



Volume 4. Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany, 1866-1890

When compared with the revolutionary excitement of 1848/49 or the horrors of trench warfare in 1914-18, the Bismarckian era can seem drab, an age of equipoise when conformity and compliance were the first duty of the citizen. Certainly, Bismarck scored stunning military and diplomatic victories between 1866 and 1871, but his later years in office have been characterized as a period of “fortification” – not exactly an exciting interpretive key either. But to look beneath the surface calm of Bismarckian Germany is to see quite a different picture, one shot through with contradictions, conflicts, and crises. Contradictions resulted from attempts both to entrench and to extend the international and constitutional agreements achieved at the time of unification. Conflict was inevitable when the effects of rapid economic, social, cultural, and political change became self-reinforcing and as a younger generation of Germans sought new challenges to match the great deeds of their fathers. Crises arose whenever Bismarck felt his authority in jeopardy. How do we assess the causes, consequences, and historical significance of all this turmoil?

A preliminary hypothesis, which readers are encouraged to test against the documents and images included in this volume, is that the German Empire was forged in ways that embedded features of a modernizing economy, society, and culture within the framework of an authoritarian polity. This is not a new proposition. Moreover, it is easy to be too categorical in applying the labels “modern” and “authoritarian,” so that everything before 1866 is deemed un-modern and everything after 1890 hypermodern. Many features of German politics after 1866 were more democratic than those in other European nations at the time. Conversely, traditional elements are easily discernable in social relations, the arts, and certain sectors of the industrial economy. Nevertheless, the anvil of tradition and the hammer of modernity allowed Bismarck and other reformist conservatives to mold German authoritarianism into new and durable forms. As a consequence of decisions made (or skirted) in the founding era [*Gründerzeit*], Imperial Germany was encumbered by barriers to political reform, and those barriers closed off or constrained opportunities to avoid a German fascism in the twentieth century. Despite the

ascendancy of bourgeois codes of conduct and the rapid expansion of industrial capitalism, Socialists, Catholics, Poles, Jews, and other out-groups were subject to social discrimination or overt persecution by the state. Science and technology were harnessed to the interests of military firepower, colonial expansion, and the domination of world markets. Women's demands for equal rights found little resonance. And one charismatic leader exercised near-dictatorial control over his ministerial colleagues, party leaders, and the entire system of state.

If citing all these portents of a calamitous future seems like reading history backwards, then we should attune ourselves to the views of contemporary Germans who did not know how the story would end. The documents and images included in this volume help us do exactly that. In examining these sources, we discover that those Germans who found themselves on the right side of class, confessional, and gender boundaries tended to view life in the 1870s and 1880s as stable and predictable. Their pronouncements on the mood of the times are often self-satisfied, and we see them striking complacent poses in the official iconography of the day. For other Germans, though, life was brutal, rigidly controlled, and patently unfair. They, too, took the pulse of the times – in their diaries, autobiographies, letters, party manifestos, and parliamentary speeches, for example. Their quest for something better can also be seen in the images presented here. How do we differentiate one group from another, and how do we find a place for Germans who do not fit neatly into either group? We could perhaps find answers to these questions by considering Max Weber's three hierarchies of status, wealth, and power. But comparing the stories told by quantitative and non-quantitative documents in this volume illustrates how difficult it is to match up Germans' objective place within these three hierarchies with their subjective reactions to movement up or down the ladder. The sources in this volume have therefore been grouped in a different way.

Both the documents and images have been divided into seven chapters: Demographic and Economic Development; Society; Culture; Religion, Education, and Social Welfare; Politics I: Forging an Empire; Military and International Relations; and Politics II: Parties and Political Mobilization. Each of these chapters, in turn, is broken down into several component sections that take up individual subjects in greater detail. And within these sections, reference is frequently made to individual documents (D) and images (IM), with a link usually being provided so that readers can jump directly to these primary sources.

The organization of these materials into chapters and sections should not prevent the reader from approaching this body of textual and visual sources as a single narrative, the story of Germany's development from 1866-1890, and from drawing larger conclusions. There are, in fact, several overarching themes that run through this volume like threads through a fabric. Four themes are identified and explained below. The reader is encouraged to consider them at various points in this volume – and, of course, to identify new ones.

The first theme considers both preferences for stasis and motives for reforming the existing order. Which economic structures, social relationships, cultural attitudes, and political institutions from 1871 remained in place in 1890 – or, for that matter, in 1918? By parsing these texts and examining the details of these images, we can inquire into Germans' subjective reactions to stability and change in their personal and public lives.

The second theme overlaps with the first one. It concerns the tension between authority and protest. Was the principle of authority on display every September 2nd when Germans celebrated the origins of their empire in the crucible of war? Was revolution the clarion call that inspired a wave of strikes, lockouts, and other labor disputes in the final years of Bismarck's chancellorship? In the documents, we find that representatives of the authoritarian German state – emboldened by the support of elites and others who feared that the pace of change was getting out of hand – were able to erect many barriers to a more equitable distribution of wealth, privilege, and power. We also encounter a surprising number of Germans who were challenging and seeking to overturn such barriers, questioning fundamental assumptions about how authority should be legitimated and deployed. These Germans devised or resurrected forms of political, social, and cultural protest that we typically associate with earlier or later periods of German history – with the age of Romanticism, for example, with the revolutions of 1848/49, or with Expressionism, Pan-Germanism, and anarchism in the early years of the twentieth century. In this volume, however, we grapple with the paradox that authoritarianism actually fostered and radicalized expressions of protest in Bismarck's Germany, too.

The third theme focuses on Germany in its remarkable regional diversity. This diversity cannot be reduced to a center-periphery polarity. To be sure, we often encounter the skeptical views of Germans who felt distant from and alienated by social, cultural, and political developments in the new imperial capital, Berlin. But we must not neglect the extreme geographical unevenness of industrial development, religious affiliations, and regional political cultures across the federal

states and provinces of Germany. Only if we abandon the perspective of political leaders in Berlin and explore the back-roads of German history can we properly apprehend the interconnectedness of local, regional, and national affairs. And only then can we appreciate the diversity of outlooks among taxpayers, churchgoers, conscripts, employees, newspaper readers, and others who saw themselves primarily as Leipzigers, Rhinelanders, or Bavarians and as Germans only secondarily.

Fourth and lastly, unexpected trajectories and unanticipated crises remind us that Germans' hopes and fears for the fate of the new German nation did not diminish between 1871 and 1890. This discovery makes us more mindful that the history of Bismarckian Germany should be read as a book whose ending, because it was unknown, fostered a deep sense of unease among contemporaries. Even though much of this anxiety first became apparent or was radicalized in the Wilhelmine period, when *fin de siècle* Germans looked back on the previous quarter-century they were right to be astounded by how much the face of German society had changed – and how rapidly. The new urgency of addressing a national electorate in the age of universal male suffrage, the increased tempo of work, travel, and communication, the accelerating pace of artistic experimentation, the sudden appearance of threats on the international horizon: all this contributed to a new sense – one of the hallmarks of modernity – that life was changing at an ever-faster pace and that the future was becoming less predictable with each passing day.

A final point not too obvious to mention is that historical scholarship on Bismarckian Germany has moved in exciting new directions over the past thirty-five years. Compared to historical interpretations that held sway in the early 1970s, more recent scholarly accounts emphasize the diversity, dynamism, and paradoxes of German development under Bismarck, without losing sight, however, of what did *not* change between 1871 and 1890. This historiographical context is cited in many of the prefatory remarks attached to documents and images in the following seven chapters. Those remarks, like this introduction, encourage readers to draw their own conclusions from the contending interpretations of German history. In doing so, readers may find that these sources confirm the importance of the Bismarckian era as a transitional epoch – when Germans were exploring how best to reconcile tradition and change – *and* as a period worth studying in its own right.

