

Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany (1866-1890)

Introduction

After Napoleon's defeat and expulsion from the German lands in 1814, Central Europe experienced a half-century of peace. The German Confederation (1815–1866) was a loose federation of thirty-nine sovereign and independent states. It was far from the unitary German nation-state envisioned by German nationalists: included within its borders were parts of the Habsburg Empire (Austria), enclaves of non-German-speaking populations, and some (but not all) of Prussia's territory. During these fifty years, German nationalists outlined their goals with increasing clarity and fervor: they spoke and wrote incessantly about the shape of a future Germany and whether it might have a constitution, a representative parliament, and perhaps even a republican form of government.

Due to the rapid growth of newspapers and journals, especially after 1830, the nationalists' message reached a larger segment of people in Central Europe than ever before, though mainly other members of the educated urban elite. The vast majority of Germans lived in the countryside, where they experienced chronic insecurity and hardship. In the 1840s, critics of the status quo raised increasingly vocal opposition to autocratic rulers, and disastrous harvests contributed to the German (and pan-European) revolutions of 1848–49. Between March and May 1848, a National Assembly in Frankfurt am Main was elected on the basis of broad suffrage and met for the first time. Over the next year, its members debated fundamental social, economic, and national issues but lacked the power to impose their decisions on individual states. By March 1849, the Frankfurt National Assembly had been forced to retreat in the face of a state-led conservative backlash. The following month, Prussia's King Friedrich Wilhelm IV refused to accept the German crown, which he said would be a dog-collar around his neck.

During the 1850s—which were neither as barren or reactionary as historians once thought—Germany's industrial revolution gathered steam and a free-market economy emerged. This industrial take-off brought new wealth and international respect to Prussia, in whose territories many of the rapidly industrializing regions were found. But Prussian statesmen were neither strong nor bold enough to challenge the Habsburg Empire for hegemony in Central Europe. The idea of a "third Germany" did not gain traction either. In the early 1860s, the expansion and reform of the Prussian army was seen as a precondition for asserting Prussia's power, but when the Prussian king, Wilhelm I, demanded new recruits, he encountered liberal opposition in the Prussian parliament. The ensuing "constitutional conflict" seemed to pit absolutism against liberalism, constitutionalism, and parliamentarism. In September 1862, the Prussian king appointed Otto von Bismarck to break the deadlock. Bismarck was unsuccessful at first: repression did not dislodge the liberal opposition. Gradually, Bismarck concluded that a military showdown with Austria would solve Prussia's internal and external challenges. Thus, the scene was set for the dramatic events of 1866–71.

Overview

The unification of Germany in 1871 was an event of world historical importance. It created a nation-state of forty-one million persons in the heart of Europe. As a federation of twenty-six semi-independent kingdoms, grand duchies, principalities, and city-states, the new German Empire [*Deutsches Reich*] was viewed as a military dynamo and economic force within Europe. Its science and technology, education, and municipal administration were the envy of the world. And its avant-garde artists reflected the

ferment in European culture. After Otto von Bismarck's departure from office in 1890, Germany played a decisive role in precipitating the cataclysm of the First World War. The Weimar Republic of the 1920s represented an experiment in democracy, but after Adolf Hitler's appointment as Reich chancellor in January 1933, Germany became a criminal, genocidal power under the Nazis, plunging the world into a second, even more devastating conflict. A brief period of two sovereign German states followed between 1949 and 1990. Today, Germany is once again united as the economic powerhouse of Europe and is widely viewed as a stable and respected nation.

Things might have turned out differently.

On August 22, 1862, two swimmers were struggling against a fiendish current in the Bay of Biscay near the fashionable resort town of Biarritz, France.^[1] One of the swimmers was Princess Katharina von Orlov, the vivacious twenty-two-year-old wife of the Russian ambassador stationed in Brussels. The other swimmer—an avid one—was Otto von Bismarck. At that time Bismarck was Prussia's diplomatic envoy to France. After arriving in Biarritz, Bismarck wrote to his wife, Johanna, that from his rooms in the Palais Beauharnais he could see "the charming view of blue sea, which drives its white foam between wonderful cliffs toward the lighthouse ... I am ludicrously healthy and so happy" If Bismarck was impressed by the scenery, he was even more smitten by the married princess, who was "funny, clever and charming" but also represented a forbidden love. Half his age, she called him "Uncle," while he called her "Catty." Historians still wonder whether Bismarck was actually in love and whether the relationship remained platonic. Local lifeguards concentrated on other dangers lurking. They had formed an association to combat the Atlantic current, which they knew could easily carry swimmers out to sea. According to one chronicle written by the lifeguards, on that August day Princess Orlov was caught first in the current; Bismarck tried to save her, and soon both swimmers were floundering. A lighthouse keeper, Pierre Lafleur, managed to rescue the princess, then the envoy, both half dead. Bismarck later became godfather to Lafleur's son, who was orphaned when Lafleur himself drowned soon thereafter.

Four weeks after Bismarck's brush with death, on September 23, 1862, he was appointed Prussia's new minister president. Forty-seven years old, he was already well known for his conservative views and his denunciation of revolutionaries in 1848. Prussia's war minister had persuaded King Wilhelm I that Bismarck could overcome the opposition of liberals in the Prussian parliament who refused to approve army reform. Wilhelm was so discouraged by this opposition, which soon blossomed into a full-blown conflict between monarchy and parliament, that he had already signed the papers announcing his abdication. History hung in the balance. Some contemporary observers expected a liberal-bourgeois revolution like the one in Paris in 1830 that had sent France's Bourbon dynasty into exile. Others feared a *coup d'état* against parliament akin to Louis Napoleon's seizure of power in 1851. Like that double drowning off Biarritz beach, neither of these outcomes came to pass. Instead, Bismarck's appointment in 1862 created the international and domestic constellations that permitted Prussia, in less than ten years, to solve the so-called German Question. It did so by excluding Austria, overcoming liberal opposition, defeating the "eternal enemy" France, and creating a unified German Empire.

Counterfactual history—"what if" history—is not the best way to explore and explain what actually happened in the past. The historian Thomas Nipperdey famously pronounced that "In the beginning was Bismarck," and it is with Bismarck that we must start. Why do we refer so naturally to Bismarckian Germany, or to Bismarck as the founder or architect of German unity? Does Bismarck's historical significance confirm the "great man" (or even the "great person") theory of history? Or are there more convincing ways to approach questions about how German unification was achieved, where real power lay in the Second Reich, and what prospects remained open?

Historiographical Debate and Open Questions

We can divide the principal debates about Bismarckian Germany into two groups. On the one hand,

historians have argued about the place of Imperial Germany as a whole in modern German history. One contentious question concerns the roots of Nazism and the Third Reich: Can we find these roots in the pre-1918 era? On the other hand, some scholars focus on just the period of Bismarck's ascendancy (1866–1890). One question that interests them is whether unification in 1871 was indeed a Bismarckian “revolution from above,” as it has often been characterized.

The German Empire (1871–1918)

Among the first group of questions, let us consider four debates that have brought Bismarckian and Wilhelmine Germany within a single interpretive frame.

(1) Was there a “special path,” a German *Sonderweg*, that led from the mid-nineteenth century to the Third Reich? Even before the First World War, and then in the interwar period, Germany's alleged “peculiarity” had a positive connotation: it was embraced by German scholars who believed that their nation had escaped many of the developmental problems associated with “the West.” In the 1970s, the poles of the *Sonderweg* thesis were reversed, reflecting German society's need to address the meaning and causes of Nazism and the Holocaust. The idea of a negative German path to modernity was advanced by a group of relatively young German historians, many of whom taught at the University of Bielefeld. The most prominent members of this group were Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Jürgen Kocka. These historians looked to Imperial Germany and found that German history had already begun to go off the rails in that era. Unlike Britain in 1688 and France in 1789, Germany in 1848 failed to experience a bourgeois revolution. Germany's “missing revolution,” again unlike Britain and France, preserved the power of “pre-industrial elites”—especially aristocratic, agrarian Junkers in eastern Prussia, but also military, bureaucratic, and court elites. According to this thesis, the manner of unification in 1871 enhanced the reputation and power of Prussia's traditional elites and extended their hegemony over Germany, thereby closing off possible developments in the direction of liberalism, parliamentarism, and democracy. A “matrix of authoritarianism” was also established on the basis of anti-democratic traditions fostered in the family, in the schools, in university student corps, and elsewhere. These features of Imperial Germany, according to the Bielefeld scholars, deflected German history from a normal Western path to liberal democracy and created the preconditions for Hitler and the Nazis.^[2]

Since the 1980s, critics of the *Sonderweg* thesis have dismantled it piece by piece. Although a post-*Sonderweg* consensus among historians remains elusive, scholars now recognize that Imperial Germany was far more modern, dynamic, and oriented toward bourgeois (rather than aristocratic) interests than the Bielefelders believed. German unification was not simply a “revolution from above” engineered singlehandedly by Bismarck. Liberals were more successful than previously believed. The bourgeoisie [*Bürgertum*] was not “feudalized”: on the contrary, it exercised *de facto* hegemony in the economic, social, and cultural spheres. And Germany did not diverge from a Western trajectory leading to liberal democracy because there is no “normal” Western pattern in the first place. Critics of the *Sonderweg* thesis have also stressed the many historical ruptures after 1918 that undermine the idea of a continuity from Bismarck to Hitler. Such ruptures included defeat, revolution, and near civil war in 1918–19, hyperinflation in 1923, the Great Depression after 1929, and the short-term calculations of anti-democratic elites in January 1933, who mistakenly believed they could control Hitler after boosting him into the chancellor's office.

(2) The Bismarckian and Wilhelmine periods are also considered in tandem by historians who study the fundamental democratization of German society—the penetration of politics down to the lowest levels of society and into the nation's smallest communities. In the short term, Bismarck's decision to introduce universal manhood suffrage for national elections after 1867 unquestionably contributed to a sudden expansion of the political nation, but scholars debate its long-term effects. For example, did the economic downturn after 1873 set the stage for a “political mass market” where antisemitism and other forms of demagoguery were used to mobilize voters who were experiencing the downside of economic

modernization? When did the age of mass politics arrive? And if Imperial Germany's constitution incorporated a mix of parliamentary and monarchical forms, what were the prospects for increasingly democratic practices and outcomes? These questions cannot be answered by looking to Bismarckian or Wilhelmine Germany alone. The cynical exploitation of material grievances and cultural anxiety may have reached new levels after the turn of the century; but the sociologist Max Weber concluded that in 1890 Bismarck bequeathed to posterity a nation "without any and all political education." At that time, Weber wrote, Germans' "capacity for independent political thought" lay "far below the level ... that it had already reached twenty years earlier [i.e. in 1870]."[3]

(3) To what extent was the Second Reich a truly national state? Here, two sets of inter-related questions arise. On the one hand, how did local, regional, national, and cosmopolitan identities overlap in Germans' self-perception? Was love of one's homeland [*Heimat*] compatible with new national affections and allegiances? And did it really matter that the German Empire was a *federal* state?[4] On the other hand, contemporaries continued to debate Germany's national mission even after the exclusion of German-speaking parts of the Habsburg Empire in 1866 provided a "small German" [*kleindeutsch*] answer to the German Question. Radical nationalist associations such as the Pan-German League were founded around 1890, just when Bismarck's system of continental alliances was about to give way to "world policy" [*Weltpolitik*] as pursued by Kaiser Wilhelm II. After 1900, radical nationalists fought with each other and with the government in Berlin over custodianship of the symbols of national authority; but many of these conflicts were born in the time of Bismarck.

