What motivates a democratic nation to create a publicly funded memorial for Otto von Bismarck? Though Bismarck was without doubt of significance, he was by no means a pluralist. This question, posed by a skeptical public, has remained unanswered since the Otto von Bismarck Foundation was founded in Germany in the 1980s.

Previously established memorial foundations commemorated politicians who were leading representatives of a democratic Germany, so Bismarck hardly fits in. Apparently, the conservative element now back in power attempted to introduce a new perception of German history “through the back door.” Uta Titze-Stecher (SPD) was outraged at this idea and aired her worst fears during the 1996 parliamentary debate on the bill to establish the Otto von Bismarck Foundation. She accused the liberal-conservative majority in parliament of promoting “images of history from the chancellor’s office,” suggesting that Helmut Kohl wanted to set himself up as the “success[or] to the title of Iron Chancellor.” She finished her speech with a warning about a “dangerous precedent” and her fear of further “personality cults . . . from Frederick the Great to Hermann the Cheruscan.”1 However, with the votes of the Christian Democrats/Christian Social Union and the Liberal Democrats, the legislation for the establishment of the federally funded Otto von Bismarck Foundation passed. Still, the hefty controversy about the aims of this new institution did have a lasting effect. A ceremony held by the foundation on the occasion of the one-hundredth anniversary of Otto von Bismarck’s death was accompanied by demonstrations, admittedly minor, by political extremists of both the left and right.2

Now a decade after it began under somewhat difficult conditions, the Bismarck Foundation has since established itself alongside similar cultural and historical institutions. Today, even those who were at first critical now acknowledge its achievements. At this point, we can look back at the work carried out in public remembrance of Otto von Bismarck from an historical perspective in order to evaluate the accomplishments of the Bismarck Foundation located in Friedrichsruh (near Hamburg).

The picturesque village of Friedrichsruh in the middle of the Sachsenwald just outside Hamburg became famous as the last residence of Bismarck, who acquired the estate and the surrounding forests as a gift for unifying the German states in 1871. Until Bismark’s death in 1898, the
formerly sleepy village received visits from princes, statesmen, and numerous ordinary people, especially from the middle classes. Until 1890, Bismarck performed a large part of his official duties there. Journalists from the *Hamburger Nachrichten* visited him regularly and became a kind of mouthpiece for his opposition to the Kaiser.  

During his time as chancellor, Friedrichsruh became a popular destination for thousands of Bismarck’s admirers. After 1890, it was a place for the nationalist-minded German bourgeoisie to pay homage to the “unifier of the Empire.” This “pilgrimage tourism” to the Sachsenwald reached its peak during the celebration of Bismarck’s eightieth birthday on April 1, 1895. Thousands traveled to Friedrichsruh to pay tribute to the “Iron Chancellor,” and more than ten thousand students from all corners of the empire paraded in front of the chancellor’s estate.  

A central element fueling the admiration for Bismarck was the unification of Germany under Prussian rather than Austrian leadership, the so-called “kleindeutsche Lösung” of 1871. According to Hans-Walter Hedinger, “there was no clear distinction between the concept of ‘empire’ and ‘nation’ in the minds of the majority.” Bismarck became a “symbol of identification beyond compare.” Elevated from his “concrete individuality as a real historical figure . . . he gave those with a vested interest in even the boldest of national political aspirations an opportunity to project their hopes.”  

