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The German Empire and its Historians

Views of the Empire before 1960

The historiography of the German Empire is as old as the *Kaiserreich* itself. Indeed, one could argue that it is older still, since an extensive historical literature on the subject of Germany's territorial and political development pre-dated the founding of the Empire by several decades, and itself made a significant contribution to the formation of a German nation-state.¹ Of particular importance in this regard was the work of a small group of mid-nineteenth century liberal historians known as the Borussian or Prussian School, which began to develop the view that it was Prussia's historical mission to unite the German states – although without Austrian territory – under the political and military leadership of the Hohenzollern monarchy. Imbued with a belief in progress and a conviction that future developments could be discerned from careful study of the past, Borussian historians looked back through the decades to trace the rise of Prussia to its position of latent hegemony over the German lands. Initially their views were hotly contested, not least by Catholic historians, but the events of 1866–71 seemed to confirm the validity of their approach: “they enjoyed the celebrity that comes from being on the winning side,” as Robert Southard puts it.²

1 For a detailed analysis of the issues raised in this chapter see S. Berger, *The Search for Normality. National Identity and Historical Consciousness in Germany since 1800* (Providence and Oxford, 1997); and G. G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History. The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middletown, 1968).

2 R. Southard, *Droysen and the Prussian School of History* (Lexington, 1995), p. 1.

The works of Johann Gustav Droysen (1808–86), whose *History of Prussian Politics*, published in 16 volumes between 1855 and 1886, first established the School, Max Duncker (1811–86), Heinrich von Sybel (1817–95), and Heinrich von Treitschke (1834–96) are the best-known examples of the Borussian approach. The founding of the German Empire represented the fulfillment of a long-cherished dream for these men, who were unable to prevent a strong streak of triumphalism from permeating the pages of their post-unification publications. Indeed for them, scholarship and partisanship were inseparable. Works such as Treitschke's *History of Germany in the Nineteenth Century* (1874–94), or Sybel's *Foundation of the German Empire* (1889–94), effectively became the official historiography of Imperial Germany and their influence continued to be felt well into the twentieth century. There was, of course, nothing peculiarly German about historians acting as nation-builders – it happened right across Europe in the nineteenth century, proceeding hand-in-hand with the discipline's professionalization³ – but there were good reasons why historians in Germany should continue to identify so closely with their state long after 1871. For a start, German university professors were (and indeed still are) civil servants, so had “little incentive to bite the hand that fed them,” as Stefan Berger puts it.⁴ There was also the legacy of the early nineteenth-century German intellectual tradition that saw language and cultural identity as central to the *Volksgeist* or national spirit, and therefore placed philologists and historians in a privileged position, effectively guarding an ethnic Holy Grail. As a result, the historical profession – often tellingly referred to as a guild or fraternity (*Zunft*) – developed in Germany rather like a Masonic order, which not only closed ranks against outsiders but sought to speak with one voice when important “national” matters were at stake.

For a new generation of historians that emerged in the years around 1890, the Empire had already become part of everyday reality. Although no less patriotic than the Borussians, these historians attempted to distance themselves from their teachers. Self-consciously adopting the “scientific” method and “objective” approach of the famous Prussian historian Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), the historians of the so-called Ranke Renaissance – above all Max Lenz (1850–1932) and Erich Marcks (1861–1938)⁵ – upheld the traditions of German *Historismus*

3 See S. Berger, M. Donovan, and K. Passmore, eds., *Writing National Histories. Western Europe Since 1800* (London, 1999).

4 S. Berger, *The Search for Normality*, p. 8.

5 See H.-H. Krill, *Die Ranke-Renaissance. Max Lenz und Erich Marcks* (Berlin, 1962). In a recent biography Jens Nordalm has questioned whether Marcks should be regarded as a Neo-Rankean, although his arguments are not entirely convincing. See J. Nordalm, *Historismus und moderne Welt. Erich Marcks (1861–1938) in der deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft* (Berlin, 2003).

or “historism,”⁶ which included, among other things, attempting to understand each historical period in its own terms, since all eras were (in Ranke’s famous formulation) equally close or “immediate” to God. In practice this meant an inherent acceptance of the political status quo, an antipathy towards comparative history, and a rejection of efforts to judge historical individuals or institutions on the basis of external criteria. The Neo-Rankeans produced a host of narrative-based studies of the Reformation, the Prussian reform era of the early nineteenth century, and the diplomatic history of the major European states, with detailed attention paid to politics, philosophy, and religion, but with little consideration of social or economic forces. They also penned numerous biographies of “great men,” such as Martin Luther, Frederick the Great, Napoleon, Kaiser Wilhelm I, and, of course, Otto von Bismarck.

In a 1901 essay on “Bismarck and Ranke,” Lenz attempted to bring the values of his two seemingly very different heroes – the political man of action and the contemplative historian – into some kind of harmony, a synthesis of power (*Macht*) and spirit (*Geist*). The thing that linked the two men, Lenz argued, was their common belief in the primacy of a state’s foreign policy.⁷ Ranke’s conviction that the internal structure of a state is conditioned by its external relations, and that history’s first concern should, therefore, be foreign policy and the balance of power between states, was updated by Lenz and Marcks to include a global dimension. They, like the sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) and many other middle-class contemporaries, believed that the founding of the *Kaiserreich* would come to mean little if it was not followed up by further expansion around the world. As a result, German historians in the 1900s saw themselves as “heralds of policy,” helping to popularize and justify a host of nationalist and colonial causes, such as the Navy League and even – in the case of Dietrich Schäfer (1845–1929) – the militant demagoguery of the Pan-German League.

Despite the social and political homogeneity of the German historians’ guild, however, it would be incorrect to think of history in the Wilhelmine era as one-dimensional or devoid of debate. It is all too easy to forget that there were counter-narratives that viewed the “official” version of

6 The German term *Historismus*, which dates from around 1800, has been translated as both historicism and historicism. The latter, however, has also been associated with a specific philosophical approach, identified by Karl Popper in *The Poverty of Historicism*, which attempted to predict the course of human history on the basis of past behavior, suggesting that history was developing towards a particular end according to predetermined laws. That is not what is suggested here. See S. Berger, “Historians and nation-building in Germany after reunification,” *Past and Present*, 148 (1995), p. 188, n. 6.

7 H.-H. Krill, *Die Ranke-Renaissance*, p. 108.

German history with considerable skepticism. There were historians, for instance, who continued to uphold the historical identity of individual German states such as Bavaria and Saxony, or who clung to the idea of a “Greater Germany” (*Grossdeutschland*), rather than the Prussian-dominated “Little Germany” (*Kleindeutschland*) bequeathed by Bismarck. There was also a new school of economic history represented by Gustav Schmoller (1838–1917) and Otto Hintze (1861–1940), which led to an increasing interest in the “social question” at German universities. Certainly, Germany’s leading historical journal, the *Historische Zeitschrift* (founded in 1859), was never short of argument. Particularly heated scholarly exchanges took place over the value of the ambitious psycho-cultural approach pioneered by Karl Lamprecht (1856–1915), whose *German History* of the 1890s was so different from either the Borussian or the Neo-Rankean schools that he became marginalized in German academia, though he was fêted in some of the Reich’s regional historical associations and abroad.⁸ Also on the margins, although no less vociferous, were Socialist and Catholic historians, with their own publications and debates. Within the historians’ guild, however, it was the Neo-Rankeans who increasingly held the upper hand. Both Marcks and Lenz were often invited to address official gatherings, such as at the unveiling of Kaiser-Wilhelm monuments or the numerous anniversary dinners that littered the Wilhelmine social calendar. Despite their pretensions to objectivity, which only in fact extended as far as to establish the reliability of their sources, the Neo-Rankeans made no effort to disguise their own national liberal and anti-Catholic prejudices, and their contributions to such events offered little more than empty rhetoric and hollow pathos.

A characteristic feature of the Neo-Rankean approach, and of German historical writing in the 1900s in general, was the frequently-made suggestion that, whether for geographical, religious, or historical reasons, Germany’s development and destiny differed from that of other European nations. The idea of a *Sonderweg* – a different or special historical path – took many different forms, but the tone was invariably positive. It was claimed that Germany’s particular geopolitical situation (its *Mittellage*) demanded a strong state, with a large permanent army and an efficient civil service, standing above sectional interest and party politics. It was also argued that such a state was fully capable of generating reforms and innovations, as the Prussian reform era had demonstrated, and compared

8 See R. Chickering, “The Lamprecht controversy,” in H. Lehmann, ed., *Historikerkontroversen*, pp. 15–30; also Chickering’s *Karl Lamprecht. A German Academic Life, 1856–1915* (Atlantic Highlands, 1983).

favorably with the parliamentary factionalism and *laissez-faire* values of Victorian Britain, or the universalism of revolutionary France. This view, which was also to be found in more sophisticated form in the 1907 study *Cosmopolitanism and the Nation-State* by Friedrich Meinecke (1862–1954),⁹ became exaggerated in the years around World War One, when the “deep” cultural values of German *Kultur* were frequently contrasted with the materialistic ethos of western *Zivilisation*, and academics like Werner Sombart (1863–1941) were moved to portray the conflict as a struggle between Anglo-Saxon materialism and German idealism, embodied by “merchants” and “heroes” respectively.¹⁰ The significant contribution made by historians to Germany’s war effort, whether in the form of petitions, pamphlets, or other kinds of propaganda, has been well documented.¹¹

The establishment of the Weimar Republic ushered in a limited degree of liberalization of the German historical profession, with regard to both ideological and methodological approaches. Social Democrats, who like practicing Jews had effectively been barred from professorial chairs in the Empire, were now in theory able to pursue academic careers. Catholic historians, such as Franz Schnabel (1887–1966), could also look forward to better career prospects. Even so, the historical profession remained socially and politically elitist, in large part because of its patriarchal internal structures. The requirement to write a second dissertation (the *Habilitation*) before one stood a chance of being accepted into the ranks of the professoriate (the *Ordinarien*) was a particularly high hurdle for non-conformists to jump. The continued dominance of the Neo-Rankean approach meant that history in Germany – “the motherland of modern history” (Ernst Troeltsch) – was increasingly seen as old-fashioned and parochial by international standards. This perception was no doubt strengthened by the way in which German historians took it upon themselves to act as guardians of their nation’s honor, playing a leading role in campaigns against the “unbearable yoke” of the Versailles Treaty, and in particular Article 231, the “war-guilt” clause.

9 F. Meinecke, *Cosmopolitanism and the National State* (Princeton, 1970); originally published in Germany as *Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat. Studien zur Genesis des deutschen Nationalstaats* (Munich and Berlin, 1907).

10 W. Sombart, *Händler und Helden* (Munich and Leipzig, 1915). On Sombart see F. Lenger, *Werner Sombart, 1863–1941: Eine Biographie* (Munich, 1994).

11 See W. J. Mommsen, ed., *Kultur und Krieg: Die Rolle der Intellektuellen, Künstler und Schriftsteller im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Munich, 1996); J. Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth and Mobilization in Germany* (Cambridge, 2000); M. Stibbe, *German Anglophobia and the Great War, 1914–1918* (Cambridge, 2001).

The conviction that Article 231 was unjust – that Germany had been no more culpable than the other great powers in 1914 – was virtually unanimous within the guild. Thus German historians had no qualms of conscience about receiving money from a secret government body, the Foreign Office's War Guilt Department (*Kriegsschuldreferat*), which was established in 1919 solely to contest Allied views on the origins of the war.¹² The department's twin-track propaganda campaign was impressive in scope: seemingly objective scholarly research was funded by a Coordinating Office for Research on the Causes of the War, which had its own monthly journal and which published the famous (but significantly incomplete) 40-volume document collection *The High Politics of the European Cabinets 1871–1914*;¹³ at the same time (April 1921), a Working Committee of German Associations was set up to influence the views of the general public. Anything that could undermine the official view, such as an independent report written by the law professor Hermann Kantorowicz (1877–1940) on behalf of the Reichstag's War Guilt Committee, was suppressed: completed in 1927, the report was not published until 1967.¹⁴

Most German historians accepted the Weimar Republic either reluctantly (as in the case of Meinecke), or not at all.¹⁵ Both Marcks and Lenz, whose pre-war national liberalism slid all too easily into national conservatism, condemned the Republic as a foreign imposition, alien to German historical traditions. In this the malign legacy of the “positive” *Sonderweg* idea was clear to see. The predominant view of the Empire remained unashamedly positive, even if historians were more critical in their assessments of the last Emperor. “Back to Bismarck!” was a call echoed by many in the guild. Dissenting voices, such as the left-liberal

12 See H. Herwig, “Clio deceived: Patriotic self-censorship in Germany after the war,” in K. Wilson, ed., *Forging the Collective Memory: Government and International Historians through Two World Wars* (Providence and Oxford, 1996), pp. 87–127; A. Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War. Controversies and Consensus* (London, 2002); U. Heinemann, *Die verdrängte Niederlage. Politische Öffentlichkeit und Kriegsschuldfrage in der Weimarer Republik* (Göttingen, 1983); W. Jäger, *Historische Forschung und politische Kultur in Deutschland. Die Debatte 1914–1980 über den Ausbruch des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Göttingen, 1984).

