

2

Domestic Politics in Wilhelmine Germany 1890–1914

POINTS TO CONSIDER

Chapter 1 highlighted many of the key features of Germany in 1900, yet it raised one key question, which remains the focus of this chapter: who really ran Germany? This will be considered in the following themes:

- The 'new course' of Wilhelm II and Caprivi
- The advent of *Weltpolitik*
- Bülow and the problems of *Weltpolitik*
- Political stalemate
- Key debate: Was Wilhelmine Germany an entrenched authoritarian state?

Key dates

- 1890 Resignation of Bismarck; Caprivi appointed Chancellor
Anti-Socialist Laws lapsed
- 1893 Agrarian League formed
- 1894 Hohenlohe appointed Chancellor
- 1897 Government reorganised; *Weltpolitik* initiated
- 1898 Navy League formed
First Naval Law passed, followed by the laws of 1900, 1906, 1912
- 1900 Bülow appointed Chancellor
- 1908 The *Daily Telegraph* affair
- 1909 Bethmann appointed Chancellor
- 1912 Major socialist gains in *Reichstag* elections
- 1913 Zabern affair
- 1914 Outbreak of the First World War

Key question
In what ways did
Caprivi embark on a
'new course'?

1 | The 'New Course' of Wilhelm II and Caprivi 1890–4

If the new young Kaiser had assumed that Bismarck's departure in 1890 would give him a free hand, Wilhelm II was to be disappointed. The new chancellor, Caprivi, soon proved himself to be more astute and independent-minded than the Kaiser had bargained for. He spoke of embarking on a 'new course', with a more consultative approach to government and a conciliatory attitude to previously hostile forces, such as the Centre Party and

the Social Democrats. The Anti-Socialist Laws lapsed. In contrast to the stalemate between Bismarck and the *Reichstag* in the late 1880s, Caprivi was able to depend on a fair degree of backing from the *Reichstag*. This allowed him to push through a number of social measures in 1891:

- Sunday work was prohibited.
- Employment of children under 13 years of age was forbidden.
- Women were not allowed to work for more than 11 hours a day.
- Industrial courts were set up to arbitrate disputes.

Caprivi's success paved the way for an even more important change – the reform of Germany's tariff policy (see page 12). Ever since 1879 Germany had followed a policy of protection for both agriculture and industry. In order to encourage the export of German manufactured goods, Caprivi negotiated a series of commercial treaties with Austria-Hungary, Italy, Russia and a number of smaller states. These treaties were bilateral, which meant that each country agreed changes likely to benefit the other. These agreements led to the reduction in German tariffs on agricultural goods in return for favourable reductions in the tariffs imposed on exported German manufactured goods. Therefore, they not only acted as a vital spur to the growth of the German economy, but also represented a political triumph for Caprivi. His policy of tariff reform gained broad support as most parties, except the Conservatives, recognised the benefits of lower food prices. It seemed as if the new Chancellor could perhaps make Bismarck's system work in a flexible and progressive fashion. It was not to last.

Growing opposition

The Kaiser had been so taken by the success of tariff reform that Caprivi had been given the noble title of count. However, powerful voices quickly and effectively raised doubts:

- Court conservatives. To start with, Wilhelm II himself backed Caprivi's social policy in the belief that the improvements would discourage people from supporting the socialists. Yet, Wilhelm II's sympathy began to wane and many of Wilhelm's advisers at court disagreed with Caprivi's 'socialist' policies. Some encouraged the Kaiser to ditch him and to assume a more authoritarian 'personal rule'.
- Landowners. They were deeply upset by the commercial treaties since they threatened to reduce their profits. In 1893 the Agrarian League was formed to put pressure on parliament and to win support and privileges for landowners. It quickly grew into an effective and well-organised lobby of a third of a million members that acted as a powerful pressure group on behalf of the conservative parties.
- Military. In 1893 there had also been resentment in military circles when Caprivi made concessions over the Army Bill in the *Reichstag* by reducing the length of conscription for national service from three years to two (see also page 28).

Resignation of Bismarck; Caprivi appointed Chancellor: 1890

Anti-Socialist Laws lapsed: 1890

Agrarian League formed: 1893

Key dates

Key question
Who opposed the 'new course' and why?

The Army Bill was actually rejected, resulting in the *Reichstag* being dissolved and the following election brought things to a head. There were conservative concerns about anarchist outrages across Europe and the increase in the total number of Social Democrat seats to 44 (see Table 2.1). Opponents of Caprivi now reinforced Wilhelm II's own doubts about his Chancellor's suitability for office and Wilhelm II pressed Caprivi to draw up an anti-socialist Subversion Bill. The Chancellor refused and this led to an extraordinary plan by Wilhelm II and his supporter, Eulenburg. Their plan was to set aside the powers of the *Reichstag*, crush socialism and establish a more authoritarian system centred on the Kaiser himself. This was the final straw for Caprivi. He successfully talked the Kaiser out of such a course of action, but he had lost the will to carry on. In October 1894 Caprivi resigned and gladly retired from the political scene.

