

THE GERMAN EMPIRE, 1871–1918

Furious economic growth and social change resulted in pervasive civic conflict in Imperial Germany. Roger Chickering presents a wide-ranging history of this fractious period, from German national unification to the close of the First World War. Throughout this time, national unity remained an acute issue. It appeared to be resolved momentarily in the summer of 1914, only to dissolve in the war that followed. This volume examines the impact of rapid industrialization and urban growth on Catholics and Protestants, farmers and city dwellers, industrial workers and the middle classes. Focusing on its religious, regional, and ethnic reverberations, Chickering also examines the social, cultural, and political dimensions of domestic conflict. Providing multiple lenses with which to view the German Empire, Chickering's survey examines local and domestic experiences as well as global ramifications. *The German Empire, 1871–1918* provides the most comprehensive survey of this restless era available in the English language.

ROGER CHICKERING is Professor Emeritus of History at Georgetown University. His publications include *The Great War and Urban Life in Germany: Freiburg, 1914–1918* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) and *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914–1918* (Cambridge University Press, 3rd ed., 2014).

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For
K. G. B.
T. A. B., Jr.
A. B.

Partners in Eugene and Beyond

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PREFACE

The origins of this book reach back some forty years, to a time when a number of colleagues suggested that I write a survey of German history in the imperial era. After pondering the idea, I put it aside. I was young enough at that time to feel uneasy about scaling the heights of abstraction necessary to write such a survey. I chose instead to remain with archivally grounded research into the German Empire's history. Only after my retirement, when prolonged archival research became impractical – and when I was no longer young by any reckoning – did the idea of writing a general survey become attractive.

In the meantime, writing the history of the German nation-state had become more problematic intellectually. The project now confronts the claims and achievements of “postnational” historiography, which treats orders of phenomena and relations that transcend the nation-state or otherwise bear on its history as external factors. The varieties of this genre include transnational history, global history, world history, regional history, the history of migration, colonial history, postcolonial studies, and comparative history. The proposition that the nation-state represents a privileged object of historical study was already up for debate when I was in graduate school, as the historical implications of decolonization, European unification, and globalization became increasingly urgent. These processes provided the historical backdrop of my subsequent professional career; and they intruded on how my colleagues and I thought about the place of the nation-state in German history. Well before I retired, I had begun to wonder about the legitimacy of supervising dissertations that had only German developments as their theme.

The body of postnational scholarship has now expanded to the point where writing the history of the nation-state seems to require justification, if not apology. Its postulates have come under fire: the geographical boundedness of its subject matter, the analytical categories and methodologies that it appears to mandate – the hegemonic status of the nation-state as the font of collective identity, as the framework, context, and measure of historical development. In some quarters, the history of nation-state has become the object of animus or suspicion, an obstacle to the broadening of historical research. “I am disillusioned with the hegemonic position of the nation state in the writing of history,” confesses an American scholar. He has called for “unbinding

German history,” shifting its center “away from the nation state” in order to liberate a polycentric history, which will accommodate, in the words of one of his colleagues, “cultural diversity, political fragmentation and the persistence of competing sub-national identities of various kinds.”¹ In a recent book on the German emigrant diaspora, he has sought to put these precepts into practice.² He notes that the history of German emigrants encompasses “the vast majority of German actors,” who lived “peacefully in a great variety of other locations” outside the nation-state. The history of this “greater German cultural community” reveals German nation-states to be “simply stages in the existence of a nation” – a truth over which the historiography of the nation-state has “run roughshod.”³

The truth or plausibility of these claims is not at issue here, but it is comforting to know that other advocates of postnational history have shown more sympathy for the national historiography. Sebastian Conrad and Jürgen Osterhammel, two German pioneers in the field, have called for a “transnational perspective” as the complement (*Ergänzung*) of a national-historical perspective. “It would be shortsighted to deny justification now to a national historical perspective across the board,” they write. The nation-state remains a legitimate object of historical inquiry, not as a “unitary actor” but rather as a “realm of action and experience.”⁴ This formulation is generous and inclusive. It recognizes the central importance of the nation-state in transnational processes such as globalization and colonialism.⁵ It recognizes, too, that nation-states were themselves realms in which polycentrism, “cultural diversity, political fragmentation and the persistence of competing sub-national identities” were basic motifs.

The following historical survey of the German Empire embraces this proposition. It seeks to accommodate transnational processes as they affected developments within the nation-state that was called the Kaiserreich. The account emphasizes the fractious and contentious nature of social and political relations within the nation-state, and it argues that invocations of national solidarity must themselves be understood historically as products of civic conflict. The account is thus not without contemporary relevance. My hope is that it will appeal not only to undergraduate students of history, but also to interested general readers.

