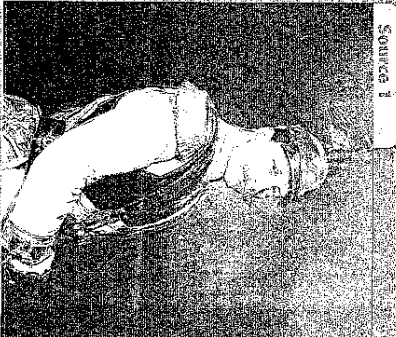
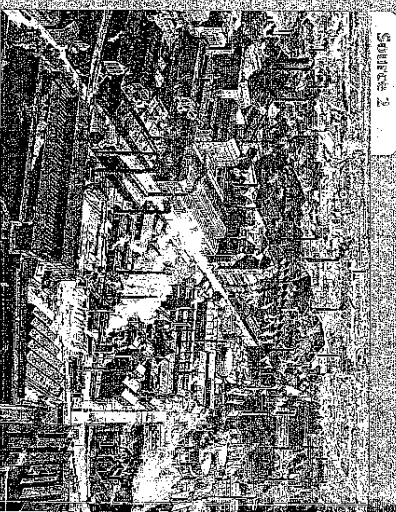


Chapter

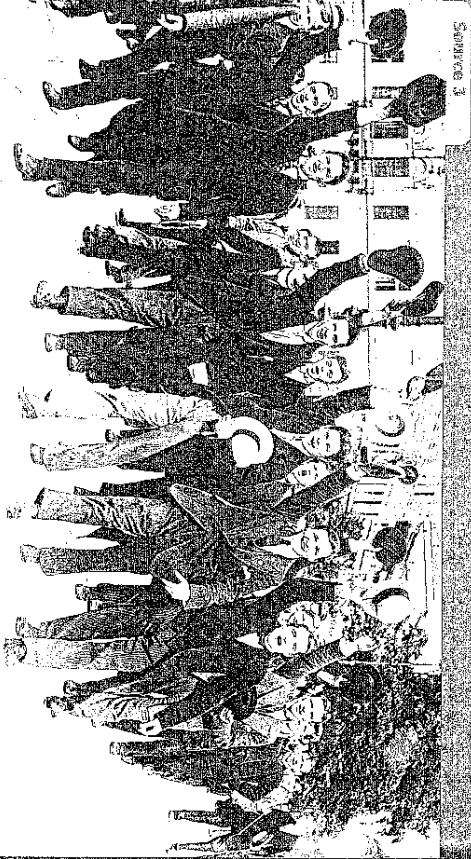
Wilhelmine Germany, 1890–1914



Source 1



Source 2



Source 3

Think about

- ▶ What image do you think Kaiser Wilhelm II was trying to project of himself in Source 1?
- ▶ Source 3 was taken in 1914. Can you think of any reason why these young German men are cheering?

Further reading

For the most recent assessment of Kaiser Wilhelm II, see Clark, *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, 2001.

Before our eyes yesterday an elevating ceremony was played out: before us stands the statue of Emperor Wilhelm I, the imperial sword raised in his right hand, a symbol of law and order. It reminds us all of other duties, of the serious struggle against the tendencies which are directed against the foundations of our existence as a state and a society. So, gentlemen, my appeal goes out to you now: Forward in the struggle for religion, for morality and order, against the parties of revolution!

Speech by Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1894

Think about

- ▶ What does Source 4 suggest about Wilhelm's aims?

Introduction

It was clear from the start of his reign that Kaiser Wilhelm II intended to rule Germany differently from his grandfather. Bismarck's resignation in 1890 ended what many Germans were soon to regard as a period of strength and stability. However, as you know, Bismarck's legacy was far from promising in several respects. He had ignored the consequences of many of the social and economic changes in Germany, attempting to isolate the 'threat' from the left whilst protecting authoritarian rule and the continued power of the elites. The new Kaiser failed to address these fundamental issues and the frequent changes of Chancellor (four between 1890 and 1914) left him with more direct power and influence than was intended by the Imperial Constitution. His own personality was badly suited to such power and he became increasingly preoccupied with foreign policy. By the beginning of the 1900s, the growing military power of Germany was used as a way of masking internal opposition by generating patriotic loyalties. This policy of papering over the basic cracks which were appearing within the political system was hardly to the long-term advantage of Germany. Of course, one of the key features of this period was that it ended with a world war. To what extent was this the fault of the Kaiser and his government?

Key questions

- How did Germany develop economically and socially during this period?
- To what extent did the Kaiser establish a 'personal rule'?
- Where did power really lie?
- How successfully did the government deal with political opposition?
- To what extent was foreign policy used to distract attention away from internal problems?
- How much responsibility should Germany bear for the outbreak of the First World War?

Kaiser Wilhelm II

Historians disagree about the importance of the Kaiser during this period. He has been regarded in two different ways: as crucial to an understanding of the events which followed his accession and also as a more marginal figure who was unsuccessful in fully asserting his power. However, it is certainly helpful to have a sense of his aims and personality and it would be hard to deny that his power and influence were important factors influencing German policy, even if the extent of them is in dispute.

Wilhelm was the son of a German father and an English mother (he was the grandson of Queen Victoria). He was born with a paralysed left arm and a defect in the balancing mechanism in his ear. As an adult, he still required assistance in dressing and cutting up food. Historians have speculated as to how this affected him as he grew up. Certainly he showed signs of needing to prove his own strength and power and from an early age showed a great interest in the military. As Kaiser, he was rarely seen out of military uniform and he often chose soldiers to advise him. His moods were erratic and he was extremely sensitive to criticism from those around him, although this did not

include sensitivity to public opinion in general. One of his closest advisers until 1894, Bülow, told one of the Kaiser's Chancellors:

Source 5

Wilhelm takes everything personally. Only personal arguments will impress him. He likes to lecture others but will not allow himself to be taught. He cannot bear boredom, heavy-handed, stiff and pedantic people get on his nerves and can achieve nothing through him. Wilhelm II likes to shine and to do and decide everything by himself... To get him to accept an idea one has to pretend that the idea is his own... Never forget that HM [His Majesty] needs to be praised from time to time... You will always achieve all you desire so long as you do not omit to express your admiration whenever HM has earned it.

Extract from Bülow's *Memoirs*, 1930-1931

Wilhelm was prone to outbursts of rage when things did not go his way. In another communication to Bülow (Chancellor 1900-1909), Bülow expressed his dismay that 'HM is no longer in control of himself when he is seized by rage'.

