History of Germany
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Key personality: Bismarck
Germany under Bismarck 1870 – 1890
The Unification of Germany 1864-1871
Bismarck’s Foreign Policy 1871-1890

Key point:
Although there were some impressive economic achievements Bismarck’s domestic polices were at times divisive
and repressive. They failed to unite all of the German people behind the new state.
During the reign of Kaiser William I (1871-1888), Bismarck (nicknamed the Iron Chancellor) was the most
powerful man in the Empire and completely dominated the government of the Reich.

The following elements of his domestic policy will be examined:
  - Political Parties
  - The Constitution of the Second Reich.
  - The “Kulturkampf”
  - Economic change
  - Bismarck’s attempts to curb the growth of socialism.

Main Political Parties in the Second Reich

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>SPD</td>
<td>Party wished to see a socialist state in Germany. Persecuted but received the largest number of votes from 1890 onwards. Very popular in the newly expanding towns.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Centre Party</td>
<td>Party represented Catholics and national minorities such as the Poles. It cut across class boundaries and drew support form all elements of German Catholic society.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Progressive Liberals</td>
<td>Middle Class party that split from the National Liberals. Favorited constitutional reform. Supported the anti-clerical measures against the Catholic Church</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Liberals</td>
<td>Dominant party of the early years of the Second Reich. Middle Class party. Favorited anti-Clerical measures and Free Trade</td>
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<td>Free Conservatives</td>
<td>Party of big business. Politically the closest to Bismarck</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conservatives</td>
<td>This party represented the interest of the Junker class. Strong in Prussia. Over represented in the Reichstag</td>
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The Constitution:
Prussia dominated the new Germany that was called the Second Reich. It covered two thirds of the land area and contained the same proportion of the population. It had practically all the industry. The new constitution drawn up by Bismarck was a Federal system. Each of the twenty-five states had considerable control over their affairs and decided their own form of government; e.g. Bavaria and Saxony were ruled by kings. Under the constitution there were to be three branches of the Federal government:
The Presidency that was held by the King of Prussia (as German Emperor). The German Emperor had considerable powers. He had personal control of the armed forces. He appointed and dismissed all ministers including the Chancellor.
The Federal Council (or Bundesrat) represented the different states of the Empire. It had fifty-eight members. Seventeen were from Prussia, six from Bavaria, four from Saxony. It had the power to change the constitution. However no change could be made to the constitution if fourteen delegates objected. This in practice meant that Prussia could always stop change.

The Parliament or Reichstag was elected by Universal Male Suffrage (all males over 25 could vote) and Secret Ballot. It voted on the Federal budget and its consent was needed for all legislation. This was the most advanced system in Europe at this time.

However, the powers of the Reichstag were limited:
It could not initiate legislation. It had no say in the appointment or dismissal of the Chancellor or Imperial ministers. The Imperial Chancellor was appointed by the Emperor. He was in charge of foreign policy. The Kaiser (in effect Bismarck) could dissolve it any time with the agreement of the Bundesrat.

The Kulturkampf (the Struggle for Civilization)
After unification about two-thirds of Germans were Protestant (mainly Lutheran) while about one-third were Catholics.

Reasons for the Kulturkampf:
The largest party in the Reich was the National Liberals. Their philosophy opposed all institutions that placed restraints on the freedom of the individual. They saw Rome as their natural enemy. In 1864 the Pope Pius IX had strongly condemned Liberalism throughout Europe. The doctrine of Papal Infallibility (1871) further alarmed Protestant opinion and placed a question mark over the loyalty of Catholics to the new Empire.

Catholics were traditionally pro-Austrian and this was a further cause for suspicion about their loyalty. Bismarck, although not anti-Catholic himself, believed that German Catholics could give only some of their allegiance to the German state and must reserve some part of their loyalties to a non-German authority (the Pope). He harassed Catholicism as a "state within a state."

The Catholic Centre party (Zentrum) was founded in 1870 to defend the interests of Catholics within the new Reich. Bismarck was alarmed at the formation of a party that seemed to give its allegiance to Rome, and not to the Reich. The support of national minorities for the party further confirmed this fear.

As a Prussian, Bismarck was intolerant of the Polish minority in the East of Germany. He was annoyed that the Church encouraged the use of the Polish language in areas that were predominantly Polish.
The main battleground was control of education. It is important to remember that this was a struggle waged by the both the Reich and state governments. The main states involved were Prussia, Baden and Hesse.

The May Laws
In 1871 the Catholic division of the Prussian Ministry of Culture was abolished. A leading anti-clerical, Adalbert Falk was appointed as minister and in 1872 the Jesuits were expelled from Germany.

The following year, the "May Laws" were introduced by Falk in Prussia.
The state was given control over education. They extended State control over the education of the clergy. They laid down required subjects for ordination. It decreed that candidates for the priesthood had to attend a German University for three years before entering a seminary.

Civil Marriage was introduced.
The power of the Papacy in Germany was undermined when disciplinary authority over the Church was given to state agencies e.g. civil appointment of Bishops.

The reaction of the Catholic Church
In 1874 when the Church refused to accept the validity of these laws the government responded with even more severe restrictions on the power of the Church. A law in May gave the Prussian government the power to expel all clerics who did not meet the requirements set in 1873. It authorized the state to fill vacancies.
However elections to the Reichstag showed that these policies had failed to weaken the Zentrum who won 95 seats. The laws had convinced many Catholics that a separate party was necessary for the defense of their interests.

In 1875 the Pope issued an encyclical that declared all the measures invalid. The state responded by cutting off all financial aid to Bishops until they recognized the laws. All monastic orders except those engaged in medical work were expelled from Prussia.