Table 2.1: *Reichstag* election results (total number of deputies = 397)

Party	1887	1890	1893	1898	1903	1907	1912
<i>Conservatives</i>							
Seats	121	93	100	79	75	84	57
Per cent of vote	25	19	19	16	13	14	12
<i>National Liberals</i>							
Seats	99	42	53	46	51	54	45
Per cent of vote	22	16	13	12	14	14	14
<i>Left Liberals</i>							
Seats	32	76	48	49	36	49	42
Per cent of vote	14	18	15	11	9	11	12
<i>Centre Party</i>							
Seats	98	106	96	102	100	105	91
Per cent of vote	20	19	19	19	20	19	16
<i>Social Democrats</i>							
Seats	11	35	44	56	81	43	110
Per cent of the vote	10	20	23	27	31	29	35
<i>Minorities</i>							
Seats	33	38	35	34	32	29	33
Per cent of vote	8	9	8	11	10	9	8
<i>Right-wing extremists</i>							
Seats	3	7	21	31	22	33	19
Per cent of vote	0.2	1	4	3	3	4	3
Turn-out (%)	77	71	72	68	75	84	84

Key question

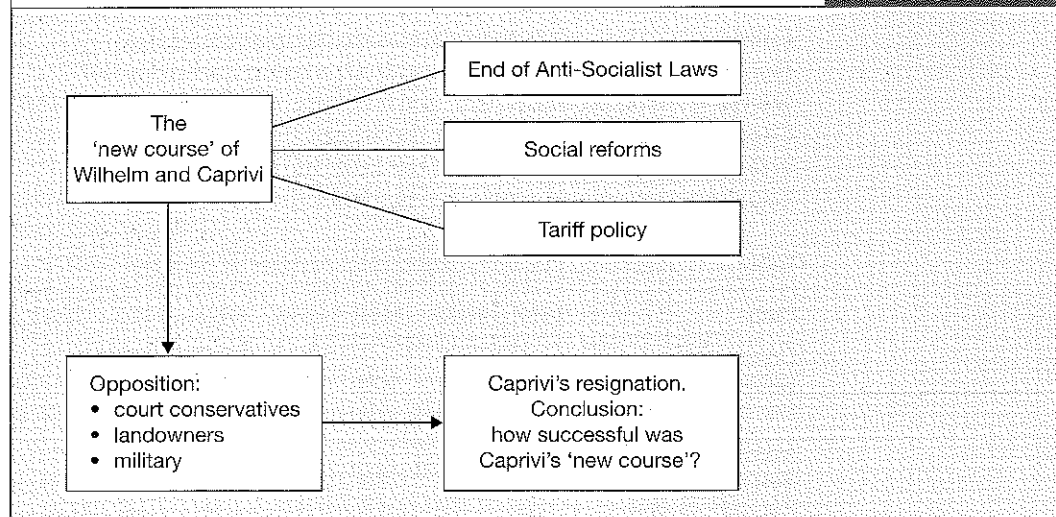
How successful was Caprivi's 'new course'?

Conclusion

Caprivi's four years as Chancellor neatly illustrate the difficulties of trying to cope with the pressures of the various political forces in Imperial Germany. In his attempt to create a genuine base of parliamentary support for the government, Caprivi showed his understanding of the need, in a modern industrial society, for a political approach that recognised the concerns and aspirations of the mass of the population. However, Caprivi's 'new course' foundered because it was opposed by the established forces of

power and influence. He was subjected to considerable abuse from the conservative press and he was the focus of opposition intrigue at court. In the end, he could not rely on the consistent support of the Kaiser whose delusions of greatness were now taken up with thoughts of 'personal rule' and *Weltpolitik*.

Summary diagram: The 'new course' of Wilhelm II and Caprivi 1890–4



2 | The Advent of *Weltpolitik*

Although Hohenlohe was appointed Chancellor in 1894 and held the office for six years, the government was increasingly dominated by men who supported the policies of the Kaiser. Indeed, there was even talk of a military *coup* and overthrowing the constitution. Nothing came of it. Yet, the ageing Hohenlohe could not counter the intrigue at court and in government circles. By 1897, a group of key political figures had emerged who sympathised with the Kaiser's wish to embark on what he saw as 'personal rule'. In that year there were three new important appointments in the government:

- most importantly Bülow, as Foreign Secretary
- Admiral von Tirpitz, as Navy Secretary
- Count Posadowsky-Wehner, as Interior Secretary.