This unpredictable and at times unbelievable behaviour made him in many ways an unsuitable monarch. Certainly his chancellors frequently had to restrain him from making potentially disastrous decisions and found their own freedom for action hampered by his mood swings. However, Wilhelm was also lazy and uninterested in the day-to-day detail of government. He once boasted that he had never read the Imperial Constitution. In these circumstances, he could be swept along by others, especially in military matters. And yet he wanted to establish a 'personal rule' where he set the terms and directed policy with minimal contact with the Reichstag. He believed that his power came from God.

Germany 1890-1914

The economy

What kind of country did the new Kaiser rule over? In economic terms, Germany continued to flourish; indeed her industrial might expanded much further after 1890. Production of manufactured goods increased by a multiple of five compared to British production which merely doubled. By 1914 Germany produced two-thirds of Europe's steel and over half its coal. Germany also led the way in the newer industries of electrical goods, chemicals and steel.

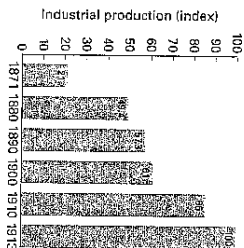
Agricultural production was more patchy, but overall by 1914 Germany was producing a higher yield of crops than anywhere else in the world.

Several factors contributed to this economic growth, but it is worth highlighting particular factors here. Firstly, the population was expanding at an astonishing rate. The German population increased from 41 million to 67.7 million between 1871 and 1914. In France during the same period the population increased from 36 million to 40 million. This provided a vast labour force, much of which was located in towns and cities as more and more people left the countryside in search of work. Other factors included the sheer size of the German Empire (which provided a substantial home market for manufactured goods) and the expertise of the German banking system which granted generous long-term loans which in turn boosted investment.

Think about

Does Source 5 support the view that the Kaiser controlled German policy?

Foreign visitors were frequently stunned by Wilhelm's odd behaviour. The head of the Military Cabinet died of a heart attack after dancing for Wilhelm in a nut.

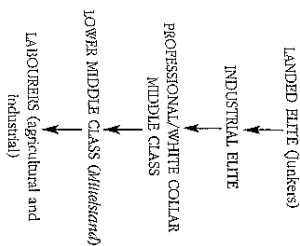


The growth of German industrial production after unification, with 1913 as the base.

Think about

What impact do you think this economic growth had on Germany's military potential and German society?

Social hierarchy
German society 1890-1914:



In East Prussia, cheap labour was sometimes brought in from Poland and Russia and, where peasants owned land, the practice of dividing it between their children was a further cause of poverty.

Society

German society was clearly undergoing a period of profound change. The middle and working classes were swelling in number, whilst the economic power of the old land-owning elites was in decline. Industrial workers were beginning to acquire some sense of a common identity which was expressed in the growing popularity of the Social Democratic Party and the trade unions. German society remained, however, fundamentally divided along class, religious and geographical lines. Movement from one social class to another remained rare.

At the top of the social pyramid were the landed elites (Junkers) who, despite their declining economic power, remained the most privileged and powerful groups in political terms. They dominated appointments to the government, the army and the bureaucracy, and in Prussia they still dominated elections through the three-class voting system (see p. 30). Not surprisingly, they continued to defend their own interests and fight against the threat of greater democracy which could challenge their pre-eminent position in the government of Germany. Joining this land-owning elite in increasing numbers were the wealthy industrialists who, rather than challenging the power of the Junkers, instead sought to join their ranks. They too feared an extension in the power of the working class which could cut their profits, and were therefore commonly in tune with right-wing conservative politics. They even sought to copy the land-owning elite's lifestyle, for example by purchasing landed estates and securing army posts for their sons.

One rung down the social ladder were the less wealthy members of the middle class. Those involved in expanding professions, such as civil servants and academics, tended to support the status quo and offer support to the government. They were generally satisfied with the status they had achieved. The *Mittelstand* (lower middle class) were less happy, however. Craftsmen, shopkeepers and small farmers, for example, felt stranded between the industrial working class (who were gaining strength from trade unions and the Social Democrats) and the growing success and power of larger industrial concerns. This feeling of exclusion led them to question Germany's industrial age and turn to right-wing pressure groups who they hoped would restore Germany's traditional values.

At the bottom of this hierarchy lay the labouring classes. Agricultural labourers found it increasingly difficult to earn a living. Many had become seasonal labourers and were dependent on finding alternative sources of employment to supplement their income. Not surprisingly, many labourers found their way to towns and cities to seek employment. For the industrial workers, now growing rapidly in numbers, employment was more stable and wages increasing. However, working and living conditions were poor and the rising cost of food and rents did little to help.

The political structure

The political structure established in 1871 (see pages 30-31) remained largely unchanged. The elites continued to dominate the government, and the Reichstag, although certainly becoming much more troublesome, could only exercise a negative influence on government policy (i.e. the power to block government policies).

7

Party	1887	1890	1893	1898	1903	1907	1912
German Conservatives	80	73	72	56	54	60	43
Free Conservatives	41	20	28	23	21	24	14
National Liberals	99	42	53	46	51	54	45
Centre Party	98	106	96	102	100	105	91
Left Liberals	32	76	48	49	36	49	42
Social Democrats (SPD)	11	35	44	56	81	43	110
Minorities	33	38	35	34	32	29	33
Right-Wing Splitter Parties	3	7	21	31	22	33	19
Total	397	397	397	397	397	397	397

One of the most striking features of these elections was the growing strength of the Social Democratic Party, which by 1912 had become the largest single party in the Reichstag. Despite the strong opposition to the party from both the government and the right, the SPD's programme was hardly revolutionary. Its manifesto of 1891 (the Erfurt Programme) signalled a basic intention to pursue reform within the existing parliamentary system. This was partly the result of pressure from the trade unions, most of which were led by social democrats who opposed revolutionary aims. Whilst the SPD refused to work with other parties, it continued to stand in elections and campaign legally for reform. One historian has described the government's failure to recognize the weakness of the socialists to work with it as a tragedy for Germany (Craig, 1981).

Pressure groups

The weaknesses of the Reichstag led to a growth of pressure groups representing a range of different social groups:

Trade unions increased their membership considerably after 1890 and, by 1914, membership had risen to about 3.3 million. Their approach towards government was to work with it rather than to confront it and they focused their efforts on practical matters such as working hours, wages and conditions. Those workers who did not belong to a trade union (collectively known as the *Lohnproletariat*) sometimes made more direct challenges to the government through spontaneous strikes, other illegal and even violent protests. They were not, however, supported by either the official trade unions or the SPD.

