

## PART 1: EMPIRE TO DEMOCRACY, 1871–1929

# 1 The Kaiserreich, 1871–1914



In this section, we will examine the structure of the German Empire, including how it was governed, what its economic basis was and the nature of its society. We will look into:

- Political authority: the extent and make-up of the German Empire in 1871; the 1871 constitution; the role of emperor and chancellor; political groupings and parties and their ideologies
- Government and opposition: Kaiser Wilhelm I and government under Bismarck; their personalities and policies; the role of the Reichstag; the struggle between autocracy and democracy; the development of parties and political opposition
- Government and opposition: Kaiser Wilhelm II and his chancellors; personalities and policies; the place of the Reichstag; the struggle between autocracy and democracy; the development of parties and political opposition
- Economic developments: industrial expansion; old and new industries; agriculture; trade and wealth
- Social developments: the class hierarchy; elitism and the culture of militarism; the condition of the working people
- The political, economic and social condition of Germany by 1914.

## Political authority

### The extent and make-up of the German Empire in 1871

On 1 January 1871 the German Empire (*Kaiserreich*) was born. The origins of this new force in European diplomacy lay in a decisive military victory over France in the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71). The National Day of the new empire or *Reich* commemorated the crushing German victory in that war at the battle of Sedan on 1 September 1870.

Germany was now united. In theory, this was by voluntary agreement among the rulers of the various states that were now gathered into the new empire: the kings, grand dukes, dukes and princes, together with the senates of the Free Cities of Hamburg, Bremen and Lübeck. In practice, Prussia was by far the most powerful of the parts that made up the empire.

- Prussia's king became the German emperor, Wilhelm I.
- Prussia's chief minister, and the political architect of the new empire, Otto von Bismarck, became chancellor of the new empire.
- Prussia's capital, Berlin, became the empire's capital city.
- Prussia occupied about two-thirds of the empire's land area and held about three-fifths of its population.



**Figure 1.1:** The German Empire in 1871. Note the size of Prussia, but also the fact that Prussia is itself made up of several different units, making it to some extent a federal kingdom within a federal empire. The borders are by no means those of modern Germany, but include a large chunk of modern Poland.

Prussia had led the movement to abolish hundreds of internal customs **tariffs** that had become barriers to trade. This allowed the free movement of goods within



## Hidden voices

*Hildegard von Spitzemberg (1843–1914)*

Von Spitzemberg was the daughter of a politician in the south German state of Württemberg. A **Protestant** herself, she married a Catholic diplomat and accompanied him when he was sent to be Württemberg's ambassador to the Prussian capital. Although initially unenthusiastic, she became an admirer of Prussia and a friend of Bismarck's. In a country where women could not vote or stand for public office, she was nevertheless involved in politics as a 'salon hostess', inviting influential men to meet and discuss issues of the day in her home.

What a peace treaty for us Germans! More magnificent and glorious than ever! United into one Reich, the greatest, the most powerful, the most feared in Europe;

great by reason of its physical power, greater still by reason of its education and the intelligence that permeates it! Every German heart hoped for it, none suspected that its dreams would be fulfilled, in this way, so soon and so magnificently.<sup>1</sup>

## Discussion points

1. What does von Spitzemberg's response to the victory in the Franco-Prussian War tell us about **nationalism** in Germany?
2. What kind of country and what kind of political policy are implied in the *first* part of her description of the new empire as 'greatest', 'powerful' and 'feared'?
3. Now comment on the *second* part of the description, 'education and intelligence'.

their own territories. They were joined by other German states, notably in the Customs Union or **Zollverein** of 1834, but some states had joined before that, while others only joined later. Prussia went on to exploit the iron ore and coal found in its western territories of the Ruhr valley and Saarland to develop its economy strongly in the 1850s and 1860s.

However, the German Empire was more than just an extension of Prussian power over the smaller states. Constitutionally it was an unusual combination of apparently conflicting principles, all of them deeply rooted in the new state:

- Conservatives tended to back federalism;
- **Liberals** supported the unitary principle;
- The Prussian political establishment emphasised the military nature of the new empire.

Let's take those three terms in order.

The empire was a federation, in which each member state sought to retain a voice in discussions and decisions. Accordingly, the main executive body was a Federal Council or **Bundesrat**. This council was made up from ambassadors from the various states and its meetings were always held in private. It had considerable power and prestige. All laws needed its consent and it could veto any proposed changes to the Constitution. It had powerful committees in such areas as Foreign Affairs. As **chancellor**, Bismarck usually presided over Bundesrat meetings. Many Conservative politicians were reluctant to see any of the different states' traditional rights overridden by a centralising (and essentially Prussian) government.