13 J. Lepsius, A. Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, and F. Thimme, eds., *Die große Politik der europäischen Kabinete von 1871–1914*, 40 vols. (Berlin, 1922–7).

14 H. Kantorowicz, *Gutachten zur Kriegsschuldfrage 1914. Aus dem Nachlaß herausgegeben und eingeleitet von Imanuel Geiss* (Frankfurt, 1967).

15 See B. Faulenbach, *Die Ideologie des deutschen Weges. Die Deutsche Geschichte in der Historiographie zwischen Kaiserreich und Nationalsozialismus* (Munich, 1980); also P. Schöttler, ed., *Geschichtsschreibung als Legitimationswissenschaft 1918–45* (Frankfurt, 1997). In English see R. Gerwarth, *Bismarck in Weimar. Germany's First Democracy and the Civil War of Memories, 1918–33* (Oxford, 2005).

Johannes Ziekursch (1876–1945), whose *Political History of the New German Empire* appeared in three volumes between 1925 and 1930,¹⁶ and Eckart Kehr (1902–33), a student of Meinecke who wrote his doctoral thesis on *Battleship Building and Party Politics in Germany*,¹⁷ were cold-shouldered. As one of the first historians to argue that an alliance of heavy industry and large landowners was a crucial and malign legacy of the Empire, Kehr would later become an important posthumous influence on a generation of German historians, but during his short lifetime he remained on the margins of the historical profession. More typical of attitudes was the conservative historian Adalbert Wahl (1871–1957), who described the Empire as “a highpoint in the history of humanity as a whole.”¹⁸

Similar assessments continued to be published by Neo-Rankean historians after 1933, even if some swift footwork was needed to keep pace with the changing political circumstances. Hermann Oncken (1869–1945), a former student of Lenz who had been considered a political moderate in the 1920s, welcomed Hitler’s first government as a “new concentration of German power,” although he soon fell out with the regime. Gerhard Ritter (1888–1967), who would later be arrested because of his connections to the resistance, introduced his biography of Friedrich the Great by linking the eighteenth-century Prussian king to Bismarck and the Führer.¹⁹ Erich Marcks predictably took the same line with his old hero Bismarck. The *Kaiserreich* and Third Reich were thus “two stages in the same political development,” according to Marcks.²⁰ The positive line of continuity “from Bismarck to Hitler” was also pursued by Otto Westphal (1891–1950) in his two-volume history *The Reich*, published in 1941.²¹ Westphal, a council member of the Reich Institute for the History of the New Germany, made no secret of his wholehearted approval of Hitler’s rule, but the extent to which the German historical profession as a whole responded to National Socialism has only recently become the subject of detailed scrutiny.

It was long claimed that the historical profession remained aloof from Nazism, and was largely successful in maintaining its commitment to

16 J. Ziekursch, *Politische Geschichte des neuen deutschen Kaiserreiches*, 3 vols. (Frankfurt, 1925–30).

17 E. Kehr, *Battleship Building and Party Politics in Germany 1894–1901* (Chicago and London, 1973), first published in Germany as *Schlachtflottenbau und Parteipolitik 1894–1901* (Berlin, 1930).

18 Quoted in E. Frie, *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich* (Darmstadt, 2004), p. 6.

19 G. Ritter, *Friedrich der Große. Ein historisches Profil* (Leipzig, 1936).

20 H.-H. Krill, *Die Ranke-Renaissance*, pp. 253–4.

21 O. Westphal, *Das Reich*, vol. 1 *Germanentum und Kaisertum*; vol. 2 *Aufgang und Vollendung* (Berlin, 1941).

objective scholarship throughout the Third Reich. This undoubtedly complacent view has been challenged by a host of studies since the 1990s,²² but it remains far from easy to distinguish between National Socialist and national conservative elements in the historiography of the 1930s, or between “true believers” and “fellow travelers” within the guild. It is clear that generational factors were significant. For established university professors, 1933 did not necessarily represent a major watershed, since a nationalist, authoritarian, and anti-democratic outlook was already firmly in place by the time Hitler came to power. It had formed in the years around the First World War, hardened during the Weimar Republic, and only began to crumble after 1945. Thus a full-scale *Gleichschaltung* was not necessary, especially as potential dissidents – such as the liberal Catholic Franz Schnabel – could easily be forced into retirement. For a younger generation of aspiring academics, however, the new opportunities presented by the regime in areas such as ethnic history (*Volks-geschichte*),²³ or the so-called *Ostforschung* – the history of Eastern European territories to which Nazi Germany laid claim under the banner of *Lebensraum* – proved difficult to refuse.²⁴ The extent to which historians provided the justification for “ethnic cleansing,” or even became “accessories to murder” through their involvement in Nazi research projects, remains a sensitive and controversial subject, as a dramatic debate at the 1998 German historians’ conference in Frankfurt testified. The posthumous reputations of some of post-war West Germany’s most respected historians – Theodor Schieder (1908–84), Werner Conze (1910–86), Karl-Dietrich Erdmann (1910–90), Fritz Fischer (1908–99) and even Hans Rothfels (1891–1976), a Bismarck specialist of Jewish ancestry who was forced into exile by the Nazis in 1939 – have been tarnished as a result, and in some cases maybe “permanently contaminated” (Hans-Ulrich Wehler), although the dangers of a witch hunt are clear for all to see.²⁵

22 See K. Schönwälder, *Historiker und Politik. Geschichtswissenschaft im Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt and New York, 1992); U. Wolf, *Litteris et Patriae. Das Janusgesicht der Historie* (Stuttgart, 1996); W. Schulze and O. G. Oexle, eds., *Deutsche Historiker im Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt, 1999); I. Haar, *Historiker im Nationalsozialismus. Die deutsche Geschichte und der “Volkstumskampf” im Osten* (Göttingen, 2000).

23 Despite its reactionary ideology *Volks-geschichte* could also be methodologically innovative, pre-empting some aspects of post-war social history. See W. Oberkrome, *Volks-geschichte. Methodische Innovation und völkische Ideologisierung in der deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft 1918–1945* (Göttingen, 1993).

24 See M. Burleigh, *Germany Turns Eastwards. A Study of “Ostforschung” in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, 1988).

25 V. Ullrich, “Späte Reue der Zunft. Endlich arbeiten die deutschen Historiker die braune Vergangenheit ihres Faches auf,” *Die Zeit*, September 17, 1998; also S. F. Kellerhoff, “Pionieren der Sozialgeschichte droht Denkmalsturz. Werner Conze, Karl Dietrich Erdmann und Theodor Schieder unterstützten Hitlers Lebensraum-Ideologie,” *Die Welt*, July 27, 1998.

The recent zeal for “outing” dead historians as Nazi sympathizers stands in stark contrast to the pattern of events in West Germany after 1945, when there was no concerted attempt to de-Nazify the guild. Only a handful of individuals who had been in the SS or involved in the most extreme kind of racial history lost their university positions after the war – Ernst Anrich, Günter Franz, Erwin Hölzle, Theodor Mayer – and even right-wing apologists such as Walther Hubatsch (1915–84) remained in employment. Certainly, there was a new mood of contrition and sobriety within the profession, best exemplified by Friedrich Meinecke’s *The German Catastrophe* of 1946,²⁶ but even here there were signs of an inability to learn the lessons of the 1930s. Meinecke’s attempts at self-criticism were genuine, but it evidently did not come easy for a man whose life was so entwined with the historical guild – he had attended Ranke’s funeral in 1886 and edited the *Historische Zeitschrift* for nearly 40 years – to question all his earlier beliefs and assumptions. Indeed, it was not clear whether he saw the real “catastrophe” as being Hitler and the Holocaust, or Germany’s defeat, degradation, and division. The men who formed the backbone of West Germany’s historical profession after 1945 had all been born and educated in the Empire, and some had seen active service in World War One. They were certainly more critical of aspects of Germany’s long-term development than the preceding generation, as the new editor of the *Historische Zeitschrift*, Ludwig Dehio (1888–1963), made clear in his quasi-metaphysical study of “balance of power or hegemony” (1948),²⁷ but most nevertheless tried to isolate the Third Reich as a “chance” event or “accident” of history, which could not have been predicted.²⁸ This traumatic episode had been caused, Gerhard Ritter argued, not by a deficit but by a surfeit of democracy, embodied in the rise of the vulgar masses, who were duped into supporting a demonic revolutionary from beyond the borders of the Empire. As for the *Kaiserreich*, their reading remained in essence conservative or national liberal, for all the criticisms of Germany’s military leadership or the extremism of the Pan-German League. This was not surprising since, as Georg Iggers (born 1926) puts it: “[w]hat was left

26 F. Meinecke, *The German Catastrophe. Reflections and Recollections* (Cambridge, MA, 1950), first published in German as *Die deutsche Katastrophe* (Wiesbaden, 1946).

27 L. Dehio, *Gleichgewicht oder Hegemonie. Betrachtungen über ein Grundproblem der neueren Staatengeschichte* (Krefeld, 1948). In English see Dehio’s *Germany and World Politics in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1960).

28 Meinecke uses the word *Zufall* (“chance” or “coincidence”) in *Die deutsche Katastrophe*; others referred to Hitler as a *Betriebsunfall* (a “breakdown in the works” or “an industrial accident”). See J. Steinle, “Hitler als ‘Betriebsunfall in der Geschichte.’ Eine historische Metapher und ihre Hintergründe,” *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, 45 (1994), pp. 288–302.

in 1945 was essentially the profession of 1933 purged of its more liberal, critical elements."²⁹

Methodological innovations were also conspicuous by their absence in the 1950s. It was as if German history, like British industry, was suffering from what Kenneth Barkin has referred to as the "ageing pioneer" syndrome.³⁰ Narrative history, with a particular emphasis on national politics and the state, remained the paradigm of historical scholarship, and all attempts to introduce analytical concepts from the social sciences were regarded with suspicion. The extent to which historians like Gerhard Ritter identified with the state was often betrayed by their choice of language: the German edition of Ritter's monumental *The Sword and the Sceptre*,³¹ for instance, contains numerous expressions such as "our ambassador in London," while in one chapter there are no fewer than 25 references to the Entente powers as the "enemy" or our "opponents."³² Although the likes of Lenz, Marcks, and Oncken were long dead, the leading figures in West German history still had strong personal links to the Neo-Rankeans: both Ritter and the Hamburg professor Egmont Zechlin (1896–1992), for instance, had studied under Oncken. It is ironic, therefore, that one of the few apparently progressive areas of German history in the "economic miracle" years – the structural approach to social history developed by Conze at Heidelberg, and to a lesser extent, Schieder in Cologne – should have been particularly badly affected by the revelations of the 1990s. Their innovative use of sociological models and quantifiable sources, such as demographic statistics, is now tainted by the knowledge that the same methods had earlier been used by Conze under the banner of *Volks-geschichte*, and specifically by Schieder in his "Poland Memorandum" of autumn 1939, with regard to the removal of the Jewish population (*Entjudung*) from Polish towns.³³ Since Conze and Schieder were academic father-figures to some of Germany's most prominent recent historians, including Martin Broszat, Wolfgang Mommsen, Lothar Gall and Hans-Ulrich Wehler, it is little wonder that the repercussions of the 1998 debate are still being felt today.

29 G. Iggers, ed., "Introduction," in *The Social History of Politics. Critical Perspectives in West German Historical Writing Since 1945* (Leamington Spa, 1985), p. 20.

30 Quoted by D. Blackbourn in *Populists and Patricians. Essays in Modern German History* (London, 1987), p. 25, n. 5.

31 G. Ritter, *The Sword and the Sceptre. The Problem of Militarism in Germany*, 4 vols. (Miami, 1969–73), first published in German as *Staatskunst und Kriegshandwerk. Das Problem des "Militarismus" in Deutschland* (Munich, 1954–68).

32 See I. Geiss, "Der Ausbruch des Ersten Weltkrieges," in *Studien über Geschichte und Geschichtswissenschaft* (Frankfurt, 1972), p. 12.

