

Source-based questions: Bismarck as pragmatic politician

Study Source 1 below and then answer questions (a) to (c):

SOURCE 1

(Bismarck explains the motives behind his policies in a speech to the Reichstag, 1881)

I have often acted hastily and without reflection, but when I have had time to think I have always asked: what is useful, effective, right for my fatherland, for my dynasty – so long as I was merely in Prussia – and now for the German nation? I have never been a doctrinaire. Liberal, reactionary, conservative – these I confess seem to me to be luxuries. Give me a strong German state, and then ask me whether it should have more or less liberal furnishings, and you'll find that I answer: Yes, I've no fixed opinions. Make proposals, and you won't meet any objections of principle from me. Sometimes one must rule liberally, and sometimes dictatorially; there are no external rules.

(a) Study Source 1.

What, according to Source 1, were Bismarck's main priorities in his government of Germany between 1870–90? [5 marks]

(b) On what issues did Bismarck most strongly disagree with the German liberals? [7 marks]

(c) What are the main arguments for and against the claim that 'Bismarck was primarily a conservative influence upon German politics between 1870–90'? [18 marks]

5 Wilhelm II's Germany, 1888–1918

Key Issues

- 1 How important were the personality and priorities of Wilhelm II in shaping German politics in this period?
- 2 What pressures and priorities guided German government in this period?
- 3 How important were the accession of Wilhelm II in 1888? German economic growth between the accession of Wilhelm II and the outbreak of the First World War? To what extent did Chancellor von Caprivi pursue a 'new course' in German domestic politics?
- 4 How effective were the major institutions of government within Wilhelmine Germany?
- 5 What were the main aims of German domestic policies between 1890 and 1914?
- 6 Was social democracy a serious threat to the stability of Wilhelmine Germany?
- 7 What were the results of Germany's decision to pursue a 'world policy'?
- 8 Was Germany's position in European diplomacy strengthened or weakened by its policies between 1894 and 1905?
- 9 What was the impact of the First World War upon German domestic politics?
- 10 Historical interpretation: What forces shaped the political policies of Wilhelmine Germany?

Framework of Events

| | |
|------|---|
| 1888 | February: Publication of German commitments to Austria-Hungary in the Dual Alliance March: Death of Kaiser Wilhelm I June: Death of Kaiser Friedrich III; accession of Wilhelm II January: Reichstag refuses to renew Anti-Socialist Laws March: Resignation of Bismarck as Chancellor of Germany June: Reinsurance Treaty between Germany and Russia allowed to lapse October: Expiry of Anti-Socialist Law Renewal of Triple Alliance between Germany, Austria and Italy for 12 years Dismissal of Caprivi. Hohenzollern appointed Chancellor of Germany von Tirpitz is appointed as German naval secretary First German Naval Bill von Bülow replaces Hohenzollern as Chancellor of Germany German attempts to initiate an alliance with Russia fail First Moroccan crisis, started by Kaiser's visit to Tangier Third German Naval Bill Fourth German Naval Bill. Publication of interview in <i>Daily Telegraph</i> causes embarrassment for Kaiser |
| 1890 | Germany recognises French interests in Morocco von Bülow is replaced as German Chancellor by Bethmann-Hollweg Second Moroccan Crisis Elections leave Social Democrats as strongest party in Reichstag 'Zabern incident' in Alsace-Lorraine embitters Franco-German relations June: Assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo |
| 1891 | |
| 1894 | |
| 1897 | |
| 1900 | |
| 1904 | |
| 1905 | |
| 1906 | |
| 1908 | |
| 1909 | |
| 1911 | |
| 1912 | |
| 1913 | |
| 1914 | |

Further Reading

Texts designed for AS and A2 Level students
Bismarck and Germany, 1862–90 by D.G. Williamson (Longman, Seminar Studies series, 1986)
Bismarck and the German Empire, 1871–1918 by Lynn Abrams (Routledge, Lancaster Pamphlets, 1995)

More advanced reading

The most influential biographies of Bismarck are probably:
Bismarck and the German Empire by Erich Eyck (Allen & Unwin, 1968) which provides a classic, German liberal view of the subject.
Bismarck: the Man and the Statesman by A.J.P. Taylor (New English Library, 1968) which remains a classic interpretation of Bismarck's career.
Bismarck, the White Revolutionary by Lothar Gall (Allen & Unwin, 1986)
 A more concise summary is provided in 'Bismarckian Germany' by Geoff Eley, in *Modern Germany Reconsidered, 1870–1945*, G. Marrel (ed.) (Routledge, 1992).

- 1914 July: Austria-Hungary declares war on Serbia
- August: Germany declares war on Russia and on France
- 1916 Hindenburg becomes Chief of the General Staff
- 1918 Armistice ends the First World War.

Overview

A KEY issue in any political appraisal of Wilhelmine Germany is to establish whether or not the events of 1890 really constituted a new departure in German history. In that year Wilhelm II, only 18 months into his reign, dismissed Otto von Bismarck from his post as Chancellor. The traditional view of historians is that the removal of Bismarck's caution and realism, and of his fundamental concern for a peaceful diplomatic balance in Europe, set Germany and Europe on the road to the disaster of 1914.

Yet it may also be argued that little changed in 1888 in terms of the fundamental forces that drove German politics. These emerged in the late 1870s when, against a background of severe economic depression, Bismarck formed a formidable conservative alliance to resist the economic and political demands both of liberals and of the working classes. Industrialists and Junker landowners alike demanded policies that resisted the growth of genuine political freedom, which favoured the protection and development of their own economic interests, and which deflected the demands of the lower orders in German society. The emergence of a colonial programme, largely at odds with most of the principles that Bismarck had followed earlier in his political career, may be taken as a prime example of such policies. The departure of Bismarck, the argument continues, had little impact upon this situation. The essential conservative power-base of the German government, and the essential threats to that power-base, remained unchanged, and future Chancellors came under equal pressure to respond to these factors.

On the other hand, in social and economic terms, a great deal changed in Germany after 1888, and it changed very quickly. In the first decade of the 20th century the German Reich was barely recognisable as the state that Bismarck had founded in 1871. Its industrial economy had grown spectacularly, becoming the strongest in Europe, employing some 60% of the working population. In combination with this development, trade unionism expanded rapidly and the Social Democrats (SPD) amassed votes at such a rate that, by 1912, they constituted the largest single party in the Reichstag. Despite the enormous political and economic successes that Germany had achieved in the past few decades, or perhaps because of them, the Reich that entered the 20th century was full of contradictions. Economically and socially it was a modern and dynamic state; in political terms, however, it remained dominated by traditional elites who clung to their power and privileges, with little sympathy for political reform. Unsurprisingly, these elites supported policies that might have the widest appeal to the population, which might attract or at least isolate those who would otherwise favour more radical policies. The most striking political features of the Wilhelmine period, therefore, were not constructive measures of social development and reform, but measures and gestures designed to promote Germany's international status and prestige.

Superficially, Wilhelm II was well suited to act as the focus for this *Sammlungspolitik*. He relished military affairs, and delighted in grand gestures

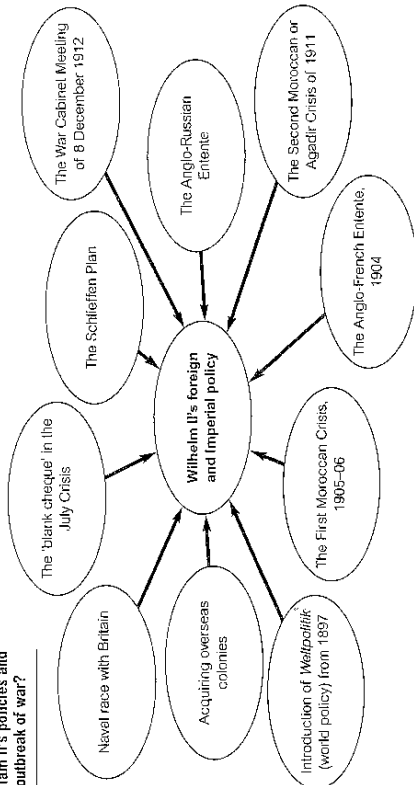
Sammlungspolitik (German - 'policy of gathering together'). Term used to describe the attempt by the German government in the 1890s and 1900s to pursue policies that would have an equal appeal to the many different political and economic interest groups that existed within the Reich.

which made him the centre of public attention. Unfortunately, he was not a good judge of such gestures, and failed to appreciate the impact that they might have upon Germany's neighbours. It was one of the great ironies of the Wilhelmine period that Germany - perhaps the most secure and prosperous state in Europe - appeared to believe itself threatened and resented on all sides by jealous enemies. The most dangerous and damaging elements of this *Sammlungspolitik* were the building of a German battle fleet, and the decision to pursue *Weltpolitik*. Even if the aim in both cases, as many historians now argue, was to win popularity at home, rather than really to challenge foreign powers abroad, the very nature of that policy made it impossible to reassure those foreign powers. In attempting to avoid the consequences of domestic instability, therefore, Germany made a substantial contribution to international instability.

In both international and domestic terms, the First World War provided an enormous test for the German state and society. In retrospect, the decision to enter the war, in the hope of a quick and rewarding victory, was disastrous, for the impact of the war upon domestic politics was exactly the opposite of that which Germany's leaders had envisaged in 1914. The economic prosperity of the country was wrecked by the enormous costs of the war and by the economic blockade which was imposed by Germany's enemies. The political differences that the war was intended to heal, or at least to mask, opened wider than ever. In the final stages of the war Germany was a country in crisis: the rift between the most conservative and the most left-wing elements in German politics were such that the state stood on the verge of civil war. In addition, the economic confidence and security that had been the most striking features of pre-war Germany lay in ruins. Although the Kaiser abdicated and fled into exile, the military and industrial conservatives who had supported him remained, eager to preserve their pre-eminence, and to shift the blame for the disaster onto other shoulders. The scene was set for the darkest decades in German history.

Weltpolitik (German - 'world policy'). Term used to describe the policy of the German government in the 1890s and 1900s whereby it sought to establish and advance German interests in all parts of the world, rather than concentrating upon European affairs.