¹ H. Glenn Penny, “German Polycentrism and the Writing of History,” *GH*, 30 (2012), 265–82.

² H. Glenn Penny, *German History Unbound: From 1750 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2022).

³ *Ibid.*, 1, 281.

⁴ Sebastian Conrad and Jürgen Osterhammel, eds., *Das Kaiserreich transnational: Deutschland in der Welt*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen, 2006), 13–15.

⁵ For an extended argument in this direction see Mark Hewitson, *Germany and the Modern World, 1880–1914* (Cambridge, 2018).

A word is necessary about the place of comparison in the volume, in both a spatial and chronological sense. Despite its receptivity to the claims of postnational historiography, the survey is in several respects self-contained. It is set within the European frontiers that defined the German Empire in 1871, as well as within areas in Europe and the rest of the world that came under German control afterwards. Otherwise, it turns only incidentally to developments in other countries. Nor, excepting a prologue, which offers a brief overview of earlier events in central Europe by way of background, does the story venture outside the period of 1871–1918, the chronological life of the German Empire.⁶

In several other respects, the historical survey cannot be self-contained. From the moment the German Empire was founded in 1871, it generated urgent comparisons with other countries, whether the comparative measures were economies, social relations, cultural achievements, political systems, colonial holdings, or military power. To the extent that these comparisons bore on political, social, or cultural dynamics in Germany, they, too, were transnational phenomena. Comparisons with the German Empire have also invoked other iterations of the German nation-state itself – the Weimar Republic, National Socialism, both components of divided Germany after the Second World War, and the reunified German Federal Republic after 1989. Most commonly, this order of comparison has attempted, explicitly or implicitly, to locate the German Empire in a longer-term trajectory of national history, usually after 1871. A glance at the footnotes in this survey reveals that it, too, represents such an attempt. The overwhelming preponderance of the scholarship on which the volume relies has been published since 1918, most of it since 1989. This is, in other words, an effort of collaborative recollection. Few scholars who have been involved in it have been able to treat the history of Imperial Germany as chronologically self-contained: most of us have known about the course of German history after the fall of the German Empire.

Many efforts to situate the German Empire along this historical trajectory have revolved around the idea of a *Sonderweg*, a special German path of development in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Particularly after the Second World War, historians commonly invoked a history of failed German social and political development in order to explain the catastrophes of the Third Reich. In this analysis, the Germans failed to establish the institutional pillars of popular government, which were in place in Great Britain, France, the United States, and other western countries by the end of the nineteenth century.⁷ Governments in these lands were responsible to

⁶ For a study that attends magnificently to both these shortcomings, see David Blackbourn, *Germany in the World: A Global History 1500–2000* (New York, 2023).

⁷ Jürgen Kocka, “Asymmetrical Historical Comparison: The Case of the German *Sonderweg*,” *History and Theory*, 38 (1999), 47.

parliamentary bodies, whose electorates comprised most, if not all, adult male voters. In the German Empire, by contrast, such institutions were largely absent. Parliaments were still elected by restricted or weighted suffrage; and they remained powerless to dismiss executives. The power of autocratic institutions was anchored in the country's constitutions, as preindustrial elites, particularly noble landowners, officials, and soldiers, continued to exercise power in the place of the liberal bourgeoisie, the class that was now hegemonic in other western lands.

The emphasis on Germany's developmental peculiarities thrived in the 1960s and 1970s, in part because American social science provided historians on both sides of the Atlantic with a compelling framework to understand Germany's maldevelopment. Modernization theory had already begun to inform American policy toward the so-called undeveloped Third World during the Cold War era. Now Germany's frustrated historical development invited scrutiny in the same light, as a process that left the country's fate during the modern era still in the hands of premodern elites. It became commonplace to situate the beginning of this narrative in a key German moment of political failure in the nineteenth century. Germany's commercial, industrial, and professional bourgeoisie, the country's would-be modern elites, failed in their attempt to emulate their historical counterparts elsewhere, those who had led the revolutionary overthrow of the Old Regime in England, North America, and France during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The failure of the German revolution in the nineteenth century thus ensured that when fundamental change did come to Germany's economic, social, and political institutions later in the century, it came from above and took on authoritarian forms, presided over by the same elites who had dominated preindustrial society in central Europe.

