

wider than ever before. Indeed, historians today are more likely to disagree on conceptual and methodological issues than on the character of the Empire itself. While historiographical diversity is to be welcomed, if historians cannot agree on the correct questions to ask they will be in no position to complain when others – journalists, film-makers, or Internet activists – take on that role instead. In this sense at least, Wehler's concern seems justified.

Finally, it has been suggested that the post-1990 historiography is noticeably more positive about the Empire than that of the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>146</sup> Although there is an element of truth in this assertion, it is also misleading. With the exception of the area of foreign policy – where there has undoubtedly been some attempt to revive “pre-Fischer” positions – the 1990s produced no significant study of the Empire which genuinely merits the label “apologist.” What is undoubtedly the case, however, is that the “reunification” of 1990 has made the *Kaiserreich* seem less like a historical aberration and more like a precursor to today's Germany. For some this is a cause for concern; for others a source of pride, yet it is nevertheless striking how all recent historians have sought to provide a balanced picture of this fascinating era, in which one can find examples of light and shadow in remarkably equal measure.

146 See S. Berger, *The Search for Normality*, p. 112.

## 2

### Great Men? Otto von Bismarck and Kaiser Wilhelm II

In 1983 Richard Evans boldly asserted that “the biographical approach in its present form has reached the limits of its usefulness.”<sup>1</sup> Since then, however, historical biography appears to have undergone a spectacular renaissance, with works on modern German history, such as Ian Kershaw's *Hitler* or Ulrich Herbert's *Best*,<sup>2</sup> leading the way. Popular with the reading public, biographies are frequently to be found at the top of both the history sales charts and the critics' picks of the year, while television producers seem more than ever in thrall to Ralph Waldo Emerson's dictum that “there is properly no history, only biography.” The two principal figures in the history of the German Empire, Otto von Bismarck and Kaiser Wilhelm II, have both been the focus of increased scholarly attention in recent years, while many of the era's leading politicians, generals, and industrialists have found their biographers too. With this in mind, it might appear as if Evans's confident prognosis was spectacularly wrong, once again proving that historians should stick to the past rather than attempting to predict the future. In fact, his reference to biography “in its present form” was a significant caveat, because Kershaw and Herbert can be said to have created a genuinely new kind of biography, approaching their respective subjects with the skeptical eye of the structuralist historian, and instinctively looking “to downplay

1 R. J. Evans, “From Hitler to Bismarck,” in *Rethinking German History*, p. 89.

2 I. Kershaw, *Hitler*, 2 vols. (London, 1998–2000); U. Herbert, *Best. Biographische Studien über Radikalismus, Weltanschauung und Vernunft 1903–1989* (Bonn, 1996).

rather than to exaggerate" the part played by the individual in complex historical processes.<sup>3</sup> Of course, biographers have always attempted to provide historical context, but Kershaw and Herbert do more than this, integrating the story of a single life into a structural history of German society more successfully than many would have thought possible. Since such works remain the exception rather than the rule, however, they do not necessarily invalidate the general thrust of Evans's argument. In other words, just because Kershaw's *Hitler* might provide fresh insights into the nature of National Socialism, one cannot assume that each new biography of Bismarck will have a similar effect for the German Empire. Evans's skepticism, therefore, about "the adequacy of an approach which is based on the assumption that a nation's fate is determined by a single individual, or even a small group of individuals," remains valid, whatever television or Hollywood might think.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly, the sort of history that personalizes complex developments, or reduces causality to the actions and intentions of a small ensemble of historical actors is viewed with suspicion by most of today's historians. Few would now agree with the Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) that "history, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here."<sup>5</sup> Not only is "the whole notion of historical greatness . . . in the last resort futile,"<sup>6</sup> but an excessive concentration on individual intentions inevitably obscures the complex web of pre-conditions underpinning all historical actions. As Karl Marx recognized some 150 years ago, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past."<sup>7</sup> Even so, the "great man" school of history has undoubtedly left its mark on the study of the German Empire, and its legacies are hard to avoid. Carlyle (himself a well-known Germanophile and biographer of Frederick the Great) had many admirers on the Continent, but historians like Treitschke, Lenz, or Marcks scarcely needed any encouragement to focus on "heroes, hero-worship, and the heroic in history." Indeed, it was the centrality of biography to the German historian tradition which made it so suspect to historians of the "new orthodoxy," for whom few charges were more damning than that of "personalism."

3 I. Kershaw, *Hitler*, vol. 1, 1889–1936 *Hubris*, p. xii.

4 R. J. Evans, "From Hitler to Bismarck," pp. 55–6.

5 T. Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-worship and the Heroic in History* (London, 1872).

6 I. Kershaw, *Hitler*, vol. 1, p. xiv.

7 K. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Moscow, 1977), p. 10.

One only has to read a few pages of one of the pre-1945 hagiographies of Bismarck – which, as David Blackbourn observes, performed much the same function as Bismarck towers and monuments<sup>8</sup> – to understand why historical biography is still regarded as an inherently conservative or apologist genre by many in the German historical guild today. Although the very earliest literature on the *Reichsgründer* (founder of the Empire) was dominated by critical essays from political opponents,<sup>9</sup> the first biographies – in Germany at least – were written by dedicated disciples. Both Lenz and Marcks contributed biographical studies that fell into this category,<sup>10</sup> but the apogee of Bismarck panegyric was probably Arnold Oskar Meyer's ultra-nationalist *Bismarck. The Man and the Statesman*,<sup>11</sup> which was completed in the summer of 1943 and was described by its author as "my contribution to national service during the war."<sup>12</sup> Meyer (1872–1944), did not live to see his book in print, but in an epilogue Wilhelm Schüssler suggested that his work would survive as a "monument to the way in which a German, an austere northerner, a Lutheran, a hot-blooded patriot and a researcher passed judgment."<sup>13</sup> Thankfully it did not, despite a West German reprint in 1949.

For historians wary of the "great man" tradition, the founding of the German Empire undoubtedly presents real problems. Back in 1978 the American Gordon Craig (1913–2005) opened his major study of *Germany 1866–1945* with a question: "Is it a mistake to begin with Bismarck?"<sup>14</sup> Eighteen years later Wilfried Loth (born 1948) had no such concerns: "Every history of the Empire must begin with Bismarck," he wrote.<sup>15</sup> Thomas Nipperdey was even more emphatic. Volume 2 of his *German History 1866–1918* opens with a Biblical fanfare: "In the Beginning there was Bismarck."<sup>16</sup> Conscious of the reaction this line was likely to provoke,

8 D. Blackbourn, "Bismarck: the sorcerer's apprentice," in *Populists and Patricians*, p. 33.

9 Such as the liberal politician Ludwig Bamberger's *Monsieur de Bismarck* (Paris, 1868).

10 M. Lenz, *Geschichte Bismarcks* (Leipzig, 1902); E. Marcks, *Bismarck* (Stuttgart and Berlin, 1909). The latter, which stops in 1848, was intended to be volume 1 of the authorized Bismarck biography but Marcks was unable to finish the job. His *Otto von Bismarck. Ein Lebensbild* (Stuttgart and Berlin, 1915) is a succinct treatment of Bismarck's career as a whole.

11 A. O. Meyer, *Bismarck. Der Mensch und der Staatsmann* (Stuttgart, 1949, first published 1944).

12 Quoted in A. J. P. Taylor, *Bismarck. The Man and the Statesman* (Harmondsworth, 1995, first published 1955), p. 272.

13 Quoted in H. Hallmann, ed., *Revision des Bismarckbildes. Die Diskussion der deutschen Fachhistoriker 1945–55* (Darmstadt, 1972), p. XVI.

14 G. Craig, *Germany 1866–1945* (Oxford, 1978), p. 1.

15 W. Loth, *Das Kaiserreich. Obrigkeitsstaat und politische Mobilisierung*, p. 23.

16 T. Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1866–1918*, vol. 2, *Machtstaat vor der Demokratie*, p. 11.

Nipperdey went to unusual lengths to justify his choice of words.<sup>17</sup> The *Reichsgründung*, he argued, “had many causes, and stands in a mesh of structural conditions and anonymous processes ... but it cannot be disputed: Bismarck determined this founding of the German Reich; it was he who recognized, and also steered, the currents of the age which bore him on. Without him, everything would have been different.”<sup>18</sup> For all the unfashionability of the “great man” approach, each of the major studies of the German Empire to be published since 1990 can be said to accept Bismarck’s central role in the narrative. The index to Volker Ullrich’s popular synthesis *The Nervous Great Power* is indicative: “Bismarck, Otto Fürst von, 20 ff., 24, 26–40, 45–123,” and so on.<sup>19</sup> Even the arch-structuralist Wehler gives Bismarck pride of place in his most recent account of the Empire, referring to him as “the most successful professional politician in nineteenth-century Europe,” “a political power *sui generis*,” and “one of the great masters of the German language in the nineteenth century.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, as one reviewer observed, Bismarck “hovers like a giant” over Wehler’s 1,500 pages, with a more central role than in the equivalent volume of Nipperdey’s history.<sup>21</sup>

Wehler, it should be stressed, never resorts to the kind of emotive language employed by Klaus Hildebrand (born 1941), whose description of Bismarck’s achievement recalls star-struck eulogies to the “blacksmith of German unity” from a century ago: “Finally it was Bismarck, who in a specific situation let the glowing fire burst into flames, and presented the Germans with the longed-for warmth of a nation-state, without starting a destructive conflagration and without harming them through direct exposure to the heat of the necessary battles.”<sup>22</sup> The East German Marxist Ernst Engelberg, although more balanced in his overall judgment of Bismarck’s career, was no less fulsome when praising his intellectual gifts: “No one had more courage than him when it came to rethinking or thinking anew ... no one came close to the precision of his powers of observation and creative imagination.”<sup>23</sup> Bismarck’s latest British biographers are also convinced of his pivotal role in the decade of unification.

17 Not only did this phrase suggest an unmistakably “personalist” approach, it also repeated a stylistic device Nipperdey had used before: his *Deutsche Geschichte 1800–1866. Bürgerwelt und starker Staat* (Munich, 1983) starts: “In the Beginning there was Napoleon.”

18 T. Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1866–1918*, vol. 2, p. 11.

19 V. Ullrich, *Die nervöse Großmacht 1871–1918*, p. 706.

20 H.-U. Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, vol. 3, pp. 264, 334, and 266 respectively.

21 J. Breuilly, “Auf dem Weg zur deutschen Gesellschaft? Der dritte Band von Wehlers ‘Gesellschaftsgeschichte.’” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 24 (1998), p. 154.

22 K. Hildebrand, *Das vergangene Reich*, p. 853.

23 E. Engelberg, *Bismarck. Urpreuße und Reichsgründer* (Berlin, 1985), p. 451.

Edgar Feuchtwanger speaks of his “almost superhuman dexterity” and “dazzling virtuosity” in converting former opponents into devoted followers, while Katharine Lerman (born 1954) suggests “it is impossible to argue that things would have turned out much the same if Bismarck had not been at the helm or that his personality did not make a significant difference.”<sup>24</sup> Despite all this, however, the degree to which an individual can really be considered the “founder” of an Empire remains a moot point, and it provides an appropriate starting point for our consideration of the *Kaiserreich*’s recent historiography. The chapter will also examine two other important aspects of the Bismarckian era before switching its attention to the man perceived as the Iron Chancellor’s antipode, Kaiser Wilhelm II.

### To What Extent Was Bismarck the “Founder” of the German Empire?

Nipperdey notwithstanding, the history of the first German nation-state does not begin with Bismarck, and its eventual establishment was not an achievement of the Prussian minister-president alone. As Geoff Eley rightly stresses:

[t]he creation of a united Germany was placed on the political agenda by organized radical and liberal agitation between the 1830s and 1860s. The process of proposing the category of the German nation and of organizing public life into a new political community of citizens owed little to the initiative of the Prussian government. In fact, the real work of constituting the German nation had to be conducted in *opposition* to the existing sovereign authorities by civil initiative and voluntary association.<sup>25</sup>

When Bismarck was appointed minister-president of Prussia in 1862, at a time of liberal revival and constitutional crisis, he undoubtedly responded to the challenge in an innovative way, effectively placing himself at the head of what he referred to as “the revolutionary party” (becoming, in A. J. P. Taylor’s memorable phrase “half country-squire, half-revolutionary”).<sup>26</sup> Yet although the man dubbed the “white revolutionary” is sometimes

24 E. Feuchtwanger, *Imperial Germany 1850–1918*, p. 34; E. Feuchtwanger, *Bismarck* (London and New York, 2002), p. 258; K. A. Lerman, *Bismarck* (London, 2004), p. x.