1. Of the factors mentioned in the mind map, which do you think was Wilhelm II's greatest success? Explain your answer.
2. Can you link any of the factors mentioned in the mind map? (For instance, the 'Introduction of *Weltpolitik*' can be linked to 'acquiring overseas colonies' and the 'naval race with Britain'.)
- Can you find any other links?
3. Was Wilhelm II the person most responsible for the outbreak of the First World War? From the points mentioned in the mind map, which link William II's policies and the outbreak of war?



5.1 What was the impact upon German politics of the accession of Wilhelm II in 1888?

The long reign of Wilhelm I ended in March 1888, in the Kaiser's 92nd year. His son, briefly Kaiser as Friedrich III, had only months to live. He had suffered for a year from cancer of the throat, which had already deprived him of speech, and which ended his life in June. The imperial throne of Germany thus passed to his own son, and the 30-year reign of Wilhelm II began.

The personality and aims of Wilhelm II

The personality and psychology of the new Kaiser, now 29 years of age, have been a source of fascination for historians. His relationship with his parents, especially with his English mother, was tense and uneasy, and his personal sensitivity was undoubtedly increased by an accident at birth which left him with a withered arm and partially deaf. At Bonn University he showed far less interest in systematic study and learning than in the company of student aristocrats, and discovered the true passion of his youth in his years as an officer in the Potsdam Guards. Dismissed by his own father as 'inexperienced, immature and presumptuous', Wilhelm has not been kindly treated by historians. A typical judgement is that of Gordon Craig, in *Germany 1866–1945* (1978). 'Wilhelm had as much intelligence as any European sovereign and more than most, but his lack of discipline, his self-indulgence, his overdeveloped sense of theatre, and his fundamental misreading of history prevented him from putting it to effective use.'

The age of the young Kaiser was also significant. He belonged to a new, confident generation unaware of the dangers that German conservatism had narrowly survived in 1848 and in 1862. As historian Golo Mann put it, 'his memories began in 1870. He regarded the position which he owed to brilliant manoeuvres and clever acts of violence as the gift of God, as the natural order of things.'



Delusions of grandeur: a photograph of Wilhelm II, dated 1909.

Aristocrats: People whose families have a high social rank, especially those who hold a title. Their wealth is passed down the generations by inheritance.

Divine Right of Kings: The political view that claims that royal authority derives directly from God. As a consequence, a particular family or individual is designated by the will of God as ruler in a particular state.

Alfred von Kiderlen-Wächter (1852–1912)
Prominent German diplomat. Ambassador to Denmark (1884), to Rumania (1900) and to Turkey on several occasions. Foreign Minister (1910) under Bethmann-Hollweg's administration. An enthusiastic supporter of *Weltpolitik* in general, and of the Triple Alliance in particular.

What did the personality of the new Kaiser mean for the conduct of the German government? Firstly, it meant that Wilhelm II would not be content with the passive role played by his grandfather. He believed passionately in the Divine Right of Kings, and from this derived a notion of the mystical link between the ruler and his people. Not for him a reign based upon the narrow interest of Junker landowners, or dictated by the advantage of Prussia alone. Wilhelm, in the words of the historian A. J. P. Taylor, desired an absurdity – to be Emperor of all the Germans'. In a state built by Bismarck upon division and confrontation, the prospects of harmonious relations between monarch and Chancellor were dim.

Strong though he was on principle, the new Kaiser's style of government was hectic, spectacular and shallow. He travelled obsessively, rarely spending as much as half the year in his capital and earning the nickname of *Der Reise-Kaiser* ('the travelling Emperor'). He had views on everything, but rarely bothered to back his inspiration with hard information. He just talks himself into an opinion,' remarked the German diplomat Alfred von Kiderlen-Wächter in 1891, while Wilhelm's biographer M. Balfour has remarked that 'his fluency in speaking meant that he approached all questions with an open mouth. It was a fair summary of the man and the monarch that he openly boasted that he read neither the newspapers nor the German constitution. The outcome was a 30-year reign of great spectacle, constant motion, but little positive content. It amounted, in the words of the future Weimar minister, Walter Rathenau, to a 'kittentante foreign policy, romantic conservative internal policy and bombastic and empty cultural policy'.

The collapse of Bismarck's political system

For all the monumental achievements of the previous three decades, Bismarck's position as Chancellor of the Reich had remained dependent, in practice, upon the goodwill of the monarch. That position had appeared for some years to be threatened by the prospect of the succession of Crown Prince Friedrich, with his allegedly liberal sympathies, and his English wife, the Crown Princess Victoria. The death of Friedrich saved Bismarck from one challenge to his authority only to confront him with another. The political sympathies of Wilhelm were less liberal, but he differed fundamentally with his Chancellor as to methods of government.

The issues that divided the two men in 1888–90 were, in reality, merely symptoms of their different interpretations of the Reich and of the role of the Kaiser. A strike by miners in the Ruhr (May 1889) gave Wilhelm the chance to display his brand of paternalism towards the German working class. While he prepared a programme of social reforms, including a ban on Sunday working, Bismarck rejected the principle of conciliation and concession. Instead he aimed to continue a policy of hostility and confrontation. Bismarck's plans to make the renewable Anti-Socialist Laws permanent not only provoked a clash in the royal council (January 1890), but had severe repercussions in the Reichstag elections in the following month. Bismarck's coalition of Conservatives and National Liberals lost 85 of their 220 seats, and the Social Democrats nearly doubled their share of the vote. Deprived of the support of both monarch and Reichstag, Bismarck had only intrigue to fall back on. His attempts to force through a package of measures to revise the constitution to help his political control, forced the Kaiser's hand. Wilhelm chose the path of conciliation, demanded Bismarck's resignation, and received it on 18 March 1890.

Bismarck's legacy

For all his earlier achievement, Bismarck bequeathed to Germany a legacy of tension and troubles. The concentration of power in his own hands meant he had consistently obstructed the growth of truly representative institutions in Germany. As Max Weber commented, 'Bismarck left behind him as a political heritage a nation without any political education ... a nation without any political will, accustomed to allow the great statesman at its head to look after its policy for it.' Undoubtedly, Bismarck had governed with great shrewdness, but the sad result of his political egoism was that his great power now passed into the hands of an irresponsible and unstable monarch. Furthermore, Wilhelm inherited a variety of thorny problems, especially in colonial and foreign policy, which Bismarck had allowed to develop for reasons of short-term political advantage. Despite his famous announcement upon Bismarck's resignation that 'the ship's course remains the same; "Full steam ahead" is the order', Wilhelm's fundamental misunderstanding of recent German and European history was to guarantee the destruction of most of the essential principles of Bismarckian Germany within the next 30 years.

1. What were the main political beliefs of Kaiser Wilhelm II?
2. Why did Otto von Bismarck fall from power in 1890?

5.2 What was the extent and what were the consequences of German economic growth between the accession of Wilhelm II and the outbreak of the First World War?

The years of Wilhelm II's reign to 1914 saw German industry build upon its Bismarckian foundations to take its place among the foremost industrial economies of the world. In this respect, the character of the country matched that of the Kaiser. It was young, dynamic, and outwardly confident.

Population growth, heavy industries and communications

Underlying Germany's economic acceleration was a continued rapid growth in population, providing native industries with a greater labour force and with more consumers. Between 1870 and 1890, Germany had experienced a population rise of 21%, from 40.9 to 49.5 million. In the next two decades, the rate of increase was half as great again, leading to a population of 65 million.

The traditional heavy industries of the Reich maintained the direction that they had followed in 1870-90, but they experienced a spectacular acceleration in the pace of output. Coal production was challenging that of Britain by the outbreak of the First World War, while steel output had surpassed that of Great Britain in 1900, and was nearly double that of its rival by 1910. The necessary corollary of these increases in German production was the expansion of its communication system. The Wilhelmine period saw a steady continuation of the growth in the railway system that had been a central feature of economic expansion since the foundation of the Reich. A system that extended 19,480 kilometres in 1870, and 41,820 kilometres in 1890, had grown to 59,016 kilometres by 1910.

The development of a German merchant navy was even more spectacular. The total tonnage of steamships registered at Hamburg rose from 99,000 in 1880 to 746,000 in 1900, while the figures for Bremen in the same period were 59,000 and 375,000. Germany's total merchant marine in 1914 amounted to 3 million tons, only a quarter of the British total, but nearly three times that of the USA.

Key economic indicators, 1890-1913

| | Coal and lignite (million tons) | Pig iron (million tons) | Steel (million tons) | Exports (£ million) | Imports (£ million) |
|------|------------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| 1890 | 88.1 | 4.66 | 3.16 | 170.5 | 213.6 |
| 1900 | 149.8 | 8.52 | 7.37 | 237.6 | 302.1 |
| 1910 | 192.3 | 14.79 | 13.15 | 373.7 | 446.7 |
| 1913 | 276.0 | — | — | 504.8 | 588.5 |

The 'new' industries

Nor was German expansion limited to traditional industries. By the outbreak of the First World War, Germany had established a substantial lead over all other European powers in the new chemical and electrical industries. Germany came to produce 75% of the world's output of chemical dyes by 1914, and played a prominent role in the development of agricultural fertilisers, pharmaceutical products and the industrial uses of sulphuric acid, sodium and chlorine. In electronics, Werner von Siemens had already contributed the electric dynamo (1867), and important work on electronic traction (1879 onwards). There was also the development of the two biggest electricity combines in Europe, Siemens/Halske, and AEG (*Allgemeine Elektricitäts Gesellschaft* - General Electricity Company). By 1913 half of the world's electro-technical trade was in German hands. Such household names as Daimler and Diesel also attest to German achievement in engineering. In short, Germany's economic position within Europe was being transformed, not merely by industrialisation, but by the creation of 'young' industries, emerging at a time when older industrial economies were beginning to feel the need for reinvestment and modernisation.

National wealth and living standards

The total wealth of the German Reich increased in the peaceful years of the Wilhelmine era, according to the contemporary economist, Karl Helfferich, from 200,000 million marks to 300,000 million. The table below relates to Prussia alone. It indicates the increase in the number of great personal fortunes in this period. Other evidence suggests that the increase in German prosperity was more generally felt. For example, per capita income doubled in the course of 40 years. It rose from 352 marks per year (1871-75), through 603 marks per year (1896-1900) to 728 marks per year in 1911-13. The dramatic decrease in the rate of emigration, from 134,200 in 1880-89, to 28,000 in 1900-10, also indicates the relative rise in German living standards by the latter decade.