The Agrarian League was formed in 1893 by Junkers keen to see the restoration of protectionist measures to protect them from foreign competition. It soon became a major influence within the German Conservative Party. Attempts to secure the support of the peasants made some headway in the north but, in the south, the peasantry formed their own pressure groups – the Peasant Leagues. Their influence was particularly marked in Bavaria and the Centre Party, worried about the loss of the peasant vote, began to form its own Catholic Peasant Associations and became more supportive of protectionist policies.

Nationalist groups grew in number after 1890. They were largely an attempt by the ruling classes to secure support for naval expansion and a more aggressive foreign policy and did not pose a threat to the government. Their sources of support came mainly from the middle classes. The Navy League, one

What patterns of voting emerged

The Reich government generally looked for support from the conservatives and the National Liberals. The Centre Party often supported the government, but became increasingly critical of government policy in the early 1900s. The SPD, though more willing to work with the government than one might suppose, was hardly a source of support on which the government could – or would want to – rely. See page 33 for a summary of these political parties.

- What patterns of voting emerged from source 7?
- Was this a pattern to be welcomed by the government?

The number of strikes increased during this period – for example, there were three general miners' strikes (in 1889, 1905 and 1912). In 1910 nearly 700,000 workers were involved in more than 3,000 strikes. Most of the strikes were neither members of the SPD nor the trade unions.

Women also formed pressure groups. There was inequality between men and women in all aspects of German life. Married women had no control over their property, did not receive equal pay and could not vote. Until 1908 they were not permitted to take part in any political activity. By 1914 there were two main women's organizations, the DDFP (Federation of German Women's Associations) which was conservative in outlook, and the Socialist Women's Movement which was much more radical.

The Kaiser supported the social welfare measures brought in by Caprivi. He wanted to kill socialism with kindness – in other words to make it difficult for the SPD to oppose the government.

We must cry out, so that the whole nation hears us, we must cry out until it reaches the steps of the throne! But we must at the same time act, so that our cry does not once again die away unnoticed... we must bring things to a point where our district council presidents report to their superiors: 'The greatest discontent dominates the farmers' circles', and their previous attitude, that was so well disposed to the government, has turned into the reverse...

Extract from an article written in 1892 by a Silesian tenant-farmer

of the most significant nationalist groups, had about 200,000 members by 1900. Anti-Semitic groups also grew in number and contested elections, although their impact on German politics was small.

In conclusion, we can see that although the structure of the political system remained the same, there were signs that the German people were becoming more politically active.

Domestic policy, 1890-1914

Caprivi

Bismarck's successor as Chancellor was Leo Graf von Caprivi, a man whom Wilhelm believed he could control but who in fact exercised a degree of independence. Caprivi embarked on a 'new course' intended to conciliate different political groups and achieve a workable government majority in the Reichstag. In 1891 he was able to implement a number of social welfare measures including limitations on child and female labour and working on Sundays. He followed this up with a series of trading treaties which offered lower duties on food to Germany's trading partners in exchange for easier access to foreign markets for manufactured goods.

What seemed on the surface to be sensible policies aimed at winning over the left and encouraging economic expansion led to Caprivi's downfall in 1894. The key problem was that Caprivi was alienating the elites by his social welfare reforms and upsetting the landed elites with his Tariff Act which left them much more vulnerable to cheap foreign food imports. It was this dissatisfaction which led to the creation of the Agrarian League in 1893. Nor were the socialists satisfied with the few measures which Caprivi had brought in – the left was not to be fobbed off with limitations on Sunday work and child labour (Craig, 1981). The result was therefore a deadlock between government and the Reichstag, a situation which Caprivi had set out to avoid.

None of this was helped by Caprivi's unusual decision to relinquish the position of Prussian Prime Minister (a post which Bismarck had combined with Chancellor). Caprivi's replacement in this post was Count Bodo zu Eulenberg, a favourite of the Kaiser. Eulenberg, a landed aristocrat himself, fully supported the conservative opposition to Caprivi and encouraged the Kaiser to ignore the wishes of his Chancellor. In 1894, amidst a wave of anarchy across Europe and an increase in SPD seats in the previous year's elections, Eulenberg pressed the Kaiser to implement an anti-socialist bill. Caprivi was presented with the supervision bill and refused to support it. The Kaiser's response was to threaten to rule without the Reichstag and it was only on Caprivi's insistence that the plan was dropped. By this time, however, Caprivi had lost too much favour amongst the ruling elites and was dismissed by the Kaiser along with Eulenberg (an illustration of the Kaiser's capricious nature).

Hohenlohe

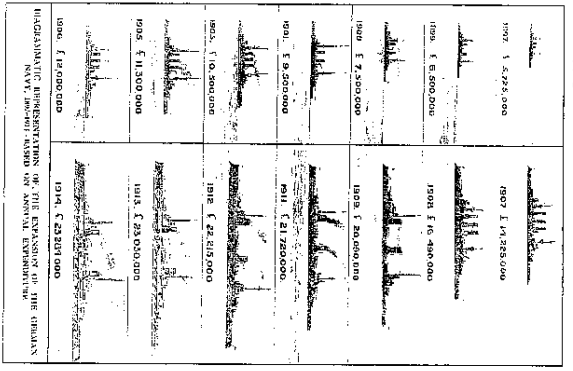
Caprivi's successor was an elderly Bavarian gentleman named Prince Cillovsky zu Hohenlohe-Schillingfürst. Hohenlohe was not a natural leader and made no decisive contribution to German politics. He represented industrialists and anti-socialists and much of his efforts were spent trying to get anti-socialist measures through the Reichstag, although this was more to satisfy the Kaiser than out of any burning desire on his part. However the supervision bill, presented to the Reichstag in 1895, was not passed.

From 1897 onwards, Hohenlohe, although still Chancellor for a further three years, was no longer at the heart of policy making. The Kaiser made three appointments during that year: Count Bernhard von Bülow as Foreign Secretary, Admiral von Tirpitz as Navy Secretary and Count Posadowsky-Wentner as Interior Minister. The first two appointments signalled the Kaiser's determination to focus increasingly on foreign policy. Certainly, Germany's foreign policy took on a much more aggressive character. The policy of *Weltpolitik* (World Policy) emerged in 1897, consisting of three main strands:

- Acquire more colonial territory
- Create a German-dominated economic zone in central and eastern Europe
- Expand the navy

This policy was immensely popular amongst the nationalist pressure groups such as the Pan-German League and was also popular with industrialists who saw the promise of new markets for their goods and new sources of raw materials. It also promised to fulfil the ambitions of the Kaiser and his closest ministers who wished to raise Germany's profile on the world stage.