The next chapter in this narrative is set in the German Empire, the new nation-state that resulted from this process.⁸ The consequences of Germany's failed development now set deeper roots. The continued frustration of popular rule and the weakening of the emancipatory impulses in German liberalism represented one side of the story. The other was the reconsolidation of premodern social formations, particularly the aristocracy, which would under normal circumstances have disappeared, as Germany's dramatic economic and social transformation eroded the foundations of this group's social existence. Instead, with the support of other vulnerable social groups, such as peasant farmers, artisans, and other small manufacturers, premodern elites continued to control legislative bodies and to dominate public administration and military institutions. They encouraged the militarization of civic culture, the dissemination of the army's authoritarian political values. They also pursued aggressive external policies in the calculation that these would buttress

⁸ Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *The German Empire, 1871–1918* (Leamington Spa, 1985).

authoritarian institutions and promote domestic unity. In subsequent chapters of the narrative, these same elites undermined the republican regime that succeeded the German Empire in 1918; then they helped bring National Socialism to power, in hopes of protecting their own values and social distinction. Within this framework, the narrative of the *Sonderweg* thus emphasized the extent to which the foundations of Nazism were laid between 1871 and 1918. For several decades after the collapse of the Third Reich, this framework offered a compelling analysis of the “German problem,” locating fateful continuities in German history from 1871 to 1945.

However, as direct memories of National Socialism receded during the 1980s, criticism of the *Sonderweg* mounted along with doubts about the utility of modernization theory itself.⁹ Much of the commentary focused on the capacious ambiguity of the central terms “modern” and “modernity,” which had seen service in the *Sonderweg* narrative as essential attributes of institutions, policies, social positions, political practices, and attitudes. It often seemed as if debate over the *Sonderweg* had become a quarrel over the meaning of just these terms. The difficulties became acute as historians uncovered the “modernity” of the Third Reich itself, which had once been thought to represent the *cri de coeur* of modernization’s social victims.¹⁰ The turn away from the *Sonderweg* accelerated in 1989, as decades of recovery, democratic stability, and peaceful economic integration into western Europe culminated in German reunification. Thereafter, the case seemed more plausible that social and political conditions in the German Empire had been in basic respects little different – and no less modern – than elsewhere in the West.¹¹ National Socialism had accordingly not gestated in long-term pathologies of premodern institutions and habits of mind; it had resulted instead from more proximate or exogenous factors, such as Germany’s defeat in the First World War, the ill-advised Treaty of Versailles, and the brutal impact of the world depression on republican Germany. By the early twenty-first century, it was possible to argue that the German Empire represented a modern model for progressive features of the unified German Federal Republic itself, such as inclusionary political institutions, broad popular participation, and the most comprehensive system of social insurance in the world.¹²

⁹ David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford, 1984).

¹⁰ Riccardo Bavaj, *Die Ambivalenz der Moderne im Nationalsozialismus: Eine Bilanz der Forschung* (Munich, 2003); Paul Betts, “Fascination with Fascism: The Case of Nazi Modernism,” *JCH*, 37 (2002), 541–58; Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY, 1989).

¹¹ Detlev J. K. Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity* (New York, 1987).

¹² Hedwig Richter, *Aufbruch in die Moderne: Reform und Massenpolitisierung im Kaiserreich* (Berlin, 2021); Hedwig Richter, *Demokratie: Eine deutsche Affäre. Vom 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich, 2020).

The debate over the *Sonderweg* and the place of the German Empire in longer-term German developments has been a protean phenomenon. The chronological parameters, the understandings of the beginning and end of the special path, have shaped the narrative trajectory. The path of German history looks different if its beginning is located in the year 1871, 1890, 1914, or 1919, and if its telos or final point is set in 1918, 1933, 1941, 1945, 1989 – or somewhere else. The last major surveys of German history in the imperial era were published during the early 1990s, and they reflected the decreasing purchase of the *Sonderweg* as an explanatory framework.¹³ A brief controversy over the German Empire, which flared at the beginning of this decade on the 150th anniversary of the German Empire’s founding, rehearsed familiar arguments.¹⁴

Recent developments, including the resurgence of populist nationalism in Europe and the United States, have suggested a possible new framework or point of emphasis in the debate, if not a transformation in its very terms. Political movements on both sides of the Atlantic have drawn into question nothing less than the defining denominator of the *Sonderweg*. At issue are the legitimacy and stability of liberal democracy as a preferred form of modern government, a vehicle for resolving political conflict, defining consensus, and ensuring the peaceful transfer of power. In at least one major western country, which I myself know well, this legitimacy and stability have undergone a direct challenge, and would-be European imitators are easy to identify – even in Germany. If the appeal of aggressive, nationalist autocracy be located as a post-democratic response to domestic conflict and partisan polarization, it would suggest a different developmental trajectory as a model.¹⁵ In this light, the German path of development after 1871 looks less retrograde than precocious.

