Prologue: Imperial Germany

"What a paradise this land is! What clean clothes, what good faces, what tranquil contentment, what prosperity, what genuine freedom, what superb government!"[1] Mark Twain's exclamations in 1878 to his friend and editor, William Dean Howells, sounded a theme that echoed in the judgments of countless visitors who followed the American writer to Germany in the late nineteenth century. Indeed, the German Empire's renown as a dynamic and prosperous land, whose accomplishments were the envy of the modern world, only grew during the next decades, as evidence accumulated of breathtaking change.

By the turn of the twentieth century Germany had become Europe's foremost industrial power. In the production of steel and chemicals and in electrical engineering, the sectors that drove the so-called "second industrial revolution," Germany's accomplishments were rivaled only in the United States. German engineers were pioneers of the new industrial technologies. Mammoth firms such as Krupp, Siemens, and Bayer spearheaded the growth of the German economy. Coal production in Germany increased more than seven times between 1870 and 1913, steel production fifteen times.[2] Gross national product multiplied six times in the same era. In a manner that belied Mark Twain's picture of "tranquil contentment," German society was transformed within a generation. The population exploded by nearly 60 percent between 1871 and 1910. Half of it farmed in 1875; less than one-third did in 1913. During the same interval the number of Germans doubled whose primary occupations were in industry, and in 1913 they outnumbered Germans who worked in agriculture. In the wake of torrid industrial growth, Germany became one of the world's most urban societies. The capital city,

[1] Samuel Clemens to William D. Howells, Frankfurt am Main, 4 May 1878, in *Mark Twain–Howells Letters: The Correspondence of Samuel L. Clemens and William D. Howells 1872–1910* (2 vols., Cambridge, MA, 1960), I, 227.

[2] For a convenient survey of the pertinent statistics, as well as an accessible introduction to the German Empire, see Volker R. Berghahn, *Imperial Germany, 1871–1914: Economy, Society, Culture, and Politics* (New York, 1994).

Berlin, grew by nearly five times between 1871 and 1910, to more than 2 million inhabitants; six other German cities counted over 500,000 inhabitants in 1910.

Other features of the German Empire impressed contemporary observers no less. Germany's claim to "superb government" reflected the reputation of its bureaucracies for efficiency and incorruptibility. German trains ran on time; and the streets were clean. Defenders of Germany's constitution could likewise appeal to standards of efficiency in order to justify vesting the monarch with substantial authority and, conversely, significantly limiting the powers of parliament. In an era when – in Germany and elsewhere – democratic government carried the taint of corruption and fecklessness, Germany's more authoritarian system could plausibly claim to embody "true freedom." In all events, it spawned the most progressive system of social insurance in the world, which offered public entitlements that workers do not to this day enjoy in the United States. In the eyes of most observers, however, the greatest emblem of bureaucratic authoritarianism was Germany's cultural achievement. The German public school system was reputed to be the finest and most comprehensive in the world. It banished illiteracy. Germany's public universities served as models throughout the world. Whether in medicine, the natural sciences, the social sciences, or the humanistic disciplines, German scholarship was preeminent. Between 1900 and 1925 over one-third of the Nobel Prizes in chemistry and physics went to Germans. German was the international language of scientific discourse.

There was a darker side to this spectacle. The German Empire was born on the battlefield; and the legacy of its birth had a profound and enduring impact on society and politics in the new state. The German army was the mightiest in the world, the model for military reformers everywhere. Soldiers enjoyed enormous influence and respect in Germany. The authoritarian features of the German constitution were designed in the first instance to isolate the army from civilian control. The views of the generals figured significantly in councils of state, while deference to martial virtues permeated institutions of civil society, from student fraternities to corporate boardrooms. German nationalism, the civic religion of the new state, radiated military values, as well as an aggressive confidence in Germany's growing industrial power and the conviction that German influence in the world ought to correspond to the country's burgeoning economic might. Germany's participation in overseas colonialism began late, in the middle of the 1880s, but it became as loud and provocative as its most public champion, the emperor William II. It also accompanied the relentless construction of a battle fleet, which made Germany a European naval power second only to Great Britain. In the early years of the twentieth century, as a series of diplomatic crises

in north Africa and the Balkans raised the prospect of European war, the accents in contemporary fascination with Imperial Germany changed, and admiration for its industrial and cultural accomplishments ceded to apprehension over the combination of German military power and an erratic foreign policy. "The ultimate aims of Germany surely are, without doubt, to obtain the preponderance on the continent of Europe," read a bleak British analysis in 1909, which concluded that Germany would then "enter on a contest with us for maritime supremacy."[3]