(4) The fourth and last set of questions about Imperial Germany as a whole consider the ascendancy of bourgeois interests and values. These questions highlight ways in which the Second Reich was closer to the Germany we know today than it was to the Germany of Frederick the Great. "How modern was the Kaiserreich?" "How bourgeois was the Kaiserreich?" "Was German society a society of subjects" (i.e., not a society of citizens)? Such questions were posed long ago by Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Thomas Nipperdey, and they continue to prompt historical debate. Historians sometimes seem to suggest that everything before 1890 was "unmodern" and everything after 1890 was hyper-modern.[5] Yet, well before Bismarck left office, Germany had moved toward a thoroughly industrial capitalist economy; political culture was being shaped by a mass press and mass parties; and identifiably modern anxieties about the future were percolating through German society. Although scholars today are comfortable with the proposition that the Empire was *both* "authoritarian" and "modern," they also appreciate that neither descriptive term offers the last word on many topics of perennial interest—for example, could Germans have embraced reform to avoid a descent into war and revolution in 1914–18?[6]

Bismarckian Germany (1866–1890)

What about the second set of questions—those that have led scholars to grapple with the Bismarckian period exclusively? Of course, to focus narrowly on the 1870s and 1880s is to begin on the wrong foot. That said, it is possible to identify four salient questions that can be addressed through documents and images in volume 4 alone. Understandably, we come first to Bismarck himself.

(1) The "Bismarck myth" existed only in embryonic form before 1890, then grew exponentially after Bismarck left office. By 1914, Bismarck monuments were found across the length and breadth of Germany. Their proliferation was an exercise in the manipulation of memory cultures: putting Bismarck on a pedestal, literally and figuratively, was intended to discredit liberal traditions and endorse authoritarian ones. If Bismarck scholarship no longer revolves around the question "man or myth?", why are new biographies of the man still pouring out of publishing houses in the twenty-first century?[7] How are Bismarck's achievements judged today compared to 50 (or 100) years ago? And how do we separate his strategies and accomplishments from his missteps and failures? In any attempt to answer these questions, Bismarck's complex personality and inscrutable machinations are of central importance: Did Bismarck really intend to shape a new Germany with his three wars of unification (1864–71)? Were

motives for personal power evident when he drafted a Reich constitution in 1866–67? What importance should we ascribe to his working relationship with Germany’s three Kaisers? (There were, after all, *only* three, and Bismarck had spectacularly dysfunctional relationships with the last two.) Why did Bismarck turn away from liberalism in the so-called “second founding of the Reich” in 1878–79? And why did his enthusiasm for overseas colonies rise and fall in less than twelve months (1884–85)?

Readers will discover that thumbnail descriptions of Bismarck’s system of rule—Bonapartist dictatorship, Caesarist rule, charismatic leadership, veiled despotism—do not explain things very well. Bismarck followed three precepts of statecraft that do not accord with any of these models. He often devised policy to meet short-term emergencies, not long-range goals. He typically kept his options open until all alternative possibilities had been exhausted. And he understood *Realpolitik*—the politics of the possible—as a way to exclude sentiment and ideology from policymaking. As Bismarck put it once, proceeding through life on the basis of principles was akin to walking down a narrow path in the woods holding a long pole in his mouth. Thumbnail descriptions are misleading for a second reason. Bismarck never came close to exercising one-man rule. The symbolic authority of Germany’s “Iron Chancellor” was carefully crafted and stage-managed by Bismarck himself, and it needed to be refortified from time to time. Despite his centrality to the Reich’s entire political system, and notwithstanding his claim that he merely held the coattails of a history that he could not control, Bismarck was just one among many influential individuals trying to impose his stamp on the new Empire while preventing others from doing so.

(2) If we remain respectful of Bismarck’s talent but are not bedazzled by his “genius,” how then does that alter our view of German unification in 1871? Some scholars have characterized the new Reich as a system of “skirted decisions.” Others view Imperial Germany’s alleged synthesis of absolutism and parliamentarism as a typically German form of the modern constitutional state—and a successful one at that. Still others see it as a normal staging post on the road to a modern liberal democracy, which closely resembled others emerging in Europe and America from the eighteenth century onward. Bismarck’s relationship with the Reichstag and his persistent efforts to circumscribe its role continue to attract historians’ attention. Similarly, the complex ways in which Bismarck ensured Prussia’s *de facto* hegemony within the Reich remain open to interpretation. Prussia’s domination of Reich affairs generally, and the inability of liberals to do away with Prussia’s undemocratic three-class suffrage specifically, were factors that slowed or halted the further development of the Reich constitution in a liberal direction.

What cannot be denied is that the 1871 constitution suited many Germans quite well—in the Bismarckian era and even on the eve of the First World War.^[8] In contrast to the view put forth by the Bielefeld School of the 1970s, the Empire’s founding and its initial legislation in the 1870s achieved many of the goals of the nationalist movement and the ideals held by liberals. Those outcomes largely realized the economic aspirations of the bourgeois economic elite and satisfied liberal demands for constitutionalism and the rule of law. They did so *because* the new Reich fell short of a fully parliamentary political system (which neither group wanted).

Historians are also exploring how parliamentary deputies, like parliament as an institution, were existentially dependent on a rapidly changing public sphere and the rise of a mass press. For example, compared to today, newspaper editors were remarkably generous in the space they allocated to verbatim stenographic reports of Reichstag debates published every day while parliament was in session. As the Berlin historian Andreas Biefang has written, it was in the age of Bismarck that “parliamentarians were compelled to create for themselves a public image.” A modern form of celebrity served the Social Democratic leader August Bebel in opposition even as it fueled Bismarck’s own prestige. But that development had unintended consequences. A “gap opened up between what could be said publicly and what was actually feasible.”^[9] The parties never actually constituted or controlled

the government: the Kaiser alone appointed his state ministers, and he could dismiss the Reichstag and call new elections whenever he wanted. Therefore, party candidates and parliamentary deputies could promise almost anything to voters without ever having the opportunity (or responsibility) to deliver on their promises. This points to another feature of mass politics found in embryonic form before 1890: the “frightful brutalization of public opinion”^[10] by radical antisemites and other demagogues. They got away with what Hitler called “the big lie,” and they profited at the polls when they spouted “alternative facts.”

(3) If Bismarck’s foreign policy and his alliance system no longer generate much debate, the same cannot be said of Germany’s encounters with the wider world more generally. Historians have lately been asking how Germans conceived of their global mission before, during, and after the short period (1884–85) when new colonies were actually acquired. They have found that Germans defined their own national mission in racialized, colonialist terms long before 1871, just as they continued to do so after Germany lost its colonies in 1919. Globalization—often said to have begun around 1880—shaped Germans’ national identity from an early date. Consider the ethnographic displays of foreign peoples [*Völkerschauen*] of the 1870s and 1880s, which were made possible by transnational networks and transfers. At a time when colonial commodities—exotic foods and adventure stories, for instance—were just beginning to flood into Germany, these displays proved to be enormously popular.

(4) A fourth and final point follows from the third. Advocates of the *Sonderweg* thesis were not wrong to call attention to a “friend-foe” model of political conflict in Bismarckian Germany. The lines of continuity these scholars drew from Imperial Germany to the Third Reich were too straight, but they suggested plausible parallels between Bismarck’s political campaigns against “enemies of the Reich” and later assaults against Communist “criminals” and racial “outsiders” in the 1930s. Bismarck’s political enemies included Catholics, Social Democrats, Poles, Jews, and other ethnic minorities: they all experienced discrimination, repression, and worse. Scholarly research about how “insiders” and “outsiders” were defined before 1890 continues to pay dividends. The danger of a teleology stretching from Bismarck to Hitler still looms, but as two of the fiercest critics of the *Sonderweg* thesis once wrote, “the question about continuity is not *whether* but *what kind*.”^[11]

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When these eight questions are considered together, they allow us to look beneath the surface calm of Bismarckian Germany. What we see there is a picture shot through with contradictions, conflicts, and crises. Contradictions resulted from attempts to defend international and constitutional arrangements set in place at the time of unification. Conflict was inevitable when the effects of rapid economic, social, cultural, and political change became self-reinforcing and as a younger generation of Germans sought new challenges to match the great deeds of their fathers. Crises arose whenever Bismarck felt his authority in jeopardy.

How do we assess the historical significance of all this turmoil? A preliminary hypothesis, which readers are invited to test against sources in this volume, is that Imperial Germany’s highly dynamic economy, society, and culture were embedded within an authoritarian political system. The latter was also dynamic, not sclerotic. Yet, many of its bourgeois defenders tended to prize stability and prestige over the principles of equity, inclusiveness, and fairness. Despite the ascendancy of bourgeois codes of conduct and even while industrial capitalism was expanding rapidly, out-groups were subjected to persecution. Science and technology were harnessed to the interests of military firepower, colonial expansion, and the domination of world markets. Women’s demands for equal rights had not yet found the resonance they would after 1900. And one leader, Bismarck, dominated his ministerial colleagues, party leaders, and the entire system of state.

If portents of a calamitous future tempt us to read history backwards, we should pause for a moment

and attune ourselves to the views of contemporary Germans who did not know how the story would end. Germans who found themselves on the right side of class, confessional, and gender boundaries tended to view life in the 1870s and 1880s as stable and predictable. Their pronouncements on the mood of the times are often self-satisfied, and we see them striking complacent poses in the official iconography of the day. For other Germans, though, life was brutal, rigidly controlled, and patently unfair. They, too, took the pulse of the times—in their letters, autobiographies, and pub conversations, for example. How do we differentiate between privileged and unprivileged groups, and where do we place Germans who do not fit neatly into either category? The documents and images in this volume may help readers match up Germans' objective places within hierarchies of economic wealth, social status, and political power with their subjective reactions to movement up or down these ladders.

The balance of this introduction addresses issues and themes that are found in this volume's seven sections. These are organized as follows:

1. Demographic and Economic Development
2. Society
3. Culture
4. Religion, Antisemitism, Education, Social Welfare
5. Politics I: Forging an Empire
6. Military, International Relations, Colonialism
7. Politics II: Parties and Political Mobilization

Dividing the following remarks into discrete sections should not prevent readers from approaching this introduction as a coherent narrative—the story of Germany's early development as a newly unified nation-state. Hopefully, readers will see the Bismarckian epoch as a transitional one and as a period worth studying in its own right.