33 See G. Aly, *Macht-Geist-Wahl. Kontinuitäten deutschen Denkens* (Berlin, 1997).

Predictably, the harshest views of the Empire to be published between 1945 and 1960 came from outside of the West German historical establishment. Those forced into exile by the National Socialist regime led the way: Erich Eyck (1878–1964), a left-liberal lawyer and journalist who wrote a critical three-volume biography of Bismarck in Britain before and during World War Two;³⁴ the sociologist and intellectual historian Helmuth Plessner (1892–1985), who put forward his influential thesis of Germany as a “belated nation” as early as 1935, but did not receive a German university post (in sociology rather than history) until 1951;³⁵ and the historian Golo Mann (1909–94), who had followed his father – the novelist Thomas Mann – into exile in 1933, and was belatedly awarded a Chair at Stuttgart in 1960. His decision to return to Germany was not typical: of 134 exiled historians, only 21 returned to reside permanently in Germany.³⁶ By the standards of the 1950s guild, Golo Mann’s view of German history was critical, even if his conviction that World War Two was forced upon Germany by “a lone villain” fitted neatly into West Germany’s post-war consensus.³⁷ However, compared to the work of a new wave of German-American historians around 1960 it already seemed anachronistic. For men such as Hans Rosenberg (1904–88), Hans Kohn (1891–1971), George Mosse (1918–99), Fritz Stern (born 1926), and the US-born Leonard Krieger (1918–90), only one question really mattered: how could Nazism ever have happened?³⁸ In confronting this crucial conundrum history became “a work of diagnosis,”³⁹ in which there could be no recourse to a lone villain. Instead, the idea of the *Sonderweg* reappeared, though now the “political divergence of Germany from the West” (Leonard Krieger) took on a wholly negative guise. The *Sonderweg* would remain central to debates on the German

34 E. Eyck, *Bismarck. Leben und Werk* (Zurich, 1941–4), published in English as *Bismarck and the German Empire* (London, 1950). Significantly, it was not published in Germany until 1963.

35 H. Plessner was given a Chair in Sociology at Göttingen in 1951. It was another eight years before his major work appeared in a German edition: *Die verspätete Nation. Über die politische Verführbarkeit bürgerlichen Geistes* (Stuttgart, 1959).

36 S. Berger, *The Search for Normality*, p. 40.

37 G. Mann, *Deutsche Geschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt, 1966), p. 811. First published in Germany in 1958; in English as *The History of Germany since 1789* (New York, 1968).

38 H. Rosenberg, *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy and Autocracy. The Prussian Experience 1660–1815* (Cambridge, MA, 1958); H. Kohn, *The Mind of Germany* (New York, 1960); G. L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology. Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York, 1964); F. Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair. A Study in the Rise of the German Ideology* (Berkeley, 1961); L. Krieger, *The German Idea of Freedom: History of a Political Tradition* (Chicago, 1957).

39 The phrase comes from W. Reddy, *Money and Liberty in Modern Europe. A Critique of Historical Understanding* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 14.

Empire for the next 30 years, before finally fading from view in the 1990s. For Rosenberg, who drew on earlier critiques from the likes of Friedrich Engels and Max Weber, Germany's "wrong turn" had socio-economic causes; Krieger, Kohn, Mosse, and Stern were more interested in its cultural or intellectual roots. A cruder version of the intellectual *Sonderweg* had featured in Anglo-American wartime propaganda, and in a host of English-language publications from the 1940s which sought to establish lines of continuity between Luther and Hitler, or locate a fatal flaw in the German national character (as in A. J. P. Taylor's widely-read polemic *The Course of German History*).⁴⁰ The work of historians such as Stern and Mosse displayed much greater subtlety than the populist pamphleteers, of course, but viewing German history from the teleological perspective of 1933 inevitably ran the risk of blurring or distorting their view of the Empire, as later critics were eager to point out. In the meantime, however, the exiles had succeeded in opening up new and profitable lines of enquiry, which would help to reinvigorate the study of modern German history, both in and outside the Federal Republic.

The Fischer Controversy

The story of the Fischer controversy has been told many times before, and often in considerable detail.⁴¹ As the publication of Fritz Fischer's book *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (literally, the "grasp for world power")⁴² occurred in the same year as the inauguration of President Kennedy and the building of the Berlin Wall (1961), it is now very much part of history

40 A. J. P. Taylor, *The Course of German History* (London, 1961 – first published 1945).

41 See J. A. Moses, *The Politics of Illusion. The Fischer Controversy in German Historiography* (London, 1975); I. Geiss, "Die Fischer-Kontroverse," in *Studien über Geschichte und Geschichtswissenschaft* (Frankfurt, 1972), pp. 108–98; A. Sywottek, "Die Fischer-Kontroverse. Ein Beitrag zur Entwicklung historisch-politischen Bewußtseins in der Bundesrepublik," in I. Geiss and B. J. Wendt, eds., *Deutschland und die Weltpolitik des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts* (Düsseldorf, 1973), pp. 19–47; V. Berghahn, "Die Fischer Kontroverse – 15 Jahre danach," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 6 (1980), pp. 403–19; H. Böhme, "'Primat' und 'Paradigmata.' Zur Entwicklung einer bundesdeutschen Zeitgeschichtsschreibung am Beispiel des Ersten Weltkriegs," in H. Lehmann, ed., *Historikerkontroversen*; K. Jarausch, "Der nationale Tabubruch. Wissenschaft, Öffentlichkeit und Politik in der Fischer-Kontroverse," in M. Sabrow, R. Jessen, and K. Grosse Kracht, eds., *Zeitgeschichte als Streitgeschichte. Große Kontroversen seit 1945* (Munich, 2003); M. Stibbe, "The Fischer controversy over German war aims in the First World War and its reception by East German historians," *Historical Journal*, 46 (2003), pp. 649–68.

42 F. Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht. Die Kriegszieldpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914–18* (Düsseldorf, 1961); edited version in English as *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (London, 1967).

itself. It may seem tempting, therefore, to overlook the controversy in favor of more recent debates, especially as Fischer himself died in 1999, aged 91. There are two reasons why this temptation should be resisted: first, because much of the research carried out on the *Kaiserreich* over the past five decades would have been unthinkable without it; and second because the battle-lines drawn up at the height of the controversy still scar the German historical landscape. In 2003 a young Potsdam historian with the unusual but highly appropriate name of Klaus Grosse Kracht (born 1969) published an essay which certainly caused a “big row” (*grosse Krach*) among German historians. The article, in a little-read journal of religious history, suggested that the young Fischer – who had himself studied theology – had been more actively engaged in National Socialism than was previously believed.⁴³

Fischer, who was branded a radical, a Communist, even a traitor, by the German right in the 1960s, had never disguised the fact that he had joined the SA in 1933 and the Nazi Party itself four years later. What Kracht discovered, however, was that in the mid-1930s Fischer had also been close to the pro-Nazi “German Christians” and had signed a declaration by a number of theology professors in support of the Führer. He had also written a letter in March 1943 to Walter Frank (head of the Nazi Reich Institute for the History of the New Germany), thanking him for his “active support” in obtaining a chair at Hamburg University. In comparison with other recent historiographical earthquakes concerning post-war German historians and the Third Reich, it only measured about three on the Richter scale, and Kracht’s implication that Fischer had been hypocritical – for demanding a more open and critical engagement with Germany’s past, yet keeping his own past hidden – was unfounded. What was more significant, however, was the essay’s reception. Not only were Kracht’s findings reported most extensively in those conservative newspapers, such as *Die Welt* and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*,⁴⁴ which had been in the forefront of the campaign against Fischer in the early 1960s, but there were also curious links to the controversy’s original protagonists. A former student of Egmont Zechlin for instance, the journalist and historian Volker Ullrich (born 1943), attacked Fischer in *Die Zeit*: “The famous historian, who was so impressively focused in taking

43 K. G. Kracht, “Fritz Fischer und der deutsche Protestantismus,” *Zeitschrift für neuere Theologiegeschichte*, 10 (2003), pp. 224–52.

44 S. F. Kellerhoff, “Gewissermassen schizophoren,” *Die Welt*, January 17, 2004; J. H. Claussen, “Umgepoltes Denken – Erst völkisch, dann kritisch: Der Historiker Fritz Fischer,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, January 7, 2004. See also the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* article of July 16, 2001, attacking Chancellor Gerhard Schröder for suggesting in a speech that Germany had “instigated” two world wars.

German war aims policies to task, was always so vague when it came to explaining his own career path," he wrote.⁴⁵ Even before the appearance of Kracht's essay, the right-wing historian Michael Stürmer (born 1938), had remarked in a retrospective interview: "When an assistant of the Reich Institute for the History of the New Germany [i.e., Fischer] claimed the moral high ground in attacking a man who had sat in the Gestapo's cells [i.e., Ritter], then something was wrong."⁴⁶ The zeal with which Fischer's opponents seized upon Kracht's modest revelations, and indeed the speed with which Fischer's erstwhile lieutenants leapt to his defence,⁴⁷ illustrates very clearly the passions aroused by the original controversy.

Fischer's "crime" in the 1960s was to challenge one of the longest-running taboos in German history. By suggesting that Germany was principally to blame for the outbreak of war in 1914 he shattered a consensus that had existed within the historians' guild since 1919: that the Treaty of Versailles had been an iniquitous example of "victor's justice." In the 1950s German historians had appeared to defuse the "war-guilt" question successfully. With little option but to accept the blame for World War Two on Hitler's posthumous behalf, the guild effectively managed to put the issue of World War One on a back-burner. In a spirit of post-war reconciliation, and with the need to integrate the Federal Republic of Germany into western institutions, there was even a joint statement issued by French and German historians, accepting that World War One had been a tragic product of the alliance system, for which no country could be held responsible. Lloyd George's famous phrase, that the great powers had "slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war," became the formula around which consensus could be built. Of course, not everyone agreed – the American historian Bernadotte E. Schmitt and the Italian Luigi Albertini are famous examples⁴⁸ – but by the late 1950s the debate on the origins of the Great War appeared to have run its course.

In Germany such remarkable unanimity had only been possible because of the peculiar nature of the historians' guild, which had continued to resemble a highly-restrictive gentleman's club; an "old-boys-network" in which the members were expected to protect their own, and to close ranks

45 V. Ullrich, "Griff nach der Wahrheit. Der berühmte Historiker Fritz Fischer im Zwielficht," *Die Zeit*, January 15, 2004.

46 Interview with Stürmer in R. Hohls and K. Jarausch, eds., *Versäumte Fragen. Deutsche Historiker im Schatten des Nationalsozialismus* (Munich, 2000), p. 360.

47 See for instance H. Pogge von Strandmann, "Aus akutem Geldmangel in die Partei eingetreten," letter to *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, February 4, 2004.

48 B. E. Schmitt, *The Coming of the War* (New York, 1930); L. Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1952–7).

under fire. Young historians who asked the wrong kind of questions could see their career expectations disappear in a plume of cigar smoke. Books which did not conform to the prevailing orthodoxies faced an uphill struggle to be published or – in the case of émigré historians like Hans Rosenberg or Francis Carsten (1911–98) – to be translated into German. That until the great expansion of higher education in the 1960s and 1970s there were only 15 universities (and around 170 professors of history) in the whole of West Germany also played a part. Fischer's great advantage was that he was an insider, both socially and politically, with the security of a Chair at Hamburg University. Methodologically too, Fischer worked very much within the Rankean tradition, focusing on “high” politics, the state and its foreign relations: *Griff nach der Weltmacht* was a 900-page opus based almost entirely on the scrutiny of original documents, and had the footnotes to prove it. By all accounts, its author did not set out with a particular thesis in mind, but simply followed the paper-trail through the German archives, which had only recently regained possession of key files confiscated by the Allies in 1945. Fischer and his research assistants – principally Imanuel Geiss (born 1931) and Helmut Böhme (born 1936) – were, however, extremely thorough, looking not only at diplomatic and foreign office records, but those of other Reich offices, the Prussian ministries, and other institutions too. Their first unexpected discovery in the Potsdam Central Archive of the GDR was the so-called “September Programme” of war aims prepared for Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg in 1914, which became the centerpiece of an essay for the *Historische Zeitschrift* in 1959,⁴⁹ but which did not yet trigger a full-scale confrontation within the guild.

The Fischer controversy, which broke out at the end of 1961, is generally considered a watershed in German historiography. Not everyone agrees: Gerhard A. Ritter (born 1929, and not to be confused with Fischer's opponent Gerhard Ritter), points to a number of influential studies in the 1950s and the breakthrough of social history in the second half of the 1960s, to indicate an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary process.⁵⁰ Others, such as Richard Evans, highlight the guild's break with its Rankean traditions in the second half of the 1960s as “the real

49 See F. Fischer, “Deutsche Kriegsziele, Revolutionierung und Separatfrieden im Osten, 1914–18,” *Historische Zeitschrift*, 188 (1959), pp. 249–65. The document was actually first seen by Geiss before he joined Fischer in Hamburg, and had earlier been seen and ignored by Hans Herzfeld. Interview with Geiss in R. Hohls and K. Jarausch, eds., *Versäumte Fragen*, p. 222.