After two great European wars had lent plausibility to this British judgment of German intentions, fascination with Imperial Germany migrated to the historians.[4] The decisive moment in the recent historiography of the German Empire was in 1961, when the German historian Fritz Fischer charged not only that the Imperial German government launched the great European war in 1914 but also that Germany's leaders were guided in this decision by ambitions that bore a chilling resemblance to Adolf Hitler's hegemonic designs during the Second World War.[5] In the furious debate that attended Fischer's provocation, the principal issue became the German Empire's location in a story that reached its terrible conclusion in the Third Reich. Particularly among a younger generation of West German historians, it became common to portray the history of Imperial Germany as a critical juncture along a *Sonderweg*, a special German path of social and political development. In this reading, the German route to the modern world was plagued by the survival of "pre-industrial elites" in positions of social and political power, notably in large-scale farming, the upper echelons of the civil bureaucracies, and the army, whose officer corps remained the preserve of the aristocracy.[6] The power of these elites then served to frustrate the development of modern institutions and attitudes conducive to democratic government. Because this view clashed with contemporary impressions of Imperial Germany's vibrant modernity and industrial power, however, it came under attack itself.[7] In an alternative reading, the problems of Germany's long-term development towards Nazism, and hence the pathologies of Imperial

[3] A. Nicolson to Edward Grey, St. Petersburg, 24 March 1909, in G. P. Gooch and Harold Temperley (eds.), *British Documents on the Origins of the War* (11 vols., London, 1926–38), V, 737.

[4] For surveys of the literature, see Matthew Jeffries, *Contesting the German Empire, 1871–1918* (Oxford, 2008); Roger Chickering (ed.), *Imperial Germany: A Historiographical Companion* (Westport, CT, 1996).

[5] Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht: Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914–1918* (Düsseldorf, 1961); translated into English as *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York, 1967).

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

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

Germany, inhered in the social pressures and disruptions of modernity itself.

The immediate issue in the present volume is not the place of Imperial Germany in the incubation of National Socialism. It is, instead, the death of Imperial Germany in war. This focus makes it possible to skirt the now tired debate over the modernity of the *Kaiserreich*. The recent discussions have, however, isolated aspects of the German Empire's prewar history that are relevant to its wartime ordeal.[8] The most pertinent feature of this history was the persistence of deep internal divisions in the nation state that had emerged in 1871. These divisions were of several orders, and they raised difficult questions about the sources of the new state's integration, legitimacy, and cohesion.

One order of division was immediately obvious, for it was written into the constitution of 1871. The German Empire was a federation of twenty-five constituent states. By the terms of the constitution, the states retained many of the attributes of sovereignty, including their dynasties, the bulk of their institutional apparatus, and most of the powers that these semi-authoritarian regimes had traditionally exercised over their subjects. The purview of the federal executive in Berlin was limited to matters of common concern, such as national defense, foreign affairs, and aspects of commercial policy, such as tariffs, while the powers of the federal legislature were restricted still further, in the first instance to budgetary questions. The lower house of the federal parliament, the Reichstag, was democratically elected (by adult males); and, for just this reason, it was largely excluded from deliberations on basic matters of state, such as foreign and military policy.

The result of these arrangements was the fragmentation of Germany's basic political and administrative structures. The public institutions that most immediately affected the lives of Germans were not national in scope. They fell instead into the jurisdictions of the states or municipal governments, which themselves remained autonomous in significant respects. The federal government neither legislated nor administered policies that related to police and criminal justice systems, transportation and communication, poor relief, public health, or education (at all levels). State and local government also levied and collected the direct taxes on property and income.

