

The dominance of one man

Henry Kissinger reflects on the times of a statesman

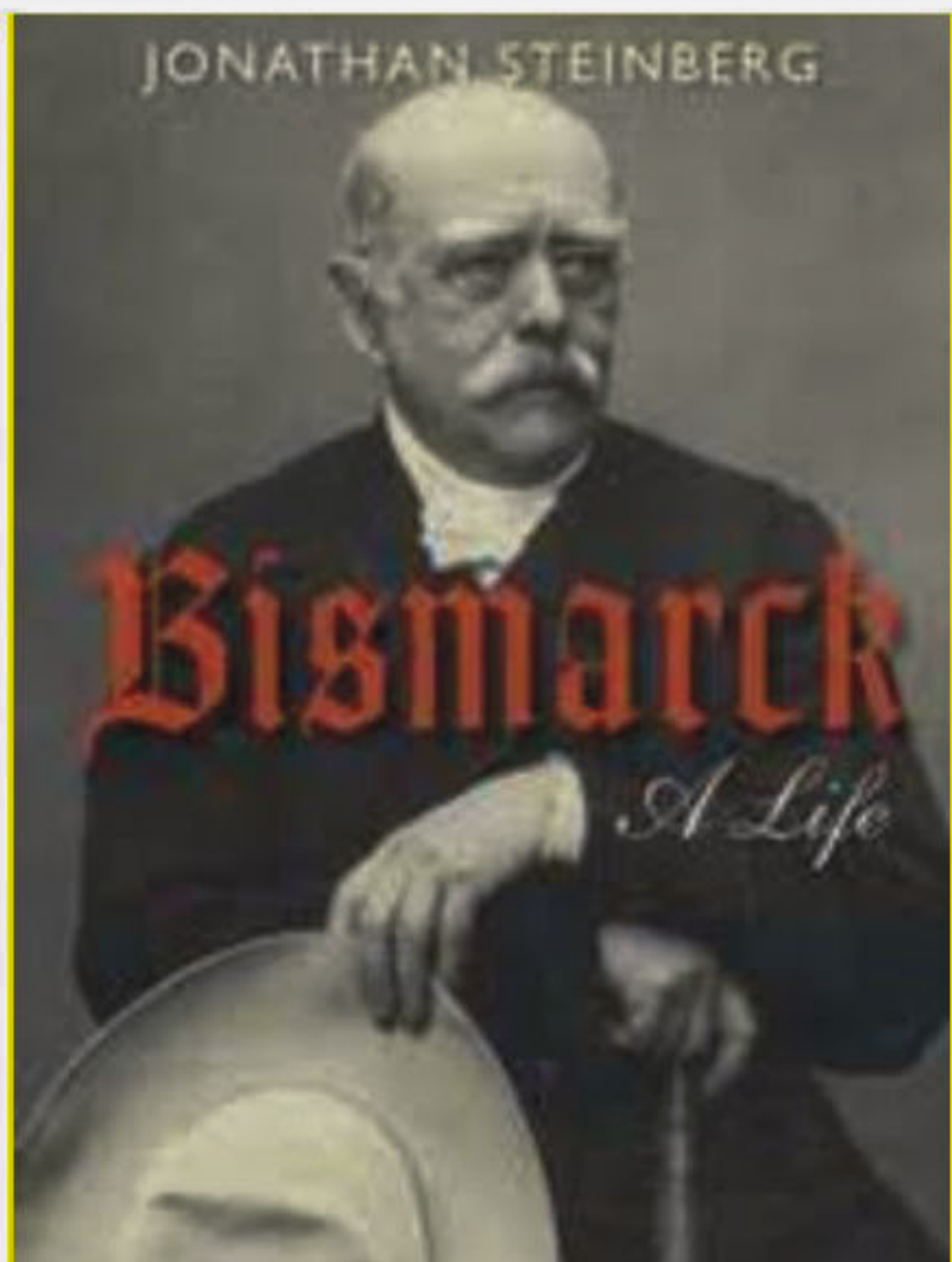
In the summer of 1862, Otto von Bismarck was appointed minister-president of Prussia. His highest previous rank had been ambassador to Russia. He had never held an administrative position. Yet with a few brusque strokes, the novice minister solved the riddle that had stymied European diplomacy for two generations: how to unify Germany and reorganize Central Europe. He had to overcome the obstacle that Germany comprised 39 sovereign states grouped in the so-called German Confederation. All the while, Central European trends were warily observed by the two “flanking” powers, France and Russia, ever uneasy about and tempted to prevent the emergence of a state capable of altering the existing European balance of power.