It should be noted, however, that this overall prosperity was not shared by German agriculture. It was not that agriculture stagnated: scientific methods of cultivation had spread rapidly since 1870, with an estimated

The rise in incomes - in the German Imperial currency of Reichmarks (RM)

| Total fortune of: | 1895 | 1911 |
|--------------------------------|--------|---------|
| Between 100,000 & 500,000 RM | 86,552 | 136,843 |
| Between 500,000 & 1 million RM | 8,375 | 13,800 |
| Between 1 and 2 million RM | 3,429 | 5,916 |
| Over 2 million RM | 1,827 | 3,425 |

fourfold increase in mechanical harvesting between 1882 and 1907 alone. Yet German grain producers could not compete adequately with American imports, especially when large ocean-going steamers and low freight charges cheapened imports further. By 1900, it was cheaper to import grain from America than to transport it 400 kilometres within Germany. Grain prices dropped and heavy internal tariffs were needed to enable the Junker farmers of East Prussia to pay their debts. Economically, therefore, the Germany of Wilhelm II presented a subtly contrasted picture of modern dynamism and embattled conservative interests.

Inevitably the dramatic expansion of German industry involved substantial changes in the distribution and the living standards of the working population. Already evident in Bismarckian Germany, these changes accelerated dramatically in the decades that immediately preceded the First World War. In particular, they took the form of a large-scale movement of the population to urban centres, and from agricultural to industrial employment. In the four decades up to 1907, it has been estimated, something like 40% of the population of united Germany moved from one region of the Reich to another, and the proportion of the population employed in industrial production increased from 31% to 40%. Some spectacular examples of urban growth had occurred in the years since unification. Between 1870 and 1910, for example, the population of Leipzig grew from 107,000 to 679,000. Equivalent figures for Cologne (129,000 to 517,000), Essen (52,000 to 295,000) and Duisburg (37,000 to 229,000) tell the same story and must be placed in the context of an overall rise in the German population of only 44%. Apart from the growth of individual towns, the nature and function of whole regions were sometimes transformed. In the Ruhr, in the Saarland, in Upper Silesia and elsewhere, new industrial conglomerations had been created as villages developed into towns, and merged with each other in the process of industrial growth. Such regions naturally experienced the same social problems that had arisen in other parts of Europe where rapid industrialisation had taken place. 'Overcrowding', writes David Blackbourn (*Germany 1780–1918: The Long Nineteenth Century*, 1997), was exacerbated by the conditions to which the occupants of attics, cellars and tenements were exposed – damp, lack of natural light, primitive sanitary conditions that made the perfect breeding ground for infectious diseases. Periodic outbreaks of cholera and typhus were the most vivid symbol of dangerous, degraded living conditions. A major outbreak of cholera in Hamburg in 1892 was the worst of many such epidemics.

What were the political implications of such developments?

It would be easy to see these developments as a classic case of industrial expansion alienating the industrial workforce, and preparing the ground for class conflict. In the case of Germany, however, the effects may have been more complex. The nature of Germany's economic growth in the Wilhelmine years, for instance, also produced a rapidly expanding lower middle class, with less radical political aspirations, alongside the industrial workers. It has been estimated that, in the 25 years leading up to 1907, the number of 'white collar workers' (clerical, rather than manual workers) roughly tripled in Germany to a total of 3.3 million. At the time of unification there were more than ten manual workers to each clerical worker. On the eve of the First World War the ratio had been reduced to 3.5 to 1. A number of social historians have also stressed that regional and religious identities remained strong in Germany, often cutting across traditional conceptions of class-consciousness. A further factor to be taken into account is the fact that the vast bulk of this urban population

found work during the Wilhelmine period. In only one year between 1900–14 did unemployment rates in Germany rise above 3%. Wilhelmine Germany never had to cope with the impact of economic depression upon this industrial population. There can be little doubt that the governing elites of the period regarded the industrial masses with suspicion, and often with fear. Whether they were right to do so is a question on which historians have yet to reach agreement.

1. In what respects did the German economy make the most spectacular progress between 1890 and 1914?

2. Who benefited most and who benefited least from the trends in the German economy during these years?

5.3 To what extent did Chancellor von Caprivi pursue a 'new course' in German domestic politics?

The search for a German consensus

Bismarck's successor as Chancellor of the Reich and as Prime Minister of Prussia was General Leo Caprivi. He brought to these offices the prestige of high military rank, personal honesty and modesty, but none of the political experience or deviousness necessary to master the complexities and contradictions of the Bismarckian state. The primary problem of the Caprivi era, in the opinion of historian J. Alden Nichols (*Germany after Bismarck*, 1958), was how to handle a complex political creation that had finally escaped from the control of its creator. The new Chancellor, like the Kaiser, desired greater conciliation and less confrontation in domestic politics. He refused to regard any political grouping as a *Reichsfeinde* (see page 72) and was willing to accept the assistance of any group in furthering his projects. Both Caprivi and the Kaiser claimed not to be initiating a 'new era', an indication of how little they understood of Bismarck's rule.

Reform of the Bismarckian system

The years 1890–94 saw systematic inroads made into the domestic system established by Bismarck.

- The Anti-Socialist Laws were allowed to lapse.
- Attempts were made to win the working classes over to the Reich with a series of reforms that included – a ban on Sunday working – the limitation of working hours for women and children and the establishment of courts for industrial arbitration.
- Confrontation with national minorities in Posen and in Alsace-Lorraine was eased by the relaxation of rules governing the use of German in administration and education.

- A moderate reduction was sought in the privileges of Prussia within the Reich. Prussia's independent foreign ministry was abolished, its tax system reformed and a graduated income tax introduced.

Of much more direct offence to the Prussian Junkers was Caprivi's new economic course. In the interests of increased trade and of cheaper food, he abandoned Bismarckian protectionism, that great guarantee of the Junkers' agricultural prosperity. A series of trade treaties – with Austria-Hungary and Italy in 1892, with Belgium, Switzerland and Romania in 1893, and with Russia a year later – greatly stimulated Germany's industrial progress but involved, as their price, the reduction of German agricultural tariffs. The unfortunate coincidence of these measures with

Leo von Caprivi (1831–1889)
Entered the Prussian army in 1849 and fought in the conflicts with Denmark (1864), Austria (1866) and France (1870–71). Head of Admiralty (1883–88). Imperial German Chancellor (1890–94).

the increase in cheap American corn exports drove not only the Junkers, but also most farmers into opposition to the government. The Federation of Agriculturalists (*Bund der Landwirte*), founded to organise this opposition (February 1893), boasted 250,000 members within the year and constituted one of several new conservative forces in German politics.

The fall of Caprivi and the return to conservatism

The fate of two pieces of projected legislation illustrated the deterioration of Caprivi's political position. A bill by the Prussian Ministry of Education, proposing religious segregation of schools, and closer control of religious education by the Churches (1892), was defeated by the opposition of all liberal groups in the Reichstag. The defeat brought about Caprivi's resignation as Prime Minister of Prussia, which further weakened his political base. More surprisingly, a new Army Bill also ran into opposition. Presented to the Reichstag in 1892, it was only passed after a dissolution and new elections in which the conservative parties and the Social Democrats prospered at the expense of the Liberals.

Four years in office served to convince Caprivi that he had underestimated the selfishness of the various political interests in the Reichstag. In the same period, the initial, superficial 'liberalism' of the Kaiser had faded. Wilhelm accepted his Chancellor's resignation in October 1894. He was disillusioned at the failure of the workers to desert the Social Democrats and rally to him, perturbed at the resurgence of political violence especially evident in the assassination of the French president by anarchists, and perplexed at the rift between the government and Junker conservatism.

Did Caprivi abandon Bismarck's foreign policy?

It is a more complex matter to decide whether Caprivi departed from the traditional Bismarckian course in handling Germany's foreign affairs. Certainly he presided over the destruction of a central element in the Bismarckian diplomatic system when in March 1890 he refused to renew the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia. In this, he was not acting with any anti-Russian motive; instead he hoped to maintain friendly relations with the great eastern power. Caprivi was influenced, however, by personalities in the foreign office, such as Friedrich von Holstein whose general leanings were anti-Russian. Their convincing arguments concerned the incompatibility of sections of the treaty with German undertakings to Austria and to Romania, and the undoubted fact that its terms gave far greater advantages to Russia than to Germany. In short, Caprivi acted honestly where deviousness might have served better. The result of his action was the almost immediate confirmation of Bismarck's nightmare, a diplomatic understanding between Russia and France. Furthermore, by agreeing to the renewal of the Triple Alliance with Austria and Italy in 1891 he made a contribution to the formation of hostile camps in Europe that eventually undermined the peace.

Caprivi remained Bismarckian in the sense that he continued to resist the considerable pressures within Germany for a 'world policy' (*Weltpolitik*). He saw little realistic future in the acquisition of colonies. The essence of his policy remained European, to consolidate and improve Germany's position in Central Europe. This aim was served by his system of economic agreements with Germany's neighbours and by the confirmation of the Triple Alliance.

It had its most controversial display in the Anglo-German treaty of July 1890. By this treaty Germany transferred to Great Britain all rights to the island of Zanzibar, and to large areas of the adjacent African mainland, in

Friedrich von Holstein (1837-1909)
Entered the Prussian diplomatic service in 1860. Became a *privé* of Bismarck, but lost favour through his disagreement with the Chancellor's policy of alliance with Russia. Returned to prominence after Bismarck's fall. Head of Foreign Ministry (1900-06), losing office in the aftermath of the Moroccan crisis.

return for the strategic North Sea island of Heligoland. If, however, the Zanzibar agreement was an opening move, in a plan to tempt Britain into closer relations with Germany in place of the Russian alliance, it was a failure. Caprivi underestimated the reluctance of the British to get involved in binding continental commitments. He also found that his concept of Germany's continental future was not widely popular at home. The Pan-German League (*Alldeutscher Verband*), which took form between 1891 and 1894, was a deliberate attempt to encourage the Reich to pursue a more energetic, prestigious and cosmopolitan foreign policy. Thus, although Caprivi rejected some of the methods most dear to Bismarck, the brief span of his government did represent the last attempt to limit Germany to European commitments before his opponents launched it on the ultimately disastrous course of 'world policy'.