In addition, two long-serving figures began to assume even greater prominence:

- Friedrich von Holstein, a senior official in the Foreign Office
- Johannes von Miquel, Prussian Finance Minister (and the leader of the National Liberals).

The creation of the new government team has led many historians to view 1897 as a turning point in history since it coincided with the drive to achieve world power status for Germany, or *Weltpolitik*. This not only marked a decisive shift in

Key question

How was the imperial government reorganised?

Hohenlohe appointed Chancellor: 1894

Government reorganised;
Weltpolitik initiated: 1897

Key dates

the emphasis of Germany's foreign policy (see Chapter 3), but also raised implications for the future of German domestic politics.

Key question
How and why did
Weltpolitik become
government policy?

Key term
Sphere of influence
An area or region
over which a state
has significant
cultural, economic,
military or political
influence.

The motives of *Weltpolitik*

Bismarck had thought of Germany as essentially a European power. While he had no objections to overseas colonies, his priority was to maintain Germany's powerful position on the continent without alienating Britain. However, the Kaiser himself believed that *Weltpolitik* would satisfy Germany's destiny which he aimed to do in the following ways: colonial acquisitions, the establishment of economic **spheres of influence** and the expansion of naval power to complement the strength of the army. In the government team assembled in 1897 he was supported by a number of like-minded ministers.

However, there were also other powerful intellectual and economic forces at work in Germany that favoured the new policy:

- Nationalism (see page 14).
- Imperialism (see page 14). Industrial changes had created economic demands for the acquisition of raw materials and markets beyond Europe.
- Social Darwinism (see page 15).



A German poster of 1902 glorifying the Navy League. Such images were popular as a kind of mass propaganda for the league and the fleet.

- Radical nationalism (see pages 14–15). These nationalists formed a series of pressure groups which performed a two-fold purpose. On the one hand, they popularised the idea of *Weltpolitik* and encouraged mass support for the policy. On the other, they exerted political pressure on the imperial government to pursue the policy to the full.

The German navy

Of greater importance to *Weltpolitik* was the decision to expand the German navy. The appointment of Tirpitz meant that there was a man prepared to do this, for he not only enjoyed the full confidence of Wilhelm II, but also recognised the importance of gaining parliamentary support and popular backing for such plans. In 1898, he established the Navy League in order to further these aims. The Navy League argued that naval expansion was a patriotic national symbol of Germany's new status in the world. With the backing of leading industrialists, it was able to gain a membership of over a million and this large-scale public support strengthened Tirpitz's position in his handling of the *Reichstag*. When he presented the Naval Bills of 1898 and 1900 they were both passed with substantial majorities, largely because they were supported by the Centre Party.

Navy League formed:
1898

First Naval Law
passed: 1898,
followed by the laws
of 1900, 1906, 1912

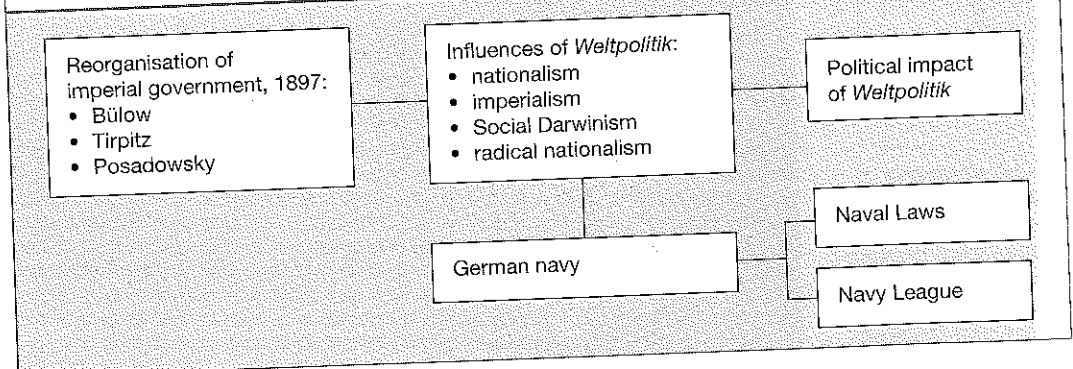
Key dates

The political impact of *Weltpolitik*

The introduction of *Weltpolitik* succeeded where Caprivi's 'new course' had run into difficulties because it achieved a greater acceptance from the various political parties. It successfully rallied both the middle and upper classes and their political representatives in the *Reichstag* behind the Kaiser and the government. The support of the Centre Party represented an important step forward, since it helped to secure an effective majority for the government in the *Reichstag*. *Weltpolitik* even won the support of many of the ordinary people by playing on their feelings of patriotism and loyalty to the crown. Finally, the policy closely coincided with the aspirations of the Kaiser, who convinced himself that *Weltpolitik* must be under his personal rule. However, in the coming years it was shown that *Weltpolitik* did not prove to be the complete cure for the problems of government.