Within nine years, Bismarck untied this knot in what Jonathan Steinberg, a professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania, describes as “the greatest diplomatic and political achievement by any leader in the last two centuries.” He overcame the princes of the German states in two wars and rallied them in a third; won over public opinion by granting universal manhood suffrage making Prussia one of the first states in Europe to do so; paralyzed France by holding out the prospect of agreeing to the French acquisition of Luxembourg, and Russia by a benevolent attitude during the Polish revolution of 1863. Bismarck accomplished all this “without commanding a single soldier, without dominating a vast parliamentary majority, without the support of a mass movement, without any previous experience in government and in the face of national revulsion at his name and his reputation.”

It is a measure of Steinberg’s achievement in “Bismarck: A Life” that the subsequent description of the “political genius of a very unusual kind” becomes far from a panegyric. He describes in an incisive, if occasionally distracting, psychological approach a highly complex person who incarnated the duality that later tempted Germany into efforts beyond its capacity. Bismarck was never seen in public without a uniform, yet he had never really served in the military and was generally viewed with suspicion by the military leaders for what they saw as his excessive moderation. The man of “blood and iron” wrote prose of extraordinary directness and lucidity, comparable in distinctiveness to Churchill’s use of the English language. The embodiment of realpolitik turned power into an instrument of self-restraint by the agility of his diplomacy. He dominated Germany and European diplomacy from a single power base, the confidence of an aging king, without other institutional backing or great personal following.

Bismarck is often cited as the quintessential realist, relying on power at the expense of ideals. He was, in fact, far more complicated. Power, to be useful, must be understood in its components, including its limits. By the same token, ideals must be brought, at some point, into relationship with the circumstances the leader is seeking to affect. Ignoring that balance threatens policy with either veering toward belligerence from the advocates of power or toward crusades by the idealists.

Bismarck dominated because he understood a wider range of factors relevant to international affairs some normally identified with power, others generally classified as ideals than any of his contemporaries. He came into office in a world beset by the memory of the Napoleonic period. The new order that emerged was based on the belief that the goal of peace could be achieved only by nations with compatible domestic institutions (shades of modern



Bismarck: A Life
Jonathan Steinberg.
Oxford University Press

neoconservatism). The Holy Alliance of Prussia, Austria and Russia was created to police the continuation of essentially legitimist conservative states, committed to upholding rule by their royal families. The balance of power sustained Europe’s strategic equilibrium. When Bismarck became Minister-praesident, all these elements were in flux. A new Napoleon had made himself emperor in France by popular election. Parliaments were gaining at the expense of princes. The principles of the Holy Alliance were in tatters.

Bismarck’s originality consisted of being neither in the camp of power nor in that of ideology. During the Crimean War, while serving as ambassador to the German Confederation, Bismarck outlined three options for his king: (a) alliance with Russia, which implied a conservative orientation; (b) alliance with France, implying the opposite; or (c) a sharp shift to domestic policies in Prussia with an introduction of popular institutions a step that would cut the ground out from under the princes. Like a physicist, Bismarck analyzed the principal elements of each situation and then used them in an overall design.

Bismarck’s opponents were still wedded to the 18th-century concepts of the international system as a great clockwork with intricately meshed parts: the science of Newton. Bismarck foreshadowed an age whose equilibrium was an ever-changing interaction of forces, themselves in constant flux, like later atomic physics. Its appropriate philosopher was not Descartes but Darwin; not “I think, therefore I am,” but the “survival of the fittest.”

Still, for the 28 years that he served as chancellor of Germany, Bismarck preserved what he had built by a restrained and wise diplomacy, which was the single most important element in maintaining the peace of Europe. “My

map of Africa lies in Europe,” he said in resisting pressures to acquire colonies. And he responded to the suggestion of a pre-emptive war against Russia with: “Woe to the statesman whose arguments for entering a war are not as convincing at its end as they were at the beginning.”

