



**Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918**

No period of modern German history has inspired as much controversy as the era bounded by Otto von Bismarck's dismissal from power in March 1890 and the outbreak of war in 1914. During the interwar period, Imperial Germany was the focus of the debate over the origins of the Great War. After 1945, the issue became the place of the German Empire in the historical trajectory towards Nazism. By the 1970s, it had become common to trace the roots of the Third Reich directly back to the manifold tensions and contradictions of Imperial Germany. In the most influential statement of this case, the West German historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler portrayed the *Kaiserreich* as a deeply flawed social and political system, in which essential features of a pre-modern age had survived into the modern, industrial era. Imperial Germany's constitutional structure remained autocratic in critical respects, while the country's ruling class, the landed Prussian nobility, not only dominated the army and councils of state, but also left its imprint on broader values and attitudes, as the country underwent its economic and social modernization. The result of this asymmetry was increasing domestic tension. The ruling classes clung grimly to power in the face of democratic challenges from many quarters, whether the progressive middle class, women's organizations, or the labor movement. In the end, so goes the argument, Germany's political elites resorted to war in 1914 as a strategy of survival – in the hope that military victory would shore up the beleaguered fundamentals of their own power.

In part because it seems wed to untenable assumptions about how countries ought to modernize, Wehler's view has itself been beleaguered. It also appears to minimize the dynamism of the German Empire, which many contemporaries regarded as the most modern country in Europe – a place where economic development, social change, and cultural achievement were unmatched, and where a mix of authoritarian and popular rule produced efficient and effective government. If Imperial Germany was tension-ridden, so goes an alternative argument, then the tensions were due to the pace of change – in other words, to the rapid onset of modernity itself.

The following volume of documents addresses the second half of the *Kaiserreich*, when the pace of industrial development, social ferment, and cultural change became torrid. The new German emperor, Wilhelm II, who gave his name to the era, seemed in many respects to symbolize the impulsive energies of Germany's development, as well as its contradictions. The documents speak primarily to the country's precocious dynamism, but they should be read in conjunction with the previous volume, in which constitutional matters, the putative font of Germany's pre-modern tensions, figure more prominently.

### **Suggestions for Further Reading:**

Volker Berghahn, *Das Kaiserreich 1871-1914: Industriegesellschaft, bürgerliche Kultur und autoritärer Staat* [*The Kaiserreich 1871-1914: Industrial Society, Civic Culture, and Authoritarian State*]. Stuttgart, 2003.

David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany*. Oxford and New York, 1984.

Roger Chickering, ed., *Imperial Germany: A Historiographical Companion*. Westport, CT, 1996.

Matthew Jefferies, *Imperial Culture in Germany, 1871-1918*. Houndmills and New York, 2003.

Wolfgang Mommsen, *Bürgerstolz und Weltmachtstreben 1890-1918* [*Civic Pride and World Power Aspirations 1890-1918*]. Berlin, 1995.

Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1866-1918* [*German History 1866-1918*]. 2 volumes, Munich, 1990-92.

Joachim Radkau, *Das Zeitalter der Nervosität: Deutschland zwischen Bismarck und Hitler* [*The Era of Nervousness: Germany between Bismarck and Hitler*]. Munich and Vienna, 1998.

Volker Ullrich, *Die nervöse Grossmacht: Aufstieg und Untergang des deutschen Kaiserreichs 1871-1918* [*The Nervous Great Power: The Rise and Fall of the German Kaiserreich 1871-1918*]. Frankfurt am Main, 1997.

Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte: Von der "Deutschen Doppelrevolution" bis zum Beginn des Ersten Weltkrieges 1849-1914*. [*The History of German Society: From the "German Double Revolution" to the First World War 1849-1914*]. Munich, 1995.

Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Das deutsche Kaiserreich 1871-1918* [*The German Kaiserreich 1871-1918*]. Göttingen, 1973.