The expansion of the navy had a profound impact on Germany's domestic and foreign policies. The Navy League, created in 1898, acted as a propaganda instrument to drum up popular, patriotic support for Germany's expanding fleet, and it met with success. Expansion of the navy proved more popular than the army, perhaps because it symbolised German growth (the army was still dominated by Prussia). Naval bills were passed by the Reichstag in 1898 and 1900, with the support of the Centre Party. However, naval expansion was not without its problems. For one thing, the cost of building such a powerful fleet was high. Secondly, it contributed significantly to deteriorating relations with Britain (see page 66).



A British diagram produced in 1914, showing the growth in the German navy since 1897.

The other significant political development during Hohenlohe's chancellorship was an attempt to achieve a 'marriage of iron and rye'. This involved an alliance between the landed and industrial elites which was described in 1897 as *Sammelnugsworte*. The alliance was hardly a stable one, however, and was based on the negative aim of suppressing socialism. The alliance of the

Think about this diagram of German naval expansion was produced in Britain. What does it suggest about Britain's response to German naval expansion? Why do you think it was produced?

conservatives and National Liberals (but not the Centre Party) was only briefly of much use. In the elections of 1898, only the Centre Party and the Social Democratic Party gained more seats with the *Sammelnug* parties losing out.

Bülow as Chancellor

In 1900 Hohenlohe resigned and his place was filled by Bülow, who was by now exerting a good deal of influence on policy. Bülow faced two main problems on the domestic front. Firstly, his attempt to increase tariffs on foodstuffs did not go far enough to please the conservatives, while further alienating the socialists and Left Liberals who opposed the inevitable knock-on effect of higher food prices. Not surprisingly, the SPD again gained seats in the 1903 election. In the end, the tariff changes were supported by the Free Conservatives, the Centre Party and the National Liberals (the so-called black-bale alliance), but the 'marriage of iron and rye' was damaged.

The second problem facing Bülow was how to finance *Weltpolitik*. The government finances had been in deficit since 1900 and the biggest demands from the army and the navy had yet to be made. In 1905, Bülow proposed to raise indirect taxes and introduce an inheritance tax. Both measures created immediate opposition. Socialists and the Centre Party voted against raising indirect taxes which would increase the prices of goods purchased by the working people who could least afford them. Meanwhile, the inheritance tax was fiercely opposed by the conservatives, who weakened the proposal to such an extent that it was not worth implementing.

Bülow was facing a stalemate. The Centre Party was critical of the government's treatment of the native people of German South West Africa, where an uprising in 1904-1905 had been crushed, after reports reached them from Catholic missionaries. It had also denied the government support over the raising of indirect taxation. Bülow decided to break with them but faced the inevitable problem of forming a workable coalition in the Reichstag. He was helped by the election result of 1907 when the nationalist appeal of the government led to a drop in SPD seats and an increase in seats of the right-wing parties. Bülow proceeded to form the 'Bülow Bloc' consisting of conservatives and Liberals. It was an uneasy alliance, however, with the Left Liberals demanding the kinds of social reform which the conservatives found intolerable.

The Daily Telegraph Affair

In 1908 a conversation took place between the Kaiser and a friend which was subsequently written up in the style of an interview for the *Daily Telegraph*, in the hope that it might improve Anglo-German relations. In this interview the Kaiser claimed that the prevailing sentiment amongst his own people is not friendly to England! but that the English were mad, mad as March hares! in believing that he himself wanted anything other than peace. Following the publication of the article, demands were made by the German press and the Reichstag for more control over the Kaiser's actions. Bülow - who claimed not to have read the article although it had been sent to him before publication - sided with the Kaiser's critics and tried to persuade the Kaiser to agree to more constitutional constraints on his behaviour. In the event, no changes to the constitution followed, demonstrating the Reichstag's divisions and essential weaknesses. The affair had, however, fatally undermined Bülow's relationship with the Kaiser. The support which he had gone to such lengths to secure was rapidly dwindling.

Bethmann Hollweg

In 1909 Bülow's fate was sealed by a further unsuccessful attempt to raise money for the military. The *Bülow Bloc* fell apart as the conservatives again rejected an inheritance bill, supported this time by the Centre Party which had been stung by the anti-Catholic tone of the 1907 election campaigns. The shortage in government finances remained and there was little prospect of a majority of support for the government. Bülow resigned.

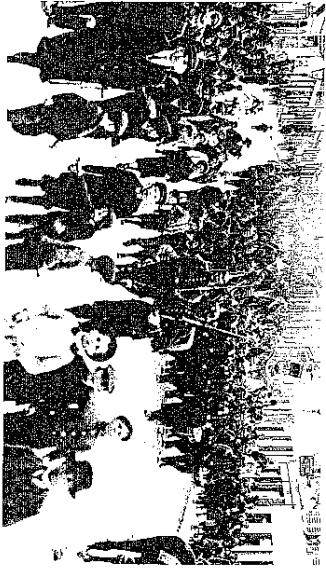
His successor was Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, an experienced administrator who sympathized with the policy of *Wohlfühlpolitik* and disliked democracy. However, his freedom for manoeuvre was restricted by previous policies and by the growing tensions that German actions had unleashed in Europe. He increasingly relied on the court, the army and the bureaucracy to support him in the face of continued opposition from the Reichstag. Only the patriotism generated by military expansion and the possibility of a threat from Russia enabled him to get anything through the Reichstag.

One of the few initiatives put forward by Bethmann Hollweg was a reform of the three-class voting system of Prussia which had long been on the political agenda. It further illustrated the deadlock in the Reichstag; the conservatives found it too threatening whilst the other parties found its moderation unacceptable. Bethmann Hollweg withdrew the bill in the face of such opposition. Two years later, in 1912, his opposition grew further with the SPD winning 110 seats in the election and becoming the single largest party in the Reichstag.

In the same year both the Navy Office and the War Ministry requested large increases in military expenditure. Initially Bethmann Hollweg resorted to a temporary measure of a tax on spirits to avoid a row over an inheritance tax, but a further request for money to fund the army's expansion forced the issue. This time, the inheritance bill was passed following the successful passage of the second army bill. Although it inevitably provoked opposition from the conservatives, the other parties rallied to the government to demonstrate their patriotism in the face of a perceived threat from Russia. The new tax had finally been achieved but the national debt remained high.

