperial Germany, 1871-1918* (Oxford, 2009), 155, 234.

¹³⁵ Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, Le Rider, *Modernity and Crises of Identity*; Forth, *Masculinity in the Modern West*; Domeier, 'The Homosexual Scare,' Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, Nicolaus Somart, 'The Kaiser in His Epoch: Some Reflections on Wilhelmine Society, Sexuality and Culture,' in John Röhl and Nicolaus Sombart, (eds.), *Kaiser Wilhelm II: New Interpretations: The Corfu Papers*, (Cambridge, 1982), 287–312; Reagin, 'The Imagined Hausfrau,' Habermas, *Frauen und Männer*, 260-5. Also, of course, relevant: Jean H. Quataert, *Reluctant Feminists in German Social Democracy, 1885-1917* (Princeton, 2015), building on Taylor-Allen milestone work, and Richard J. Evans, *The Feminist Movement in Germany, 1894-1933* (London, 1997). For similar dynamics, see in France and Britain: Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class*. Reprint edition. (Berkeley, 1997) and Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, 1988). Arguably, the fin-de-siècle ended in 1945.

¹³⁶ Forth, 65, 158.

Semitism and Darwinist racial science.¹³⁷ While fears that men gained more feminine qualities, and women more masculine characteristics make up the broadest trend in this period 1860-1945, this social phenomenon found resonance in political discussions of the ‘yellow peril’ and ‘white man’s burden,’ anti-Semitic explanations of the crash of 1873 in the age of empire and colonial rivalries.¹³⁸ Politically these fears spoke of alleged threats to white civilization and a natural order, informing discussions of military expansionism.

The broadest trend—the fear of feminine men and masculine women as legible in discussions on power in central Europe—holds the most relevance for the period discussed in this article. I specify that the era 1860s-1890s remains distinct from the scandal years of the Wilhelmine period 1905-1908, where political critics weaponized homophobia against elite homosexual decision-makers such as Phillip zu Eulenburg and Bernhard von Bülow, partly directed against the closeted Kaiser.¹³⁹ John C. Fout rightly

¹³⁷ Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*. Sabeau’s work proposes a parallel era around 1800.

¹³⁸ The literature on increased anti-Semitism is vast, but milestones include: Marion A. Kaplan, *Jewish Daily Life in Germany, 1618-1945* (Oxford, 2005). More recently: David Sorkin, *Jewish Emancipation: A History Across Five Centuries* (Princeton, 2019). Anti-Semitism too fluctuated and varied in this period as racial science generally changed its humoral cadence in the 1870s—‘anti-Semitism’ a term invented in the 1870s. Fritz Stern, *Gold and Iron* (New York, 2013), 600. On overlaps between anti-Semitism and black racism: Sander L. Gilman, *The Jew’s Body* (London, 1991). Fears of an alleged ‘yellow peril’ emerge also in central European discussion from c.1895. Stefan Dudink, Karen Hagemann, and Mischa Honeck, ‘War and Gender: Nineteenth-Century Wars of Nations and Empires—an Overview,’ in Karen Hagemann, Stefan Dudink, and Sonya O. Rose, (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Gender, War, and the Western World Since 1600* (Oxford, 2020), 229-30. On identity marketing, see: Kreklau, “‘Eat as the King Eats’”, Ch.5.

¹³⁹ Martin Kohlrausch, ‘The unmanly Emperor. Wilhelm II and the Fragility of the Royal Individual’, in: Schulte, Regina (ed.), *The Body of the Queen* (Oxford, 2006), 254-278, Norman Domeier, *The Eulenburg Affair: A Cultural History of Politics in the German Empire* (New York, 2015), 261-264, Terence Cole,

assertrts that ‘the period beginning around 1890 is a “new”, historically specific stage in the history of sexuality (concurrent with trends across the industrialized west), continuing to 1945, with subphases from 1914 to 1933 and from 1933 to 1945, given the exigencies of the German experience. The period from the mid-1860s through the late 1880s was probably a transitional era.’¹⁴⁰ We must add two further subphases to this chronology: c.1860-1890, and c.1905-1914. In the first, elite men suffered persistent male heterosexual gender anxiety, among whom Otto von Bismarck counts as one example.¹⁴¹ In the second, middling male critics’ ‘rebuke of homosexual life-styles must be understood to represent the heterosexual male fear of a new gender role for men that

‘Kaiser versus Chancellor: the crisis of Bülow's Chancellorship 1905-1905,’ in Richard J. Evans (ed.), *Society and Politics in Wilhelmine Germany* (London, 1978), 40-70, Robert Beachy, *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity* (New York, 2014), Ch.4, Frank Bösch, ‘Transfers and Similarities: Journalists, Politicians and Scandal in Imperial Germany and Britain,’ in: Frank Bösch and Dominik Geppert (eds): *Journalists as Political Actors: Transfer and Interactions between Britain and Germany since the late 19th Century* (Augsburg, 2008), 13-34, Isabell Hull, *The Entourage of Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1888-1918* (Cambridge, 1982), Ch.3. ‘The Liebenburg Circle’, Katherine Lerman, *The Chancellor as Courtier. Bernhard von Bülow and the Governance of Germany, 1900-1909* (Cambridge, 1990) Ch.6. ‘The Collapse of the System’. On colonial scandals: Arne Perras, *Carl Peters and German Imperialism 1856-1918: A Political Biography* (London, 2004), 197-211 on abuses of power, Rebekka Habermas, *Skandal in Togo: Ein Kapitel deutscher Kolonialherrschaft* (Berlin, 2016). Much of this rhetoric, of course, will have held affinities with the Viennese crash of 1873. Hans Rosenberg, *Grosse Depression und Bismarckzeit* (Berlin, 1967).

