



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918
Bernhard von Bülow's "Dynamic" Foreign Policy (1899)

Bernhard von Bülow (1849-1929) was Reich chancellor from 1900 to 1909. In this speech before the Reichstag, in which he announced the second proposal for a German fleet, he outlines his vision for an expansionist German foreign policy. His metaphorical use of the hammer and anvil speaks to many Germans' belief that colonial expansion was necessary in order to protect their country from other powers.

[. . .]

In our nineteenth century, England has continually expanded its colonial empire – the largest the world has seen since the days of the Romans. The French have gained a firmer and firmer foothold in North Africa and Africa and created for themselves a new empire in the Far East. In Asia, Russia has embarked on a series of victories that has taken it to the Pamir Plateau and the coasts of the Pacific Ocean. The Sino-Japanese War four years ago and the Spanish-American War barely eighteen months ago have kept the ball rolling. These wars have resulted in momentous, dramatic, and far-reaching decisions, shaken old empires, and contributed to the ferment in new and dangerous ways.

[. . .]

The English prime minister said a long time ago that the strong states would grow ever stronger and the weak ones ever weaker. [. . .] We have no desire to tread on the toes of any foreign power, but, by the same token, we do not want our toes trodden on either (*"Bravo!"*). And we do not want to be shunted aside by any foreign power in political or economic matters (*Loud applause*).

It's time, it's high time for us [. . .] to consider the position we must adopt on the processes that are unfolding all around us, processes that bear the seeds of future power relations, perhaps for a long time to come. To remain immobile on the sidelines, as we have done so often in the past, either from an inbred modesty (*Laughter*) or because we have been entirely absorbed by our own inner disputes, or even because of doctrinairism – to daydream on the sidelines while others take a slice of the pie – this we cannot and will not permit (*Applause*).

It is out of the question for the simple reason that we now have interests in all parts of the world. [. . .] The rapid growth of our population, the unprecedented expansion of our industry, the industriousness of our merchants, in short, the phenomenal vitality of the German people have integrated us into the world economy and drawn us into international politics. If the British speak of Greater Britain, if the French speak of Nouvelle France, if the Russians move into Asia, we too have the right to a Greater Germany (*"Bravo!" from the right; laughter on the left*). Not in the

sense of military conquests, but, indeed, in the sense of a peaceful expansion of our commerce and its bases. [. . .] We cannot and will not tolerate a return to the status quo at the expense of the German people.

[. . .]

Many in the world today feel envy toward us (*Protest on the left*), both political and economic envy. There are individuals, there are interest groups, there are movements and perhaps even nations who believe that Germans were easier and more pleasant neighbors when, despite our education and culture, foreigners looked down on us in political and economic matters like arrogant noblemen looking at a humble tutor (*“Rightly so!”; laughter*).

This age of political impotence and economic and political humility must not be allowed to return (*A loud “Bravo!”*).

In the words of Friedrich List, we do not ever again want to be the slaves of humanity. But we will only be able to maintain a leading position if we recognize that there is no welfare for us without power, without a strong army, without a strong fleet (*“That’s right!” from right; protest from the left*).

Gentlemen, for a nation that will soon number sixty million, a nation that inhabits the center of Europe and is sending its economic feelers out in all directions, the means have not yet been devised to win the struggle for survival in this world without a strong navy and army (*“Very true!” from the right*).

In the coming century the German people will be either a hammer or an anvil.

Source: Buchners Kolleg Geschichte. *Das Kaiserreich 1871 bis 1918* [Wilhelmine Germany 1871 to 1918]. Bamberg: CC. Buchners Verlag, 1987, p. 137 ff.

Original German text also reprinted on the *World War I Document Archive* website (www.lib.byu.edu/~rdh/wwi/.)

Translation: Adam Blauhut