1. Demographic and Economic Development

What do I need to know? The German Empire was located on Europe's northern plain between France and Russia. In terms of geographical territory, it was a little bigger than Spain and a little smaller than Texas (see the maps in this volume). In 1871 the Empire had a population of about 41 million. By 1910 that figure had risen to almost 65 million (compared to 82 million in Germany today).^[12] Urbanization was one of the most conspicuous features of demographic change. Between 1871 and 1910 the proportion of Germans living in the countryside declined from about 64 percent to 40 percent. Conversely, the share of people living in big cities rose from just under 9 percent to almost 27 percent.^[13] Industrial expansion was fueled by railway construction (especially early on), coal mining, iron and steel production, machinery and machine tools, and, somewhat later, synthetic dyes.^[14] Service industries such as commerce and banking also grew rapidly. By 1900, Germany had surpassed Great Britain as the largest economy in Europe and was second world-wide only to the United States.

Although economic opportunities were increasing overall in the Bismarckian era and modern technology was infiltrating workplaces and homes alike, these changes often brought unwelcome consequences. Such consequences included forced migration from the countryside to unfamiliar cities, job insecurity when booms and busts affected occupational sectors differently, a rising cost of living, and the loss of traditional touchstones based in local communities and smallness of scale.

[1 representative document](#) (doc 1.2.12). The construction industry was just one economic sector where the breakthrough of serial production, mechanization, and the growth of specialized supply industries partly displaced artisans who had previously overseen or been integrated into the entire production process.

[1 quirky image](#) (image 1.2.9). The painter Max Liebermann offered a sympathetic view of a cobbler's workshop in 1881–82. By that time, industrial production was driving many small artisanal enterprises out of business.

1.1. Population Growth, Migration, Occupational Structure

Migration to the cities predated the Bismarckian era, of course, but the appearance of huge metropolises was especially pronounced during the 1870s and 1880s. In the midst of population shifts, extreme disparities arose in the rate of urban growth across Germany, which would have been even more dramatic except for a massive wave of emigration, beginning in 1880, to America and other destinations. As the problem of pauperism from the 1840s evolved into the “social question” of the 1860s, overcrowding in Berlin and in other large cities resulted in squalid “tenement barracks” that epitomized the negative side of freedom of movement.

Scholars used to contend that most of the Bismarckian period was afflicted by a Great Depression (1873–96). This has now been exposed as a myth. The 1870s and 1880s included shorter periods of boom and bust, and some historians use the term “great recession” instead. The German economy as a whole continued to expand, but that long-term expansion was barely visible to many Germans. Even a brief downturn in a particular occupational branch or local workplace could have devastating effects on families, especially when compounded by the illness or death of a primary earner or the reduced income that came with temporary unemployment or strikes.

There was a strong economic upswing during the “founders’ era” [*Gründerzeit*] from 1871 to 1873, fueled by billions in francs paid as a war indemnity by the French after the Franco-German War. After 1873, a sharp downturn convinced many Germans that the capitalist system was dysfunctional. In contrast to earlier and later periods, Germans in the 1870s and 1880s *sensed* that they were living through a socio-economic crisis (see [image 4.5.35](#)). That feeling contributed to their growing dissatisfaction with the status quo in the second half of Bismarck’s term in office. It also fueled political attacks on liberalism and the Jews.

1.2. Agriculture, Industry, Commerce

After the mid-1870s, German agriculture experienced increased competition from foreign producers. Grain from Australia, Russia, and the U.S. or Canadian prairies could now reach German markets at prices that pushed the owners of large estates in the Prussian east into debt or over the brink of bankruptcy. Yet technological innovations such as the introduction of steam-powered threshing machines in the countryside contributed to overall increases in the productivity of German agriculture. Growth rates in mining, industry, and commerce outstripped those of German agriculture, especially after the mid-1870s; but we should not exaggerate the speed of Germany’s transition from an agrarian to an industrial state (the tipping point occurred around 1900). It makes more sense to speak of a gradual change from an agrarian state with a strong industrial sector to an industrial state with a strong agrarian sector after the turn of the century.

In the first decade covered by this volume, the engine of German industrialization was still fueled by railway construction and by the large-scale mining, iron-rolling, and other industries that sustained it. Small workshops had not disappeared, even though the exclusive rights of the guilds had been breached in most German states in the early 1860s through freedom of occupation legislation. The huge factories that we associate with the era of high capitalism were still rare in the 1870s. In 1882 more than half of all heavy industrial enterprises employed five workers or fewer. The textile industry was still very important, and it relied heavily on female home workers. By the 1880s, however, technological innovations were changing the face of industry: precision machinery, steel, toolmaking, and—somewhat later—petrochemical and electrical industries were shifting the German economy onto new paths.

Further changes were wrought by the introduction of gas motors, advances in construction technology, the transition from horse-drawn to electric trolleys, and the increased use of electric light, telephones, and automobiles at the very end of the nineteenth century.

This progress in transportation and urban infrastructure contributed to the remarkable growth of cities: workers were able to live farther from city centers, travelling to and from their shifts by public transport. Urban growth in turn fueled a recognizable consumer culture that drew the worlds of industry, commerce, and everyday life closer together. By the late 1880s, advertisers were trumpeting modern conveniences, poets were writing paeans to technological progress, and scientists, inventors, and explorers were contending that the new age of discovery was being realized through German know-how.

2. Society

What do I need to know? Germany's regional diversity makes it difficult to generalize about social conditions or class relations in the Empire. The population of Prussia was roughly two-thirds of Germany's population, but Prussian society itself was marked by vast differences internally. Nowhere in the Reich did city life and country life exist in isolation from each other. The migration of people and the transfer of goods between urban and rural economies reflected a society on the move. As traditional, corporative "social estates" [Stände] gradually evolved into recognizably modern social classes, strategies for intergenerational advancement became more sophisticated. And as industrial capitalism gathered steam, the working classes were subject to new forms of hardship and exploitation. So were women, who experienced the double burden of work and family in an age of obvious gender inequality. Social reformers, novelists, and a vibrant public sphere ensured that these changes could not be ignored.

Writers offered many critiques of bourgeois dominance in the social, economic, and cultural spheres. A common outlook was hardly likely, given the differing lifestyles and opportunities faced by the upper middle classes, which included educated elites (e.g. civil servants, professors, and professionals), economic elites (e.g. captains of industry like the Krupp family), or commercial elites (e.g. the Jewish banker Gerson Bleichröder). Another group that perplexed observers of the day—and itself—was the lower middle class (*petit bourgeoisie* in French and *Mittelstand* in German).^[15] This group included small business owners, shopkeepers, artisans, and independent peasant proprietors. During the 1870s and 1880s the German *Mittelstand* was buffeted by freedom of occupation, freedom of movement, globalization, and the rise of factory production. For this group, the fear of falling victim to "big business" and the prospect of "proletarianization" were two sides of the same coin, sometimes resulting in the politics of resentment (see Section 4.5 below).

[1 representative document](#) (doc. 2.2.11). An awareness of hierarchical distinctions not only conditioned relations between the classes, it also reinforced fine gradations within them. In regions where industrialization was accelerating—as in Remscheid, near the confluence of the Rhine and Ruhr rivers—social elites were often constituted by merchants and industrialists whose status derived mainly from income.

[1 quirky document](#) (doc. 2.4.53). After 1878, political repression and reprisals by employers put enormous pressure on members of Germany's labor movement to keep their activities secret—even from their spouses. This passage, which was written by a wife who felt aggrieved by her activist husband, shows the human cost of such repression and secrecy.

2.1. City and Countryside

Like "German agriculture," the "German countryside" is an abstraction with limited explanatory power. The lifestyle of a Junker landlord or day laborer on one of the vast grain-growing estates in eastern Prussia bore little resemblance to that of a poor livestock farmer or a vintner trying to eke out a living from a tiny plot of land in the southwestern state of Baden. These groups benefited in different ways

from the rationalization of German agriculture, which included the introduction of new farming techniques, synthetic fertilizers, and mechanization. Hence historians should emphasize the increasing *diversity* of rural society, not its uniformity. That diversity helps explain why Germans from some regions voted with their feet and left unsatisfying rural lives to move to the big cities. It also colored the personal reflections written during and after such migrations. Those reflections can be augmented by statistics drawn from an increasing number of social scientific studies of rural and urban life. The urbanization of what had once been a tiny village near Lübeck, for example, can illustrate the disorienting effect that mobility, machines, and markets had on Germans living in rural areas (see [doc. 2.1.2](#)).

2.2. Class Relations and Lifestyles

One way to appreciate the impact of this interpenetration of city and countryside is by considering the new ways in which time and space were measured. In rural areas, the rhythms of the sun and the seasons still largely determined productive and social activities. But farmers and innkeepers needed to be aware of train schedules, shift times, and telegraphic offices if they were to serve clients who now lived beyond the horizons of the village.^[16] Marriage customs and burial rites in the countryside still appeared to unfold according to an ancient time clock—one that ran too slowly for young city dwellers rushing to a dance hall or an international art exhibition. The simple meals and spartan interiors of rural cottages seemed worlds apart from the full larders and ornate decor of middle-class households in the cities. But for the latter, keeping up appearances required social strategies that were fluid and ill-defined. Those strategies were also subject to intervention by outside forces in both countryside and city: the state in its local, regional, and national guises; lawyers, politicians, and social theorists; and entrepreneurs, consumers, and others for whom the cash nexus was paramount. As parents hoped their children would prosper from their own sacrifices, and as the new significance of wealth erased traditional distinctions between “social estates,” the contours of a new class society came into view.

Satirical journals poked fun at the new pretensions that became evident as these class divisions narrowed or widened. They noted, for instance, that claims to represent “the people” were often put forward by social elites who were as narrow as they were privileged. The hunt for decorations and titles continued to animate burghers eager to rub shoulders with courtiers and the very rich. And successful industrialists such as Alfred Krupp and Carl von Stumm did their best to inject hierarchies of status and authority into workplace relations on the shop floor. Bankers, lawyers, professors, and other members of the propertied and educated bourgeoisie added to the clamor for social prestige. This newly acquisitive society horrified such novelists as Theodor Fontane and Heinrich Mann in the 1890s: they both remarked on the paradox that ubiquitous status-seeking and one-upmanship actually had a levelling effect on society as a whole.

Other levelling influences included near-universal literacy (estimated at 95 percent in 1890), the rise of the advertisement-driven mass press, expanded access for middle-class youths to secondary schools, universities, and institutes of technology, the pervasiveness of consumer culture, and the general rise in the proportion of family incomes available for discretionary expenditures (i.e. after paying for food, clothing, and housing). For the working classes, this portion rose from about 40 percent of family incomes in the 1870s to 55 percent in the 1890s. Education came to be seen as the most important means for generational advancement. Over time and with great variation among regions, the social and institutional constraints that had made life harsh, painful, and short for most Germans before 1866 loosened or disappeared. The levels of geographical and social mobility achieved in the 1870s indicated that there was no turning back from a dynamic society that had still seemed distant to the revolutionaries of 1848–49.