25 G. Eley, “Bismarckian Germany,” in G. Martel, ed., *Modern Germany Reconsidered*, pp. 19–20.

26 A. J. P. Taylor, *Bismarck. The Man and the Statesman*, n. 176.

compared to the sorcerer's apprentice, who conjured up spirits he could not control, Bismarck's agenda had more prosaic origins than the spirit world.<sup>27</sup> It was Germany's much-maligned liberals who provided Bismarck with most of his cues, not least by correctly locating their own failure in 1848 in an excess of idealism (*Idealpolitik*) and a lack of power-political realism (*Realpolitik*). Indeed, the concept of *Realpolitik* itself, which came to be seen as the very essence of cynical Bismarckian politics, was in fact a term coined by a disenchanted liberal journalist, August Ludwig von Rochau in 1853.<sup>28</sup> One could, therefore, argue, as Michael Stürmer does, that Bismarck only succeeded because he "produced the policies that liberal Germany desired."<sup>29</sup> Certainly, "liberal Germany" made a distinctive contribution to the founding of the German Empire, and the once common argument that 1866–7 represented some kind of betrayal of liberal principles – the selling out of freedom for the sake of national unity – is seldom seen nowadays. As Michael Hughes makes clear, "to the majority of German Liberals the second was an essential precondition of the first."<sup>30</sup>

No one would dispute that as Prussian minister-president in the 1860s Bismarck had a crucial influence on the course of events, but there are important ways in which the historian can challenge or qualify the "great man" mythology. For a start, Bismarck himself was acutely aware of the limits to which men – great or otherwise – can shape history. One of his favorite Latin proverbs was "one cannot make a wave, only ride it,"<sup>31</sup> and many of his most famous quotes point to the insignificance or powerlessness of the individual: "clinging to history's coat tails," "steering the tides of time," "riding the forces of history," and so on. Second, one must remember the highly vulnerable nature of Bismarck's position: as a servant of the crown, he could have been removed from office at any moment. He had no party or institutional powerbase to back him up, and (despite the impression conveyed by Wehler's *The German Empire*) even at the height of his powers he was never a dictator with complete freedom of action. That he survived in power for so long was a testament

27 The description of Bismarck as a "white revolutionary" was originally used by the liberal politician Ludwig Bamberger in 1868, before the US diplomat and politician Henry Kissinger adopted it as the title of a 1968 essay. It is nowadays particularly associated with the historian Lothar Gall, who made it the central theme of his acclaimed biography (first published in Germany in 1980): *Bismarck. The White Revolutionary*, 2 vols. (London, 1986).

28 A. L. von Rochau, *Grundsätze der Realpolitik, angewendet auf die staatlichen Zustände Deutschlands* (1853). Ironically von Rochau was one of Bismarck's most vocal critics at the time.

29 Quoted by G. Eley, "Bismarckian Germany," p. 20.

30 M. Hughes, *Nationalism and Society. Germany 1800–1945* (London, 1988), p. 132.

31 E. Feuchtwanger, *Bismarck*, p. 4.

to his political skill, his careful planning for different contingencies, but above all his luck. A man with the temperament of a gambler, Bismarck made the most of his decade-long winning streak. Indeed, it could be said that he lived off it for the rest of his life.

Third, the degree to which he was able to create the external crises and opportunities faced by Prussia in the decade before the *Reichsgründung* should not be exaggerated. Few now believe he possessed any kind of timetable or master-plan for unification. This view was advanced by much of the pre-1945 literature, but it was never based on firm evidence, relying heavily on prophetic remarks Bismarck was supposed to have made in 1862 to Disraeli, the British Leader of the Opposition, at a dinner-party in London.<sup>32</sup> Even if the "master-plan" thesis is dismissed, there is still a tendency within the historiography to portray Bismarck as a sovereign master of events, dictating both their tempo and direction. Ultimately this is no more convincing than the willfully contrary view of A. J. P. Taylor (1906–90) who saw him purely as an opportunist, making policy on a day-to-day basis. In reality, Bismarck's statesmanship is perhaps best characterized by what Otto Pflanze termed the "strategy of alternatives":<sup>33</sup> the keeping open of a variety of courses, which Gall suggests "became his tactical byword and one he employed with ever-increasing skill."<sup>34</sup> Wily strategist though he was, however, he did not possess demonic powers and could not dictate the actions of other states. To take one obvious example, for all his cynicism and trickery, he could not force France to declare war on Prussia in 1870.<sup>35</sup>

Fourth, it should not be forgotten that the "Little German" Empire of 1871 was only one of several potential outcomes considered by Bismarck in the 1860s. Contrary to the view put forward in his predictably self-justifying memoirs and accepted uncritically by his first biographers, Bismarck did not follow a consistent path towards this single goal.<sup>36</sup>

32 Bismarck allegedly suggested that once in charge he would reform the army, find a pretext for war with Austria, destroy the German Confederation and unite Germany under Prussian leadership. However since the story only turned up many years later, in the memoirs of a Saxon diplomat, it must be regarded with skepticism, especially as there are no corroborating accounts.

33 See O. Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany*, vol. 1, *The Period of Unification, 1815–1871* (Princeton, 1963).

34 L. Gall, *Bismarck. The White Revolutionary*, vol. 1, p. 208.

35 For the latest research on this episode see D. Wetzel, *A Duel of Giants. Bismarck, Napoleon III, and the Origins of the Franco-Prussian War* (Madison, 2001); and J. Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870–1871* (Cambridge, 2003).

36 Originally published as O. von Bismarck, *Erinnerungen und Gedanken* (1898), then republished in an edition by Horst Kohl as *Otto von Bismarck. Gedanken und Erinnerungen*, 2 vols. (Stuttgart, 1898), Bismarck's memoirs became one of the greatest publishing successes of the

Michael Hughes (1942–93) took this argument further than most: “It was never Bismarck’s wish or intention to unify Germany in the way he did in 1871,” he contended, “[h]e was pushed into it by forces beyond his control inside and outside Germany.”<sup>37</sup> Before 1866 Bismarck appears to have given serious thought to a peaceful division of the German states into separate Prussian and Austrian spheres of influence, probably along the line of the River Main (even if such a “dualist” solution is unlikely to have satisfied him for very long). Similarly, after 1866, he did not consider a union between the North German Confederation and the southern German states as either imminent or necessarily desirable. Certainly, there was no inevitability about the extension of German unity south of the Main, a step he famously referred to in 1869 as “a fruit not ripe for plucking.”<sup>38</sup>

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, one must also acknowledge that things could have turned out very differently. Bismarck’s fame and reputation were built on the back of Prussia’s military victories against Denmark (1864), Austria and the south German states (1866), and France (1870–1).<sup>39</sup> Clear-cut though these triumphs might appear in retrospect, they were precarious undertakings which could easily have cost Bismarck his job, if not his life. “However straightforward Bismarck’s unification policy might have appeared to later nationalist historians,” Wehler observes, “at [the Battle of] Königgrätz it stood on a knife’s edge.”<sup>40</sup> Prussia’s eventual victory over the forces of Austria and Saxony was only secured because of developments for which Bismarck was not responsible and did not fully understand: the expansion of the railway network; new weapons technology; higher levels of literacy; and improved telegraphic communications. The long-term shift in Prussia’s favor brought about by these changes “did not make Prussian victory inevitable,” John Breuilly (born 1946) points out, “it merely made it probable whereas just five years earlier it would have been improbable.”<sup>41</sup>

nineteenth century, selling over 300,000 copies in the first few days of December 1898 alone. The first English edition followed shortly afterwards: *Bismarck, the Man and the Statesman, Being the Reflections and Reminiscences of Otto Prince von Bismarck*, 2 vols. (London, 1899).

37 M. Hughes, *Nationalism and Society*, p. 102.

38 In a letter to Werther, 26 February 1869, quoted in K. A. Lerman, *Bismarck*, p. 144 and elsewhere.

39 It was only in hindsight, of course, that these collectively became known as the “Wars of German Unification.” See W. Carr, *The Origins of the Wars of German Unification* (London, 1991).

40 H.-U. Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, vol. 3, p. 295.

41 J. Breuilly, *The Formation of the First German Nation-State, 1800–1871* (Basingstoke, 1996), p. 82.

Historians wary of the problematic nature of Bismarck-based narratives can adopt a number of alternative explanatory strategies. One is to emphasize the economic dimension to the *Reichsgründung*: to argue that Germany was united less by “blood and iron” than by “coal and iron” in John Maynard Keynes’ famous phrase, or that “nationalism is generated among a people by the growing awareness of its economic backwardness and by the desire for a modern economy,” as Robert Berdahl argued.<sup>42</sup> Since Prussia (or at least some of it) was at the forefront of German economic development, this approach is generally no less Prussia-centric than Bismarck-based accounts. From the middle of the century onwards there was undoubtedly growing pressure from entrepreneurs, chambers of commerce, and organizations like the Congress of German Economists for more integration between the German states. “Up to 1848 German nationalism had been mainly an ideological force,” Feuchtwanger notes, “it now paired with the economic self-interest of Germany’s most dynamic class to demand a greater unity.”<sup>43</sup> In general, however, Feuchtwanger plays down the importance of economics in the story of German unification. Those who take it more seriously usually owe allegiance to the Marxist tradition – Marx saw political unification as an inexorable consequence of the dynamics of capitalist expansion<sup>44</sup> – or belong to the German school of historical social science. The most important work in the latter category was Helmut Böhme’s *Germany’s Path to Great Power Status* (1966), which focused on the economic dimension of the struggle for supremacy between Austria and Prussia, and greatly downplayed Bismarck’s role. Indeed, Böhme argued explicitly that the founding of the German Empire “can no longer be written as part of Otto von Bismarck’s biography.”<sup>45</sup>

In Böhme’s view, Austria’s military defeat at Königgrätz was ultimately less significant than its renewed failure a year earlier to join the German *Zollverein*; the key institution in economic narratives of German unification. This Prussian-dominated customs union, founded in 1834, abolished internal tariff barriers between member states and established trade treaties with external territories (including Austria). It was built up in stages, but by the early 1850s its borders already foreshadowed those of the later German Empire.<sup>46</sup> It increased inter-dependence among

42 R. Berdahl, “New thoughts on German nationalism,” *American Historical Review*, 77 (1972), p. 72.

43 E. Feuchtwanger, *Imperial Germany 1850–1918*, p. 6.

44 A. Dorpalen, *German History in Marxist Perspective*, pp. 218–19.

45 H. Böhme, ed., *Die Reichsgründung* (Munich, 1967), p. 8.

46 The founder members were Prussia, Bavaria, Saxony, and Württemberg, together with a number of smaller states. Baden and Nassau joined in 1835, followed by Frankfurt (1836),

its members, and was used by Prussia to exert political pressure on the smaller German states, but its members fought on opposite sides in 1866 and the extent to which it made some kind of political unification more likely is still disputed by historians.<sup>47</sup> Although there are those who consider it a vital step towards a German nation-state, others dismiss its contribution as minimal, citing Ernst Renan's famous quip "a custom's union is not a fatherland."<sup>48</sup> Most take a middle position, often drawing a parallel with the contemporary European integration process to show that the path from economic union to political union is neither straight nor smooth. Heinrich August Winkler, for instance, suggests "in the area of trade policy the German Customs Union anticipated the Little German solution, without making it inevitable,"<sup>49</sup> and Hans-Peter Ullmann agrees: "The most one can say is that economic processes fostered the founding of the Empire, and made other possible solutions to the national question, such as the Greater Germany with Austria, less probable."<sup>50</sup>

Another of the principal ways in which historians can subvert the "great man" narrative is to emphasize the role of the national movement in German unification. The nineteenth century is, of course, often characterized as the "age of nationalism," and by the 1860s it was sufficiently strong in the German states "to make the pursuit of any overtly anti-national policy difficult, if not impossible."<sup>51</sup> There was not, however, anything resembling a nationalist mass movement. It remained a predominantly Protestant, urban, male and middle-class cause, and its principal organization, the National Association (1859) never had more than 25,000 members.<sup>52</sup> Beyond this there were a host of ostensibly non-political organizations which formed a broader popular basis for the national movement – gymnastics clubs, choral societies, riflemen's clubs,

---

Brunswick (1841), Hanover (1851), Oldenburg (1852), Schleswig-Holstein (1866), Mecklenburg and Lübeck (1868), Alsace-Lorraine (1871). The hanseatic ports of Hamburg and Bremen did not join until 1888.

47 For a succinct discussion of the historiography of the *Zollverein* see H. Kiesewetter, "Economic preconditions for Germany's nation-building in the nineteenth century," in H. Schulze, ed., *Nation-Building in Central Europe* (Leamington Spa, 1987), pp. 81–105.

48 See R. Dumke, "Der deutsche Zollverein als Modell ökonomischer Integration," in H. Berding, ed., *Wirtschaftliche und politische Integration in Europa im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 1984), pp. 72–101.

49 H. A. Winkler, *Der lange Weg nach Westen*, vol. 1, p. 215.

50 H.-P. Ullmann, *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich 1871–1918*, p. 15.

51 J. Breuilly, *Austria, Prussia and Germany, 1806–1871* (Harlow, 2002), p. 8.

52 In fact, the National Association did not aspire to be a mass movement and charged a high membership subscription which restricted working-class membership. See S. Na'aman, *Der deutsche Nationalverein. Die politische Konstituierung des deutschen Bürgertums 1859–1867* (Düsseldorf, 1987).

and the like – and national feelings were also expressed at cultural festivals and anniversary celebrations, such as those commemorating the "national poet" Friedrich Schiller in 1859.<sup>53</sup> Yet much of this sentiment was vague and, just as it had been in the revolutions of 1848–9, remained divided between supporters of the Little German and Greater German solutions. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that most of today's historians play down the role of nationalism in the founding of the Empire. They argue that it was more a consequence than a cause of unification, pointing to the development of both an official nationalism from above, and more aggressive forms of grassroots nationalism from below, as products of the imperial era itself.<sup>54</sup>

However, to see the *Reichsgründung* solely as a feat of Prussian arms would be to overlook two important "national" aspects of the 1871 settlement. While it is correct to argue that the "creation of the Second Reich is first of all a political phenomenon ... not the consequence of inescapable geographical or economic facts,"<sup>55</sup> it is also the case that Bismarck's "revolution from above" was only possible because of the cultural, economic, and political formation of the nation in the years before 1871. Of course, Bismarck was no nationalist,<sup>56</sup> and his primary aim was to extend Prussian power, but his decisions "were informed by a sense of the importance of nationality in modern German politics."<sup>57</sup> Second, and more specifically, it is important to recognize the extent to which the *Reichsgründung* was dependent on Bismarck's informal alliance with Little German national liberalism, facilitated by the famous Indemnity Bill of September 1866. This tactical agreement with his former enemies has been described as an act of "political genius" and Bismarck's "real political feat."<sup>58</sup> Nowhere was the liberal contribution to unification more apparent than in the raft of legislation enacted in the North German Confederation between 1867 and 1870. As Eley puts it, "Germany was re-made during the 1860s and 1870s, both territorially-constitutionally and socially-culturally, and it was re-made along the lines German liberals had broadly envisaged."<sup>59</sup> Certainly, the introduction of more than 80

---

53 See D. Düding, "The nineteenth-century German nationalist movement as a movement of societies," in H. Schulze, ed., *Nation-Building in Central Europe*, pp. 19–49.

