

**Twentieth-Century Germany:  
From Bismarck to Brandt**

*By the same author*

**THE GERMAN REVOLUTION, 1918–19** (Historical Association pamphlet)

**THE GERMAN REVOLUTION OF 1918** (Cambridge University Press)

Twentieth-Century Germany:  
From Bismarck to Brandt

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*To my Mother  
in gratitude*

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# Preface

The eight decades of German history which form the subject of this book have seen more dramatic events, more drastic changes and more destructive violence than any comparable period in the history of another nation. Germany has been a political laboratory, a seed-bed of extremism, a physical and ideological battleground, the most formidable military power and the most heavily defeated nation of modern times. Culture, economics and social life have all been moulded by these pressures. In 1960 an American historian, reviewing German history in the previous half century, identified five images: the prosperous and on the whole admired Empire of William II; the militarist, expansionist Germany of the First World War; the troubled, sympathy-evoking Republic of Weimar; the aggressive, genocidal Nazi Reich; and the post-war democracy of Bonn, whose acknowledged virtues could not quite obliterate the shadows of the recent past. In the 1970s the range of images is further extended. The Federal Republic of Brandt and Heinemann differs in many ways from that of Adenauer and Heuss, while despite its imported Communist trappings the East German Republic or D.D.R. is yet another manifestation of the German *Wesen*. Events since 1969 have placed the story in a new perspective, and provide a vantage point from which to reconsider the whole post-Bismarckian epoch.

A theme which has occupied some historians lately is the continuity of German history, which is often discernible, despite the transformations, within the period 1870–1945, even between 1848 and 1949. More obvious is the parallel between the two world wars, and the unity of that epoch (1914–45) in which the inter-war years were little more than an extended and uneasy truce. It is not hard to see the ‘master race’ of the Second World War as the successors of the Pan-Germans of the First, while Ludendorff anticipates Hitler, both in his territorial ambitions and in his conception of total war. A ‘continuity of errors’ has been perceived in German policy running from the imperial government before and during the First World War to the Third Reich. In both wars the Germans overestimated their own strength and underestimated that of the hostile coalition. In particular, they seriously

underrated the military capability of the United States. The defeat of 1918 was never fully acknowledged. In both wars moral and political assets were sacrificed for short-term military advantage. German territorial ambitions coincided to some extent in the two struggles, although Hitler went far beyond the dreams of Bethmann Hollweg. Yet some errors were not repeated. Hitler managed to avoid the more obvious mistakes of his predecessors. He deliberately forbore from provoking England by a world and big navy policy such as had been the Kaiser's undoing, and, by signing the Nazi-Soviet Pact, he ensured that Germany was not, as in 1914, 'encircled'. What even Hitler could not eliminate was the challenge to the West implicit in his claim to dominate Eastern as well as Central Europe. Certainly his preoccupation with continental rather than global aims gave the Second World War a different emphasis from the First, and for Hitler, whatever his eventual overseas demands might have been, hostilities with the western powers were an unwanted by-product of his desire for *Lebensraum*. Yet since Britain was the guarantor of the European balance of power as well as of the colonial *status quo*, Anglo-German conflict remained a basic issue in both wars, with the United States playing first a supporting and ultimately a decisive role. Nevertheless the tendency of some contemporary historians to minimise the difference between the 1914 and 1939 situations obfuscates rather than clarifies. There was no element of preventive war in 1939 as there had been twenty-five years earlier. Given the existence of some common ground between Bethmann Hollweg and Hitler, the two men differed fundamentally in objectives and methods, above all in their mental and moral attitudes. And although, taking the analogy a stage further, resemblances can be found between the policy of Stresemann after the First World War and that of Adenauer after the Second, yet when we consider the post-1945 period it is the differences between that and its predecessors which impress. The year 1945 marked a break in German history of a unique kind. The revolution of 1789 transformed France, but was followed by the Napoleonic counter-revolution. The Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917 inaugurated a new era in Russian and world history, but did not divide Russia down the middle. Whatever pattern there was in German history before 1945 hardly survived the *Götterdämmerung* of the Third Reich, especially as the break coincided with a basic shift in the global balance of power which Germany itself had helped to bring about.