2.3. Conditions of Work

The capitalist mode of production changed fundamentally in the 1870s and 1880s. On the one hand,

artisans and other members of the *Mittelstand* were hard pressed to retain even the vestiges of the “golden age” that they claimed, erroneously, had characterized their working conditions and lifestyles before national unification. On the other hand, the advance of industrialization and the expansion of commercial and consumer cultures produced new opportunities for social groups such as retail clerks. The accounts of flax cultivators on the Lüneburg Heath, not unlike those that describe working-class hierarchies in a steel factory in Hamburg, suggest that even within apparently monolithic occupations a complicated layering of workplace responsibilities and social ranks was discernable. Such layering sometimes baffled social scientists who were trying to discover why the expenditures and lifestyles of working-class or lower-middle-class German families varied so much. Parents experienced universal pressure to provide the essentials of life to their children while saving a few pennies to cope with illness, injury, unemployment, old age, and other calamities. Social studies often yielded ambiguous answers or perpetuated myths about workers’ unhealthy or “irrational” lifestyles. Yet, as historians we can be pleased that survey takers and photographers crossed the threshold of so many homes: they allow us to peer into the interior lives of Germans who left no other record of their daily affairs.

2.4. Gender Relations

After promising starts in 1848–49 and the early 1860s, the bourgeois and working-class women’s movements made relatively slow headway during the 1870s and 1880s. Women remained second-class citizens, their rights inside and outside marriage were severely limited, and they could not vote in national elections. But the Bismarckian period was far from devoid of commentaries about gender relations. Not only literary scholars, artists, and photographers, but also activists and social scientists with widely divergent agendas, analyzed the “woman question.” Those analyses documented women’s sexual exploitation in the workplace, the social origins of parents of illegitimate or fatherless children, and the state regulation of prostitutes. They also addressed the many restrictions placed on women’s ability to protect their property in marriage, to secure other legal rights inside or outside the family, and to participate in associational life and politics.

Gender-specific roles characterized almost every workplace environment, from street cleaning in Munich to domestic service in Berlin to factory labor in the Ruhr district. Gradually the campaign to increase educational opportunities for women gathered steam, through vocational schools for women and lobbying efforts to overcome conservative views about which occupations “suited” their abilities. In this campaign Hedwig Dohm stands out. She provided cogent and forceful arguments for more employment opportunities for women and for the female vote. At a time when Germany’s Social Democratic Party was suffering state repression, Clara Zetkin and August Bebel wrote pioneering, passionate critiques of gender inequality. These writings and ideas were taken up in bourgeois reading circles and discussion groups too. Many victories still lay in the future, and a backlash against women’s emancipation had already begun; but contemporaries were aware that a woman’s movement was coming into existence, and that alone was a momentous fact.

3. Culture

What do I need to know? During the Bismarckian era, artists in Germany—to generalize grossly—were moving away from Romanticism, reveling in realism, dabbling in Impressionism, and not yet anticipating Expressionism. The great age of artistic “secessions” began after 1890, when rebellions against orthodox artistic styles or cultural institutions produced a dialectical evolution of creative genres and tastes. But many artistic breakthroughs after 1890 had earlier foundations.

In the 1870s, patriotic scenes and portraiture dominated German painting. Victory columns and other monuments proliferated. And the brilliance of Johannes Brahms was denied the recognition it deserved. But “imperial culture” was not monolithic, because Germany had many centers of artistic production, not a single definitive one. Dresden and Munich took the lead, while Berlin gradually made a name for

itself as a cultural center too. This lack of an artistic center equivalent to Paris or London hindered the development of a cohesive German style, instead encouraging artistic diversity and the personal idiosyncrasies of creative artists. Even in the 1860s, artists were lampooning Bismarck in Germany's popular satirical magazines, and the mass press contributed to the breakdown of distinctions between high culture and popular culture. By the end of the 1880s, orthodox styles and bourgeois complacency were being challenged by giants of artistic expression such as the painter Adolph Menzel, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, and the dramatist Gerhart Hauptmann.

[1 representative image](#) (image 3.1.18). Adolph Menzel's painting, *The Iron Rolling Mill* (1872), conveys a true-to-life impression of smoke, sweat, heat, and backbreaking labor, but it was first conceived in the mind of the artist. Menzel wanted to move beyond the genre of historical realism, at which he was already a master, and to satisfy his own curiosity about how best to depict the emerging Germany of huge factories, complex industrial organization, and the human cost they entailed.

[1 quirky image](#) (image 3.1.28). Arnold Böcklin's painting, *In the Play of the Waves* (1883), was hailed by art historian Cornelius Gurlitt (the brother of Böcklin's Berlin art dealer, Fritz Gurlitt) as one of the greatest achievements of the nineteenth century. Art critics were not so sure. For portraying mythical creatures with lustful intentions, Böcklin's painting was denounced by the moral purity movement.

3.1. Artistic Movements and Individualism

When the Nazis looked back at fifteen years of Weimar culture (1918–33), their verdict seethed contempt: “a wasteland.” Hermann Muthesius, an early pioneer of German architectural modernism, once referred to the nineteenth century in similar terms: he called it the “inartistic century.” It may be true that realist painting during Bismarck's time often drew on Biedermeier conventionality rather than more rebellious forms. But that is only half the story. Less than half, actually.

Germany's federal states and municipalities set their own cultural policies to express and protect what they defined as public taste. These policies became more important after 1890, when a rise in artistic production that took sex, crime, and adventure as its themes summoned into existence an influential moral purity movement. Even before 1890, though, the public was exposed to a plurality of styles as some artists abandoned the cities and developed a lighter, “open air” (*plein air*) style of landscape painting. Others followed peasants into tiny rural cottages and rustic taverns in order to paint them in their daily environments. (See [image 3.1.19](#) for Wilhelm Leibl's painting, *Peasants in Conversation*.)

The gradual development of a national art market, the rapid rise in the circulation of journals and popular newspapers, the increasing numbers of illustrated books, book series, and lending libraries, new efforts to make museums and concert halls more accessible to the bourgeois public, the staging of national and international art exhibitions—these developments had a potentially homogenizing effect on German culture. But it remained impossible to discern, much less impose, identifiably “national” standards for what constituted good German art. Long before 1890, German artists were searching for new ways to express the deeper cultural significance of political unification, industrial capitalism, and alienation from bourgeois conventions. These issues were tackled in every artistic genre but were particularly evident in the novels of Imperial Berlin.

Thus it would be incorrect to say that either complacency or conformism characterized the creativity of individuals who followed the beat of a different drummer or who expropriated the celebratory kernel of official culture for their own purposes. Artists such as Fritz von Uhde and Hans Marées laid the groundwork for the Secession movements that developed in Dresden and Munich after 1890. Cultural anxiety about the durability of fundamental social values was expressed in print, on canvas, and on the stage, even as victorious Prussian troops marched through the Brandenburg Gate. (The analogous moment might be the now-famous kiss that Russian leader Mikhail Gorbachev delivered on the cheek of

East Germany's party chairman Erich Honecker in October 1989 when they celebrated the fortieth anniversary of the German Democratic Republic's founding, even as the GDR's popular legitimacy was crumbling.)

3.2. Music, Verse, and Prose

The birth of the German Empire was anticipated by a monumental work by Johannes Brahms, *Ein Deutsches Requiem* (Opus 45), completed in 1868. In adopting lines from 1 Corinthians 15, it seemed to anticipate the great national events to come: "We shall not sleep, but we shall all be changed. In a moment, in the twinkling of any eye, at the last trumpet: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed." In contrast to August Heinrich Hoffmann von Fallersleben's *Founders' Songs*, which ridiculed the pretensions of speculators in the early 1870s, the Brahms Requiem provided a deep resonance, a broad reflection on the accomplishment of unity—deeper and broader, certainly, than the verses of *The Watch on the Rhine*, sung by German soldiers marching to the front in the summer of 1870. Likewise, *Parsifal*, the last of Richard Wagner's grand operas, can hardly be said to have lacked resonance. Wagner's Ring Cycle, first performed at Bayreuth in 1876, was the culmination of the composer's search for a "total work of art" [*Gesamtkunstwerk*] sufficiently grand and unique to measure up to the Germany of both ancient and modern times. For better or worse, German music was never the same again.

Few writers of poetry and prose in this era made a lasting mark on German literature. An exception is the giant of German realist literature, Theodor Fontane. His novel *Der Stechlin* captured the spirit and tone of other literature of this era. It depicted with wry humor the unfolding of a local election campaign in backwoods Prussia. And it conveyed Fontane's characteristic mix of admiration for Prussia's rich heritage and his anxiety that German society had lost its moral compass. The same anxiety can be found in other sources that offer contrasting viewpoints—in celebratory poems and satirical cartoons, allegorical murals and children's board games, monumental architecture and kitschy pageants. German cultural production in these years reflected both pride in national achievement and misgivings about the future it would bring about. The opening of the National Gallery in Berlin in 1876 may not have provided the hoped-for opportunity to gather within one temple the variety of cultural expression under Bismarck. But the gallery's very first acquisition, Menzel's *Iron Rolling Mill*, illustrates the folly of attaching the label "inartistic" to the new Germany.

4. Religion, Antisemitism, Education, Social Welfare

What do I need to know? Historians and social scientists were once prone to argue that religious piety inevitably wanes in the face of modernizing trends such as urbanization, industrialization, the rise of a self-conscious working class, and the deification of technology and science. Similarly, when scholars observed that modernization had overcome the traditional *Kirchturmshorizont*—literally, the horizon as seen from the local church steeple—they implied that religion was replaced by other forms of identification and allegiance, such as class, gender, and ideology. But religion did not become irrelevant during the German Empire. Quite the reverse: religion continued to condition the outlook of Germans as it had for centuries, while also providing the impetus for important new departures on a national scale.

When war in 1866 excluded Catholic Austrians from the future Germany, the emerging nation became more Protestant. In 1871, the population of the Reich was about 62 percent Protestant and 36 percent Catholic. Jews constituted only 1.25 percent—a shockingly small percentage when considered in the light of what happened in the 1930s and 1940s. These figures mask crucial regional distinctions. Of about 512,000 Jews in all of Germany, 326,000 lived in Prussia and 36,000 lived in Berlin alone. Whereas the Kingdom of Prussia had about the same proportions of Protestants and Catholics as the whole empire, the next four largest federal states varied greatly. The proportion of Protestants in Bavaria was low, just 28 percent; in Saxony, it was very high, 98 percent. In Württemberg, Protestants constituted over two-

thirds of the population, in Baden just one-third.

In the 1870s, Protestant antipathy toward Germany's one-third Catholic minority fueled the *Kulturkampf*, which can be translated as the "struggle for culture" or the "struggle for civilization." During the same decade, antisemites claimed that Germany's capitalist economy had fallen victim to the Jews, who some also deemed a racial threat to the nation. Even so, most German Jews had good reason to believe that Jewish emancipation in 1869 promised a bright future.