The Zabern affair

In 1913 an event occurred in the former province of France, Alsace, which was yet another example of the divisions within German society and the increasing breach between the government and its people. In this case, it was the army



60

Activity

Write a resignation letter from Bülow to the Kaiser explaining why you have resigned as Chancellor of Germany.

Activity

Compare the four Chancellors of Germany between 1890 and 1917. For each Chancellor, make notes under the following headings:

- Aims
- Successes
- Failures
- Why forced to resign

Using these notes, discuss whether or not you agree with the following statement:

Summary
German Chancellors 1890–1917:

Capivi: 1890–1894

Hohenlohe: 1894–1900

Bülow: 1900–1909

Bethmann Hollweg: 1909–1917

TECHNIQUES

The problems encountered by the German government in its domestic policy between 1890 and 1914 were less to do with the Chancellors themselves and more to do with other factors.

Note: For inclusion into your key skills portfolio, you will need to write up your answer to the question, including at least one image.

Activity

Read the historical debate on this page. Then arrange yourselves into four groups. Each group will consider one of the interpretations and look for evidence which *supports* it using the material in this chapter. You might also like to consider what evidence you could put forward to *undermine* the other three interpretations.

The groups will then take part in a debate, arguing either for or against the following motion:

Power clearly lay in the hands of Kaiser Wilhelm II between 1890 and 1914.

At the end of the debate, try to reach a consensus on where you think power did lie between 1890 and 1914.

Note: The class teacher may wish to help/video the debate or make detailed notes to provide evidence for the key skills criteria.

which provoked the affair by mistreating inhabitants of the town of Zabern. Rather than dismissing the commanding officers as was expected, the Kaiser merely transferred them to another area. This was as good as saying that the army was above the law and under the sole authority of the Kaiser. The public outcry illustrated that the status accorded to the military by the Kaiser was not acknowledged by the German people. Bethmann Hollweg received an enormous vote of no-confidence in the Reichstag (293 to 54 votes) but remained in office until 1917. Here again was a sign that the Reichstag was weak; the Chancellor remained unaccountable to the Reichstag and his authority came from the Kaiser alone.

Where did power lie in Wilhelmine Germany?

Historical debate

This has been the subject of considerable debate since the 1960s. The interpretations generally fall into four groups outlined chronologically:

Interpretations

Examples of historians

Some historians argue that Kaiser Wilhelm II established a personal rule in which he exercised considerable control over the direction of government policy. He set the terms and his chancellors were never able to assert power in the way that Bismarck had done previously. However, that is not to say that the Kaiser ruled well. His obsessive and unpredictable personality led to considerable errors of judgement, such as the *Dobly Telegraph* affair. Nevertheless, in this 'individualist' interpretation, power lay with the Kaiser.

Röhrl

An alternative interpretation – labelled 'structuralist' for convenience – argues that in fact power lay in the hands of the elites. The determination of the elites to cling on to power led to anti-socialist policies and eventually to foreign expansion in order to divert attention away from internal problems.

Wether Hegahn

A more recent interpretation argues that we should stop focusing solely on the Kaiser or the elites and consider what was happening at the grass roots level. Rather than being manipulated, there were signs that the working and middle classes were beginning to assert themselves more effectively and that they were having an impact, however indirectly, on the direction of government policy.

Bley Blackburn Evans

Most recently, there has been an attempt to find a way through these different interpretations. On the one hand, the Kaiser was never able to dominate the direction of foreign and domestic policy. On the other hand, the nature of the German Constitution meant that when no agreement between power blocks could be reached, the key decisions fell to him.

Clark

Source 10
A photograph taken in Zabern in early 1914.

Document exercise: Domestic policy 1890-1914

SOURCE

The policies of the SPD

...our tactics today cannot be the same as during the state of emergency. In any case we never gave up parliamentary activity and participation in daily politics even at the time; only the Party's principal task then had to consist of the bitterest, genuinest resistance against a government, which placed us outside the law, was trying to destroy us politically and individually, and hence with whom there could only be war, not negotiation. Nowadays it is different. The government has probably not given up the struggle against us. But the barbaric way of annihilation is over, and they have recognised us as a belligerent power and are conducting a civilised fight against us, in which, by our ability, we are in a position to achieve real successes.

A Bavarian Social Democrat outlines his party's policy in 1891

SOURCE B

The views of Kaiser Wilhelm II

Public opinion didn't concern him. He knew that people didn't love him, and cursed him; but that wouldn't deter him. I then reminded the Emperor of the difference between Prussia and the Empire; said that in Prussia he had old rights which continued to exist, so far as the Prussian Constitution had not limited them...The Emperor interpreted the Emperor hardly has any rights, which I attempted to refute. Besides, this was quite unimportant, said HM: the south German democratic states didn't worry him. He had 18 army corps and would make short work of the south Germans.

Report by Hohenlohe in 1897

SOURCE C

Navy propaganda

...the concept of the navy has indeed, as Prince Bismarck once said, been the hearth around which the German attempts at unity have clustered and warmed themselves...It has also, however, been allotted the further task of overcoming the discord between the parties in the united German Empire, and directing the minds of the disputants towards a higher goal: the greatness and glory of the Fatherland. Today millions of our compatriots are spiritually alienated from the state and the prevailing economic order; the concept of the navy possesses the power...to revive the national spirit of the classes and fill them once again with patriotic loyalty and love for the Kaiser and Reich.

From an article written by the press bureau of the Imperial Army Office, 1906

SOURCE E

The policies of the Centre Party

In the Reichstag new groups must be formed. The Centre Party will enter no permanent coalition, only such temporary combinations as may be necessary from time to time...There can be no question of a systematic opposition on our part against the government...The main thing is that everyone, without regard for party viewpoints, should unite in support of society and the government and protect them against attack.

Extract from the *New York Herald*, 1890 outlining the policy of Windthorst, leader of the Centre Party

Examination-style questions

- 1 Comprehension in context**
Using Source B and your own knowledge, explain how Kaiser Wilhelm II viewed his own power.
- 2 Comparing the sources**
To what extent do Sources A and E outline similar attitudes towards the German government?
- 3 Assessing the sources**
How reliable is Source C about the likely effect of naval expansion on the German people?
- 4 Making judgements**
Using all the sources and your own knowledge, explain how effectively Kaiser Wilhelm II and his government dealt with political opposition.

