



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 4. Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany, 1866-1890
Memories of a Secondary School [*Gymnasium*] Student in Leipzig (c. 1880)

Secondary schooling for the more privileged middle and upper classes was oriented more towards classical languages (and classical ideals) than practical subjects and contemporary issues. After ascending to the throne in 1888, Kaiser Wilhelm II attempted a reorientation towards more scientific, technical, and “German” studies; but he and his followers faced an uphill battle. As this excerpt from the memoirs of a secondary school [*Gymnasium*] student reveals, students had long been drilled – the military metaphor is appropriate – in Greek, Latin, and classical history rather than in German or contemporary history.

Later on, there was endless Latin, and even later, Greek. German and gymnastics were equally valued minor subjects. We had two hours of each per week; only in the higher grades was instruction in German allotted somewhat more time. I wrote many Latin verses – about peace, war, the swimming pool, the lyre, the piano – but I wouldn’t have known whether any poets lived in Germany or what kind, if I did not figure it out from the books that my father put on my mother’s desk. I was capable of calculating the surface area of an ellipse, but I did not have even a rough concept of a square kilometer or the salary of a full professor at university. We wrote Greek exams in the form of translations from German originals without a dictionary, which really constituted a particular waste of both Greek and German, because we did not have what it took for such work – basically we could not read Homer. We learned from Caesar’s *De Bello Gallico* about the construction of the bridge that Caesar had built for his legions over the Rhine and could name every brace and fret, but we did not know what the structure of the German Reich looked like according to the constitution. We were more familiar with the Second Messenian War than with the Second Silesian War or the Wars of Liberation [from Napoleon], because our history lessons did not include these late events. The historical and political foundations of our lives remained completely unknown to us.

However, this was by no means the teachers’ fault; it had to do with the times, and I knew of no *Gymnasium* where the situation would have been any different.

Source: Rudolf Binding, *Erlebtes Leben [A Life Lived]*. Potsdam, 1937, pp. 75-76.

Original German text reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870-1914. Dokumente und Skizzen [German Social History 1870-1914. Documents and Outlines]*, 3rd ed. Munich: C.H. Beck, 1982, pp. 330-31.

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