Germany's constituent states were not equal, however. They ranged in size and importance from the dwarf principality of Schwarzburg-Sondershausen to the kingdom of Prussia, which sprawled over

[8] The literature on the German Empire is enormous. For a good guide to the problems that have informed it, see James Retallack (ed.), *Imperial Germany, 1871–1918* (Oxford, 2008).

two-thirds of the empire's land area and encompassed about 60 percent of its population. Prussia predominated in Imperial Germany.[9] The Prussian king was the German Kaiser, or emperor; the Prussian prime minister was normally the federal chancellor, and his Prussian ministerial colleagues normally doubled as the top officials in the federal government, where they were called state secretaries rather than ministers. None of these officials were responsible to parliament for their power, however; they served instead at the pleasure of their monarch. In the upper house of the federal legislature, which was called the Bundesrat (or Federal Council) and comprised fifty-eight members selected by the governments of the German states, the Prussian vote was usually sufficient to determine the agenda and always sufficient to block constitutional change. The powers of the federal parliament were much less extensive than those of the Prussian parliament, which was not democratically elected. The franchise in Prussia, as in most of the other states (and municipalities), was restricted in ways calculated to ensure the power of the wealthy and educated. In the Prussian case, the suffrage system also preserved a disproportionate voice for the Junker nobility, the class whose estates dominated the lands where grain was grown east of the river Elbe.

Institutional fragmentation overlay other cleavages. The areas that had been forged together in 1871 were confessionally mixed, and these divisions remained pervasive and deep-seated. They originated in the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. That they continued to inspire intense loyalties in the early twentieth century was due in large measure to the *Kulturkampf*, the bitter conflict that marked Imperial Germany's first decades, when the Protestant rulers of the new state undertook a campaign to reduce the power and autonomy of the Catholic Church in the German territories. Among other things, legislation passed during the 1860s and 1870s in Prussia and other states extended controls over the training and appointment of the Catholic clergy, regulated parochial education, and banned the Jesuits and a number of other religious orders from German soil. The campaign fed on the belief, which was popular among German Protestants, that Catholics owed their ultimate loyalties to the Pope and hence could not count as true Germans. Before it abated, in the 1880s, the *Kulturkampf* mobilized German Catholics in defense of their own interests; and it left a legacy of mistrust and suspicion that had by no means disappeared in 1914.

The Catholic minority constituted about 40 percent of the German population. The German Church comprised five archbishoprics and twenty-five bishoprics. The flock was concentrated in the south and

[9] Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600–1947* (Cambridge, MA, 2006).

west – in Bavaria, southern Baden and Württemberg, and in the Prussian provinces of Westphalia and the Rhineland – as well as in Prussian Poland and Silesia to the east. Although it encompassed a full social spectrum, from peasants and landed aristocrats to businessmen, professionals, and workers in the cities, Catholic Germany tended to be more agrarian, less industrial or commercial, than Protestant Germany, so confessional segregation reinforced popular Protestant images of backward and superstitious Catholics. The gulf was emphasized, in all events, by the systematic underprivileging of Catholics in public bureaucracies, the officer corps, the professions, and higher education.

The Protestant majority in Germany was organized in thirty-nine separate Churches. Most of these Churches were Lutheran in their doctrinal and liturgical coloration. All of them were state institutions. Their heads were Germany's secular rulers, from the Hamburg senate to the grand duke of Baden or the Prussian king, who oversaw ecclesiastical administration, dogma, and discipline, and appointed the Protestant clergy in their territories. While it was the principal confession in the northern and eastern parts of the country, Protestantism also predominated in the country as a whole. Nearly all the dynasties were Protestant, as were most of the elite groups that dominated Germany's public bureaucracies, both military and civilian. In addition, Germany's civic religion carried distinct Protestant overtones; and Martin Luther was a national symbol in a way that no German Catholic figure could be.