[Further Reading \(General works\)](#)

1. Demographic and Economic Development

Population Growth, Migration, Occupational Structure. We confront a paradox as soon as we try to assess why material conditions were improving for many Germans and yet, at the same time, life was also becoming less secure. Although economic opportunities were increasing and the hardware of modern technology was infiltrating workplaces and homes alike, such changes often brought unwelcome consequences: forced migration from the countryside to unfamiliar cities, job insecurity as different occupational sectors experienced booms and busts, a rising cost of living despite increases in nominal wages (D9), and the loss of traditional roots associated in one way or another with smallness of scale. Germany was urbanizing rapidly in the pre- and post-Bismarckian eras, too, but the growth of cities and the concomitant decline in the number of Germans living in rural communities – designated as those with fewer than 2,000 inhabitants – is especially pronounced during the 1870s and 1880s. Whereas almost two-thirds of the population lived in such rural communities in 1871, less than half still did so in 1895. It is impossible to overlook the extreme disparities between city and countryside caused by population shifts and urban growth rates across Germany (D1, D2, D3, D4, IM1, IM3, IM4). Without continuing emigration to America and other destinations, population growth would have been even more dramatic. Even so, it certainly seemed momentous at the time. As the problem of “pauperism” from the 1840s evolved into the “social question” of the 1860s, overcrowding in Berlin and in other large cities resulted in squalid “tenement barracks” (IM2) that epitomized the downside of freedom of movement.

Scholars used to believe that most of the Bismarckian period was afflicted by a Great Depression (1873-1896); this belief has been exposed as a myth by further research. In reality, the 1870s and 1880s were characterized by shorter periods of boom and bust; some historians use “great deflation” to describe the cumulative effect of the latter. Although some sectors suffered more severe downturns than others, the German economy as a whole continued to expand. For Germans living through these tumultuous decades, such long-term expansion was very difficult to perceive. Even brief downturns in a particular occupational branch or a local place of employment could have a devastating effect on family budgets, especially when compounded by the sickness or death of a primary wage-earner or the reduced income that came with temporary unemployment or strikes. We can identify periods when the general economy did well: the years 1866 to 1873 and the early 1880s were two such times, and there

was a strong upswing during the “founding years” [*Gründerzeit*]. That upswing, however, was followed by a downturn after 1873, which convinced many Germans that the capitalist system was dysfunctional (see Chapter 3). Indeed, there is merit in Hans Rosenberg’s thesis, advanced in the 1940s, that socio-economic dislocation and anxiety shaped the radical political movements that came to the fore in the period 1873-96. In stark contrast with the 1850s and 1860s, on the one hand, and the period of broader and more sustained prosperity between 1896 and 1913, on the other, Germans *sensed* that they were living through unprecedented hard times in the 1870s and 1880s. That sense of hardship contributed to their growing dissatisfaction with the status quo in the second half of Bismarck’s term of office.

Agriculture, Industry, Commerce. After the mid-1870s, German agriculture experienced increased competition from foreign producers. For example, grain from the North American prairies, Australia, and Russia could now reach German markets at prices that pushed owners of large estates in the Prussian east into debt or bankruptcy. Yet technological innovations such as the introduction of steam-powered threshing machines in the countryside (IM5, IM6) contributed to overall increases in the productivity of German agriculture. To be sure, growth rates in mining, industry, and commerce outstripped those of German agriculture, especially from the mid-1870s onward. But we should be careful not to exaggerate the speed of Germany’s transition from an agrarian to an industrial state (the tipping point is generally regarded as c.1900). It makes more sense, as Klaus Bade has argued, to speak of a gradual change from an agrarian state with a strong industrial sector (especially during the Bismarckian era) to an industrial state with a strong agrarian sector after the turn of the century (D5, D6).

In the first decade covered by this volume, the engine of German industrialization was still railway construction and the large-scale mining, iron-rolling, and other industries that sustained it (D7, D8). Small workshops had not disappeared, even though the exclusive rights of the guilds had been breached in most German states in the early 1860s through freedom of occupation legislation (D10, IM7). The huge factories that we associate with the era of high capitalism were still rare in the 1870s. In 1882 more than half of all heavy industry enterprises had a workforce of no more than five employees (IM8). Nevertheless, by the 1880s technological innovations were changing the face of industrial production: now precision machinery, steel, tool-making, and – somewhat later – the emergence of the petro-chemical and electrical industries shifted the German economy onto new paths. Commerce and banking also expanded greatly in these years. The documents and images in this section describe the

introduction of gas motors (D11), changes in the construction industry (D12), the transition from horse-drawn to electric trolleys (D14, D15), and the introduction of electric lights, telephones, and automobiles (D16, D17, IM10, IM11, IM12). Such progress in transportation and urban infrastructure contributed to the further growth of cities: workers were able to live further from city centers and still travel rapidly to and from their shifts with public transportation. They also fueled a recognizable consumer culture that drew the worlds of industry, commerce, and everyday life closer together. By the late 1880s, advertisers trumpeted and ordinary Germans marveled at the modern conveniences that had changed their daily routines (IM10, IM11). Scientists, inventors, and explorers believed that the age of discovery was being realized through German know-how (IM14, IM15), and poets wrote paeans to technical progress (D18).

[Further Reading \(Ch. 1\)](#)

2. Society

City and Countryside. Like “German agriculture,” the “German countryside” is an abstraction that cannot be sustained. The lifestyle of a landlord or a day laborer on one of the vast grain-growing estates owned by Junkers in eastern Prussia bore little resemblance to that of a poor livestock farmer or a vintner trying to eke out a living from a tiny plot of land in the southwestern state of Baden. These groups benefited to different degrees and in different ways from the rationalization of German agriculture, which included the introduction of new farming techniques, synthetic fertilizers, and mechanization. Hence, the increasing diversity, not uniformity, of rural society merits emphasis. This diversity explains why Germans from some regions voted with their feet and left unsatisfying rural lives to move to the big cities. It also determined the local flavor of personal reflections written during and after such peregrinations (D1, D2, D3, IM1, IM2). Those reflections are bolstered by statistics drawn from an increasing number of social-scientific studies of rural and urban life in these years, and they suggest a high degree of interpenetration between city and country. The urbanization of what had previously been a tiny village near Lübeck (D2) illustrates the disorienting effect that mobility, machines, and markets had on rural Germany.

Class Relations and Lifestyles. One way to appreciate the effects of this interpenetration between city and countryside is to consider the new ways in which time and space were measured. In rural areas, the rhythms of the sun and seasons still largely determined productive

and social activities. But farmers and inn-keepers needed to be aware of train schedules and shift times if they were to serve clients who now lived beyond the horizons of the village. Marriage customs and burial rites (D1, D49) in the countryside still appeared to unfold according to an ancient time-clock – one that ran too slowly for young city dwellers rushing to a dance-hall or an international art exhibition. The simple meals and spartan interiors of rural cottages seem worlds apart from the food budgets and interior furnishings of middle-class households in the cities (D13, D14, D50, D51, D52, D53, D54, D55). But keeping up appearances required social strategies that were not only fluid and ill-defined, but also subject to intervention by “outside” forces in both countryside and city. Such forces included the state in its local, regional, and national guises; lawyers, politicians, and social theorists; and entrepreneurs, consumers and others for whom the cash nexus was paramount. As parents hoped that their children would prosper and profit from their own sacrifices, and as the new significance of wealth, both real and symbolic, gradually erased the boundaries between social “estates” [*Stände*], the contours of a new class society gradually came into focus.