Key question
Was *Weltpolitik*
politically successful?

Summary diagram: The advent of *Weltpolitik*



Key question

How successful was
Bülow in managing
the imperial
government?

Key date

Bülow appointed
Chancellor: 1900

3 | Bülow and the Problems of *Weltpolitik*

In 1900, Hohenlohe, tired of being ignored and not consulted on policy matters, resigned and Bülow replaced him. He was a very competent administrator and handled the *Reichstag* effectively. Significantly, his main interest was foreign policy and he enjoyed the trust of the Kaiser. He therefore hoped to reduce the conflicting interests on the domestic front by rallying support for the *Weltpolitik*. As he himself said in a private letter to Eulenburg:

I am putting the main emphasis on foreign policy ... Only a successful foreign policy can help to reconcile, pacify, rally, unite. Its preconditions are of course, caution, patience, tact, reflection.

Yet, despite Bülow's aspirations and skills, it was not always so easy to maintain support for the government in the *Reichstag*.

Social reform

Bülow did try to revive the 'new course' initiated by Caprivi by the inclusion of the socially minded Posadowsky as Interior Secretary. The aim was to expand the social welfare provision in order to pacify the working classes to the imperial state. As a result, new measures were introduced such as:

- an extension of accident insurance in 1900 (see page 6)
- a law making industrial courts compulsory in towns with a population above 20,000 people
- an extension of the prohibition of child labour.

Tariffs

Tariff policy had been an ongoing issue in Germany and in 1902 it revived again with renewed controversy. The landowning interest working with the Conservatives and the Agrarian League had long bitterly opposed Caprivi's commercial treaties (see page 34). They now demanded the imposition of higher tariffs to protect agriculture. In contrast, the Social Democrats and Left Liberals called for lower tariffs to reduce the price of bread for the benefit of the working classes. In the end the compromise Tariff Law of 1902 was comfortably passed which restored tariffs to pre-1892 levels with the combined support of the Centre, the National Liberals and the Free Conservatives. On one level, Bülow's compromise was endorsed by the *Reichstag* election result of 1903 where the Centre maintained its dominant position (see Table 2.1). Nevertheless, on another level, the election revealed that:

- The Social Democrats, who had opposed the tariffs, saw their popular vote go up significantly and their number of seats increased from 56 to 81.
- The Conservatives, who had demanded even higher tariffs, saw their vote narrowly decline.

Key dates

Budget

Weltpolitik generated its own problems too. The budget had run into debt as the mounting costs of maintaining the army, expanding the navy and running the empire took effect. If the 'glories' of *Weltpolitik* were to be continued then substantial tax increases had to be introduced. Bülow was astute enough to realise that this was likely to cause a political storm – and so it did. In 1905 he suggested a two-pronged attack on the deficit by proposing an increase in indirect taxes and an **inheritance tax**. The proposals came to nothing because first, the Centre and the Social Democrats voted down the indirect taxes that would have hit the working classes most severely; and secondly, the Conservatives and their allies weakened the inheritance tax proposals, so as to make them financially insignificant. The Reich treasury deficit continued to grow.

The 'Hottentot' election

Bülow's government was also being attacked for its policy in the colony of German South West Africa (modern Namibia). The local population was crushed in 1904–5 and subsequent revelations of awful brutality, corruption and incompetence in the administration of the colony were made public. The government's proposals of compensating the white settlers and of finding extra money for suppressing the rebels and for the new administration were not well received in the *Reichstag*. To Bülow's shock, not only the SPD, but also his normal ally, the Centre Party, voted against the government, leading to its defeat.

Bülow was determined to bring the unruly Centre Party to heel, so the *Reichstag* was dissolved. The government's election campaign was known as the '**Hottentot election**' as it played on the campaign in Africa, but was also anti-socialist, anti-Catholic and nationalistic.

The result was an encouraging one for Bülow, as the number of Social Democrat seats was halved and the parties of the right made some good gains (see Table 2.1, page 35). This enabled Bülow to bring together the Conservatives, Free Conservatives, National Liberals and Left Liberals in a **coalition** dubbed the 'Bülow bloc'. Posadowsky was replaced by the conservative bureaucrat, Bethmann, as Interior Secretary. Yet, Bülow's coalition was extremely fragile and his triumph was not to last long.