54 See M. Hughes, *Nationalism and Society*, p. 101. Hughes argues that "nationalism played a marginal role" in the process of founding the Reich.

55 E. Feuchtwanger, *Imperial Germany 1850–1918*, p. xvi.

56 For a discussion of this issue see O. Pflanze, "Bismarck and German nationalism," *American Historical Review*, (1955), pp. 548–66. After 1871, and particularly after 1890, Bismarck tried to style himself as a German nationalist, but his efforts were hardly convincing.

57 J. Breuilly, *The Formation of the First German Nation-State*, p. 113.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 83; H.-U. Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, vol. 3, p. 282.

59 G. Eley, "Bismarckian Germany," p. 26.

new laws had a genuinely liberalizing and mobilizing effect, ushering a period of rapid modernization in northern Germany which did not go unnoticed in the south. Without this compromise with national liberalism, which was particularly important in generating popular enthusiasm in the build-up to war with France, Bismarck's prospects would have been bleak. An act of "naked Prussian self-interest would only have experienced a short-lived triumph," Wehler suggests.<sup>60</sup> It also meant that after 1871 Bismarck "was as much the prisoner of the liberals as they were the followers he manipulated."<sup>61</sup> The establishment of the first German nation-state thus had "two faces" (Dieter Langewiesche), even if it is invariably just a single mustachioed countenance which stares out from the cover of books on the Empire.

A further way in which historians seek to qualify and contextualize the "great man" narrative is to internationalize the events of 1866–71. The so-called "German question" has always been an international issue, or to put it another way, the "balance of power in Germany has historically been an integral part of the balance of power in Europe."<sup>62</sup> This was apparent in 1815, 1848, 1945, and again in 1989–90. Things were no different in 1866–71, when it could be argued that the founding of the Empire only became possible because of a unique window of opportunity in European affairs. It would probably not have happened without a fortunate combination of factors: the unification of Italy, which acted as a model for many liberal nationalists in the German states; the new balance of power created by Russia's defeat in the Crimean War, which led to a temporary turning-away from Europe and a break with its former ally Austria; Britain's preoccupation with domestic and imperial issues, which meant it regarded change in Central Europe with "sympathetic disinterest"; and finally, France's increasingly desperate search for foreign policy successes under its weakening Emperor Napoleon III. One recent historian to place great emphasis on this international context is Volker Ullrich:

Generations of historians have attributed the completion of German unity to the towering political genius of Bismarck. In fact, it was decisively facilitated by an unusual international set of circumstances: that "trough in the waves of great-power politics" (Ludwig Dehio) following the Crimean War of 1854–6, which largely removed great-power pressure from Central Europe.<sup>63</sup>

60 H.-U. Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, vol. 3, p. 282.

61 E. Feuchtwanger, *Imperial Germany 1850–1918*, p. xviii.

62 J. Breuilly, *The Formation of the First German Nation-State*, p. 106. See also W. E. Mosse, *The European Powers and the German Question, 1848–1871* (Cambridge, 1958).

63 V. Ullrich, *Die nervöse Großmacht*, p. 26.

So where does this leave Bismarck's contribution to the founding of the German Empire? One of his most respected biographers, the American Otto Pflanze, has no doubts: "Bismarck did succeed in 'making history.' His own career shows that he was overly pessimistic about the impact of individual personality upon the historical process."<sup>64</sup> Of course, having devoted half a lifetime to writing a three-volume biography of the great man, Pflanze was unlikely to conclude otherwise, but historians more skeptical of the role of individuals in history still acknowledge Bismarck's ability to "utilize decisively the favorable conditions of the moment" (Immanuel Geiss).<sup>65</sup> Wehler, for instance, argues that "he came much more fully to terms with the industrial revolution than has been realised by those historians who would like to brand him as an old-fashioned cabinet politician,"<sup>66</sup> and Breuilly highlights another characteristic feature of nineteenth-century Europe which Bismarck seemed instinctively to understand: that "[u]nder modern political conditions there are powerful pressures pushing states towards some kind of identification with their subjects. This is linked to the greater participation of people in affairs of government; with the transformation of subjects into citizens."<sup>67</sup> Bismarck saw, in other words, that in an age of territoriality and nation-state formation, only Prussia could be the basis of a "single sovereign and territorial state in which German nationality dominated."<sup>68</sup>

This is not to argue that the Little German solution was the only show in town. It remains a common failing of many widely-read accounts of German history that insufficient attention is paid to other potential outcomes.<sup>69</sup> Even if one discounts as implausible the kind of 1848-style liberal unification from below championed by Erich Eyck in his critical Bismarck biography of the 1940s,<sup>70</sup> one can still identify four possible alternatives to the "greater Prussia" which emerged from the events of 1866–71: a reformed German Confederation; a dualist division of the German states into separate Austrian and Prussian spheres of influence; a so-called *Trias* solution, with the southern German states forming a third bloc between the two major powers (as advocated by the Saxon statesman Friedrich Ferdinand von Beust); or some kind of decentralized Central

64 O. Pflanze, "Bismarck's Realpolitik," in J. J. Sheehan, ed., *Imperial Germany*, p. 172.

65 Quoted in S. Berger, *The Search for Normality*, p. 116.

66 H.-U. Wehler, "Bismarck's imperialism, 1862–1890," in J. J. Sheehan, ed., *Imperial Germany*, p. 190.

67 J. Breuilly, *The Formation of the First German Nation-State*, p. 106.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 103.

69 One work to stress the openness of the German question is J. J. Sheehan's *German History 1770–1866* (Oxford, 1989).

70 E. Eyck, *Bismarck and the German Empire* (London, 1950).

European federation incorporating the non-German Habsburg territories as well. As we have seen, Borussian historians and their Neo-Rankean successors considered the Prussian route to be pre-ordained by history, and most subsequent historians have tended to agree. As Breuille observes, it remains much easier to criticize the Borussian view than to replace it.<sup>71</sup> The leading German historian of the 1950s and 1960s, Gerhard Ritter, dismissed as "wishful thinking" the arguments of those who claimed that Prussian and Austria could have stayed as they were, or formed a loose Central European federation. Such thinking, articulated by Bismarck's contemporary antagonist Constantin Frantz (1817–91),<sup>72</sup> and subsequently by Catholic historians such as the liberal Franz Schnabel and the conservative Heinrich von Srbik (1878–1951),<sup>73</sup> "assumes that there would have been some kind of possibility for the Germans to remain artificially detached from the great movement of nationalism in the nineteenth century," Ritter contended.<sup>74</sup> In his view the die had already been cast in the first half of the century, long before Bismarck took up the reins. Nevertheless, the arguments of Schnabel and von Srbik enjoyed something of a renaissance after 1945. With the creation of separate West and East German states, Bismarck's Empire began to appear as an exceptional interlude in an otherwise long history of division; and in the light of two murderous world wars the modest virtues of the Holy Roman Empire or the German Confederation seemed worthy of rediscovery. As Stefan Berger puts it: "[t]he delegitimation of the Bismarckian nation-state went hand-in-hand with the search for alternatives. Some historians began to argue that the Holy Roman Empire or the German Federation had been more appropriate than a unified nation-state which was almost certain to upset the balance of power in Europe over and over again."<sup>75</sup>

With Germany once again reunited, the most recent German-language studies of the Empire's foundation have largely lost sight of such concerns. The events of 1989–90 seemed to confirm the validity of the Little German solution; to show that even after 40 years of division, most Germans still considered a single nation-state their natural home. Thus while criticisms may be leveled at the means of achieving the *Reichsgründung* ("blood and

71 J. Breuille, *The Formation of the First German Nation-State*, p. 6.

72 Frantz put forward the idea in his *Untersuchungen über das Europäische Gleichgewicht* (1859) of a voluntary central European union – consisting of the German states, Holland, Sweden, and Denmark, and guaranteed by British support – as a way of reining in the political ambitions of France and Russia.

73 See H. von Srbik, "Die Bismarck-Kontroverse," in H. Hallmann, ed., *Revision des Bismarckbildes*, p. 201.

74 G. Ritter, "Geschichte als Bildungsmacht" (1946), in *ibid.*, p. 8.

75 S. Berger, *The Search for Normality*, p. 61.

iron") or at the shortcomings of the imperial constitution, the historical validity of the Little German solution – the rise of Prussia and the fall of Austria – is often taken for granted. In fact it has been largely left to English-language historians to remind readers that this was not necessarily the case; and to point out that from an Austrian (or, indeed, Bavarian Catholic) perspective, the so-called "unification" of 1871 appeared more like a partition or division.<sup>76</sup>

### Was There a "Second Founding of the Empire" in the Late 1870s?

For the best part of a decade those liberals who had chosen to co-operate with Bismarck had little reason to rue their decision. From the establishment of the North German Confederation in 1867 to the end of the so-called "Delbrück era" in 1876, they were directly involved in shaping Germany's new political arrangements. Liberal majorities in the imperial Reichstag, often comprising left liberal Progressives as well as National Liberals and Free Conservatives, passed a series of classical state-building measures (including new commercial and criminal legal codes, a high court, a unified currency, and a central bank) and extended earlier reforms introduced in the North German Confederation to the south German states. Much of this was co-ordinated by Rudolf Delbrück, the head of the Reich Chancellor's office, who was effectively Bismarck's deputy in the early years of the Empire. Although the liberals' still had a major goal to achieve – the introduction of full parliamentary government with ministerial responsibility – the new political structures (see Chapter 3) seemed to provide a workable basis for future reform. From their perspective, it was a case of the glass being half-full rather than half-empty. In the second half of the 1870s, however, the outlook for liberalism was to grow darker, as the Empire underwent what George Windell described as "a constitutional crisis more fateful if less dramatic than the famous Prussian constitutional conflict of the 1860s."<sup>77</sup> Indeed some historians argue that this crisis led to a fundamental re-founding of the Reich in a more conservative guise. They believe, in other words, that the "external" foundation of the Empire at Versailles in 1871 was followed by a second "internal" foundation less than a decade later.

76 See M. Hughes, *Nationalism and Society*, ch. 5.

77 G. Windell, "The Bismarckian Empire as a Federal State, 1866–1880," *Central European History*, 2 (1969), p. 302.



Historians had long been aware of the significant set of changes that occurred in the late 1870s. The Grand Duke of Baden had recognized an imminent "change of system" (*Systemwechsel*) as early as April 1878, and contemporary opponents of Bismarck were soon using the phrase "internal founding of the Empire." It featured too in the work of Weimar revisionists like Ziekursch and Kehr. Yet it was only really in the 1960s that this "conservative turn" came to be regarded as a caesura every bit as significant as 1871. Two historians, Hans Rosenberg and Helmut Böhme, were particularly important in advancing this view, which became a cornerstone of the "new orthodoxy" and of the *Sonderweg* thesis. The importance Böhme attached to it is evident in the following quote: "With the year 1879 Prusso-Germany's 'own' way, in contrast to both western democracy and Russian autocracy, was finally secured; as was the position of the Prussian aristocracy in the army, higher bureaucracy and diplomatic corps. Only now was the Prussian hegemony in Germany established conclusively, and only now were the contours of the 'Reich' clearly defined."<sup>78</sup> It was at this juncture, Böhme argued, that the fateful alliance (*Sammlung*) between agrarian Junkers and heavy industrialists was forged, which was to prove such an obstacle to future political reform. Consequently, Winkler chose it as one of the *Turning Points in German History*, emphasizing in particular the moral and political fall of German liberalism, and Wolfgang Mommsen termed it "the great domestic political watershed."<sup>79</sup> As with other aspects of the "new orthodoxy," however, the notion of a second *Reichsgründung* came under intense scrutiny in the last decades of the twentieth century. The major studies of the 1990s are thus more cautious in their judgments, even though some still see it as an important juncture in modern German history. Before we consider the arguments on both sides, however, it will be necessary to outline briefly the principal changes that were implemented in the late 1870s and, first, the context in which they occurred.

In one of his typically pithy sentences, A. J. P. Taylor remarked that "[a]ll revolutionaries become conservative once they are in power, and Bismarck had always longed for tranquility even when he was a revolutionary."<sup>80</sup> Yet having established the Empire, the role of consolidator did not come as easily to Bismarck, whose multiplicity of offices and pivotal role

78 H. Böhme, *Deutschlands Weg zur Großmacht*, p. 420.

79 H. A. Winkler, "1866 und 1878: Der Machtverzicht des Bürgertums," in C. Stern and H. A. Winkler, eds., *Wendepunkte deutscher Geschichte, 1848-1975* (Frankfurt, 1979), pp. 37-60; W. J. Mommsen, "The German Empire as a system of skirted decisions," in *Imperial Germany 1867-1918*, p. 16.

80 A. J. P. Taylor, *Bismarck. The Man and the Statesman*, p. 194.

meant there was never much prospect of tranquility. Not only did he have to work within the double bind of separate Prussian and imperial constitutions, controlling two separate though connected executives, but he needed to do so while simultaneously retaining the faith of the Prussian monarchy, obtaining parliamentary majorities, and respecting federal sensitivities. He was, as Lerman observes, in serious danger of becoming "a prisoner of the institutional system he had devised."<sup>81</sup> It was perhaps not entirely surprising, therefore, that Bismarck's first years as Imperial Chancellor were marked by bouts of poor health, self-pity, and depression, together with prolonged absences from Berlin. When, in May 1875, he offered to stand down, it was probably not just a tactical move, even if the resignation letter became one of his standard methods of crisis management in years thereafter.