Foreign policy

The war to end all wars'. This was how the First World War was to be described. Not surprisingly, the events leading up to it, and the question of who was most responsible, have generated considerable debate amongst historians. However, the purpose of this section is to explore German foreign policy between 1890 and 1914 and as such it should not be regarded as a comprehensive account of the origins of the war. The focus here is on Germany, but this should not be interpreted as suggesting that Germany was the only country responsible for war.

The end of Bismarck's diplomacy

Bismarck's primary aim in foreign policy had been to maintain the isolation of Germany's main enemy, France. This had involved alliances with Austria-Hungary (in the 1882 Triple Alliance, also involving Italy) and Russia (the Reinsurance Treaty of 1887). These two alliances stood uneasily together, however, as Austria-Hungary and Russia were unlikely to resolve their differences in the Balkans. In 1890, after Bismarck's resignation, Caprivi argued that an alliance with Russia was unacceptable in the light of Germany's close ties to Austria-Hungary and, consequently, the Reinsurance Treaty was not renewed. It is possible that it would not have lasted for long anyway, but this decision certainly had the effect of making Russia feel isolated, especially when the Triple Alliance was renewed in 1891. As a result, Russia was more inclined

SOURCE

A summary of the historical debate surrounding the causes of the First World War can be found on page 69.

SOURCE B

The election results of the SPD (numbers of seats)

1897	11
1890	35
1893	44
1898	56
1903	81
1907	43
1912	110

to respond to French pressure and in 1894 the Franco-Russian Alliance was signed. This seemed to fulfil Bismarck's nightmare of coalitions in which Germany faced potential enemies on both sides. Certainly Germany's position in Europe made her vulnerable to encirclement and was a significant factor in the foreign policies that followed.

Although military plans were drawn up in case a two-front war did break out, Germany did not feel unduly alarmed at this point. One of the key miscalculations made by Germany was that Britain would remain aloof from alliances with France or Russia and that she would gradually be won over to Germany's side. This British alliance would help to neutralize any potential threat to Germany from France or Russia. However, because a British alliance was considered inevitable, it was treated with insufficient urgency. Indeed, in 1896 the Kaiser jeopardized relations with Britain by sending a telegram to Kruger, the Boer President, supporting the independence of the Transvaal in South Africa. Britain was offended as she was trying to defend her own position in the area.

Weltpolitik

By 1897 the Kaiser and his circle – which by now included figures such as Bülow and Admiral Tirpitz – had strong feelings that Germany should actively pursue a policy which would enhance its status as a world power.

Source 11

The times when Germany left the land to one of his neighbours, the sea to the other, and reserved heaven, where pure doctrine is endorsed, for himself (*Langhüter – Bruno*) – those times are past... We must demand that the German missionary and the German trader, German goods, the German flag and German ships in China are just as much respected as those of other powers. (*Libby Bruno*)... we don't want to put anyone in the shade, but we demand our place in the sun too. (*Bruno*) In East Asia as in the West Indies we will endeavour to safeguard our rights and our interests, true to the traditions of German policy, without unnecessary severity, but also without weakness. (*Libby apphause*)

Bülow speaking to the Reichstag after Germany acquired Kiaochow in China, 1897

The policy of *Weltpolitik* was to dominate German foreign policy after 1897. It involved active colonial expansion and the creation of a strong navy. Its popularity derived from the economic opportunities of an overseas empire as well as nationalist ambitions for Germany to become a more powerful state on the world stage.

Historians have differed in their interpretation of *Weltpolitik*. Fritz Fischer, whose controversial claims about German foreign policy are summarized on page 69, argued in the 1960s that it represented the first step towards world status which would involve both colonial and European expansion. In other words, he saw it as the first step towards war. Other historians such as Wheeler and Bayly emphasize the extent to which *Weltpolitik* was driven by domestic concerns and was intended to distract the people away from internal disputes and encourage them to support the Kaiser and his government (Source 12).

Germany's military plan, known as the Schlieffen Plan is discussed in a margin note on page 68.

Between 1890 and 1896 there was therefore no clear direction in foreign policy. During these years there were two main views on the future direction of Germany's foreign position. One was for Germany to dominate middle Europe economically, the other was for Germany to extend her ambitions and seek to gain world status by establishing a large overseas empire. By 1896, the second view was emerging as the favourite.

Think about

- ▶ What do you think Bülow means in Source 11 by a place in the sun?
- ▶ How would you describe the tone of this speech?

Social Darwinism was the application of Darwin's biological theories of survival of the fittest to society and politics. It was used to justify limited social reform, for example, because by providing for the poor, the 'unfit' might artificially survive and even thrive. Social Darwinism had a significant impact on relations between states. In order to survive, many believed that states had to prove their fitness and strength, for example by expansion and if necessary by war.

Think about

- ▶ Did the formation of alliances make war more or less likely?

Source 12

Weltpolitik therefore came into existence as a real herring of the ruling classes to distract the middle and working classes from social and political problems at home.

Geiss, *German Foreign Policy 1871-1914*, 1976

There are probably elements of truth to the last interpretation, termed 'social imperialism'. Certainly naval expansion stirred the patriotism of many and naval bills were passed without difficulty by an increasingly critical Reichstag. Fischer's argument is perhaps more difficult to defend. The chaotic and largely unsuccessful implementation of *Weltpolitik* undermines his theory that this was a coherent masterplan. The colonial gains in Africa, the Far East and the Pacific were small compared with other states and were too widely scattered to be defended properly. What is more, German naval expansion caused considerable alarm in Britain, whose naval fleet was the strongest in the world. This effect was not unintentional, the idea being to force Britain to acknowledge German power and accept that an alliance was in her best interests. This was a good example of how German foreign policy was mismanaged by using heavy handed and threatening tactics.

Meanwhile, Bülow continued to work on the assumption that Britain would eventually come round to Germany's way of thinking. Another opportunity to improve relations between the two countries was lost between 1898 and 1901. After clashes with France in North Africa and the threat that Russian expansion in the Far East posed to her empire, Britain felt isolated and looked to Germany for possible assistance. Her approach was ignored and Britain finally ended her 'splendid isolation' in 1902 with an anti-Russian alliance with Japan. This was followed shortly by a 'friendly agreement' between France and Britain known as the Entente Cordiale in 1904. Bülow's free hand policy had failed to keep Britain out of the arms of France and a Europe split in two was beginning to take shape. Only Russia's weakness, after the defeat of her war against Japan in 1905, offered any consolation to Germany.