50 G. A. Ritter, *The New Social History in the Federal Republic of Germany* (London, 1991). Ritter's view is supported by W. Schulze, *Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft nach 1945* (Munich, 1993), but contested by Berger, *The Search for Normality*, p. 63.

revolution in German historiography.”⁵¹ It is certainly true that while the controversy is often considered to have opened the way for new methodological approaches, this did not occur until around 1965–7, when major publications by Böhme, Rosenberg, and Ralf Dahrendorf all appeared.⁵² Only the first and weakest chapter of *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, which looked at “German imperialism” and the development of war aims before 1914, suggested any kind of break with German historical traditions, and this was largely thanks to Böhme. It was not the Hamburg historian’s methods, but the implications of his argument that were explosive. If, as the documents seemed to indicate, Germany had unleashed the First World War in a bid to secure hegemony over Europe and hence “world power” status, then the Second World War could no longer be put down to an evil dictator alone; if the aggressive foreign policy of the Third Reich represented a continuation of earlier German planning, then the guild’s attempts to portray the Nazi era as fundamentally unconnected to the rest of German history would be fatally undermined. In the eyes of many German historians, who read Fischer’s book with a mixture of anger and alarm, the threat it posed was not just scholarly. It was as if the very stability and integrity of the West German state was at stake. Thus the Fischer controversy became much more than an argument among historians: it became a political event, with parliamentary statements, newspaper editorials, television debates, and even an unpleasant whiff of “dirty tricks.”⁵³ Unnecessary though much of this was, it was in large part due to the public nature of the controversy (together with the “Auschwitz trial” of 1963) that many younger Germans began to engage with their country’s history for the first time. Indeed, Carl Schorske (born 1915) has written that the “shaping of Germany’s future was almost as much at stake in the Fischer controversy as the truth about its past.”⁵⁴ It was as if the wall of silence that had been built up since 1945, and which had undoubtedly played its part in stabilizing the early Federal Republic, had finally cracked. It would take the rest of the

51 R. J. Evans, “Wilhelm II’s Germany and the historians,” *Rethinking German History*, p. 33.

52 H. Böhme, *Deutschlands Weg zur Großmacht. Studien zum Verhältnis von Wirtschaft und Staat während der Reichsgründungszeit* (Cologne and Berlin, 1966); Hans Rosenberg, *Große Depression und Bismarckzeit* (Berlin, 1967); R. Dahrendorf, *Society and Politics in Germany* (New York, 1967), first published as *Gesellschaft und Demokratie in Deutschland* (Munich, 1965).

53 West German Foreign Office funding for Fischer’s planned lecture tour of the US in 1964 was mysteriously withdrawn at the last minute, although the tour went ahead with American support.

54 C. Schorske, “An afterword,” in H. Lehmann, ed., *Historikerkontroversen*, pp. 185–6.

decade – and particularly the student unrest of 1967–8 – before the wall crumbled, but Fischer had dealt an important blow.

Fischer's foremost opponents in the early 1960s, such as Ritter, Rothfels, Zechlin, and Hans Herzfeld (1892–1982), had all participated in the campaign against the "War-Guilt Lie" in the 1920s and continued to emphasize the essentially defensive nature of German policy in 1914.⁵⁵ Their objections were many and varied. The principal criticisms were aimed less at Fischer's catalogue of war aims documents – although he was accused of taking them too much at face value – than the "masochistic" or "self-flagellating" interpretation of Germany's role in July 1914, which covered only 50 pages and relied heavily on the work of Geiss. The part played by Bethmann Hollweg in the events of July 1914 became a particular focus of debate, as did Fischer's flat, functional prose style and "judgmental" tone. The latter was perceived to depart from the German historicist tradition of seeking to understand the actions of individuals in their own terms through a process of sympathetic intuition, rather than assessing them against a set of transcendental norms. It is important to note that the hostility Fischer encountered did not just come from the "usual suspects." Independent spirits such as Ludwig Dehio, who had been an important influence on Fischer, and Golo Mann, also condemned *Griff nach der Weltmacht* as "fundamentally wrong." This undoubtedly represented the majority view in the guild at the time, even if the German-American historian Fritz Stern offered vocal backing to the underdog. The public nature of the controversy, however, ensured that Fischer soon gained a following of young historians eager to carry out further research on the Empire. Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann (born 1938), Bernd Jürgen Wendt (born 1934), Dirk Stegmann (born 1941), and in Britain, John Röhl (born 1939), were among those to identify with Fischer's cause. It is questionable whether there was ever a fully-fledged "Fischer School,"⁵⁶ but one of his later students, the left-wing publicist Bernd Schulte, has continued to fight Fischer's corner in a series of books, articles, and Internet essays.⁵⁷

55 See G. Ritter, "Eine neue Kriegsschuldthese? Zu Fritz Fischers Buch 'Griff nach der Weltmacht,'" *Historische Zeitschrift*, 194 (1962), p. 668; G. Ritter, *Der Erste Weltkrieg. Studien zum deutschen Geschichtsbild* (Bonn, 1964).

56 Although his opponents often talked of a "Fischer School," one of his former students, Peter-Christian Witt, has denied it ever existed, pointing to Fischer's willingness to supervise students on a wide range of topics and with a great variety of scholarly approaches. P.-C. Witt, "Fritz Fischer," *Kasseler Universitätsreden*, 5 (Kassel, 1988), p. 16.

57 Most recently, B. F. Schulte, *Weltmacht durch die Hintertür. Deutsche Nationalgeschichte in der Diskussion*, vol. 2 (Hamburg, 2003).

By October 1964, when Fischer's theses were debated at the German historians' conference in Berlin, it was clear that the split was methodological as well as ideological, with a growing divide between those who continued to uphold "the primacy of foreign policy," and those, such as Wolfgang Mommsen (1930–2004), who wanted greater attention to be paid to the Empire's domestic power structures. It was in this context that the work of the young Weimar historian Eckart Kehr – who had suggested that domestic political considerations were behind the building of the Wilhelmine battle fleet – was "rediscovered." Kehr's provocative rewriting of Ranke's dictum, which now became "the primacy of domestic policy," summed up the new approach. The split was partly, but not wholly, along generational lines, since there were also younger historians such as Andreas Hillgruber (1925–90), who disputed the extent to which the Empire's foreign affairs were influenced by domestic factors. Hillgruber continued to emphasize the importance of Germany's international and geopolitical situation, or the "curse of geography" as he later put it.⁵⁸

In *Griff nach der Weltmacht* the so-called "continuity question" had been downplayed by Fischer. The connections made between the Kaiser's and the Führer's war aims were more implicit than explicit. In the course of his subsequent publications, however, Fischer became more radical – although not always more convincing – in portraying a direct line of continuity between the *Kaiserreich* and the Third Reich. His second major book on the subject, *War of Illusions* (1969),⁵⁹ concentrated on the years between 1911 and 1914, and sought to tackle the questions raised but not fully answered by the first chapter of *Griff nach der Weltmacht*. It focused in particular on the "alliance of elite groups" which Fischer suggested was principally responsible for the continuity of policy between the two regimes. This time, an even wider range of documentary sources were consulted, including the records of political parties, economic pressure-groups, and industrial concerns. Unlike most of his contemporaries in the historians' guild, Fischer had developed an interest in social and economic history, fostered by his stays in Britain and the US during the 1950s, and by his reading of German émigré historians like Hans Rosenberg. The origins of World War One, Fischer suggested, could not be explained by reference to governments and diplomats alone, but required a much bigger picture than the statist Neo-Rankean model was able to provide. Belatedly, after a half century during which their guild

58 A. Hillgruber, *Die gescheiterte Großmacht. Eine Skizze des deutschen Reiches 1871–1945* (Düsseldorf, 1980).

59 F. Fischer, *Krieg der Illusionen. Die deutsche Politik von 1911 bis 1914* (Düsseldorf, 1969); in English as *War of Illusions* (London, 1974).

had “drifted into isolation,”⁶⁰ historians in Germany began to follow in the footsteps of their French, British, and US colleagues; expanding their focus from the state and its leaders to society as a whole. This so-called “paradigm shift”⁶¹ should not be exaggerated, since many continued to uphold the “old” paradigm, but the late sixties certainly saw an increasing cross-fertilization between history and the social sciences. The new approach, variously labeled “historical social science,” the “social history of politics,” “critical history,” or simply “Kehrite” (a neologism coined by Wolfgang Mommsen), eschewed great men and historic events, and focused instead on socio-economic structures. One of its most able practitioners, Jürgen Kocka, has referred to “social history” as the “magic password” of the late 1960s.⁶² It was particularly useful for opening doors in Germany’s new universities, such as Bochum and Bielefeld, where the atmosphere was very different from Tübingen and Heidelberg, and where many were willing to follow Fischer’s lead in looking for specific lines of continuity in modern German history.

The Fischer controversy could not, and did not produce an outright “winner,” but by the end of the decade Fischer’s supporters clearly felt in possession of both the scholarly and the moral high ground. This is evident from the short book written in the early 1970s by the Australian historian John Moses, tracking the history of the controversy from a fiercely pro-Fischer standpoint.⁶³ Fischer’s theses gained their author fame and respect abroad, and a fair few admirers at home, although Volker Berghahn (born 1938) warned in a 1980 essay that many German school textbooks were yet to incorporate Fischer’s findings in their accounts of 1914.⁶⁴ It was also perhaps significant that despite honorary degrees from East Anglia, Sussex, Oxford, and a host of other foreign universities, Fischer was not recognized in a similar fashion in the Federal Republic until 1988. That it was the modern and modest University of Kassel which bestowed such an award on the octogenarian historian, rather than one of Germany’s traditional seats of learning, spoke volumes for the bitterness with which many in the historians’ guild continued to regard their most famous member.⁶⁵

60 G. Iggers, “Introduction,” in *The Social History of Politics*, p. 11.

61 The term was invented and popularized by the American physicist and historian of science Thomas Kuhn (1922–96).

62 Interview with Kocka in R. Hohls and K. Jarausch, eds., *Versäumte Fragen*, p. 388.

63 J. A. Moses, *The Politics of Illusion*.

64 V. Berghahn, “Die Fischer Kontroverse – 15 Jahre danach,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 6 (1980), pp. 403–19.

65 P.-C. Witt, “Fritz Fischer,” *Kasseler Universitätsreden*.

A “New Orthodoxy?”

The Fischer controversy and the negative *Sonderweg* thesis provided the dual impetus for a growing consensus that began to form among younger historians in the late 1960s. If the sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf (born 1929) had set the ball rolling with his *Society and Politics in Germany*, it was Hans-Ulrich Wehler (born 1931) who would become the most prominent representative of the new approach, along with Jürgen Kocka (born 1941) and Heinrich August Winkler (born 1938). Wehler had first come to prominence with a study of *Bismarck and Imperialism* in 1969, but his key text on Imperial Germany was to appear some four years later.⁶⁶ Wehler’s *The German Empire 1871–1918* was very much a book of its time: written against the backdrop of the student unrest and political crises of the late 1960s, when its author was a lecturer in Cologne, it claimed to be a “problem-oriented historical structural analysis” and presented a deliberately provocative set of theses rather than the well-rounded narrative traditionally favored by Germany’s master-historians. It disposed of the metaphysical literary vocabulary so beloved of the guild – “fate,” “destiny,” “tragedy,” et cetera – which was a legacy of historicism’s roots in the Romantic era, and sought to replace it with the clear, rational language of enlightened scientific analysis. Admittedly, some of the new terminology – “social imperialism,” “negative integration,” “organized capitalism” – was equally problematic, a sub-scientific jargon that muddied rather than cleared the waters, but the discursive shift no doubt contributed to the book’s daunting air of certainty.