The cult around Bismarck was a central pillar of nineteenth-century German national mythology. The almost sacred nature of the admiration for the first chancellor of the empire found its most visible expression in a wave of Bismarck monument-building. These monuments began to be erected throughout the empire as early as 1875. They were symbols of an era, an extreme case of a young nation searching for its national identity. By 1914, more than 700 such memorials had been planned and almost 500 actually built in his honor. Moreover, these were merely the tip of the iceberg. Hundreds of statues, busts, and allegorical figures were on the nationalist agenda. Wolfgang Hardtwig speaks of a “monument craze” in Germany in this era. At the time, there were calls for a “radical aesthetic re-evaluation.” The Bismarck statues were a distinct, biographical sort of nationalist memorial which contrasted with the pantheism of the Valhalla, the mythological theme of the Kyffhäuser memorial, or the extravagant allegory of the Niederwald memorial in Rüdesheim. The number of Bismarck memorials even exceeded the numerous Kaiser Wilhelm memorials. Furthermore, in contrast to the latter, the initiatives for their construction were motivated “less . . . by a desire on the part of officialdom to cultivate patriotism than by a spontaneous gesture.” For large sections of the population, they were “genuinely popular and . . . fulfilled the function of a true national monument in the consciousness of many
Germans, more so than any other so-called national monuments. Apart from the classic memorial statues, such as the one by Begas erected in 1901 in front of the Reichstag in Berlin, the Bismarck towers and pillars, which now seem so grotesque, above all stylized him as a mythic symbol of unification. Whoever approaches the colossal Bismarck monument in Hamburg’s harbor—it resembles the statue of medieval Roland, the defender of a city’s rights and a symbol of strength—can experience something of the surge of patriotic feeling which makes a pragmatic and differentiated appraisal of Bismarck as an historical figure difficult, even today.

After his death in 1898, any lingering inhibitions the German Right had about claiming Bismarck wholly for their own propaganda disappeared. The official unveiling of the Bismarck pillar in the small village of Silk (two kilometers from Friedrichsruh) was emblematic. Following solstice celebrations interpreted as an ancient Germanic custom, the pillars (almost 200 were planned throughout the German Empire) were supposed to be honored “in mutual celebration [of the] transfigured hero” in order “to tell future generations the story of how conflict between factions subsided upon encountering the sacred silence of the grave in the Sachsenwald . . . in honor of the great chancellor who lives on in the hearts of his people.” This was the essence of the emotional and historically distorted call by German students for the building of these memorials. The bizarre climax of the cult surrounding Otto von Bismarck in and around Friedrichsruh was the consecration of the memorial stone by the fanatic Austrian anti-Semite and leading Pan-German Georg von Schönerer. It was erected on the occasion of Bismarck’s hundredth birthday celebration in 1915 in Aumühle, two kilometers away. Its inscription is in the unmistakable diction of ultra-nationalistic propaganda loudly proclaiming, in anticipation of times to come, “In great times we come to you, Bismarck! Your work, your will is our path—A Pan-Germanic nation is the goal! Schönerer and the Pan-Germanic movement of Austria 100 years after the birth of Bismarck.” The Bismarck myth, summarized in the nickname “the Iron Chancellor,” was a sign of an increasingly aggressive nationalism at the turn of the century: a desire for a national identity coupled with an aversion to “enemies” from within and without, which fostered a range of fears about the future. In fact, this all had little to do with the historical reality of Bismarck’s domestic and foreign policies.

The “pilgrimages” to the Bismarck memorials in the Sachsenwald were dominated by national agitation, at least through 1945. The opening of the museum and mausoleum there in 1928 was celebrated as a “new national shrine.” True to the National Socialist vision of a “final victory,” the mausoleum was intended to remind Germans “that a person
can do a lot for his fatherland when he invests all his strength and treads his path with a will of iron.”

After the total defeat of Nazi Germany, a paradigm shift quickly occurred in the public perception of the “Founder of the Empire.” But the myth was not shattered; it merely changed its outward appearance. Up through 1945, Bismarck’s role as a merciless, authoritarian politician at home and abroad had been emphasized. After the defeat, his admirers—almost dutifully—viewed him mainly as a talented politician in foreign affairs after 1871, whose political efforts could in no way be held responsible for the fatal turn taken by German nationalism. In the decades after WWII, Friedrichsruh remained a place of pilgrimage for right-wing conservatives as well as extremists, who gather there on January 18, April 1, or July 30. When Walter Busse visited the mausoleum in October 1970, he was amazed at the “wreath-laying organizations” that were previously unknown to him: at the sarcophagus, he found dedications “to the chancellor of the old empire from the Bismarck Union of the Conservative Party of Berlin and West Germany,” and “to the ‘great chancellor’ from the ‘German Block.’” In addition to these suspicious-sounding groups, federal and various regional governments paid official respects on Bismarck’s one-hundred fiftieth birthday in 1965. In 1971, the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the empire, even Willy Brandt (SPD) sent a wreath.

