

**Source-based questions: the Hohenzollern candidature****SOURCE F**

During dinner at which Moltke and Roon were present, the pronouncement came from the embassy in Paris that the Prince of Hohenzollern had renounced his candidature in order to prevent the war with which France threatened us. My first idea was to retire from the service because I perceived in this extorted submission a humiliation of Germany for which I did not desire to be responsible. I was very distressed for I saw no means of repairing the corroding injury I dreaded to our national position from a timorous policy, unless by picking quarrels clumsily and seeking them artificially. I saw by that time that war was a necessity, which we could no longer avoid with honour.

Bismarck discussing the events of 12 July 1870 in his memoirs, *Reflections and Reminiscences*, published in 1898.

1. Explain briefly the following references:
  - (a) 'it must not turn into a Prussian concern' (Source D)
  - (b) 'your son' (Source E)
  - (c) 'the corroding injury I dreaded to our national position' (Source F)
2. Study Sources B, C and E.
  - (a) From a comparison of these sources, assess the consistency of the King's attitude to the Hohenzollern candidature.
  - (b) On the evidence of these sources, consider the view that Bismarck treated the opinions of the King with barely concealed contempt.
3. Study all of the sources.
 

From these documents, and any other evidence known to you, how far would you agree that by 12 July 1870 Bismarck had sustained a major diplomatic defeat entirely of his own making?

**Further Reading**

*The Unification of Germany, 1815–70* by A. J. A. S. S. Hodder & Stoughton, Access to History series, 1989  
*Imperial Germany 1870–1918* by Edgar Feuchtwanger (Routledge, 2001)

**4 Germany under Bismarck, 1871–1890****Key Issues**

- What problems confronted Bismarck in the government of united Germany, and how effectively did he deal with them?
  - 4.1 What were the main political features of the Bismarckian state?
  - 4.2 Why, and with what results, did Bismarck enter into an electoral alliance with the National Liberals between 1871 and 1878?
  - 4.3 What was the purpose of the *Kulturkampf*, and to what extent was it achieved?
  - 4.4 Why did Bismarck abandon the National Liberals for a more conservative stance in 1878?
  - 4.5 How successful was Bismarck in his attempt to combat socialism?
  - 4.6 Historical interpretation: To what extent was Bismarck responsible for the authoritarianism and intolerance of the German state in the early 20th century?
- In what ways did Germany's economy and society develop in the years after unification?
  - 4.7 To what extent did Bismarck's foreign policy succeed in defending German interests in the 1870s?
  - 4.8 Did Bismarck's alliance with Austria after 1878 represent the failure of his diplomatic system?
  - 4.9 Why did Bismarck launch a German colonial policy in his last years in power?
- How well did the diplomacy of the united Reich serve the interests of Germany and of European peoples?
  - 4.10 What was the impact of unification upon German economic development?

**Framework of Events**

|      |   |
|------|---|
| 1871 | January: Proclamation of German Empire<br>May: Franco-Prussian War concluded by Treaty of Frankfurt   |
| 1872 | June: Expulsion of Jesuits from Germany as part of <i>Kulturkampf</i><br>September: Formation of 'League of the Three Emperors'   |
| 1874 | Introduction of May Laws, limiting the independence of Catholic clergy  |
| 1875 | March: Publication of papal bull <i>Quod Nuncquam</i> attacking May Laws<br>April: 'War in Sight' crisis<br>June–July: Congress of Berlin resolves the international crisis arising out of the Russo-Turkish War                |
| 1879 | July: Major conservative gains in Reichstag elections at expense of National Liberals<br>October: Introduction of anti-socialist laws   |
| 1880 | July: Passage of new tariff laws, introducing economic protectionism<br>October: Conclusion of Dual Alliance between Germany and Austria<br>Conclusion of revised 'Three Emperors' Alliance between Germany, Russia and Austria |
| 1882 | Introduction of accident insurance – part of Bismarck's 'state socialism'   |
| 1883 | Formation of Triple Alliance, involving Germany, Austria and Italy  |
| 1884 | Introduction of sickness insurance as part of Bismarck's policy of 'state socialism'  |
| 1885 | Renewal of 'Three Emperors' Alliance<br>German East Africa Company created. Annexation by Germany of Tanganyika and Zanzibar  |
| 1886 | Anglo-German agreement on spheres of influence in East Africa   |
| 1887 | Conclusion of Reinsurance Treaty between Germany and Russia   |

1838

March: Death of Emperor Wilhelm I; succession of Friedrich III  
 June: Death of Friedrich III; succession of Wilhelm II  
 March: Dismissal of Bismarck as Chancellor of Germany

## Overview

In order to understand the methods by which Otto von Bismarck governed the German Empire between 1871 and 1890, it is necessary to understand the complex origins of that Empire. Important as the personal role of Bismarck was in bringing about German unification, other forces impersonal and perhaps more powerful were also at work. Since the 18th century nationalist theorists had preached that it was Germany's destiny to rise above the selfish interests of individual German princes and to create a united state that might allow Germans at last to play a positive and dominant role in European affairs. Such beliefs had been stimulated by the disturbances of 1848, which seemed to promise the collapse of the old political order in Europe, and by events in Italy in the 1850s, which began to undermine the conservative influence of the Austrian Empire. Alongside such theories, the advance of industrialisation in Germany created economic interests that orthodox politicians found difficult to ignore and impossible to resist. The advantages of easier trade and communications between the states were such that, as early as 1834, a range of north German states had associated themselves in a customs union, the *Zollverein*, that involved a high degree of economic co-operation decades before any political union was envisaged.

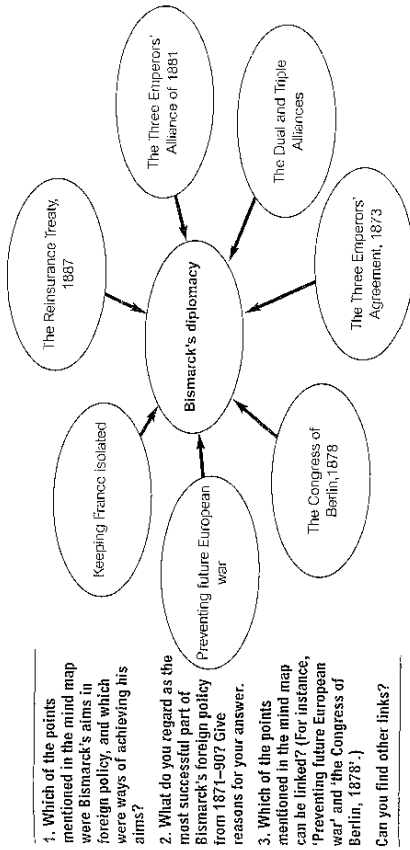
These forces were confronted by other, more conservative, interests. Austria and Russia had enormous traditional interests to defend in central and eastern Europe. Not only were the rulers of both states dedicated to the defence of legitimist interests, including those of the individual German princes, but both governed such a mixture of racial groups that the very existence of their empires was threatened by the principles of nationalism. In Prussia, too, conservative instincts were likely to oppose any attempt to establish a unitary, popular German state. Under Friedrich Wilhelm IV (1840–61), and under his brother and successor Wilhelm I (1861–88), the Prussian monarchy was equally devoted to legitimist principles, and equally hostile to the notion that political power should lie in the hands of the nation. In Prussia's feudal landowning class, the *Junkers*, the kings of Prussia found ample support for such conservative ideas.

From 1862, Bismarck himself acted as the leading servant of this conservative Prussian monarchy, and as the willing representative of Junker interests. As such, he had little sympathy for the causes of national unity or of liberal reform, yet he was equally hostile to the authority of Austria within the German Confederation, and to the claims of the Austrian Emperor to be able to dictate to Prussia over the affairs of Germany. Bismarck's primary aim in the 1860s was to readjust the political balance within Germany, guaranteeing the security of Prussian interests, while controlling those political forces within Prussia that threatened the interests of the governing class. If his aims were essentially conservative, Bismarck's methods were subtle and imaginative. Contemporary diplomatic circumstances in Europe enabled him to isolate and confront Austria, and the promise of significant changes in German politics won the consent of liberals within Prussia and other German states.

**Legitimist:** A theory of monarchy which considers that each state has a ruler, or ruling family, designated by God as the only 'legitimate' or true ruler. Thus the Hohenzollern family were the 'legitimate' rulers of Prussia.

**Junkers:** The aristocratic landowners, with extensive estates, predominantly in East Prussia, who formed the governing class of the Prussian state.

**German Confederation:** The alliance of German states, under the presidency of the Austrian Emperor, established in 1815 to guarantee the security of its members in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars.



1. Which of the points mentioned in the mind map were Bismarck's aims in foreign policy, and which were ways of achieving his aims?

2. What do you regard as the most successful part of Bismarck's foreign policy from 1871–90? Give reasons for your answer.

3. Which of the points mentioned in the mind map can be linked? (For instance, 'Preventing future European war' and 'the Congress of Berlin, 1878'.)

Can you find other links?

How successful was Bismarck in the 1860s? It is quite possible that he had achieved all that he aimed for by 1866. At that stage, he had isolated and defeated Austria, effectively ending its influence over the affairs of northern Germany. It may well be the case that Bismarck visualised the North German Confederation, under Prussian leadership, as the ideal outcome of this struggle. Other factors, however, forced him to go further. Unsuccessful in his attempts to appease or to deflect French suspicions over the growth of Prussian influence, Bismarck accepted an unlikely alliance with nationalist enthusiasts in the course of the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71). The most important outcome of the war was the transformation of the wartime coalition of German states into a formal and permanent political union. By 1871, his achievement was not so much that a united German Reich emerged from that war, but that it emerged in a form acceptable to the conservative forces that Bismarck represented.

● Austria was excluded.