Conclusion

In the early years of the twentieth century, the German political system became increasingly sophisticated. New political forces were emerging in the country and yet imperial government showed only a limited ability to come to terms with these forces. Powerful interest groups, such as the trade unions and the Catholic Church wanted their wishes to be taken into account by their political representatives in parliament. Moreover, economic forces also exerted new pressures; the dilemma of government finance and tariff reform reveals clearly the limitations of implementing government policy. By 1908 it seemed as if Bülow's

Inheritance tax

The tax on the estate, or total value of the money and property, of a person who has died. Also known as estate tax and death duty.

'Hottentot election'

The name given to the *Reichstag* election of 1907, when the government's nationalist patriotic campaign played on the colonial war against the rebels in German South West Africa.

Coalition

A government made up of members from several parties.

Profile: Bernhard von Bülow 1849–1929

- 1849 – Born near Hamburg, the son of Bismarck's Foreign Minister
- 1870–1 – Served as a volunteer in the Prussian army during Franco-Prussian War
- 1873 – Studied law and entered the diplomatic service
- 1873–97 – Served as a diplomat in various embassies across Europe
- 1897–1900 – Appointed as Foreign Minister and initiated *Weltpolitik*
- 1900–9 – Chancellor of Germany
- 1906 – Made Prince of Bülow
- 1908 – *Daily Telegraph* affair
- 1909 – Forced to resign by the Kaiser
- 1914 – Appointed as special envoy in Rome in an unsuccessful attempt to prevent Italy joining the war against Germany
- 1915–29 – Retired from public life and died in Rome in 1929

Bülow was a scheming politician by nature who found that he was able to further his own position by pandering to the Emperor. He was also a skilled and effective administrator and dominated the German political scene for a decade. Nevertheless, in domestic policy, he had few new ideas and his control of the *Reichstag* became increasingly difficult, despite the creation of the Bülow bloc in 1907. His main interest was foreign policy and he enjoyed the trust of the Kaiser for developing the *Weltpolitik*. However, his muddled **diplomacy** was responsible for strengthening the ties between Britain, France and Russia which led to the Triple Entente (see page 59).

In 1909, he was forced to resign when he failed to give the Kaiser adequate support following Wilhelm's indiscreet interview with the *Daily Telegraph*. Later, as ambassador to Italy, he failed to prevent that country entering the First World War on the side of the Allies. After his retirement, he sought to redeem himself by writing an autobiography that revealed the political corruption and personal jealousies that existed within the German government.

Key term**Diplomacy**

The art and practice of negotiating between states with regard to issues of peace-making, trade, war and economics.

Key date

The *Daily Telegraph* affair: 1908

Key question

What is the significance of the *Daily Telegraph* affair?

The *Daily Telegraph* affair

In the winter of 1908–9 the political crisis came to a head, although in a somewhat bizarre fashion. The German public had already been treated to a moral scandal by the revelation that the Kaiser's close friend, Eulenburg, was at the centre of an extensive ring of homosexuals at court, when the *Daily Telegraph* affair broke.

In an interview with a journalist, the Kaiser expressed his wishes for closer relations with Britain. Yet, his comments

government, far from controlling events, was increasingly at the mercy of them.

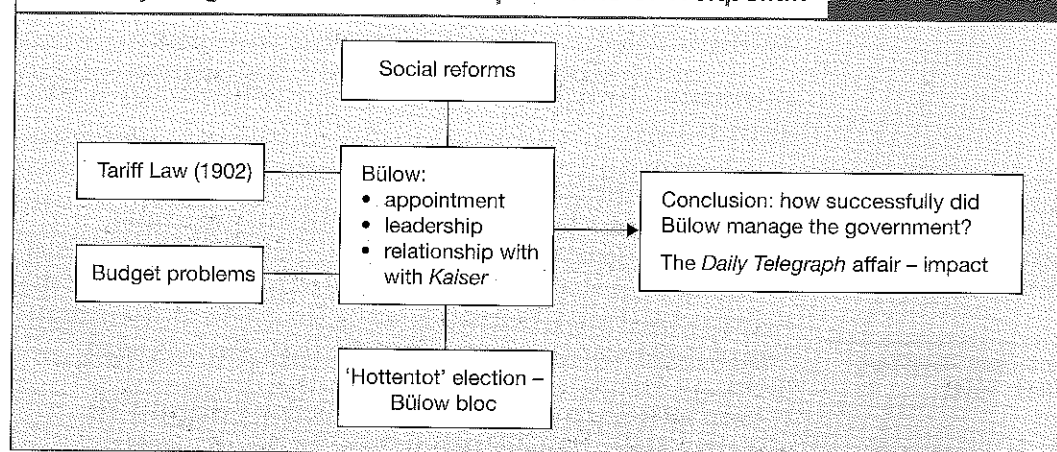
attracted much criticism for making such an important statement on foreign policy to the foreign press and there were demands in the *Reichstag* for constitutional limitations to be placed on the Kaiser. Bülow himself was in a difficult position, as he had actually cleared the article before publication, which made the situation all the more constitutionally delicate.