¹⁴⁰ John C. Fout, ‘Sexual Politics in Wilhelmine Germany: The Male Gender Crisis, Moral Purity, and Homophobia,’ *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 2, no. 3 (1992): 389-90.

¹⁴¹ We do not know to what extent this anxiety ran across all social strata.

threatened...the traditional role for men in society'.¹⁴² Underlying these shifts we may read a silent revolution in the authorship of discourse from c. 1860-1870, where aristocrats formerly holding a monopolar, blade-wielding claim to masculinity lost self-representative power to middling political critics whose strong gender-specific domestic ideals, sharp preference for separating between public and private spheres, as well as a Weberian protestant claim for male industriousness in the new economic empire may have served to recommend themselves in rivalry with former better-placed nobility within the new economic superpower of the German Empire.¹⁴³

Otto's gender anxiety grew more pronounced as his career evolved. Otto's perceptions during the wars may well speak of a larger and fascinating paradox in the Prussian council rooms, where increases in fear coincided with rises in military success, even as individuals weaponized sexism.¹⁴⁴ It comes as no surprise that gender anxieties

¹⁴² A then-contemporary pseudo-historical vision already complicated by the scholarship of Lyndal Roper, Lynn Abrams, and David Sabeau. Ibid, 421. The period 1990-1905, in turn, represent Wilhelm's early, comparatively more successful phase, surprisingly unharmed by the First Moroccan Crisis.

¹⁴³ David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford, 1984); Warren G. Breckman, 'Disciplining Consumption: The Debate about Luxury in Wilhelmine Germany, 1890-1914,' *Journal of Social History* 24: 3 (April 1, 1991): 485-505.

¹⁴⁴ This contradiction is worthy of further study. We currently lack a monographic examining gender in the Wars of Unification or Prussian expansion. Good models for such a work are readily available for the Napoleonic era. E.g. Karen Hagemann, "'Heroic Virgins" and "Bellicose Amazons": Armed Women, the Gender Order and the German Public during and after the Anti-Napoleonic Wars,' *European History Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (October 1, 2007): 507-27, and 'Of "Manly Valor" and "German Honor": Nation, War, and Masculinity in the Age of the Prussian Uprising Against Napoleon,' *Central European History* 30, no. 2 (June 1997): 187-220, *Revisiting Prussia's Wars against Napoleon* (Cambridge, 2015) and the edited volume by Hagemann and Jean Helen Quataert (eds.), *Gendering Modern German History: Rewriting*

spilled into the war rooms of colonial negotiations and imperial rivalries before World War I. Chris Clark finds that decision-makers in the summer at the cusp of the Great War suffered from ‘an obsessi[on with the] triumph over the “weakness” of one’s own will....However one situates the[se] characters...within the broader contours of gender history,’ Clark writes, ‘it seems clear that a code of behaviour founded in a preference for unyielding forcefulness over the suppleness, tactical flexibility and wiliness exemplified by an earlier generation of statesmen (Bismarck, Cavour, Salisbury) was likely to accentuate the potential for conflict.’¹⁴⁵ He identifies ‘mood swings, obsessiveness, “nerve strain”, vacillation, psychosomatic illness and escapism’ between 1905 and 1914, burdened by responsibility and an emphasis on a ““traditional canon of masculinity””.¹⁴⁶ Otto shared in these symptoms already from the 1860s. I thus qualify the comparison between July Crisis negotiators and Otto slightly, with the idea that that Otto’s experience of gender operated within a code that already from the 1860s framed diplomacy as too pusillanimous, hidden, operating in a potentially too gender-hybrid sphere unlike the masculine battlefield to those in the Prussian war council. This longer trend indeed, as Clark notes, was deeply detrimental to defusing tension during the July Crisis.

Already legendary in the 1860s, the persistent ‘Bismarck Myth’ of the popular genius statesman reached new heights during the prince’s retirement years and posthumous years.¹⁴⁷ Success-stories are told in retrospect, and after his career had been concluded, contemporaries could more easily select aspects with which to work for their

Historiography (Oxford, 2007). For recent assessments on the so-called Wars of Unification: Dudink, Hagemann, and Honeck, ‘War and Gender’, 227-67.

¹⁴⁵ Christopher M. Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London, 2012), Part III.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, ‘Detente.’

¹⁴⁷ Frankel, *Bismarck’s Shadow*, 19; Müller, ‘Man, Myth and Monuments,’ 626–36

own purposes. Even a brief survey of behind-the-scenes actions at key moments of his career however shows that the gendered and masculine specificity of his's life was anything but clear-cut during Prussia's expansion and era of consolidation.

Otto von Bismarck's experience was often fearfully feminine at critical points of his political career—a terrible dimension which he counteracted with misogyny towards women of power who allegedly came close to threatening his politics, paired with anti-Catholicism. His own political strategies in domestic as well as international negotiations meanwhile resembled most closely those fictitious machinations, of whom he consistently accused the various Queens of Prussia and Empresses of Germany between 1848 and 1890; even as he gained a princely title, and claimed to manage the feminine appetites of foreign powers from Berlin, gender played a key role in his worldview, permeating retrospective accounts. Towards the end, he successfully used his political successes to contribute to fabricating his own myth, effacing his insecurities and suffering decades before. These gendered dynamics in the era of European crises of identities may find political mirror-images in our own period, while the 'Bismarck myth' may be one that we no longer need.

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