Wistfulness over the disappearance of social estates and mixed feelings about the new significance of class relations can be discerned in the images of the day. They document the distances of time and space separating a midday meal of itinerant laborers in Thuringia (IM1) from a Sunday afternoon stroll by upper-middle-class *burghers* on Dresden’s famed Brühlsche Terrasse (the “balcony of Europe”) (IM2). Satirical journals poked fun at the new pretensions that became evident as these class divisions widened. They noted, for instance, that claims to represent “the people” were often put forward by the most privileged and narrow of social elites (IM3). The hunt for decorations and titles continued to animate burghers eager to rub shoulders with courtiers and the very rich (D4, D5, I4, I5). And successful industrialists like Alfred Krupp and Carl von Stumm did their best to import hierarchies of status and authority (D7, D8, D11, D12) into the fabric of workplace relations on the shop floor. Bankers, lawyers, professors, and other members of the propertied and educated bourgeoisie added to the clamor for social prestige (D9, D10, D13, D14, IM4, IM5, IM7, IM9). This newly acquisitive society horrified the novelist Theodor Fontane (D6, IM6), who remarked on the paradox that the ubiquity of status-seeking and one-upmanship actually had a leveling effect on society as a whole.

Other leveling influences included near-universal literacy; the rise of a mass press; increasing access for middle-class youths to secondary schools, universities, and institutes of technology; the pervasiveness of consumer culture; and the general rise in the proportion of family incomes

available for discretionary expenditures after payment of essential food, clothing, and housing costs. For the working classes, discretionary income rose from about 40 percent of family income in the 1870s to 55 percent in the 1890s. Among these leveling influences, education [*Bildung*] came to be seen as the most important means for overcoming barriers to advancement in urban and rural areas alike. New modes of transportation and communication, too, carried discontents from one sphere to the other and offered the prospect of escape when such discontents became too severe to bear. Over an extended period of time and with great variations among regions, the social and institutional constraints that had made life harsh, static, or isolated before 1866 loosened or disappeared. The levels of geographical and social mobility achieved in the 1870s indicated that there was no turning back from a dynamic society that had still seemed distant to revolutionaries in 1848/49.

Conditions of Work. This section illuminates the effect of changing methods of capitalist production in the 1870s and 1880s (IM12, IM14, IM15). On the one hand, artisans and other members of the lower middle classes [*Mittelstand*] were hard-pressed to retain even the vestiges of the “golden age” that they claimed, erroneously, had characterized their working conditions and lifestyles before unification (D15, D16, D17, IM16, IM17). On the other hand, the advance of industrialization and the expansion of commercial and consumer cultures produced new opportunities for social groups such as retail clerks (D18). Both groups’ reflections remind us that there are always winners and losers in industrialization. The accounts of flax cultivators on the Lüneburg Heath and of farm workers in Mecklenburg or Pomerania (D19, D20, D21), not unlike those that describe working-class hierarchies in a steel factory or workplace conflict in Hamburg (D26, D28), suggest that even within apparently monolithic occupations a complicated layering of workplace responsibilities and social rank was discernable (IM13). That layering often baffled social scientists (D51, D52, D53, D54) who were trying to discover why the expenditures and lifestyles of working-class or lower-middle-class Germans varied to such a large extent, despite universal pressures to provide the essentials of life to growing families while saving a few *Pfennigs* to cope with injury, unemployment, old age, or other calamities of life (D46, D47, D48, IM23). Their studies often yielded ambiguous answers or perpetuated myths about workers’ unhealthy or “irrational” lifestyles. Yet, as historians, we can be pleased that survey-takers and photographers crossed the threshold of so many homes, for their work offers us a view into the lives of Germans who left no other record of their daily affairs.

Gender Relations. After promising starts in 1848/49 and the mid-1860s, both the bourgeois and the working-class women's movements made relatively little headway during the 1870s and 1880s. The growth of the Social Democratic Party in the 1890s and the questioning of bourgeois values that accompanied the philosophical and artistic movements of the *fin de siècle* were prerequisites for more successful demands for women's rights. But the Bismarckian period was anything but devoid of commentaries on the double standards that characterized gender relations at the time (D29, D30). Not only literary scholars, artists, and photographers (D29, IM16, IM17, IM18), but also activists and social scientists with widely divergent agendas provided any number of analyses of the "women's question." Those analyses documented women's sexual exploitation inside and outside the workplace (D22, D23), the social origins of parents of illegitimate or fatherless children (D31, D32, D48), the state regulation of prostitutes (D33, D34, D35), and the many restrictions placed on women's ability to protect their property in marriage, to secure other legal rights inside or outside the family, or to participate in associational life and politics.

Gender-specific roles characterized almost every workplace environment, from street cleaning in Munich to domestic service in Berlin to factory labor in the Ruhr district (IM11, IM15, IM16, IM17). Gradually the campaign to increase educational opportunities for women gathered steam through vocational schools for women (D41, D42) and lobbying efforts to overcome conservative views about which occupations "suited" their abilities (D43, IM19, IM20). In this campaign, Hedwig Dohm stands out as having provided cogent and forceful arguments not only for more employment opportunities, but also for the female vote (D39, D40). At a time when the Social Democratic Party was suffering state repression, Clara Zetkin and August Bebel also wrote pioneering and no less passionate critiques of gender inequality (D44, D45, IM19, IM20, IM21). These writings and ideas were taken up in bourgeois reading circles and discussion groups and in meetings organized by female members of the Social Democratic Party (I22). Other accounts describe the alleged sexual morals of working-class women (D36, D37), the effect of Socialist activities on working-class marriages (D38) and, further up the social scale, the types of family roles and leisure pursuits that were considered appropriate for bourgeois or aristocratic women (D55, IM23, IM24, IM25).

[Further Reading \(Ch. 2\)](#)

3. Culture

Artistic Movements and Individualism. Hermann Muthesius, an early pioneer of German architectural modernism, once referred to the nineteenth century as the “inartistic century.” It may be true that German Realism produced fewer creative breakthroughs than the Romanticism of the first half of the century or the Expressionism of the Wilhelmine period. Realist painting often drew on Biedermeier conventionality rather than Romantic rebellion. Nevertheless, the images and texts included in this section illustrate that Germany’s cultural institutions remained regionally dispersed and resistant to top-down control. Artists sought but never found a distinctive, coherent form of “German” art that would reflect the political “unity” of the post-1871 nation state.

Germany’s federal states (and municipalities) set their own cultural policies to express and protect “public taste.” These policies became more important after 1890, when sex-, crime-, and adventure stories called into existence a moral purity movement – something that was hardly necessary in Bismarckian Germany. Unlike France, with its indisputable cultural capital, Paris, late-nineteenth-century Germany could boast many centers of artistic production, not a single definitive one. Dresden and Munich were in the lead, but Berlin, the new political capital, was gradually making a name for itself as a cultural center, too. If the lack of a single center of artistic production hindered the development of a cohesive German style, then it also provided for a diversity that accommodated the personal idiosyncrasies of independent artists. Some artists abandoned even these artistic centers and developed a lighter, “open air” (*plein air*) style of landscape painting (IM25, IM27). Others followed peasants into tiny rural cottages and rustic taverns in order to paint them in their daily environments (IM21, IM22, IM23).