## Key term

**Chancellor:** A figure with authority over certain organisations, such as a head of government.



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For Liberals, unification was a move towards a more modern German state. As a concession towards their ideas of the unity of the new empire, there was also a democratic national assembly or **Reichstag**, elected by universal adult male suffrage (all men over 25 had a vote). At the time, this was known as ‘universal suffrage’; today we would call it ‘universal male suffrage’. The Reichstag shared legislative power with the Bundesrat and also shared the right to review non-military government expenditure. Members were also involved in campaigns for further **reform**.

However, it was a military victory that had helped to create the empire and, as you will discover, the backbone of the empire was its army, an army that was a fundamentally Prussian institution. This plain political fact was to have the enormous influence over the history of the country as a monarchy, as a republic and then as a tyranny.

### The 1871 Constitution

The new empire needed a new constitution. Bismarck provided one by adapting that of the Prussian-dominated North German Confederation (1867–71) to suit the new unified German state. The 1871 Constitution was designed to protect the traditional rights of the crown, as well as the special powers of the army and the bureaucracy, from any liberalising threats. The most notable aspect of this was the complete separation of military and civilian affairs. The army, of which the **Kaiser** (German emperor) was Commander-in-Chief, was granted a budget that was only to be subjected to democratic review by the Reichstag every seven years. This recognised what was seen as the special part played by (largely Prussian) military might in the unification of Germany, known in the phrase of the day as **Nationalwerdung** (becoming a nation).

This state of affairs should be seen against the backdrop of a military establishment and bureaucratic tradition looking back towards the autocratic regimes of the 18th century in German states. This was especially the case in the north, where Prussia was the dominant power. In the south, especially in Bavaria, democratic political parties were more advanced.

The 25 states that made up the federal empire retained a degree of authority to run their own local affairs. There were still kings in Bavaria, Saxony and Württemberg, and grand dukes in Baden and Hesse.

At a federal (national) level, there were two new institutions of government:

- The *Bundesrat* (Federal Council) had 58 members drawn from all the states of the empire. The largest group, unsurprisingly, was from Prussia, which sent 17. The next largest was from Bavaria which sent 6, then Saxony with 4 and so on. If 45 members of the Bundesrat could agree, then the Federal Council could rewrite the constitution. This meant that there was the appearance of a liberal ability to reform, but it gave Prussia’s group of 17 the ability to block all change.
- The 397 members of the *Reichstag* (National Assembly or Parliament) were chosen in elections in which all men who were German citizens and at least 25 years old could vote in a secret ballot. The members were elected for a five-year term. The Reichstag was required to approve the federal budget and all legislation.

## The roles of emperor and chancellor

The leadership of the empire was in the hands of the Prussian King in his new role as Kaiser (emperor). In this role, he had considerable powers.

- He was Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, so he gave the orders.
- He appointed all ministers, including the chancellor; he could also dismiss them whenever he chose.
- He could issue decrees and ordinances, which were like laws but did not have to go through the Reichstag.

The national anthem of the empire was personally dedicated to the emperor. The imperial flag was red, black and white, the personal colours of Wilhelm's family. Thus, the new state clearly placed the emperor at the centre of things.

Appointed by the emperor and responsible (answerable) to him, the **Reichskanzler** (imperial chancellor) was also a powerful figure.

- He presided over the Bundesrat, which meant that he ran it.
- He had to sign the emperor's decrees and ordinances in order for them to be legal.
- He was in charge of all aspects of government.

Despite this, the job's title 'chancellor' seemed to suggest that it was not a powerful role. The name was lower in standing than 'prime minister', for example. This was part of the means for reassuring the member states that they, and their prime ministers, retained much of their old authority. Just as the emperor's first minister was a chancellor, not a prime minister, so the institutions were referred to as federal agencies, not ministries or government. The first chancellor, Bismarck, never referred to himself as an imperial minister, and nor did any of his successors (until the upheavals of 1918).

Bismarck held on to his old jobs as prime minister and foreign minister of Prussia until close to the end of his time in office as chancellor of the empire, regarding them as essential to his political power.