Patterns of confessional distribution reinforced regional divisions in Imperial Germany, and these, too, survived well into the twentieth century. Compulsory elementary schooling eliminated illiteracy, but it had not yet erased regional patterns of speech, which remained heavy enough to block oral communication between Bavarian and Frisian peasants – or, for that matter, between Bavarian peasants and middle-class residents of the Bavarian capital city, Munich. The vitality of local dialects fed on regional tensions. Anti-Prussian sentiment was common; and it fostered local patriotism in other states, such as Bavaria, as well as within Prussia itself – in regions such as the Rhineland, where local traditions and confessional practices kept uneasy company with rule from Berlin.

These antagonisms were particularly marked in regions that were inhabited by groups whose first language was not German. Imperial Germany's ethnic minorities included Danes in the north, French-speaking people in Alsace-Lorraine, the western territories annexed in 1871, and several million Poles in the eastern provinces of Prussia. All these groups had to contend with official policies of "Germanization," the object of which was, among other things, to compel members of ethnic minorities to use the German language in schools and public business. Not one of

these minorities was happy under German rule, but the Catholic Poles were the largest and best organized for resistance, and hence the most persistent source of ethnic conflict in Imperial Germany.

The real template of domestic tension lay elsewhere, however. Class conflict was the product of prodigious economic development and social change at the end of the nineteenth century. These processes generated a huge industrial workforce. While working-class organizations of several confessional and political colorations took shape, the mobilization of the German proletariat transpired principally under the militant banner of Marxism. By the beginning of the twentieth century the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) was the largest and best-organized socialist party in the world. Its program envisaged the revolutionary overthrow of Germany's basic social and political institutions, the replacement of capitalism and private property with socialism, and the establishment of democratic government in place of Germany's system of semi-authoritarian rule.

This agenda looked anything but idle, as the growth of the SPD registered in the relentless increase of its vote in successive elections to the Reichstag. The government responded to this specter with a broad array of countermeasures, which included the outlawing of the party between 1878 and 1890, persecution of the party thereafter by the police and in the courts, and, for the last resort, plans for a counterrevolutionary coup d'état against the Reichstag. Imperial Germany was also the site of bitter industrial strife. With the support and encouragement of the state, employers contested the organization of the labor force at every juncture. Despite all these efforts, over 2 million workers belonged to socialist trade unions in 1912, while the SPD itself counted some 1 million members. When, in the federal parliamentary election of the same year, the Socialists registered a spectacular victory, winning one-third of the popular vote and returning as the largest party in the Reichstag, their success provoked consternation and alarm outside the working class, as well as the prospect of constitutional crisis. Although signs abounded by the turn of the century that the revolutionary energy of the party was moderating amid the material gains that organized labor had achieved, the Socialists' success symbolized powerful resentments against the manifold sources of social and political inequality in the German Empire.

Regional, confessional, ethnic, and social conflict was thus rife. It focused on the very structures of German politics. Parliamentary rule on the basis of democratic suffrage was virtually nowhere in place – neither in federal, state, nor local deliberative bodies. The desirability of democratic rule was a principal issue at all levels of government, however, advocated foremost by the Socialists and progressive liberals,

resisted tenaciously by the Conservatives and other groups on the political right.

The ubiquity of domestic conflict lent a special urgency to issues of legitimacy and national integration in Imperial Germany. From the beginning, the effort to cultivate a popular sense of national unity in Imperial Germany took on particular urgency; and it featured an emphasis on enemies, both domestic and foreign. The demonization of Catholics and Socialists, branding them as *Reichsfeinde* ("enemies of the fatherland"), was one facet of this effort, which was calculated to justify their persecution while it unified the rest of the population in opposition to them. The campaign found expression not only in exclusionary legislation and the courts but also in schoolbooks, the sermons of Protestant clergymen, and patriotic oratory. A variation on this theme provided a degree of ideological coherence to the German conduct of foreign affairs. The slogan *Feinde ringsum!* ("Enemies on all sides of us!") enjoined national solidarity and the suspension of domestic conflict in the face of a hostile world. Otto von Bismarck and those who succeeded him atop the national government were alive to the domestic implications of international rivalries. The German decisions to establish overseas colonies and then to construct a battlefleet were due in part to considerations of domestic policy – to the calculation that colonial empire and a navy would become proud symbols of national power, around which much of the population, even Catholics and industrial workers, might rally in support of established institutions. The pursuit of "active" policies towards the country's diplomatic rivals was designed to achieve the same ends.