The gradual development of a national art market; the rapid rise in the circulation of journals and newspapers; the increased number of illustrated books, book series, and lending libraries (D14, D15, D16, IM32, IM33); new efforts to make museums and concert halls more accessible to the bourgeois public (D10, IM17, IM18); the staging of national or international art exhibitions (IM15, IM16): all these developments eventually exerted a homogenizing effect on German culture. It nevertheless proved impossible to devise, much less impose, identifiably “national” standards of what constituted good German art. Long before 1890, German artists were searching for new ways to express the deeper cultural significance of political unification (D1, D2, D5), industrial

capitalism (D19, IM20, IM38), and alienation from bourgeois conventions (D6, IM29, IM30, IM31). Particularly evident in the novels of Imperial Berlin, these issues were tackled in every artistic genre.

Thus, it would be incorrect to say that either complacency or conformism characterized the creativity of individuals who, like Adolph Menzel and Friedrich Nietzsche, followed the beat of a different drummer throughout their careers or who, like Max Liebermann and Gerhart Hauptmann, expropriated the “celebratory” kernel of official court culture by celebrating new subjects and new styles. Many of the artists whose work is featured in this chapter – Fritz von Uhde, Hans Marées, Wilhelm Leibl, Arnold Böcklin, and others – laid the groundwork for the Secession movements that developed in Dresden and Munich after 1890. But as we see when we compare reactions to two German unifications (1870/71 and 1989/90), cultural anxiety about the durability of fundamental social values was expressed in print, paint, and on the stage, even as victorious Prussian troops marched through the Brandenburg Gate in 1866 (the analogous moment in October 1989 might be the now-famous kiss on the cheek that occurred when Mikhail Gorbachev and Erich Honecker celebrated the 40th anniversary of East Germany’s founding, even as the GDR’s popular legitimacy was crumbling).

Music, Verse, and Prose. The birth of the German Empire was anticipated by a requiem. Johannes Brahms’ *German Requiem* (Opus 45), completed in 1868, was a monument within the composer’s *oeuvre* (D21). It seemed to anticipate the great national events to come in adopting lines from 1 Corinthians 15: “[. . .] We shall not sleep, but we shall all be changed. In a moment, in the twinkling of any eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.” Unlike August Heinrich Hoffmann von Fallersleben’s *Founding Songs* (D23), which ridiculed the pretensions of speculators in the early 1870s (D17), Brahms’s *Requiem* provided a deeper resonance, a broader reflection on the accomplishment of unity – deeper, certainly, than the verses of *The Watch on the Rhine*, sung by German soldiers marching to the front in the summer of 1870 (D22). Likewise, the last of Richard Wagner’s grand operas, which premiered in the first decade of the German Empire, could hardly be said to lack resonance. When Wagner’s Ring Cycle was performed at Bayreuth for the first time in 1876, it constituted the culmination of the composer’s search for a “total work of art” [*Gesamtkunstwerk*] (D24, IM39) sufficiently grand and unique to measure up to the Germany of both ancient and modern times. Thereafter, for better or worse, German music was

never the same again, even though Theodor Fontane privately found good reasons to forego a performance of Wagner's *Parsifal* (D25).

Relatively few writers of poetry and prose in this era made a lasting mark on German literature. The most significant exception is the giant of German Realist literature, Theodor Fontane, whose novel *The Stechlin* is excerpted in Chapter 7. *The Stechlin* does three things at once: it captures the spirit and tone of other literature of this era, it depicts with wry humor the unfolding of a local election campaign in backwoods Prussia, and it conveys Fontane's characteristic mix of admiration for Prussia's rich heritage and his anxiety that German society had lost its moral compass (D8). The same anxiety can be found in other sources that, when considered together, also offer a contrasting mix of viewpoints: celebratory poems and satirical cartoons (D1, IM34, IM35, IM36, IM37), allegorical murals and children's board games (IM2, IM5), monumental architecture and kitschy pageants (IM3, IM6), pronouncements on the mood of the times from outside Germany's borders (D3, IM7), studies of German language and grammar, (D12, D13), and efforts to foster a culturally literate public while celebrating the accomplishments of the *avant garde* (D10, D11). It is difficult to overstress the diversity of ways in which German cultural production in these years reflected both pride in national achievement and misgivings about its future consequences. The opening of a National Gallery in Berlin in 1876 may not have provided the hoped-for opportunity to gather within one temple the variety of cultural expression in the Bismarckian era; but the Gallery's very first acquisition, Adolph Menzel's *Iron Rolling Mill* (IM20), illustrates the folly of labeling the new Germany "inartistic" and leaving it at that.

[Further Reading \(Ch. 3\)](#)

4. Religion, Education, Social Welfare

Protestants and Catholics. Historians were once prone to argue that religious allegiances inevitably wane in the face of modernizing trends like those charted in the first three chapters of this volume: population explosion, urbanization, industrialization, the rise of a self-conscious working class, the deification of technology and science, and cultural despair. Similarly, when historians observe that modernization had overcome the traditional *Kirchturmhorizont* – literally, the horizon as seen from the local church steeple – they imply that religion had been superseded by other structuring categories like class, gender, and ideology. But religion did not become irrelevant in this way during the Empire (IM1, IM2). Quite the reverse: religion continued

to condition the outlook of Germans as it had for centuries, while also providing the impetus for important new departures on a national scale.

Of these, the *Kulturkampf* [“cultural struggle”] between the German state and the Catholic Church was the most important. The *Kulturkampf* was not conjured out of nowhere by Bismarck; it drew on the determination of Protestant liberals to break what they saw as the archaic and dangerous influence of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in general, and the authority of the Pope specifically (D2, D4, IM6, IM7, IM8, IM9). Because the Pope, Catholic priests, and the political party leaders who defended the rights of Catholics were defined by Bismarck and the liberals as “enemies of the empire” [*Reichsfeinde*], most documents illuminating the course and consequences of the *Kulturkampf* are included in Chapter 7, where other state-sponsored campaigns of discrimination against minority groups are considered. Yet this conflict was a cultural one: it cannot be reduced to its purely confessional or party-political dimensions. Based on the tremendous growth of popular piety in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, religion continued to provide a filter through which the overwhelming majority of Germans viewed the material circumstances of their lives and the “Christian state” to which they looked for guidance (D1, D3, I4, I5). Thus religion helped shape discourses about the role of women in society, the proper practice and legitimate beneficiaries of charity, the scope of social reform, and the acceptable bounds of censorship.

Jewish Life and the Rise of Political Antisemitism. In the Bismarckian era, Jews as well as Catholics were the targets of nationalists obsessed with the need to define and defend a confessionally homogenous nation state. The 1870s was not only the decade in which associational life expanded rapidly in support of Protestant and Catholic confessional goals, but also the decade in which an alleged Jewish threat to the young German nation mobilized antisemites of word and deed. One impetus to the explosion of political antisemitism was the perception that Jews benefited disproportionately from the scandals associated with the founding era. The propaganda that carried the antisemites’ message to every corner of the land drew on centuries-old stereotypes and falsehoods about the Jews: for example, their alleged propensity for usury and the blood-libel myth. But another source of antipathy toward the Jews can be discerned in Germans’ uncertainty about whether the boundaries of their nation were sufficiently well-defined to meet the challenges of a precarious geographic position in Europe and the international, even global, reach of commercial and cultural networks (IM10, IM11). In

this context, it became easy for anxious nationalists to claim that Germany would never be truly unified until the Jewish “enemy within” was vanquished.