## Political groupings and parties and their ideologies

In the Reichstag, the biggest political party was the **National Liberals** or *National-liberale partei*. In the first federal elections, they won 125 seats, making them the largest single party. They increased their representation to 155 seats in the 1874 election.

The party had its origins in a grouping of deputies in the Prussian **Landtag** (state parliament) in the 1860s and had supported Bismarck's foreign policies, including the move towards German unification. They mostly supported the government, especially on matters of social reform. They drew their own support from the *Grossbürgern*: wealthy landowners in central Germany, rich businessmen and northern merchants.

Liberalism was a major force in the Kaiserreich. Understandably, given its supporters, the movement supported a free-market approach to economics and the rule of law. It opposed **revolutionary** politics but campaigned for political

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### ACTIVITY 1.1

Was Prussia just too dominant a part of a united Germany?

Create a spider diagram showing the areas in which Prussia occupied a position of power in the Kaiserreich. Conduct some research to find out what checks there were on Prussian power.

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reform including increasing democratisation. Liberalism contained both more and less radical groupings. Sometimes these divisions led to parties forming, splitting or merging, a volatility that undermined its political effectiveness. Liberals supported Bismarck's social and political reforms, and his attack on the Catholic Church.

The other main liberal group was the **Progressives**. They too had begun in the Prussian *Landtag* but, unlike the National Liberals, they had a history of opposing Bismarck. They were not able to accept Bismarck's refusal to give way and grant regular Reichstag oversight of the huge expenditure on the army (some 90% of the total government budget) or the responsibility of government ministers to the democratic body. The Progressive party actively opposed the government in the Reichstag on these issues.

They campaigned for a parliamentary democracy on the British model, with the monarchy's role strictly limited and power lying in the elected national assembly. Initially opposed to state intervention, the party became more enthusiastic about legislation for social welfare. The Progressives drew their support from the intelligentsia, artisans, the lower ranks of the civil service and businessmen.

While Conservative political groups in the Reichstag never enjoyed the electoral support given to the Liberal groups, this was more a function of the weakness of the Reichstag during this period than anything else. Many important powers were held by the assemblies in the individual states, the *Landtage*, and in these Conservatives often had a majority. This was the case, for example in Prussia, which was home to three-fifths of the German population.

A good example of the Conservative groups was the *Reichspartei* (Empire Party, but usually known as the **Free Conservatives**) in Prussia. Mainly speaking for heavy industry, this party drew its support from Berlin, the Rhineland and Silesia.

The **Conservatives** were supported by the landed interest in East Prussia and Mecklenburg. They had even less party organisation than the liberal parties and relied instead on their patriarchal and traditional powers in these rural areas. They were unenthusiastic about change and had not supported unification, unlike the Free Conservatives.

Sometimes nicknamed the 'throne and altar' party, Conservatives supported a powerful monarchy, a strong army and the Protestant church, believing in the right of the authorities to govern. They tended to support Bismarck, but were unimpressed by the reforms he had introduced to meet Liberal demands. They paid attention to agricultural voters and opposed anything that might harm farmers' interests. They sought to protect the rights and traditions of the different states that made up the new empire, and opposed moves to centralise power. Conservatism was also **anti-Semitic**.

The second largest party in the Reichstag was the **Centre Party** or *Zentrumspartei*. It had been founded in 1870 to represent the interests of **Roman Catholics** in Germany. Its founders were noblemen from Silesia and the Rhineland, but it was based on religion, not class or region. It drew support from smallholders in south

and west Germany, as well as from farmers and the Catholic urban working class in western Germany.

Because of its nature and purpose, it did not fit easily into a conservative-liberal spectrum, representing a coalition. This included a working-class wing which wanted more government intervention, with social and economic reforms, and a more middle- and upper-class wing with social-conservative views. It took a strong interest in education and defended Catholic schools. Initially in conflict with Bismarck (who regarded them as potential traitors), they became his allies in opposing Socialism.

## Government and opposition: Wilhelm I

### Wilhelm I and Bismarck: their personalities and policies

**Wilhelm I** was in his mid-seventies in 1871. When only ten he had joined the Prussian army as an officer and he saw active service in his teens, fighting the French and winning an Iron Cross. Bismarck described him as an old-fashioned, courteous, infallibly polite gentleman of the Prussian military caste.

Wilhelm survived two assassination attempts in 1878, in the second of which he was seriously wounded. Bismarck used this opportunity to push an Anti-**Socialist** law through the Reichstag, even though the assassin himself had been expelled from the Social Democratic Party.