The first Moroccan crisis

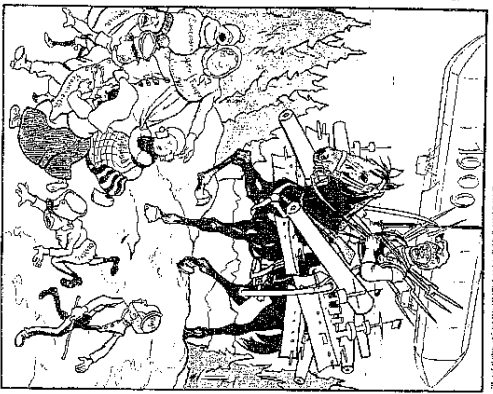
In 1905 France tried to extend her influence in Morocco. Germany argued that this would have illegal trading implications and the Kaiser went to Morocco himself to demand a settlement. This was another demonstration of heavy-handed methods and was intended as a show of strength which would convince France that it was Germany, and not Britain, that was the important ally. In the event, however, Britain supported France at the international conference held at Algeiras in 1906 and Germany was forced to back down. Germany was by now more isolated than ever and the Entente Cordiale was strengthened, not destroyed. By the crisis, in 1907 the Entente was extended to include Russia after Britain concluded territorial agreements with her. Although all the agreements involving Britain were not firm commitments, they nevertheless succeeded in splitting Europe in two, with the Triple Alliance on one side and the Triple Entente on the other.

Why did tensions continue to increase after 1907?

- ▶ Three events in particular contributed to the increase in tension 1907-1912.
 - A crisis in the Balkans in 1908-1909 which demonstrated where loyalties lay. Germany stood by Austria and forced Russia (still weak after the Japanese war) to back down in 1909, an event Russia was determined should never be repeated.

● A naval race between Britain and Germany.

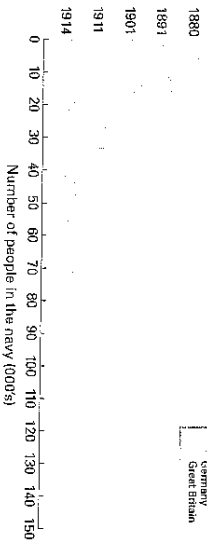
The British government responded to fears that the German navy could overtake its own if measures were not taken. The Liberal government agreed to increase battleship production and the race was on. In 1909, negotiations were conducted between Britain and Germany, but made little progress. Relations between Germany and Britain were severely damaged.



A German newspaper cartoon published in January 1909 and called Europe's Terror. Mother Europe is saying to her children (the countries of Europe): 'Watch out children, the evil man is coming! The man on horseback represents Germany.'

13. Why is it surprising that this cartoon was produced in Germany? Whose point of view might it reflect?

The expansion of the German and British navies before the First World War.



14. Do these figures back up the diagram on page 58?

● The second Moroccan crisis in 1911. French troops were sent to Morocco at the Sultan's request and Germany regarded this as a first step towards a French take-over which would contravene the agreement reached at Algiers in 1906. As before, however, Germany had an ulterior motive. By sending a gunboat, the *Panther*, to Morocco, she was again demonstrating her strength. Secondly, it was hoped that the offer to recognize a French protectorate in Morocco in exchange for land in the French Congo would gain some French goodwill. The results were disastrous for Germany. The British fleet was put on alert and Germany received considerably less land than she had requested. Furthermore, British and French ties were put on a firmer footing and a naval agreement between the two countries was concluded.

Summarize relations between Britain and Germany between 1890 and 1911. You could do this in several formats including a cartoon strip, a flow chart or a newspaper editorial written by either a German or British journalist. Your summary should demonstrate how Germany missed opportunities and how relations between the two countries deteriorated.

Wiedrich had again failed to achieve its aims and Germany was more isolated than ever. By 1912, Europe was divided and an arms race was evident. Not only was the naval race reaching new proportions, but there was also an expansion in land forces in Britain, Germany, Austria and Russia. Germany was alarmed at the speed of the Russian recovery and calculated that Russian strength by 1917 would make it difficult to defeat her in a two-front war.

The outbreak of war: Germany's fault?

In December 1912 a meeting took place between the Kaiser and his senior military and naval advisers. The prospect of war was clearly on the cards. Germany was still at loggerheads with Britain and the outbreak of war in the Balkans made it seem increasingly likely that Germany would at some point be called upon to help her ally, Austria. During the meeting, war was regarded as likely, but it was also made clear that timing would have a role to play.

- 15. Why do you think Moltke saw war as inevitable in 1912?
- 16. What views did the military and naval leaders have about the timing of war and why?
- 17. Does this source provide conclusive evidence that war was being planned in advance?

Extract from Admiral Müller's records of the war council meeting, 8 December 1912

Evidently war, if it came, would be better in 1914 than in 1912. However, historians disagree about whether this document represents conclusive proof that Germany was planning a war from 1912. The Kaiser's moods were changeable and his ideas often unrealized – and Müller himself suggests that little was achieved at the meeting.

The assassination

In June 1914, the heir to the Austrian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, was shot in Sarajevo by a Serb extremist. The events which followed appear, in retrospect, to have been under German control. At some point after the assassination, war was seen as inevitable, at least by the German military, and swift action seemed the best option.

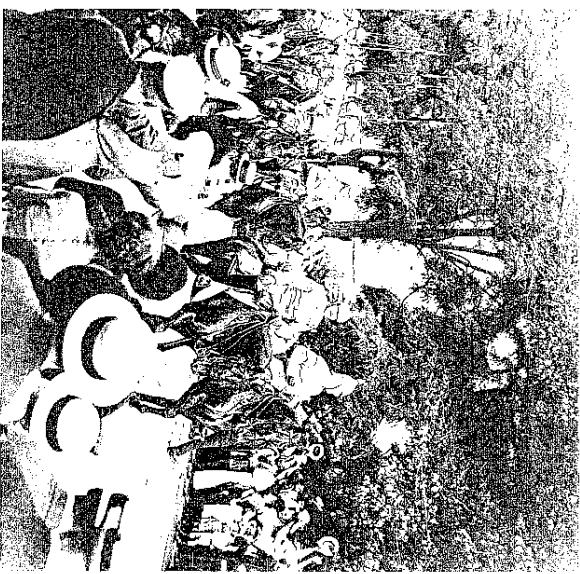
Germany offered Austria a 'blank cheque' after the assassination – a promise of support no matter what happened without this guarantee. Austria would have hesitated to declare war on Serbia and risk fighting Russia. However, the offer of German support persuaded it to send a delayed ultimatum to Serbia which it expected to be refused, providing a further justification for war.