The deterioration of European international relations after the turn of the twentieth century owed a great deal to these German calculations. It also led to Germany's growing isolation among the European powers and placed the country's leaders under additional duress, lest the appearance of diplomatic weakness further threaten their domestic position. At home, a "national opposition" deployed in loud nationalist associations, such as the Pan-German League and the German Army League, to assail the government in the name of patriotism for its feeble defense of German interests at home and abroad. The victory of the Socialists in the election of 1912 fueled this attack and lent plausibility to visions of the nation's doom. The sense of apprehension and beleaguerment lingered into the summer of 1914, when another diplomatic crisis intruded.

In 1871 German national unification had come in the wake of foreign war. The transcendence of domestic divisions in a great moment of international crisis was thus a defining motif in the history of Imperial Germany. As conflict continued to plague domestic politics in the new

German Empire, the same motif endured as an enticement to statesmen and nationalist politicians. Like the preoccupation with enemies, competition for colonies and naval power gestured to its logic. Decisions made in the summer of 1914 capitulated to the same logic. "Let us regard war as holy, like the purifying force of fate," proclaimed one nationalist leader in 1913, "for it will awaken in our people all that is great and ready for selfless sacrifice, while it cleanses our soul of the mire of petty egotistical concerns."[10] The patriotic enthusiasm that swept the country in the summer of the next year suggested that this sentiment was broadly shared, that a great many people hoped that war would banish "petty egotistical concerns" and bring Germans of all classes and confessions together in a great common experience.

The great war that followed did indeed provide a common national experience. It affected profoundly the lives of every German man, woman, and child who endured it. After the initial enthusiasm had passed, however, the common experience of war not only exacerbated old domestic conflicts; it also bred new ones. As the war's ramifications seeped into every aspect of life in Germany, they eroded the legitimacy of a government that had embarked upon the conflict with little anticipation of the dreadful costs. Imperial Germany thus died as it had been born, in war. This is the story.

[10] Quoted in Roger Chickering, "Die Alldeutschen erwarten den Krieg," in Jost Dülffer and Karl Holl (eds.), *Bereit zum Krieg: Kriegsmentalität im wilhelminischen Deutschland 1890–1914* (Göttingen, 1986), 20–32, 25.

1 The war begins

It began, to use the formula familiar in today's newspapers, with an "act of state-sponsored terrorism." The archduke Francis Ferdinand was the heir apparent to the Habsburg throne of Austria–Hungary; when, on June 28, 1914, a Serbian student shot him and his wife to death in Sarajevo, the capital of the Austrian province of Bosnia, the act provoked astonishment and outrage throughout Europe. Public excitement quickly receded, however, despite lingering rumors in the newspapers – subsequently substantiated – that officials of the Serbian government had been complicit in the assassination. In Germany and elsewhere the summer season had begun. The onset of warm weather signaled travel for those who could afford it; and, for those who could not, it brought less idle adjustments in the annual rhythms of life in town and countryside.

In Berlin, as elsewhere, the events in Sarajevo provoked a series of fateful deliberations during the first weeks of July.[1] The German leadership concluded that the assassination carried far-reaching implications for German security. Austria–Hungary was Germany's principal ally. The Serbian affront promised to encourage discontent not only among the South Slav inhabitants of Austria–Hungary but also among the other ethnic groups that made up the Habsburg monarchy. In the eyes of the German leaders, the logic of this process boded the dissolution of the monarchy and, ultimately, Germany's full diplomatic and military isolation in Europe.

This alarming prospect loomed over the consultations in the German capital. The decisions that emerged out of these deliberations have themselves given rise to a bitter dispute among professional historians.[2] At the

[1] On these deliberations, see now Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York, 2013), which deals less convincingly with developments "in Berlin" than "elsewhere."

[2] Fischer, *Germany's Aims*; John A. Moses, *The Politics of Illusion: The Fischer Controversy in German Historiography* (New York, 1975).