Another way of looking at German history of the last hundred years is to see it as an unsuccessful attempt to find a synthesis between *Macht* (power, force) and *Geist* (mind and spirit). In one sense the failure to reconcile the two had bedevilled German history for centuries, but

since 1871 it has been acute. Bismarck's Reich gave obvious priority to power: the Weimar Republic, culturally so rich, perished from weakness. Hitler's Germany represented the adulation and abuse of power to a monstrous degree. Whether the Federal Republic, despite being a product of defeat and the cold war, will find the elusive balance between the two extremes is something on which only an interim judgement can be offered, but the signs indicate that a compromise is at last being achieved. The keynote of West German politics in the 1970s is a sober realism of a kind rare in the century's earlier decades.

In January 1971 West Germans remembered – rather than celebrated – the centenary of Bismarck's refoundation of the German Empire. The tone was subdued, there was little enthusiasm or self-congratulation. A hundred years after Bismarck's achievement it still looked impressive, but its disastrous consequences inevitably raised the question whether it had not after all been a tragic mistake. Assumptions taken for granted in earlier decades were critically scrutinised. Indeed the whole Bismarckian contribution has been re-examined in the light of bitter experience: the master of *Realpolitik* has himself been reassessed with a new realism, as part of the general demythologisation characteristic of recent German historiography. No doubt the unification of Germany, incomplete though it was in 1871, brought many benefits. It lay in the logic of history and was long overdue. The economic unification under Prussia which preceded it was certainly advantageous. But the methods used to unify Germany, and the form it took, seem as questionable now as they were to a few far-sighted people at the time. A change of some kind was no doubt inevitable in the middle of the nineteenth century. It is hardly conceivable that the Confederation of 1815, in which an ambitious Prussia took second place to a dynastic and ethnically divided Austria, could have lasted indefinitely. But that a less one-sided and more permanent solution than Bismarck's could have been found, such as the federated Central Europe advocated at the time by some, must appear the greatest missed opportunity of modern German history. Even so a doubt remains whether a Germany peacefully united under liberal auspices could have avoided a military collision with the other major countries, given the temper of German nationalism, the skill and resources at its disposal, and the explosive nature of great power rivalry in that epoch. But that is speculation.

Whether the still divided portions of the Bismarckian Reich will ever reunite is also speculative. In some quarters people are already sceptical, viewing the seventy-five years of unity as an 'episode' unlikely to be repeated. A hundred years ago the question of German unity was primarily one for the Germans themselves, even if other interested powers had to be conciliated or 'compensated' in one way or another.