The evolution of public education and public health reflected a combination of conservative and progressive influences. An atmosphere of conservatism was found in universities and other institutes of higher education, most conspicuously in their personnel policies, but they provided German scholars with studies and laboratories in which theoretical and empirical research could be conducted according to the highest international standards. Bismarck's system of social insurance made a start in securing workers some measure of material security. The key laws provided health insurance (1883), accident insurance (1884), and old-age and invalid coverage (1889). In each case, however, coverage was rudimentary, and workers were being repressed at the same time by Bismarck's Anti-Socialist Law. Meanwhile, the goal of protecting Germany's natural environment for future generations gave rise to movements for heritage preservation and environmental protection whose aims anticipated similar movements in the 1970s.

[1 representative document](#) (doc. 4.2.19). At the height of the first wave of modern German antisemitism, this petition was circulated in 1880–81 demanding legislative action to solve the alleged "Jewish problem." That the petition gathered "only" 250,000 signatures was considered a setback, and when it was introduced in the Prussian parliament Bismarck refused to respond to it.

[1 quirky document](#) (doc. 4.5.46). In this report from Munich, a British diplomat named Robert Morier describes a banking swindle perpetrated by a middle-aged spinster named Adèle Spitzeder. Morier explains how post-unification speculation in Germany opened the door to hucksters big and small. He expresses astonishment that Spitzeder—"half Saint, half bacchante"—could dupe Bavarians with her "hiccupping benedictions."

4.1. Protestants, Catholics, and the Free Religion Movement

The *Kulturkampf* between the German state and the Catholic Church was the most important religious conflict in Bismarckian Germany. Bismarck did not conjure the *Kulturkampf* out of his hat. The conflict reflected the determination of Protestant liberals to break what they saw as the archaic and dangerous influence of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in general, and the authority of the pope specifically. Because the pope, Catholic priests, and political party leaders who defended the rights of Catholics were defined by Bismarck and the liberals as "enemies of the Reich," they are discussed in Section 7, where other state-sponsored campaigns to discriminate against minority groups are considered. Yet this conflict was a cultural one.

Religion also helped shape discourses about the role of women in society, practices of charity, the scope of social reform, and the legitimate bounds of censorship. The quasi-secular Free Religion Movement demonstrated the power of humanist ideals dating from the Enlightenment, even as those discourses evolved further after mid-century.

4.2. Jewish Life and the Rise of Political Antisemitism

The single most important thing to know about Jewish life in Imperial Germany is that the deputies of the North German Confederation passed legislation in July 1869 granting the Jews equal citizenship rights. This was a momentous step in the Jewish struggle for emancipation, which had been underway since the Enlightenment. Yet even before all of Germany was unified, Jews as well as Catholics were the

target of nationalists obsessed with the need to define and defend a confessionally homogenous nation-state. The 1870s was not only the decade in which associational life expanded rapidly in support of Protestant and Catholic confessional goals; it was also the decade in which an alleged Jewish threat to the young German nation mobilized antisemites of word and deed. One impetus for the explosion of political antisemitism was the perception that Jews were benefiting disproportionately from the scandals associated with the “founders’ era” (1871–73). Antisemitic propaganda drew on centuries-old stereotypes and falsehoods about the Jews—for example, their alleged propensity for usury and the blood libel myth.^[17] But another source of antipathy toward the Jews can be discerned in Germans’ uncertainty about whether the boundaries of their nation were sufficiently well-defined to meet the challenges of a precarious geographic position in Europe and the global reach of commercial and cultural networks. In this context it became easy for anxious nationalists to claim that Germany would never be truly unified until the Jewish “inner enemy” had been vanquished.

In obvious contrast to the radical antisemitism that followed defeat in 1918 and the state-sponsored murder of six million Jews after 1933, antisemitism in the Bismarckian era did not attract enough support to lead to widespread violence against Jews. Nor did it destroy the Jews’ confidence that Germany would provide a more congenial home as modernization continued. Even so, antisemitic politicians and publicists used spine-chilling language to try to ostracize the Jews, marginalize them in business and the press, strip them of civil and political rights, and even banish them from German soil.

4.3. Public School Reform and Higher Education

German education was recognized throughout the world for its high standards, relative accessibility, and outstanding contributions to science. No one could ignore the unprecedented growth in the number of primary, secondary, and university-level students studying in Germany and in the number of institutions that taught them. As in so many other spheres of social, economic, and cultural life, modernizing trends in German science brought tremendous international prestige to the new Reich. In assessing this success story, we must remember that countless educational opportunities were closed to German girls and women. Confessional and class divisions also made a mockery of claims that German education was universally accessible or based on intellectual merit alone. The pressure to instill “state-supporting” values in students’ minds increased markedly. The hyper-nationalism exhibited by Leipzig members of the Association of German Students in the early 1880s followed the grain of Kaiser Wilhelm II’s later panegyrics about the role of school curricula as means to combat the “revolutionary threat” of Social Democracy. German youth were seen as the fount of national regeneration at a time when the nation allegedly faced confessional, class, and gender threats.

4.4. Poor Relief, Public Health, Social Insurance

Religious piety fueled charitable efforts to relieve the suffering of the poor. After unification, as Social Democracy drew attention to the plight of society’s most vulnerable members, Germans redoubled their efforts to solve the “social question.” When Kaiser Wilhelm I’s royal decree of November 1881 announced the government’s intention to inaugurate a comprehensive system of state-supported insurance for sickness, accidents, and old age, few contemporaries failed to recognize this impressive program as the carrot that went with the stick Bismarck had been applying to the Social Democratic movement since the early 1870s. Poor-relief doctors and bourgeois social reformers documented the undernourishment and other hardships that afflicted millions of working-class families. Journalists, satirists, artists, and Social Democrats likewise ensured that problems of poor health, premature death, and gaps in the social safety net moved to the forefront of public awareness.

4.5. “Organized Capitalism” and its Critics

An unbridgeable ideological gulf separated Karl Marx’s analysis of 1867, *Das Kapital*, from Kaiser Wilhelm

II's pronouncement on the "workers' question" in February 1890. Quite a different justification for workers' compensation was offered by Bismarck in the 1880s. At that time the chancellor was still struggling to wring his social legislation from a reluctant, cost-conscious Reichstag. (Section 7 will examine relations between the state, workers, and Social Democracy in more detail.) Often, critics of organized capitalism responded to social crisis with a sense of panic, blaming capitalism's "dysfunctions" on the Jews. Earnest reformers and reactionary doomsayers disagreed fundamentally in their prognostications—so much so that their solutions to the "epidemic" of capitalism made existing problems seem even more poisonous.

4.6. Environment

Folklorists such as Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl felt that the German people and the land were intrinsically connected to each other (see, e.g., doc. 4.6.52 on German forests). Believing that German authenticity could be found in the German countryside, they began to argue that the natural landscape, with its infinite variations, had to be preserved and protected in order for the German character to thrive. Back-to-nature pronouncements went beyond a reverence for aesthetics, harmony, and permanence. By the end of the nineteenth century, an increasing number of Germans recognized the importance of environmental issues, not least because they were trekking into the countryside in unprecedented numbers as hikers and tourists. Only a few could envision an organization that would advocate publicly for environmental protection [*Heimatschutz*], but those who could wanted to manage forests and fields, and control access to natural monuments rationally, for the benefit and enjoyment of all. They faced stiff competition from developers, entrepreneurs, and governments who endorsed belching smokestacks, open-pit mining, and urban sprawl because they generated huge revenues.

5. Politics I: Forging an Empire

What do I need to know? In July 1866, Prussia's military victory over the Habsburg Empire ended the latter's 800-year dominance in Central Europe and excluded it from the future Germany. It also effectively ended Bismarck's "constitutional conflict" with liberals in the Prussian parliament. Prussia and the German states north of the River Main formed the North German Confederation (1867–70). Besides the authority vested in Prussian King Wilhelm I and Bismarck as head of the federal presidium and federal chancellery, the Confederation's two legislative bodies—both of which had to assent to new laws—were the Reichstag and the Federal Council. The Reichstag was elected by universal manhood suffrage, whereas the Federal Council was composed of civil servants representing the government of each state. This basic structure was transferred to the German Empire upon its founding in 1871.

After 1867 it became apparent that anti-Prussian feeling was growing, not diminishing, in the south. However, liberals and Bismarck were able to work together in the Reichstag to pass modernizing legislation in economic, trade, and legal matters. In July 1870, French Emperor Napoleon III's inept diplomacy over the Spanish succession allowed Bismarck to maneuver France into declaring war, at which point prior military agreements between Prussia and the southern German states were invoked. A popular wave of enthusiasm erupted as German forces inflicted defeats on the French army, which capitulated on September 1–2, 1870, at the Battle of Sedan. In October–November 1870 Bismarck moved quickly to negotiate the entry of the southern states into a unified Germany. On January 1, 1871, while the war continued, the new German Empire [*Reich*] was founded, and on January 18 the German emperor [*Kaiser*] was proclaimed in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles.

Beginning in March 1871, Reichstag elections resulted in the National Liberal Party holding the dominant position in parliament. Its deputies worked closely with Bismarck on important legislation that consolidated legal unification, removed impediments to industrial capitalism, and escalated the struggle against the Catholic Church. In the late 1870s, Bismarck decided that he would rely on the Conservative and Catholic parties for support; he schemed to split the National Liberal Party. When Bismarck launched

his anti-socialist crusade in 1878 and turned to protectionism in 1879, left-wing National Liberals seceded from the party in 1880: they joined with Progressives in the German Radical Party in 1884. These left liberals frustrated many of Bismarck's plans; he responded by questioning their loyalty to the Reich. By the 1880s, Bismarck had overcome centrifugal forces that (in his view) threatened German unity; but as he turned from forging the Empire to fortifying it, he concluded, wrongly, that he remained indispensable.

[1 representative document](#) (doc. 5.2.26). The sociologist Max Weber anticipated the arguments of today's historians when, from the perspective of 1918, he analyzed the National Liberals' motives to join hands with Bismarck in shaping German unification according to their own goals and beliefs (rather than submissively accepting a "revolution from above"). In this excerpt Weber emphasizes the immense political talent found among National Liberal parliamentarians at that time and why they could reasonably expect more liberal victories in the future.

[1 quirky document](#) (doc. 5.1.2.C). Bismarck once said that "Anyone who has looked into the glazed eyes of a soldier dying on the battlefield will think hard before starting a war." This account focuses on the wounded soldiers and unburied corpses found on the battlefield after the Battle of Königgrätz on July 3, 1866. It was written by Georg Hiltl—an actor, theater director, and novelist. Although Hiltl's essay appeared in the popular family journal *Die Gartenlaube*, its explicit language hinted at the carnage of modern warfare.