● The existence and independence of the German princes were maintained to a degree. Indeed, the imperial authority of the Kaiser was based upon the support and acclamation of the German princes.

● The imperial constitution guaranteed the political interests of Prussia's governing classes in all important respects.

Inevitably one of the dominant themes of German domestic politics during the 1870s and the 1880s was the government's attempt to keep political power predominantly in the hands of these traditional, conservative classes. However strong nationalist sympathies may have been in some areas of German politics, Bismarck's domestic policies were directed more by considerations of class struggle. Aware of the potential challenge from middle-class interests and from the

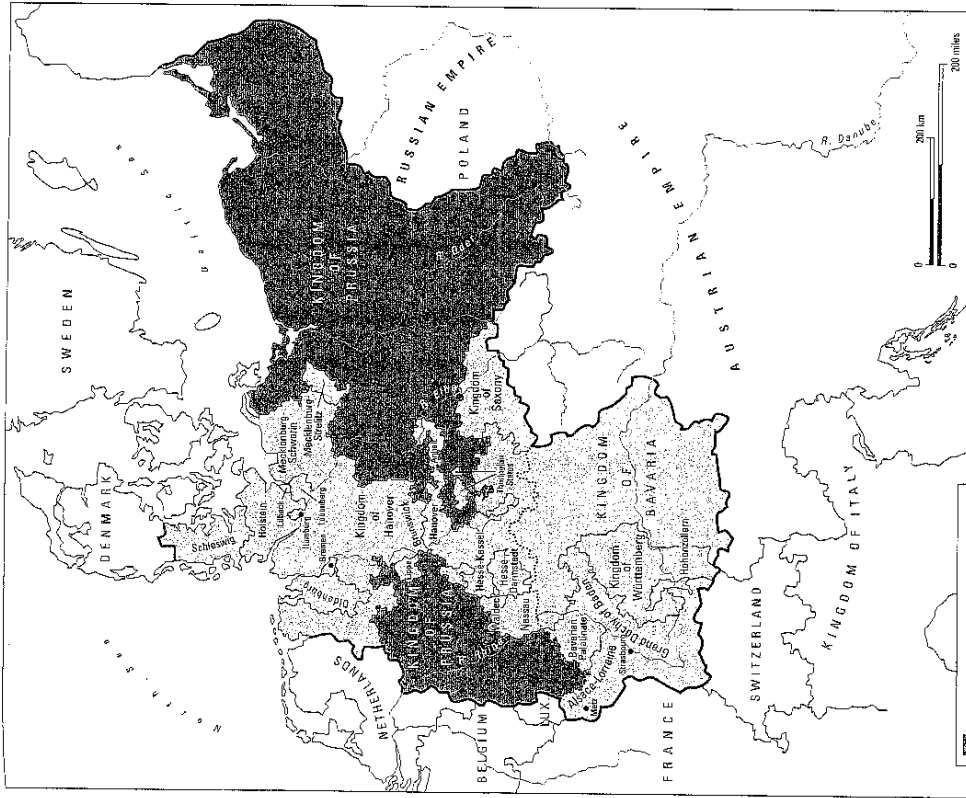
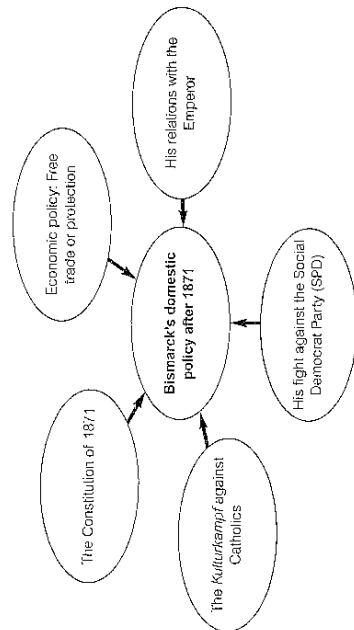
increasing political organisation of the working classes, Bismarck worked to ensure that no direct political power fell into the hands of these groups. In this undertaking he was only partly successful. Appearing to work with the National Liberals in the 1870s, Bismarck successfully placed his emphasis upon policies that consolidated the Bismarckian state, rather than any that strengthened the direct political interests of the Liberals. Bismarck's great political re-alignment in 1879, however, represented a shift to a coalition in which he was no longer the undisputed senior partner. In a climate of economic recession he could not afford to ignore the demand of Junker agriculturalists, and of industrialists, for economic protection. Although it was not wholly distasteful to Bismarck to abandon the Liberals for more conservative allies, the move demonstrated the limits of his success in the long term. While he could control the parliamentary aspirations of the industrial middle classes, he could not ignore their economic power, for that formed a fundamental basis of the power and prosperity of the German state. Able to manipulate the Reichstag, but not the economic might of the Ruhr, Bismarck was forced now to seek a path equally acceptable to Junkers and industrialists. In the course of the next three decades, this alliance of *yc* and steel would lead German policy into paths that Bismarck would never willingly have contemplated. He had indeed ensured that the united Reich would be based upon conservative interests, but not exclusively upon those of the Prussian Junkers.

Bismarck's attitude towards the other major component of German industrialisation — the urban working class — was much clearer. He regarded them as a consistent threat to the aristocratic society, from which he came, and remained unconditionally hostile to their political ambitions. Bismarck was a sufficiently subtle politician, however, to know that such ambitions had to be deflected, rather than suppressed. He therefore pursued a dual policy that sought to obstruct the growth of the leading socialist parties, while introducing a programme of social reforms promoted and funded by the state.

**Coalition:** A government or a parliamentary majority consisting of people from two or more political parties who have decided to work together.

**Reichstag:** the parliament of the united German Empire (Reich).

1. What do you regard as Bismarck's greatest achievement in domestic policy after 1871? Explain your answer.
2. What do you regard as Bismarck's greatest failure?
3. From the factors mentioned in the mind map, place what you regard as Bismarck's achievements in one column and his failures in another.
4. On balance, do you regard Bismarck as being successful in domestic policy after 1871?



The German Empire functioned as a federation of 25 states (19 lesser states + free cities + Alsace-Lorraine). Each possessed its own representative assembly and was responsible for specific local provisions.

The German Empire in 1871

1865: Prussia  
1871: Territory included in German Empire  
..... 1867-71: Limit of North German Confederation

How successful was Bismarck in these domestic policies? To a remarkable extent, he succeeded in preserving the political structures that he valued. At the end of his career, the Prussian monarchy and the army were stronger than they had ever been, and the Junker class continued to dominate the high offices of state. The economic and social structure of Germany, however, had not stood still. German industry had continued to develop, its growth directly stimulated by political unification. Bismarck contributed to this growth by his strategy of coalition, compromise and concession to these economic forces. At his fall from power, he left one of the most modern and dynamic economies in Europe in the hands of rulers and politicians whose attitudes and political priorities were those of the mid-19th century.

The newly unified German state also faced another major challenge. Unification brought about a transformation in the European balance of power. Germany had to confront the mistrust, if not the downright hostility, of states whose interests had been damaged or threatened by this transformation. Although three wars were fought in the process of unification in the 1860s, Bismarck had little to gain from further warfare. Utterly opposed to a *grossdeutsch* union that would bring Austria back into German politics, he had no further territorial ambitions. German diplomacy in the 1870s and 1880s was dominated by the desire to isolate France, the state most likely to challenge the new Germany, and to maintain a system of alliances that would prevent conflict between Austria and Russia. For all his shifts and compromises in the course of two decades, that system remained essentially intact at the end of Bismarck's career. It is tempting to view the fall of Bismarck in 1890 as a key factor in the transformation of European diplomacy from stability and balance to ambition and confrontation.

**Grossdeutsch** (Great German) term used to describe the concept of a united Germany in which all ethnic Germans are included.

#### 4.1 What were the main political features of the Bismarckian state?

**Kaiser Wilhelm I (1797–1888)**  
Saw action in the Napoleonic Wars, and developed a reputation in Prussia as a conservative and militarist. He became regent of Prussia upon the breakdown of his brother King Friedrich Wilhelm (1859), and succeeded as king upon his brother's death (1861). He appointed Otto von Bismarck as Minister-President (1862) to stave off constitutional challenges, and supported his minister through successful wars with Denmark, Austria and France. Upon the formation of the German Reich in 1871, Wilhelm became the first Kaiser (Emperor) of unified Germany. He remained a symbol of conservative values, and of the dominance of the Prussian elite within united Germany until his death at the age of 91.

military budget, but largely sacrificed this weapon by agreeing in 1874, mainly through fear of starting a new constitutional conflict, to approve that budget for a period of seven years. It repeated this process in 1881 and 1887. This loss of the full right of budget approval, argues historian Hajo Holborn, 'blocked the growth of a parliamentary system in Germany'. Furthermore, the bulk of the remainder of the Reich income, from indirect taxation, posts and from the contributions of member states, lay wholly beyond the control of the Reichstag.

#### The Bundesrat and the Emperor

In reality, political power lay outside the Reichstag. In part, it lay with the upper house, the *Bundesrat*, but for the most part it rested with the Prussian hierarchy. The *Bundesrat* had the power to initiate legislation. Also, with the assent of the Emperor, it had the authority to declare war and to settle disputes between states. With the interests of the Reich and of the individual states thus balancing each other out, real power lay with Wilhelm I and his ministers. Wilhelm was by hereditary right German Emperor, with full powers over the appointment and dismissal of ministers, who were responsible only to him. He also had full control over foreign affairs, and had the right to the final say in any dispute over the interpretation of the constitution. By virtue of its size, Prussia possessed 17 of the 58 seats in the *Bundesrat* at a time when 14 votes constituted a veto. The body therefore served the important dual purpose of maintaining the separate political identity of Prussia within the Reich, and of blocking any steps towards a radical, unitary state. Indeed, the balance of forces in the German constitution as a whole indicated clearly that it was designed to block and to prevent any major constitutional change or development in the future.