## **1. Economic Development**

The motor of change in Wilhelmine Germany was the transformation of the material circumstances in which Germans lived and labored. This section presents dramatic evidence of this transformation. Germany's population exploded in the course of a generation, and most of the growth was concentrated in urban areas (Docs. 1-3). Dramatic increases in agricultural production made both demographic growth and redistribution possible (Docs. 4-6). By 1913, less than a third

of Germany's population was engaged primarily in farming, while the rest was occupied in the secondary and tertiary sectors that were defined respectively by industry and service. The growth of cities was at once a condition and a result of the country's prodigious industrial expansion, which came in the wake of groundbreaking technological advances in steel and chemical processing (Docs. 7-10). In these core areas of production, which were associated with the "second" industrial revolution, much of German industry was concentrated in capital and labor, as Germany supplanted Great Britain as Europe's foremost industrial power. By the end of the nineteenth century, the products of German industrial enterprise included conveniences – from automobiles and small, electric-powered machinery to aspirin – that have become standard features of modern life (Docs. 11-13).

## **2. Society and Culture**

Industrialization triggered new social formations. Traditional life in the countryside contended with the movement of the rural population to cities and urban conurbations (Docs. 1-4). Social mobility increased among the middle strata of society, as Germany completed the transition from a corporate or estates-based society [*ständische Gesellschaft*] to one based on class relations (Docs. 10-13). Yet social stratification cut many ways. Large inequalities in wealth, education, housing, and health segregated cities, where demarcated spaces and divergent ways of living fostered distinctive group identities (Docs. 2, 3, and 9). These inequalities also bred social conflict, which led to responses from the state and private organizations that sought to ameliorate, or at least control, the antagonisms created by economic and social inequality (Docs. 5-8).

In this class-based society, the lifestyles of aristocrats, the bourgeoisie, and the working class diverged. As the political role of nobles in the modern bureaucratic state waned, their privileged social status remained intact. It has been claimed that the bourgeoisie or “upper middle classes” strove to imitate the nobility, in an effort to gain the social recognition that they believed their economic and scientific achievements merited (Doc. 14). The so-called “feudalization of the bourgeoisie” has been blamed for making the German bourgeoisie receptive to the social norms of militarism and paternalistic authority, as well as to archaic codes of honor (Docs. 15-16), that came to the forefront in Nazi society. Meanwhile, private life and leisure, which remained emblems of class experience, were played out in forums that new technologies and productive capacities had called to life, such as the movie house and the department store (Docs. 17-18).

Confession, gender, and generation could not be reduced to class divisions, nor could they escape them. Although women's inferior status was captured broadly in popular prejudice and social convention, and although the dynamism of the German economy provided increasing opportunities for women outside the home, the experience of working-class women differed in basic respects from that of bourgeois women (Docs. 19-22). The same proposition applied to the young and the old (Docs. 23-25). The *Kulturkampf* [cultural struggle] abated during the Wilhelmine era, but confessional antagonisms survived amid the discrimination that Catholics continued to face (Docs. 26-32). The Catholic milieu embraced many industrial workers but tended to reject radical utopian alternatives as a framework for expressing social aspirations (Doc. 33). Jews had always been subjected to anti-Semitism in Germany, but by the 1890s most of them had concluded that acculturation was the key to full integration (Docs. 34, 36). The vision of a separate Jewish homeland in the Middle East, which was born in the 1890s, had little appeal to German Jews, despite Kaiser Wilhelm's apparent interest in the project (Doc. 35).

### **3. "Modern Life": Diagnoses, Prescriptions, Alternatives**

The term "modern" is replete with ambiguity. Its plurality of meanings betrays the complexity of society and cultural production in the Wilhelmine era. A new mass commercial culture emerged in which technological change and high levels of literacy led to an explosion of printed matter (Doc. 7). While some contemporary observers were struck by the unity of cultural life, this conceit ignored the burgeoning forces that challenged the character and values of the Kaiser (Doc. 1). Throughout the 1890s, especially around the turn of the century, a heterogeneous array of cultural critics, prophets, and reformers became dissatisfied with the stultifying atmosphere of officialdom (Docs. 2, 3, 14, and 17-19).

In the visual arts, many painters broke with the hierarchies of academic art, which were embodied in the figure of Anton von Werner, to stage their own exhibits – or "secessions" – outside the traditional structures of state sponsorship and with an eye towards innovation in form and subject-matter (Docs. 3-6). In literature as well, many young writers freed themselves from the conventions of past masters (Doc. 8). Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* used modern literary devices (such as radically changing perspectives), and his depiction of the modern bourgeoisie revealed the strains that economic and social change imposed on a merchant family in Lübeck

(Doc. 9). In poetry, fascination with the city, impressions of daily life in constant flux, and the desire for stylistic innovation led artists in many directions. From August Stramm's evocation of the physicality of the uttered word, to the lyrical aestheticism of Rainer Maria Rilke, German poetry flourished from the countryside to the battlefield (Docs. 10-13). *Die freie Volksbühne* [*The Peoples' Free Stage*] fostered innovation in the theater but acted as a conduit of Socialist critique as well (Doc. 14). Oskar Panizza's *Das Liebeskonzil* [*The Council of Love*], a scathing satire of the Catholic Church, was banned for most of the author's lifetime (Doc. 15). Satire, a weapon most successfully brandished in illustrated magazines like *Simplicissimus*, was an antidote to the Kaiser's pomposity.