But “Bismarck: A Life” shows as well the nemesis of success. The emergence of a united Germany reduced the flexibility once provided by the multitude of sovereign states in the center of Europe. A united Germany was powerful enough to defeat each of its neighbors individually, almost obliging these neighbors, especially France and Russia, to explore a coalition. The nightmare of hostile coalitions (le cauchemar des coalitions), designed to compel Germany to divide its forces between East and West, grew into one of the motivating forces of Bismarckian diplomacy. He sought to counter it by involving Germany in a dizzying series of partly overlapping, partly conflicting alliances with the aim of giving the other great powers except the irreconcilable France a greater interest to work with Germany than to coalesce against it.

It was not to be. Bismarck’s triumphs of the 1860s restricted the maneuvering room for his intricate plan of an alliance with Austria; a Three Emperors’ League with Austria and Russia; and a so-called reinsurance treaty with Russia. The annexation of Alsace-Lorraine in 1871 produced a France determined on revenge and, hence, a potential ally of any other adversary of Germany. Only five major states remained, constricting the available combinations. Even Bismarck, in his later years, had difficulty managing these arrangements between incompatible partners or keeping track of them, as Steinberg impressively shows.

The dynamism by which Bismarck reordered Central Europe was difficult to replicate when he sought to preserve what he had built. When he acted as a revolutionary as minister-president of Prussia, Bismarck could control the timing of policy. In his years as chancellor of Germany and as protector of what existed, others posed the challenges. Bismarck had to await events. In a sense, he became the prisoner of his own design and of its domestic necessities (to which, for example, he had to sacrifice his reluctance to enter the colonial race).

I must register two caveats. Steinberg’s hostility toward Bismarck’s personality sometimes causes him to overemphasize personal traits at the expense of his strategic concepts, which were usually quite brilliant. The second caveat concerns the direct line Steinberg draws from Bismarck to Hitler. Bismarck was a rationalist, Hitler a romantic nihilist. Bismarck’s essence was his sense of limits and equilibrium; Hitler’s was the absence of measure and rejection of restraint. The idea of conquering Europe would never have come to Bismarck; it was always part of Hitler’s vision. Hitler could never have pronounced Bismarck’s famous dictum that statesmanship consisted of listening carefully to the footsteps of God through history and walking with him a few steps of the way. Hitler left a vacuum. Bismarck left a state strong enough to overcome two catastrophic defeats as well as a legacy of unassimilable greatness. Nevertheless, “Bismarck: A Life” is the best study of its subject in the English language. (Abridged)

Henry A. Kissinger is the author of the forthcoming “On China.”

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REFLECTIONS

Music in the memory

Syed Badrul Ahsan travels across a landscape of melody

Hasrat Jaipuri did not think much of Javed Akhtar. Of course he did not, for he inhabited an era when music and song in India were redolent of meaning and poetry. And did you know that Kundan Lal Saigal, the man from Jammu, was in the early stages of his career a typewriter salesman who sang even as he dealt with customers? There were all those times when people walked into his shop and asked him to sing a few lines before they walked out with new typewriters. It was in one of those moments that someone noticed the fine tenor of his voice and thought it could resonate all over India. The rest is, well, history. Those who came after Saigal began with the notion that music could only be the way Saigal made it or it was no music at all. Remember Mukesh’s *Dil Jalta Hai To Jalne De?* There were others who eventually were led to the conclusion that they could carve their own niches in the world of melody only through going out of Saigal’s shadow. Talat Mehmood, who never pretended to emulate Saigal, could nevertheless know that in the man was a defining spirit of Indian music.

All of this, and a lot more besides, is what you come by in Manek Premchand’s painstaking survey of the history of music in modern India. But there is a caveat here, which is that the music he deals with relates somewhat to ghazals but largely to songs as they have been made for Indian cinema in the golden era straddling the 1930s to part of the 1970s. No, Premchand does not say so in so many words. But the personalities he deals with singers, lyricists, composers are his reference to the long story of music he handles. And he handles it on a big scale, seeing that where music buffs earlier focused only on those who lent their voices to the songs, Premchand concentrates on the history behind the poetry and the melody that went into the songs. To be sure, he also throws up all those much-needed life sketches of the men and women he brings to light in his work. Take the sad story of Geeta-Roy Dutt, for instance. She was a rising singer when she met Guru Dutt. When they fell in love and married, it was nearly everyone’s expectation that the pair would together take the world by storm. It did not exactly happen that way, for Guru Dutt soon revealed the dark side of his personality through forbidding Geeta to sing any more. When she tried to keep up the