In obvious contrast to the radical antisemitism that followed defeat in 1918 and the state-sponsored murder of six million Jews after 1933, antisemitism in the Bismarckian era did not attract enough support to lead to widespread violence against Jews. Nor did it destroy the Jews’ confidence that Germany would provide a more congenial home as modernization continued. Nevertheless, to further the Jews’ integration into German society required great effort, as suggested by Emil Lehmann’s campaign for Jewish rights in Saxony (D6, D14, IM15) and the public advocacy of notables during the “Berlin Conflict” (D15, IM12, IM13, IM14, IM18). Documents included here (D9, D10, D11, D16, D17) provide chilling examples of the radicalism and plainness of language used, even in Bismarck’s day, by antisemitic leaders and publicists. They spoke of ostracizing the Jews, destroying their “dominant” position in German business, culture, and the press, stripping them of civil and political rights, banishing them from German territory, and even instigating physical violence against them (D9, D10, D11, D16, D17, IM16, IM17, IM19).

Public School Reform and Higher Education. German education enjoyed recognition throughout the world in this era because of its high standards, relative accessibility, and contribution to outstanding scientific achievement. Statistical overviews document the unprecedented growth in the number of primary, secondary, and university-level students studying in Germany and in the number of educators and institutions that taught them (D18, D19, IM20, IM22). It is crucial in assessing this success story to keep in mind the highly gendered nature of educational opportunities open to German youth as well as confessional and class divisions that made a mockery of the claim that German education was universally accessible or based on intellectual merit alone (D23, D24). According to first-hand accounts written by children and university students (D20, D21, D22), corroborated by the recollections of their teachers (D25), there was a decrease over time in the number of children kept from school because they were needed in the fields at harvest time or as messengers for small businesses. By the same token, pressures to instill “state supporting” values in students’ minds increased markedly. The hyper-nationalism exhibited by Leipzig members of the Association of German Students in the early 1880s followed the grain of Kaiser Wilhelm II’s pronouncements at the end of the decade about the central role of school curricula as a means to combat the “revolutionary threat” of Social Democracy (D26, D27). In both cases, German youth was seen as the fount of national survival

and regeneration in the face of confessional, class, and gender threats facing the “untested” nation.

Poor Relief, Public Health, Social Insurance. Religious piety fuelled charitable efforts to relieve the suffering of both the rural and urban poor. German youth was mobilized in the same effort. After unification, however, as Social Democracy grew better able to draw attention to the discontent of society’s most afflicted (D31, D33), Germans redoubled their efforts to solve the “social question.” When Kaiser Wilhelm I’s throne speech of November 1881 (D28, IM25) announced the government’s intention to inaugurate a comprehensive system of state-supported insurance for sickness, accidents, and old age (IM26), few contemporaries failed to recognize this impressive program as the “carrot” that went with the stick that Bismarck had been applying to the Social Democratic movement since the early 1870s. The reports of poor-relief doctors (D32) and bourgeois social reformers (D34, D37, D38, D39) document the undernourishment and other hardships that afflicted millions of working-class families (D33). Journalists, satirists, artists, and Social Democrats also ensured that problems of poor health, premature death, and gaps in the social safety net moved to the forefront of public awareness (D35, IM24, IM26, IM27, IM28).

“Organized Capitalism” and its Critics. An unbridgeable ideological gulf separated Karl Marx’s analysis of 1867, *Das Kapital* (D36, IM29), from Kaiser Wilhelm II’s pronouncement on the “workers’ question” in February 1890 (D30, IM28). Quite a different justification for workers’ compensation (D29) was offered by Bismarck in the 1880s. At that time the chancellor was still struggling to wring the building blocks of his program of social legislation from a reluctant, cost-conscious Reichstag. Meanwhile, panicked reactions to social crisis (IM30) were offered by critics of organized capitalism who blamed its “dysfunctions” on the Jews. We read the polemics offered by scurrilous antisemites (D40, D41) and a Catholic reformer (D42), and we see an artist’s attempt (IM31) to portray the personal calamities that followed a bank failure in 1872 (Bismarckian Germany’s closest approximation of the late twentieth century’s Enron scandal). These reformers, doomsayers, and sympathetic observers were anything but unanimous in their prognostications (D37); indeed, their solutions to the “epidemic” of capitalism usually made existing problems seem even more poisonous.

[Further Reading \(Ch. 4\)](#)

5. Politics I: Forging an Empire

The Wars of Unification. While military matters and international relations after 1871 are dealt with in the next chapter, this one underscores the interpenetration between domestic and foreign policy in the forging of German unity between 1866 and 1871. In these years, three successful wars brought immense prestige and power to Bismarck, King Wilhelm I, and the Prussian army (IM1, IM3, IM12, IM13, IM20, IM30, IM31, IM32). The first documents in this section nevertheless reflect the contingent and contested nature of the political, diplomatic, and constitutional developments that eventually resulted in the proclamation of the German Empire in January 1871. These developments – presented through the eyes of foreign diplomats, the man on the street, and commentators stationed far from Berlin (D1, D2, D3) – demonstrate that almost every aspect of “imperial” power had to be negotiated. We read of the deals Bismarck struck with myriad individuals and groups: with his own king and with Germany’s federal princes, who were determined to preserve as much of their own traditions and autonomy as possible at each stage of the unification process (D8, D9, D10); with liberals in Prussia, who were forced to reassess the possibility of pursuing the twin goals of unity and freedom together (IM11); with Helmuth von Moltke, chief of the Prussian general staff, who wanted to use the military’s battlefield triumphs as a springboard for domestic political influence (D7, I25); with foreign powers, including France, Britain, and Russia, who were concerned that Prussia now posed a threat to international peace (IM14, IM15, IM16); and with the growing power of the press, which could portray Bismarck as the most hated man in Germany at one moment and as the most popular the next (IM2).

These documents and images also draw back the curtain on behind-the-scenes discussions leading up to two of the most compelling moments in the unification process. The first was Bismarck’s decision to edit the Ems Dispatch on July 13, 1870. Shown here in its original and revised versions, the dispatch allowed Bismarck to goad the French into declaring war on Prussia (D4, D5, IM17, IM18). The second event was the “Hail!” to the new Kaiser in the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles on January 18, 1871 – a scene that was famously painted by Anton von Werner in three versions, each with a distinct perspective and intent (IM27, IM28, IM29). Images drawn from French and German satirical journals help us assess the resistance to Prussian hegemony in Central Europe, from depictions of “Wilhelm the Butcher” to innumerable variations on the Prussian eagle and spiked helmet (IM33, IM34). Contemporary drawings and photographs also depict the opposite sentiment, epitomized by Prussian victory

parades through the streets of Paris and Berlin or sentimental paintings telling the story of Prussia's "inevitable" rise (IM30, IM32, IM36). But they do not allow us to forget the dead and wounded whose sacrifices made those victories possible.

Forging a Constitutional State: The Quest for Unity and Liberty. Battlefield victories and "Hails!" to the Kaiser did not suffice to forge a working constitutional state. The same kinds of political negotiations that led to the imperial proclamation continued afterward, too – in parliament, in the press, in the slow process of legal codification, and in the critical reflections of liberals who still hoped that national unity would foster greater civil and constitutional liberties (D25, D26). Beginning with the impassioned defense of German federalism written by one Württemberg Democrat in the mid-1860s – and then updated in subtle ways in the mid-1890s (D12) – the documents in this section show how Bismarck and the liberals found common ground on a broad platform of economic, legal, and constitutional reforms. The particularly fruitful legislative periods of 1866-67 and 1871-74 are highlighted (D14 through D24, IM37, IM38, IM39). Readers are encouraged to consider where the emphasis should be put when this legislative agenda is described as "reformist conservatism" – on the adjective or the noun? The same is true of the terms "constitutional monarchy," which can be assessed through Reichstag debates and iconography (D16, IM37), and "federal state" [*Bundesstaat*], which was meant to suggest that central authority now rested with the imperial state (in the singular), as opposed to the confederation of states [*Staatenbund*] that had existed until 1866.