#### The Treaty of Frankfurt and the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine

The outcome of the Franco-Prussian War and the ultimate shape of the German Reich were decided simultaneously by the terms of the treaty signed at Frankfurt on 10 May 1871. France was compelled to pay a war indemnity of 5 billion francs over a period of three years. It also had to accept substantial territorial losses. German nationalists had claimed Alsace unsuccessfully in 1815, in the 1820s and again in 1848–49, and now that desire was supplemented by power; annexation was perhaps inevitable. 'This territory', wrote the nationalist historian von Treitschke, 'is ours by right of the sword, and annexation follows from the right of the German nation to prevent the loss of any of its sons'.

Northern and eastern Lorraine, with the great fortress of Metz, also became German territory. There was far less justification for regarding these as German lands, and for many years the standard view on this issue was that Bismarck bowed reluctantly to the pressure of the army, the king and the nationalists. More recent research has suggested that Bismarck may have had some role in the formation of this public mood. His motives, however, are unlikely to have been ideological. On a practical level, historian Gordon Craig points out in *Germany 1866–1945* (published in 1981) that French bitterness was likely to be just as great, whatever the terms of the surrender, and Bismarck himself wrote in similar vein to his ambassadors abroad. 'We cannot look to the French emperor for our guarantees. What the French nation will never forgive is their defeat as such: in German hands Strasbourg and Metz will take on a purely defensive character.'

#### Political parties

The parties that competed for seats in the Reichstag were very different

**Bundesrat**: Upper house of the Reichstag which represented the independent interests of the states.

**Veto** (Latin = 'I forbid'): A negative vote exercised constitutionally by an individual, an institution or a state. It has the effect of automatically defeating the motion against which it is cast.

**War indemnity**: A payment made by the defeated side in order to pay the costs incurred by the victors in the war.

organisations from their English counterparts. They were predominantly pressure groups representing the sectional interests of one part or another of the diverse German nation, and they remained social phenomena rather than instruments for winning the struggle for power.

**The Conservatives**

On the right wing of the Reichstag stood two major groups, the Conservatives (from 1876 the 'German Conservatives') and the Imperial Party (*Reichspartei*). The former had its strength in Prussia itself, among Protestant, aristocratic landowners. Concerned at, and sometimes openly hostile towards, Bismarck's flirtations with liberalism and nationalism, it remained a moderate force in the Reichstag, but a major one in the Prussian Landtag, which it dominated through local influence. The *Reichspartei* enjoyed a broader geographical basis of support, among landowners and industrialists alike. Also, its support for the Imperial Chancellor was much more consistent, in admiration of his great achievement in the foundation of the Reich.

**Composition of the Reichstag, 1871-1890**

|   | 1871 | 1874 | 1877 | 1878 | 1881 | 1884 | 1887 | 1890 |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| German Conservatives                      | 57   | 22   | 40   | 53   | 50   | 78   | 80   | 73   |
| <i>Reichspartei</i>                       | 37   | 33   | 38   | 57   | 28   | 28   | 41   | 20   |
| National Liberals                         | 125  | 165  | 141  | 109  | 47   | 51   | 99   | 42   |
| Progress Party                            | 46   | 49   | 35   | 26   | 60   | -    | -    | -    |
| Centre Party                              | 81   | 91   | 93   | 94   | 100  | 99   | 98   | 106  |
| Social Democrats                          | 2    | 9    | 12   | 9    | 12   | 24   | 11   | 35   |
| Guelphs                                   | 9    | 4    | 10   | 4    | 10   | 11   | 4    | 11   |
| National groups (Alsatiens, Poles, Danes) | 14   | 30   | 30   | 30   | 35   | 32   | 29   | 27   |
| Total seats = 387 (1871: 382)             |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |

Pressure groups: Political organisations who wish to influence political decision making but do not wish to gain political power.

**Ludwig Windthorst (1812-1891)**

Deputy (1849) and Minister of the Interior in Hanover, and hostile to the Prussian annexation of that state. Leader of the Centre Party (*Zentrum*) in the Reichstag after unification, fiercely opposing Bismarck in the course of the *Kulturkampf*.

*Kulturkampf*: German term meaning 'struggle for civilisation'; the clash with the Catholic Church in Germany in the 1870s. For German liberals, the Catholic Church was the old enemy. For Bismarck, it was not so much a struggle between belief and unbelief, more a matter of a conflict between monarchy and 'pushiness'. What is at stake is the defence of the state.

**The Centre Party**

The Centre Party (*Zentrum*), founded in 1870, still tends to be described as the party of Germany's large Roman Catholic minority. In fact it was more than that. Primarily dedicated to the defence of the interests of the Catholic Church, it also attracted others with a partisan objection to the recent work of Bismarck, such as the Protestant 'Guelphs', who were embittered supporters of the deposed King George of Hanover. Particularly strong in Bavaria and in the Rhineland, the Centre Party was led in the Reichstag by a Catholic Hanoverian, Ludwig Windthorst. One of the few great parliamentarians of the 'Bismarck era', greatly respected, even by those who loathed his views, Windthorst has been characterised by historian Golo Mann as 'a shy idealist, a devout fox, a man of principles and a very clever politician, dignified and cunning'.

**The Liberals**

In the 1870s the National Liberals were Bismarck's most enthusiastic supporters in the Reichstag. They were at one with him in their enthusiasm for a centralised state, if increasingly at odds with him in their support for progressive social and constitutional legislation. To their left stood the Progress Party (*Fortschrittspartei*), diminished but unbowed by the liberal split of 1866. They shared the National Liberals' enthusiasm for free trade and the rule of law, but were opposed to the centralism and militarism of the Bismarckian state. In Eugen Richter and Eduard Lasker they had effective parliamentary leaders, the latter so consistent a critic of the

Chancellor as to be described by Bismarck as 'even more of a vile louse than Windthorst'.

**The Left**

German socialism in 1871 was yet a modest force, based upon Ferdinand Lassalle's General Workers' Association (*Allgemeiner Arbeiterverein*) founded in 1863, and the Social Democratic Workers' Party formed by Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel at Eisenach in Saxony in 1869. Its day was, however, soon to come.

| Wilhelm Liebknecht (1826-1901)  | August Bebel (1840-1913)   | Ferdinand Lassalle (1825-1864)  |
|---|--|---|
| A socialist, active in 1849, and subsequently in contact (1850) with Karl Marx. One of the founders of the First International (1865) and of the German Social Democratic Party. Subsequently leader of the SPD and a prominent member of the Second International. | Worked with Liebknecht on the foundation of the First International (1865) and of the German Social Democratic Party. Subsequently leader of the SPD and a prominent member of the Second International. | Radical socialist, a friend of Karl Marx. Active in the Ruhr in 1848-49 and subsequently founder of the first German trade union. |

1. By what means did Prussia exert influence over the politics of united Germany after 1871?
2. What different interests were represented by the political groups within the Reichstag between 1871 and 1890?
3. How convincing is the claim that 'the constitution of the German Reich in 1871 was one of the most democratic in Europe'?

**4.2 Why, and with what results, did Bismarck enter into an electoral alliance with the National Liberals between 1871 and 1878?**

**How much common ground existed between Bismarck and the National Liberals?**

The first seven years of Bismarck's government of a united Germany, 1871-78, are frequently described as his 'liberal era'. While Bismarck was by no stretch of the imagination a true liberal, he found it convenient during this period to co-operate in the Reichstag with the National Liberal party. In this period, they were the dominant party in an assembly where the Chancellor had no party of his own. Secondly, the spirit of conciliation that had motivated the indemnity of 1866 remained alive. The National Liberals remained broadly sympathetic towards Bismarck as the architect of their major policy aim, national unity. Most important, their immediate aims coincided with Bismarck's in such areas as the consolidation of that national unity and the centralisation of the administration of the Reich.

To conservative critics it often seemed that the alliance with the National Liberals was carrying Bismarck too far to the left. Lothar Gall, in *Bismarck, the White Revolutionary* (1986), describes Bismarck as being the 'stirrup-holder of liberalism'. In fact it is clear that the Chancellor gave his 'supporters' nothing that involved any immediate political power. The Press Law (May 1874) provided little protection for editors against government prosecution. Attempts in the Reichstag to limit the influence of the Junkers in Prussian local government achieved little of practical value. Also, as we have seen, the Reichstag failed to maintain control over the vital area of government military expenditure.

It is equally important to establish, however, that the measures undertaken in 1871-78 should not merely be written off as 'sops' offered by Bismarck to 'fool' the National Liberals and to maintain a convenient political understanding in the short term. The economic and administrative

indemnity of 1866: One of Bismarck's first actions upon coming to office in 1862 was to ignore liberal objections to taxation needed by the state to increase the size of the army. The taxes were levied without parliamentary permission, in defiance of all liberal and constitutional principles. Following his success against Austria in 1866, and the creation of a North German Confederation, Prussian liberals voted to 'pardon' Bismarck for this action. This is widely interpreted as a sacrifice of constitutional principles in the interests of nationalism.

legislation of his 'liberal era' was of the greatest importance in the formation of the German state. It illustrates very clearly the complex relationship between Bismarck and the German liberals. The period produced, in the words of historian Geoff Fley, 'an impressive concentration of forward-looking economic legislation [and] an elaborate framework of capitalist enabling laws'. Although Bismarck refused to grant the liberals the kind of political framework that they desired for Germany, the *Mitteleuropäischer* state of 1875 was, in economic terms, very much what liberal thinkers had always envisaged. Only time would tell whether this delicate balance of socio-economic progressiveness and political conservatism could be maintained.