In spite of the events held to commemorate Bismarck’s achievements, the number of visitors to Friedrichsruh continually declined after the 1970s. This was surely a consequence of the critical examination by a new generation of historians of the “real Bismarck as well as the mythical figure.” Nuanced scholarly studies in the 1980s and ’90s added to this; thus in 1998, Ute Frevert could observe that among historians Bismarck no longer aroused “hefty emotions” and was “neither a cult figure nor a dusty relic.” In academic terms, the myth seemed to have been neutralized. However, the public debates surrounding the establishment of the national memorial foundation showed that Bismarck was still controversial.

Though he remains a disputed figure, Bismarck was doubtless one of the most important nineteenth-century German statesmen. However, against the backdrop of his burdened legacy and from a democratic-didactic point of view, the idea of establishing a memorial foundation dedicated to him was bound to meet with resistance. With Adenauer, Ebert, Heuss, and Brandt, it was generally recognized across party lines that they all basically stood for democratic and constitutional traditions in Germany. Bismarck, on the other hand, at best represented the “ambivalence between tradition and modernism” so typical of the German Empire after 1871. The Janus-faced nature of the constitution he shaped, with its uneasy balance between the traditional monarchical order and
rudimentary parliamentary freedom; his domestic policies, which resulted in years of fierce battles against Catholics and the labor movement; and, not least, the thoughtless abuse of power by the Imperial Chancellor’s office—made all attempts to “restyle [Bismarck] as a democrat . . . seem quite outrageous.”

In spite of this, tentative plans to honor Bismarck with a federal memorial foundation under public law were made as early as 1987. The idea grew out of a project originally conceived at the local level to preserve the historic railway station in Friedrichsruh. Moreover, there was concern about reports of the poor state of Bismarck papers still in the possession of the family. After a visit to Friedrichsruh in July 1987, Federal Minister of the Interior Friedrich Zimmermann set up a committee to investigate the possibility of setting up a government-subsidized foundation. Similar to other, equally controversial historical projects of the Kohl era, the establishment of a Bismarck foundation was soon made an “issue of utmost priority.” Chancellor Helmut Kohl expressed worry about the “unsatisfactory state of archives” at Friedrichsruh and strongly supported the idea of establishing a foundation.

A decision in favor of setting up an institution along the lines of the national heritage estates in Rhöndorf and Heidelberg was made in October 1987. In the following period, however, a lively controversy arose, initially at the regional level. Incorrigible Bismarck worshipers demanded that Friedrichsruh be renamed “Bismarcksruh.” Social Democrats and members of the Green Party expressed deep concerns about the project. In the ensuing debate, some Greens expressed fears that the project would become more than a Bismarck museum (which already existed) and “have as its sole function the promotion of neo-conservative thought and the reconstruction of national identity.” This kind of objection was raised time and again during the early years of the Otto von Bismarck Foundation; it was criticized as a tool of historical revisionism and as nothing but a think-tank of conservative historians with pro-government leanings. But because the liberal-conservative government still held a safe majority in parliament, the foundation was able to start work in the second half of 1997. Probably as a concession to the project’s numerous critics, Michael Epkenhans, a Social Democrat and an historian, was appointed executive director. He had previously worked as a research assistant at the Friedrich Ebert Memorial in Heidelberg. He did not sway in his ideological approach: “Our starting point can only be the current state of research on Bismarck, no matter how many people feel the urge . . . to reinterpret him.” This was mainly directed against the Bismarck Alliance’s intention to exert its influence on the foundation’s work while it was still in the process of being established. In Epkenhans’s opinion, the structures being
put in place in Friedrichsruh were to help “reach a certain degree of normality in coming to terms with a problematic ancestor.”