Wilhelm I died in 1888 and was succeeded briefly by his ill son Friedrich, who died after just 99 days as emperor. He was succeeded in turn by his son Wilhelm, later in the same year.

Unlike her husband Wilhelm I, **Empress (Kaiserin)** Augusta received a full and liberal education, including lessons in drawing and music. When they first met in 1826, she was Princess Augusta von Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach, and half his age at just 15. They married in 1829. She was bored by military and court life, and disliked Bismarck a great deal. He returned her feelings, accusing her of having undue influence on the Kaiser. Augusta especially disliked Bismarck's foreign policy, believing that under his influence Prussia had been aggressive and without principles. She was tolerant of Catholicism, something which conflicted with Bismarck's suspicion of Catholic influence in German society and his belief that loyalty to the Vatican undermined the German political unity for which he was working. The chancellor, who had so praised the emperor, showed his hostility to Empress Augusta, saying that Wilhelm I's good sense was occasionally undermined by 'female influences'.

In 1864 Augusta founded the National Women's Association, which looked after the wounded, and corresponded with Florence Nightingale. She blamed Bismarck for the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war (1870–71) and founded a school for the destitute daughters of German officers in 1873. She only became reconciled with Bismarck towards the end of her life, in the light of his support for her grandson, who would become Wilhelm II.

**Otto von Bismarck** was the son of a **Junker** (a Prussian country gentleman) from east of the river Elbe. The Junkers were famous for their conservative

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values, hostility to change, solid virtues and deep Lutheran Protestant faith. They dominated the officer class in the army and the bureaucracy.

Tall and slim in his early years, Bismarck later became corpulent from eating and drinking enormous quantities. He had a high-pitched, soft voice and he claimed to detest public speaking. Far more intelligent and well-read than was usual among Junkers, he became interested in politics in his early thirties, convinced that he had the ability to stem the tide of liberal thinking and to preserve the powers of the Junker in Prussia and, after 1871, in a unified Germany.

Bismarck was a complex man. As a politician he was ruthless and could be cruel. On the other hand, he was no fanatic or ascetic. He enjoyed a happy family life and was not without a sense of humour. He knew when compromise was necessary. The product of a Prussian grammar school, he knew Latin and Greek and spoke and wrote fluently in French and almost as well in English. Later he learned Russian. He often expressed himself in abrupt ways, coldly and harshly, sometimes even disdainfully.

His fall from power in 1890 caused a sensation in Germany and beyond. He did not agree with the increasing interest taken by Wilhelm II in social policy such as improving conditions for industrial workers. His 30 years as first Prussian then German political leader had seen great achievements, not least as architect of a united Germany.

### Kaiser Wilhelm I and government under Bismarck

Throughout the period of his chancellorship, Bismarck pursued a policy of building German unity around Prussian leadership. As part of this he identified those groups which were powerful enough, or which might become powerful enough, to threaten national unity and social stability.

The first such group was the Roman Catholic Church. About a third of Germany's citizens were Catholic. In 1871, the year of German unification, a meeting of the Catholic First Vatican Council declared that the Catholic leader, the Pope, was unable to make a mistake when declaring something to be a doctrine of the Church. This was widely believed to mean that popes could never make mistakes, something the First Vatican Council hadn't actually said. Such a declaration seemed to make the Pope an autocratic leader whom Catholics would obey in everything, making the Protestant German nationalist Bismarck question their loyalty to the empire.

Catholics were also suspected of being supportive of German-speaking, Catholic Austria. As Austria was a country which Prussia had fought as recently as 1866, this also contributed to the political belief that Catholics were not dependable citizens. These suspicions led to the **Kulturkampf** (literally 'culture struggle'), refer to the section on 'The struggle between autocracy and democracy'.

The second group to draw Bismarck's fire were those Poles who lived in eastern Germany. The German Empire was a nation of several languages: there were speakers of French in Alsace-Lorraine and Danish speakers in North Schleswig, while, in the east, over 5% of the population were Polish speakers. A principle of





### Speak like a historian

Bismarck's biographer Jonathan Steinberg discusses what the basis of Bismarck's authority was. He quotes Max Weber, one of the founders of sociology, who offered three reasons for our obeying the state:

Tradition: 'the authority of the "eternal yesterday"';

Charisma: 'the absolutely personal devotion and personal confidence in revelation, heroism, or other qualities of individual leadership ... the elected war lord, the plebiscitarian ruler, the great demagogue, or the political party leader';