A Turn from Liberalism? The reflections of German Leftists, drawn from both the socialist and liberal camps, throw light on the possible paths that lay open for ongoing constitutional reform in the 1870s, even under Bismarck's increasingly autocratic style of governance (D25, D26, D27, D28, D29, D30). The liberals were now split between left-liberal and National Liberal factions, but their many accomplishments in these years cannot be dismissed. From 1874 onward, though, we see an incremental narrowing of opportunities to realize the dream of a liberal constitutional state with parliamentary control over the executive branch (D31, D32). By the mid-1880s, liberal disunity, the perceived threat of Socialism, and Bismarck's unassailable ascendancy in the Prussian ministry of state seemed to offer little hope for the future (D33). For a time it appeared possible that the coming reign of Kaiser Friedrich III might break Bismarck's omnipotence in domestic politics and revive liberal fortunes. More and more Germans had come to the conclusion that Bismarck was not only "a despot," as Theodor Fontane and others claimed, but that he was also dispensable (D34, D35). Yet the opposition parties in the

Reichstag were unable to form an anti-Bismarckian coalition. The penetration of imperial institutions – and the *idea* of empire – into the dynastic states provided further impetus for the concentration of power in the office of the imperial chancellor and in the symbol of Kaiserdom (IM40, IM41). Friedrich was terminally ill with throat cancer even before he ascended the throne, and his reign in 1888 lasted only 99 days. Liberals soon realized that his son, Kaiser Wilhelm II, was unlikely to endorse a return to a “liberal era” (D36, D37, I45, IM46).

[Further Reading \(Ch. 5\)](#)

6. Military and International Relations

Treaties and Alliances. The Nikolsburg agreement of July 26, 1866 (D1) effectively ended the diplomatic contest between Prussia and Austria for supremacy in German-speaking Central Europe. Four years later, the Germans’ victory over the French was described by Benjamin Disraeli as constituting a revolution in Europe whose consequences affected every other Great Power (D2). For the next two decades, Bismarck’s policy was one marked by caution and the consolidation of German power, both internally and externally. That policy was guided by core principles from which the Chancellor never wavered. First, he sought to reassure Europe and the world that Germany was a “satiated” nation, dedicated to peace. Second, his “nightmare of coalitions” (D4) – the fear that two or more Great Powers would ally against Germany – required that he isolate France diplomatically. To that end Bismarck encouraged France to redirect its feelings of *revanche* over the loss of Alsace and Lorraine into colonial expansion while, third, keeping Russia friendly to Germany – or at least friendly enough to prevent it from joining an opposing alliance (D5, D6, D7, D8, IM2, IM4, IM5, IM6). Fourth, the Chancellor consistently propped up the power and prestige of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, with which Germany concluded a formal alliance in 1879.

With the benefit of hindsight, students are often tempted to conclude that Bismarck’s track record – his three successful wars between 1864 and 1871 and his mastery of *Realpolitik* – makes him an unqualified “genius.” This ascription of genius also seems warranted when we compare Bismarck’s accomplishments to the zig-zagging policies pursued by the Foreign Office after 1890, when we consider the transformation of the Anglo-German rivalry into estrangement and animosity following Kaiser Wilhelm II’s decision to station a battle fleet in the North Sea, and when we consider that the unwinnable two-front war Germany faced in 1914 was the single greatest threat that Bismarck managed to avoid during his term of office. It may be true that

Bismarck offered the world forty years of peace and was a gifted diplomatic tactician, for example when he played the honest broker at the Congress of Berlin in 1878 (IM3). Such hindsight, however, is not twenty-twenty. It ignores the aggressive expansionism and fearsome loss of life that were instrumental to his *Realpolitik* between 1862 and 1871. At the end of his term of office, too, both Bismarck's genius and his long-term goals can be questioned. In particular, he appears to have underestimated the power of nationalism both at home and abroad. Nationalism undermined the diplomatic and military value of his single steadfast ally, Austria-Hungary; it also fueled restless aggression among a younger generation drawn to Pan-Germanism. Bismarck's own policies contributed to the German public's rapturous reception of the most stirring line in his last major Reichstag speech of February 1888 – "We Germans fear God and nothing else in the world!" (IM9) – and their utter neglect of his peaceful intentions (D16, D17, IM9, IM10, IM11). By 1889, Bismarck was ready, on both the domestic and diplomatic fronts, to take previously unacceptable leaps in the dark to preserve his own authority in office. Hence, readers should consider both the virtues and the flaws of Bismarck's foreign policy, from two perspectives: over the *longue durée* and with careful attention to the divergent assessments voiced by contemporaries who basked in the glow or felt the sting of his statecraft.

The Prussian Officer Corps and Militarism. In the process of forging an empire, the sword of victory was wielded by the Prussian army. Yet among today's historians the role of the military in Imperial Germany has become a very contentious issue. Exactly what linkage should we draw, for example, between the Prussian victory over Austria in July 1866 and Bismarck's successful whipping-through parliament, just two months later, of a bill (D9) "indemnifying" him for disregarding the liberal opposition? As the documents and images in this section illustrate, the heavy symbolism that accompanied the proclamation of the empire in the palace of Louis XIV in January 1871 was not accidental. At that event, the trappings of military power so overwhelmed everything else that when Anton von Werner, commissioned to paint the scene, entered the Versailles Hall of Mirrors, one Prussian officer exclaimed, "What is that *civilian* doing in here?" But did the annual Sedan Day festivities (D10) commemorating the defeat of France reflect a new chauvinism among the German populace? Or were they more meaningful as occasions for local communities to celebrate the social and cultural ties that bound them together? Was the same bonding experience evident when veterans of the wars of unification and others who had been conscripted after 1871 gathered at the "regulars' table" [*Stammtisch*] in the local tavern to discuss their real or imagined memories of wartime service? (D11)

Even more open to debate is the degree to which the social ethos of the Prussian officer corps infused German society. This debate revolves around the meaning of the term “social militarism,” which has eluded clear definition. We discover the importance that both Kaiser Wilhelm I and his grandson placed on the social ethos of Prussian officers (D12, D14). By the time Wilhelm II ascended the throne in 1888, it was already evident that the ancient Prussian nobility could no longer supply the number of socially privileged and politically “reliable” recruits needed by a modern army. The Kaiser made a virtue of necessity. He decreed that a new “nobility of spirit” would ensure the continued respect shown to the officers’ corps by German society (D13, D15, IM7, IM8). Although historians no longer believe that popular acceptance of the military’s elevated status in society signified the “feudalization” of the bourgeoisie, this issue continues to elicit debate.

Colonialism. Germany’s brief flurry of colonizing activity in the mid-1880s represented the single most important exception to Bismarck’s policy of maintaining the status quo in foreign affairs after 1871. Fortifying Germany’s position in Europe and “insulating” it from potential shocks from the international alliance system remained Bismarck’s priorities – this was where his map of Africa lay, as he once put it (IM12). Some Germans believed otherwise, including Friedrich Fabri, Director of the Barmen Rhine Missionary Society. Fabri was convinced that his 1879 pamphlet, *Does Germany Need Colonies?* (D18) was instrumental in unleashing the public clamor for overseas colonies. Whatever the merits of that claim, the early 1880s saw the rise of noisy colonial lobby groups and the reorganization or expansion of some older societies promoting emigration, geographic exploration, or the export trade (D20, D21). Fabri’s pamphlet and the agitation of these societies captured the public mood of Germans who worried about how to reinvigorate the economy, provide a safety valve to (perceived) over-population through emigration, and secure raw materials and markets for German industry.

