

Germany Under William II, 1890–1914

It is possible to make sense of this confusing period in Germany's history by looking carefully at four major issues. After a brief introduction, I will take these in turn, with the intention of giving you clear pointers to the important debates. The issues are:

- (1) Who were the policy makers?
- (2) What impact did *Weltpolitik* have on Germany?
- (3) How serious were the domestic problems facing the government?
- (4) Did Germany plan to go to war after 1912?

Introduction

In this period Germany went through a major social and economic change. In population the Empire grew from 49 million in 1890 to 65 million by 1914, with a major migration in population from the countryside to towns. More importantly, Germany experienced considerable economic growth after 1896. By 1914 Germany had surpassed Britain as Europe's major industrial power.

These social and economic changes paralleled the growth in size and importance of the industrial working class and the industrial middle class (factory owners and merchants). However, Germany's political system was dominated by representatives of the landowning classes, in particular those who owned large estates in the eastern part of Prussia (the *Junkers*). These developments created serious problems for Germany's political leaders.

Who were the policy makers?

One of the problems in answering this question is the fact that, after 1890, Germany did not possess a Chancellor of the stature of Bismarck to produce and implement policy. Although Von Bulow (Chancellor 1900 to 1909) and Bethman Hollweg (Chancellor 1909 to 1917) played a role in policy formation, they cannot be regarded as the major influences on German foreign and domestic policy in the mould of Bismarck.

For A-level candidates, Wilhelmine Germany is often seen as a difficult subject. Germany was undergoing a major social and economic transition. Historians have been unable to agree on who formulated government policy. Here Derrick Murphy offers help and guidance through the period, by focusing on four key issues.

Under the German Constitution, the individual with the most political power was the German Emperor. He was commander-in-chief of the armed forces and had the power to hire and fire government ministers, including the Chancellor. According to the historian J.G. Rohl, it was Kaiser William II who was the most important policy maker in this period. In fact, the period 1890 to 1914 has been regarded as 'the personal rule' of William II. Clearly, the decision to follow *Weltpolitik* in foreign affairs after 1896–7, and its domestic equivalent, *Sammlungspolitik*, were policies enthusiastically supported by William. Perhaps the most important meeting in this period, the War Cabinet meeting of 8 December 1912, was called and chaired by the Kaiser. It is clear that William II wielded much more political power than his two predecessors,

William I (1871–88) and Frederick III (1888).

However, other historians have seen different influences on policy. The German historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler and the 'Bielefeld' group of historians put forward the view that powerful pressure groups, rather than the Kaiser, played a major role in deciding policy. Industrialists, through the Navy League, and landowners, through the Agrarian League, together with nationalists, through organisations such as the Pan-German League, all lobbied the government for action.

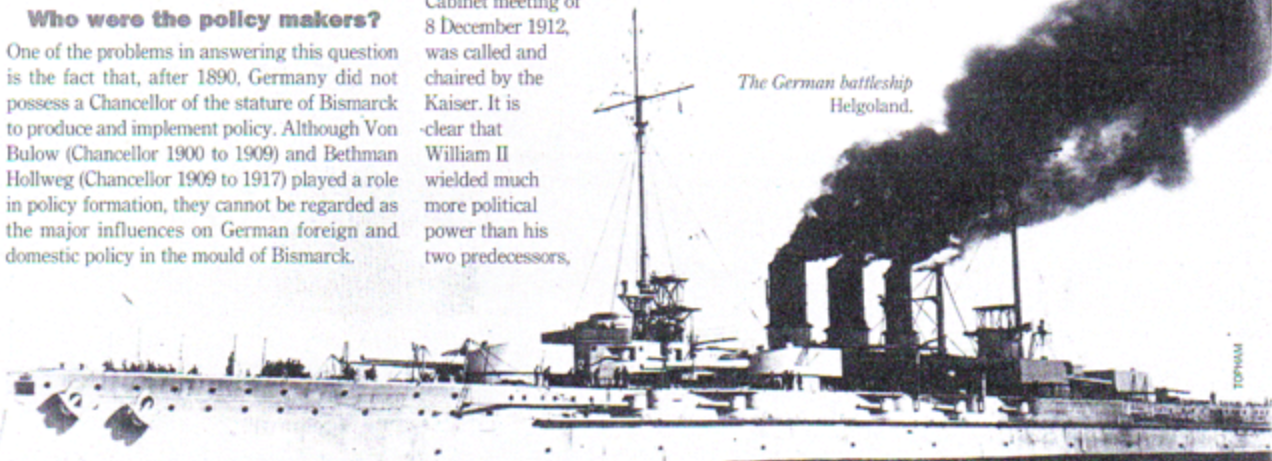
Weltpolitik, 1896–7 to 1914

Weltpolitik was the decision to make Germany the centre of a major empire through the acquisition of substantial colonial territories. The tool for the achievement of this goal was the construction of a large navy which would rival the greatest navy of the day — the Royal Navy.