**Administrative and financial consolidation**

The state created by Bismarck was a curiously disunited entity. It lacked religious unity and unity of economic interests. It contained national minorities with little or no desire to be part of the German Empire. There is thus much truth in the historian A.J.P. Taylor's description of the Reich in 1871 as merely a 'wartime coalition'. Such were the separatist feelings of the states, for instance, that Germany had no national flag until 1892 and no national anthem until after the First World War. For Bismarck, with his desire for closer political control, and for the National Liberals, with their enthusiasm for national unity it was vital that this situation be improved. The first session of the Reichstag, therefore, saw the passage of over 100 acts to this end. The currencies of the states were unified into a national currency, all tariffs (taxes) on internal trade were abolished, and a uniform body of commercial law was introduced. The Prussian State Bank became the Reichsbank, and Germany adopted the gold standard. Uniformity of legal procedures was achieved in 1877. A national Appeals Court was established by 1879, although the codification of German civil law did not come into effect (January 1900) until long after Bismarck's fall from power.

**The problem of the national minorities**

After administrative separatism, the second major area of disunity concerned the national minorities within Germany's borders. For nearly 20 years, by a mixture of coercion and conciliation, Bismarck attempted to tie these minorities more closely to the German state, but had no significant degree of success. In Alsace-Lorraine the decision to allow French or pro-French elements to leave the territories resulted in the migration of 400,000 people between 1871 and 1914. The remainder found themselves governed by Prussian civil servants, with the German language imposed in schools and in local administration. From 1874 they were represented in the Reichstag, and the choice of governors for the territories showed some tact and commonsense. Edwin von Manteuffel (1809–1885) was a humane and conscientious administrator. His successor, Prince Clotthwig von Hohenlohe, was a south German Catholic and had more in common with the people of Alsace than with many Prussian Prussians. The consistency with which the people of Alsace voted for deputies in favour of separation from the Reich showed, however, that such attempts at conciliation were largely unsuccessful.

In the case of the Poles, conciliation was much less in evidence. When the state sought to reduce the influence and independence of the Catholic Church within Germany, Polish clergy in the eastern provinces were particularly hard hit. Their leader, Cardinal Ledochowski, was imprisoned and his office left vacant for 12 years. The use of the Polish language was outlawed in education and in the law courts. State funds were used to finance the purchase of lands in Polish hands for the purpose of settlement

**Edwin von Manteuffel (1809–1885)**  
 One of the main influences behind Prussian army reform in the early 1860s and active in the wars against Denmark, Austria and France.  
 Commanded army of occupation in France (1871–73). Governor of Alsace-Lorraine (1890–85).

**Clotthwig von Hohenlohe (1819–1901)**  
 Prime Minister of Bavaria (1868–70) in which office he supported the idea of German unity under Prussia. German ambassador to Paris (1874–85); Governor-General of Alsace-Lorraine (1885–94); Chancellor of Germany (1894–1900).

**Enabling Laws:** Laws which confer the legal freedom to take certain actions, although they do not make these actions obligatory.

**Mitteleuropäischer ('Little German'):** Term used to describe the concept of a united Germany (favoured by Prussia) from which Austria is excluded.

**Plébiscite:** A direct vote of all of the electors of a state to decide a question of public importance. Otherwise known as a referendum.

1. What measures were taken in the 1870s to consolidate the unity of the German state?
2. How accurate is the description of the years 1871–78 as a 'liberal era' in the government of Germany?

**4.3 What was the purpose of the Kulturkampf, and to what extent was it achieved?**

**German liberalism and the Catholic Church**

The first decade of domestic politics in the German Reich was dominated by the clash with the Catholic Church. It was branded at the time as the 'struggle for civilisation' (*Kulturkampf*). It is difficult for us to grasp today, in a generally more secular age, the feelings aroused by this legal assault upon Germany's substantial Catholic minority. We shall miss its significance altogether unless we accept that, as historian Erich Eyck tells us in *Bismarck and the German Empire* (1968), 'in those years many of the most enlightened and highly educated men believed that the future of mankind was at stake'.

The view that Bismarck artificially engineered this confrontation as a means of uniting various strands of German opinion against a common enemy is no longer tenable. The roots of the *Kulturkampf* stretch deep into German history, certainly back to Prussia's acquisition of the largely Catholic Rhineland in 1815, and possibly to the Reformation. This was not even exclusively a German issue, for reforming politicians in Italy, and in France during the Third Republic, had also felt obliged to confront the conservative principles of the Catholic Church. In those states, too, it seemed to many that the authority and the teachings of the Church were incompatible with the principles of a modern society based upon national identity. In the case of Germany in the early 1870s the struggle was really made up of two separate clashes. For the German liberals, the Catholic Church was an old enemy. Precursors of the *Kulturkampf* can be seen even in the southern states, as in the Church Law (1860) and the Elementary School Law (1868) passed in Baden. The offence of the Catholic Church had been compounded in 1864 with the publication of Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors*, in which the Pope condemned every major political and social principle for which German and Italian liberals stood. Pius had declared moral warfare, and for the liberals the battle appeared to be one for the future of human thought.

**Bismarck and the Catholic Church**

For Bismarck the issue was less abstract. Despite the fact that he and most of the Prussian Junkers were Protestant, his battle had little to do with doctrine. 'It is not a matter of a struggle between belief and unbelief', he declared. 'It is a matter of the conflict between monarchy and patricianhood. What is at stake is the defence of the state.' For him the origins of the *Kulturkampf* lay in the events of 1866–70, during which Prussia had replaced Austria as the dominant force in German politics. In the process, tens of thousands of German Catholics had been transformed from sympan-

by Germans, although the Poles were rather more successful in raising funds for the reverse purpose. It is scarcely surprising that, given these tactics, the Polish problem remained unsolved.

Finally, the problem of the Schleswig Danes was largely ignored. In 1879, on the eve of the Dual Alliance, Austria agreed to allow Germany to abandon the plebiscite in North Schleswig promised by the Treaty of Prague in 1866. It took a world war to revise the status of North Schleswig and of Alsace-Lorraine, and to resolve the problems of Germany's Polish subjects.

thetic *grossdeutsch* supporters of the Habsburg monarchy into reserved followers and subjects of Prussia. Its origins also lay in the recently declared doctrine of Papal Infallibility (July 1870). By aiming to the Catholic loyalties directly to the Papacy, instead of to the national state, the doctrine was a clear challenge to state power. The launching of this struggle offered Bismarck other political advantages, such as closer ties with the anti-clerical Italian government, with Russia, themselves greatly troubled by Catholic Poles, and with the National Liberals. His major motive, however, was probably the desire to combat those whom he felt genuinely to be 'enemies of the Empire' (*Reichsfeinde*). The Catholics were thus the first of many minority groups to play this role in 'united' Germany.

#### The May Laws

The spearhead of the attack upon the Catholic Church was formed by legislation framed, under Bismarck's instructions, by Adalbert Falk, the Prussian Minister of Religious Affairs. First, in 1872, came the cutting of diplomatic relations with the Vatican (May) and the expulsion of the Jesuit order from German soil (July). In the following year came the main onslaught in the form of Falk's notorious 'May Laws'. The education of clergy, clerical appointments and the inspection of Church schools were all brought under state control. Appointments to German ecclesiastical positions were limited to those educated in Germany, and priests were forbidden to use the threat of excommunication as a means to compel opponents. In a further series of measures, civil marriage – strenuously opposed by Bismarck – in 1849 became compulsory in the Reich, and most religious orders in Germany were dissolved (1875).

#### The results of the Kulturkampf

In 1874–75, Church and state remained locked in conflict. Eight of the 12 Catholic bishops in Prussia were deprived of their offices and more than 1,000 priests were suspended from their posts. However, the desired political effect was not achieved. Spiritually the Church thrived upon its 'martyrdom', and politically the increase in the representation of the Centre Party in the Reichstag frustrated Bismarck's hopes of a quick surrender. There were also other unhappy side-effects. The anti-Catholic stance endangered good foreign relations with Austria and the threat of an Austro-French understanding grew. Prussian conservatives, although staunchly Protestant, disliked the liberals' hostility to all religious institutions in schools and distrusted Bismarck's liberal alliance in general. Indeed, the price demanded by the liberals for their further support – the extension of free trade and ministerial office for members of their party – seemed to Bismarck himself to be unreasonably high. The death of Pius IX (1878) and the election of the more conciliatory Leo XIII provided an opportunity that Bismarck seized with enthusiasm. With the repeal of the bulk of the May Laws (1878) and the symbolic dismissal of Falk (July 1879), the *Kulturkampf* came to an abrupt end. Of the great 'struggle for civilisation', only the laws on civil marriage, state supervision of schools and those against the Jesuits remained.

Did Bismarck, therefore, lose the *Kulturkampf*? Certainly the struggle did much to damage his earlier work of unification, and made the majority of German Catholics more sympathetic to Papal authority than they had been before. On the other hand, reconciliation did largely transform the Centre into a purely religious party. If we see Bismarck's aim as the preservation of his state in the longer term, then perhaps we should accept the verdict of historian C. Grant Robertson that 'Bismarck deliberately sacrificed victory in the *Kulturkampf* to victory in other issues, more important in his judgement'.

Papal Infallibility. The principle defined by Pope Pius IX in 1870, whereby the Pope, as God's representative on Earth, was inevitably correct in any doctrinal statement that he made. As a denial of freedom of opinion, and as a potential challenge to the authority of national governments, this doctrine isolated the Catholic Church from most of the other major political and philosophical forces in western Europe.

Jesuit order. A religious order founded by St Ignace Loyola in the 16th century. The founders' principle that members owed direct obedience to the Pope alone caused the order to be viewed with great suspicion in most European states. The order's close association with education also caused it to be viewed as a major channel by which the influence of the Catholic Church might be spread.