1. Which of Bismarck's policies were abandoned when Caprivi held office?

2. In what ways did the priorities of Caprivi's government differ from those of Bismarck's government?

5.4 How effective were the major institutions of government within Wilhelmine Germany?

The office of Chancellor

The German Reich was to have three more chancellors between the fall of Caprivi and the outbreak of war in 1914. The first of these was a Catholic, Bavarian aristocrat, Prince Chlodwig von Hohenlohe-Schillingensfürst (1894-1900). After a lifetime in state service, he reached the highest office at the age of 75. He was, frankly, a stop-gap. His conservative views on domestic matters and his pro-Russian sympathies recommended him to the German right, and his lack of any coherent programme of his own fitted in well with Wilhelm's ambitions of personal government. Primarily, in the words of the contemporary German politician Friedrich Naumann, Hohenlohe was 'an artist in the avoidance of catastrophe'. His years in office constituted, in retrospect, a lull before the diplomatic storm of the new century.

Hohenlohe's resignation in 1900 was precipitated by the Kaiser's persistent failure to consult him on important policy matters. His successor was to be a prime necessity in Wilhelm's irresponsible political meddling. Bernhard von Bülow (1900-09) was a more cosmopolitan and, it was felt, more modern man than Hohenlohe. There was too much of the flatterer courtier about Bülow for him to have been a safe, moderating influence on the Kaiser, as Hohenlohe had been.

Many historians have laid upon Bülow much of the blame for Germany's diplomatic irresponsibility during the period. The circumstances of Bülow's fall are thus ironic. Although his resignation in June 1909 was ostensibly due to the defeat in the Reichstag of his project for a tax on inherited wealth, the real cause of his downfall was, like Bismarck's,

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| Bernhard Prince von Bülow (1849-1929) Chancellor of the German Empire (1900-09) under Kaiser Wilhelm II. Having risen through the Foreign Office, where he had been Minister since 1897, von | Bülow was closely identified with German colonial expansion and seemed to share the Kaiser's enthusiasm for a 'world role'. He had a reputation for brilliance, but Russia that unintentionally superficial Polish was not | backed by firm principles or broad vision, and he deserved the nickname of 'the eel' bestowed upon him. Bülow adopted attitudes to France and Russia that unintentionally reinforced the trend | towards opposing European power groups. He resigned after losing the confidence of Wilhelm II and the Reichstag. |
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Pan-German: The policy which dictates that all those of German racial origin should be united in a single German state. This naturally involved the union of Germany with those parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire whose population was ethnically German.



the loss of the monarch's confidence. This arose from Bülow's carelessness the previous year in allowing the publication of an interview given by Wilhelm to the British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph*. Characteristic irresponsibility on the Kaiser's part led to utterances offensive to Britain and to Russia, and highly embarrassing to Germany. Most Germans, he suggested, were hostile to Britain, and he was the only force that restrained their hostility. An outcry in the Reichstag brought Wilhelm to the verge of a nervous breakdown and ended the 'golden age' of his personal government. In the long run, as many foreign observers have pointed out, the Reichstag missed the opportunity for long-term constitutional change afforded by the *Daily Telegraph* incident, and Bülow alone paid a high price for the affair.

The last peacetime Chancellor of Imperial Germany was Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg (1856-1921). A man of personal courage and honour he seemed an ideal choice from the point of view of domestic affairs. However, his crippling disability was his total inexperience in foreign or military affairs. While this certainly recommended him to a Kaiser who desired supremacy in those areas, it was part of Germany's tragedy that such a man led the government at the time when the fate of Europe depended upon such matters.

In a sense such changes in personnel were of secondary importance. Of greater significance in the years 1894-1914 was the erosion of the overall power of the Chancellor, perhaps the most important of all the departures from Bismarck's system of government. In part, this was due to an 'invasion from above', to the Kaiser's consistent desire for personal rule. At the same time the power of the Chancellor was eroded from below, by the loss of control over various, previously subordinate, ministries. Caprivi had allowed far greater freedom to other departments than Bismarck had ever tolerated, and Admiral Tirpitz at the Naval Ministry provided a good example of an independence of action inconceivable before 1890.

The Reichstag

Although it is clear that Wilhelmine Germany was not a true constitutional monarchy, it would be inaccurate to dismiss the Reichstag as an ineffective sham. There is much evidence of improved party organisation in the assembly after 1890, and evidence too of occasions when the Reichstag showed concerted opposition to the government. The most notable example occurred in 1913, when deputies were united in outrage over the behaviour of the military in the Zabern Affair. Yet the fact remains that the government was able largely to ignore such pressure and the Reichstag was never able to bring down a government or to restrict its actions, as its British or French equivalents might have done.

In part this was because the Chancellor was not a parliamentary party leader and could not be undermined by the reduction of his majority. There were also other serious weaknesses in the German parliamentary system, which prevented it from playing a more positive role in government. As a representative assembly, it was unsatisfactory in several respects. Its constituencies, for instance, were notoriously uneven, their boundaries remaining unchanged between 1871 and 1914. By the time of the 1912 elections, the largest were ten times the size of the smallest. They did not reflect population changes, and it took far more votes to elect a Social Democratic representative in an industrial region than to elect a conservative or a member of the Centre Party in a rural constituency.

Yet the Social Democratic Party steadily increased its parliamentary representation. Why then could parties not put effective pressure upon the government in the Reichstag? To a large extent, this was due to their

Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg (1856-1921)
Started his career as a civil servant in Brandenburg, served in the Prussian Ministry of the Interior, and became Secretary of State in the Imperial Office of Internal Affairs (1907). Bethmann-Hollweg was appointed Chancellor in 1909. He was a competent administrator, but lacked knowledge and experience of foreign and military affairs. He became increasingly dependent on non-Parliamentary centres of influence such as the court, army and bureaucracy.

Alfred von Tirpitz (1849-1930)
Founder of the German navy. Served in the Prussian navy from 1865. Chief of Staff of Navy High Command Rear Admiral (1895); Secretary of State of Imperial Navy Department (1897-1916), in which capacity he was an advocate of submarine warfare. Drafted Germany's first Navy Law (1898) and the many subsequent laws. He became an admiral in 1903; Grand Admiral in 1911. Tirpitz was a nationalist deputy in the Reichstag (1925-28).

inability to form effective coalitions. This, in turn, was due to divisions and resentments arising from the party politics of previous decades. The National Liberals had supported Bismarck's anti-socialist laws and had been enthusiastic promoters of the *Kulturkampf* (see Chapter 3). The Social Democratic Party and the Centre Party could not easily forget or forgive this. Such differences were eventually overcome under the pressures of war, and a coalition emerged between these groups that formed the basis of the Weimar Republic (see Chapter 11), but there was no such agency in the 1890s or the 1900s. Historian David Blackbourn, in *The Fontana History of Germany 1780-1918: the Long Nineteenth Century* (1997), emphasises how these parties never had to concern themselves with practical issues or effective compromises. This was because they were never in power in this period, or seriously in pursuit of power. Instead, they could afford the luxury of ideological rhetoric, which distanced them from each other. This was especially true of the Social Democrats. Theoretically a Marxist party, it turned its face against alliances with bourgeois parties, and preached radical social and political change to an extent that created fear and hostility among political groups with whom the Social Democrats might profitably have formed an electoral alliance. It must also be remembered that the German state was federal, and that significant differences existed between political conditions in one state and in another. Party co-operation on a national level became even more difficult when party attitudes and relations differed greatly in the provinces.

The army in the German mentality

The decline of the Chancellor's office, the personal unreliability of the monarch and the failure of the Reichstag to seek fundamental political change, were different elements in the severe weakening of civil government in Germany. The most important result of this was that the German army occupied a status unparalleled in Europe. In part, it owed this status to the role that it had played in Germany's growth. The nation suffered from what the historian A.J.P. Taylor called a 'Sadovaw-Sedan complex', based on the memories of the great victories of the past. Glorification of war and conquest was commonplace in contemporary German thought and writing. 'The whole nation', remarked the socialist August Bebel, 'is still drunk with military glory and there is nothing to be done until some great disaster has sobered us.'

Two illustrations may help to indicate the independence of the army from German government. In November 1913, a series of disturbances broke out in the garrison town of Zabern (Saverne) in Alsace. They were evidently triggered by the arrogant behaviour of garrison troops, and resulted in arbitrary arrests, the use of force to disperse crowds, and the declaration by the military authorities of a state of siege. Fearful for public order, the civil authorities sought to discipline the soldiers involved, but were directly overruled by the Kaiser himself. The 'Zabern Affair' escalated and caused an outcry in the Reichstag comparable with that over the *Daily Telegraph* interview. The vote of censure against the government and its support of the military authorities was carried by 293 votes to 54. Yet the matter ended there. As in 1908, the Reichstag hesitated to take further action, and the Kaiser and his ministers firmly maintained their support of the army. The failure to take any effective action against excesses illustrates the virtual immunity of the army from political control.

A similar point is made by a study of the contemporary development of military strategy. Under Count von Schlieffen (Chief of the General Staff 1891-1906) the army command had come to terms with the problems of war on two fronts. Their strategy - the 'Schlieffen Plan', formulated in

Federal: A system of government which consists of a group of states controlled by a central government. The central government deals with things concerning the whole country, such as foreign policy, but each state has its own local powers and laws.