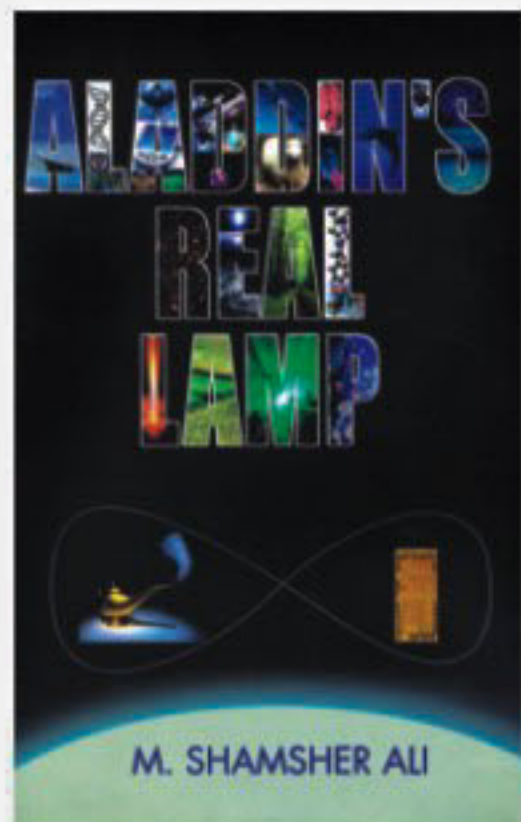
practice through singing in clandestine fashion, he discovered the ‘crime’ and what followed was traumatic. Geeta Dutt suffered tragedy three times over through her husband’s ban on her singing, through his consuming passion for Waheeda Rehman, through his eventual suicide. Fifteen years after Dutt’s death, Geeta passed on herself, in an extremity of sadness.

There are stories here that recreate the past for those who have lived through it, all through their adolescence and into adulthood. Hemant Kumar (or Hemonto Mukherjee) was a tireless traveler, forever commuting between Bombay and Calcutta, singing as well as composing music for such movies as Nagin. His story is one of those incredible tales of luck and dedication combining to produce greatness in a man. Hemant Kumar was supposed to be an engineer. He ended up being a diligent creator of music, and not just in Hindi movies. His legendary status in Bengali music and his particular devotion to Rabindrasangeet catapulted him in his lifetime to heights that few people ever reach. And he achieved all that through smoking sixty cigarettes a day! If you go into an

observation of the careers of composers, it is all here. Naushad’s rise and endurance hardly need any retelling. But there is Naashaad too, the musician who rather late in life chose to migrate to Pakistan from India. Anyone among you who recalls Talat Mehmood’s *Tasveer Banata Hoon / Tasveer Nahin Banti* will know the immensity of creativity in Naashaad. In Pakistan, he did wonders as well. Noor Jehan’s rendering of the Salgirah song, *Le Aae Phir Kahan Par / Kismat Hamein Kahan Se* will remain testimony to the genius in Naashaad. And while you mull over that, do not ignore such giants as Gulzar. The sheer number of awards he has received is pretty mind-boggling. He has been honoured for such qualities as best lyrics writer, best director, best dialogue writer, best story writer, best feature film maker and best documentary maker. Is there anything else that he has not touched? The first song he wrote was a result of Shailendra’s asking him to compose one for the movie Bandini. It became a hit. Try humming *Mora Gora Ang Layee Le / Mohe Shaam Rang Dayee De* and you will picture an expansive twilight of poetry. Gulzar’s marriage with Rakhee was not destined to last, but his love for her has never subsided. He dedicated the work, Ravi Paar and Other Short Stories, to her. Meena Kumari valued his poetic judgement. She left her poetry (did you know she too had been smitten by the Muse?) with him. He subsequently had them published as Meena Kumari Ki Shairi. When the next time around you hear Lata singing *Humne Dekhi Hai In Ankhon Ki Mehekhti Khushboo* or Kishore Kumar crooning *Aanewala Pal Jaanewala Hai*, whisper to your soul that behind the music there is Gulzar.

Yesterday’s Melodies is an unputdownable affair, one of the reasons being that you sing as you go along. When you read the story of the composer Ghulam Mohammad’s career, you cannot but bring to life that ageless song of his once more. Yes, we are speaking of the Rafi-Lata number *Hum Tum Ye Bahar Dekho Rang Laya Pyar / Barsaat Ke Maheene Mein*. And would you like giving Saigal’s *Main Kya Janu Kya Jadu Hai* a try? That second ‘kya’, says Premchand, is hard to pick up. But it has to soar if it has to have any meaning.