Its impact

In the end, caught between loyalty to his friend, the Kaiser, and the demands of the *Reichstag*, Bülow sided with the latter. He secured a promise from the Kaiser that, in future, the terms of the constitution would be respected. Thereafter, the crisis petered out and no constitutional changes followed. It seemed as if Bülow, nicknamed 'the eel', had once again slithered his way out of a tight corner. Yet, the Kaiser's trust in his Chancellor had been fatally weakened by these events and when Bülow's new budget proposals were rejected by the *Reichstag* in 1909, the Kaiser took the opportunity to secure the Chancellor's resignation.

The *Daily Telegraph* affair is an illuminating insight into the power politics of the Wilhelmine age. Bülow had survived for over a decade at the very centre of German politics by playing the part of the old-fashioned courtier with a sound grasp of how to satisfy all the vested interests. He retained the backing of the Kaiser through flattery and by turning situations to his advantage. He also gained a degree of broader political support through the nationalistic policy of *Weltpolitik*. However, his failure to stand by the Kaiser in the *Daily Telegraph* affair underlined how vulnerable the office of Chancellor was to the personal whims of the Kaiser. The Chancellor remained accountable to the Kaiser alone, not to the *Reichstag*. This was in spite of the fact that there was a growing belief that the Kaiser could no longer behave as an authoritarian monarch and had to conform to some constitutional changes. Yet now when the opportunity presented itself for constitutional reform, the *Reichstag* showed a marked reluctance to assert itself and its authority.

Summary diagram: Bülow and the problems of *Weltpolitik*



4 | Political Stalemate

German government was nominally in the hands of Chancellor Bethmann in the last few years of peace. However, powerful forces between 1909 and 1914 limited his capacity to direct affairs and he generally backed away from introducing major initiatives. It seemed as if the German government had reached political stalemate.

Key question
What was the significance of the 1912 *Reichstag* election result?

Key dates

Bethmann appointed Chancellor: 1909

Major socialist gains in *Reichstag* elections: 1912

Outbreak of the First World War: 1914

The *Reichstag*

With the collapse of the Bülow bloc, Bethmann's parliamentary base of support was narrow, as his conservative views meant that his natural allies came from the right-wing parties. Any attempt to broaden his support by appealing to the centre or left would have offended his conservative and right-wing supporters. In this situation Bethmann tried to avoid depending on any particular party, although this allowed other forces to exert their influence outside parliament.

The *Reichstag* elections of 1912 further added to the Chancellor's parliamentary difficulties, since there was a distinct shift to the left. Indeed, it was historically significant and the Social Democrats became the largest party in the country with 35 per cent of the vote (see Table 2.1, page 35). The Social Democrats and the Left Liberals won 110 and 42 seats, respectively, and the Conservative–Centre alliance could no longer dominate the *Reichstag*. However, this created a situation of virtual deadlock for Bethmann's government.

All these figures served to increase the fears of conservatives of a possible democratic and socialist revolution. The SPD would have been even stronger in the *Reichstag* if constituency boundaries had been revised to reflect growing urbanisation. Yet, although the SPD had become the largest party in the *Reichstag*, there were emerging two clear factions within it: the orthodox Marxists and the moderates (see page 26). It is important to note



A cartoon from 1912 which tries to challenge the fears of the middle classes who saw the stereotype of the socialist as a bloodthirsty assassin and revolutionary. 'A Sozi depicted by the enemies. What a "Sozi" (really) looks like.' (Sozi was a nick-name for a socialist.)

that the majority of SPD supporters were to be found in the latter group – and they were proud patriots concerned about Germany's diplomatic isolation from Russia, France and Britain.

Military spending

The problem of imperial finance remained the key stumbling-block and in 1912–13 it came to a head over defence expenditure. In the wake of the second Moroccan crisis (see page 63) the army and the navy both submitted plans involving major increases in expenditure. The idea of an inheritance tax was again proposed as the only possible means of raising the required money, but Bethmann feared a hostile political reaction and resorted to the stop-gap measure of taxing spirits. In early 1913 Moltke, the Chief of Staff, went even further and demanded a second Army Bill to increase the peacetime strength of the army by 20 per cent to 800,000 men in 1914 (see page 68).