1. What evidence is there of the political influence and independence of the German army during the reign of Wilhelm II?

2. What were the strengths and weaknesses of the Chancellors who served Wilhelm II between 1894 and 1914?

3. In what respects can it be argued that the government of Germany during the Wilhelmian period was undemocratic?

1897 – called for a rapid outflanking movement through Belgium and Luxembourg to eliminate France from the war before Russian mobilisation was completed. Sections of that force could then be transferred to the Eastern Front to meet the Russians. Militarily it was a daring plan, yet it was politically indefensible, as Germany was among those nations who guaranteed Belgium's neutrality. Nevertheless, the strategy became the basis of German military planning for the next 15 years. Gerhard Ritter, who saw the growth of unrestrained military independence in Germany as one of the main causes of the disaster of 1914, has outlined the reason for this. 'To raise political objections to a strategic plan worked out by the General Staff would have appeared in the Germany of Wilhelm II unwarranted interference in a foreign sphere.' In the years preceding 1914, and in that fateful year itself, the German military establishment differed from those of other European powers, not in the degree of its preparedness for war, but in the degree of its freedom from civil governmental restraint.

5.5 What were the main aims of German domestic policies between 1890 and 1914?

For many years after the collapse of the German Reich in 1918, it was usual for historians to conclude that the policies of Wilhelmian Germany had been shaped primarily by foreign aims and ambitions. In recent years, however, a new 'school' of German historians has insisted upon the 'primacy of domestic affairs'. They argue that domestic struggles were the prime preoccupation of German politicians, and that even the great adventure of *Weltpolitik* was in truth only a foreign means to a domestic end. Hans-Ulrich Wehler, in *The German Empire 1871–1918* (1985), states that the true theme of Wilhelmian, and indeed of Bismarckian, politics was the defence of inherited ruling position by pre-industrial elites against the onslaught of new forces – a defensive struggle which became even sharper with the erosion of the economic foundations of these privileged leading strata.

Government through repression or through national consensus?

Certainly, the years of Caprivi's chancellorship had seen the vested interests of the Junker class threatened by the benevolent attitude of the Kaiser towards social problems, and by the sympathy of the Chancellor for industrial economic interests. The fall of Caprivi, largely the work of the Junkers themselves, forced future chancellors to seek new tactics against the dual threats of socialism and industrialism. The first tactic was repression. After 1894, the expressed desire of Wilhelm II to be 'King of the Beggars' was rarely in evidence. Instead, the Kaiser pointedly withdrew his original instructions to Protestant pastors to concern themselves with social questions. The five years between 1894 and 1899 witnessed a stream of anti-socialist and anti-union legislation proposed in the Reichstag, mostly without success.

The refusal of the Reichstag – in which conservative representation dropped 21% between 1893 and 1898 – to support a policy of repression, forced a change of tack. Under Bülow's administration, the government embraced a principle defined in 1897 as *Sozialimpolitik*. In other words, it sought to 'gather together' behind a common policy all the major propertied and conservative interests in the Reich. If the hostility between Junker and the industrialists could be bridged, a formidable front could be presented to social democracy. Bülow's policy had two prongs:

1. The reorientation of economic policy, evident in 1902 when Bülow abandoned Caprivi's system of trade treaties, to replace them with a set of high tariffs protecting agriculture and certain key German manufacturers from foreign competition. Russian corn, incidentally, was largely excluded thereby from the German market, to the relief of the Junkers. The discontent of German heavy industry, meanwhile, was relieved by the start of Germany's massive naval construction programme. Apply this combination of conservative economic interests because known as the Alliance of Rye and Steel.

2. Meanwhile, the wider policy of *Weltpolitik* played the same role. Bülow's explanation of his policy in 1897, while superficially declaring the 'primacy of foreign affairs', in fact betrayed the true nature of *Weltpolitik*. 'I am putting the main emphasis on foreign policy. Only a successful foreign policy can help to reconcile, pacify, rally, unite.'

Parties in the Reichstag, 1890–1912

| | 1890 | 1893 | 1898 | 1903 | 1907 | 1912 |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Conservatives | 93 | 100 | 79 | 75 | 84 | 57 |
| National Liberals | 42 | 53 | 46 | 51 | 54 | 45 |
| Left Liberals | 76 | 48 | 49 | 39 | 49 | 42 |
| Centre | 106 | 96 | 102 | 100 | 105 | 91 |
| Social Democrats | 35 | 44 | 56 | 81 | 43 | 110 |
| National minorities (e.g. Poles, Danes, Alsaceans) | 38 | 35 | 34 | 32 | 29 | 33 |
| Anti-Semites | 5 | 16 | 13 | 11 | 21 | 13 |

Germany and its minorities

A lesser, but nevertheless significant, feature of the domestic politics of 1894–1914 was the reversal of Caprivi's policies towards national minorities within the Reich. In Prussia, for example, Bülow rigorously enforced the laws banning the use of Polish in education, and passed a law in the Landtag (1908) allowing the confiscation of Polish estates for the settlement of German farmers. It is true that in 1911 Alsace and Lorraine received a new constitution integrating them more closely into the normal political system of the Reich. However, the 'Zabern Affair' of 1913 showed clearly that the brutal mentality of military occupation still predominated.

The position of Germany's Jewish population during the Wilhelmian years is not easy to define. Assimilation had produced some impressive success stories. Families such as the Warburgs, the Rothschilds and the Balfins had established themselves with enormous success in banking and in shipping. Middle-class Jews had little difficulty carving out successful careers in medicine, science or journalism. On the other hand, more traditional career streets, such as government, the army and the judiciary, remained closed. Wilhelmian Germany also boasted a variety of anti-semitic political parties, who admittedly won relatively few votes, but provided fertile soil for a growing tradition of pseudo-intellectual anti-semitism. Ernst Haeckel's *Riddle of the Universe* and Houston Stewart Chamberlain's *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* were both published in 1899. Both adopted a pseudo-scientific approach to the question of race, 'proving' the superiority of Germanic races, and that this superiority would

Assimilation. The process by which one group adapts itself to the culture and traditions of the society in which it lives. In particular, this has come to be associated with European faced Jewish communities who have faced the choice of adapting to become part of national communities, or of instituting a distinct cultural identity.

be undermined if Jews were allowed to 'dilute' German racial characteristics by intermarriage.

1. What was *Sammlungspolitik*, and why did the German government pursue such a course during this period?
2. What evidence is there of intolerance towards minority groups within Germany at this time?

Even so, recent historical research has suggested that such 'scholarship' reasoning played little part in the growth of German anti-Semitism. Jack Wertheimer and Egmont Zechlin have both suggested that a more significant role was played by the influx of some 79,000 Jews from eastern Europe who flooded into Germany from Russian territory in the years shortly before the First World War. The element of class threat posed by these poor and unassimilated Jews, together with the element of patriotic mistrust generated by the war, formed the true basis of the anti-semitic explosion of the 1930s.

5.6 Was the rise of social democracy a serious threat to the stability of Wilhelmine Germany?

The growth and development of social democracy

We have already seen that this was a period of dramatic social and economic change in Germany, and that these changes caused a lurch among the governing classes. Alongside those changes, and perhaps because of them, electoral support for the Social Democratic Party also increased considerably. As the table on page 99 shows, a temporary lapse in Social Democrat support in 1907 was reversed so effectively that by 1912 the party was the most powerful in the Reichstag. If one were to judge from these figures alone, one would conclude that *Sammlungspolitik* failed to secure the state against the threat of socialism. The German parliamentarian, Wilhelm declared in 1913, 'becomes daily more of a sinner. Yet how much of a threat did social democracy pose to the imperial system of government? For all its Marxist origins, the German socialist movement by 1912 was broadly committed to the 'revisionism' proposed by Eduard Bernstein in 1898 in his work, *The Preconditions of Socialism and the Tasks of Social Democracy*. Bernstein's conclusion was that Marx had been mistaken about the approaching crisis of capitalism, as the rising living standards of German workers proved, and that change should not be sought through the active promotion of revolution. Historian David Blackburn summarises the position of the Social Democratic Party neatly: 'It believed that history would deliver the future into its lap. Waiting for revolution, it was caught between accommodation and action.' From 1906 onwards, leading social democrats were willing to make electoral pacts with the liberals to forward desirable social policies. They were willing, in general, to subscribe to an imperial foreign policy which they interpreted as primarily opposed to reactionary Tsardom. They even supported the financial provisions of the Army Bill in 1913, because of the government's proposal that these should be paid for by a property tax.

The 'threat' of social democracy

Nevertheless, it is possible to understand the apprehension of the ruling classes at the electoral success of social democracy which destroyed the conservative 'bulwark' of parties, and replaced it with a bloc effectively able to resist any unpopular government legislation. The 1912 elections, wrote Wolfgang Mommsen (1995), thus created the 'stalemate of the party system'. The Zabern incident, although it demonstrated the practical weaknesses of the Reichstag, also provided a disturbing

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| Karl Liebknecht (1871-1919) Son of Wilhelm Liebknecht, founder of the Social Democratic Party. After an early career as a radical lawyer, Karl Liebknecht was active in the Social Democrats resisting moves to direct the party away from its Marxist roots. Entered the Reichstag (1912), voted against war credits (1914), and served during the war as a non-combatant. Expelled from the Social Democrats (1916), he helped to found the Spartacus League. A leading figure in the German communists at the end of the war, Liebknecht was killed in the course of the Spartacist rising. | Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) Born in Poland and active in Polish radical politics before emigrating to Switzerland in 1898. Joined German Social Democratic Party, and actively resisted Bernstein's revision of its Marxist doctrine. An advocate of the general strike as a revolutionary weapon. Formed the Spartacus League with Karl Liebknecht (1916), and like him was killed in the course of the Spartacist rising. |
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illustration of the fact that massive anti-government feeling could now be mobilised within that assembly. The Social Democratic Party, furthermore, did possess an active left wing, led by Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. It maintained an orthodox Marxist line, and was to show its revolutionary potential in 1918. Lastly, we should not ignore the fact that the prospect of power in the hands of industrial workers appeared outrageous and highly dangerous to many conservatives, regardless of the uses to which those workers might turn their power. With or without justification, therefore, the election results of 1912 ensured that domestic political tensions were as high as ever as the conservatives of the German government and General Staff approached the international crisis of the last years of peace.

1. In what ways had leading theorists of German social democracy revised the revolutionary doctrines of Karl Marx by the beginning of the 20th century?
2. How realistic were the fears felt by the German governing classes at the increase in support for the Social Democrats?