5.1. The Wars of Unification

Military matters and international relations after 1871 will be dealt with in Section 6. This section underscores the interpenetration of domestic and foreign policy in the forging of German unity between 1866 and 1871. If we include the war against Denmark in 1864, these years saw three successful conflicts bestow immense prestige and power on Bismarck, King Wilhelm I, and the Prussian army. We should reflect, however, on the contingent and contested nature of the political, diplomatic, and constitutional developments that led to the proclamation of the new German Reich in January 1871. Our sources reveal that almost every aspect of "imperial" power had to be negotiated. We can read about the many political deals Bismarck struck at this time—with his own king and Germany's federal princes, who were determined to preserve their traditions and autonomy as best they could; with liberals in Prussia, who were forced to reassess whether it was possible to pursue the twin goals of unity and freedom together; with Helmuth von Moltke, Chief of the Prussian General Staff, who wanted to use the army's foreign victories to increase its political influence at home; and with other Great Powers, including France, Britain, and Russia, who worried that Prussia now posed a threat to international peace. These deals made Bismarck the most hated man in Germany at one moment and the most popular the next.

Primary documents and images help us draw back the curtain on discussions that led up to two of the most compelling moments in the unification process. The first was Bismarck's decision to edit the Ems Dispatch on July 13, 1870. Famous both in its original version and in its revised form, the dispatch enabled Bismarck to goad the French into declaring war on Prussia. The second event was the "Hail!" to the new Kaiser in the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles in January 1871—a scene that was famously painted by Anton von Werner in three versions, each with its own distinct perspective and intent (for the three versions, see [5.1.34](#), [5.1.35](#), and [5.1.36](#)). French and German satirical journals offered illuminating assessments of resistance to Prussian hegemony in Central Europe, from depictions of "Wilhelm the Butcher" to countless variations on the Prussian eagle and spiked helmet [*Pickelhaube*]. Contemporary drawings and photographs depicted the opposite sentiment, too, epitomized by Prussian victory parades through the streets of Paris and Berlin and sentimental paintings depicting Prussia's "inevitable" rise. But they do not allow us to forget the dead and wounded whose sacrifices made those victories possible.

5.2. Forging a Constitutional State

Battlefield victories and “Hails!” to the Kaiser were not enough to forge a working constitutional state. The same kinds of political negotiations that led to the imperial proclamation continued afterwards—in parliament, in the press, in the slow process of legal codification, and in the critical reflections of liberals, who still hoped that national unity would foster greater civil and constitutional liberties. From these sources we can discover how Bismarck and the liberals found common ground. The particularly fruitful legislative periods of 1866–67 and 1871–74 are worth highlighting in this regard. Where should we put the emphasis when describing the theory and reality of “constitutional monarchy”—on the adjective or the noun? Even the new German federal state [*Bundesstaat*] was contentious: the term was meant to suggest that central authority now rested with the imperial state (in the singular) rather than with the confederation of states [*Staatenbund*] that had existed until 1866.

5.3. A Turn from Liberalism?

German liberals contemplated possible paths to ongoing constitutional reform, even under Bismarck’s autocratic governance. After 1880 the liberals were split between left-liberal and National Liberal factions. Their many accomplishments in these years cannot be dismissed. As early as the mid-1870s, though, we see a narrowing of opportunities to realize a liberal constitutional state with parliamentary control over the executive branch. By the mid-1880s, liberal disunity, the perceived threat of socialism, and Bismarck’s unassailable ascendancy in the Prussian state offered little hope for the future.

For a time, it seemed possible that the coming reign of Kaiser Friedrich III might break Bismarck’s omnipotence in domestic politics and revive liberal fortunes. However, the opposition parties in the Reichstag were unable to form an anti-Bismarckian coalition. The penetration of imperial institutions—and the *idea* of empire—into the dynastic states provided further impetus for the concentration of power in the office of the imperial chancellor and in the symbol of Kaiserdome. Friedrich was terminally ill with throat cancer when he ascended the throne, and his reign in 1888 lasted only ninety-nine days. On his death, liberals realized that his son, Kaiser Wilhelm II, would not endorse a return to the “liberal era” of the 1870s.

6. Military, International Relations, Colonialism

What do I need to know? From 1871 to 1890, Bismarck’s policy was marked by caution as he sought the consolidation, not expansion, of German power. His foreign policy was guided by four core principles from which he never wavered. First, Europe and the world had to be reassured that Germany was a “satiated” nation, dedicated to peace. Second, France had to be isolated diplomatically to ensure that the “nightmare of coalitions”—two or more Great Powers allying themselves against Germany—would never come to pass. To that end Bismarck encouraged France to redirect its feelings of *revanche* over the loss of Alsace and Lorraine into colonial expansion. Third, Russia had to be kept friendly to Germany, or at least friendly enough that it would not join an opposing alliance. Fourth, Germany had to prop up the power and prestige of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, with which end it concluded a formal alliance in 1879.

In the space of a few months in 1884–85, bold claims to Southwest Africa were staked by the adventurer Carl Peters and subsequently followed up through the establishment of German protectorates in Cameroon, Togo, German East Africa, and a number of islands in the South Pacific. Bismarck agreed to this land grab even though he had previously refused to consider colonial acquisitions. But colonialism in the 1880s also represented a powerful expression of German nationalism and feelings of racial superiority among a significant number of Germans. Even before *Weltpolitik* was a declared ambition, Germany’s place in the world—like its self-perception—was being transformed by peoples, products, and ideas lying far beyond Europe’s borders.

[1 representative document](#) (doc. 6.1.4). This excerpt from Bismarck's memoirs includes the famous reference to his "nightmare of coalitions" ("le cauchemar des coalitions"). These reflections help explain Germany's most important diplomatic agreements in these years.

[1 quirky image](#) (image 6.3.21). Europe's colonial powers used the rhetoric of a "civilizing mission" to legitimate their African claims. In this cartoon, titled "Cultural Progress in the Congo," the satirical journal *Kladderadatsch* mocks Europeans' "civilizing mission" by suggesting that colonial subjects were not capable of being civilised at all. The cartoon both draws on and reproduces the trope of the "pants-wearing Negro"—a colonial subject who aspires to be civilised but, because of fundamental inferiority, can only fall short. The native's inability to understand European fashions was a central feature of this trope.

6.1. Treaties and Alliances

Shortly after the Battle of Königgrätz, the preliminary peace concluded at Nikolsburg on July 26, 1866, effectively ended the centuries-old contest between Prussia and Austria for supremacy in German-speaking Central Europe. Four years later, the Germans' victory over the French was described by Britain's future prime minister Benjamin Disraeli as constituting a revolution in Europe whose consequences would affect every other Great Power. Bismarck did not wish to see Germany involved in another war, though he was not a pacifist either; what he wanted most of all after 1871 was that international relations remain stable.

With the benefit of hindsight, we may be tempted to conclude that Bismarck's track record—his successful wars of unification and his mastery of *Realpolitik*—made him a genius. This ascription also seems warranted when we compare his accomplishments to the zigzag policies pursued by the German Foreign Office after 1890 and when we consider that the unwinnable two-front war Germany faced in 1914 was the single greatest threat that Bismarck managed to avoid during his term of office. It may be true that Bismarck offered the world forty years of peace and was a gifted diplomatic tactician—for example, when he played the honest broker at the Congress of Berlin in 1878. Such hindsight, however, is not 20/20. It ignores the aggressive expansionism and fearsome loss of life that were instrumental to his *Realpolitik* between 1862 and 1871.

At the end of his time in office, too, we can legitimately question Bismarck's genius and his long-term goals. He underestimated the power of nationalism both at home and abroad, which not only undermined the diplomatic and military value of his single steadfast ally, Austria-Hungary, but also fueled restless aggression among a younger generation drawn to Pan-Germanism. Bismarck's own policies contributed to the German public's rapturous reception of the most stirring line in his last major Reichstag speech of February 6, 1888—"We Germans fear God and nothing else in the world!"—and their utter neglect of his peaceful intentions voiced elsewhere in his speech (see [images 6.2.10](#) and [6.2.12](#)). Hence readers should consider both the virtues and the flaws of Bismarck's foreign policy over the *longue durée*.

6.2. The Prussian Officer Corps and Militarism

In the process of forging an empire, the sword of victory was wielded by the Prussian army. The role of the military in Imperial Germany has long been a contentious issue. Exactly what linkage should we draw, for example, between the Prussian victory over Austria in July 1866 and Bismarck's successful whipping through parliament, just two months later, of a bill "indemnifying" him for disregarding the liberal opposition? The heavy symbolism that accompanied the proclamation of the Reich in the palace of Louis XIV in January 1871 was not accidental. At that event, the trappings of military power overwhelmed everything else: when Anton von Werner, commissioned to paint the scene, entered the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles, one Prussian officer exclaimed, "What is that *civilian* doing in here?"

To what degree did the social ethos of the Prussian officer corps infuse German society? This question hangs on the meaning of “social militarism,” which has eluded clear definition.^[18] Kaiser Wilhelm I and his grandson both placed great importance on the social ethos of Prussian officers. By the time Wilhelm II ascended the throne in 1888, it was clear that the ancient Prussian nobility could no longer supply the number of socially privileged and politically reliable recruits needed by a modern army. The young Kaiser made a virtue of necessity. He decreed that a new “nobility of spirit” would ensure the continued respect shown to the officer corps by German society. Historians no longer believe that popular acceptance of the military’s elevated status in society signified the feudalization of the bourgeoisie.

6.3. Colonialism

Fortifying Germany’s continental position and insulating it from potential shocks from the international alliance system remained Bismarck’s priorities—Europe was where his map of Africa lay, as he once put it. Many Germans saw things differently. The early 1880s saw the rise of noisy colonial lobby groups and the reorganization or expansion of some older societies promoting emigration, geographic exploration, or the export trade. The agitation of these societies captured the public mood of Germans who worried about how to reinvigorate the economy, provide a safety valve to (perceived) over-population, and secure raw materials and markets for German industry. A semantic shift signaled this change: whereas Germans who left for overseas destinations were once called emigrants—and blamed as such for “fertilizing” other nations with their talents and virtues—from the 1880s onward they were increasingly referred to as “Germans living abroad” [*Auslandsdeutschen*]. The German people and their national mission could be conceived only in global terms.

Why did Bismarck accept colonial acquisitions even though he had previously refused to consider such action? He may have been trying to use colonial possessions as pawns in his chess game of international diplomacy. He was not averse to stirring up tension with Britain as a means of undermining the influence of Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm and his English wife Victoria, the daughter of Queen Victoria. And at least for a short time he recognized the electoral appeal of colonies. Bismarck’s brief ride on the colonial bandwagon was supported by members of the National Liberal and Free Conservative parties, whose candidates in 1884 recouped some of the seats they had lost to the left liberals in the Reichstag elections of 1881. None of these explanations makes sense, however, unless we discard the idea that Bismarck conjured up the colonial movement to serve his Machiavellian plans. Instead, we should recognize that colonies in the 1880s represented a powerful expression of national sentiment from below. The allure of colonies had its limits. The often brutal treatment of native Africans provided the Social Democrats with plenty of ammunition to denounce Germany’s territorial expansion overseas. But Carl Peters and others were indefatigable in answering such criticism with further claims—as vehement as they were unsupportable—about the economic, national, and cultural benefits of colonies.