The Reichstag arithmetic of the early 1870s meant Bismarck was forced to govern with liberal majorities, but he was soon on the lookout for ways of reducing what he saw as a dangerous dependence; partly for ideological reasons, but more importantly to increase his own room for maneuver. In a classic 1958 essay Pflanze argued that in the early years of the Empire, Bismarck had been more worried about keeping the particularist tendencies of the individual states in check, than by vaulting liberal ambitions. By the late 1870s this had changed. There no longer seemed any danger of the Reich disintegrating, since the 25 member states had accepted the new political arrangements with remarkably little dissent, but the 1874 Reichstag election results suggested a growing threat from left liberal Progressives. The army budget, which had caused the Prussian constitutional crisis of the early 1860s, had resurfaced as a bone of contention between crown and parliament. Indeed, liberal demands for constitutional reform more generally, particularly from parliamentarians like Eduard Lasker, were beginning to test the Chancellor's patience. It now suited Bismarck, Pflanze suggested, to attempt to redress the balance of power at the cost of liberals in the Reichstag.<sup>82</sup> The first victim was the faithful Delbrück, who had run the Reich administration during the Chancellor's frequent absences from Berlin, and in so doing had become a potential rival. The fact that he had a close working relationship with liberal leaders merely sealed his fate, although he did manage to resign before he was sacked. Delbrück's departure in 1876 did not, however, remove Bismarck's concerns about his personal job security. The eventual succession of Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm, who with his English wife Vicky was regarded as more liberal in outlook than Kaiser Wilhelm I, loomed

81 K. A. Lerman, *Bismarck*, p. 160.

82 O. Pflanze, "Bismarck's Realpolitik," pp. 155-79.

large in Bismarck's calculations. Fear of a future Westminster-style "Gladstone ministry," and a new era of liberal reform, was one of the main factors which lay behind the conservative turn of the late 1870s.

Another was Bismarck's recognition that the *Kulturkampf* – the divisive struggle between the Prussian state and the Roman Catholic Church, which had been unleashed with liberal support in the early 1870s – had proved counter-productive. Bismarck had originally seen the *Kulturkampf* as a convenient way of appeasing the liberals without giving in to their demands for constitutional reform. It had also reflected Bismarck's personal prejudices, as well as his paranoid fear that the Empire might be undermined from within by Poles, Alsations, or Bavarians. Yet far from weakening the cohesion of Catholic Germany, the *Kulturkampf* strengthened it, and gave it a formidable political voice in the form of the Center Party, which commanded nearly a quarter of all Reichstag seats. Although in the short term Center leaders like Ludwig Windthorst – one of the Chancellor's most vocal parliamentary critics – were unlikely to become allies, Bismarck recognized that the Reichstag votes of the Center could become a useful potential alternative to those of the liberals.

Two other factors behind the shift to the right in the late 1870s were financial in character. Since 1873 the German Empire, like most of Europe, had been suffering from the effects of an economic downturn. Although with the benefit of hindsight it is clear that contemporaries were wrong to think of it as a "Great Depression," the problems were sufficient in the eyes of many Germans to discredit the principles of economic liberalism, along with its most prominent representatives. Falling wages and rising social tensions manifest in the growth of both socialism and anti-Semitism, led to increasingly vocal calls for protectionist measures from the leaders of heavy industry and subsequently from agricultural producers too. Newly-founded pressure groups began to develop innovative forms of agitation, which quickly made their mark on ministers and officials. At the same time, the Reich government was facing a particular financial problem of its own. It was supposed to be funded from the income of the *Zollverein*, from customs duties and indirect taxes. While it had a constitutional right to levy direct taxes, Bismarck preferred direct taxation to remain the prerogative of the individual states, which each paid an annual contribution (*Matrikularbeitrag*) towards the costs of running what was initially a very small imperial administration. By the end of the 1870s, however, it had become apparent that these means were insufficient to cover the rapidly growing expenditure of the Reich government, whose annual deficits were rising with each passing year. It did not escape Bismarck's attention that the introduction of protective tariffs on a range of goods would have the double benefit of

shielding some domestic producers – although not, of course, consumers – while at the same time bringing in much needed revenue to the imperial coffers.

It was in this context that, during the course of 1878–9, the fateful cluster of measures dubbed the "second founding of the Empire" was introduced. The first, in October 1878, was a repressive Anti-Socialist Law, banning all "social democratic, socialist, or communist" activity short of standing for election. It was passed at the second time of asking in the wake of two assassination attempts on Kaiser Wilhelm I (for which Social Democrats were blameless). The law not only identified a new "enemy within," but also damaged the liberal movement, which was split over whether or not to accept what was clearly an illiberal measure. Indeed, some historians see the liberals rather than the socialists as the law's true target. Second, following Bismarck's "Christmas Letter" to the Bundesrat in December 1878 in which he acknowledged the benefits of protectionism, free trade was replaced by tariffs on grain and iron in July 1879. The tariffs themselves were set at a comparatively low level, which has led some commentators to suggest their motivation was more political than fiscal, but they could and would be increased in later years (1885, 1887, 1902), and their symbolic impact belied their modest scale. The liberal era, for which free trade was such a powerful emblem, appeared to have passed and the beneficiaries of protectionism would henceforth fight tooth and nail to retain their privileges. Third, following the death of Pope Pius IX in February 1878, tentative signs of an end to the *Kulturkampf* became apparent. Bismarck quickly entered direct negotiations with his successor Pope Leo XIII, whose conciliatory approach contrasted with the still hostile stance of the Center party. Although it would be the mid-1880s before any anti-Catholic legislation was removed from the statute books, a slow thaw in Bismarck's relations with political Catholicism could begin. In July 1879 the Prussian Minister for Education and Ecclesiastical Affairs, Adalbert Falk – a hero for many liberals because of his prominent role in the attack on Catholicism – was replaced by the conservative Robert von Puttkamer. It was Puttkamer who, as Minister of the Interior from 1881, allegedly oversaw a "purge" of liberal sympathizers in the higher civil service, which henceforth became an even greater bastion of aristocratic privilege. Finally, to ensure the safe passage of his bills through the Reichstag – newly composed following a snap election in the summer of 1878 – Bismarck increasingly found his majorities not in the liberal constellation of the early 1870s but from an alignment consisting of Conservatives, Free Conservatives and a much weakened National Liberal Party, which was shorn of its right wing in 1879, and then its left wing in 1880.

It is striking to observe how far the debate about the "second founding of the Reich" has remained focused on the figure of Bismarck and his intentions. For all the "new orthodoxy's" criticisms of personalist and historicist approaches, the practitioners of historical social science were not able to replace the "great man" altogether. In fact, as Eley notes, "the turn to economic and social history has done very little to dislodge Bismarck from his role as the directive genius of German history between 1862 and 1890."<sup>83</sup> Of course, where Bismarck was formerly cast as the hero of German history, in the 1960s and 1970s he became the villain. The hagiographic Bismarck myth of the Wilhelmine era was replaced by what Andreas Biefang refers to as "the negative Bismarck myth":<sup>84</sup> the "Daemon of the Germans,"<sup>85</sup> whose formidable abilities were used to trick the liberals, manipulate the masses and set German history on course for the tragedies of the twentieth century. Indeed, by placing particular emphasis on Bismarck's "Germanization" and anti-Polish re-settlement policies in the eastern marches, together with his occasional anti-Jewish remarks, Wehler's *The German Empire* consciously constructed links between Bismarck and a later German chancellor. It is in accounts of the alleged re-founding of the Reich that this negative Bismarck myth can be seen most clearly. The unholy alliance put together by the Chancellor in 1878–9 – "a coalition of Junker landowners, industrial barons, the now purified conservative bureaucracy and the military" – is blamed for forestalling "the democratic aspirations of Germans for at least a generation."<sup>86</sup>

It is an argument that certainly has its merits, not least in what Kenneth Barkin refers to as its "enormous explanatory power": its ability to account for the vulnerability not only of the Empire but also of the Weimar Republic; and to illuminate lines of continuity with the Third Reich as well.<sup>87</sup> Few would dispute that the position of German liberalism, and the National Liberals in particular, was severely weakened after the events of the late 1870s. Regardless of whether the primary purpose of the tariff legislation was fiscal or political, the Empire's embrace of protectionist policies did have an enduring long-term impact. And, although the extent should not be exaggerated, the cumulative effect of the changes

83 G. Eley, "Bismarckian Germany," p. 6.

84 A. Biefang, "Der Reichsgründer?" *Bismarck, die nationale Verfassungsbewegung und die Entstehung des Deutschen Kaiserreichs* (Friedrichsruh, 1999), p. 6.

85 The title of a recent book by Johannes Willms, *Bismarck. Dämon der Deutschen. Anmerkungen zu einer Legende* (Munich, 1997).

86 K. Barkin, "1878–1879. The second founding of the Reich," *German Studies Review*, 10 (1987), p. 221.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 224.

was to shift the balance of German politics rightwards. This was certainly the perception of contemporary observers. Nevertheless, most recent accounts are skeptical about the notion of a second founding of the Empire. This is largely because detailed research into each of the crucial episodes in 1878–9 suggests that Bismarck was not operating to a plan, or at least not to a master-plan for the re-founding of the Empire. As with the first *Reichsgründung*, the decisions of the late 1870s gain their coherence only retrospectively. At the time, the Chancellor was as much reacting to events as shaping them, and probably had only two consistent aims: to strengthen his own position above the parties; and to find a stable Reichstag majority somewhat further to the right (ideally with the National Liberals, but without their troublesome left wing). Beyond this, as Lerman notes, "it was not always obvious even to Bismarck himself where he was heading."<sup>88</sup> The liberal Lasker observed in his memoirs that Bismarck in 1877–8 seemed like a man waiting for something to turn up; something "that would enable him, by stirring up popular passions, to recover the initiative."<sup>89</sup> In his view, it was only the attempts on the life of the Kaiser in May and June 1878 which gave Bismarck a purpose and spurred him into action.

Of recent accounts, Winkler alone continues to uphold the notion of a conservative re-founding of the Empire without reservation.<sup>90</sup> At the other end of the spectrum are those who dismiss the second *Reichsgründung* almost out of hand, such as the late Andreas Hillgruber: "the two decades from 1871 to 1890 form a single continuous epoch," he argued.<sup>91</sup> Wehler, whose earlier works helped popularize the Böhme thesis, has distanced himself from what he now refers to as an "over-emphasized judgment."<sup>92</sup> He has also conceded ground to his critics on the issue of *Sammlungspolitik*, acknowledging that "due to insuperable internal conflicts" the relationship between industrialists and agrarians should not be thought of as "monolithic": "rather it remained a tense alliance, at times disturbed by serious antagonisms." In characteristically acerbic fashion, however, Wehler remarks that for all the clashes and conflicts within the "alliance of iron and rye," it was not simply "an artificial construct of the imagination of misguided historians."<sup>93</sup> Lothar Gall (born 1936) agrees that the shift from a reformist to a reactionary policy was a significant one.

88 K. A. Lerman, *Bismarck*, p. 162.

89 Quoted in E. Feuchtwanger, *Imperial Germany*, p. 75.

90 H. A. Winkler, *Der lange Weg nach Westen*, vol. 1, p. 245.

91 A. Hillgruber, *Otto von Bismarck: Gründer der europäischen Großmacht Deutsches Reich* (Göttingen, 1978), p. 72.

92 H.-U. Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, vol. 3, p. 934.

93 *Ibid.*, p. 935.

Henceforth Bismarck was no longer the “white revolutionary,” but a Metternich-style conservative, battling vainly against the tides of time. Unlike Wehler, however, Gall emphasizes the weakness of the new arrangements, which led not to order and stability but to chaos and a general loss of direction.<sup>94</sup> Others see 1878–9 as a significant caesura for a completely different reason: not because of what changed, but what did not change. The clearest expression of this view comes from the Marxist Engelberg, who argues that “historical and political progress” demanded change in the late 1870s, but found its path was blocked.<sup>95</sup> Feuchtwanger agrees: “The change of course in 1879 was not so much a refoundation of the Reich as a reinforcement of the existing liberal deficit,” he suggests.<sup>96</sup>

The majority of English-language historians acknowledge the important contribution of both Rosenberg’s and Böhme’s work, but are unconvinced by the “new orthodox” interpretation. Margaret Anderson, for instance, remarks wryly that it is all “a rather weighty historical burden for a tariff policy ... to bear.”<sup>97</sup> In an essay co-written with Barkin, she also questions whether there was ever actually a “Puttkamer Purge,” and highlights “the degree to which we perceive the German Empire, even today, through nineteenth-century liberal eyes.”<sup>98</sup> Just because Germany’s liberals saw the move away from free trade and the ending of the *Kulturkampf* as a triumph of reaction, does not mean we should make their viewpoint our own. In fact, all the major European countries apart from Britain responded to the economic downturn by adopting defensive measures: Russia, Italy, France, and Austria-Hungary each raised tariff barriers between 1876 and 1881. There was, moreover, no inherent reason why the shift to protectionism should have become a barrier to further political reform. After all, the nation with the highest tariffs in the nineteenth century was the USA, suggesting “that free trade and democracy were not universally intertwined.”<sup>99</sup> Bismarck and the National Liberals, moreover, continued to co-operate after 1879, just as the Chancellor had often

94 L. Gall, *Bismarck. The White Revolutionary*, vol. 2, pp. 134–5.

95 E. Engelberg, *Bismarck*, vol. 2, *Das Reich in der Mitte*, p. 319.

96 E. Feuchtwanger, *Bismarck*, p. 260.

97 M. L. Anderson, *Windthorst. A Political Biography* (Oxford, 1981), p. 236.

98 M. L. Anderson and K. Barkin, “The myth of the Puttkamer purge and the reality of the Kulturkampf,” *Journal of Modern History*, 54 (1982), p. 673. Although they were able to find “purge victims” in previous and later decades, they could not locate a single official (apart from government ministers) who was purged for his political views in the 1880s (p. 656).