The Otto von Bismarck Foundation not only had the responsibility to deal with the sensitive issue of the “ancestor” but also with its own site as a point of reference for the latent (although hardly flourishing) Bismarck cult. The foundation’s task included more than an historically differentiated appraisal of Bismarck’s epoch; it also needed to highlight the grave consequences of the Bismarck cult “as a key element in the cultural and ideological history of German nationalism.” The foundation has faced up to this responsibility and steered clear of interference by politicians or the Bismarck family. The main focus of its academic work is a new critical edition of Bismarck’s writings; the need for such an edition is generally acknowledged by Bismarck scholars because the shortcomings of previous editions from the 1920s and 1930s are too obvious. The foundation also sponsors academic conferences, seminars for students of modern and contemporary history, and lectures by renowned scholars. It is also active in public education and teacher training, cooperating closely with adult education institutions despite its relatively remote location. Regularly rotating exhibitions on various subjects contribute to the debate on Bismarck and his times. The members of the board of trustees and the academic advisory committee were able to avoid any abrupt changes in the foundation’s academic and educational activities following the election of a new government in 1998. Their influence has also quieted down criticism over the years.

The particular challenge faced by a national institution which is dedicated to a committed monarchist such as Bismarck remains the driving force behind the foundation’s activities, especially when it is viewed in comparison to other memorial foundations dedicated to democratic political leaders. There is no question that a thorough understanding of modern Germany’s development is impossible without studying Bismarck, whom Theodor Fontane called “the most interesting person” despite his deep mistrust of the chancellor. If Bismarck is viewed as a reference point for a wide-ranging and detailed study of the “long nineteenth century,” then it is no longer valid to criticize the memorial site in Friedrichsruh for persistent “hero worship.” The history of the Otto von Bismarck Foundation confirms that the “past always remains a highly contentious political issue” and that in “pluralist societies . . . the politics of history are constantly being made.” Whether the founders of the Bismarck Foundation indeed hoped “to instill an affirmative relationship toward our past” through a neo-historicist approach remains an open question. The brief comments in the foundation’s guest book record the diverse ways in which Bismarck is viewed by the general public. While one guest praised the “refreshingly critical” presentation, another was
impressed by the “shrewd and moderate politician.” This reflects the open-minded approach taken by the foundation in Friedrichsruh, a place where one can study Germany’s long and winding road toward a modern parliamentary democracy. Such an approach was urgently required to restore the critical “memory of the place” to redress the imbalance created by the idealized presentations of the Bismarck cult, namely the museum and the mausoleum, which are both still owned by the family.

Notes
4 Archive of the Otto-von-Bismarck-Stiftung, He 005/001–036.
12 Ibid., 166.
13 See Günter Kloss and Sieglinde Seele, Bismarck-Türen und Bismarck-Säulen (Petersberg, 1997).
15 Neue Preußische Zeitung, June 22, 1903.
19 See Wilhelm Mommsen, Bismarck. Ein politisches Lebensbild (Munich, 1959).


22 Lothar Gall, Bismarck. Der weiße Revolutionär (Frankfurt/Main, 1980); Ernst Engelberg, Bismarck. Urpreuße und Reichsgründer (Berlin, 1986); Ernst Engelberg, Bismarck. Das Reich in der Mitte Europas (Berlin, 1990); Otto Pflanze, Bismarck. Der Reichsgründer (Munich, 1997); Otto Pflanze, Der Reichskanzler (Munich, 1998).


33 Ibid.

34 Edgar Wolfrum, Geschichtspolitik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Der Weg zur bundesrepublikanischen Erinnerung, 1948–1990 (Darmstadt, 1999), 23.


37 Current board of trustees members (April 2004) include, in addition to members of the Bismarck family: Rudolf Seiders, Hans-Ulrich Klose, Dr. Wilfried Maier, and Silke Stokar. Members of the academic advisory committee are Lothar Gall, Klaus Hildebrand, Konrad Canis, Eberhard Kolb, Elisabeth Fehrenbach, Ulrich von Hehl, Henry A. Kissinger, Joseph Rovan, Werner Knopp, Dieter Langewiesche, Klaus Tenfelde, Volker Ullrich, and Hartmut Weber.


40 Ibid., 74.