Advocates of colonialism also nurtured Germans’ fascination with indigenous peoples, whom they brought to Germany from their own and (more often) from other nations’ colonial possessions. Such fascination spanned a wide spectrum of forms and motivations, from scientific research to puerile voyeurism. In the 1870s, Carl Hagenbeck hit upon the idea of organizing “ethnographic displays” [*Völkerschauen*] of such peoples, in order to make up for lagging attendance at his animal displays. From 1874 to 1890 and beyond, Hagenbeck and others staged a series of displays where they exhibited indigenous peoples in their supposedly natural or primitive state performing everyday tasks that were utterly unfamiliar to German onlookers. Among the most popular were displays of Samoans, Nubians (from present-day Egypt), Sinhalese (from Ceylon, now Sri Lanka), and Inuits from the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador (see image 6.3.39). Such displays were found in other European countries and the USA too, and they continued into the 1930s; yet, before 1890 they were one of the first and most sensational ways that colonies penetrated the consciousness of ordinary Germans.

7. Politics II: Parties and Political Mobilization

What do I need to know? In an age of rapid social and economic change, when the new Empire's political culture was still in flux, the tactic of labelling certain out-groups "enemies of the Reich" seemed to offer Bismarck the opportunity to create an alliance of state-supporting parties in the Prussian Landtag and the national Reichstag. Among such "enemies," Bismarck focused his attacks on German Catholics from 1871 onward, on Social Democrats after 1878, on left liberals in the early 1880s, and on the Poles of eastern Prussia starting in 1885. This strategy was prone to backfire on the chancellor. It created or strengthened the common identity of members of the victimized groups where such solidarities had previously been less apparent.

After unification the party landscape in Germany assumed patterns that persisted up to 1918 and beyond. It was in 1866–67 that both the conservative and liberal movements split. In the early 1870s the Catholic Center Party was consolidated in response to the *Kulturkampf*, and in 1875 the Marxist and Lassallean wings of Social Democracy forged a fragile unity on the basis of the Gotha Program. The 1880s also saw the older left-liberal and newer antisemitic parties split, reunite, or otherwise reconstitute themselves. Overall, the German party system was characterized by five main groupings: Conservatives, National Liberals, Left Liberals, the Catholic Center Party, and Social Democrats.

None of these groups came close to commanding a majority in the Reichstag, and even if they had they would not have become a "ruling" party (or party coalition) because the Kaiser appointed his own ministers and state secretaries and because laws passed by the Reichstag had to be approved by the Federal Council. The importance of the Reichstag nonetheless grew: its members debated and voted on essential legislation, and it became a sounding board of public opinion. Turnout for Reichstag elections also rose dramatically. In the Reichstag elections of 1874, only about 61 percent of Germans who were eligible to vote—adult males only—actually turned out at the polls. By the Reichstag elections of 1887, the turnout rate had risen to almost 78 percent—a level unmatched until 1907. One reason for this increase in voter commitment was the effort made by Reichstag deputies to ensure the secrecy of the act of voting.

Bismarck was consistent and sincere when he argued that he served at the pleasure of his king. His closest and longest relationship was with Wilhelm I, whom he served from 1862 to 1888. During the short reign of Kaiser Friedrich III in the spring of 1888, relations between Bismarck and the royal palace were strained and dishonest. Then the headstrong Kaiser Wilhelm II, aged just twenty-nine, ascended the throne in June 1888. By the end of the "Year of Three Kaisers," storm clouds had already appeared on the horizon, eventually leading to Wilhelm's dismissal of Bismarck in March 1890.

1 representative document (doc. 7.4.46). In this account, the novelist and liberal politician Gustav Freytag describes campaigning for the Reichstag election of February 1867. The campaign was fought under the novel influence of universal manhood suffrage, but it retained elements of the older, elitist style of politics dominated by local notables. Freytag is uncomfortable with having to appear "popular" and woo his electors, but his account has an ironic, humorous touch. "This universal suffrage," he writes, "is the most frivolous of all experiments ever dared by Count Bismarck."

1 quirky image (image 7.2.27). This is one of the more unusual artefacts from the history of the German labor movement and the Social Democratic Party. It is a pipe made of wood, leather, and paper. It shows a worker with a copy of the SPD's main newspaper in Braunschweig in his pocket: he is assuming a particularly disrespectful posture above a copy of the Anti-Socialist Law. The barrel of petroleum suggests the possibility of arson or some other violent act.

7.1. “Enemies of the Reich” I: Catholics

The *Kulturkampf* was Bismarck’s boldest and most ill-conceived gamble. It was heralded by a gradual escalation in tensions between state authorities and the Catholic hierarchy in the second half of the 1860s in Baden, Prussia, and other German states. Shortly after unification Bismarck and Culture Minister Adalbert Falk inaugurated a series of legislative initiatives—see the Chronology in this volume—designed to undermine the Catholic Church’s autonomy in Germany. These sought to reduce the Catholic Church’s financial independence, lessen its influence in the schools, and banish the Jesuit Order from German lands. Left liberals and National Liberals enthusiastically supported this initiative. Some of them agonized over the discrepancy between liberalism’s commitment to civil liberties and the obvious fact that Bismarck was targeting a specific group for repression. Most, however, hoped that the struggle against the Catholic Church would achieve three aims: reduce the influence of groups on the Empire’s borderlands (Prussian Poland, Bavaria, the Rhineland, and Alsace-Lorraine) who might be tempted to ally with their fellow Catholics in France or Austria; drive back the forces of “obscurantism” that had allegedly remained ascendant in the Catholic Church since medieval times; and ensure that the liberal parties remained indispensable to Bismarck, thus allowing the expansion of constitutional and economic liberties in the future.

The May Laws of 1873 constituted the centerpiece of *Kulturkampf* legislation. Tensions between Bismarck and the pope worsened over the next two years. By the end of the decade, however, Bismarck had recognized that counter-efforts by Catholic clergy and their congregations had largely frustrated his plans. The insufficiency of state institutions to combat roughly one-third of the Empire’s population had been strikingly revealed. By 1878 the chancellor had many reasons to welcome back into the government fold the principal political representative of Catholic interests, the German Center Party [*Zentrum*], which drew on a wide variety of ecclesiastical and lay organizations. The Center Party commanded a large caucus of Reichstag deputies representing Catholic constituencies. In such regions it was often a foregone conclusion that the Center candidate would emerge victorious on election day, not only due to the clustering of Catholics in specific regions of Germany but also because deep-seated social antagonisms divided Protestants and Catholics and contributed to the latter’s feelings of discrimination. Between 1878 and the mid-1880s, the *Kulturkampf* was slowly wound down. Bismarck, however, never publicly admitted defeat, and confessional peace remained fragile in the Wilhelmine era.

7.2. “Enemies of the Reich” II: Socialists

Bismarck gradually escalated repressive measures against the allegedly “revolutionary” threat of Social Democracy during the 1870s. Two assassination attempts on Kaiser Wilhelm I led to passage of the Anti-Socialist Law in October 1878. The campaign to outlaw Social Democratic activities was even more popular among bourgeois Germans than the *Kulturkampf*, and its failure proved to be another blow to the authority of the Bismarckian state. The two campaigns shared many features. They both raised hopes among middle-class liberals that a campaign against “enemies of the Empire” would consolidate the strength and inner unity of the new nation state, either by reasserting the authority of the state over followers of the pope or by defending private property and the established social order against the forces of revolution. Both led to liberal self-recrimination and second thoughts about the wisdom of designating any single political movement as “beyond the pale.” Both demonstrated that the police, the courts, and state administrators lacked the means to combat a political ideology representing such a large portion of the population. And both contributed directly to strong feelings of solidarity among the targeted group, increasing their electoral success and parliamentary influence.

Few German workers had even heard of Karl Marx in the early 1870s or knew anything about his theories of class struggle and revolution. Of those who did, many still followed the teachings of another (already deceased) socialist leader, Ferdinand Lassalle. During the period when the Anti-Socialist Law was in effect (1878–90), Social Democrats developed a comprehensive network of underground agents,

couriers, propagandists, and election workers. Due in part to the practical work of August Bebel, Wilhelm Liebknecht, and other Social Democratic leaders in the Reichstag, more and more workers came to believe that tight party organization, an autonomous network of cultural associations, political protest, and vigorous election campaigning were the best way to combat a state that had labelled them outlaws. As a result, the membership of the Social Democratic Party rose, as did the number of deputies in its parliamentary caucuses. Whereas only about 350,000 ballots had been cast for Social Democratic candidates in the Reichstag elections of 1874, the party won 1,400,000 votes in February 1890—almost 20 percent of the popular vote, more than any other party. This stunning victory contributed to Kaiser Wilhelm II's decision to dispense with Bismarck a month later and it anticipated the party's even more dramatic growth in the 1890s.

7.3. Party Programs and Organizations

Historians disagree about whether the main political parties represented stable socio-moral “milieus,” as postulated by M. Rainer Lepsius, but mainly they are skeptical.^[19] Milieu theory fails to accommodate the dynamic nature and opportunities for shifting alliances within Imperial Germany's political system. Yet, the durability of the main party groupings and their original party platforms suggests that the genesis of modern mass politics is best located in the Bismarckian, not the Wilhelmine, era. These parties' programs and election manifestos illustrate the interdependence of social, economic, and political issues in their respective ideologies. They also reveal opportunities for coalition-building between parties as well as the obstacles to cooperation that have led some historians to speak of the “pillarization” of the party-political system. Satirical cartoons and carefully posed photographs of party leaders in the foyer of the Reichstag suggest that the main parties shared more common values than historians sometimes suppose. Even so, party alliances seemed arbitrary at one moment and dependent on Bismarck's favor at another.

7.4. “Politics in a New Key”

Whether the principle of secret balloting was respected or undermined during the Bismarckian era depended very much on where a voter lived, who his employer was, and whether the government took a direct interest in the outcome of a particular local campaign. Little wonder that artists of the day depicted the unresolved questions that afflicted “philistine” voters in this era (see [image 7.4.49](#)). The antisemites of the late 1870s and 1880s understood the average voter's gullibility. Yet, all parties were forced to reckon with the masses, whether or not they wanted to. As one Conservative put it, universal manhood suffrage had grown “too hot under their feet” to allow them to rely any longer on the quieter, more patrician political culture of a bygone age.

As evidence that ordinary voters were becoming well-educated about what was at stake at election time, electoral maps became more popular: with bright inks and remarkable detail they transformed dry-as-dust statistics into comprehensible images. Election maps helped voters, politicians, and statesmen locate each party's bastions of support. It is less clear whether regional political cultures were losing their distinctiveness as national trends were widely reported in the press: mass politics and the impossibility of forming “the government” enhanced the parties' tendency to protect their own turf—defined geographically as well as by class or confession.

7.5. Bismarck's Legacy

A scholarly wag once remarked that a book titled *The Unification of Germany by Kaiser Wilhelm I* ^[20] should have been titled “... despite Wilhelm I.” The latter was famously unhappy in January 1871 about taking the new title of German Emperor, which he thought tarnished the dynastic luster of his hereditary status as King of Prussia. Until his death in 1888, Wilhelm I allowed Bismarck to take the lead in all important matters of state. But even before Bismarck fell from power two years later, contemporaries

were debating the historical significance and consequences of his long term of office.