Excommunication. Expelled from the Church, destined for eternal damnation.

1. What measures were taken against the Catholic Church in Germany in the course of the *Kulturkampf*?

2. Why did Bismarck launch the *Kulturkampf* in the 1870s?

3. What, if anything, did Bismarck gain by his measures in the 1870s against the Catholic Church in Germany?

#### 4.4 Why did Bismarck abandon the National Liberals for a more conservative stance in 1878?

##### The 'Great Depression' and its impact upon German politics

For all the issues of principle at large in the 1870s, German politics did not operate by ideology alone. For much of the so-called 'Bismarck era' the political life of Germany was played out against a background of economic anxiety and depression. Germany's 'Great Depression' was a classic case of economic recession. The economic history of the Reich opened with a short period of 'boom', fuelled by over-generous credit policies on the part of German bankers, and by the large amounts of capital pumped into the economy by French war reparations. These stimuli set off a wave of unsound investment projects whose eventual collapse, in the same fashion as the Wall Street Crash, struck a blow to business confidence whose effects could still be felt nearly 20 years later. It is important to appreciate the exact nature of the impact made by this 'Great Depression'. In terms of production and of economic growth, Germany recovered relatively quickly. The production levels of 1872–73 had been restored by 1880; urban growth continued unabated, especially in Berlin and in the Ruhr; the development of cartels allowed major industrial enterprises to maintain their stability. After 20 years of uninterrupted economic growth, however, the psychological impact of the slump was considerable, and the effect of the depression on political mentalities was to last well beyond 1880. Its main political impact was to mobilise and to polarise conservative economic thinking, and to create a powerful lobby in favour of economic protection. The rejection of liberal, free-trading policies by the leaders of German industry soon became evident in the formation of such pressure groups as the League of German Iron and Steel Manufacturers (1873) and the Central Association of German Industrialists (1876). When Junker agriculturalists also became convinced that their interests were threatened by free trade, Bismarck was faced by an enormously powerful coalition in favour of protective tariffs.

The real impact of the depression, therefore, was that it undermined the political basis upon which Bismarck had founded his power in the early 1870s. It forced him to adapt once more to the prevailing circumstances within Germany. As historian D.G. Williamson puts it, in *Bismarck and Germany, 1862–90* (1986), the economic developments of the later 1870s 'discredited both economic and political liberalism and enabled the conservatives and the survivors of the pre-capitalist era successfully to attack the liberal ethos'.

##### The significance of the reforms of 1878–1879

The ending of the *Kulturkampf* cannot be seen merely as a tactical withdrawal, cleverly calculated by a master politician. In 1878–79, Bismarck was faced once again with a crisis of the utmost gravity, which forced him to adapt and revise his policies. The change of direction that he undertook at the end of the 1870s has often been interpreted as political opportunism. More recently, historians have come to view this period as a key stage in the development of the German Reich, as significant in its way as the events of 1870–71. Heinrich Böhmé, for instance, argues in *An Introduction to the Social and Economic History of Germany* (1978) that the Franco-Prussian War established a viable form of unity between the German states, but did not establish a satisfactory socio-economic balance within the new Reich. It became increasingly clear in the course of the 1870s that Bismarck's alliance with German liberalism failed to meet the interests of

War reparations: Payments made by defeated states to compensate the victorious state(s) for damage or expenses caused by war.

Cartels: Economic arrangements whereby major manufacturers agree to share markets, rather than to compete for them. The aim is usually to fix prices for the benefit of the manufacturers and to guarantee levels of sales and profits.

many influential groups within the Reich. The dramatic switch to economic and political conservatism at the end of the decade represented an acceptance on Bismarck's part of conservative social and economic values more closely in keeping with the conservative structure of the state. Historian Agatha Ramm confirms this interpretation in describing these reforms as a 'coherent and systematic revision of policy in relation to the economic, social and financial needs of the Reich'.

#### The introduction of protectionism

Bismarck now felt compelled to meet the growing demand for measures of economic protectionism. While free trade remained an essential principle of the National Liberals, demands for higher protective tariffs increased from other quarters. These demands had been heard from the iron and steel industries from the mid-1870s, but now Prussia's Junker landowners added their voices to the argument. Instead of aiming at free access to the markets of Britain and France, they now found themselves threatened by the cheap grain arriving from the United States of America. The adoption of protective tariffs by France, Russia and Austria-Hungary over this same period seemed to make it all the more desirable for Germany to follow suit. Apart from this impressive array of industrialist and Junker opinion, the government itself had pressing motives. Protection would aid the growth of national self-sufficiency in the event of a future crisis, and tariffs provided the government with a valuable source of income independent both of the Reichstag and of the member states.

From 1876, the path chosen by Bismarck became clearer. In April of that year he accepted the resignation of Rudolf von Delbrück, head of the Chancellor's Office and architect of the earlier free-trade policies. In early 1878, the refusal of the Liberal leaders to join Bismarck's government unless they were given guarantees over ministerial appointments and policy decisions, sealed their fate in the eyes of the Chancellor. When the new tariff laws were enacted in the Reichstag (July 1879) they imposed duties of between 5% and 7% on imported foodstuffs, and of 10%-15% on imported industrial goods. An amendment proposed by Freiherr zu Frankenstein limited Bismarck's triumph: it fixed an upper limit of 180 million marks in tariff income to be retained by the Reich, and ensured that any surplus would be distributed among the states. If this provided those states with some little satisfaction, there was none for German liberalism. A substantial step had been taken back to the path of conservatism, and the 'liberal era' in the history of united Germany was effectively at an end. In the view of one of the most influential of recent German historians, Helmut Bohme, these measures constituted the establishment of an interest-based coalition that would dominate the politics of Imperial Germany up to 1918. So important was this step, Bohme believed, that it amounted to nothing less than a 're-founding of the German Empire'.

### 4.5 How successful was Bismarck in his attempt to combat socialism?

#### Bismarck's fear of socialism

The second compelling motive for Bismarck's change of course in the late 1870s was his desire to combat what he saw as the menace of socialism within Germany. Although the weakness of the socialists in the Reichstag might seem to make them unlikely candidates for the role of *Reichsfeind*, Bismarck, like most European statesmen, was genuinely shaken by and

**Protectionism.** The economic practice whereby a country's domestic industries are protected from foreign competition by the imposition of high import duties placed upon foreign goods.

#### Rudolf von Delbrück (1817-1903)

Prussian statesman. Active (1864-66) in the reorganisation of the *Zollverein*. As President of the Imperial Chancellery (1871) he was prominent in the drafting of Reich laws. A supporter of free trade, he resigned in 1876 over Bismarck's promotion of protective tariffs.

1. In what ways were the economic policies of the German Reich changed in the late 1870s?

2. Who gained and who lost from the introduction of economic protectionism in Germany in the late 1870s?

**Reichsfeind** (German) - 'enemy of the Empire'. In Bismarck's Germany this came to indicate the deliberate policy whereby one particular group (e.g. Catholics or Socialists) was held up as an enemy in order to unite other groups against them and in support of the state.

events such as the Paris Commune. The 'Eisenach' socialists had, after all, refused their support for the war in 1870. Many remembered August Bebel's claim in the Reichstag in May 1871 that before many decades pass the battler of the proletariat of Paris will become that of the whole proletariat of Europe'. It seems probable that if Bismarck's opposition to Catholicism was not primarily ideological, his opposition to socialism was. In A.J.P. Taylor's words, he 'genuinely believed in the turnip-ghost which he conjured up'.

#### The anti-socialist law

Bismarck's opportunity came in mid-1878 when two attempts upon the life of the Kaiser gave him the chance to raise the cry of 'the Fatherland in danger', to dissolve the Reichstag and to hold fresh elections. Although neither would-be assassin had any clear association with the Social Democratic Party, the mood of the electorate was patriotic and conservative. 'The Emperor has the wounds, the nation the fever', commented a liberal observer. The Social Democrats themselves had few seats to lose and the real losers of the election were the National Liberals. A majority was returned in favour of economic protection, the repeal of the 'May Laws', and the passage of Bismarck's anti-socialist measures (*Sozialistengesetze*). This law (19 October 1878) did not ban the Social Democratic Party directly but crippled its organisation by banning any group or meeting aimed at the spread of socialist principles, outlawing trade unions, and closing 45 newspapers. It was originally in operation, thanks to a liberal amendment, for only two and a half years, but was renewed regularly until 1890.

#### 'State socialism'

It was clear to Bismarck that socialism could not be conquered by oppression alone. The second string of his anti-socialist policy was thus a programme of 'state socialism'. This involved a series of measures to improve the conditions of the German workers. In 1883, medical insurance and sick pay were introduced. Although these were largely financed by the workers themselves, the employers were responsible for the funding of the scheme of insurance against industrial injuries introduced in the following year. Finally, in 1889, old age pensions were introduced, some two decades before their appearance in Britain.

Did such measures bring Bismarck more success against socialism than he had enjoyed against Catholicism? Historians have differed in their assessments of 'state socialism'. Some, like Erich Eyck, have seen the policy as a fraud, pursued for short-term political advantage. They point out how much more advantageous it would have been to relax the restrictions upon trade unions to allow workers to fight their own battles. They note that old age pensions were paid only to those who reached the age of 70, a ripe old age indeed for an industrial worker. Certainly, Bismarck failed to check the growth of the Social Democratic Party. Its membership increased from 550,000 in 1884 to 1,427,000 in 1890, suggesting that the workers saw 'state socialism' as a fraud and gave their support to the left. Gordon Craig, however, believes that it is possible to trace such paternalism in Bismarck's policies right back to 1862. 'State socialism', therefore, was based upon genuine conviction. Certainly Bismarck gained enthusiastic support from academic socialists (*Kathedersozialisten*), such as Franz Brentano and Max Weber. He also horrified some liberals who accused him of attempting to found communism in Germany.

