

Bismarck to Putin
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A follow up on my post on X a while ago...

Otto von Bismarck, 1815 – 1898

Herr Putin, “Preventive war is like committing suicide out of fear of death.”

Right then. Right today.

Here's a follow up s-essay expanding my earlier statement “into a broader reflection that brings Bismarck’s wisdom into direct conversation with Vladimir Putin’s policies, past and present. It explores historical insight, realpolitik, and the dangers of fear-driven aggression.”

The Peril of Fear-Driven Power: A Message from Bismarck to Putin

Otto von Bismarck, the Iron Chancellor of a newly unified Germany in the late 19th century, was a man whose life was defined by power—but also by restraint. Known as the master of realpolitik, he understood the delicate balance between military might and diplomatic strategy. One of his most famous warnings still echoes with grim relevance today: *“Preventive war is like committing suicide out of fear of death.”*

This statement, made more than a century ago, speaks with uncanny precision to the behavior of Russia under President Vladimir Putin. It is a statement of profound strategic insight—and a warning.

Bismarck’s Wisdom: Power With Prudence

Bismarck was no idealist. He manipulated wars to unite German states under Prussian dominance, yet after achieving his goal, he turned to preserving peace. He understood that military success is often followed by political instability, and that lasting national strength comes not from domination, but from strategic alliances and domestic unity. His system of treaties and his cautious diplomacy were designed to prevent Germany from being encircled or embroiled in ruinous wars.

For Bismarck, preventive war—the idea of striking first to eliminate a perceived future threat—was not an act of courage, but of strategic failure. It meant sacrificing a nation's long-term security out of fear, not necessity. It meant misunderstanding both the timing and the costs of war.

Putin’s Misreading of History

Vladimir Putin, in contrast, appears to have embraced a worldview that sees preemptive conflict not as suicide, but as survival. His invasion of Ukraine in 2022, framed in part as a necessity to forestall NATO encroachment and protect Russian-speaking populations, reflects the very logic Bismarck warned against.

The result has not been renewed strength or security for Russia. Instead, Putin’s aggression has led to economic isolation, an emboldened NATO, internal repression, and a war that has claimed tens of thousands of lives with no clear resolution in sight. The irony is cruel: in seeking to prevent decline, the Kremlin has accelerated it.

This is Bismarck's prophecy made flesh. Russia's leadership has attempted to avert strategic encirclement by voluntarily plunging into a conflict that could mire the nation for years, drain its resources, and alienate generations. It is a suicide not of the body, but of vision—a national project suffocated by fear masquerading as strength.

Right Then. Right Today.

What made Bismarck different was not just his cunning, but his patience. He was, at heart, a risk manager—a man who understood that true strength lay in restraint. Putin, by contrast, has modeled a 21st-century authoritarianism that equates hesitation with weakness and substitutes fear for foresight. The parallels—and the warnings—are clear. Preventive war rarely prevents anything. It ignites what it seeks to avoid. Bismarck's Germany, for all its military capacity, was preserved by diplomacy. The Germany that rejected Bismarck's wisdom in 1914 and again in 1939 plunged the world into catastrophe.

Russia now stands at a similar crossroads.

This is not a historical footnote. It is a message. A warning. And perhaps, even now, an opportunity. If the past teaches anything, it is that fear-driven violence ends not in peace, but in devastation. The future belongs not to those who strike first, but to those who think longest.

Herr Putin: remember Bismarck. The graveyards of history are full of leaders who feared too much—and thought too little.