99 K. Barkin, “1878–1879. The second founding of the Reich,” p. 230. The key issue, Barkin suggests (p. 226) “is why Germany maintained high protection after prosperity returned in the mid-1890s, not why it was introduced in the first place.”

worked with conservatives in the years before the turn. To divide the Bismarckian era into the “liberal” 1870s and the “conservative” 1880s, would, therefore, strike most historians today as simplistic, even though some authors still follow this schema in their chapter headings.<sup>100</sup> If the domestic political history of the Empire has to be divided in two, many would argue that the watershed is better located in the 1890s, than in 1878–9.

### How Do Historians Characterize Bismarck’s Rule?

By the end of the twentieth century the Iron Chancellor had been the subject of some 7,000 publications, including over 50 scholarly biographies.<sup>101</sup> The centenary of his death in 1998 triggered a new wave of academic conferences, magazine features, and, of course, yet more biographies. Anyone endeavoring to read just a fraction of these works will be struck by a depressing degree of repetition, for there is remarkably little dispute about any major aspect of Bismarck’s life story. Tellingly, even Engelberg’s East German biography of the 1980s was largely indistinguishable in its narrative from its West German counterparts.<sup>102</sup> The well-worn pattern of this familiar story is, moreover, unlikely to be challenged by the discovery of new sources of information: all the richest seams have been fully exploited and less promising ones abandoned. The latter included some half-hearted attempts at introducing the methods of “psychohistory” to the study of Bismarck – analyzing, for instance, the psychological basis of Bismarck’s health problems, or his relationship with his bourgeois mother (bad) and his Junker father (good) – but short of raising the dead it is hard to see how this approach could contribute very much.<sup>103</sup> Engelberg’s loving exploration of the Bismarck family tree, tracing it right back to late medieval times, was a similarly questionable exercise.<sup>104</sup> Fortunately, the debate surrounding Bismarck’s politics and

100 E. Feuchtwanger, *Imperial Germany*, and D. Hertz-Eichenrode, *Deutsche Geschichte 1871–1890. Das Kaiserreich in der Ära Bismarck*, are two recent examples.

101 K. Urbach, “Between saviour and villain. 100 years of Bismarck biographies,” *Historical Journal*, 41 (1998), p. 1142.

102 E. Engelberg, *Bismarck. Urpreuße und Reichsgründer* (Berlin, 1985); E. Engelberg, *Bismarck: Das Reich in der Mitte Europas* (Berlin, 1990). The first volume was published simultaneously on both sides of the Wall, and the West German media celebrated it as an important political as well as historiographical event. The reception within the historians’ guild, however, was less positive.

103 See O. Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany*, 3 vols. (Princeton, 1963–90).

104 See the opening chapters of E. Engelberg, *Bismarck. Urpreuße und Reichsgründer*.

the character of his long period in office has been a good deal livelier and more productive. Did Bismarck have a "system?" If so, can it be described as "Bonapartist?" Was he a man of his time, or rather a late-flowering example of an eighteenth-century "cabinet politician?" Does his leadership fall into the category of "charismatic" rule? Such questions go beyond his life and work as an individual; they are inextricably linked to the course of German history as a whole, and in this sense David Blackbourn is surely right to describe Bismarck as "a touchstone of attitudes among historians towards the German past."<sup>105</sup> Yet he also has a contemporary resonance. For anyone interested in political processes and the exercise of power, this cynical, empirical, and egotistical statesman, who knew a thing or two about media manipulation and "spin," remains an object of considerable fascination.

As we have seen, historical judgments of Bismarck cover the full spectrum from hero to villain. There is general agreement, however, that he was a more impressive and successful figure on the international stage than in the domestic arena. As Dorpalen put it, "[t]here is almost unanimous agreement today that the man whose proudest achievement was the establishment of a powerful German state, greatly weakened his own creation by the shortcomings of his internal policies."<sup>106</sup> Although there have certainly been attempts to revise an unduly positive view of his foreign policy, it would take a breathtakingly bold act of revisionism to suggest that, in the long term, Bismarck's domestic policies were anything other than a failure. However, it was not simply the case that Bismarck took one less seriously than the other. While he endorsed the maxim of foreign policy's primacy, and his training lay almost exclusively in that field, he also spent the best part of three decades attempting to shape Prussia and Germany's internal affairs, and remained unwilling to hand over formal responsibility to a subordinate.<sup>107</sup> Any verdict on Bismarck's rule must, therefore, take both areas into consideration, particularly as they were linked in a number of ways (not only in the obvious case of colonial policy, but also for instance in the issue of tariffs – which seriously affected the Empire's relations with Russia – or in the Chancellor's consistent hostility to "revolutionary" movements at home and abroad). Indeed, many historians argue that his foreign and domestic policies were essentially two sides of the same coin: "the consolidation and defense

of what had already been achieved, internally and externally," as Hillgruber put it.<sup>108</sup>

Two aspects of Bismarck's foreign policy have attracted particular historiographical interest: his use of alliances and his attitude to the colonial question. With regard to the former, historians rightly acknowledge Bismarck's sober appraisal of the international situation in the aftermath of 1871: that even without further expansion the Empire's "semi-hegemonic" position in the center of the continent was a potentially precarious one; and that this "unfinished" nation-state, whose creation had undoubtedly upset the balance of power in Europe, would have to consider itself complete (or "satiated," as Bismarck put it), if it was not to face the nightmare scenario of three of the five great powers forming a hostile alliance against it (Bismarck's *cauchemar des coalitions*). Many accounts still emphasize the clarity and consistency of the Chancellor's general objectives, pointing to documents such as the memorandum he dictated to his son at Bad Kissingen in June 1877, in which he stated that the aim of the Empire's foreign policy should be to achieve "an overall political situation in which all the great powers except France have need of us, and are as far as possible kept from forming coalitions against us by their relations with one another"; while simultaneously attempting to deflect great-power conflicts to the periphery of Europe (such as the Balkans) or beyond, in order to ease pressure on the Empire at its center.<sup>109</sup> Yet there are obvious dangers in taking Bismarck's words at face value, and the complex reality of German foreign policy in the 1880s often stood in stark contrast to the deceptive simplicity of such statements. Certainly, by the time of Bismarck's forced departure in 1890, the web of treaties and agreements – which constituted what is sometimes rather grandly referred to as Bismarck's "system" – was so intricate that he was famously compared to a juggler keeping five glass balls in the air at the same time.

Whether Bismarck's juggling act was a towering diplomatic achievement, tragically fritted away by his successors; an improvised set of stop-gaps, which owed more to desperation than cool calculation; or was simply too clever for its own good, since some of the secret treaty commitments appeared to contradict each other, is a matter on which historians continue to disagree. Taking their cue from Gall, the majority of contemporary historians characterize Bismarck's attempts to preserve the status quo as an increasingly complicated "system of expedients" rather than any kind of grand design. Instead of highlighting the "systematic"

105 D. Blackbourn, "Bismarck: the sorcerer's apprentice," in *Populists and Patricians*, p. 33.

106 A. Dorpalen, "The German historians and Bismarck," *Review of Politics*, XV (1953), p. 61.

107 For a few months in 1873 Bismarck gave up the post of Prussian minister-president to his friend Albrecht von Roon, but soon realized the experiment was not working.

108 A. Hillgruber, *Otto von Bismarck*, p. 71.

109 K. A. Lerman, *Bismarck*, p. 211.

aspects of the post-1879 order, they stress its makeshift nature, and suggest that Bismarck's later policies, both at home and abroad, often amounted to little more than crisis management. Wilfried Loth is typical: after 1879, he suggests, "Bismarck achieved only defensive victories in the sense of a temporary entrenchment of the status quo, and as time passed he lost all credibility."<sup>110</sup> There are, however, exceptions to this picture. Among recent English-language accounts, Seligmann and McLean's *From Reich to Republic* offers a strikingly positive (and rather old-fashioned) assessment of Bismarck's "dextrous diplomatic strategy," highlighting five basic objectives which they suggest he followed throughout his period in office: to ensure Germany's semi-dominant position over the continent through consolidation rather than further expansion; to maintain the isolation of France; to safeguard Austria-Hungary's future as a great power; to maintain cordial relations with Russia; and to avoid becoming isolated. Dividing Bismarckian foreign policy into three stages – consolidation (1871–8); alliance-building (1879–85); and stop-gaps (1885–90) – they acknowledge that the system "began to show signs of strain" in the latter phase, but nevertheless concur with A. J. P. Taylor that the Iron Chancellor's "greatest achievement" was to give his country, and the European continent, peace for 40 years.<sup>111</sup> Lerman's *Bismarck* is more skeptical: "Bismarck's control of German foreign policy and his multidimensional grasp of the complexities of international relations once attracted much admiration from diplomatic historians," she writes, but recent scholarly criticism of his "crisis management without real prospects" (Konrad Canis) has stripped away much of the mystique. Moreover, "[i]n seeking to ensnare the powers of Europe in a series of peacetime alliances, Bismarck, perhaps unwittingly, contributed to the long slide towards the First World War."<sup>112</sup>

Although by the 1880s Bismarck had become an admired and respected, if not fully trusted, figure across Europe (particularly after his skilful handling of the Congress of Berlin in 1878), he was subject to growing criticism of his foreign policy from within Germany itself. It came from informed insiders, such as the Foreign Office mandarin Friedrich von Holstein, and from wider public opinion. The latter, manifest in the rise of radical nationalist and colonialist agitation, was becoming an increasingly important element in European politics, and threatened to undermine not only Bismarck's fragile web of alliances, but also the integrity of Germany's principal ally, Austria-Hungary. Feuchtwanger contrasts the

110 W. Loth, *Das Kaiserreich*, p. 67.

111 M. Seligmann and R. McLean, *Germany from Reich to Republic*, pp. 39–40.

112 K. A. Lerman, *Bismarck*, pp. 220–1.

growing clamor for imperial acquisitions and territorial expansion with Bismarck's more traditional approach, which he describes as "a product of cabinet diplomacy in the style of Metternich."<sup>113</sup> The view that Bismarck's foreign policy resembled the kind of diplomacy that had flourished in the age of absolutism was the orthodox view among West German historians until the late 1960s, but it is less common today. In the 1950s, despite their many disagreements on other aspects of German history, the Protestant conservative Gerhard Ritter and the liberal Catholic Franz Schnabel agreed that Bismarck was a statesman whose intellectual roots lay in the eighteenth century, a "delayed Richelieu," whose model was Frederick the Great, and whose guiding principle was *raison d'état*.<sup>114</sup> The historians who advanced this view were motivated primarily by their desire to separate the "born statesman" Bismarck from the "arch-dilettante" Hitler (Ritter). To this end, they portrayed Bismarck as a man who stood aloof from the spirit of his age, an elitist who "appeared more modern than he was in reality,"<sup>115</sup> an "antediluvian" (Gustav Adolf Rein) who not only hated the telephone and electric light, but also had no real understanding of mass movements such as nationalism or socialism. A variation on this theme was played by Hans Rothfels, who argued that Bismarck understood such "irrational" populist causes only too well, and, therefore, recognized the serious dangers inherent in them. Either way, the conclusion was the same: that he should be spared any association with the twentieth-century tyrant. After all, Bismarck was a master of moderation, whose essential category was the state rather than the *Volk* or nation, and whose wars were like duels, fought honorably and without recourse to base emotions. Indeed, those searching for the roots of the twentieth-century's aggressive hyper-nationalism would be more likely to find them amongst Bismarck's erstwhile opponents in the Frankfurt Parliament of 1848–9 than in the Iron Chancellor himself.

Despite its fall from favor, this conservative picture of Bismarck as a "man out of season" re-appears from time to time. Johannes Willms' 1997 study *The Daemon of the Germans* is one recent example: "Bismarck was, and is, persistently attested with a modernity of political thought," he writes, yet "[s]uch an interpretation has absolutely no foundation. Bismarck's political thought was ... anything but modern."<sup>116</sup> Most contemporary historians reject this line of argument, however, and

113 E. Feuchtwanger, *Bismarck*, p. 233.

114 G. Ritter, "Europa und die deutsche Frage," extract in H. Hallmann, ed., *Revision des Bismarckbildes*, p. 81.

115 H. Holborn, "Bismarck's Realpolitik," in L. Gall, ed., *Das Bismarck-Problem in der Geschichtsschreibung nach 1945* (Cologne, 1971), p. 239.