At the heart of the approach adopted by Wehler and other critical historians was the conviction that the period from the 1860s to 1945 should be seen as a single historical epoch, during which Germany’s development departed crucially from the route followed by the rest of the western world. By emphasizing Germany’s *Sonderweg* these historians were not suggesting that the rise of Hitler was an inevitable product of Germany’s course of development; or that factors like Germany’s defeat in the First World War, the hyperinflation of 1923, or the Great Depression of the early 1930s were wholly insignificant. They did, however, seek to highlight long-term structural deficits that may have been more apparent in Germany than in other western nations, and so may have contributed to the catastrophic failure of democracy in 1933. Two weaknesses in

66 H.-U. Wehler, *Bismarck und der Imperialismus* (Cologne, 1969); H.-U. Wehler, *Das deutsche Kaiserreich* (Göttingen, 1973), in English as *The German Empire, 1871–1918* (Leamington Spa, 1985).

particular were highlighted: the nature of Bismarck's "blood and iron" unification, which led to a reliance on reform "from above," an exaggerated respect for armed force, and a general militarization of society; and second, the discrepancy between the Empire's rapid economic and social development on the one hand, and its resistance to political change on the other. The fateful combination of a modern economy and a backward state was seen as a product of the "failed" revolutions of 1848–9 and the weakness of the German bourgeoisie, which became "feudalized" and was therefore unable to dislodge the privileged representatives of the "pre-industrial elites" – principally the landed Junker aristocracy – from their position of political dominance in the government, bureaucracy, and army. This version of the *Sonderweg* thesis thus gained a new foundation in modernization theory, which had developed in the US in the 1950s.⁶⁷ "The price of Germany's exceptionalism," as William Reddy puts it, "was pathology; the exception that proved the rule. Where modernization and liberalism do not advance hand in hand, disaster follows."⁶⁸

Wehler concurred with Fischer that the blame for Germany's misfortunes lay with an "alliance of elite groups," who not only led the Empire down the road to disaster, but would later "help Hitler into the saddle." The Empire, which was "pseudo-constitutional semi-absolutist" in character and not a proper constitutional monarchy as the guild had always claimed, was ruled by the "traditional oligarchies" from their stronghold in Prussia, first through the dictatorial figure of Otto von Bismarck, and later through an anonymous, authoritarian polycracy. The only way in which this anachronistic power structure could be preserved was by employing a series of cynical diversionary tactics, such as colonial policy ("social imperialism") and the fabrication of foreign crises, which helped to neutralize and deflect internal tensions outward. The formidable techniques of political and social control pioneered by Bismarck – an insidious mix of repression, indoctrination, manipulation, and compensatory sweeteners – continued to be employed long after the pilot had been dropped, in a desperate and doomed effort to defend the status quo against the irresistible "onslaught of new forces." Central to this interpretation of the Empire was the notion of *Sammlungspolitik*, a term first coined by the Prussian Finance Minister Johannes von Miquel in 1897 to denote a "rallying together" of conservative interests to defend the Empire from both its internal and external enemies. While Miquel had appeared to conceive of *Sammlungspolitik* merely as a short-term expedient, Wehler

67 See S. E. Berman, "Modernization in historical perspective. The case of Imperial Germany," *World Politics*, 53 (2000), pp. 431–62.

68 W. Reddy, *Money and Liberty in Modern Europe*, p. 14.

and other critical historians saw this “cartel of fear” as a cornerstone of the Empire’s entire political edifice, erected in the so-called “second” or “internal” founding of the Reich in the late 1870s (when it was often referred to as the “alliance of iron and rye”) and surviving with “remarkable continuity” right through to 1918 (or even, in the view of Stegmann, 1932).⁶⁹ In this they were following once more in the footsteps of Eckart Kehr, whose classic description of the 1890s *Sammlung* as a reactionary quid pro quo became an almost obligatory quote in books published on the Empire in the 1970s: “For industry the fleet, *Weltpolitik*, and expansion; for the agrarians, tariffs and the preservation of the Conservatives’ social supremacy; and, as a consequence of this social and economic compromise, for the Center Party the political hegemony.”⁷⁰

West German history’s turn to the social sciences in the late 1960s and 1970s was driven by a variety of factors. There was a greater willingness to embrace new approaches from abroad, manifest in the increasing number of English-language history books to be translated into German; a desire to reconnect with earlier progressive traditions in German historiography, exemplified by the rediscovery of Kehr and Rosenberg; and a rapid expansion of higher education in the Federal Republic which generated a huge increase in the number of younger academics.⁷¹ Perhaps most important of all, however, was a change in the way West German historians perceived their own role in society. For more than a century, the historians’ guild had seen itself primarily as a servant of the state. It had provided rulers and statesmen with “lessons” from history – to be used as models for future policy – and helped to engender a sense of national pride among the German people. In the aftermath of the Fischer controversy, many younger historians instead began to embrace a different kind of civic function: the Western historical tradition, which aspires to educate and instruct citizens to participate in the democratic control of their state. The proponents of historical social science believed in other words that they could assist in the political emancipation of the Germans from their authoritarian past, and create a new historical consciousness more suitable for a democratic republic.⁷² As Georg Iggers puts it, a “belief in a liberal, social democracy” was “crucial to the critical ‘social history of politics.’”⁷³

69 D. Stegmann, *Die Erben Bismarcks. Parteien und Verbände in der Spätphase des Wilhelminischen Deutschlands: Sammlungspolitik 1897–1918* (Berlin, 1970).

70 E. Kehr, *Schlachtflottenbau und Parteipolitik* (Berlin, 1930), p. 205.

71 Between 1960 and 1975 the number of professorships and lectureships in Germany grew by 400 percent, and the number of assistants went up by 800 percent. See S. Berger, *The Search for Normality*, p. 64.

72 See J. Moses, *The Politics of Illusion*, pp. 67–8.

73 G. Iggers, “Introduction,” *The Social History of Politics*, p. 27.

This political consensus, a shared faith in the *Sonderweg* (or “structural continuity”) thesis, and a lively new journal – *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, subtitled “A Journal for Historical Social Science,” founded in 1975 – was just about all the critical historians had in common. They adopted a wide range of methodological and theoretical approaches – from the Frankfurt School, Marx (although in a strictly subordinate role), Habermas and particularly Max Weber – and were always a heterogeneous grouping. Even so, the fact that three of the leading practitioners, Wehler, Kocka, and Puhle, became professors at the University of Bielefeld, ensured that some began to talk of a Bielefeld School (or, more informally, the “Bielefelders”).⁷⁴ One feature of this phase in the historiography of the German Empire was an impressive increase in the number of research-based monographs which started to appear. Works by Kocka, Hans-Jürgen Puhle (born 1940), Hartmut Kaelble (born 1940), and Hans-Peter Ullmann (born 1949), together with others by the former Fischer students Dirk Stegmann and Peter-Christian Witt (born 1943), were important in putting flesh on the bare bones of Wehler’s structure, particularly with regard to the Empire’s economy and society. By the mid-1970s, the University of Bielefeld was by no means the only stronghold of the “critical” historians, and such was their influence within the much-expanded guild that some began to suggest they had become a “new orthodoxy.” That label is usually credited to the American historian James Sheehan (born 1937),⁷⁵ although Imanuel Geiss has suggested that it was actually Klaus Epstein who first coined the term,⁷⁶ and both Karlheinz Weissmann (“became to a very large degree the orthodoxy”) and Gustav Seibt (“social history orthodoxy”) used similar phrases as well.⁷⁷

The extent to which the description was ever valid is highly questionable. Leading “Kehrites” were quick to dismiss suggestions that they were part of any kind of orthodoxy, and claimed the notion was largely an Anglo-Saxon misperception.⁷⁸ Certainly, the traditionalists within the guild did not simply disappear in the 1970s, and continued to present their critiques of both Fritz Fischer and historical social science in publications such as the *Historische Zeitschrift* and *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* (a journal for history teachers founded by Karl-Dietrich

74 R. Fletcher, “Recent developments in West German historiography: The Bielefeld School and its critics,” *German Studies Review*, 3 (1984), pp. 451–80.

75 Sheehan used it in a book review for the *Journal of Modern History*, 48 (1976), p. 567.

76 Interview with Geiss in R. Hohls and K. Jarausch, eds., *Versäumte Fragen*, p. 231.

77 Both quoted by S. Berger, *The Search for Normality*, p. 78.

78 See H.-J. Puhle, “Zur Legende von der Kehrschen Schule,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 4 (1978), pp. 108–19.

Erdmann and which remained in conservative hands).⁷⁹ “The historicist tradition,” Stefan Berger argues, “was put on the defensive for a while, but it survived the challenge of historical social science largely intact.”⁸⁰ The belated pluralization of approaches in German history in the 1970s, including the growth of women’s history and *Alltagsgeschichte* (see Chapter 4) – which, as Berger points out, was only possible because “the first generation of critical historians had broken up the *juste milieu* of the national tradition”⁸¹ – would seem to contradict the existence of any dominant orthodoxy. Yet others disagree. In 1972, Fischer’s former lieutenant Imanuel Geiss had written: “precisely because of their experiences [at the hands of the guild] the new generation of historians . . . will hopefully never degenerate into an intolerant and anti-scientific orthodoxy of the kind that is only now finally leaving the stage.”⁸² By 1999, however, Geiss viewed the Bielefeld School as more “illiberal” than the “old orthodoxy,” and even accused them of a “totalitarian disposition.”⁸³ At the same time, Wolfram Fischer dubbed Wehler “Praeceptor Germaniae” [Germany’s teacher], an ironic use of a title previously associated with the didactic nineteenth-century historian Heinrich von Treitschke.⁸⁴ A deep-seated resentment against Wehler and his supporters was also apparent at the aforementioned 1998 German historians’ conference in Frankfurt, where the revelations surrounding Wehler’s supervisor and mentor, Theodor Schieder, were used by some as a stick to beat his former pupil. “Does the new orthodoxy have brown [i.e., Nazi] roots?” asked one reviewer, while others could not resist a sense of *Schadenfreude* as the historian who had always been so vociferous in emphasizing his subject’s moral and pedagogic responsibility, now found himself charged with failing to be “critical” when it came to his own mentor’s dark past.⁸⁵

Despite Geiss’s claims to the contrary, the “new orthodoxy” was never as monolithic or as ruthless as the “old orthodoxy” of the pre-Fischer days. The expanded German higher education system of the 1970s was simply too big and heterogeneous for that, and there was no shortage of

79 See H.-G. Zmarzlik, “Das Kaiserreich in neuer Sicht,” *Historische Zeitschrift*, 222 (1976), pp. 105–26; or K. Hildebrand, “Geschichte oder ‘Gesellschaftsgeschichte’? Die Notwendigkeit einer politischen Geschichtsschreibung von den internationalen Beziehungen,” *Historische Zeitschrift*, 223 (1976), pp. 328–57.

80 S. Berger, *The Search for Normality*, p. 79.

81 *Ibid.*, p. 68.

82 I. Geiss, “Die Fischer-Kontroverse,” in *Studien über Geschichte und Geschichtswissenschaft* (Frankfurt, 1972), p. 194.

83 Interview with Geiss in R. Hohls and K. Jarausch, eds., *Versäumte Fragen*, pp. 235–6.

84 Interview with W. Fischer in *ibid.*, p. 115.

85 *Ibid.*, p. 115. See also the review by P. Stelzel, “Hat die Neue Orthodoxie braune Wurzeln?,” <http://www.literaturkritik.de> 11 (November 2001).

non-believers willing to challenge the dogmas of historical social science in print. That said, it is understandable how Wehler's brusque and combative manner could easily make enemies: the level of vituperation may have been lower than at the height of the Fischer controversy, but scholarly exchanges between German historians in the last third of the twentieth century remained notably more heated and more public than in the English-speaking world. One trenchant critic who nevertheless maintained reasonably good terms with Wehler was the Munich historian Thomas Nipperdey (1927–92), who was invited to set out his objections to Wehler's *Empire* in the first volume of *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*.⁸⁶ Nipperdey, a moderate traditionalist, accused Wehler of seeing history in black and white terms, rather than the more appropriate shades of grey; and of acting as both judge and jury over the German past. Evoking the best traditions of German historicism, Nipperdey was particularly anxious that the imperial era should be assessed on its own merits, and not viewed simply as the pre-history of the Third Reich. He argued that there were many lines of continuity in German history: some of which ran from the Kaiser's to Hitler's Germany, but others to Weimar and the Federal Republic.⁸⁷ Nipperdey also bemoaned the absence of narrative and human personalities in Wehler's work, which affected its readability and risked alienating the general public. Above all, he suggested, it resulted in a lifeless, static picture which did not do justice to an evolving and shifting scene.

The “Anglo-Saxon” Challenge

A different kind of challenge to the alleged “new orthodoxy” began to emerge in the late 1970s from a group of young British historians led by Richard Evans (born 1947), David Blackbourn (born 1949) and Geoff Eley (born 1949). As Evans notes, these historians had no prior connection to Germany at all, other than growing up in the 1950s amidst the still pervasive presence of the Second World War. If the initial impetus had been “to find out why the Germans had fought the war, and why Hitler had come to power,”⁸⁸ the belated arrival in Britain of the Fischer

86 T. Nipperdey, “Wehlers ‘Kaiserreich.’ Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 1 (1975), pp. 539–60, later reprinted in T. Nipperdey, *Gesellschaft – Kultur – Theorie* (Göttingen, 1976).