Between 1884 and 1886, action followed words, initially through the bold claims to Southwest Africa staked by the adventurer Carl Peters (D23) and, subsequently, through the establishment of German protectorates in Cameroon, Togo, German East Africa, and a number of islands in the South Pacific (IM14). Historians continue to debate the reasons Bismarck acceded to this colonial land grab, because he had previously been disinclined to consider colonial acquisitions. The Chancellor may have been trying to use colonial possessions as pawns in his chess game of international diplomacy. He was not averse to stirring up tension with Britain (IM13) as a means to undermine the influence of Crown Prince Friedrich and his English wife, the daughter

of Queen Victoria. And, at least for a short time, he recognized the electoral appeal of colonies. His brief, tentative ride on the colonial bandwagon was supported by members of the right-wing National Liberal and Free Conservative parties, whose candidates in 1884 recouped some of the seats they had lost to the left liberals in the Reichstag elections of 1881. None of these explanations makes sense, however, unless we discard the idea that Bismarck conjured up the colonial movement to serve his Machiavellian plans. Instead, we should recognize that colonies in the 1880s represented a genuinely powerful expression of nationalist feelings among a significant number of middle-class Germans.

The allure of colonies had its limits, however. Friedrich Kapp (D19) and others offered cogent criticisms of colonial chauvinism. Over time many Germans came to share Kapp's assessment. They also realized that Bismarck had not been wrong to worry that Germany would benefit only marginally, if at all, from even a "pragmatic" approach (D22) whereby economic control of overseas territories relied on the activity of chartered companies rather than state initiative ("the flag follows trade") (D23, IM12). The often brutal treatment of native Africans provided the Social Democrats with plenty of ammunition to denounce Germany's territorial expansion overseas (D24). Satirical magazines also ridiculed claims that colonial conquests represented a "civilizing mission" on behalf of all mankind (IM17). Nevertheless, the indefatigable Peters and others were always ready to answer such criticism with further claims – as vehement as they were unsupportable – about the economic, national, and cultural benefits of colonies. Sometimes they pointed to the danger of giving Socialist critics of colonialism a hearing at all (D25). Whether opposing colonies or calling for more overseas expansion, such pronouncements expressed a growing sense of unease among nationalists that Germany's mission in the world remained unrealizable within the constraints imposed by Bismarck's system and style of governance.

[Further Reading \(Ch. 6\)](#)

7. Politics II: Parties and Political Mobilization

"Enemies of the Reich." In an age of rapid social and economic change, when the new empire's political culture was still in flux, the tactic of labeling certain out-groups "enemies of the Reich" seemed to offer Bismarck the opportunity to create an alliance of state-supporting parties in the Prussian Landtag and the national Reichstag. Among such "enemies" Bismarck focused his attacks on German Catholics from 1871 onward, on Social Democrats after 1878, on left liberals

in the early- and mid-1880s, and on the Poles of eastern Prussia starting in 1885 (D7). The first two groups receive special attention here because they most clearly demonstrated that this strategy was prone to backfire on the Chancellor. It created or strengthened the common identity of members of the victimized groups where such solidarities had previously been absent or less apparent. Earlier scholars approached the *Kulturkampf* against the Catholic Church and the Anti-Socialist Law of 1878-90 as evidence of Bismarck's successful manipulation of public opinion to safeguard his fragile Reich. Now, historians stress the degree to which both anti-Catholic and anti-Socialist campaigns accorded with the wishes of large segments of the Protestant middle classes. Both struggles also contributed to the destabilization and loss of authority of the Bismarckian state, not its fortification.

The *Kulturkampf* was probably Bismarck's boldest and most ill-conceived gamble. It was heralded by a gradual escalation in tensions between state authorities and the Catholic hierarchy in the second half of the 1860s in Baden, Prussia, and other German states. Shortly after unification Bismarck and his Minister of Culture, Adalbert Falk, inaugurated a series of legislative initiatives designed to undermine the Catholic Church's autonomy in Germany, to reduce its financial independence, to lessen its influence in the schools, and to banish the Jesuit Order from German lands (D1, D2, D3). Left liberals and National Liberals enthusiastically supported this initiative. Some of them agonized over the discrepancy between liberalism's commitment to civil liberties and the obvious fact that Bismarck was targeting a specific group for repression (D4). Most, however, hoped that struggle against the Catholic Church would achieve three aims: reduce the influence of groups on the empire's borderlands (Prussian Poland, Bavaria, the Rhineland, and Alsace-Lorraine) who might be tempted to ally with their coreligionists in France or Austria, drive back the forces of "obscurantism" that had allegedly remained ascendant in the Catholic Church since medieval times, and ensure that the liberal parties remained indispensable to Bismarck so that constitutional and economic liberties would continue to expand.

The May Laws of 1873 constituted the centerpiece of *Kulturkampf* legislation. Tensions between Bismarck and the Pope only worsened over the next two years. By the end of the decade, however, Bismarck had recognized that counter-efforts by Catholic clergy and their congregations had largely frustrated his plans. The insufficiency of state institutions to combat one-third of the empire's population had been strikingly revealed. By 1878, the Chancellor had many reasons to welcome back into the government fold the principal political representative of

Catholic interests, the German Center Party, which drew on a wide variety of ecclesiastical and lay organizations (D5). The Center Party commanded a large caucus of Reichstag deputies representing Catholic constituencies. In such regions it was often a foregone conclusion that the Center candidate would emerge victorious on election day, not only due to the clustering of Catholics in specific regions of Germany but also because deep-seated social antagonisms divided Protestants and Catholics and contributed to the latter's feelings of discrimination (see Chapter 4). Between 1878 and the mid-1880s, the *Kulturkampf* was slowly wound down (D6). Bismarck, however, never admitted defeat publicly, and confessional peace in the Wilhelmine era remained fragile.

Bismarck gradually escalated repressive measures against the allegedly "revolutionary" threat of Social Democracy during the 1870s (D8, D9, IM3, IM4, IM5, IM6). Two assassination attempts on Kaiser Wilhelm I (D11, D12, D13, IM7, IM8) led to passage of the Anti-Socialist Law in October 1878 (IM12). The campaign to outlaw Social Democratic activities was even more popular among bourgeois Germans than the *Kulturkampf*, and its failure proved to be an even greater blow to the authority of the Bismarckian state. The two campaigns shared many features. They both raised hopes among middle-class liberals that a campaign against "enemies of the empire" would consolidate the strength and inner unity of the new nation state, either by reasserting the authority of the state over followers of the Pope or by defending private property and the established social order against the forces of revolution. Both led to liberal self-recrimination and second thoughts about the wisdom of designating any single political movement as "beyond the pale" (D10, D14, D15, IM13). Both demonstrated that the police, the courts, and state administrators lacked the means or were insufficiently committed to combating a political ideology that represented such a large portion of the population (D39, IM14, IM15). And both contributed directly to strong feelings of solidarity among the targeted group, increasing their electoral success and parliamentary influence.