Reform movements challenged Wilhelmine society. They embodied the aspirations of many who sought to change the sphere of everyday life – from clothing, lifestyles, and sexuality, to education, youth, the environment, architecture, interior design, and urban planning. The “Law against the Deformation of Villages and Regions with Exceptional Landscapes” represented the victory of environmental movements (Doc. 16). Paul Schultze-Naumburg, an artist and champion of environmentalism and naturalism, was also concerned with interior design and applied arts (Doc. 17). Karl Mann's *Kraft und Schönheit* [*Vigor and Beauty*] stressed the health and moral benefits of nudism. Julius Langbehn, a failed academic, invoked Rembrandt as the spiritual father of a new Reformation, which would place art above politics, religion, and science (Doc. 19).

Social thinkers meanwhile sought purchase on many of these same "modern" developments. Ferdinand Tönnies's distinction between *Gesellschaft* [Society] and *Gemeinschaft* [Community] and his investigations into the evolution and structure of modern societies still remains a point of departure for sociologists (Doc. 20). Likewise, Max Weber's approach to understanding social processes, particularly the individual's relationship to religion and capitalism, is still central to modern sociology (Doc. 21). Georg Simmel's meditations on the city evoked many of the same themes that informed artistic production at the time (Doc. 22).

#### **4. State and Society**

Public officials joined artists, social philosophers, and reformers in confronting the challenges of modern life. The "state," which comprised public agencies on the national, state, regional, and local levels, was a vital participant in the effort to steer, soften, or limit the impact of economic,

social, and cultural changes that followed in the wake of high industrial capitalism in Germany. The state oversaw the finest system of public education in the world, and it sought to ensure that children were trained in the basic skills needed to cope with the demands of an industrial economy (Doc. 1). Children who advanced into secondary schools were drawn as a rule from better-situated families, and their training was oriented towards professional and bureaucratic careers (in the case of boys) or (in the case of girls) towards being the wives of men who pursued those very careers (Docs. 2-3).

The principal object of the state's concern, however, was the industrial working class, whose growth and organization in labor unions and political parties appeared to pose a threat to the social and political order. The repertoire of public policies to deal with this threat included both repression and a remarkably progressive program of protection and social insurance, the basis of which had been laid in the 1880s but underwent significant expansion in the Wilhelmine era, thanks in part to the support of officials like Hans Hermann von Berlepsch, the Prussian Minister of Commerce and Industry in the 1890s (Docs. 4-6). Public welfare marked out a dimension of a broader phenomenon, which a Socialist economist soon thereafter called "organized capitalism" – the growing interpenetration of public and private institutions, as public bureaucracies sought to promote and regulate economic development, and enterprise itself became increasingly organized along bureaucratic lines (Docs. 7-8). In this respect, the extension of welfare benefits to white-collar employees in 1911 was a moment of both practical and symbolic significance (Docs. 9-10).

## **5. Politics**

Political processes also underwent dramatic change during the Wilhelmine era. The Kaiser himself quickly became the symbol of both the feverish new pace of politics and the fundamental issues that divided the country (Docs. 1-6). His brash interventions into political affairs signaled a determination to preserve or extend his autocratic powers at the expense of the democratic national parliament, even as social groups – farmers, employers, Catholics, workers, and ethnic minorities – mobilized in defense of their own sectoral interests (Docs. 7-9, 17-20). The most potent symbol of this mobilization, which represented what some historians have called the birth of German mass politics, was the stunning success of the Socialist labor movement, whose political arm, the Social Democratic Party, emerged in 1912 as the largest party in the Reichstag. This was a Marxist party, which had inscribed social revolution into its program in 1891 (Docs. 12-

13). To judge from intra-party debates between "revisionists" and "radicals," its dedication to this goal was significantly less intense by 1912, but the specter of Socialism profoundly frightened the government and other political organizations (Docs. 14-16). In response, they mobilized around the putatively unifying symbols of the German nation – doing so most effectively in the popular campaign on behalf of the German battle fleet, which Alfred von Tirpitz directed from the German Naval Office in Berlin (Docs. 10-11). His difficulties in controlling the forces that he sought to mobilize suggested, however, the dangers of appealing to the kind of nationalism that found its most radical embodiment in the Pan-German League (Docs. 21-23).