The historian A.J.P. Taylor regarded Bismarck's policies as successful in some important respects. He noted how subservient the German working class was to government policy in the years leading up to 1914 and

**Paris Commune:** A radical political regime set up in Paris (March 1871) in the aftermath of France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. It lasted only until May 1871, when it was brutally crushed by French troops, but it created such an impression that it remained a powerful symbol of radical, socialist excesses for much of a generation.



1. By what means did Bismarck check the political influence of socialism within Germany in the 1880s?
2. Did Bismarck succeed in containing the threat of socialism to the German state?

concluded that Bismarck's policy had at least defused the threat of working-class opposition to the state. More recently David Blackburn has reinforced this observation in slightly different terms. In *The Fontana History of Germany 1780–1918: the Long Nineteenth Century* (1997), Blackburn notes that 'more generally, organised German workers wrestled with their desires to be good socialists and good Germans – what historians refer to as the problem of "double loyalty".'

#### 4.6 To what extent was Bismarck responsible for the authoritarianism and intolerance of the German state in the early 20th century?

##### A CASE STUDY IN HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

Few 19th-century figures have attracted the attention and controversy that surround the achievement of Otto von Bismarck. This is easy to understand when one considers the tremendous impact of German unification upon European history in the 75 years after 1871. Even in his own lifetime, the perception that Bismarck's work was central to that unification created a strand of German historiography that portrayed him as the master statesman, successfully manipulating events in order to lead Germany to its rightful destiny. Prominent in this school of thought was the Prussian academic Heinrich von Treitschke, whose monumental *German History in the Nineteenth Century* (1879–94) traced the 'inevitable' rise of Prussian mastery, with Bismarck portrayed as the chosen instrument

**Historiography:** Different historical views by historians. Another term for historical interpretation.

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|--|--|
| <p><b>The constitution of the German Empire 1871–1918</b><br/>The big fear of democracy covering naked Prussian absolutism [dictatorship]<br/>Karl Liebknecht (one of the founders of the SDP)</p>   | <p><b>Head of government: the Chancellor</b><br/>The Chancellor was chosen, and could be sacked, by the Emperor.</p>   |
| <p><b>Federal state</b><br/>The German Empire was a federal state. This meant political power was divided between the central government, based in the capital Berlin, and the state governments. State governments had responsibility for internal law and order, education and social welfare. However, some states had even greater responsibilities. Baden, Württemberg and Bavaria (The South German States) had their own postal services. Bavaria ran its own railway system and retained control over its army in peacetime.<br/>However, the largest state by far was Prussia, which comprised over 60 per cent of the national territory. It also had the two most important industrial areas within its frontiers – the Ruhr and Upper Silesia.</p> | <p><b>The National Parliament</b><br/>The National Parliament contained two houses:<br/>The <b>Reichstag</b> was the Lower House, which was elected democratically. Every male German over 25 had the right to vote.<br/>The <b>Bundesrat</b> was the Upper House. It contained representatives of the states. Prussia had by far the largest representation of any state (17 out of a total of 58).</p> |
| <p><b>Local states</b><br/>In Prussia the state parliament (<i>Landtag</i>) was chosen on a three-class suffrage. This meant that one third of all seats went to rich landowners (<i>Junkers</i>) even though they comprised a small percentage of the population. Some states, like Hamburg and Frankfurt, had democratic methods of electing their state parliaments. Mecklenburg-Strelitz had no state parliament.</p>  | <p><b>Do you think Karl Liebknecht was right?</b></p>  |
| <p><b>Head of state: the Emperor</b><br/>The Emperor was the King of Prussia. He was also the Supreme War Lord with control over the army. The Emperor appointed each minister, who was personally responsible to him. He could also sack any minister.</p>  |  |

of Germany's fate. Two nineties would wars naturally had a considerable effect upon Bismarck's reputation among historians, within Germany and abroad. If he was indeed so great and successful a statesman, and if the Germany that he governed was his conscious and deliberate creation, then he should naturally assume much responsibility for the actions, and the subsequent development, of that state.

This view was widespread in the years after the Second World War. As historians in Germany and abroad searched for the origins of the disasters caused by Nazism, they looked to the growth of the German state before the Hitler era. They examined the role of Bismarck in the political development of that state. German liberals such as Erich Eyck, in *Bismarck: Life and Work* (1941–44), and the academic Friedrich Meinecke, in *The German Catastrophe: Reflections and Recollections* (1960), led the attack by stressing Bismarck's repression of political freedom after 1870. By crippling the development of democratic institutions in Germany, Bismarck had laid the country open to future dictators. Such views were understandably popular with Germany's wartime opponents. In one of the most popular English summaries of modern German history (*The Course of German History*, 1945) A.J.P. Taylor wrote that 'during the preceding 80 years the Germans sacrificed to the Reich all their liberties; they demanded as reward the enslavement of others'. Led by Gerhard Ritter, in *Europe and the German Question* (1948), German conservatives continued to argue that Bismarck could not be held responsible for later developments. His semi-legendary views, they argued, along with his religion and his kleindeutsch views, all distanced him greatly from the principles of Nazism. As Hans Rothfels put it, in *Bismarck and the State* (1954), 'we may criticise Bismarck for paving the way to some fatal trends of our day, but we cannot very well overlook the fundamental fact that Hitler did precisely what the founder of the Reich had refused to do'.

#### Did Bismarck create an authoritarian state?

If we try to answer this question by examining the constitution of the united Germany, we find that the evidence is ambiguous. On the one hand, the Reichstag displayed some democratic features.

- It was elected by universal manhood suffrage, and its assent was required for all legislation, including the periodic renewal of the military budget.
  - It contained a wide variety of independent political parties, representing the full range of German political interests.
- Yet the assembly lacked many of the powers of a full parliamentary democracy.

- Its members had no direct control over the actions of the Chancellor, nor over foreign policy, nor – beyond the voting of the army grant – over the conduct of the army.
- With the Chancellor and other leading ministers standing aloof from the party system, the political parties could not play any direct role in the formulation of government policy.

In short, the constitution embraced two different political mentalities: one with its roots in German liberalism, and the other with its roots in the authoritarian government that had been the norm within the individual German states. Its future depended upon which would emerge supreme. Clearly, in the course of the 40 years after 1871, conservatism came out on top. In part, this was due to the preferences of Bismarck himself. It is

clear that he saw the Reichstag as a body to be manipulated, rather than as a mirror in which to discover the will of the German people. His primary aims were not to advance German democracy, but as the historian Wolfgang Mommsen puts it, in *Imperial Germany 1867–1918* (1995), to 'preserve the pre-eminence of the traditional elites despite the changes that were taking place in German society'.

One influential view of German history, however, credits Bismarck with much less direct influence over the political development of the infant Reich. Heinrich Böhm, in *Germany's Path to Great Power Status* (1966), not only placed economic trends at the heart of the process of German unification, but also saw in economics the main factors behind the shaping of politics within the new state. For Böhm, the crucial factor was the great economic depression that affected Germany between 1873 and 1879. From this crisis emerged a coalition of conservative interests, linking industrial and Junker agrarian interests, that would dominate the Reich until 1918. Liberalism was thrust into the margins of German politics, and such 'anti-modern' notions as anti-socialism and anti-semitism thrived in so conservative an environment. Socialism, in particular, was a direct product of the economic depression, and an obvious threat to the interests of these economic elites. Political oppression of the German socialist movement, therefore, was a logical product of these forces and not merely a whim or a political expedient employed by Bismarck. Geoff Eley concludes in 'Bismarckian Germany' in *Modern Germany Reconsidered 1870–1945* (1992), that 'the politics laid down in the Bismarckian period cast a long shadow. They established powerful continuities that extended through the imperial period to that of Weimar and played the key part in rendering German society vulnerable to Nazism'.

This impersonal emphasis, however, does not get Bismarck off the hook altogether. It must be pointed out that fear of revolution and of social radicalism was a fundamental element in Bismarck's political make-up and that he thus served as a major component in this conservative alliance, and a driving force behind its political measures. Several of the political elements within this alliance – leading industrialists for example – might have been identified in other states with more advanced causes. In Germany, however, under Bismarck's influence, they assented to authoritarian government, they contributed to the hostility that existed in educational and other professional circles towards democracy, and they helped to emphasise the authority and the mystique of the state. It seems necessary, therefore, to accept a consensus which, as Geoff Eley puts it, 'casts German state making in the light of social and economic history, but without turning Bismarck into the cipher of impersonal forces'.

Viewed in this way, the indictment against Bismarck is not that he created political conditions that were later used by German dictators, but that he used political forces and conditions that already existed, and which continued to exist in subsequent generations. It is hard to resist the conclusion that he did so willingly and eagerly, and that in the 1880s he presided deliberately over a political system based upon narrow conservative interests, and upon the restriction of the political activities of certain groups identified as 'enemies of the state'. The notion that German prosperity and security were threatened by hostile groups within Germany or abroad was central to Bismarck's political style. It is scarcely surprising that the next generation accepted so readily the claim that neighbours sought to restrict and restrain Germany's legitimate growth. Although Bismarck may not have approved of some of the ends to which Wilhelm II turned his political authority from 1890 onwards, he was directly responsible for the fact that the new Kaiser possessed the political authority and the necessary political support, in the first place. It is far less credible to blame Bismarck for the

power that fell into Hitler's hands in the 1930s. Where Wilhelm II acted largely within the structure of the Bismarckian constitution, and of the conservative coalition that Bismarck bequeathed to him, Hitler began his period in power by deliberately demolishing large portions of the Bismarckian structure. Not only was the Reichstag undermined by his assumption of emergency powers in 1933, and rival political parties banned, but the more traditional elements of the conservative coalition were steadily excluded from political influence. Above all, the federal structure of the Reich, so important for the preservation of Prussia's distinct political identity, was demolished and replaced by a centralised state system. *Abolition* – the integration of Austria into a greater German state – was, of course, the opposite of everything that Bismarck had worked for in the 1860s.