87 T. Nipperdey, “1933 und die Kontinuität der deutschen Geschichte,” *Historische Zeitschrift*, 227 (1978), pp. 86–111.

88 R. J. Evans, “Introduction,” in *Rethinking German History* (London, 1987), pp. 2–3.

controversy – *Griff nach der Weltmacht* appeared in an English translation in 1967 and two years later Fischer himself came to give a series of lectures – ensured that many who commenced postgraduate studies in German history around 1970 did so on the *Kaiserreich* rather than the Third Reich. Evans, Blackbourn, and Eley all proceeded to write well-respected research monographs of their own,⁸⁹ but it was two collaborative ventures which made the biggest impact: first, a collection of essays edited by Evans entitled *Society and Politics in Wilhelmine Germany* (1978) and then Blackbourn and Eley's *Mythen deutscher Geschichtsschreibung* (1980) which was republished in expanded form as *The Peculiarities of German History* (1984).⁹⁰ Until these two volumes, the notoriously insular guild had generally ignored British studies of German history, unless they could be instrumentalized for propaganda purposes (as in the campaign against the Versailles Treaty) or used to lend weight to a particular professor's pet thesis. There were some exceptions to the rule, of course, but the effects of two world wars cast a long shadow over both the content and reception of work by British historians on Germany. Even Evans, whose book on the German feminist movement was well received on both sides of the Atlantic, ruefully recalls that it received just one short review in a West Germany historical journal, and only then because the reviewer happened to be working on the same topic.⁹¹ Such complacent disinterest would change, however, with the publication of *Society and Politics in Wilhelmine Germany*, and especially *The Peculiarities of German History*, which attracted considerable attention in the German media and would later be acknowledged as an important historiographical landmark.

Both books confronted Wehler's view of the Empire head-on. Together they highlighted one of the key paradoxes (and weaknesses) of the "new orthodoxy." For all its much-vaunted internationalism and social scientific approach, it had continued very much in the national traditions of the historical guild, focusing on high politics and the state, to the virtual exclusion of the Empire's non-Prussian territories and vast swathes of German society. The "old" and the "new" orthodoxy had fought on "the same battleground," as Evans put it.⁹² One of the key premises of

89 R. J. Evans, *The Feminist Movement in Germany, 1894–1933* (London, 1976); D. Blackbourn, *Class, Religion and Local Politics in Wilhelmine Germany: The Centre Party in Württemberg before 1914* (London, 1980); G. Eley, *Reshaping the German Right: Radical Nationalism and Political Change After Bismarck* (New Haven and London, 1980).

90 R. J. Evans, ed., *Society and Politics in Wilhelmine Germany* (London, 1978); D. Blackbourn and G. Eley, *Mythen deutscher Geschichtsschreibung* (Frankfurt, 1980); in English as *The Peculiarities of German History* (Oxford, 1984).

91 R. J. Evans, "Introduction," in *Rethinking German History*, p. 5.

92 R. J. Evans, "Wilhelm II's Germany and the historians," in *Rethinking German History*, p. 45.

Society and Politics in Wilhelmine Germany was, therefore, to open up new perspectives on the *Kaiserreich*, to ensure that the voices of women, peasants, unemployed workers, and other groups on the margins – geographical as well as social – could finally be heard: “When the history of Wilhelmine Germany is approached from below, familiar features appear in an unfamiliar light,” Evans observed.⁹³ While not all his contributors could be said to have followed this agenda, Evans backed up his claim with a formidable series of edited volumes published during the course of the 1980s. The other main aim of the 1978 collection was, in Evans words, “to rehabilitate Wilhelmine society as an object of study in its own right, and not to treat it as merely as a prelude to the Nazi era”: an aspiration which echoed Nipperdey’s earlier critique of the “new orthodoxy,” and would become a mantra for many young researchers on the Empire in years to come.⁹⁴

The challenge posed by *The Peculiarities of German History*, however, was even more fundamental. The premise of this avowedly historiographical book was, in Blackbourn’s allusive phrase, that “all national histories are peculiar, but some appear to be more peculiar than others.”⁹⁵ By contesting the whole notion of German exceptionalism, the book called into question not only the “new orthodoxy’s reading of the *Kaiserreich*, but of modern German history as a whole.” Blackbourn and Eley’s attack came not from the right, as most of Wehler’s German critics had done, but from the Neo-Marxist left. They argued that the *Sonderweg* constructed by historians in the 1960s and 1970s was not based on any kind of genuine comparative history, but on an idealized vision of Anglo-American development. The very notion of a “special path” implied there was a “normal path” against which Germany should be measured, which they found both methodologically and empirically problematic. The “new orthodoxy” had relied too heavily on a misguided and romantic notion of what a successful bourgeois revolution should look like, and so had failed to see how far the Empire actually met the needs of middle-class Germans. In bemoaning the absence of a “heroic” conquest of power in the manner of 1789, the proponents of the *Sonderweg* had overlooked the fact that the bourgeoisie usually became the leading class in nineteenth-century Europe in a gradual or “silent” manner, through the “capitalist economic system and in civil society, in the sphere of property relations, the rule of law, associational life, certain dominant values.”⁹⁶ Hence there

93 Ibid., p. 46.

94 Ibid., p. 50.

95 D. Blackbourn, in D. Blackbourn and G. Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History*, p. 286.

96 D. Blackbourn, “The discreet charm of the bourgeoisie,” in *Populists and Patricians*, p. 76.

was no reason why a bourgeois revolution should have to require the establishment of parliamentary government along Westminster lines before it could be regarded as “successful” or “complete.” Moreover, terms such as “feudal” or “pre-industrial” were inappropriate in the context of the Imperial German elites, since even the notorious Junkers – “those all-purpose villains of modern German history”⁹⁷ – were capitalist farmers, engaged in a free market and with free mobility of labor. If anything, therefore, it was a case of “embourgeoisement” rather than “feudalization.” The German experience was, Blackbourn and Eley concluded, merely a “heightened version” of what happened elsewhere.

Blackbourn, Eley, and Evans did not, of course, agree on every aspect of the Empire, but one common theme linking all their work in the 1980s was the conviction that ordinary people – even peasants – must be viewed as active subjects, and not merely as passive objects of German history. This was perhaps most clearly apparent in their contributions to the debate on the nature of political mobilization in the Wilhelmine era. Where Wehler and the “new orthodoxy” stressed the importance of demagogic manipulation “from above,” the British historians saw a significant degree of autonomous self-mobilization “from below.” A good case in point is Eley’s work on the Navy League, an organization previously regarded as a prime example of manipulative social imperialism. In Eley’s reading the League was also, in part, an expression of a new kind of radical nationalism which was developing at grassroots level from the 1890s onwards.⁹⁸ Such findings had important implications for one of the central theses of the “Kehrites,” the so-called *Sammlungspolitik*. As we have seen, Wehler, Stegmann, and others emphasized the stability and longevity of this conservative pact, which they claimed was sustained by a host of manipulative techniques. The British historians now offered an alternative picture: of fragile, *ad hoc* arrangements, shifting uncertainly as Germany’s leaders struggled to “harness forces that could not be fully controlled.”⁹⁹

For all their ideological and methodological differences, certain similarities seemed to exist between the young British historians’ critique of the Bielefeld School and the earlier attack by Nipperdey. In fact, at this time the Munich historian was still reluctant to relinquish the *Sonderweg* model and remained unconvinced by what he termed Eley’s “somewhat crude personal Marxism.”¹⁰⁰ Even so, the robustness of Blackbourn and

97 D. Blackbourn, “The politics of demagoguery,” in *Populists and Patricians*, p. 221.

98 See G. Eley, *Reshaping the German Right*.

99 D. Blackbourn, “The politics of demagoguery,” p. 219.

100 See T. Nipperdey in *Kolloquien des Instituts für Zeitgeschichte, Deutscher Sonderweg – Mythos oder Realität* (Munich, 1982), p. 17.

Eley's challenge to the "new orthodoxy" was sufficient to guarantee a positive reception from some of German history's most conservative figures, ever eager to "normalize" their country's past. No doubt embarrassed by this unwelcome support, Blackbourn and Eley made strenuous efforts to acknowledge the valuable contribution of historical social science, but this could not prevent a fierce and personal counter-attack from the Bielefelders.¹⁰¹ Once passions had cooled, however, commentators began to suggest that the gulf was not actually as wide as it first appeared. Georg Iggers, for instance, noted of Blackbourn and Eley: "They, too, focus on the interrelation of society and politics; they too see continuities in German history even if these are more complex than those seen by the critical school; and they, too, are critical historians who write history from political and social commitment."¹⁰² Meanwhile Volker Berghahn questioned whether "the often bitter polemics had not obscured the fact that the two sides in the debate were merely looking at the same problem from opposite angles."¹⁰³ Certainly, while important differences remained, the mid- to late-1980s did witness a thaw in relations between the Bielefeld School and its British critics. This was symbolized in the establishment of several large-scale research projects to investigate on a comparative basis the history of the bourgeoisie (or, more accurately, the *Bürgertum*), and to test the rival claims of the "feudalization" and "embourgeoisement" theses.¹⁰⁴ The fact that one of the research projects was based in Bielefeld, at the very heart of the "new orthodoxy," is testament not only to the impact Blackbourn and Eley's work made on the German historians' guild, but also to Wehler and Kocka's willingness to review some of their most basic assumptions. A rash of subsequent publications came up with conflicting conclusions but offered little support

101 See, for example, H.-U. Wehler, "'Deutscher Sonderweg' oder allegemeine Probleme des westlichen Kapitalismus? Zur Kritik an einigen 'Mythen deutscher Geschichtsschreibung,'" *Merkur*, 35 (1981), pp. 477–87; G. Eley, "Antwort an Hans-Ulrich Wehler," *Merkur*, 35 (1981), pp. 757–9; H.-U. Wehler, "Rückantwort an Geoff Eley," *Merkur*, 35 (1981), p. 760; H.-J. Puhle, "Deutscher Sonderweg: Kontroverse um eine vermeintliche Legende," *Journal für Geschichte*, 3 (1981), pp. 44–5.

102 G. Iggers, "Introduction," in *The Social History of Politics*, p. 45.

103 V. Berghahn, "Introduction to the second edition," *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914*, p. 7.

104 The first of these projects, initiated by Werner Conze, predated the Blackbourn and Eley controversy. The second was established at Bielefeld in 1986, with the aim of examining the "Social history of the bourgeoisie: Germany in international comparison." A third project, run by Lothar Gall from Frankfurt, examined the *Bürgertum* in some 14 German cities between 1780 and 1870. Issues raised by this research are discussed in D. Blackbourn and R. J. Evans, eds., *The German Bourgeoisie* (London, 1989) and by J. Breuilly in "The elusive class: Some critical remarks on the historiography of the bourgeoisie," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 38 (1998), pp. 133–8.

for the “feudalization” thesis, which all but disappeared from accounts of the Empire in the 1990s.

One reason for the Bielefelders’ initial hostility to Blackbourn and Eley’s work was no doubt the suspicion that their emphasis on the pluralism and modernity of Wilhelmine Germany, and their frequent references to zoos, theaters, and concert halls, had apologist undertones; that the pre-Fischer guild’s elegiac evocation of the “good old days” could once again be ushered in through the back door. This was certainly not their intention. Both Blackbourn and Eley have written extensively on the “dark sides” of the Empire, but they reject the idea of a simple linear progression from the *Kaiserreich* to the Third Reich. Continuities, they argue, should be located not in the discrepancy between economic modernity and socio-political backwardness, but in the pathology of bourgeois modernity itself. It cannot be denied, however, that in the wake of *The Peculiarities of German History* a number of English-language historians produced studies with a rather more “optimistic” view of the Empire than had been the norm in post-Fischer West Germany. A good case in point was a misguided essay collection entitled *Another Germany*, edited by Jack Dukes and Joachim Remak, which consciously sought to reverse the “trap built into all recorded history – the disproportionate survival of the negative,” and not surprisingly ended up with what most considered to be an unduly positive picture.¹⁰⁵

Before we leave the Anglo-Saxon challenge to the “new orthodoxy,” it is important to note that it did not just come “from below.” While Richard Evans found widespread sympathy for his conviction that “social history belongs in the centre of German history,”¹⁰⁶ his British colleague John Röhl faced an altogether stiffer task in attempting to revive interest in monarchical history and biography at a time when both seemed to have become hopelessly outdated (see Chapter 2). In its own way, however, Röhl’s prodigious output on Kaiser Wilhelm II, along with biographies by the Americans Thomas Kohut and Lamar Cecil,¹⁰⁷ posed as serious a threat to the “new orthodoxy” as Evans, Blackbourn, or Eley. The last emperor had become a virtual non-person in Wehler’s *Empire*, meriting just seven references in the original German edition, but Röhl challenged

105 J. R. Dukes and J. Remak, eds., *Another Germany. A Reconsideration of the Imperial Era* (Boulder and London, 1988). The quote is originally from Barbara Tuchman.