The present survey of Imperial Germany’s history makes no claim to methodological innovation. The principal object is to synthesize, to balance the several interpretive templates that have structured the scholarship of several generations of historians. Students of political, social, economic, cultural, regional, gender, diplomatic, military, and colonial history will find much that is familiar, as will both the friends and foes of the *Sonderweg*. The implications of recent political developments, particularly the resurgence of

¹³ Roger Chickering, “Drei Gesichter des Kaiserreiches: Zu den großen Synthesen von Wolfgang J. Mommsen, Hans-Ulrich Wehler und Thomas Nipperdey,” *NPL*, 41 (1996), 364–75.

¹⁴ Eckart Conze, *Schatten des Kaiserreichs: Die Reichsgründung von 1871 und ihr schwieriges Erbe* (Munich, 2020), 134–58; Birgit Aschmann and Monika Wienfort, eds., *Zwischen Licht und Schatten: Das Kaiserreich (1871–1914) und seine neuen Kontroversen* (Frankfurt, 2022).

¹⁵ See Daniel Siemens, “Nationalsozialismus,” in Nadine Rossol and Benjamin Ziemann, eds., *Aufbruch und Abgründe: Das Handbuch der Weimarer Republik* (Darmstadt, 2021), 442.

populism, do echo in the survey, above all in the salience of domestic antagonism in Imperial Germany and its bearing on democratic reform and external policy. This argument suggests that modernization theory cannot capture the extent or significance of civic conflict in the German Empire, since purportedly “modern” forms of association were present on both sides, deploying purportedly “modern” methods in pursuit of their goals. These conclusions betray my skepticism about “modernity” itself as a conceptual guide to civil association and domestic conflict in the new German nation-state. The word “modern” has in any case already appeared more frequently in this preface than it will in the rest of the survey.

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It is impossible to thank all the people – students, colleagues, and friends – whose contributions are reflected in this volume. It represents the product of more than a half-century of my participation in a transatlantic scholarly community, whose impact on my own thinking about German history has generated more intellectual debts than I can list. Several friends do stand out, however, because their contributions to the volume have been immediate; and to them I owe special thanks. They include Rita Aldenhoff-Hübinger, Peggy Anderson, Jost Dülffer, Stig Förster, Gangolf Hübinger, Friedrich Lenger, Jim Retallack, Jim Sheehan, Jonathan Sperber, and Jeff Zalar. The book is based on no new original scholarship on my part, except for a section on German agriculture that I composed in the scholarly nirvana that is the Wissenschaftliches Kolleg in Berlin. Its staff, faculty, and members of the class of 2008–2009 have my great gratitude. I wish as well to thank the staff of the Knight Library of the University of Oregon, particularly the Interlibrary Loan Department, without whose help I could not have completed the volume. Thanks, too, are due to the staff at the Guin Library in the Mark Hatfield Marine Science Center of Oregon State University in Newport, Oregon, which has also provided me with essential services. Finally, I would like to thank my editors at the Cambridge University Press, Michael Watson and Liz Friend-Smith, for their infinite patience, confidence, and good will.

ABBREVIATIONS

AHR	<i>The American Historical Review</i>
AKG	<i>Archiv für Kulturgeschichte</i>
ASG	<i>Archiv für Sozialgeschichte</i>
CEH	<i>Central European History</i>
EcHR	<i>The Economic History Review</i>
EER	<i>European Economic Review</i>
EHR	<i>The English Historical Review</i>
GG	<i>Geschichte und Gesellschaft</i>
GH	<i>German History</i>
GSR	<i>German Studies Review</i>
GWU	<i>Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht</i>
HJ	<i>The Historical Journal</i>
HjB	<i>Historisches Jahrbuch</i>
HWJ	<i>History Workshop Journal</i>
HZ	<i>Historische Zeitschrift</i>
IRSH	<i>International Review of Social History</i>
JCH	<i>Journal of Contemporary History</i>
JEcH	<i>The Journal of Economic History</i>
JEEcH	<i>Journal of European Economic History</i>
JMEH	<i>Journal of Modern European History</i>
JMH	<i>The Journal of Modern History</i>
JMilH	<i>The Journal of Military History</i>
LBIYB	<i>Leo Baeck Institute Year Book</i>
MGM	<i>Militär-geschichtliche Mitteilungen</i>
MGZ	<i>Militär-geschichtliche Zeitschrift</i>
NPL	<i>Neue Politische Literatur</i>
PP	<i>Past & Present</i>
SH	<i>Social History</i>
TAJbDG	<i>Tel Aviver Jahrbücher für Deutsche Geschichte</i>
VSWG	<i>Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte</i>

VZG	<i>Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte</i>
WH	<i>War in History</i>
ZBLG	<i>Zeitschrift für bayerische Landesgeschichte</i>
ZfG	<i>Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft</i>
ZGO	<i>Zeitschrift für Geschichte des Oberrheins</i>