Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War (1890–1918)

Introduction

Wilhelmine Germany offers a perplexing study in contradictions. The beginning of this era is usually dated to the dismissal of Otto von Bismarck in 1890, when the new Kaiser, Wilhelm II, determined to play a more direct role in steering Germany. The beginning of the end came with the catastrophe of the First World War in 1914 and Wilhelmine Germany ultimately ended with the abdication of the Kaiser after the loss of the war in 1918. Historical interpretations of this period still often remain entangled in strident debates over Germany's responsibility for the outbreak of the war itself—with, ultimately, the postwar rise of Nazism in view. Yet intense historical debates about continuity and rupture, about tradition and modernity, persist even in spheres far from international politics, driven by incongruities and outright contradictions seen in Wilhelmine society.

Overview: Wilhelmine Germany, 1890-1918

On the one hand, Wilhelmine Germany was a regressive monarchy, with out-of-touch aristocrats controlling an archaic political system. On the other hand, Wilhelmine Germany was a modern industrial powerhouse, with a rapidly expanding economy, a thriving middle class, universal male suffrage (rare in Europe at the time), a sophisticated legal system, and the most advanced social welfare system in the world.

Wilhelmine Germany continued to have a rigid social structure, and lines between social classes only hardened over the three decades before the war. And yet those social classes themselves were dynamic. The middle class became more variegated as new professions emerged, and as groups and institutions within the middle class asserted political independence in myriad ways. The working class became especially (and visibly) assertive: powerful trade unions emerged to protect workers' interests, and the German Social Democratic Party became not only the largest political party in the nation, but the largest working-class movement anywhere in the world.

Radical nationalists, grouped into quasi-official associations like the Navy League, demanded a confrontational *Weltpolitik* (“global politics”) in the form of battleship-building, colonial expansion, and aggressive geopolitical posturing. And yet, at the same time, growing international trade, rising intellectual curiosity, outflows and inflows of migration, and cultural affinities of all sorts increasingly connected everyday Germans to other peoples and cultures across Europe, the Americas, and more distant parts of the globe.

The army remained a core social structure, and militarism remained near the heart of Wilhelmine culture. And yet all sorts of reform movements flourished. New roles for women opened up in professional life, in art and literature, and in political activism. Consumer cooperatives and health-food stores emerged alongside movements for environmental preservation, naturalism, and even nudism.

Germany's colonial empire was greeted by some with unbridled enthusiasm and jingoism, even after military campaigns in the colonies turned genocidal. And yet other Germans vigorously and publicly protested the brutality of Germany's colonial policies, with some radically insisting upon the basic equality of all human beings.

The Wilhelmine era saw the pernicious persistence of antisemitism in politics and organizational life. And yet a variegated and multifaceted culture flourished in German lands, including a vibrant avantgarde that offered new and startlingly modern ideas in painting, dance, architecture and literature. Jewish Germans were often at the forefront of such artistic and cultural innovation.

Despite these divergent and even contradictory paths, there remains one clear and consistent historical trajectory of the Wilhelmine era: its growing global interconnectedness. While the rhetoric of *Weltpolitik* could be used to invoke the growing might of the Imperial German Navy, it also could be used to point more gently to the extraordinary growth in German exports, whether toys shipped to the United States, woolens to England, or chemical dyes to France or China. Contact between Germans and other nations and peoples was expanding. Even Germans who neither traveled abroad nor had any economic or familial connections outside of their hometown still became engaged with “the wider world” through local newspapers that increasingly reported on global events, or through magazines and books on global geography and ethnography, or even through exotic visions that circulated in art or advertising. Wilhelmine Germany's new global interconnectedness carried ordinary Germans into a world that was far larger than the world of their grandparents. Of course, all of these growing global connections could turn into a flashpoint for tension and conflict. Ultimately, some flashpoints turned into crises, which led Germany and the world into war.

The following volume of sources addresses the second half of the *Kaiserreich*, when the pace of industrial development, social ferment, and cultural change became almost frenzied. The new German emperor, Wilhelm II, who gave his name to the era, seemed in many respects to symbolize the impulsive energies of Germany's development, as well as its contradictions. But the new global interconnectedness of the German empire in the Wilhelmine era far overshadowed the personality, ambitions, and limitations of any one man.

Recommended Citation: David Ciarlo: Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War (1890–1918). Introduction, published in: German History in Documents and Images, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/wilhelmine-germany-and-the-first-world-war-1890-1918/ghdi:introduction-5> [November 12, 2026].