1. On what grounds have historians reached different conclusions about Bismarck's government of the united German Reich?

2. How convincing is the argument that Bismarck set up a repressive, authoritarian state in Germany?

#### 4.7 To what extent did Bismarck's foreign policy succeed in defending German interests in the 1870s?

Before 1870, Bismarckian foreign policy had aims, more or less specific, that were pursued and eventually achieved by the skilful exploitation of external circumstances. Chief among these were the desire to substitute Prussian influence for that of Austria in the affairs of the German states, and subsequently to deflect the hostility of France, aroused by Prussia's success. After 1871 the essential principles of German foreign policy underwent a substantial change. In the eyes of Bismarck the *Reichsidee* (the settlement of that year was final, and Germany was a state without further territorial ambitions. As he himself remarked, 'when we have arrived in a good harbour, we should be content to cultivate and hold what we have won'). It was now Bismarck's primary aim to prevent external events from disrupting the settlement that he had created. In this underpinning he was to achieve far less success than he had enjoyed in the first decade of his diplomatic career.

##### The *Dreikaiserbund*

For some years after 1872 the mainstay of Bismarck's delicate diplomatic balance was the understanding between the rulers of Germany, Russia and Austria–Hungary, known as the 'League of the Three Emperors' (*Dreikaiserbund*). First projected at a meeting of the monarchs in 1872, it was confirmed the following year (22 October 1873). It was given a more solid form by a series of military agreements promising aid to any party attacked by a fourth power.

In concluding this general and formless agreement, Bismarck probably had three main motives, although authorities disagree as to where the main emphasis should be placed. Firstly, the *Dreikaiserbund* represented a natural union of conservative ideals against disruptive forces such as nationalism and socialism. Secondly, the League ensured that neither Austria–Hungary nor Russia was available as an ally for France. A.J.P. Taylor preferred to emphasise the third potential benefit to Germany from the League. Its object insofar as it had one, was to prevent a conflict between Austria–Hungary and Russia in the Eastern Question.<sup>1</sup> Preoccupied by domestic issues for much of the decade, Bismarck sought to ensure that Europe remained peaceful by feeding a combination of three of Europe's five main powers.

##### The 'war in sight' crisis

Behind the superficial unity of the *Dreikaiserbund* lay self-interest and mutual suspicions that were always likely to undermine it. Two crises in

<sup>1</sup> Eastern Question: A term used to describe the political and diplomatic problems posed by the decline of the Turkish Empire. This decline eased the prospect of Russian expansion in the eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East and the Balkans. Such prospects threatened the interests of Great Britain, France and Austria–Hungary.

the 1870s demonstrated the instability of the League. The first, the so-called 'war in sight' crisis of 1875, was the result of a major diplomatic miscalculation on the part of Bismarck. He had estimated, since 1871, that his purposes were best served by the survival of a republican government in France, as this would strengthen Russian and Austrian suspicions of France and keep that country in isolation. Bismarck even went so far as to dismiss and humiliate his ambassador in Paris, II. von Arnim, when the latter disagreed and promoted royalist interests. In 1875, however, political developments in France indicated a rise in royalist support and there were disturbing signs of military preparations. Bismarck's reaction was to allow threats of a preventative war, which he certainly never intended to fight, to circulate from unofficial sources. These came to a head with an article in the *Berliner Post* (9 April 1875) entitled 'Is war in sight? Far from leading to the desired French embarrassment and retreat, the article caused France to appeal to the other powers to prevent a further German assault upon it. Britain and Russia led the protest to Berlin, and the crisis ended as suddenly as it had begun, with a German retreat. The limits of Russia's confidence in Germany had been clearly illustrated.

#### The Eastern Crisis

The second crisis, the Eastern Crisis of 1875–78, was not of Bismarck's making. It arose from the general revolt of the South Slav peoples, with Bulgarian support, against their Turkish overlords in 1875–76. Pan-slavism and practical political interests encouraged successful Russian intervention and resulted in the Treaty of San Stefano (3 March 1878). By the terms of this treaty European Turkey was substantially reduced in size by the creation of large Russian client states in Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro. Bismarck had disclaimed any interest in the Eastern Question, using the famous phrase that no Balkan issue was 'worth the healthy bones of a single Pomeranian musketeer'. Even so, he could not fail to be concerned at the prospect of a clash between Russia and Austria-Hungary, which now saw its only remaining sphere of influence in the Balkans threatened. The only alternative to war was a conference of the great powers, and this met in Berlin (June–July 1878) under the presidency of Bismarck. There he played the role of the 'honest broker', not aiming for personal profit, but for a peaceful settlement between his 'clients' Russia and Austria-Hungary. The interests of the other major powers, including Britain, ensured that Russia would not be able to maintain the San Stefano settlement.

Superficially the Congress of Berlin marked a highpoint in Bismarck's diplomatic career. In the short term, he had preserved peace and confirmed Berlin as the centre of European diplomacy. Erich Eyck, on the other hand, was one of those historians who preferred to see the congress as marking the beginning of the end of the Bismarckian system. Russian opinion was bitter at the loss of Slav territory, won at the cost of Russian blood, even though they kept their substantial Asian gains from Turkey. Tsar Alexander II was not alone in seeing the Congress of Berlin as a European coalition against Russia under the leadership of Prince Bismarck. The introduction of protective tariffs against Russian agriculture in 1879 only confirmed this impression. Quite apart from the chill that entered into Russo-German relations, the *Dreikaiserbund* was further undermined by the occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by Austria-Hungary against the will of the local population.

1. What diplomatic steps did Bismarck take to defend German interests between 1871 and 1878?

2. How successful was the Congress of Berlin from Bismarck's viewpoint?

#### 4.8 Did Bismarck's alliance with Austria in 1879 represent the failure of his diplomatic system?

##### German and Austrian motives behind the Dual Alliance

Anti-German feeling in Russia arose after the Congress of Berlin as a result of thwarted pan-Slav ambitions and of the wounded pride of Alexander Gorchakov, the Russian premier, rather than as the result of any deliberate re-orientation of German policy. It had great, long-term importance in that it confirmed the impressions that Bismarck had derived from the events of 1875–78. He felt that the time had come to put Germany's relations with Austria-Hungary on a surer footing. His motives were undoubtedly complex, but were dominated by the desire to avoid diplomatic isolation, and perhaps by the hope of frightening Russia back on to better terms with Germany by the prospect of its own isolation. It was also certain that a clear commitment to Austria would be the most popular of the diplomatic options within Germany, especially at a time when his own domestic policy relied so heavily upon conservative support. As Bismarck wrote to the reluctant Kaiser Wilhelm: 'German kinship, historical memories, the German language, all that makes an alliance with Austria more popular in Germany than an alliance with Russia.' Nevertheless, it was only with great difficulty that the Emperor's scruples about the 'betrayal' of Russia and of his fellow monarch were overcome.

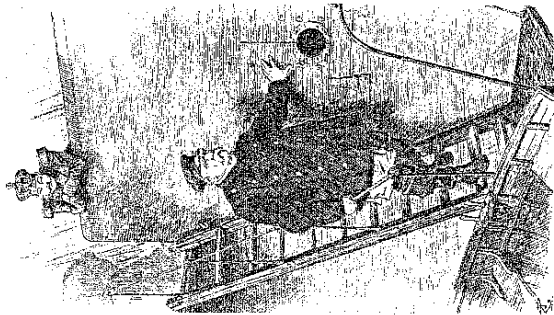
In Austria, on the other hand, the prospect of an alliance was greeted with great enthusiasm. The chief minister, Count Andrássy, was reported to have 'jumped for joy' at news of the German proposals. By the terms of this Dual Alliance (October 1879), both powers committed themselves to aid the other in the event of a Russian attack, but only to neutrality if the attack came from another power. Austria-Hungary, therefore, was not committed to aid Germany in hostilities against France—an inequality that drew further criticism from the Kaiser.

In the following years the Dual Alliance became the centre of a system of German diplomacy. The agreement has been variously interpreted by different historians, some seeing it as the salvation of European peace in the 1880s, and others seeing it as confused and contradictory. In May 1882, the alliance became the Triple Alliance through the association of Italy with Germany and Austria-Hungary. This extension of the Bismarckian system had real advantages for Germany in that its mutual undertakings with Italy were specifically anti-French. This provided Germany for the first time with a committed ally against that country. On the other hand, Austria's alliances with Serbia (June 1881) and Romania (October 1882) drew Germany even deeper into areas where it had no direct stake or interest.

##### The Reinsurance Treaty and its significance

Meanwhile, what of Russia? In the short term, Germany was able to maintain friendly relations with its neighbour. Fear of diplomatic isolation encouraged Russia to agree to the renewal of the *Dreikaiserbund* on a more formal basis (June 1881). The three powers agreed to remain neutral in the event of one of their number going to war with a fourth power. Russia and Austria-Hungary also defused tension in the Balkans for the time being, by acknowledging each other's spheres of influence in the region.

In the late summer of 1886, however, a new crisis arose over Russia's virtual deposition of Bulgaria's independent-minded King Alexander (August–September 1886). It raised the likelihood of an Austro-Russian clash more starkly than at any time since 1878, and the resultant collapse



A famous *Punch* cartoon of 1890, entitled 'Dropping the Pilot'. Commenting on Bismarck's resignation, it shows Wilhelm II watching the 'ship' of the German state, which he had guided for so long.