## **6. Germany in International Affairs**

Bismarck's dismissal signaled a major change in the direction of German foreign policy, which henceforth reflected the preferences of the Kaiser and the men whom he elected to top positions in the foreign office, such as Bernhard von Bülow and Alfred von Kiderlen-Wächter (Docs. 2 and 4). If Bismarck's policies had been largely conservative and continental in orientation, Wilhelm's "New Course" was directed abroad, towards asserting Germany's rightful place among the world powers, towards achieving what Bülow called a "place in the sun" (Docs. 1, 7). The effort to expand Germany's colonial empire was marked by aggressive intervention in disputes in Africa and Asia; and the result was to nurture suspicions among the other imperialist powers, as a series of colonial crises kept international tensions high (Docs. 6, 8, and 12). In particular, the British grew anxious as the Germans began to construct a great battle fleet, which they regarded as the indispensable means to pursue *Weltpolitik* – and to challenge British naval hegemony (Docs. 3, 13-16). The resulting Anglo-German naval race poisoned international relations in the early years of the new century (Doc. 5). Germany already possessed the world's most formidable land army, which in 1912-13 underwent its own expansion to the accompaniment of a provocative popular campaign (Doc. 17-19). It remains a matter of debate whether the events that culminated in the summer of 1914 were due to Germany's aggressive designs, but the evidence makes clear that whatever the motives, German actions – particularly the intervention of the army leadership at a critical moment in the final crisis – played a central role in the outbreak of European war (Docs. 20-24).

## Germany at War, 1914-1918

Whether or not Germany's leaders resorted to war in 1914 in the hopes of uniting the country, the results of the ensuing conflict were catastrophic. Paradoxically, the war did unite all Germans in a great national experience, but the experience itself exacerbated the social, cultural, and political tensions that had vexed Wilhelmine Germany in peacetime. The country was not prepared to fight a long war, for it was outmatched in basic resources by the coalition that took the field against it. The wrenching effort to mobilize domestic resources kept German armies in the field for more than four years, and it also resulted in such dislocation, privation, and corruption at home that the authority of the Wilhelmine state itself was called into question. The defeat of the German armies in the fall of 1918 dashed the hopes of those who had counted on a great victory, in the calculation that it would ratify the existing structures of power and restore domestic comity. Defeat was sealed instead in political collapse, revolution, and civil war.

Whatever the place of Wilhelmine Germany in the history of National Socialism, the significance of the war is difficult to exaggerate. Even its alleged benefits, such as the emancipation of women and the political integration of most of the Social Democratic labor movement (to say nothing of the birth of the German Communist Party), now appear to have been ambivalent. In George Kennan's famous formulation, the war was the twentieth century's "seminal catastrophe." To the German republican government that took shape in 1918, it bequeathed a crushing legacy of civil conflict and national humiliation.

### Suggestions for Further Reading:

Roger Chickering. *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914-1918*. Cambridge, 2004.

Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht: Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914-1918* [*Grasping at World Power: The War Aims Policy of Germany under the Kaiser 1914-1918*]. Düsseldorf, 1961.

Holger Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914-1918*. London, 1997.

Peter Graf Kielmannsegg, *Deutschland und der Erste Weltkrieg* [*Germany and the First World War*]. Frankfurt am Main, 1968.

Fritz Klein, et al, *Deutschland im Ersten Weltkrieg* [*Germany in the First World War*]. 3 vols., Berlin, 1968-9.

Wolfgang Michalka, ed., *Der Erste Weltkrieg: Wirkung, Wahrnehmung, Analyse* [*The First World War: Impact, Cognition, Analysis*]. Munich and Zurich, 1994.