5.7 What were the results of Germany's decision to pursue a 'world policy'?

The nature of *Weltpolitik*

In the years that followed the fall of Caprivi, a revolutionary new factor came to dominate the foreign policy of the Reich. That policy departed from the essentially European concerns of Bismarck and came, more and more, to demand a world role for Germany. By enlarging its interests in non-European affairs, Germany was to become a 'world power' (*Weltmacht*). The reasons for this fundamental change were complex and varied, yet on the whole this 'world policy' (*Weltpolitik*) must be seen as an external reflection of internal German developments.

Firstly, it undoubtedly reflected the mentality and personality of the Kaiser. *Weltpolitik* consisted of a headstrong and incoherent insistence that Germany should have a say in all major issues, just as Wilhelm intruded his half-formed opinion into all aspects of domestic government. As the historian Immanuel Geiss puts it, in *German Foreign Policy, 1871-1914* (1976), 'German foreign policy during this time bore the personal stamp of the Kaiser. He found it more or less congenial and in keeping with his personal ambitions and his style of behaviour.' Certainly, Wilhelm made a direct practical contribution to this policy by his appointment to high office of its enthusiastic supporters. In 1897 alone, the promotions of Johannes von Miquel to the vice-presidency of the Prussian ministry, of Alfred von Tirpitz to the naval ministry and of Bernhard von Bülow to the head of the foreign ministry provided the core of the *Weltpolitik* 'crew'.

Weltpolitik was not merely a result of the Kaiser's whim. The expansion of German industry had renewed and increased the national sense of power, and many leading figures expressed the fear that existing resources

and markets would soon prove insufficient and that emigration to the USA might rob Germany of its most dynamic sons. 'Our vigorous national development', claimed Bölow himself, 'mainly in the industrial sphere, forced us to cross the ocean.' The historian Treitschke and the statesman Delbrück publicised a variation upon this theme. Since German unification, the colonial expansion of other powers had cancelled out Germany's advance in status. Germany was faced with the choice of colonial expansion or stagnation as a major power. This theme of world expansion as a logical sequel to unification was most eloquently expressed by the sociologist Max Weber in his inaugural lecture at Freiburg University in 1895. 'We have to grasp', he stated, 'that the unification of Germany would have been better dispensed with because of its cost, if it were the end and not the beginning of a German policy of World Power.'

Lastly, many recent historians concentrating upon the domestic affairs of the Reich have interpreted *Weltpolitik* as essentially an element in the solution of Germany's internal political problems. At a time when the apparent factional divisions in German politics were widening, it provided a means of uniting national opinion and neutralising the disruptive opposition of the Social Democrats. The patriotic stance of the Social Democrats in 1914 certainly suggests that *Weltpolitik* succeeded where the reform programmes of Bismarck and of Caprivi had failed. Most historians would now agree with the conclusion stated by Hermann Geiss, that '*Weltpolitik* came into existence as a red herring of the ruling classes to distract the middle and working classes from social and political problems at home'. Where Bismarck (in 1890) and Wilhelm II (in 1894) had toyed with the idea of a *coup d'état* as the answer to domestic pressures, Germany now turned to the glamour and excitement of *Weltpolitik*.

The acquisition of colonies

In the last four years of the 19th century the mentality of *Weltpolitik* manifested itself in all those quarters of the globe subject to European penetration. In Africa it took the form of a masquerade as protector of the Boers in their confrontation with British imperialism in the Transvaal, under President Kruger. After the Boers had thwarted an ill-organised, British-backed coup, Wilhelm dispatched his famous 'Kruger Telegram' congratulating them on maintaining their independence 'without having to appeal to friendly powers for assistance'. With German naval power in its infancy, it was an empty gesture, whose only lasting effect could be to cause offence to a potentially friendly European power.

The first tangible reward of *Weltpolitik* was reaped in China in 1897. There, alarmed at the extent of Japan's success in its war against China (1894–95), Germany acted, together with Russia and France, to modify the original Japanese gains, and to ensure that China remained open to European penetration. Its own private gain was a 99-year lease of the port of Kiaochow as a trading and naval base. The following year the small groups of Pacific Islands, the Carolines and the Marianas, were purchased from Spain. In 1899, Germany declared that its joint control with Britain and the USA over the islands of Samoa was dissolved, and assumed possession of the eastern portion of the islands.

Patently trivial as such gains were, the extension of German interests in the Middle East had more serious international implications. As early as 1888, the Deutsche Bank had agreed with the Turkish government to finance the projected railway from Baghdad to the Persian Gulf. It was clearly a region sensitive to both British and Russian interests. While Bismarck had specified at that time that German money implied no direct German political interest, Wilhelm II showed none of his restraint. In a

typically pretentious speech (1898) he referred to himself as 'the protector of 300 million Muslims', and openly referred to 'my railway'. The compensation for strained relations with Britain and Russia was the attraction of the Turkish Empire into the German orbit – yet the First World War proved Turkey to be an ally of doubtful worth.

The birth of the German navy

The most spectacular and damaging manifestation of Germany's new ambitions was the growth of its naval power. The development of a mighty battle fleet, like *Weltpolitik* itself, served several purposes. For many, like its founder Admiral von Tirpitz, it was an assertion of the nation's new status. 'The fleet, he declared, 'is necessary to show that Germany is as well born as Britain'. In so saying, he betrayed the essential feature of naval development. It was aimed at, and bound to offend, Great Britain. It was the one major European power with whom Germany had no potential continental argument, and whose friendship might have offset the Franco-Russian alliance. Equally, the decision to develop the fleet provided a huge new outlet for German heavy industry. It was no coincidence that so great an industrialist as Alfred Krupp was a leading member and backer of the Naval League (*Flottenverein*), founded in 1898. To the politically-minded middle classes, the fleet represented a national weapon relatively free from the influence of the Prussian Junkers.

The first Naval Bill, of March 1898, envisaged an eventual force of 19 battleships, 12 heavy cruisers and 30 light cruisers. The launching of the revolutionary British battleship, HMS Dreadnought, (February 1906), had a double impact upon the naval question. By rendering obsolete all existing battleships, it opened up the real possibility that a German fleet could compete with its British counterpart. At the same time, it necessitated an urgent rebuilding of the German fleet. In retrospect, further German bills in 1906, 1907 and 1908 constituted a double misfortune for the German state. They resulted in a tremendous financial undertaking, and signalled the beginning of a naval arms race between Britain and Germany. It is in these respects that we may accept the verdict of historians Ian Potter and Ian Armour, in *Imperial Germany 1890–1918* (1991), that 'the whole naval programme was an expensive failure'.

Weltpolitik: the balance sheet

With the exception of the new battle fleet, the physical results of *Weltpolitik* were meagre, even absurd. By 1914, Germany possessed a colonial 'empire' of only about a million square miles. Total German investment in those colonies was only 505 million marks. The colonies were dotted about the globe, almost indefensible and totally vulnerable to the attack of an enemy – as their fates in 1914 were to prove. In terms of Germany's overall diplomatic position, the decision to move towards 'world power' was of enormous negative importance. It completed the destruction of the Bismarckian European balance and prepared the way for Germany's isolation and encirclement. The historian Bernadotte Schmitt summarised the error of *Weltpolitik* as follows:

'A policy of naval expansion, the development of an African empire, commercial and financial penetration of the Near East could each be justified. But to pursue all three courses at the same time was the worst possible policy; for it kept alive the distrust and suspicion of the Entente powers, convinced them of the dangerous reality of German militarism, and made them more anxious than ever to act together.'

1. Into what areas did German influence spread as a result of *Weltpolitik*?

2. Summarise the impact of *Weltpolitik* upon Germany's diplomatic relations with other European powers.

3. Why did Germany decide to build a major battle fleet at the end of the 19th century?

Source-based questions: The construction of the German navy

Study the following source material and then answer the questions which follow.

SOURCE A

Record of a conversation between the Chancellor, Helmholtz-Schillingfries, and the Kaiser, March 1897

His Majesty received me with great affability, and listened approvingly to my explanation, and then indulged himself in a highly detailed lecture on the navy. He enumerated the ships that we have and the ones we would need in order to survive a war. He emphasised that we had to have an armoured navy to protect our trade and to keep ourselves supplied with provisions, and was of the opinion that our fleet would have to be strong enough to prevent the French fleet cutting off food supplies that we needed. If the Reichstag didn't approve this, he would nevertheless carry on building, and would present the Reichstag with the bill later. Public opinion didn't concern him.

SOURCE B

Part of an article in *Neulatus*, a journal published to promote the German navy (published in 1900)

The concept of the navy has indeed been the unity have clustered and warmed themselves. Thus it has already helped to fulfil a great national mission. 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 the greatness and the 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 Kaiser and Reich.

SOURCE C

Part of a secret communication from the German ambassador in London to the Chancellor, von Bülow. He reports conversations with senior British ministers. (The comments in brackets are those written by the Kaiser in the margins of the original document), July 1908.

Both ministers considered that the situation between England and Germany turned on the question of the fleet. Expenditure on the British navy had risen as a result of the German programme (Falsch! As a result of British greed for

power, and their fear of bogeymen), and in proportion to the increased speed of construction (There has been no increase). Every Englishman would spend his last penny to maintain naval superiority (According to *Nauticus* they have it threefold), on which depended England's existence as an independent state.

I replied that a 'German invasion' existed only in the British imagination. No reasonable being in Germany thought of it ('Very good'). The invention of the Dreadnought had unfortunately made ship-building dearer and had caused Britain to forfeit her immense advantage, but whose fault was that?

(a) Use Source C and your own knowledge.