116 J. Willms, *Bismarck. Dämon der Deutschen*, p. 62.

agree with the former American diplomat and politician Henry Kissinger that Bismarck's mixture of realism, empiricism, cynicism, and Darwinism "represented a new age."<sup>117</sup> "His views reflected the revolt of the nineteenth century against the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries," as Pflanze put it.<sup>118</sup> While his objective – to preserve the Prussian military monarchy in a rapidly changing world – may indeed have been conservative and anachronistic, the means he used to achieve it were certainly not: "Unlike the great practitioners of cabinet diplomacy ... he did not limit the forces which he exploited to the government of states. He included also the revolutionary social and political movements of modern times."<sup>119</sup> Engelberg is another to emphasize the modern dimensions to Bismarck's persona, highlighting the way in which he was able to look beyond the narrow horizons of his class to accept revolution (albeit from above) as a valid political weapon. What kind of eighteenth-century cabinet politician, he suggests, could have deposed four princes – one king, one elector, and two dukes – as Bismarck did in 1866, without any regard for legitimacy or the established order of things?<sup>120</sup> Instead, Engelberg characterizes Bismarck's rule as a form of "Bonapartism," "even if Bonapartist terror-elections along the infamous lines of Napoleon III's France were impossible" in the German Empire.<sup>121</sup>

As a GDR historian (and an ideological hardliner in the 1950s and 1960s), it was hardly surprising that Engelberg should turn to a concept developed by Karl Marx to define Bismarck's rule. First coined by Marx in his 1852 essay *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, and thereafter applied to Bismarck by such disparate characters as the arch-conservative Ludwig von Gerlach and Marx's comrade Friedrich Engels, the term "Bonapartism" was re-activated in the West by Wehler and Böhme in the late 1960s. In his study of *Bismarck and Imperialism*, Wehler used it to denote a particular kind of accommodation between the bourgeoisie, nobility, and military, to defend "a traditional, unstable social and political structure which found itself threatened by strong forces of social and political change." This stabilization was to be achieved by "undisguised repression as well as limited concessions" (such as social welfare legislation), and involved "diverting attention away from constitutional policy towards economic policy, away from the question of emancipation at home towards compensatory successes abroad."<sup>122</sup> It also involved the

117 H. Kissinger, "Der weiße Revolutionär," in L. Gall, ed, *Das Bismarck-Problem*, p. 413.

118 O. Pflanze, "Bismarck's Realpolitik," p. 161.

119 O. Pflanze, "Bismarck and German nationalism," p. 554.

120 E. Engelberg, *Bismarck und die Revolution von oben* (Brunswick, 1987), p. 18.

121 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

122 H.-U. Wehler, "Bismarck's imperialism, 1862–1890," p. 183.

use of plebiscitary techniques to appeal directly to the people, over the heads of troublesome politicians (as demonstrated by Bismarck's introduction of universal male suffrage for Reichstag elections, in an effort to circumvent the liberals). "Rarely has a new conventional wisdom become so quickly established" as Wehler's view of Bismarck, Allan Mitchell suggested, but it was not long before the Bonapartism thesis itself came under fire in both German and Anglo-American historical journals.<sup>123</sup> Ironically, East German commentators were among Wehler's fiercest critics, as a consequence of his unorthodox use of Marxist terminology,<sup>124</sup> but Western historians such as Mitchell ("a morass of illogic") and Gall were scarcely less dismissive.

Gall argued that although there may have been superficial similarities between Napoleon III's France and Bismarck's Germany, they were not consciously engineered, or utilized, by the Chancellor. Indeed, they could not have been, given the completely different constellation of forces which prevailed in the German Empire, with its formidable conservative bastions in the monarchy, army, and civil service. Unlike Louis Napoleon, Bismarck did not come to power through a *coup d'état* and never resorted to an actual referendum. He could not have hoped to enjoy the same degree of political freedom and room for maneuver as the French Emperor.<sup>125</sup> Bruce Waller, another biographer of Bismarck, agrees: "[t]he word 'Bonapartism' is not really helpful in assessing Bismarck's style of government. His mixture of old and new ideas on domestic and foreign policy was unique ... He was also not simply a leftover from cabinet diplomacy, or the opposite, a characteristic figure of his age."<sup>126</sup> Even so, similarities between Bismarck and Napoleon III's techniques of rule undoubtedly existed, and the German Chancellor was by no means ignorant of developments in post-1851 France (where he had briefly served as Prussian Ambassador in 1862). When Bismarck introduced his old age pension legislation to the Reichstag in the 1880s, he openly admitted that he had been influenced by the example of Napoleon III's social insurance policies.<sup>127</sup> There was thus "at the very least a Bonapartist strain in Bismarck's policies," as Blackburn puts it,

123 See A. Mitchell, "Bonapartism as a model for Bismarckian politics," and the replies from O. Pflanze, C. Fohlen, and M. Stürmer, *Journal of Modern History*, 49 (1977), pp. 181–209.

124 Wehler's analysis did not treat imperialism as a specific phase of capitalist development (i.e. the Marxist-Leninist view), but rather as a political technique to divert attention from domestic difficulties. See A. Dorpalen, *German History in Marxist Perspective*, p. 256.

125 L. Gall, *Bismarck. Der weiße Revolutionär*, p. 569.

126 B. Waller, *Bismarck*, p. 40.

127 See M. Seligmann and R. McLean, *Germany from Reich to Republic*, p. 36.

"and the motif of a deliberately dramatized politics is certainly not just a construct of later historians."<sup>128</sup> Yet it was for the most part a matter of style rather than substance, and to apply the concept to Bismarck's rule more generally is problematic, given the very obvious social, economic, and constitutional differences between the German and French Empires.

At the heart of the debate over Bismarck's Bonapartism was the puzzling question of why a hitherto vocal critic of colonial adventures should embark on the construction of a German colonial empire in 1884, especially as there seemed to be compelling reasons why Germany should refrain from colonial entanglements. Wehler argued that in fact there was no sudden change in Bismarck's thinking, but "a remarkable continuity of both the ideas and the methods of free-trade commercial expansionism" (i.e., "informal empire" along British lines), dating right back to the 1860s. "There were however some motives, which, contrary to his previous experience and hopes, induced Bismarck for some time to involve the state in the governance of Protectorates."<sup>129</sup> For Wehler, these motives were predominantly socio-economic in character. As a "pragmatic expansionist," Bismarck may have anticipated genuine economic benefits from colonies in Africa such as German South-West Africa, Togo, Cameroon (all 1884), and German East Africa (1885); or from Kaiser-Wilhelm-Land and the Bismarck Archipelago in the Pacific (both 1885), but more importantly their acquisition offered a diversionary escape from the adverse effects of industrialization and recession, and a short-term boost for pro-government candidates in the 1884 Reichstag election campaign. The parallel with Napoleon III's use of colonial engagements was clear, lending weight to Wehler's notion of Bismarck as a Bonapartist. However, not all historians agree that foreign policy objectives or considerations of national prestige "were only incidental" in Bismarck's brush with colonialism. Hillgruber, for instance, acknowledged the domestic considerations, but argued Bismarck's prime motivation was external: to seek an accommodation with France, in order to take advantage of Britain's difficulties in Afghanistan, Egypt, and the Sudan.<sup>130</sup> Feuchtwanger also favors a foreign policy explanation, but suggests Bismarck's "immediate aim was to distract French attention from Alsace-Lorraine and put Britain under pressure to tie herself more positively to Germany."<sup>131</sup> A further possibility is put forward by Seligmann and McLean: that Bismarck's concern over the imminent monarchical

128 D. Blackbourn, "Politics as theatre," in *Populists and Patricians*, pp. 249–50.

129 H.-U. Wehler, "Bismarck's imperialism, 1862–1890," p. 185.

130 A. Hillgruber, *Otto von Bismarck*, p. 78.

131 E. Feuchtwanger, *Imperial Germany*, p. 91.

succession in Germany led him to seek ways in which to drive a wedge between the anglophile Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm (the future Kaiser Friedrich III) and Great Britain. By developing colonies in Africa, Bismarck "had a ready-made mechanism for generating Anglo-German diplomatic incidents whenever he wished,"<sup>132</sup>

At around the same time that Wehler was advancing the notion of Bismarck as a Bonapartist, his contemporary Michael Stürmer began to reactivate a subtly different alternative: the idea of Bismarck as a "Caesarist."<sup>133</sup> This term, which was frequently used by nineteenth-century German historians to describe the rule of Cromwell and both Napoleons as well as Bismarck, was dismissed by Marx as a "superficial analogy," with little practical value because of the huge differences between ancient and modern societies.<sup>134</sup> Yet it did have the important advantage of not being specifically related to another contemporary statesman, and many of Bismarck's classically-educated liberal opponents were certainly conscious of parallels between their own age and Roman times, when emperors side-stepped troublesome political elites by appealing directly to the masses, and plebeians were appeased by a diet of "bread and circuses." Gall notes that rhetorical allusions to the governance of the Roman Empire became a "veritable topos" of German political life in the early 1880s.<sup>135</sup> At that time, the terms Caesarist and Bonapartist were often used synonymously, and this practice is continued by some historians today, although it should be noted that neither term has enjoyed great favor in recent years. It is telling that both Wehler and Stürmer have sought to move beyond the Bonapartist-Caesarist model. Indeed, even in the early 1970s, Stürmer was anxious not to push the Caesarist line too far, pointing out that "Caesarism never superseded legitimate monarchy or the Junker interest, and remained basically one means among others used by a conservative statesman."<sup>136</sup>

One further category to be employed by historians attempting to characterize Bismarck's exercise of power is the concept of "charismatic rule."

132 M. Seligmann and R. McLean, *Germany from Reich to Republic*, p. 49.

133 See M. Stürmer, "Bismarck in perspective," *Central European History*, 4 (1971), pp. 291–331; also his *Regierung und Reichstag im Bismarckstaat 1871–1880: Cäsarismus oder Parlamentarismus?* (Düsseldorf, 1974).

134 Quoted by H. Gollwitzer, "Der Cäsarismus Napoleons III im Widerhall der öffentlichen Meinung Deutschlands," *Historische Zeitschrift*, 173 (1952), p. 68.

135 L. Gall, *Bismarck. The White Revolutionary*, vol. 2, p. 130. See, for example, Ludwig Bamberger's speech in the Reichstag debate on Bismarck's accident insurance bill in 1881, when he compared Bismarck's Germany "to the Roman Republic in its decline," quoted by Gall, p. 131; or the 1880 letter from Rudolf Haym to the historian Treitschke, quoted by M. Stürmer, "Bismarck in perspective," p. 306.

136 M. Stürmer, "Bismarck in perspective," p. 329.



It was Wehler, formerly the standard-bearer of the Bonapartist paradigm, who in volume 3 of his *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* turned to this concept first developed by Max Weber in the final years of the nineteenth century. Weber suggested that charismatic rule applied where legitimation was drawn not from tradition (as in the case of monarchy), or from legality and an electorate (as in modern democracy), but from the belief that a ruler possessed extraordinary personal abilities or powers. This specific Weberian meaning of "charisma" is, therefore, rather different from the established current usage: Bismarck, a balding, rather corpulent man with a monotonous high-pitched voice and an alarming tendency to break down in tears, did not possess what nowadays passes for charisma. Nor can it be said that Wehler's paradigm shift met with critical acclaim either, even if many reviewers were quick to commend his willingness to rethink his earlier position. It was perhaps unfortunate that Wehler's magnum opus was quickly followed by the first volume of Kershaw's *Hitler*, in which the British historian also turned to Weber in an attempt to categorize the nature of the Führer's rule. Most found Kershaw's candidate a more likely choice, since Bismarck – unlike Hitler, or indeed Mussolini or Lenin – had no party of devoted followers, and remained an appointee of the crown, who could be disposed of at any time. When that time came, in the spring of 1890, there was little sense of shock and even fewer tears.<sup>137</sup> As Stürmer puts it, "Bismarck's dismissal met with widespread indifference, even a feeling of relief. Very rarely was the Kaiser to find himself so much in tune with public opinion as when he telegraphed his illusive 'The course remains the same. Full steam ahead!'"<sup>138</sup>

Although Bismarck's departure may have been overdue, Wilhelm II's eager acceptance of the *Reichsgründer's* resignation in only the second year of his reign was to have fatal consequences for the Kaiser's later historical reputation, at least according to Nicolaus Sombart (born 1923). Henceforth, "[t]he standard by which critics measured the Kaiser, explicitly or implicitly, was Bismarck." As the ex-chancellor's reputation grew beyond all bounds, particularly after his death in 1898, so the Kaiser's image declined in equal proportion.<sup>139</sup> Indeed, Sombart suggests, Bismarck and Wilhelm henceforth became polar opposites in the historiography of the Empire: the "great man," who had forged it in

137 It should be noted, however, that following his dismissal Bismarck did indeed build up a substantial popular following, as the pilgrimages to his estate at Friedrichsruh in the 1890s testified. See M. Hank, *Kanzler ohne Amt: Fürst Bismarck nach seiner Entlassung 1890–98* (Munich, 1980).

138 *Ibid.*, p. 310.

139 N. Sombart, *Wilhelm II. Sündenbock und Herr der Mitte* (Berlin, 1996), p. 22.

iron and blood; and the "stupid boy,"<sup>140</sup> who brought it down in an orgy of self-indulgent and incompetent neo-absolutism. These two men became the "positive and negative poles" around which the whole "myth" of German history since 1871 was constructed: a myth that exonerated Bismarck for all the negative consequences of unification, and instead placed full responsibility for the Empire's failings on the shoulders of the Kaiser.

### How Useful are "Psychohistorical" Approaches in Explaining the Reign of Wilhelm II?

With a humiliating physical disability, recurring suggestions of mental instability, and an ambiguous national and sexual identity – not to mention a difficult relationship with his mother – the last Kaiser certainly appears a suitable case for psychohistorical treatment. Accordingly, all Wilhelm II's biographers since Emil Ludwig in the 1920s have at least made reference to his troubled psychological state,<sup>141</sup> even if some ultimately resist the temptation to don their white coats.<sup>142</sup> For Ludwig (1881–1948), it was Wilhelm's need to compensate for his withered left arm that took center-stage; for others it was the lack of affection he received from his cruelly disappointed and hence ultra-critical parents; or the desire to "win back" his neglectful father from his mother's dominant influence. Yet historians of Imperial Germany are generally cautious of such attempts to use psychology or medicine to explain the nature of the Kaiser's 30-year reign. Psychohistory – which emerged in the US in the late 1950s and 1960s with the ambitious aim of making Freudian psychoanalysis central to historical investigation – has fallen from favor since its heyday in the 1970s, when publications such as *The Journal of Psychohistory* (1973) and *The Psychohistory Review* (1976) were first founded.<sup>143</sup> Its proponents have been accused of "reductionism, irresponsible overstatement, and historical misunderstanding,"<sup>144</sup> of "emphasizing

140 Bismarck's own characterization of Wilhelm II, quoted by E. Feuchtwanger, *Bismarck*, p. 262.

141 E. Ludwig, *Wilhelm der Zweite* (Berlin, 1925). Ludwig was a prolific and best-selling biographer, but not a professional historian.