1914

The Kaiser authorised me to inform our gracious majesty that we might in this case, as in all others, rely upon Germany's full support. But it was in the Kaiser's opinion that this action must not be delayed. Russia's attitude will no doubt be hostile, but for this he had for years prepared, and should a war between Austria and Russia be unavoidable, we might be convinced that Germany, our old faithful ally, would stand at our side. Russia at the present time is in no way prepared for war, and would think twice before it appealed to arms... If we had really recognised the necessity of warlike action against Serbia, the Kaiser would regret it if we did not make use of the present moment, which is all in our favour.

Report from the Austrian Ambassador in Berlin to the Foreign Minister in Austria, 5 July, 1914

Serbia did reject the ultimatum and on 28 July, Austria declared war on Serbia. It is clear that Germany had been pressing Austria to act quickly and ignore attempts at mediation by Britain. Three days later, Russian mobilization began. If the Schlieffen Plan (see margin note) was to be implemented, speed was essential. The dominance of the military leadership was clear. Attempts were made - successfully - to claim that the Russian mobilization was a virtual declaration of war on Germany and Germany's decision to declare war on Russia on 1 August and France two days later was greeted enthusiastically by many. The violation of Belgian neutrality provided the pretext for a declaration of war on Germany by Britain, who was in any case desperate to preserve a balance of power in Europe. War had begun.



German mobilisation in August 1914.

The Kaiser had refused to offer unconditional support to Austria during the Balkan Wars 1912-13. Does Source 16 provide any clues as to why he was prepared to offer such support in 1914?

The Schlieffen Plan was devised by General Schlieffen after the Dual Alliance between France and Russia in 1894. It addressed the problem of a two-front war. Schlieffen proposed that German troops should quickly defeat France (by marching through neutral Belgium) before Russia had a chance to mobilize fully. Within six weeks the French would be defeated and the German troops could then focus their efforts on the defeat of Russia. Significantly, this meant that speed was of the essence and explains why Germany declared war on Russia as soon as she received news of Russia's mobilization and then declared war on France.

What was the role of Bethmann Hollweg in the outbreak of war? Certainly, he was eager to see Germany expand and he was aware of the strength of the German army. He was also, however, concerned about Russia's growing strength. In 1914 he saw an opportunity to split the Triple Entente over the Balkan issue. This was a miscalculation and Germany found herself at war with all the Triple Entente members in August 1914. However, it was a calculated risk, and Bethmann Hollweg accepted the need to move swiftly once Russia mobilized. Why on such a scale may not have been deliberately planned, but nevertheless, Germany was prepared

Was the First World War Germany's responsibility?

Historical perspectives

- 1890: Bismarck's resignation, Caprivi becomes Chancellor.
- 1891: Social welfare reforms, start of tariff reform.
- 1893: Agrarian League formed.
- 1894: Hohenzollern becomes Chancellor, Dual Alliance between France and Russia.
- 1897: Bismarck appointed Foreign Minister, policy of *Weltpolitik* begins.
- 1898: Creation of Navy League; first naval bill passed by Reichstag.
- 1902: Bismarck becomes Chancellor; government facing a budget deficit.
- 1905: Entente Cordiale between France and Britain.
- 1905: Bismarck fails to solve the deficit problem; news of mismanagement of finances in SW Africa; first Moroccan crisis.
- 1907: Renunciation of Bismarck after general election, Entente Cordiale extended to include Russia.
- 1908: The *Daily Telegraph* interview.
- 1908: Bethmann Hollweg becomes Chancellor; Germany forces Russia to back down in the Balkans; failed negotiations between Germany and Britain over the navy.
- 1911: Second Moroccan crisis.
- 1912: SPD becomes the single largest party in the Reichstag; war breaks out in the Balkans.
- 1913: The Zabern affair.
- 1914: Assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand; heir to the Austrian throne; Germany offers Austria the 'Blank Cheque'; war.

In the Treaty of Versailles of 1919, Germany was forced to accept the blame for starting the war in the famous 'war guilt clause'. However, up to the 1960s, the most popular interpretation of the war was that the Great Powers had stumbled into it and all shared the blame. The publication of Fritz Fischer's *Griif nach der Wehrmacht* (Germany's aims in the First World War) in 1961 posed a fundamental challenge to this view. Fischer argued that Germany was largely to blame for the war which was the result of the expansionist aims of the German government. He also pointed to the continuities of this expansion ambition from 1897 (with *Weltpolitik*) to Hitler. This argument caused a storm of controversy and Fischer became a named figure in some circles in Germany. Prominent German historians refused to share Fischer's hand in public and the German government withdrew a grant to fund a lecture tour in America. Despite this opposition, Fischer's argument gained wide acceptance and it has certainly had a far-reaching impact on the historiography of the First World War. However, Fischer has been criticized for claiming too great a coherence to the foreign policy of Kaiser Wilhelm II and for relying on insubstantial evidence to prove his point. A twist in the Fischer thesis was advanced by historians of the 'new orthodoxy' such as Hans Ulrich Wehler who, whilst agreeing that Germany's responsibility for the war was the greatest, argued that it was domestic pressures rather than blatant expansionist aims that determined German foreign policy before 1914. With a budget deficit, an increasingly unmanageable Reichstag and a socialist movement growing in popularity and strength, diversionary tactics were chosen which would focus attention outside of Germany and generate popular support for an increasingly unpopular Kaiser and his government. More recently, historians have tended to acknowledge Germany's significant role in the outbreak of war, especially in 1914 itself, but also recognize the role of other factors, not least the other Great Powers. John Lowe, for example, identifies four main causes of war: the legacy of *Weltpolitik*, the growth of Russian power, nationalism in the Balkans and the inadequacy of German policy during the July crisis of 1914.

Conclusions

There was a lack of clear direction in domestic policy after 1890 and internal problems were at best dealt with superficially. The Reichstag was becoming more unmanageable, the working class was becoming more politically active and powerful and the government's budget deficit was not completely solved. The more aggressive foreign policy ushered in by the Kaiser hid the dual effect of diverting attention away from these problems whilst also fulfilling ambitions to project Germany onto the world stage. Germany was, by this time, a world power in terms of her economic strength and the government wanted this to be reflected outside of Germany. The policy of *Weltpolitik*, however, created tensions in Europe which certainly contributed to the First World War. Whether Germany was primarily to blame for the war is a matter for debate, but it is hard to deny that her role was particularly significant in 1914 itself.