Law: 'the belief in the validity of legal statute ... this is domination as exercised by the modern "servant of the state"'<sup>2</sup>

#### Discussion points

1. Which of these three do you think best defines the kind of leader you think Bismarck was?
2. Steinberg's own conclusion was that Bismarck combined the first and the third, tradition and law. What aspects of Bismarck's career do you think led Steinberg to this conclusion?

the Prussian constitution was 'self-administration': the different communities in the wider state had a degree of autonomy. But a major concern for Bismarck was that the German nation might be diluted by these minorities. Bismarck's biographer Otto Pflanze records that in 1873 he declared his regret that the empire had not driven the entire pro-French population out of Alsace-Lorraine and resettled the area with Germans.

Bismarck's personal dislike of Germans whose first language was Polish was notorious. He felt that building a sense of national identity for a unified Germany was to be his most important task and anything that got in the way of this was, for him, immediately suspect. Poles spoke a different language and they were Catholics: how dependable were they as citizens of the empire?

The German government adopted a policy of Germanisation. Between 1871 and 1873, it pushed through a Germanising education system for the Polish-speaking regions. It encouraged German settlement in Polish-speaking areas and banned the speaking of Polish; children who spoke it in school were punished. Pflanze notes that, having given instructions for the expulsion of **Jesuits**, other Catholic priests, journalists and all 'politically-active' people from Posen, in 1872 the chancellor began to argue in favour of expelling *all* Poles who could not prove citizenship.

The 1876 German-Language Act made German the language for conducting all public business, with the exception of school boards and local councils. In 1886, the emperor opened a session of the Prussian *Landtag* as King of Prussia and spoke about the importance of Germanising the eastern regions. Two weeks later, Bismarck gave what is called his 'great Polish speech' on the subject of the supposed 'danger' from Poles. The speech was published and half a million

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copies were distributed around Germany; his office was inundated with letters and telegrams of support. The plan was to buy up Polish-owned land and lease it to Germans. German teachers were to be encouraged to work in the east, and at the same time Polish officials and military recruits were to be deployed in the west of the country to make them more German. In the same year, the government decided that it was time for the temporary exceptions to the German-Language Act to lapse and in 1887 it abolished the use of Polish for teaching.

The third group that seemed to Bismarck to threaten the Reich were Socialists and Social Democrats. Like the Catholic Church, they were part of an international movement. As a result, German citizens looked abroad for inspiration and leadership. In 1869 the Social Democratic Party (SPD) had been formed out of various previous reform parties. (Strictly speaking, the party only changed its name to the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* in 1890 but for the sake of simplicity we refer to them as the SPD throughout.) It published its programme in 1875, calling for the state to take control of industry and for workers to share in their workplace's profits.

Bismarck responded with a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, he pushed through the Anti-Socialist Laws of 1878, which permitted elected SPD deputies in the Reichstag (though not officially as SPD – they had to stand under other labels) but other than that banned Socialist organisations, including trade unions and political parties and associations.

On the other hand, he developed his own programme of social reform to undermine the appeal of the SPD and other groups. In 1883, the state began to provide a sickness benefit to men who could not work because of illness. The following year, in 1884, the Accident Insurance Law was passed, meaning that workers injured at work would be compensated. Then in 1889 an old-age pension

**Voices from the past****Otto von Bismarck (1815–98)**

Bismarck dominated German (and much of European) politics in the second half of the 19th century. He was in no doubt that politics was about power. He built up the power of the king within Prussia, of Prussia within Germany and of Germany within Europe. Domestically, he allied himself with Liberals against Catholics, and then with Catholics against Socialists, according to his judgement of where the major threat to Prussian interests lay at the time. In his foreign policy, he engineered military successes against Prussia's neighbours, Denmark, Austria and France. However, he spent much of his career using diplomacy to avoid wars breaking out and to keep Germany from becoming involved when they did.

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Germany does not look to Prussia's liberalism, but to her power ... The great issues of the day are not decided through speeches and majority resolutions – that was the great error of 1848 and 1849 – but through blood and iron.<sup>3</sup>

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**Discussion points**

1. What does the remark about Germany tell us about Bismarck's sense of Prussia's role?
2. Comment on Bismarck's contrast between 'liberalism' and 'power'.
3. What does Bismarck mean by 'blood and iron'? What comparison or contrast would you make with Hildegard von Spitzemberg's 'education and intelligence'?