Explain briefly the reference made in Source C to 'the invention of the Dreadnought'. [3 marks]

(b) Use Sources A and B and your own knowledge. Explain how Source A differs from Source B in its explanation of the motives behind the development of a German navy. [7 marks]

(c) Use Sources A, B and C and your own knowledge. Explain the impact of the German decision to build a navy upon German domestic and foreign politics in the years between 1897 and 1914. [15 marks]

5.8 Was Germany's position in European diplomacy strengthened or weakened by its policies between 1894 and 1905?

Germany and Russia

The weakening of the Bismarckian system of alliances left Germany's European diplomacy with two central themes in the decade after the fall of Caprivi. The first was the desire to maintain friendly relations with Russia in the hope of detaching it from its new-found friendship with France. The year 1894 provided two sources of hope in this respect, with the replacement of Caprivi by the more conservative and Bismarckian Hohenzollern, and with the accession of Nicholas II. The new Tsar, a cousin of the Kaiser, enjoyed friendly personal relations with his fellow Emperor, and was susceptible to Wilhelm's entreaties to pursue a civilising mission against the 'yellow peril' in eastern Asia. The 1890s saw common action against excessive Japanese gains from China, but the logical outcome of Russian commitment was its involvement in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904. Although such distractions suited Germany's purposes, the conviction in St Petersburg that such a war had always been the German goal merely compounded the damage done by the cancellation of the Reinsurance Treaty. Nevertheless, Wilhelm came close to success in a final effort to separate Russia and France. In a meeting at Björkö (July 1905) he persuaded the Tsar to conclude an agreement whereby both states undertook to aid the other in the event of an attack by another European power in Europe. The success was, however, merely superficial. The Tsar had undertaken more than his ministers would allow him to fulfil. The implications for the loss of French economic aid alone were so serious that they refused to endorse the agreement, and the Treaty of Björkö remained a 'dead letter' from the moment of its signature.

Germany and Britain

A logical response to the growing intimacy of Russia and France would have been to cultivate relations with Great Britain more closely. German attitudes to Britain, though, remained highly ambiguous. The ambassador to London, von Hatzfeldt, hoped and believed Britain might be drawn into the Triple Alliance and consistently condemned *Weltpolitik* as a useless means of alienating a valuable ally. The Kaiser himself was certainly attracted to some elements of British society, but had an intense dislike for others, such as its constitutional monarchy. Such ambiguity was mirrored in the diplomatic history of the 1890s. The promise of the agreement over Heligoland and Zanzibar contrasted with the lively hostility created by the 'Kruger Telegram'. Germany's official, and vaguely benevolent, neutrality during the Boer War (1899-1900) was offset by the violently anti-British propaganda of the Pan-German League and the Naval League. Thus, when a Conservative government in Britain abandoned the Isolationism of the Liberals and put out feelers for a formal alliance, the opportunity was missed.

The first British approach (March 1898) collapsed because of German fears that a treaty might fail to achieve parliamentary ratification, and that relations with Russia might be strained to no avail. The second approach (January 1901) was killed by a series of miscalculations by the German Foreign Office. In the first place, senior officials remained convinced that a German alliance was Britain's only option. Speaking of British hints of an approach to France, Balow declared that 'in my opinion we need not worry about such remote possibilities'. Secondly, Germany set excessively strict conditions upon an understanding with Britain. It was to fit itself, not

Isolationism: The policy by which a state withdraws from international commitments to pursue the development of its own domestic interests.

1. What changes occurred in Germany's diplomatic relations during this period?

- (a) with Russia and
(b) with Great Britain?
2. Compare the strengths and weaknesses of Germany's diplomatic position in 1890 and in 1910.

5.9 What was the impact of the First World War upon German society and politics?

In Germany, as in other combant states, the war provided an unprecedented test of national unity and of national identity. Indeed, like conservatives all over Europe, many German politicians led their country into the conflict in the hope that the crisis would submerge differences and tensions, and would unite the population behind the governmental system. In the early stages of the war the gamble appeared to be justified. Governmental claims that this was a defensive war, necessary to prevent Germany being stifled by jealous neighbours, seemed generally to be accepted, and Germans of all political persuasions rallied to the cause. The SPD, so critical recently of most aspects of the Kaiser's policy, voted in favour of war credits, and intellectuals who should have known better issued manifestoes in which they justified the war as a necessary defence and safeguard of superior German Kultur. Programmes demanding large-scale territorial annexations after Germany's inevitable victory were extremely popular, as the historian David Blackbourn has indicated:

'Annexationist ambitions were not confined to soldiers like Hindenburg and Ludendorff, or to Pan-Germans or other super-patriots. They were shared by civilian ministers, civil servants, Catholic and liberal politicians, liberal intellectuals, even by some Social Democrats. The point is not that there were no differences between extreme annexationists and moderates -- there were -- but that the moderates were not really so moderate.'

Germans of all descriptions appealed to the concept of *Burgfrieden*, the abandonment of differences that occurs within a castle that is under siege.

Why did the political unity of 1914 degenerate as the war progressed?

The maintenance of this *Burgfrieden* depended upon a speedy victory and, as the war entered its second year, the first cracks in the political solidarity of 1914 began to appear. In particular, these were provoked by the economic effects of the war, which were complex and far-reaching. Problems quickly arose in terms of manpower and of its organisation. By the end of 1914, one-third of Germany's pre-war industrial labour force was in uniform, and with little prospect of their immediate return, new sources of labour had to be found. The number of women employed in factories rose by 50%, foreign labour was conscripted from occupied areas, especially from Belgium and Poland, and new industrial workers were recruited from the countryside. These new urban workers were subjected to an increasing level of governmental regulation. The War Raw Materials Office (KRA - *Kriegsrohstoffabteilung*) was quickly established (August 1914), co-ordinating the private companies that were to produce and distribute the raw materials required for the war effort, and this set the

Burgfriede (literally, 'Castle peace'). The term refers to the way in which the garrison of a besieged castle puts aside its differences in the face of a common threat. The term comes to mean, therefore, a political truce at a time of crisis.

pattern for increasing government intervention in the economic life of the state. In 1916, the introduction of the Auxiliary Labour Law made it obligatory for all German males between the ages of 17 and 60 to work for the war effort if so required, and left them with little independent choice as to where and how they would be employed. Although arbitration boards were established to resolve disputes, and trade unions were allowed an unprecedented role, there can be no doubt that these developments represented a substantial extension of military control over the working population. Political tensions arose from a variety of associated factors. Little seemed to be done to limit the profits made by key war industries, and no minister dared to reduce the fiscal privileges of the Junker agriculturalists. Inflation eroded wage levels in all industries, and government attempts to requisition food from the countryside caused considerable resentment among farmers. There is evidence of growing opposition to the war in the countryside some time before it manifested itself in the cities.

In addition, the attempts by the allies to blockade Germany, and to cut off imports of food and raw materials, were hugely effective. The impact upon a country that imported a third of its foodstuffs was bound to be serious, and problems of malnutrition were widespread even before the notorious turnip winter of 1916-17. Over the whole course of the war, it is believed, as many as 750,000 German deaths could be attributed to starvation. In addition to the material hardships, the government's attempts to regulate food supplies caused considerable bitterness and political division. Rationing was not implemented efficiently, with different official levels applying in different areas, and a flourishing black market existed throughout the war.

The waning of popular enthusiasm coincided, directly with the tightening of conservative, military control over the direction of the war. The disastrous losses at Verdun led to the dismissal of Field Marshal von Falkenhayn, and control of the Supreme Command (OHL - *Oberste Heeresleitung*) passed into the hands of Paul von Hindenburg and his second-in-command Erich von Ludendorff. This was of the greatest importance in terms both of German military strategy and of the direction of domestic politics. Both men set their faces against any suggestion of a compromise peace, and sought to prosecute the war by all available means to a successful conclusion. Some of the available means, such as unrestricted submarine warfare in the west, or a draconian peace settlement with Russia in the east, had serious military and political implications. On the domestic front, meanwhile, it became increasingly clear that political power had fallen into military hands to an extent that was unprecedented even in recent German experience. In July 1917, Bethmann-Hollweg, increasingly aware that it was in Germany's interests to seek a negotiated peace, lost the confidence of the military leaders and was forced out of office. His fate was later shared by the Secretary for Foreign Affairs, von Kuhlmann, who was forced to resign as late as July 1918 for suggesting in the Reichstag that the allies might be approached for a negotiated peace.

It was clear that the tripartite governmental structure of Wilhelmine Germany no longer existed. The new Chancellor, Georg Michaelis, was effectively controlled by the army, and the Kaiser no longer exercised any realistic authority. The army was now in control, to the extent that historian Martin Kitchen refers to this period as the 'Hindenburg dictatorship'. The army acquired domestic powers, restrictions upon public assemblies, supervision of political meetings, the use of troops as strike-breakers, which were not at all what left-wing politicians had originally envisaged as the results of their cooperation with the war effort. The German experience of war now aggravated the very divisions that it had been intended to heal. The SPD, for example, was increasingly at odds with the military leadership. As early as December 1915, some

members had proposed a motion in the Reichstag opposing annexations in Belgium at the end of the war, and threatening to oppose the voting of further war credits. That threat surfaced once more in July 1917 when the fall of the Tsarist government in Russia raised the possibility of moderate peace proposals which might encourage Russia to leave the war. April 1917 saw major strikes in several German cities and, while the SPD in general remained loyal to the patriotic cause, some of its more radical members took a different route. At a conference in Götting in April 1917, Hugo Haase, former chairman of the party, led a group of dissidents to form a new party, the Independent Social Democrats (USPD – *Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*). Three months later the SPD renewed its threat to vote against further war credits. Then, in January 1918, at least a million workers participated in the biggest strike that Germany had witnessed during the war.

At the same time, this movement to the left was offset by a rallying and consolidation of right-wing patriotic elements. 1917 also witnessed the formation of the Vaterland Party, a coalition of traditional conservative groups, which quickly boasted 1.25 million members and included some prominent conservative names among its membership. Admiral Tirpitz was its chairman, and Wolfgang Kapp, soon to give his name to one of the most dangerous assaults upon the Weimar Republic, was one of its primary administrators. A much less prominent member, Anton Drexler, was shortly to found another extreme nationalist organisation, the National Socialist Party. By early 1918, the battle-lines within domestic German politics had become more rigidly defined than they had ever been before the war.

What was the significance of the wartime experience for Germany's political future?