Fortunately for Bethmann, the inheritance tax was accepted on this occasion. This was partly because the worsening international situation acted as a significant stimulus; but also, there were increasing vocal demands by the nationalist associations for a more vigorous defence of German interests. The confused state of German politics was further revealed by the Conservatives, who, while supporting the increased military expenditure, opposed the inheritance tax. By contrast, the Social Democrats, who were traditionally against military spending, supported it as the tax established a precedent of a property-based tax.

The Zabern affair

Just before the outbreak of war Germany was rocked by the Zabern affair, named after the town in Alsace which had been annexed from France by Germany in 1871 (see page 2). Friction between the French inhabitants and German soldiers led to a series of disturbances and, in November 1913, officers ordered the locals to clear the streets. Twenty-eight citizens were arrested and detained in the military barracks; in one incident an officer used his sabre to cut down a disabled cobbler. This led to widespread protests, well beyond Alsace, that the army officers had acted above the law and overridden the civilian authorities and the courts. In effect, it was felt that the army had infringed the liberties of citizens.

The army defended itself by claiming to be accountable to the Kaiser alone and Wilhelm condoned the action. In the *Reichstag*, Bethmann, unlike Bülow in 1908, stood by the army and the Kaiser, but the political opposition was intense and the Chancellor received a massive **vote of no confidence**. Yet, nothing really happened.

The Zabern affair crystallised the divisions in German politics and society. For Röhl (see page 29), the incident shows how, right up to 1914, the *Kaiserreich* was still dominated by the actions, decisions and personality of the Kaiser and his supporters. The very fact that Bethmann was able to continue as Chancellor, despite a major defeat in the *Reichstag*, is seen as proof enough of

Key question

What were the implications of the imperial government's financial problems?

Vote of no confidence

A motion put before a parliament by the opposition in the hope of defeating or weakening the government. In Britain, the passing of a vote of no confidence would lead to a general election.

Key question

What was the significance of the Zabern affair?

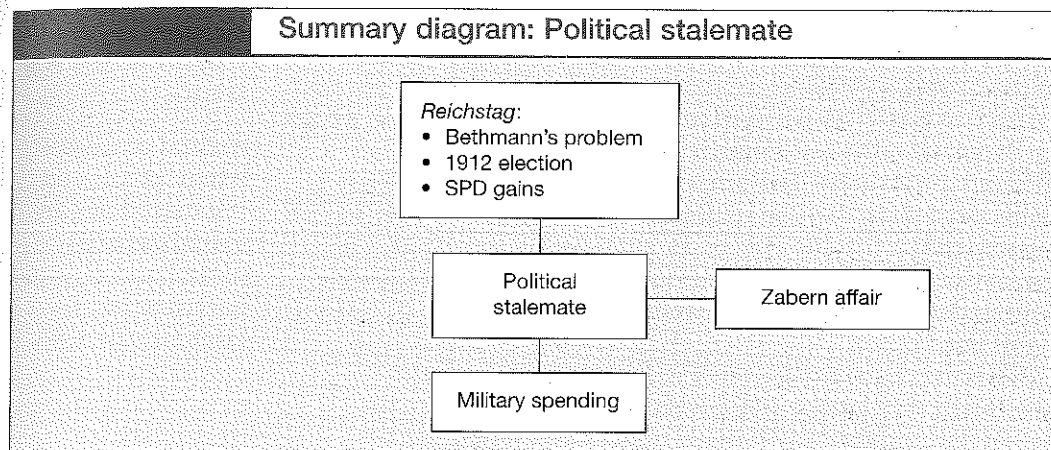
Zabern affair: 1913

Key term

Key date

how the Kaiser still ultimately controlled policy and political decision-making. However, for the structuralists, Wilhelm II was never more than a 'shadow Kaiser'. He was considered a front for the élites who were determined to manipulate him, the system and government policy in order to preserve their own privileged positions. By this interpretation, the Zabern affair is seen as a classic example of how the army was able to preserve its own authority and status. Nevertheless, the huge public outcry against the army's action with the Kaiser's support also gave strong evidence that popular movements were on the increase. Pressures were 'bubbling up' to bring about genuine democratic and social change.

Summary diagram: Political stalemate



5 | The Key Debate

The *Kaiserreich* was, therefore, both socially and politically very complicated. It was just as complex as the Kaiser's own eccentric personality. As the historian P. Kennedy has written: 'the Kaiser both reflected and inter-meshed [was involved in] the country's broader problems'. So this leaves the question:

Was Wilhelmine Germany an entrenched authoritarian state?

It is a demanding task for almost all students seeking a conclusion and it is likely to be frustrating for those who crave certainty.