106 R. J. Evans, “Introduction,” in *Rethinking German History*, p. 1.

107 L. Cecil, *Wilhelm II., vol. 1. Prince and Emperor, 1859–1900* (Chapel Hill and London, 1989); L. Cecil, *Wilhelm II. vol. 2. Emperor and Exile, 1900–1941* (Chapel Hill and London, 1996); T. Kohut, *Wilhelm II and the Germans. A Study in Leadership* (Oxford and New York, 1991).

this view with several lively collections of essays and the start of a mammoth three-volume biography.¹⁰⁸ His approach was predictably condemned by the Bielefelders as “personalist” and, therefore, inherently conservative and historicist, while his British colleague Evans was no more sympathetic: “This is history as the butler saw it. But does the keyhole really afford the best perspective on the past?”¹⁰⁹ Röhl, however, fiercely denied the charge of “personalism” and argued with some justification that his focus on the royal court did not preclude consideration of either structures or historical theory.

The East German View

Today it is all too easy to forget that until the dramatic events of 1989–90, a separate historical tradition, with its own particular perspective on the German Empire, had evolved in the territory of the German Democratic Republic. The East German view of the *Kaiserreich* is often overlooked, or dismissed as worthless, since its prime function was to provide political legitimation for the Communist state. Yet no historian works in an ideology-free zone, and every political system seeks legitimation. In this regard there were interesting parallels between the Marxist-Leninist historiography of the GDR and the equally didactic “historical social science” in the Federal Republic. The similarities were not purely functional: both endorsed the primacy of domestic politics; both were severely critical of the bourgeoisie for failing to fulfill its “historical mission”; and, as Evans observed in the late 1970s, both shared an aesthetic similarity too. “Historical monographs in West Germany have come more and more to resemble a kind of social-democratic mirror-image of their East German counterparts,” he wrote, “with empirical material being sandwiched between two slices of theoretical discussion – and, as often as not, effectively unrelated to either of them.”¹¹⁰ Of course, there was also much that divided GDR historians from the “new orthodoxy”: the latter’s use of “modernization” theory; the “feudalization” concept; above all, the

108 J. C. G. Röhl and N. Sombart, eds., *Kaiser Wilhelm II - New Interpretations* (Cambridge, 1982); J. C. G. Röhl, ed., *Der Ort Kaiser Wilhelms II. in der deutschen Geschichte* (Munich, 1991); J. C. G. Röhl, *The Kaiser and his Court. Wilhelm II and the Government of Germany* (Cambridge, 1994); J. C. G. Röhl, *Young Wilhelm. The Kaiser's Early Life 1859–1888* (Cambridge, 1998); J. C. G. Röhl, *Wilhelm II. The Kaiser's Personal Monarchy 1888–1900* (Cambridge, 2004).

109 In a 1983 review of Röhl and Sombart, eds., *Kaiser Wilhelm II - New Interpretations*. See R. J. Evans, “From Hitler to Bismarck,” in *Rethinking German History*, p. 59.

110 R. J. Evans, “Wilhelm II’s Germany and the historians,” p. 35.

conviction that the real inadequacy of the Empire lay in “the inherent flaws of the exploitative, class-divided capitalist system, which neither social integration nor any parliament could have remedied.”¹¹¹

History was the most generously funded of all the humanities in the GDR, but this support came at a high price: it was expected to justify and legitimate a system of “real existing socialism” which paid only lip-service to the principles of academic freedom and critical scholarship. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the spiritual fathers of the GDR, had seen history as part of a developmental process, inextricably linked to the present and the future, and subject to recurring and ascertainable laws. If, as they believed, the shape of the future could be “read” by the study of past developments, then it followed that the future was a necessary concern for the historian as well. In practice this meant that GDR historians would not only be expected to research the past, but also to play an active role in building the Workers’ and Peasants’ State. A distinctive GDR history first began to emerge around 1951, when an earlier Communist view which had developed in the years of Nazi tyranny and saw German history as one long tale of authoritarian “misery” – another version of the negative *Sonderweg*¹¹² – was rejected in favor of a new and more positive reading, which portrayed the GDR as the “lawful” heir of a proud democratic-revolutionary tradition. From this perspective the Empire was viewed as a “crucial social advance,” which for all its faults (monopoly capitalism, imperialism, and militarism) had given the growing working class new opportunities to organize on a national scale.¹¹³

East Germany’s progressive heritage, stretching back to the Peasants’ Revolt of the sixteenth century, was sketched out in a 1951 textbook entitled *The Development of Germany and the German Labor Movement until the Fall of Fascism*,¹¹⁴ which effectively placed the history of the labor movement at the centre of German national history (echoing the efforts of the Borussia School to give Prussia similar pride of place a century

111 A. Dorpalen, *German History in Marxist Perspective. The East German Approach* (Detroit, 1985), p. 238.

112 The so-called *Misere* approach was associated with the Hungarian Marxist theorist Georg Lukács and the German historian Alexander Abusch. See A. Fischer and G. Heydemann, “Weg und Wandel der Geschichtswissenschaft und des Geschichtsverständnisses in der SBZ/DDR seit 1945,” in A. Fischer and G. Heydemann, eds., *Geschichtswissenschaft in der DDR*, vol. 1 (Berlin, 1988), pp. 3–30.

113 H. Wolter, *Bismarcks Außenpolitik 1871–81. Außenpolitische Grundlinien von der Reichsgründung bis zum Dreikaiserbündnis* (East Berlin, 1983), p. 5

114 *Die Entwicklung Deutschlands und der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung bis zum Sturz des Faschismus* (East Berlin, 1951).

earlier).¹¹⁵ The book was prepared by a team of historians under the leadership of Kurt Hager (1912–98), head of the propaganda department of the Socialist Unity Party's Central Committee, and a powerful influence on GDR history throughout the lifetime of the republic. At the first state-wide meeting of East German historians in 1952, Hager called on all those present to learn the lessons of Marx and Engels, and to adopt "historical materialism" as their method.¹¹⁶ Historians should recognize, in other words, that history was driven not by ideas or individuals (the unscientific "idealist" conception of history which prevailed in the West), but by the development and ownership of modes of production. Only by studying these changes, which were subject to universally valid laws, could history become truly scientific. It was immediately clear, however, that there were embarrassing gaps in the existing Marxist-Leninist scholarship, in terms of both historical periods and social classes. Many of these gaps would remain untouched by GDR historians until the 1980s, since, at the Party's behest, historians' efforts were to be focused on a few selected highlights of German history: principally the Reformation and Peasants' Revolt; the Revolutions of 1848–9; and the rise of the working class. Historical research institutes were established at the German Academy of Sciences in East Berlin and at the Universities of East Berlin, Halle, and Leipzig, and a rational division of labor was agreed, with each institute focusing on a different "strategic area." Ominously, "scientific cadres" – political appointees with a special training in Marxism-Leninism – were also appointed to each institute, to ensure the historians did not deviate from their designated tasks, though it was not until 1964, when a special department to coordinate all historical research was established at the Academy of Sciences, that centralized control was finally secured.¹¹⁷ The last remaining regular contacts between East and West German historians were broken off at around the same time.

It is difficult to pass judgment on the achievements of GDR history in this period, given the high degree of political control and the absence of a free scholarly culture. Most assessments of GDR historiography do, however, acknowledge that valuable empirical work was carried out in a number of areas, such as "revolutions, social history and everyday life."¹¹⁸ Writing in the mid-1980s, the American Georg Iggers – by no

115 S. Berger, "National paradigm and legitimacy: Uses of academic history writing in the 1960s," in P. Major and J. Osmond, eds., *The Workers' and Peasants' State. Communism and Society in East Germany under Ulbricht 1945–71* (Manchester, 2002), p. 252.

116 A. Dorpalen, *German History in Marxist Perspective*, p. 49.

117 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

118 K. H. Pohl, "Einleitung: Geschichtswissenschaft in der DDR," in K. H. Pohl, ed., *Historiker in der DDR* (Göttingen, 1997), p. 17.

means an apologist for East Germany – referred to the “great contributions of DDR historical studies” in the area of social and economic history, particularly with regard to the impact of industrialization.¹¹⁹ Works such as the eight-volume *History of the German Labor Movement* or Jürgen Kuczynski’s monumental *History of the Condition of Workers under Capitalism* were certainly impressive in scope, and were recognized in the West as the product of serious research.¹²⁰ Other GDR ventures to receive praise were *Germany and the First World War*, a three-volume collection which appeared in 1968, and a monumental compendium on the history of German political parties, edited by Dieter Fricke and published on both sides of the wall.¹²¹

The very narrow parameters for historical research set in 1951 remained largely unchanged until the early 1970s, when the onset of the era of détente, together with changes at the top of the East German state – most notably the replacement of Walter Ulbricht by Erich Honecker in 1971 – ushered in a limited but significant opening up of GDR history. While non-conformists struggled to find a niche in areas such as church history, which enjoyed a partial autonomy, an expanded definition of the GDR’s “heritage” (*Erbe*)¹²² broadened the range of acceptable topics open to “mainstream” East German historians: Luther, Frederick the Great, Bismarck, and the history of Prussia more generally, all became the subject of research in the late 1970s and particularly the 1980s. This shift from a selective to a more integral approach had a number of causes. The GDR’s desire “to back-project their own statehood onto the historical identity of the part of Germany they occupied, so that Luther or Frederick the Great . . . appeared retrospectively East German” was a factor,¹²³ as was Erich Honecker’s personal interest in Prussian history,¹²⁴ but it must

119 G. Iggers, “Foreword,” in A. Dorpalen, *German History in Marxist Perspective*, p. 17.

120 Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED, *Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, 8 vols. (East Berlin, 1966); J. Kuczynski, *Die Geschichte der Lage der Arbeiter unter dem Kapitalismus*, 38 vols. (East Berlin, 1961–72).

121 F. Klein et al., *Deutschland im Ersten Weltkrieg*, 3 vols. (East Berlin, 1968–9); D. Fricke, ed., *Lexikon zur Parteiengeschichte 1789–1945: Die bürgerlichen und kleinbürgerlichen Parteien und Verbände in Deutschland* (Leipzig and Cologne, 1983–6).

122 A distinction was made in GDR historiography between East Germany’s broad “heritage” and its more narrowly-defined historical “tradition.” The latter, based on the history of the working class, was of course valued more highly. See U. Neuhäuser-Wespy, “Erbe und Tradition in der DDR. Zum gewandelten Geschichtsbild der SED,” in A. Fischer and G. Heydemann, eds., *Geschichtswissenschaft in der DDR*, vol. 1, pp. 129–54.

123 R. J. Evans, “German history – past, present and future,” in G. Martel, ed., *Modern Germany Reconsidered*, pp. 238–9.

124 See J. Petzold, “Politischer Auftrag und wissenschaftliche Verantwortung von Historikern in der DDR,” in K. H. Pohl, ed., *Historiker in der DDR*, p. 100.

primarily be seen as a consequence of East Germany's political ambitions. It was hoped that references to the national heritage could help to legitimize the concept of a separate "socialist German nation."¹²⁵ History in the GDR had possessed a strong "national(ist) orientation" since the early 1950s,¹²⁶ but the more pronounced emphasis on its Prussian heritage in the 1980s now led to the curious situation that Marxist East German historians were often less critical of the *Kaiserreich* than their colleagues in the "bourgeois" West.

GDR research into Prussian history was centered in Berlin, while the Karl-Marx-University in Leipzig continued its established focus on labor and world history. Historians in both institutes, however, appear to have had increasing difficulty in fitting their empirical findings into a Marxist-Leninist framework. For some time, East German history books had been quietly turning orthodox Marxist theory on its head by paying far greater attention to developments in the "superstructure" (such as politics), than to the changing modes of production at the economic "base."¹²⁷ The most acclaimed products of East German history in the Honecker era, such as Hartmut Zwahr's work on the formation of the Leipzig working class,¹²⁸ or the two-volume biography of Bismarck by Ernst Engelberg (see Chapter 2), appeared impressive precisely because these authors were able to loosen the constraints of the ideological straitjacket more than most. In their very different ways, however, both Zwahr (born 1936) and Engelberg (born 1909) remained exceptions to the rule. When regular meetings between East and West German scholars were tentatively revived in the early 1980s, the inability of GDR historians to back up their theoretical positions with empirical research (or vice-versa) was recognized on both sides. Indeed, as Martin Sabrow notes, this recognition led to anxious discussions in the Central Institute for History at the Academy of Sciences, and an internal acknowledgement that GDR history was falling short of international standards.¹²⁹

After reunification in 1990 there were heated and often bitter exchanges over the extent to which East German historians had been forced

125 A. Blänsdorf, "Die deutsche Geschichte in der Sicht der DDR," *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, 39 (1988), p. 274.

126 S. Berger, "National paradigm and legitimacy," p. 256.

127 See A. Dorpalen, *German History in Marxist Perspective*, p. 27.

128 H. Zwahr, *Zur Konstituierung des Proletariats als Klasse. Strukturuntersuchung über das Leipziger Proletariat während der industriellen Revolution* (Berlin, 1978).