The political polarisation that took place in the course of 1917–18 serves to illustrate how important Germany's wartime experience is in understanding the events of the next two and a half decades. It is commonplace to emphasise the role played by the 1919 peace settlement in creating the divisions that crippled the Republic and eventually brought Adolf Hitler to power. More recently, however, historians have been eager to stress that most of these factors had their origins in the war itself. Edgar Feuchtwanger (*Imperial Germany 1850–1918*, 2001) has explained how in the war. By an early stage in the war the small business man, later the target of much Nazi propaganda, already felt himself severely damaged by the privileges and incentives offered by the military and the government to large-scale industrial producers. The crippling inflation that constituted one of the most spectacular problems of the 1920s was the direct result of inadequate financing of the war. The fact of an extended conflict left the German government with severe financial problems. Able to cover only 16% of the costs from taxation, and unwilling to extend the tax liability of the privileged classes, the German government gambled on other means. On the assumption of eventual victory, and subsequently of imposing heavy reparations upon their opponents, they printed extra cash to finance the war, so that Germany floated through the war on a sea of paper money (Jan Porter and Ian Arno, *Imperial Germany 1890–1918*, 1991). Another method of financing the war was through the large-scale issue of war bonds. Prosperous members of the middle classes invested patriotically in such bonds, only to find that the prospects of repayment receded with the prospects of victory. For many such Germans the war destroyed the social status and the financial security to which they had been accustomed, and left them adrift in an uncertain and threatening world. In effect, the

Weimar Republic in 1919 inherited an economic situation that was more or less hopeless, not because of the terms of the peace, but because of the nature of the war itself.

5.10 What forces shaped the political policies of Wilhelmine Germany?

A CASE STUDY IN HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

One of the most important and persistent themes in historical revisionism in recent decades has been the tendency to question the roles and the importance of 'great men' in shaping historical events. This tendency has been particularly evident in recent work on German history, where traditional interpretations have laid great emphasis upon the roles of such individuals as Otto von Bismarck and Adolf Hitler. Although historians have rarely accorded him the same status as these men, Kaiser Wilhelm II was also believed to have made an important impact upon the course of German politics in the two decades before the outbreak of the First World War. His accession to the throne in 1888 was held to signal a significant change in the exercise of state power within the Reich. Where his grandfather, Wilhelm I, had largely entrusted Bismarck with his executive authority, and had allowed his Chancellor a wide freedom of action, the young Kaiser insisted upon direct, personal control. Distinct differences were therefore discernible between the priorities of 'Bismarckian' and of 'Wilhelmine' Germany. Tentative and insincere colonialism, for instance, gave way to full-blown *Weltpolitik*. The alliance with Austria, once a tool for maintaining the balance of Europe, became the basis for a wartime alliance. J.G. Rohl, in *Germany without Bismarck: the Crisis of Government in the Second Reich, 1890–1900* (1967), made a characteristic case for this point of view when he wrote that between 1897 and the crisis of the *Dreyfuss Telegram* interview, Wilhelm 'dictated policy to an amazing extent. All appointments, all bills, all diplomatic moves were made on his orders.' This emphasis upon the personal authority of the Kaiser was widely accepted, both by contemporaries and by historians. In 1918, the army's Junker commanders believed that they could convince enemy politicians that fundamental change had taken place in the political structure of Germany simply by forcing the abdication of the Kaiser.

This comfortable consensus was one of the casualties caused by the important work of the German historian Fritz Fischer. In such books as *War of Illusions: German Politics, 1911–1914* (1969) and *World Power or Decline: The Controversy over Germany's War Aims in the First World War* (1975), he claimed that elements in German society pressed the state into policies which made Germany directly responsible in large part for the outbreak of war in 1914. It was not satisfactory either to pin blame solely upon the Kaiser's erratic personality, or to deny Germany's overall responsibility. Although Fischer's main concern was with the origins of the war, his conclusions had important implications for the writing of Wilhelmine history. In the place of a stable society, dominated by a powerful Kaiser, Fischer portrayed a society in crisis, whose governments sought desperately for policies that might provide a degree of national unity.

The body of work that followed in support of the 'Fischer thesis' was largely synthesised by Hans-Ulrich Wehler in his influential book, *The German Empire* (1973). Wehler, too, portrays Wilhelmine Germany as a cynically anti-democratic state, in which elite groups, industrialists, Junkers, and certain agencies in which their influence was entrenched, such as the army and the diplomatic corps, placed enormous pressures upon the Kaiser and his government to protect their vested interests. The

Zabern incident in Alsace-Lorraine in 1913, or the wide acceptance of the dangerous and irresponsible Schlieffen Plan, might be taken to represent one strand of these influences. The authority of Friedrich von Holstein in the Foreign Ministry (1900–06) might be taken to represent another.

In its turn this 'new orthodoxy' has been challenged in recent years, especially by the work of a school of British historians that includes Richard Evans (editor, *Society and Politics in Wilhelmine Germany*, 1978), David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley (co-authors of *The Pezilarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-century Germany*, 1984). Their main criticism of Wehler and his school is that they have underestimated the complexity of Wilhelmine society, and have thus overstated the ease with which that society could be manipulated by the government. They have concentrated less upon the upper strata of German society, and are less convinced of the coherence and control of its governing elites. Instead their emphasis falls upon non-elite groups in the lower-middle or working classes, which they see as exerting enormous and disruptive pressures, to which the governors of Germany were forced to respond. The growth of the Social Democratic Party in the Reichstag in the last years of peace provides specific evidence of the pressure emanating from the industrial working classes. David Blackbourn's work on the Centre Party at this time also indicates that it was no longer a strictly clerical party, but increasingly a party that reflected middle-class and lower-middle-class interests. The government was forced to adopt policies that would court the parliamentary representatives of these classes, or which would deflect them from social and economic demands more threatening to the interests of the political elites. In particular, this might be seen in the more active and expansionist foreign policy of the Wilhelmine period. Volker Berghahn also placed the history and development of the German navy in this context, seeing it as a focus for popular, paucic emotion, rather than as a strategic military weapon in its own right.

Where once the German Reich between 1890 and 1914 was seen as a stable and orthodox, semi-autocratic state, the question of political control now seems to be more difficult and confused. No new consensus has emerged to replace the traditional interpretation, and the picture created by recent research is rather of lack of control, of a state attempting to reconcile many conflicting forces and interests. This is the view and the social diversity that James Retallack refers to, in *Modern Germany Reconsidered* (1992), when he writes that 'the Empire was not entirely bad. It was neither completely urban nor completely rural. Aristocrats did not exclusively set the tone of everyday life – but neither did the Social Democrats. Manipulative strategies to deflect change did not always work as planned [and] often they went disastrously wrong'.

Source-based questions: The government role of Wilhelm II

Study the following four passages and answer both of the sub-questions that follow.

SOURCE A

From: Edgar Feuchtwanger, *Imperial Germany 1850–1918*, published in 2001. This historian ascribes an important role to the Kaiser, at least in the early stages of his reign.

The first three years of Hohenzollern's chancellorship saw the 'personal regime' at its height. Most of the Kaiser's assertions of self-will had to do with personalities, the fight against 'revolution', and most importantly with the complex of foreign and defence policy including the building of an ocean-going fleet. In fact, the Kaiser interfered often decisively in most major decisions and the only limit to the personal regime was his own ignorance, inconsistency and lack of a coherent plan. This still left the chancellor and the bureaucracy room for manoeuvre.

Source-based questions: The government role of Wilhelm II

SOURCE B

From: Katherine Anne Lerman, *Kaiser Wilhelm II, Last Emperor of Imperial Germany*, published in Heinemann History Briefings, 1994. This historian largely rejects the idea that historical events are determined by the influence of one man.

Many historians have been understandably reluctant to accept the thesis that the Kaiser personally ruled Germany before 1914. Not only does this thesis seem portentously close to the 'great man' theory of history, but it also appears to underestimate the complexity of the imperial German political system, the influence of the other states and political institutions within the Empire, and the inevitable constraints on the exercise of monarchical authority. Moreover, on close examination of policy issues, it is quite clear that the Kaiser did not rule Germany on a day to day basis or have command of the details of government work. His knowledge and understanding of political matters was always very superficial; he disliked routine work and read newspaper cuttings in preference to political reports. The one major issue on which Wilhelm II will is generally seen to have been decisive is in the building of a German navy. A preoccupation with the Kaiser's political initiatives and actions tends to encourage the conclusion that his 'personal rule' was a myth, and that the monarchy merely interfered with or meddled in political decision-making, thereby contributing to, but in no sense determining the erratic course of German policy before 1914.

SOURCE C

From: Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *The German Empire 1871–1918*, published in 1985. This historian suggests that no individual or interest was able to dominate German politics during this period.

A power vacuum was created [by the fall of Bismarck] and subsequently a climate arose in which various personalities and social forces appeared in an attempt to fill it. Since neither they nor Parliament succeeded, there existed in Germany a permanent crisis of the state behind its façade of high-handed leadership. This in turn resulted in a variety of rival centres of power; it was this system that caused the zigzag course so often followed by German politics from that time on. First the young Kaiser tried to be both Emperor and Chancellor in one, in Bismarck's mocking phrase a brand of 'popular absolutism'. But this never received constitutional sanction: nor did Wilhelm II succeed in changing.

constitutional reality for any length of time, however much his clique of advisers tried to surround the decision-making process with the illusion of monarchical power.

SOURCE D

From: D. Blackbourn, *Germany 1760–1918*, the Long Nineteenth Century, published in 1987. This historian emphasises the role that Wilhelm was able to play in German government by his indirect influence, rather than by direct constitutional authority.

Recent writers have devoted much attention to the Kaiser's state of mind. Whether he suffered from arrested development, megalomania or manic-depression, the point is that his personal flaws mattered because he mattered. The Kaiser exercised an influence on German politics in many different ways. He was a powerful symbolic figure who helped to set the tone of public life, and seduced many younger middle-class Germans by acting out the role of 'strong man'. The Kaiser also exercised his prerogatives. He took his power of appointment seriously, and used it, often against the advice of responsible ministers. He absorbed the influence of courtiers and favourites, and he interfered in decision-making by personal vetoes, marginal notes on official documents, and endless policy pronouncements. While ministers dealt with elected politicians, they also had to cope with demands and initiatives that came directly or indirectly through the Kaiser from various sources – powerful economic interests, court favourites, aides-de-camp and generals.

(a) Compare the views put forward in Sources B and D on the role played by Wilhelm II in the direction of German government. [15 marks]

(b) Using these four passages and your own knowledge, evaluate the claim that 'the major problem in German politics between 1890 and 1914 was not the power of Wilhelm II, but the absence of any dominant political power'. [30 marks]