On March 29, 1890, Bismarck's train left Berlin to deliver him into retirement on his estate in Friedrichsruh (near Hamburg). That leave-taking provided Germans with an opportunity to look back over twenty-five years of unprecedented change and achievement in the economic, social, and cultural realms. The German Empire had been forged through military victory, monarchism, and Prussianism. But as John Maynard Keynes observed in 1919, it had also been forged through "coal and iron." It developed into an economic power of the first order, able to dominate industrial markets on a global scale. It boasted schools, scientific laboratories, and electoral freedoms that were the envy of Europe and the world. And the principle of federalism, so powerful in earlier epochs, had not been sacrificed even as the empire's central political institutions grew in number and importance. Even protection for the rights of Jews seemed secure, or more secure than in other parts of Europe.

Nevertheless, in the process of forging and fortifying their empire, Germans had deepened existing cleavages of wealth and rank, attacked the rights of minority groups, driven a wedge between the working classes and the rest of society, compromised the prerogatives of parliament, and followed the lead of an increasingly out-of-touch statesman. Some historians still believe that such actions and attitudes would later play an important role, placing hurdles in the path of parliamentarization, democratization, and the tolerance of diversity, thereby contributing to the possibility of a German fascism. This interpretation of structural barriers to modernization—or, more precisely, modernization in liberal, democratic directions—has been downplayed in most history books published in the past thirty years. However, history should remain open to multiple readings and critical reflection. The interplay between older and newer interpretations is something to cherish. As Dieter Langewiesche once noted, "How the German Kaiserreich should be assessed has always been contentious. ... We should take seriously this polymorphism of older views of the Kaiserreich and not straighten out what has grown in crooked fashion. Or at least not too much."^[21]

Epilogue

After 1890, it was not a chancellor but rather an emperor who put his personal stamp on the age. The pace of change during the Wilhelmine era (1890–1918) was more torrid than in Bismarck's day. This was true in every sphere of life: the social, the economic, the cultural, and the political. As the economy improved from the mid-1890s onward and real wages rose, the population continued to grow rapidly and urbanization accelerated. Class divisions and class conflict permeated social relations, despite the proliferation of reform movements (including, most notably, socialist and bourgeois feminist movements). Expressionism and other forms of modernism provided unheard-of ferment in the arts, though German culture followed European trends. In domestic politics, the rise of economic lobby groups and nationalist pressure groups helped ensure the further penetration of politics down to the base of German society. On the eve of the First World War, the five basic party groupings from the Bismarckian era remained in place. Politicians and parliamentarians retreated into their party silos, broad coalitions were chimerical, and popular pressure in the streets or party maneuvering in parliament were insufficient to overturn Prussia's undemocratic three-class suffrage: it remained the most potent symbol of authoritarianism and resistance to change. It is too simple to say that all avenues to constitutional reform had been blocked. Even Conservatives were beginning to see that democracy could not be resisted by purely negative means. But no way forward was clear.

It was in the realm of foreign policy that the dynamism and unpredictability of Wilhelmine Germany contrasts most starkly with Bismarck's preference for stability. Kaiser Wilhelm II's impulsiveness, fed by his "personal regime," destabilized German policy at every turn, as did *Weltpolitik* and battleship building. Wilhelm II's saber-rattling was intended to assert and enlarge Germany's place among Europe's Great Powers. It had the opposite effect. The result was descent into war in 1914 and revolution in 1918, which brought the history of Imperial Germany to a close after less than fifty years. However, the Empire

did not collapse because it lacked a statesman of Bismarck's caliber: arguments to that effect are part of the "Bismarck myth" and are unsupportable. The Germany of 1914 was socially and politically distant from the nation-state that Bismarck and his National Liberal allies had forged in 1871, and international relations were subject to pressures and practices unknown in Bismarck's day.

James Retallack

NOTES

[1] The following account draws on Alexander Demandt, "Bismarcks Tod im Atlantik 1862. Zehn Alternativen zur deutschen Geschichte," in *Otto von Bismarck und das „lange 19. Jahrhundert. Lebendige Vergangenheit im Spiegel der „Friedrichsruher Beiträge“ 1996–2016*, ed. Ulrich Lappenküper (Paderborn, 2017), p. 1119, and Jonathan Steinberg, *Bismarck: A Life* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 175–76.

[2] Discussions of Germany's "special path" have become stale, but the place of the nineteenth century in modern German history still draws historians' attention. See David Blackbourn, Geoff Eley, Suzanne Marchand, and Helmut Walser Smith, "Forum: The Long Nineteenth Century," *German History* 26, no. 1 (2008), pp. 72–91; Karen Hagemann and Simone Lässig, eds., "Discussion Forum: The Vanishing Nineteenth Century in European History?," *Central European History* 51 (2018), pp. 611–95.

[3] Max Weber, *Parlament und Regierung im neugeordneten Deutschland* (1918), in *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe*, eds. Horst Baier et al., Abt. I, vol. 15, *Zur Politik im Weltkrieg*, ed. Wolfgang J. Mommsen (Tübingen, 1984), p. 449 (original emphasis). [Original German: "Aber dadurch erzieht man eine Nation nicht zu eigenem politischen Denken. ... Was war infolgedessen ... Bismarcks politische Erbe? Er hinterließ eine Nation ohne alle und jede politische Erziehung, tief unter dem Niveau, welches sie in dieser Hinsicht zwanzig Jahre vorher bereits erreicht hatte."]

[4] For a short introduction see Abigail Green, "How did German Federalism Shape Unification?" in *Germany's Two Unifications. Anticipations, Experiences, Responses*, ed. Ronald Speirs and John Breuilly (Basingstoke, 2005), pp. 122–38.

[5] Imperial Germany's modernity is (over-) emphasized in Frank-Lothar Kroll, *Geburt der Moderne. Politik, Gesellschaft und Kultur vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Berlin, 2013).

[6] See *inter alia* Peter Brandt, "War das Deutsche Kaiserreich reformierbar? Parteien, politisches System und Gesellschaftsordnung vor 1914," in *Geschichte als Möglichkeit. Festschrift für Helga Grebing*, ed. Karsten Rudolph and Christl Wickert (Essen, 1995), pp. 190–210.

[7] Including Steinberg, *Bismarck* (2011), and Christoph Nonn, *Bismarck. Ein Preuße und sein Jahrhundert* (Munich, 2015); see also Karina Urbach, "Between Saviour and Villain: 100 Years of Bismarck Biographies," *Historical Journal* 41 (1998), pp. 1141–60.

[8] See Mark Hewitson, "The Kaiserreich in Question: Constitutional Crisis in Germany before the First World War," *Journal of Modern History* 73 (2001), pp. 725–80; Mark Hewitson, "The Wilhelmine Regime and the Problem of Reform: German Debates about Modern Nation-States," in *Wilhelminism and Its Legacies: German Modernities, Imperialism, and the Meanings of Reform, 1890–1930*, eds. Geoff Eley and James Retallack (Oxford, 2003), pp. 73–90.

[9] Andreas Biefang, *Die andere Seite der Macht. Reichstag und Öffentlichkeit im "System Bismarck" 1871–1890* (Düsseldorf, 2009), p.15. [Original German: "Indem die Parlamentarier sich ein öffentliches Image zuzulegen gezwungen waren, öffnete sich zugleich die Schere zwischen dem öffentlich Sagbaren und dem tatsächlich Machtbaren, ein Phänomen, das als ‚mediale Doppelstruktur‘ demokratischer Politik bis in die Gegenwart fortwirkt."]

[10] See Otto von Helldorff-Bedra to Philipp zu Eulenburg, December 11, 1892, and other letters in *Philipp Eulenburgs Politische Korrespondenz*, ed. John C. G. Röhl, 3 vols. (Boppard am Rhein, 1976–83), vol. 2, *Im Brennpunkt der Regierungskrise 1892–1895* (1979), pp. 988–98, here 990.

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- [11] David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford, 1984), p. 22.
- [12] In a territory of 541,000 square kilometers or 209,000 square miles, German population density increased from 76 to 120 persons per sq. km. between 1871 and 1910. (Figures have been rounded.)
- [13] For our purposes here, “countryside” is defined as areas where people lived in communities of fewer than 2,000 inhabitants, whereas “big cities” had more than 50,000 inhabitants.
- [14] Annual industrial growth averaged about 4.5 percent between 1866 and 1872, but then declined to about 3 percent per annum during the “great recession” of 1873–1896.
- [15] See Jonathan Sperber, “*Bürger, Bürgertum, Bürgerlichkeit, Bürgerliche Gesellschaft*: Studies of the German (Upper) Middle Class and its Sociocultural World,” *Journal of Modern History* 69 (1997), pp. 271–97.
- [16] See Jean-Michel Johnston, “The Telegraphic Revolution: Speed, Space and Time in the Nineteenth Century,” *German History*, volume 38, issue 1 (March 2020), pp. 47–76.
- [17] Usury is the practice of lending money at unreasonably high rates of interest. The “blood libel myth” involves false accusations that Jews kidnap and murder the children of Christians in order to use their blood for religious rituals during Passover and other Jewish holidays. For a microhistory of how these antisemitic accusations evolved since the Middle Ages and tore apart one West Prussian community in 1900, see Helmut Walser Smith, *The Butcher’s Tale: Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town* (New York, 2002).
- [18] See Benjamin Ziemann, “Militarism,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Imperial Germany*, ed. Matthew Jefferies (Farnham, 2015), pp. 367–82; Roger Chickering, “Militarism and radical nationalism,” in *Imperial Germany 1871–1918. The Short Oxford History of Germany*, ed. James Retallack (Oxford, 2008), pp. 196–218.
- [19] M. Rainer Lepsius, “Parteiensystem und Sozialstruktur. Zum Problem der Demokratisierung der deutschen Gesellschaft,” in M. Rainer Lepsius, *Demokratie in Deutschland. Soziologisch-historische Konstellationsanalysen. Ausgewählte Aufsätze* (Göttingen, 1993), pp. 25–50 (orig. 1966).
- [20] Heinrich von Sybel, *Die Begründung des Deutschen Reiches durch Wilhelm I. vornehmlich nach den preußischen Staatsacten*. 7 Bde., München 1889–1894.
- [21] Dieter Langewiesche, “Der Historische Ort des deutschen Kaiserreichs,” in *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich 1890–1914*, ed. Bernd Heidenreich and Sönke Neitzel (Paderborn, 2011), p. 23. [German original: “Wie das deutsche Kaiserreich einzuschätzen ist, war immer umstritten. ... Diese Vielgestaltigkeit älterer Kaiserreichbilder sollten wir ernst nehmen und nicht begradigen, was krumm gewachsen ist. Oder doch nicht zu sehr.”]

Recommended Citation: James Retallack: Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany (1866-1890). Introduction, published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:introduction-4>> [July 10, 2025].