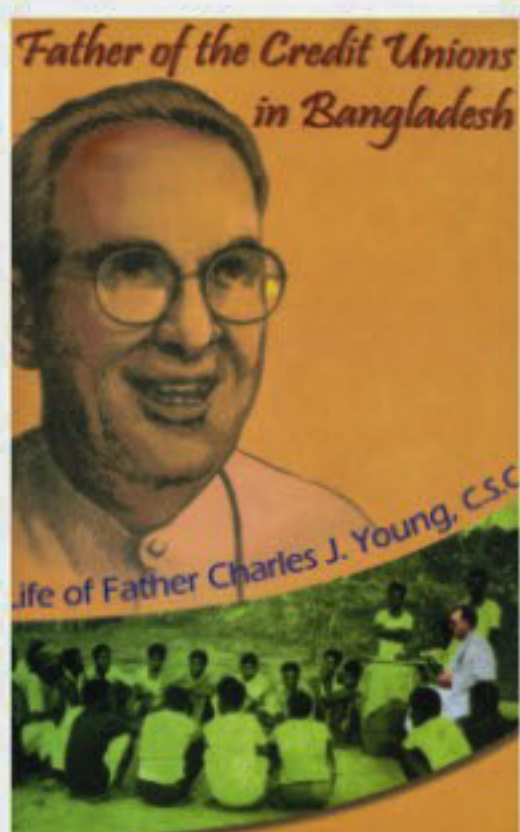
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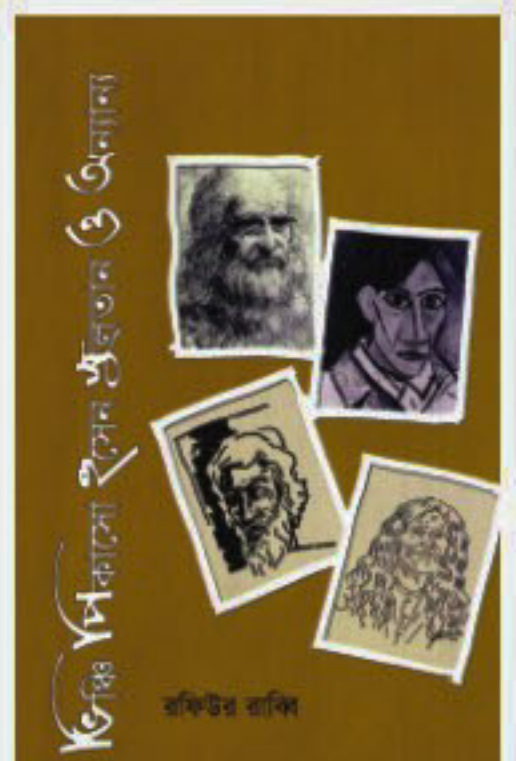
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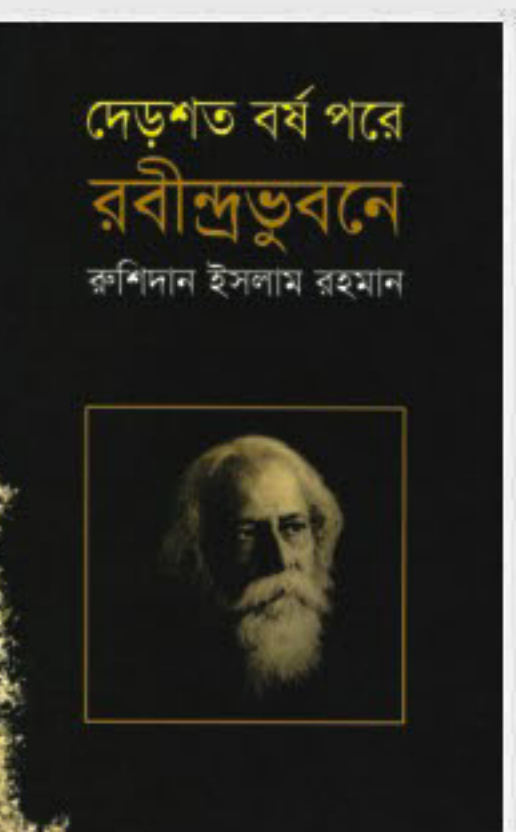
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