It is impossible to cast aside Kaiser Wilhelm II entirely. It has been suggested that Wilhelm II came to symbolise the inconsistencies of the *Kaiserreich*. On the one hand, he was a defender of traditional privileges of the Prussian monarchy. On the other, he was an enthusiast for technology, new industries and a world role for Germany. From 1890 to 1914, his personal influence enabled him to set the tenor of government policy. Between 1897 and 1908 his influence was most marked. This represented the high point of the Kaiser's personal rule and it coincided exactly with the years of supremacy of Bülow, who

recognised that his own position depended on flattery and the promotion of the Kaiser's personal views.

However, the *Kaiserreich* was not an absolute monarchy, like Russian Tsarism, nor a dictatorship like the **Third Reich**. The Kaiser and the imperial government had to work within the constitutional framework created in 1871. German citizens enjoyed certain civil liberties as a *Rechtsstaat*: the freedom of expression, of press, and of assembly. All men over 25 had the right of universal suffrage, which gave Germany a broader franchise than Britain until 1918. The *Reichstag* could not be ignored as it had the power to endorse or reject legislation initiated by the imperial government, including finance bills. Indeed, as Germany developed more into a modern industrial society, the amount of legislation discussed in the *Reichstag* increased significantly. It must not be forgotten that the turn-out of the *Reichstag* elections increased substantially from 50 per cent in 1871 to nearly 85 per cent in 1912. Clearly the German people no longer saw it as a meaningless institution, but one of increasing relevance. The tremendous growth of the SPD was so politically telling that the reintroduction of repressive laws was no longer really a feasible option. In many senses, pre-1914, the country of Germany was a developed, sophisticated and highly educated society. It would be easier to explain the rise of Nazism if this was not so.

Nevertheless, although there is evidence of Germany potentially developing into a parliamentary democracy, the monarchical system was strongly upheld and supported by powerful forces, especially the Prussian élites. This was recognised by Bülow, who generally developed policies to protect their interests, unlike Caprivi, who had paid the price of alienating them in the early 1890s.

First, the constitution was fundamentally weakened in several key ways:

- The Kaiser retained the power to appoint the Chancellor and the government ministers; the Chancellor therefore was not obliged to be accountable to the *Reichstag* (even after Bethmann's massive vote of no confidence in 1913).
- The **federal structure** was obviously unfair and undemocratic; Prussia covered two-thirds of Germany and it still had the three-class electoral system (see page 5).
- Prussia continued to block any change in the *Bundesrat* (see pages 4–5).

Secondly, there was a lack of will on the part of the political parties to take responsibility for bringing about changes. This was for three reasons:

- All the parties distanced themselves from the Social Democrats. The Conservatives saw them as anathema, but even the more moderate middle-class parties were scared of their growing influence and they refused to co-operate actively as they feared constitutional reform might lead to radical reforms.

Third Reich

Third Empire: the Nazi dictatorship 1933–45. It was seen as the successor to the Holy Roman Empire and Imperial Germany 1871–1918.

Rechtsstaat

A state under a rule of laws.

Federal structure

Where power and responsibilities are shared between central and regional governments, for example, the USA.

Third Reich
 and Empire: the
 dictatorship
 1933–45. It was
 as the
 successor to the
 Roman
 Empire and
 Imperial Germany
 1918.

Rechtsstaat
 under a rule

structure
 power and
 abilities are
 between
 and regional
 governments, for
 the USA.

Key terms

- There were a lot of parties and each one tended to act more like an interest group rather than acting for the common good of government.
- The prestige and status of the Kaiser were still deeply ingrained in the minds of many *Reichstag* deputies. They actively supported the patriotic and expansionist policy of *Weltpolitik*.

Therefore, the balance of power still rested with the forces of conservatism, although their right to govern was under threat from forces of change. The conflict between these two groups was the source of great political tension and frustration. So, although in 1914 Imperial Germany was not ungovernable, partly because of its economic well-being and partly because there was still general respect for the monarchy, it had reached a situation of political stalemate. This made for weak and confused government in the hands of an entrenched authoritarian regime in 1914, and fundamental change did not seem imminent. It was only to collapse after four years of war and defeat.

Some key books in the debate

V. Berghahn *Imperial Germany, 1871–1914* (New York, 2005).

D. Blackbourn and G. Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History* (Oxford, 1984).

David Blackbourn, *The Long Nineteenth Century* (Fontana, 1997).

P. Kennedy, *The Rise of Anglo-German Antagonism* (Allen & Unwin, 1982).

Annika Mombauer, *New Research on Wilhelm II's Role in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge, 2003).

J. Retallack, *Germany in the Age of Kaiser Wilhelm II* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1996).

J.C.G. Röhl, *The Kaiser and his Court* (Cambridge, 1994).

H.-U. Wehler, *The German Empire* (Berg, 1985).

Summary diagram: Was Wilhelmine Germany an entrenched authoritarian state?