129 M. Sabrow, "Der Streit um die Verständigung. Die deutsch-deutschen Zeithistorikergespräche in den achtziger Jahren," in A. Bauerkämper, M. Sabrow, and B. Stöver, eds., *Doppelte Zeitgeschichte. Deutsch-deutsche Beziehungen 1945–90* (Bonn, 1998), p. 129.

to conform, or had timidly adapted to circumstances through self-censorship. Fierce verbal attacks on former GDR historians – very few of whom were able to retain their university posts – came principally from two quarters: young dissidents, such as Armin Mitter and Stefan Wolle, who had been excluded from jobs in the GDR; and the grandees of the West German historical guild, who were determined not to “turn a blind eye” as their scholarly fathers had done after 1945. One of the latter, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, declared in 1991 that for decades the “overwhelming majority of GDR historians” had “prostituted themselves as the intellectual lackeys of a late Stalinist party,” and had therefore lost all credibility.¹³⁰ It was a sweeping judgment, but one that was very much in keeping with the Borussia mood of triumphalism which swept through western Germany in the aftermath of reunification.

The End of the *Sonderweg*?

Although the enlarged Federal Republic of the 1990s possessed neither the borders nor the institutions of Bismarck’s Empire, there was a palpable sense among German historians, on the moderate left as well as the conservative right, that some kind of normality had been restored; that Germany’s “long road to the West” had finally reached its destination.¹³¹ This was apparent not only in the desire to consign GDR historiography to the scrapheap, but also in an upsurge of interest in Germany’s first unification and its subsequent history. It had become fashionable in the 1970s and 1980s to think of the Federal Republic as a “post-national” state – to argue that the Germans were better off divided, since that was the way they had lived for the most of their history – but such arguments disappeared with almost unseemly haste in the 1990s. Whether one sees this as part of a deeply disturbing attempt to sanitize and “renationalize” German identity, as Stefan Berger does, or agrees with Heinrich August Winkler that it marked a welcome return to European normality, the consequences for the historiography of the *Kaiserreich* have been largely positive. One by one, the major historians of the post-Fischer era stepped forward to offer their considered reflections on the Empire and its history: Nipperdey, Mommsen, Ullmann, Wehler, and

130 Quoted by W. Bramke, “Freiräume und Grenzen eines Historikers im DDR-System,” in K. H. Pohl, ed., *Historiker in der DDR*, p. 29.

131 The title chosen by Heinrich A. Winkler for his two-volume history of modern Germany was *Der lange Weg nach Westen*, vol. 1. 1806–1933 and vol. II. 1933–1990 (Munich, 2000).

Winkler among them.¹³² Some of these authors sought to address an audience far beyond the scholarly community, and as the public rediscovered its interest in accessible works of history, new publishing opportunities arose for younger and less prominent historians too.¹³³ Of course, the *Geschichtswelle*, or history boom, of the 1990s was by no means only a German phenomenon. In the English-speaking world, where history was “flavor of the month,” readers could choose from a wider selection of titles on Imperial Germany than ever before.¹³⁴ Inevitably this substantial corpus of post-reunification scholarship provides much of the raw material for the following chapters, although the reflective nature of many of these studies means they are stronger on past historiographical battles than on current debates.

Since the merits of individual titles cannot be discussed here, a few general observations on the post-1990 historiography must suffice. The most obvious common characteristic has been the move away from the *Sonderweg* paradigm. Blackbourn and Eley’s contribution has been previously mentioned, but it is important to recognize that the Britons were not solely responsible for this development. It was already apparent in the early 1980s that many German historians considered this central plank of the “new orthodoxy” to be conceptually flawed,¹³⁵ and it was further undermined by the results of the comparative *Bürgertum* research of the

132 T. Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte, 1866–1918*, vol. 1. *Arbeitswelt und Bürgergeist* (Munich, 1990); T. Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte, 1866–1918*, vol. 2. *Machtstaat vor der Demokratie* (Munich, 1992); W. J. Mommsen, *Das Ringen um den nationalen Staat: Die Gründung und der innere Ausbau des Deutschen Reiches unter Otto von Bismarck 1850 bis 1890* (Berlin, 1993); W. J. Mommsen, *Bürgerstolz und Weltmachtstreben: Deutschland unter Wilhelm II 1890–1918* (Berlin, 1995); H.-P. Ullmann, *Das deutsche Kaiserreich 1871–1918* (Frankfurt, 1995); H.-U. Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, vol. 3. *Von der “Deutschen Doppelrevolution” bis zum Beginn des Ersten Weltkriegs, 1849–1914* (Munich, 1995).

133 See works such as D. Hertz-Eichenrode, *Deutsche Geschichte 1871–1890. Das Kaiserreich in der Ära Bismarck* (Stuttgart, 1992); D. Hertz-Eichenrode, *Deutsche Geschichte 1890–1918. Das Kaiserreich in der wilhelminischen Zeit* (Stuttgart, 1996); W. Loth, *Das Kaiserreich. Obrigkeitsstaat und politische Mobilisierung* (Munich, 1996); V. Ullrich, *Die nervöse Großmacht. Aufstieg und Untergang des deutschen Kaiserreichs* (Frankfurt, 1997); E. Frie, *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich* (Darmstadt, 2004).

134 J. Retallack, *Germany in the Age of Kaiser Wilhelm II*; V. Berghahn, *Imperial Germany 1871–1914: Economy, Society, Culture and Politics* (Providence and Oxford, 1994); W. J. Mommsen, *Imperial Germany 1867–1918: Politics, Culture and Society in an Authoritarian State* (London, 1995 – first published in Germany in 1990); D. Blackbourn, *The Fontana History of Germany, 1780–1918. The Long Nineteenth Century* (London, 1997); M. Seligmann and R. McLean, *Germany from Reich to Republic 1871–1918* (Basingstoke, 2000); E. Feuchtwanger, *Imperial Germany 1850–1918* (London, 2001).

135 Institut für Zeitgeschichte, *Deutscher Sonderweg. Mythos oder Realität?*; J. Kocka, “Der ‘deutsche Sonderweg’ in der Diskussion,” *German Studies Review*, 5 (1982), pp. 365–79; H. Grebing, ed., *Der deutsche Sonderweg in Europa 1806–1945. Eine Kritik* (Stuttgart, 1986).

late 1980s. If the majority at that time still favored its retention, it was for political and pedagogic rather than scholarly reasons. The idea that the course of German history had gone badly awry had been central to the establishment and the legitimation of the Federal Republic after 1945, and remained an important part of West Germany's political identity: "If you eliminate the *Sonderweg* thesis then you break the backbone of Germany's political consciousness since 1945," Kurt Sontheimer argued in 1982.¹³⁶ The fear that such a step would play into the hands of ultra conservatives, who wish to deny the existence of problematic continuities in Germany's history and seek to relativize their nation's historical guilt, was still a concern for Berger in the mid-1990s.¹³⁷ By then, however, it was clear that its supporters had conceded so much ground that the concept (as originally conceived) was no longer viable. Although one should be wary of pronouncing the *Sonderweg* dead and buried – it is unlikely to ever fully disappear – few were still propagating an unrevised version of Germany's "special path" at the century's end.¹³⁸

In a 1998 essay with the revealing title "After the End of the *Sonderweg*," Jürgen Kocka accepted that the "pre-modern" and "feudal" characteristics of the Empire had been exaggerated, and acknowledged that the word *Sonderweg* was itself unhelpful.¹³⁹ Those, like Kocka, who nevertheless wished to retain at least some sense of German specificity, were forced to redefine their terms: Karl Dietrich Bracher spoke of Germany's "special consciousness"; Helga Grebing of "distinctive difficulties"; and Wehler – in his ambitious structural history of German society or *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* – replaced the notion of a "special path" with Germany's "special conditions."¹⁴⁰ More recently, Hartwin Spenkuch has argued that although the central argument of the *Sonderweg* thesis does not fit the Empire as a whole, it can still be applied to Prussia.¹⁴¹ Whether any of these modifications to the *Sonderweg* represents a substantial improvement is open to doubt; more significant is the fact that by making concessions and seeking common ground, the historians of the Bielefeld School helped to defuse an issue that had earlier provoked polemical excesses on both

136 K. Sontheimer in *Deutscher Sonderweg. Mythos oder Realität?* p. 32.

137 S. Berger, *The Search for Normality*, pp. 117–18.

138 The left-wing political scientist Reinhard Kühnl was one. See his *Deutschland seit der Französischen Revolution. Untersuchungen zum deutschen Sonderweg* (Heilbronn, 1996).

139 J. Kocka, "Nach dem Ende des Sonderwegs. Zur Tragfähigkeit eines Konzepts," in A. Bauerkämper, M. Sabrow, and B. Stöver, eds., *Doppelte Zeitgeschichte*.

140 K. D. Bracher, in *Deutscher Sonderweg. Mythos oder Realität?* p. 46; H. Grebing, *Der deutsche Sonderweg in Europa*, p. 199; H.-U. Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, vol. 3.

141 H. Spenkuch, "Vergleichsweise besonders? Politisches System und Strukturen Preußens als Kern des 'Deutschen Sonderwegs,'" *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 29 (2003), pp. 262–93.

sides. The extent of the consensus should not be exaggerated – as a further sharp exchange of views between Wehler and Eley in the mid-1990s made clear¹⁴² – but a real convergence of positions was nevertheless apparent. Not only did the words *Sonderweg* and “feudalization” disappear, but there was a less judgmental tone and a greater sensitivity to the era’s numerous ambiguities. There was general agreement that the Empire underwent some dramatic changes during its 47 year existence, not just economically and socially, but politically too. Many of these changes were caused by “factors of a non-intentional nature,” rather than the conscious decisions of Germany’s elites.¹⁴³ On the other hand, it also became widely accepted that although the German experience may only have been an “intensified version of the norm,” the unprecedented simultaneity (or “tragic contemporaneity” to use Nipperdey’s phrase) of three of the modern world’s most fundamental challenges – the national question, the constitutional question, and the social question – did present the Empire with a particularly formidable set of problems.

It was, of course, no coincidence that the fading of the *Sonderweg* paradigm occurred in the 1990s. Its decline was in part a consequence of the “normalization” of German affairs brought about by reunification, but the *Sonderweg* was also a classic example of the kind of “meta-narrative” that has met with increasing historiographical skepticism in the post-modern era. This is borne out by the fact that no other master narrative has emerged to take its place. Instead, as Kenneth Ledford notes, “[t]he focus of historical research has . . . tended to shift from sweeping interpretation and master narrative to the inner workings of institutions, the social construction and cultural meaning(s) of categories such as religion, class, and gender, and to a tolerance of ambiguity.”¹⁴⁴ The danger inherent in this otherwise positive development is clear: a sheer mass of detail, freed from the restraints of an overarching story, could end up obscuring rather than clarifying the bigger picture. If a “diffuse Pointillism” comes to replace the structured synthesis, Wehler recently argued, the historical profession risks failure in its duty to interpret and explain the past.¹⁴⁵ Ledford’s quote hints at another significant trend in the historiography too: the range of methodological approaches being adopted by historians of the German Empire is

142 See Wehler’s review article in *Central European History*, 29 (1996), pp. 541–72, and Eley’s reply in *Central European History*, 31 (1998), pp. 197–227.

143 C. Lorenz, “Beyond good and evil?,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, 30 (1995), p. 756.

144 K. Ledford, “Comparing comparisons: Disciplines and the *Sonderweg*,” *Central European History*, 36 (2003), p. 372.

145 H.-U. Wehler, *Historisches Denken am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen, 2001), p. 102.

wider than ever before. Indeed, historians today are more likely to disagree on conceptual and methodological issues than on the character of the Empire itself. While historiographical diversity is to be welcomed, if historians cannot agree on the correct questions to ask they will be in no position to complain when others – journalists, film-makers, or Internet activists – take on that role instead. In this sense at least, Wehler’s concern seems justified.

Finally, it has been suggested that the post-1990 historiography is noticeably more positive about the Empire than that of the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁴⁶ Although there is an element of truth in this assertion, it is also misleading. With the exception of the area of foreign policy – where there has undoubtedly been some attempt to revive “pre-Fischer” positions – the 1990s produced no significant study of the Empire which genuinely merits the label “apologist.” What is undoubtedly the case, however, is that the “reunification” of 1990 has made the *Kaiserreich* seem less like a historical aberration and more like a precursor to today’s Germany. For some this is a cause for concern; for others a source of pride, yet it is nevertheless striking how all recent historians have sought to provide a balanced picture of this fascinating era, in which one can find examples of light and shadow in remarkably equal measure.

146 See S. Berger, *The Search for Normality*, p. 112.