## **1. Battle**

The German armies marched to war confident of a quick victory. These expectations seemed vindicated during the first weeks of combat, as reports from the front sang of a magnificent triumph in France – but then these reports grew quieter and began to tell of a different, stationary kind of war (Docs 1-2). A similar change registered in the tone of letters sent from soldiers in the field (Docs. 3-7). In ways that were impossible to read from either the official reports or the letters sent back home, Germany's strategic prospects had become bleak, the subject of extended dispute among the country's military and naval leadership (Docs. 8-10). Given the failure of the great German offensive in the west in the spring and early summer of 1918, even the army's high command was compelled to admit the hopelessness of the country's military fortunes (Docs. 2, 11)

## **2. Mobilization of the Home Front**

Reactions to the outbreak of war were a great deal more complicated and ambivalent than the famous scenes of resolve and enthusiasm that were celebrated early on in print and image (Docs. 1-5). Historical scholarship has shown that many of these scenes represented at most the experience of select groups of people, and that they took on heavy ideological significance in retrospect. In any case, enthusiasm over the war soon waned everywhere, as the vast effort to mobilize Germany's material and moral resources began. The army, which had been a pervasive presence in German politics and society before the war, now became the principal agent of mobilization. Soldiers enjoyed near-dictatorial powers on all levels of government, to the point where something similar to a military dictatorship settled in during the later years of the war, when Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff took over the supreme command (Docs. 6-8). The army was the driving force in the mobilization of German industrial resources and in the channeling of German labor into industries that manufactured the tools of war (Docs. 9-13). Meanwhile, the mobilization of morale and the attempt to maintain popular support, if not enthusiasm, for the lengthening war also required the systematic intervention of military authorities, both as censors and purveyors of "patriotic instruction" (Docs. 14-19). The soldiers could, however, also appeal to the efforts of leading German scholars and intellectuals, who

offered their own visions of why various constituencies of Germans were fighting (Docs. 20-25). The tensions, not to say contradictions, among these visions were symptomatic of the growing challenge of maintaining popular confidence in the war effort.

### **3. Privation and Ferment on the Home Front**

Mobilization profoundly affected the balance of social and political forces in Germany. Because it recognized that the war could not be won without the active support of the labor movement, the German government made significant concessions to the trade unions, a principal part of which was Social Democratic in orientation (Docs. 1-3). As a consequence, industrial workers were in some respects better able to deal with the growing material shortages that set in everywhere, most ominously in the supplies of food and coal. Rationing failed to prevent either inflation or the burgeoning of the black market, nor did it halt the general deterioration of popular morale (Docs. 4-10). In these circumstances, political opposition took shape within the radical wing of the Social Democratic party, particularly after revolution visited Russia in 1917, to suggest a model for bringing the war to an end (Docs. 11-12, 15, and 19). In the spring of 1917, the founding of the Independent Social Democratic Party marked the rupture of the German Socialist labor movement (Doc. 16). The effort to counteract growing opposition to the war included the more vigorous repression of agitators and an attempt to remobilize public opinion behind the idea of a victorious peace (Docs. 14, 17). By 1917, questions of foreign and domestic policy were thus interlocked. The proponents of a more moderate, compromising peace were also the advocates of turning Germany into a parliamentary democracy, while those who called for a *Siegfrieden* [freedom through victory] included the champions of an authoritarian political system (Docs. 18, 20-23).

### **4. Seeking an End to the War**

Why was Germany fighting? And what kind of peace would justify the sacrifices that Germans had invested in the war? These questions were divisive almost from the beginning, as the initial exuberance over a war in defense of the nation began to wear off. By the end of 1914, when German troops were everywhere on the soil of other countries, a number of important groups, which included many of the country's industrial leaders, had sketched out visions of massive German annexations in Europe – the country's reward for its military success (Doc. 2). In this thinking, these leaders had the support of the German government itself, although other, more moderate groups called instead for a compromise settlement, usually on the basis of a return to

the status quo of 1914 (Doc. 1, 3). As the military stalemate dragged on, the prospect of a negotiated peace with at least part of the enemy coalition became increasingly attractive, particularly in the Reichstag, among the parties that represented the social groups that bore the heaviest burdens of the war (Docs. 5, 6). In 1917 these parties commanded a parliamentary majority, which defied the army's high command with the so-called "Peace Resolution" in favor of a settlement without annexations or indemnities (Doc. 7). Because such a peace would require the renunciation of large-scale territorial gains abroad (as well, evidently, as constitutional concessions at home), both the military and civilian defenders of the old order resisted it until October 1918, when the army itself concluded that Germany must seek peace through the president of the United States (Docs. 4, 8, and 9).