1. What changes took place in Germany's relations with Austria and with Russia in the years between 1878 and 1890?
2. Does Bismarck's foreign policy after 1871 suggest that he was more concerned to consolidate German power in Europe than to expand it?
3. How secure was Germany's position in European diplomacy by the time Bismarck left office in 1890?

of the *Dreikaiserbund* threatened the whole basis of Bismarckian diplomacy. In an attempt to plug the gap and to retain some influence over Russia's actions, the Chancellor was able to conclude (June 1887) a secret agreement with Russia, known as the Reinsurance Treaty. By its terms, both powers agreed to remain neutral in the event of a dispute with a third power. Germany also recognised Russia's greater interest in Bulgaria. As these neutrality clauses did not apply in the event of a German attack on France, or of a Russian attack upon Austria–Hungary, Bismarck did in fact gain some means of preventing the latter eventuality. Much controversy has centred upon the question of whether the Reinsurance Treaty was compatible with the Dual Alliance. In fact, there was no contradiction in the letter of the two agreements. They placed Germany in the position of having to decide, in the event of a clash between Russia and Austria–Hungary, who was truly the aggressor and thus which treaty Germany would honour. Bismarck's achievement in the Reinsurance Treaty was that he preserved Germany's power to arbitrate between the two powers.

#### The 'balance sheet' of Bismarckian diplomacy

What, then, was Bismarck's diplomatic legacy? The historian John McManis, in *Essays in Modern European History*, concludes that, by his commitment to Austria–Hungary, Bismarck bequeathed potential political disaster. 'Two years before Bismarck's fall from office, his system was shaking and the shadow of a Franco-Russian alliance was creeping into the horizon.' This judgement is harsh in that it attaches too little importance to the forces driving Bismarck in his decision in 1879, and underestimates the subtlety of the Reinsurance Treaty. It was, after all, Wilhelm II who allowed the treaty to lapse in 1890 when Russian enthusiasm for its renewal remained high. Nor did Bismarck create the eastern European tensions that erupted in 1914. If Bismarck's work as a diplomat can be criticised it is perhaps on the grounds that he monopolised power to such an extent that, after his fall, the diplomatic future of Germany would inevitably lie in the hands of less able men.

## 4.9 Why did Bismarck launch a German colonial policy in his last years in power?

### The acquisition of colonies

In the mid-1880s, the otherwise consistent course of German foreign policy took an unprecedented twist. Bismarck gave his government's support to the formation of a far-flung, but important, body of German colonial possessions. This contrasted starkly with the fact that in 1871 he had refused to annex French colonial possessions in place of Alsace–Lorraine, and that as late as 1881 he had declared that 'so long as I am Chancellor we shall pursue no colonial policy'. Germany's part in the 'scramble for Africa' was concentrated in the years 1884–85, establishing sovereignty in areas where German trading interests had been developed by private firms over the previous decade or so. In April 1884, the state agreed to 'protect' a strip of territory at Angra Pequena, in what is now Namibia, which had been secured from the Nama tribesmen by the Bremen merchant, Franz Lüderitz. Within the year, to the deep concern of British interests in southern Africa, this had grown into the colony of South-West Africa. In July of the same year the government appointed Gustav Nachtigal as German Consul-General in Togoland and the Cameroons, where he had previously been representing a group of Hamburg businessmen. Karl Peters, a businessman and adventurer of dubious reputation, acquired most of German East Africa (now Tanzania) for the Reich, in February 1885, through a series of shady deals with local chiefs. Further afield, the establishment of imperial control over northern New Guinea (May 1885) and over the Samoan Islands in the Pacific (1899) completed the shape of the German colonial empire.

### What were Bismarck's motives?

The reasons for this abrupt departure from tradition have exercised historians ever since, and there is still no general agreement as to Bismarck's motives. The traditional view of nationalist historians was that Bismarck had always hoped for imperial greatness, and was merely awaiting his opportunity. More recently the most widely accepted explanation has been that the German Chancellor had to conform to dominating trends in German society. German industry was now powerful enough to seek new outlets and new sources of raw materials abroad. It was perhaps natural that, after the introduction of protective tariffs in 1879, many businessmen should seek similar protection for their interests abroad from the state. This enthusiasm found expression in the formation of such successful pressure groups as the German Colonial Union (*Deutscher Kolonialverein*, 1882) and the Society for German Colonisation (*Gesellschaft für Deutsche Kolonisation*, 1884). Nationalist feeling also proclaimed that the German state, having established its European position, now had to make its power felt in the wider world. Lastly, Bismarck may have been influenced by the arguments of the political conservatives, who saw foreign adventures as a welcome distraction from domestic tensions at a time when the struggle against socialism was in full swing.

Whatever the rationale behind it, German colonial policy was generally sterile. Bismarck had hoped that colonisation would not become a financial burden upon the Reich, but would be financed by private enterprise. 'I do not wish to load provinces', he told the Reichstag in 1884, 'but to protect commercial establishments in their development.' These hopes were ill founded. By 1913 colonisation had cost the German taxpayer over

**Imperialism:** The practice whereby a state acquires economic and/or political power over other territories, usually with a view to commercial/industrial expansion.

1. What colonial territories did Germany acquire in the 1880s?
2. What benefits and what disadvantages did Germany derive from the acquisition of colonies in the 1880s?

1,000 million marks in direct government aid. Only Togoland and Samoa had proved to be self-supporting. In almost every respect the results of 30 years of imperialism had been a disappointment. The total German population of the colonies amounted to only 24,000, most of them officials.

Only South-West Africa, where diamonds were discovered in 1907, fulfilled hopes of valuable natural resources. The native populations, poor and under-developed, were unable to play the role of consumers of German industrial produce. Worst of all, the limited colonial experiment of 1884–85 provided the basis for German pretensions to a 'world policy' in the next decade, and thereby played no small role in the events that led to war in 1914.

#### 4.10 What was the impact of unification upon German economic development?

##### The stimulus of unification

The establishment of the Reich in 1871 provided a number of direct stimuli to an economy that already possessed a substantial base for prosperity. Alsace-Lorraine, for example, contained Europe's largest deposits of iron ore. Production increased rapidly under German control, from 684,000 tons in 1872 to 1,859,000 tons in 1882. The injection of part of the French indemnity payments into the national economy caused a spectacular, if short-lived, boom in 1871–73. This was felt especially in the building and railway industries. Lastly, unity provided the opportunity for a burst of legislation designed further to unify the economic life of the Reich.

Simply in terms of output, the Bismarck era provided further dramatic advances for the German economy. Coal production soared, steel production increased by some 700%, and the German merchant marine advanced from virtual non-existence to the position of second largest in the world. The table below, by contrasting German development with that of Great

##### Economic comparisons between Great Britain, France and Germany, 1870–90

|   | 1870 | 1890 |
|---|------|------|
| <i>Population (millions)</i>              |      |      |
| Germany                                   | 41   | 49   |
| Britain                                   | 32   | 38   |
| France                                    | 36   | 38   |
| <i>Coal production (million tons)</i>     |      |      |
| Germany                                   | 38   | 89   |
| Britain                                   | 118  | 164  |
| France                                    | 13   | 26   |
| <i>Steel production (million tons)</i>    |      |      |
| Germany                                   | 0.3  | 2.2  |
| Britain                                   | 0.6  | 3.6  |
| France                                    | 0.08 | 0.6  |
| <i>Iron ore production (million tons)</i> |      |      |
| Germany                                   | 2.9  | 8    |
| Britain                                   | 14   | 14   |
| France                                    | 2.6  | 3.5  |

Britain and France, gives an impression of its advance as a world industrial power. Apart from the doubling of the railway network, it is also important to note the extent of nationalisation that took place during these decades. Out of Prussia's 28,000 kilometres of track, 24,000 kilometres passed into state ownership between 1879 and 1884.

##### Banking, finance and industrial cartels

In these respects the 1870s and 1880s formed part of a steady and consistent development. What was unique to this period was the development of two important features in the economy. Firstly, the post-war boom provided a considerable stimulus to the German banking industry. By the mid-1870s, Germany had a remarkably well-endowed system. Apart from the Reichsbank, there were six other banks which dominated commerce and industry with a combined capital of 2,500 million marks. They participated widely in the arrangement of private loans to industry and of public loans to the state, in the encouragement of new industries such as electricity and chemicals, and in the development of foreign and colonial ventures. With their representatives sitting on the boards of many leading companies, the co-operation between bankers and industrialists – known as 'finance capitalism' – reached a high stage of development during this period. Such bankers could also provide important services for the state. Bismarck's own banking adviser, Gerson Bleichröder, helped to finance the expensive military campaigns of 1863–66 at a time when state reserves were low, and later stage-managed the policy of railway nationalisation in the 1870s and 1880s.

The second distinctive feature of contemporary economic development was the growth of cartels. There were four such cartels in 1865, and only eight a decade later. Harder times made such arrangements more attractive and Germany boasted 90 in 1885 and 210 five years later. The largest cartels, such as the Rhenish Steel Syndicate and the Ruhr Coal Syndicate, headed by such men as Alfred Krupp, Hugo Stinnes and Fritz Thyssen, exercised enormous influence over the economic and political development of the Reich. Their demands for protective tariffs in the 1870s, and their later campaigns for naval and colonial development, clearly demonstrate this influence. A further result of these cartels was that safe home markets enabled German industrialists increasingly to break into foreign markets by 'dumping' goods cheaply.

Therein lay the seeds of the ultimate failure of Bismarck's conservative system. For all his fear of Catholics or Socialists, the greatest danger to Junker, Prussian Germany arose from the increasing demands and ambitions of German financiers and industrialists.

1. What were the major features of Germany economic and commercial development in the 1870s and the 1880s?

2. In what ways did German economic developments in the 1870s and the 1880s change the state and the society that Bismarck had created in 1871?