142 Lamar Cecil's *Wilhelm II. Prince and Emperor, 1859–1900* is a good example of biography which eschews psychohistorical speculation.

143 For a critique of psychohistory see J. Barzun, *Clio and the Doctors: Psycho-History, Quanto-History, and History* (Chicago, 1974).

144 R. Waite, review of C. Strozier and D. Offer, eds., *The Leader: Psychohistorical Essays*, in *The American Historical Review*, 91 (1986), p. 355.

unconscious motive rather than conscious purpose," of assuming that "all people are the same regardless of time and place," and of "failing to account for the social determinants of psychological attitudes and individual actions."<sup>145</sup> Our consideration of the literature on the Empire's second "great man," therefore, begins with a brief assessment of the contribution of psychohistory to our understanding of Wilhelm II, before moving on to the much-debated question of the Kaiser's "personal rule."

As Christopher Clark (born 1960) observes, attempts at a medical diagnosis of Wilhelm's condition have "tended to follow contemporary trends in popular science: 'nervous debility' in the 1890s; dynastic degeneracy in the early Republican era; Freudian paradigms in the 1920s and periodically thereafter; 'repressed homosexuality' from the 1970s; neurology in the 1980s; and, in the gene-obsessed *fin de siècle* of the twentieth century, 'the gene of George III.'"<sup>146</sup> The dangers of medicalizing Wilhelm II, whether through psychohistory or what Clark refers to as "retrospective neuroscience," are clear. For a start, the evidence is largely circumstantial and often contradictory. Second, a preoccupation with psychological or neurological factors can obscure the actual rational basis for apparently illogical actions, as well as removing all sense of historical context. If, moreover, medical information is not used in a responsible manner – to shed light on significant decisions, for instance – history risks becoming little more than an upmarket form of gossip, in which intimate details about an individual's private life are exposed purely for their own sake (Evans's "history as the butler saw it"). Some of the literature on Wilhelm's sexuality comes close dangerously to this category, even if Isabel Hull puts forward a spirited case to justify her in-depth study of the Kaiser's relationships with the homoerotically-charged "Liebenberg Circle."<sup>147</sup>

Furthermore there are specific problems with the psychoanalytic approach. Even if one accepts the validity of psychoanalysis as a diagnostic method (which many do not), Wilhelm will never be able to take his place on the psychiatrist's couch, and efforts to analyze him posthumously are bound to be highly speculative. In any case, to attempt a diagnosis without the necessary clinical training and experience inevitably smacks of dilettantism. One historian more qualified than most to speculate on Wilhelm's state of mind is the American Thomas Kohut (born 1951), grandson of a prominent Viennese psychoanalyst and himself a graduate

of the Cincinnati Psychoanalytical Institute. Although critical of much psychohistory which he dismisses as "pathography," Kohut is convinced that the past's psychological dimension "remains a historical subject of decisive importance."<sup>148</sup> In his study of *Wilhelm II and the Germans* Kohut applies his favored approach – a form of psychoanalytic theory known as "self psychology" – to the Kaiser. Unlike many earlier writers, Kohut argues that Wilhelm's physical handicap was not the issue. Indeed, mastering his disability was the "greatest developmental accomplishment, perhaps the greatest single achievement of his life."<sup>149</sup> The real problem lay in his relationship with his parents: "Wilhelm wanted a strong and domineering father and a tender and compassionate mother. Instead, his father was compassionate and his mother was domineering."<sup>150</sup> As a consequence of his parents' lack of empathy, Wilhelm failed to develop healthy self-esteem, becoming a "narcissistically disturbed" man with a childlike craving for people to "mirror" him and affirm his sense of self-worth.<sup>151</sup> According to Kohut, this helps to explain Wilhelm's "driven self display" as the peripatetic *Reisekaiser*, and also the alleged psychological congruence between the Kaiser and his subjects, famously highlighted by contemporaries such as Friedrich Naumann and Walther Rathenau. The Kaiser became widely recognized as the symbol and mouthpiece of the *Kaiserreich* precisely because he shared its tensions and contradictions, in a way that a more consistent ruler would have found impossible.

Much of Kohut's analysis rings true, although the heavy emphasis on Wilhelm's upbringing is not wholly convincing since another of Wilhelm's recent biographers, the British historian John Röhl, suggests that by nineteenth-century standards Wilhelm's parents were warm and affectionate. Röhl's own emphasis lies on heredity (notably the genetically inherited blood disease porphyria, which was probably responsible for the "madness" of King George III of England and spread through the royal houses of Europe) and organic damage, such as the "minimal cerebral dysfunction" which Wilhelm may have suffered as a result of oxygen deprivation during a traumatic breech-birth. He examines the medical evidence, both from the birth itself and from the subsequent horrific attempts to "cure" the infant Willy, in almost forensic detail.<sup>152</sup>

145 T. Kohut, "Psychohistory as history," in *The American Historical Review*, 91 (1986), pp. 336, 338.

146 C. Clark, *Kaiser Wilhelm II* (Harlow, 2000), p. 21.

147 I. Hull, *The Entourage of Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1888–1918* (Cambridge, 1982).

148 T. Kohut, "Psychohistory as history," p. 352.

149 T. Kohut, *Wilhelm II and the Germans. A Study in Leadership* (New York, 1991), p. 44.

150 *Ibid.*, p. 78.

151 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

152 See J. Röhl, *Young Wilhelm. The Kaiser's Early Life 1859–1888*.

The gargantuan scale of Röhl's three-volume portrait of the Kaiser makes it one of the defining landmarks of recent scholarship on German history, even if it also confirms the veracity of Emerson's observation that "great geniuses have the shortest biographies." Its length is swollen by extensive quotations from contemporaries, which certainly add to the documentary value of the enterprise, but should not be taken too much at face value since, as Kohut points out, Wilhelm was a "transference figure," on to whom people projected their diverse hopes and aspirations.<sup>153</sup>

While biographers are frequently accused of falling into the trap of empathizing too closely with their subjects, this is most definitely not a charge that can be leveled at the Sussex historian. As one reviewer observed, "Röhl milks the sheer awfulness with deadpan relish."<sup>154</sup> Indeed, for the aforementioned Sombart, the flaw in Röhl's magnum opus lies in precisely the opposite direction: "The reason? He does not love the Kaiser."<sup>155</sup> Sombart's own idiosyncratic study of Wilhelm, subtitled *Scapegoat and Lord of the Center*, is undoubtedly a much less substantial piece of scholarship than Röhl's, but it does offer an interesting take on psychohistory. Sombart acknowledges that one cannot solve the "riddle" of Wilhelm II with "individual-psychological explanatory models" alone. In his view, monarchs have their own psychology, far removed from the mundane world of their bourgeois subjects. To understand Wilhelm, he suggests, one must enter the "sacred-magical sphere" of kingship: the ceremonies, rituals, and symbolic acts which were so central to Wilhelm's own perception of his role, but which modern man has lost the capacity to comprehend. Much of this territory was explored more soberly by another German, Elisabeth Fehrenbach, in the 1960s,<sup>156</sup> but Sombart is correct to acknowledge Wilhelm's achievement in giving his position some kind of substance and meaning. He is surely wrong, however, to see the long, slow decline in Wilhelm's reputation as an inevitable consequence of his "assassination" of the Empire's founder. Given the genuinely high hopes aroused by the young Emperor's accession, and the relief with which many people greeted Bismarck's departure, Wilhelm started with considerable credit in the bank. That this was so quickly expended was due more to his manifold shortcomings as a ruler than the overly sympathetic Sombart would have us believe. The last emperor did become something of a scapegoat after 1918, when it suited the Germans to blame the "degenerate" on the throne, but the

153 T. Kohut, review of Röhl, *Young Wilhelm*, *Central European History*, 29 (1996), p. 137.

154 D. Blackbourn, "How wicked and horrid," *London Review of Books*, 15 July 1999, p. 20.

155 N. Sombart, *Wilhelm II. Sündenbock und Herr der Mitte*, p. 7.

156 E. Fehrenbach, *Wandlungen des deutschen Kaisergedankens, 1871-1918* (Munich, 1969).

catalogue of blunders laid at Wilhelm's doors was not just down to malicious myth-making.

It would be fair to say that Sombart's efforts to rehabilitate the Kaiser's reputation have not been well received. Blackbourn, for instance, dismissed one of his essays as "a baffling mixture of aperçu and cliché, insight and silliness, invigoratingly energetic thought and deadly rebarbative prose."<sup>157</sup> Yet he does at least deserve recognition for being one of the few twentieth-century German writers to take Wilhelm II seriously. Until recently, the German historical guild studiously ignored the last Kaiser, who was so obviously not a "great man" in the mould of Bismarck or Frederick the Great.<sup>158</sup> This neglect left the field open to journalists, publicists, and English-language historians who, as we have seen, have been at the forefront of work on Wilhelm II for the past three decades. There are many, of course, who would argue that all of this is essentially irrelevant: that to focus on any single individual is bound to distort our view of German society as a whole. Certainly, if one believes that Wilhelm II was merely a "shadow emperor," a largely insignificant element in Germany's polycratic leadership in the 1890s and 1900s, then there is indeed little point in subjecting his medical and psychological history to such detailed scrutiny. However, if one believes as Röhl does, that Wilhelm II was a "powerful and pernicious ruler," a kind of "missing link" between Bismarck and Hitler,<sup>159</sup> then his personal character assumes a much greater importance, especially if one concurs with Jonathan Steinberg that the Kaiser was "one of those strange figures in history whose personalities have had more effect on the course of affairs than their deeds."<sup>160</sup> While it is quite possible to accept the importance of individual personality in history without necessarily endorsing the psychohistorical approach, one's ultimate judgment on the value of such work is likely to depend on how seriously one takes the notion of Wilhelm's "personal rule." It is to this issue that we now must turn.

157 D. Blackbourn, "The Kaiser and his entourage," in *Populists and Patricians*, p. 48.

158 The only notable exception was W. J. Mommsen. However, since the start of the new millennium, a new, younger generation of German academics has begun to focus on neglected aspects of Wilhelm's reign. See T. H. Benner, *Die Strahlen der Krone. Die religiöse Dimension des Kaisertums unter Wilhelm II. vor dem Hintergrund der Orientreise 1898* (Marburg, 2001); S. Samerski, ed., *Wilhelm II. und die Religion. Facetten einer Persönlichkeit und ihres Umfelds* (Berlin, 2001); L. Reineremann, *Der Kaiser in England. Wilhelm II. und sein Bild in der britischen Öffentlichkeit* (Paderborn, 2001); and H. Afllerbach, ed., *Wilhelm II. als Oberster Kriegsherr im Ersten Weltkrieg. Quellen aus der militärischen Umgebung des Kaisers 1914-1918* (Munich, 2004).

159 Phrases taken by John Röhl's preface to *Wilhelm II. The Kaiser's Personal Monarchy, 1888-1900* (Cambridge, 2004), p. xiii.

160 J. Steinberg, quoted by T. Kohut, *Wilhelm II and the Germans*, pp. 3-4.

### To What Extent Did Wilhelm II Succeed in Establishing "Personal Rule"?

An excessive emphasis on individuals risks obscuring the many continuities that existed between Bismarckian and Wilhelmine Germany. With these in mind, the events of 1890 should perhaps not really be described as a "transformation of German political life,"<sup>161</sup> although the majority of recent accounts do accept that Wilhelm's arrival on the throne made a significant difference. Indeed, Wolfgang Mommsen describes his impact as "devastating,"<sup>162</sup> while Seligmann and McLean go as far as to state: "Most of the disasters which befell Germany after 1888 can be attributed to the actions of Wilhelm II." They give two reasons: first, "Wilhelm's determination to reaffirm the semi-absolutist character of the Prussian monarchy by re-establishing the practice whereby the monarch ruled personally; [and] second, the fact that the new Kaiser's unstable personality made him peculiarly unsuited to fill the role of absolute ruler."<sup>163</sup> The phrase "personal rule" (or *persönliches Regiment*) is, however, problematic and comes with a host of excess baggage. As Clark points out, it "meant different things to different people and has never acquired an agreed or stable meaning, a fact that has muddled the scholarly dispute over its applicability."<sup>164</sup> It was famously used by the royal favorite and future chancellor Bernhard von Bülow in a letter of 1896 ("With me, personal rule – in the good sense – would really begin"), but also by some of the Kaiser's fiercest contemporary critics (such as the journalist Maximilian Harden, who wrote in 1902: "The Kaiser is his own Reich Chancellor. All the important political decisions of the past twelve years have been made by him").<sup>165</sup> It resurfaced in the title of a 1948 book on the Wilhelmine era by Erich Eyck, and has been a feature of the historiographical debate virtually ever since.<sup>166</sup>

Eyck's thesis, which took the Kaiser's absolutist aspirations at face value, met with a skeptical reception. The legalistically-minded conservatives

161 T. Kohut, *Wilhelm II and the Germans*, p. 128.

162 W. J. Mommsen, "Kaiser Wilhelm II and German Politics," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 25 (1990), p. 289.

