

## PASS NOTES

# The Second Reich (1871-1918)

### What exactly was the Second Reich?

This is the term used for the united Germany of 1871-1918, also known as the Kaiserreich. The First Reich was the medieval Holy Roman Empire, especially under the Ottonian and Hohenstaufen dynasties. The Third Reich, of course, was Hitler's, from 1933-1945.

### How democratic was it?

Despite concessions to the lesser states, such as Bavaria and Saxony, Germany after 1871 was dominated by Prussia, the largest state, both in area and population. The German emperor was always the king of Prussia. The states had their own armies but all came under Prussian control in wartime.

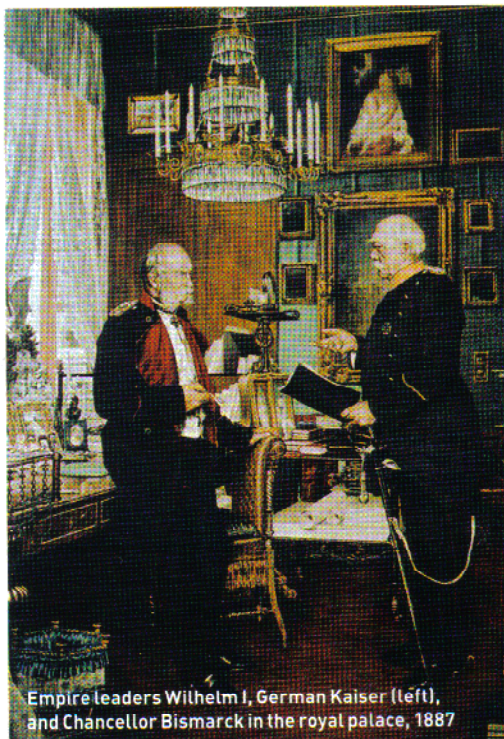
Germany was not a parliamentary democracy on British lines. The monarchy was very powerful. The emperor controlled foreign policy and the forces; he could declare war and peace. The imperial chancellor was appointed by the emperor. The chancellor was not directly answerable to the Reichstag, or parliament, which had some say over the budget and other areas. There was widespread suffrage, though this was more limited in Prussia than in the other states.

### How did Germany develop after 1871?

Germany's industrial revolution got under way in the 1880s, and had soon begun a transformation of German society. The speed of industrialisation took everyone by surprise. By 1900 Germany was out-producing Britain in coal and steel production, and her electrical and chemical industries were the most advanced in Europe.

### What do we mean by Germany's special path?

Some historians have claimed Germany followed a special path



Empire leaders Wilhelm I, German Kaiser (left), and Chancellor Bismarck in the royal palace, 1887

(Sonderweg), which made her different from comparable European powers. This view was particularly popular in the 1970s, when many accepted that Germany carried the major responsibility for war in 1914 and 1939. These historians sought to explain why Germany seemed more aggressive and unstable than her neighbours. They argued that Germany failed to adapt political institutions to the demands of a modern industrial society, in particular to the emergence of a large, politically-literate working class. The resultant tension destabilised the regime and ultimately led to the decision to go to war in 1914.

More recently this theory has come under attack. Looking at July 1914, German historian Golo Mann argued forcefully that Germany "was not the only beast in the jungle". Work by British historians such as David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley suggests that Germany's path was not fundamentally different from other European states, and that German uniqueness has been exaggerated [The Peculiarities of German History, Oxford 1984].

### What was German policy within Europe?

German policy aimed initially at keeping France isolated. Chancellor Bismarck sought alliances with the other conservative powers, Austria-Hungary and Russia. After his fall from power in 1890 this was not maintained. The alliance with Russia was allowed to lapse. Germany began to look for overseas colonies, seeking her "place in the sun". Growing tension with Great Britain was symbolised in the 1898 Navy Law which initiated the building of Germany's High Seas Fleet. This provoked a naval arms race, intensified after 1905 with British construction of the first dreadnought. By 1907 Germany was

effectively surrounded by a group of potentially hostile powers – the Triple Entente of Great Britain, France and Russia – which, in 1914, was strong enough to withstand what was perceived as a German attempt to dominate the Continent.

### Why did the Reich fall?

Unexpected military defeat in 1918 triggered the collapse of the Second Reich. German morale had been undermined by the British naval blockade and the entry of the United States into the war in 1917. The last great German offensive on the Western Front, in March 1918, could not sustain its early successes; by the summer, the German army was forced into retreat. The final collapse, in November, saw widespread military and naval mutiny – some of it undoubtedly influenced by the Bolshevik revolution in Russia – which culminated in the abdication of Wilhelm II and the establishment of a republic: the war ended two days later.

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## KEY DATES

### The rise and fall of the German Empire

#### 1871 A new empire proclaimed

The German Empire is proclaimed after victory in the Franco-Prussian War. Wilhelm I becomes emperor.



Emperor Wilhelm II

#### 1888 The emperor dies

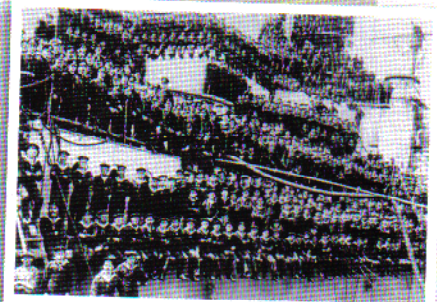
Death of Wilhelm I and then his successor, Friedrich III. Wilhelm II becomes emperor.

#### 1890 Fall of Bismarck

Bismarck is removed from power; Wilhelm II takes increasingly personal – and erratic – control of foreign and domestic policy.

#### 1898 Naval arms race

Navy Law establishes the German High Seas Fleet, from then on a permanent source of dispute with Great Britain.



SMS König, built in 1914, and some of the German High Seas navy c 1916

#### 1912 Tension mounts

The Social Democratic Party (SPD) becomes the largest party in the Reichstag against a background of growing international tension.

#### 1914 War is declared

Outbreak of First World War; many think this engineered by Germany, to assert European domination and resolve domestic difficulties.

#### 1918 Military in retreat

Military successes in March 1918 are not sustained. By autumn, the German army is in full retreat. Widespread revolutionary uprisings across Germany lead to the abdication of Wilhelm II and the proclamation of a republic (9 November).