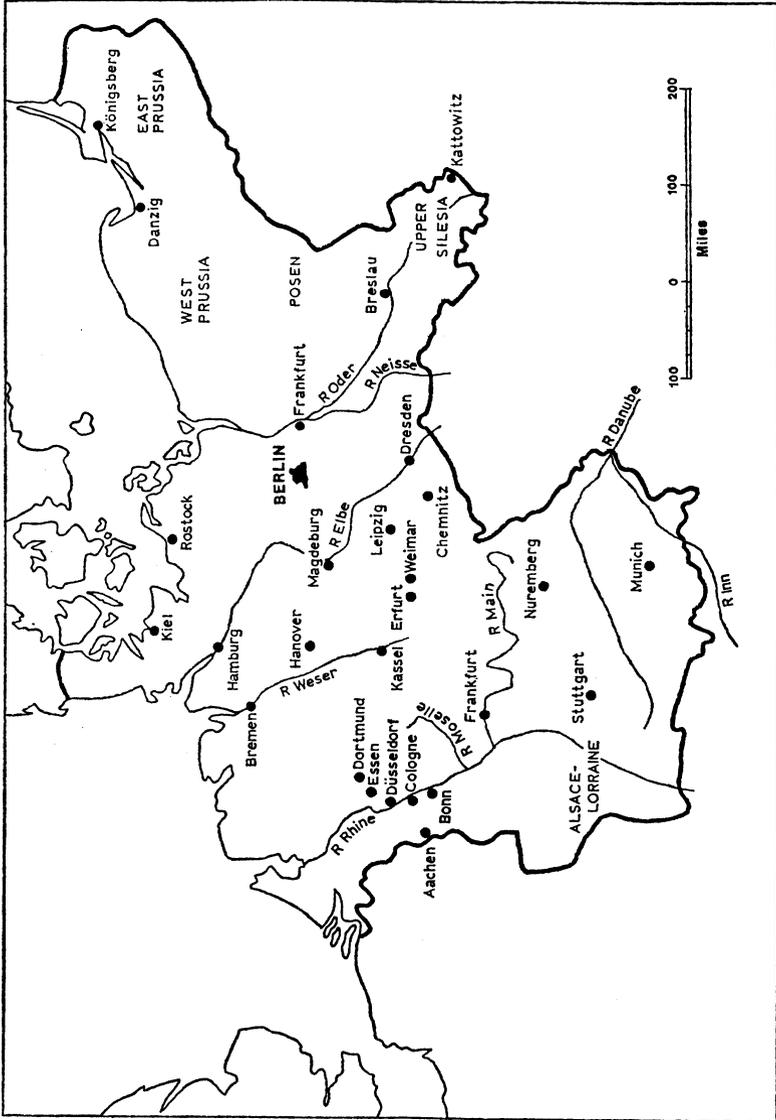
Today the German question cannot be isolated. Both German states are deeply enmeshed in the structures of alliance and the balance of security headed by the two super-powers, who between them divide the German inheritance. Since virtually no one now believes that unification, if it comes, will be attained through strength, power has lost much of its appeal: hence, incidentally, the main reason for the success of liberalism under Bonn compared with its failure under Weimar. For it is in foreign policy that the contrast between Germany at almost any time between 1890 and 1945 and the Germany of today is most marked. Chancellor Bülow was applauded when in 1900 he declared that in the coming century his country would be either the hammer or the anvil of world politics. His later successor, Brandt, had the support of the great majority of his compatriots in his determination that it should be neither. All that can be said at present is that although German nationalism may be a spent force, the energies released by unification are still at work in various fields. The recovery of the German people, moral as well as economic, from a catastrophe which might have been fatal to many nations, deserves more recognition than it often receives. Few who knew Germany in 1945 could have expected that within a quarter of a century its people would have gone so far to redeem themselves from a terrible legacy. Whatever fate has in store for the Federal Republic and the D.D.R., there is reason here for satisfaction, even for pride.

I should like to thank Mr Anthony Nicholls of St Antony's College, Oxford, Dr John Röhl of the University of Sussex, Mr Evan Edwards of University College, Cardiff, and Dr Eleanor Breuning of University College, Swansea, who at one time or another read all or part of the typescript and saved me from numerous errors. I owe much to their helpful advice, as I do to that of the late S. H. Steinberg, who saw and commented on the first chapters. I am grateful to the staffs of the Wiener Library, London and of the library at St David's University College, Lampeter, for helpfulness at all times; to Mrs I. Crowdy, Mrs G. Evans and Mrs R. Shaw for typing the script, often more than once; to the Pantyfedwen Fund Committee, Lampeter, for a grant towards expenses; to the German Embassy, London, for a loan of photographs; and to my publishers for their encouragement, consideration and assistance, including the drawing of maps. I hope that the many others who have kindly aided me in one way or another will accept this general acknowledgement of my appreciation. Last, but most of all, I thank my wife for her patience, advice and invaluable help, especially in reading the proofs and in making the index.

A. J. R.

# List of Abbreviations

<i>A.H.R.</i>	<i>American Historical Review</i>
<i>H.J.</i>	<i>Historical Journal</i>
<i>H.Z.</i>	<i>Historische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>J.C.H.</i>	<i>Journal of Contemporary History</i>
<i>J.M.H.</i>	<i>Journal of Modern History</i>
<i>P. &amp; P.</i>	<i>Past and Present</i>
<i>V.J.Z.G.</i>	<i>Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte</i>
<i>B.D.</i>	<i>British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898–1914</i>
<i>G.P.</i>	<i>Die Grosse Politik der Europäischen Kabinette, 1871–1914</i>
<i>D.B.F.P.</i>	<i>Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919–1939</i>
<i>D.G.F.P.</i>	<i>Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918–1945</i>



Map 1 Imperial Germany in 1890