Few German workers had even heard of Karl Marx in the early 1870s or knew anything about his theories of class struggle and revolution. Of those who did, many still followed the teachings of another (then deceased) socialist leader, Ferdinand Lassalle. During the period of the Anti-Socialist Law (1878-90), Social Democrats developed a comprehensive network of underground agents, couriers, propagandists, and election workers. Tempered by the practical parliamentary politics of August Bebel, Wilhelm Liebknecht, and other Social Democratic leaders in the Reichstag and state parliaments, more and more workers came to believe that tight party

organization, an autonomous network of cultural associations, political protest, and the principle of “all hands on deck” on election day were the best way to combat a state that had labeled them outlaws (D16, D24, D25, D26, D27, D28, IM16, IM17, IM18, IM19, IM20). As a result, between 1878 and 1890 the membership of the Social Democratic Party rose, as did the number of deputies in its parliamentary caucuses (D37, IM21, IM22, IM23). Whereas only about 350,000 votes had been cast for Social Democratic candidates in the Reichstag elections of 1874, 1.4 million ballots were cast for the party in February 1890 – almost 20 percent of the popular vote (D38, IM25). This stunning victory contributed to Kaiser Wilhelm II’s decision to dispense with Bismarck a month later and anticipated the party’s even more dramatic growth in the 1890s.

Party Programs and Organizations. Universal male suffrage was introduced in 1867, first for elections to the Reichstag of the North German Confederation and then, in 1871, for the new empire. In these years the party landscape in Germany assumed patterns that persisted up to 1918 and beyond. Historians disagree about whether the main political parties represented stable socio-moral “milieus,” as postulated by M. Rainer Lepsius. Milieu theory fails to accommodate the dynamic nature and opportunities for shifting alliances within Imperial Germany’s political system. Yet the durability of the main party groupings and of their original party platforms suggests that the genesis of modern mass politics is best located in the Bismarckian, not the Wilhelmine, era. It was in 1866-67 that both the conservative (D17, D18, D19) and liberal movements (D21, D22) split. The Social Democrats also organized in these years, first in the regional and then the national arenas (D24, D25). In the early 1870s, the Catholic Center Party was consolidated in response to the *Kulturkampf* (D20), and in 1875 the Marxist and Lassallean wings of Social Democracy forged a fragile unity on the basis of the Gotha Program (D26, D27, D28). The 1880s saw the older left-liberal and newer antisemitic parties split, reunite, or otherwise reconstitute themselves (D23, D29).

These parties’ programs and election manifestos illustrate the interdependence of social, economic, and political issues in their respective ideologies. They also reveal opportunities for coalition-building between parties as well as the obstacles to cooperation that have led some historians to speak of the “pillarization” of the party-political system. Satirical cartoons (I26, I27, I28) and carefully posed photographs of party leaders (I29, I30) suggest that the main parties shared more common values than historians sometimes suppose, even though party alliances seemed arbitrary at one moment and dependent on Bismarck’s favor at another.

“Politics in a New Key.” The emergence of new political parties and party groupings was not the only important feature of the emerging mass politics in Bismarckian Germany. In this section we also see the power of the press to bring questions of public policy into the homes of ordinary Germans (I31, I32). As voters came to accept the act of casting a ballot as a natural patriotic duty or as the best means of expressing class, confessional, regional, or ideological solidarities, the turnout for Reichstag elections rose dramatically – again, much more dramatically than the better-studied elections after 1890. In the Reichstag elections of 1874, about 5.2 million Germans cast ballots, resulting in a turnout rate of 61.2 percent. In the Reichstag elections of 1887, about 7.6 million Germans trooped to the polls. This amounted to a turnout rate of 77.5 percent, which remained unmatched until 1907 (D32). One reason for this increase in voter commitment was the effort made by Reichstag deputies to ensure the secrecy of the act of voting.

Such protection was far from iron-clad (D33, D34, D35, D36, D37). Whether the principle of secret balloting was respected or undermined depended very much on where a voter lived, who his employer was, and whether the government took a direct interest in the outcome of a particular local campaign. Little wonder that artists of the day depicted the “unresolved questions” that afflicted “doubtful voters” in this era (IM33, IM34, IM35, IM36). Voters also became the target of irresponsible promises and appeals from radical parties. The antisemites of the late 1870s and 1880s contributed most to the brutalization of public opinion: they had a high appreciation for the average voter’s gullibility (D30, D31, D32). Yet all parties were forced to reckon with the masses – as one Conservative put it, whether or not they wanted to and whether or not they were comfortable doing so. Universal male suffrage had grown “too hot under their feet” to allow them to rely any longer on the older and more exclusive politics of notables [*Honoratiorenpolitik*].

Bismarck’s Legacy. A scholarly wag once remarked that a book entitled “The Unification of Germany by Kaiser Wilhelm I” should have been titled “... *despite* Wilhelm I.” Before his death in March 1888, Wilhelm I himself observed wryly that it was not easy to serve as Kaiser under the reign of a chancellor like Bismarck. For his part, Bismarck was consistent and sincere when he argued that he served at the pleasure of his king (IM38). During the short reign of Kaiser Friedrich III (IM42) in the spring of 1888, relations between Bismarck and the royal palace were severely strained. To the surprise of most insiders, a cordial relationship between chancellor

and emperor reemerged when Kaiser Wilhelm II ascended the throne in June 1888. By the end of the “Year of Three Kaisers,” however, storm clouds had already appeared on the horizon, eventually leading to Wilhelm II’s dismissal of Bismarck in March 1890 (D42, IM46). Even before that date, contemporaries had been debating the historical significance and consequences of Bismarck’s long term of office (D40, D41). Where next for Germany?

This debate continued for months and years after Bismarck’s resignation (D43, D44, D45). A Bismarck cult had already assumed immense proportions before the former chancellor’s death in July 1898. Just one year earlier, however, an anonymous political cartoon (IM48) had drawn attention to the way German history under Bismarck had followed convulsive but inconclusive paths toward a new century. This cartoon depicted the same kind of triumphalism we see elsewhere in this volume – over international foes, would-be assassins, and liberal opponents. But it also depicted deep-seated anxieties about where those triumphs might lead in the future.

The German Empire had been forged on the anvil of military victory, monarchism, and the predominance of Prussia. It had developed into an economic power of the first order, able to dominate industrial markets in any number of sectors. It boasted schools, scientific laboratories, an art scene, and electoral freedoms that were the envy of Europe and the world. And the principle of federalism, so powerful in earlier epochs, had not been sacrificed even as the empire’s central political institutions grew in number and importance. Even protection for the rights of Jews seemed secure, or at least as secure as in other parts of Europe. Nevertheless, the question of whether the authoritarian or the modern features of the empire would become more pronounced in the new century remained tantalizingly open. In fact both features persisted and continued to evolve.

On March 29, 1890, Bismarck’s train left the Lehrter station in Berlin to deliver him into retirement on his estate in Friedrichsruh (IM47). That leave-taking provided Germans with an opportunity to look back over twenty-five years of unprecedented change and achievement in economic, social, and cultural realms. But in the process of forging and fortifying the empire, Germans had also diminished themselves. They did so by increasing the cleavages of wealth and rank, attacking the rights of minority groups, driving a wedge between the working classes and the rest of society, compromising the prerogatives of parliament, and following the lead of an increasingly out-of-touch statesman. These activities and attitudes encumbered later German history in ways that placed barriers in the path of parliamentarization, democratization,

and the tolerance of diversity. This interpretation of Bismarckian Germany and its legacy has been downplayed or challenged in most history books published in the past twenty years. However, it is appropriate that a new history – presented on the Internet through plain-speaking documents and revealing images – should be just as open to multiple readings and critical reflection as the histories we read on the printed page.

[Further Reading \(Ch. 7\)](#)

James Retallack

Suggestions for Further Reading

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