

Jacob Burckhardt on Bismarck's Legacy (1890)

Abstract

Jacob Burckhardt (1818–1897) was a Swiss historian of art and culture, particularly the Renaissance. He held a professorship in Basel from 1858 until his retirement in 1893. The following text is drawn from two letters that Burckhardt sent to his friend Friedrich von Preen (1823–1894) in March and September 1890, not long after Bismarck has been forced from office by Kaiser Wilhelm II. Burckhardt looks darkly into Germany's future, even though he had never been a great admirer of the former chancellor. In the first letter, Burckhardt worries that Bismarck's departure signifies a setback for the principle of authority with respect to the Reichstag and other democratic institutions. The political parties are unworthy of greater responsibility, Burckhardt suggests, and Bismarck's departure could also have international repercussions. In the second letter, he expresses his long-standing distaste for Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* against the Catholic Church. He also notes that Bismarck's renowned intolerance for views contrary to his own disqualifies him as someone deserving of a "pious" assessment from historians.

Source

I. Jacob Burckhardt to Friedrich von Preen

Basel, March 25, 1890

What times we live in, indeed! Men, interest and things may well come to the fore that will overturn our present antlike existence. Our dear nineteenth century has so accustomed people to the idea that everything new, however questionable in itself, is justified, that nothing can any longer hinder the process. It is quite incredible how empty-headed and defenceless even thoroughly decent people are when confronted by the spirit of the age. The Parties which have existed up to now seem to me like groups of actors gesticulating in front of the footlights, and illuminated hitherto by a strong light from above—and suddenly caught in their various attitudes and lit from below by a hard red light.

Everyone reads the papers in his own way; the unrest in Köpenick, for example, made *one* impression upon me which was that the rioters followed a strictly military order, which means to say that a sense of duty and the accompanying sense of discipline may be beginning to move over to the other side. The usual rowdyism, which has been latent hitherto, will become more and more prominent, and increasingly difficult to keep down with the methods employed up till now. We had a little example of it here last Saturday among the Germans liable for military service and their defiant and threatening disturbances in the lower town, the like of which have never occurred previously on the same scale.

And in times like these they "shatter"^[1] the Chancellor to pieces. Not that he had any medicine in his bag against serious dangers; but it would have been wise, outwardly at least, to do everything possible to preserve whatever looks like authority, or even recalls it. That article may one day become something of a rarity. A troublesome Reichstag can be sent packing, and they will probably be able to govern without it if only for a time. And then, no doubt as a result of some event or other, Ministries will be forced upon the Government by the Parties, and with them you will get unrestrained opportunism, careerists and everything and everybody constantly changing, both personnel and tendencies. In the meanwhile those in the rest of Europe who have had to duck under, or have been elbowed into the gutter by the German Reich, will rise to a more or less courageous and impudent independence. [...]

II. Jacob Burckhardt to Friedrich von Preen

Basel, September 26, 1890

I entirely approve of your supporting the Bismarck memorial, however obnoxious I myself always found that individual, and in spite of the harm which his acts have done us in Switzerland; for his *Kulturkampf* (I must repeat), together with the doings of the French Radicals, has had the effect of encouraging every form of nihilism and disintegration. But where Germany was concerned, Bismarck was in fact the prop and banner of that mystery Authority, and you will have learnt to appreciate the immense value of such imponderabilia from many angles. Those who only esteemed and flattered the contingent element in his power can safely turn away from him now he is fallen; on the other hand, what you value is the creator and sustainer of Power itself, without which the individual powers in even the best of nations would probably paralyse one another mutually and cancel each other out. But as far as I am concerned, I must beg you to look indulgently on the *Schadenfreude* with which I have noted the interviews given since then; no man has ever “raged” against his own fame like Bismarck. He has exonerated purely historical study from treating him with the least trace of piety. [...]

NOTES

[1] The expression used by Wilhelm II when Bismarck was retired. [Footnote from Alexander Dru, ed. and trans., *The Letters of Jacob Burckhardt*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955, p. 222.]

Source of English translation: Alexander Dru, ed. and trans., *The Letters of Jacob Burckhardt*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955, pp. 222–24.

Source of original German text: Jacob Burckhardt to Friedrich von Preen, letters of March 25, 1890 (I), and September 26, 1890 (II), in Jacob Burckhardt, *Briefe*, ed. Max Burckhardt, vol. 9, 1886–1891. Basel: Schwabe and Co., 1980, pp. 238–39, 268–69.

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