163 M. Seligmann and R. McLean, *Germany from Reich to Republic*, p. 61.

164 C. Clark, *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, p. vii. For the history of the term see I. V. Hull, "Persönliches Regiment," in J. C. G. Röhl, ed., *Der Ort Kaiser Wilhelms II in der deutschen Geschichte* (Munich, 1991), pp. 3–23.

165 Both quoted by J. C. G. Röhl, *The Kaiser and his Court. Wilhelm II and the Government of Germany* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 120–1.

166 E. Eyck, *Das persönliche Regiment Wilhelms II. Politische Geschichte des Deutschen Kaiserreiches von 1890 bis 1914* (Zurich, 1948).

who dominated the guild in the 1950s were quick to highlight Wilhelm's apparent adherence to the Prussian and Imperial constitutions, as well as the shortcomings in his character which would have limited his effectiveness as an absolute ruler.<sup>167</sup> After the historiographical earthquakes of the 1960s, the "new orthodoxy" was equally dismissive, with Wehler and other members of the Bielefeld School employing Hans Delbrück's contemporary characterization of Wilhelm as a "shadow emperor." In Wehler's *German Empire* Wilhelm was "a weak figure atop a clay pedestal," and his *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* continues to portray the Kaiser in a peripheral role.<sup>168</sup> However, Eyck's thesis – or a refined version of it – found an important supporter in John Röhl, who made his mark with a 1967 study of German high politics after Bismarck's fall.<sup>169</sup> Röhl's book drew heavily on newly discovered or previously neglected primary sources, such as the voluminous papers of the Kaiser's friend and confidante Philipp Eulenburg, which the British historian later published in edited form. Since then, Röhl and Wehler have appeared as the leaders of two opposing factions, although in fact they share rather more than one might imagine: both belong to the post-Fischer generation and possess a strong antipathy towards the apologist efforts of the "old orthodoxy"; both pursue an unashamedly "top down" approach; and both take a pessimistic view of the prospects for reform in a system of constitutional monarchy where "the main emphasis was placed on the noun and not the adjective."<sup>170</sup>

The clearest statement of Röhl's position comes in a series of essays published over a three-decade period and collected in the volume *The Kaiser and his Court*. These valuable essays focus less on Wilhelm himself than "on the structural foundations on which his so-called 'personal rule' was first erected and then sustained."<sup>171</sup> As his quotation marks imply, Röhl has always been conscious of the term's troublesome and potentially misleading nature: "Wilhelm II might have dreamed of establishing absolute rule for himself, but it remained no more than a dream. Even his severest critics did not believe that he ever practised such a form of rule."<sup>172</sup> Instead, Röhl prefers the more neutral concept of the "kingship mechanism," first developed by the sociologist Norbert Elias (1897–1990)

167 See E. R. Huber, "Das persönliche Regiment Wilhelms II," *Zeitschrift für Religion und Geistesgeschichte*, 3 (1951), pp. 134–48; F. Hartung, "Das persönliche Regiment Kaiser Wilhelms II," *Sitzungsberichte der deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin* (Berlin, 1952).

168 H.-U. Wehler, *The German Empire*, p. 64.

169 J. C. G. Röhl, *Germany without Bismarck. The crisis of government in the Second Reich, 1890–1900* (London, 1967).

170 H.-U. Wehler, *The German Empire*, p. 54.

171 J. C. G. Röhl, *The Kaiser and his Court*, p. 1.

172 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

to refer to the pattern of relationships and mentalities created by the interplay of a monarch, his officials, and the royal court. According to Röhl, the Kaiser's formidable powers of patronage and appointment led to a system of flattery and favor, in which the "whole government of the Reich and Prussia, all the higher civil service, indeed in the last analysis the entire *classe politique* of Wilhelmine Germany, were suffused with the desire to win or retain the favour of the 'All-Highest Person.'"<sup>173</sup> It is not enough, therefore, just to locate particular pieces of legislation that were produced on Wilhelm's initiative: one must consider those measures that were blocked by officials fearful of losing "All-highest confidence" ("negative personal rule"); and also the malign contribution of his entourage, "which was selected purely on the basis of the monarch's inclinations" and can be said to have represented "the institutionalisation of the Kaiser's personality."<sup>174</sup> A system constructed on the flimsy basis of regal favor, in which lines of communication and decision-making bypassed the nominally responsible government, and in which the heads of the military and naval cabinets could gain access to the emperor more easily than his chancellor, resulted in a state of affairs not altogether different from Wehler's "polycratic, but uncoordinated authoritarianism."<sup>175</sup> Far from undermining his case, however, Röhl sees this as clear evidence of the "kingship mechanism" in action.

He is also quick to emphasize that the Kaiser's involvement in Wilhelmine politics was not constant and consistent, but fell into five distinct stages. Thus the dismissal of Bismarck (1888–90) was followed by a phase of direct personal interventions, which one might term "improvised personal rule" (1890–7); once the Kaiser's chosen men were in place, a decade-long phase of "institutionalized personal rule" could begin, in which active personal involvement became less necessary (1897–1908); a third phase commenced with Wilhelm on the defensive following the traumatic crises of 1907–8 (the Eulenburg scandal and the *Daily Telegraph* Affair),<sup>176</sup> and lasted up to the outbreak of war in 1914: it was only during the conflict itself that Wilhelm finally became a "shadow emperor."<sup>177</sup> Most historiographical discussion has revolved around the second phase, which began with a series of ministerial changes in the

173 Ibid., pp. 123–4.

174 Ibid., *The Kaiser and his Court*, p. 117.

175 H.-U. Wehler, *The German Empire*, p. 62.

176 On the scandals that dogged Wilhelm II's reign see M. Kohlrausch, *Der Monarch im Skandal: Die Logik der Massenmedien und die Transformation der wilhelminischen Monarchie* (Berlin, 2005).

177 J. C. G. Röhl, *The Kaiser and his Court*, pp. 116–17.

summer of 1897. According to Röhl, Kaiser Wilhelm was "in complete control of the Executive in Berlin" for the next three years, acting as "his own chancellor" until Bülow's appointment in 1900.<sup>178</sup> Thereafter, Röhl suggests, "the less the Kaiser felt obliged to intervene, the better the system was working."<sup>179</sup>

While there can be no doubt that Wilhelm and his advisors did meet with some success in their efforts to increase his personal involvement in government, Röhl's specific interpretations have been frequently challenged, and not only by the Bielefelders. In a dismissive review of one of Röhl's books, Evans opted for sarcasm: "Far from being the moving cog at the center of the German governmental machine, Wilhelm II was usually a spanner in the works."<sup>180</sup> A more measured critique came from Eley, who nevertheless noted: "In domestic politics the crucial governing axis for the years 1897–1900 was that of Miquel and Arthur von Posadowsky ... while Miquel was careful not to lose the Kaiser's ear, 'personal rule' was certainly not the organizing priority of his politics."<sup>181</sup> Wilhelm's personal policy enthusiasms of the late 1890s – repressive legislation against the labor movement, naval expansion, and the Prussian Canal Bill – were not matched by similar initiatives after 1900: "Towards the major political questions of the period," Eley suggests, "the Kaiser could not have been more indifferent."<sup>182</sup> James Retallack (born 1955) agrees, noting "all too often we are told nothing concrete about the policies that were actually implemented by Wilhelm's capriciously chosen men."<sup>183</sup> Clark believes it is possible "to discern in the emperor's domestic political initiatives a consistent – if ill-thought-through and poorly articulated – objective, namely to integrate and enlarge the politically 'neutral' middle ground in German politics and culture and to set his monarchy squarely within it," but adds that he was "unable, despite many energetic interventions, to realise this programme in any meaningful way, or even consistently to impose his will on the executive."<sup>184</sup>

Meanwhile, Lerman's acclaimed study of the slippery and sycophantic Bülow has shown that he was too self-centered to have ever been a mere

178 J. C. G. Röhl, *Germany without Bismarck*, pp. 278–9.

179 J. C. G. Röhl, "Introduction," in J. Röhl and N. Sombart, eds., *Kaiser Wilhelm II. New Interpretations*, p. 15.

180 R. J. Evans, "From Hitler to Bismarck," in *Rethinking German History*, p. 63.

181 G. Eley, "The view from the throne: The personal rule of Kaiser Wilhelm II," *Historical Journal*, 28 (1985), p. 479.

182 Ibid., p. 481.

183 J. Retallack, "Wilhelmine Germany," in G. Martel, ed., *Modern Germany Reconsidered*, p. 42.

184 C. Clark, *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, pp. 59, 259.

"tool" of the Kaiser, even though he was never under any illusions about the ultimate source of his authority.<sup>185</sup> It is clear that Bülow, who was extremely adept at "managing" his sovereign, did not simply respond to direct orders from above. Indeed, some historians argue that Wilhelm's periodic involvement in governmental affairs owed more to the fluctuating influence of his friends and advisors than any coherent strategy of his own. Thus it peaked in the 1890s, when the influence of Eulenburg was at its height (and Wilhelm "was virtually a cipher for Eulenburg's pet schemes")<sup>186</sup> but declined markedly thereafter. An extreme version of this thesis was presented by Ekkehard-Teja Wilke in the 1970s, who argued that Wilhelm was essentially the captive of manipulative power-brokers with their own personal agendas.<sup>187</sup> Few historians found Wilke's book convincing, but many regard the Kaiser's impulsiveness (he quickly gained the sobriquet "Wilhelm the Sudden"), his inconsistency, and indiscipline as serious impediments to his chances of ever becoming a monarch who would "rule as well as reign." As Feuchtwanger puts it, "the only limit to the personal regime was his own ignorance, inconsistency and lack of a coherent plan."<sup>188</sup> His restless hunger for travel, which meant that he was absent from Berlin for more than six months each year, also hindered his prospects.

It is unfortunate that the term "personal rule" has become so well established, since it misleads and provokes in roughly equal measure. Clearly the Kaiser was no dictator, nor was he the coordinator of policy for any sustained period, yet to govern the Empire against the Kaiser's wishes was – in the long run at least – simply not possible. Wilhelm II was the single most powerful person in the Empire, and much more than an occasional fly in the ointment. His influence was greater in the 1890s than it was in the 1900s, but his gradual marginalization in domestic politics was to some extent counterbalanced by his determined retention of the *Kommandogewalt* – his extra-parliamentary "power of command" over the army – which Mommsen terms "the last bastion of royal influence against the onslaught of democracy."<sup>189</sup> Moreover, although there is general agreement that Wilhelm's powers diminished further after 1914, his interventions could still be decisive. Holger Afflerbach has recently argued that there were three ways in which the Kaiser continued to play a

185 K. A. Lerman, *The Chancellor as Courtier. Bernhard von Bülow and the Governance of Germany, 1900–1909* (Cambridge, 1990).

186 G. Eley, "The view from the throne," p. 482.

187 E.-T. P. W. Wilke, *Political Decadence in Imperial Germany* (Urbana and London, 1976).

188 E. Feuchtwanger, *Imperial Germany*, p. 126.

189 W. J. Mommsen, "Kaiser Wilhelm II and German politics," p. 305.

significant role in wartime: as an "umpire" called upon to resolve internal disputes; as the man who continued to control the lever of personnel policy (at least until 1916); and as someone who still possessed a veto on all important decisions.<sup>190</sup> This view is supported by Hull, who notes: "Kaiser Wilhelm was in fact far more active in setting broad wartime policy than it first seems. The view of the passive, indecisive Kaiser was the product of wartime political polemics."<sup>191</sup>

John Röhl undoubtedly deserves great credit for reminding us of the "monarchocentric" nature of the German Empire. He has never suggested – as Mommsen implied in the title of one of his last publications<sup>192</sup> – that the Kaiser should bear personal responsibility for all the German Empire's misfortunes. That would indeed be simplistic, given the complexities of the state and society over which Wilhelm ruled. There were, as we shall see in Chapter 3, significant limits to the Kaiser's authority. He was only one factor in a complex political system, in which the parties, pressure groups, and mass media all played an increasing part, but he was a vital factor nevertheless. It is for this reason that purely structural approaches are likely to be every bit as flawed as wholly personal ones. Ultimately, a combination of the two will be required if historians are to find convincing answers to their many important questions regarding Wilhelm II and the governance of Germany.

190 H. Afflerbach, "Wilhelm II as Supreme Warlord in the First World War," in A. Mombauer and W. Deist, eds., *The Kaiser. New Research on Wilhelm II's Role in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 195–216.

191 I. V. Hull, "Military culture, Wilhelm II and the end of the monarchy in the First World War," in A. Mombauer and W. Deist, eds., *The Kaiser*, p. 237.

192 W. J. Mommsen, *War der Kaiser an allem schuld? Wilhelm II. und die preußisch-deutschen Machteliten* (Munich, 2002).

**Contesting the Past**

The volumes in this series select some of the most controversial episodes in history and consider their divergent, even starkly incompatible representations. The aim is not merely to demonstrate that history is "argument without end," but to show that study even of contradictory conceptions can be fruitful: that the jettisoning of one thesis or presentation leaves behind something of value.

**Published**

*Contesting the Crusades*  
Norman Housley

*Contesting the German Empire 1871–1918*  
Matthew Jefferies

**In preparation**

*European Renaissance*  
William Caferro

*Reformations*  
C. Scott Dixon

*The French Revolution*  
Paul Hanson

*Vietnam*  
David Hess

*Origins of the Second World War*  
Peter Jackson

*The Enlightenment*  
Thomas Munck

*Witch Hunts in the Early Modern World*  
Alison Rowlands

*The Rise of Nazism*  
Chris Szejnmann

# Contesting the German Empire, 1871–1918

Matthew Jefferies