Why did Germany embark on *Weltpolitik*?

- Many nationalists saw the acquisition of a large empire as the natural destiny of Germany. In the middle of the century Prussia had united most German states into the German Empire. Now it seemed natural for Germany to acquire a large empire, just like Britain, France and Russia.
- Associated with this was the fear of missing out on acquiring colonies. The 'scramble for Africa' had been going on since 1880; states as small as Belgium were acquiring colonies.

The German battleship Helgoland.



(c) After 1896 Germany went through its 'second industrial revolution'. The government, which was dominated by landowners, believed that *Weltpolitik* would win the support of the growing industrial middle class. The decision to build a large navy was, in part, due to pressure from the Navy League, which had strong support from industrialists.

(d) The government was also swayed by the publication of *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*, written by an American, Alfred Mahan. According to Mahan, colonial empires rose and declined throughout history. The most important reason for the rise in colonial empires was sea power. Therefore, if Germany wished to acquire a large empire, a powerful navy was essential.

What did *Weltpolitik* achieve?

(a) In the period 1898–1912, the German parliament (the *Reichstag*) introduced a number of measures (1898, 1900, 1906 and 1912) which made the German navy the



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Who was in charge? Above: Kaiser Wilhelm II. Left: Von Bulow, Chancellor 1900–1909. Above right: Bethmann Hollweg, Chancellor 1909–1917.

Domestic problems, 1890–1914

The two biggest problems facing the German government were:

- Winning support for a government dominated by Protestant landowners from Catholics and the industrial middle class.
 - Preventing the growth of the Social Democratic party (SPD) amongst the industrial working class. This party was committed to the complete social, economic and political transformation of German society, involving the redistribution of wealth away from the rich, and the public ownership of land and property.
- To meet these twin problems, the German government intended that *Weltpolitik* should unite all political groupings in Germany (except the SPD) behind it. This policy was termed *Sammlungspolitik* (policy of bringing together). Up to 1909 enthusiasm for *Weltpolitik* did win support for the government from most political parties. However, in that year the government faced a major financial crisis over naval building. It could either raise money through increasing taxes on the rich — or through the sales tax. By opting for an increase in the sales

Great Powers. For instance, Britain, whose relationships with France and Russia had been poor for decades, finally made agreements: with France in the Entente Cordiale of 1904 and with Russia in the Entente of 1907. By 1909 the former Chief of Staff of the German army, von Schlieffen, was stating that Germany had become encircled by hostile powers.



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tax, the government lost the support of the Catholic Centre party and the Liberals. In the *Reichstag* elections of January 1912 the SPD gained 112 seats, making it the largest party. Other anti-government parties also did well, such as the Left Liberals. Parties which supported the government all fared badly.

Did Germany plan to go to war after 1912?

By the time the Kaiser called the War Cabinet meeting of 8 December 1912, the future of the government looked bleak. After 15 years *Weltpolitik* had failed to deliver a large empire. Instead, Germany now felt encircled by hostile Great Powers. The government was losing support in the *Reichstag* and the SPD had grown to become the largest party.

A successful European war, which would win Germany control of the continent (a policy termed *Mittleuropa*), could form an important launch pad for the creation of the large empire Germany wanted. A successful war would also allow the government to suppress the SPD. Although controversy still surrounds the 8 December meeting, it seems that German policy makers were willing, at the very least, to take a calculated risk of launching a war to solve their foreign and domestic problems.

Further reading

- Abrams, L. (1995) *Bismarck and the German Empire, 1871–1918*, Routledge (Lancaster Pamphlets).
 Layton, G. (1995) *From Bismarck to Hitler: Germany, 1890–1933*, Hodder & Stoughton.
 Porter, I. and Armour, I. D. (1991) *Imperial Germany, 1890–1918*, Longman.

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