For Catholics Prussia became a police state. Many Bishops and priests were imprisoned including the Archbishop of Posen, the Archbishop of Cologne, and the Bishop of Treves and others were expelled from Prussia. A total of 1400 parishes - one third of those in Prussia - were left without priests.

**The End of the Kulturkampf**

However many Germans, including the Kaiser and the Crown Prince, were concerned about the effects of these policies upon the moral-fabric of the nation.

Conservative Protestants were uncomfortable about civil marriage and state control of education. Others feared the consequences of the wholesale alienation of the Catholic population. Bismarck himself was becoming uneasy.

In 1878 the death of Pope Pius IX and the election of the conciliatory Leo XIII opened the way for compromise. Leo wrote to the Kaiser expressing his hope for friendly relations with Germany. Bismarck also began to tire of his National Liberal allies and viewed the Zentrum as possible future allies. The two issues of socialism and protectionism had become more important.

As Carr wrote “the time had come for the chancellor to cut his losses before the Empire was seriously weakened by a campaign that had only succeeded in deepening the confessional divisions in Germany.”

In 1879 Bismarck acted and Falk was dismissed. Most of the "May Laws" were dismantled in the following years except for those relating to state schools and civil marriage. The struggle left Catholics with a distrust of the state that was to last for years. It also embittered Polish-German relations.

**The Economy**

The period directly after unification was one of economic prosperity for Germany. The Crash of 1873 slowed this growth but the 1880s saw the economy pick up again. Large sums of money were invested in technological development. Germany led the way in the sciences and her industry enthusiastically adopted the new scientific developments of the period.

**Successful innovations included:**

- **The invention of the internal combustion engine (1876)**
- **Electric train (1879)**
- **Telephone network introduced into Berlin (1881)**
- **Four Wheel Cars were patented by Daimler and Benz**

As a result production increased dramatically in the textile, coal and steel industries. By 1900 Germany rivaled the more-established British economy as Europe’s largest.

The table below shows some of the impressive growth in these years:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>1875</th>
<th>1900</th>
<th>Railways (miles)</th>
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<tr>
<td>27,970</td>
<td>46,500</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47,800,000</td>
<td>142,650,000</td>
<td>Coal (tons)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,759,000</td>
<td>7,550,000</td>
<td>Iron (tons)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Germany’s population also expanded rapidly, growing from 41 million in 1871 to 50 million in 1891. The rapidly industrializing economy changed the way this expanding population earned its livelihood. By the 1880s a majority of Germans were living in towns rather than in the countryside. There was a continued flight of people from the rural East to the towns of the west. This rapid pace of industrialization contributed to the growth of the SPD.
A major economic issue was the question of tariffs. Traditionally Prussia and Germany had favored Free Trade. Big business and the large landowners wished to see their introduction. The National Liberals opposed tariffs. In 1879 in response to a well-organized political pressure and competition from cheap agricultural imports, Bismarck abandoned Free Trade and introduced tariffs.

**Bismarck and Socialism**

The creation of a large working class led to the growth of socialism. Bismarck saw the socialists as a threat to the social and political unity of the Reich and to Europe. He accused them of being un-German and greatly disliked the international nature of the movement. As Carr notes "Socialism like Catholicism had allegiances beyond the Nation state which Bismarck could neither understand nor tolerate".

In 1869 various socialist groups had joined together to form the Social Democratic Party (SPD). In 1875 at a party congress at Gotha the party drew up its program. This called for the state to take over industry and the sharing of profits among workers. In 1878 the SPD had twelve seats in the Reichstag (although their representation was greatly underestimated due to the fact that rural constituencies were much smaller than urban ones). There were two attempts on the life of the Kaiser in that year. Using these attacks as an excuse, Bismarck introduced anti-socialist laws.

**The Anti-Socialist Laws**

The Law deprived socialist organizations of the right of assembly and publication (of the 47 socialist newspapers, 45 were banned).

It also gave the government the power to expel persons from their residence who could be described as agitators. Although SPD deputies were allowed to sit in the Reichstag in effect socialism was banned in Germany. All Trade Unions associated with the SPD were also crushed. In 1880 the SPD, now in effect an underground organization, met in Switzerland to resist Bismarck's measures. A new socialist newspaper was published in Zurich and smuggled into Germany.

**Social Welfare Reform**

However Bismarck realized that socialism could not be defeated by harsh measures alone. He knew that policies were needed to improve the position of workers in Germany so as to erode support for the socialists. Williamson wrote that he wanted “to reconcile the working classes to the authority of the state.”

In 1883 he introduced a measure that gave compensation to workers during illness.

In 1884 an Accident Insurance law was introduced to compensate workers injured at work. In 1889 an Old Age Pension scheme was introduced for workers over seventy.

Although he failed to curb growing SPD support the measures were very constructive and helped to improve the life of most ordinary Germans. They were twenty years ahead of Britain in the area of Social Welfare. As Massie noted “Bismarck had given the German working class the most advanced social legislation in the World.”

**Fall from Power**

In 1888 Kaiser William I died and was succeeded by his son Frederick who died of cancer after ninety days. He was succeeded by William II (aged 29) who was determined to assert his authority and take a more active role. In 1889 he received a deputation of striking miners against the advice of the chancellor. The elections of 1890 went badly for Bismarck. He attempted to introduce a new anti-socialist bill. The Bill was defeated in the Reichstag with William II opposed to the law.

Bismarck was beginning to lose control of events and ordered ministers not to see the Kaiser without consulting him first. William demanded that he rescind this order or resign. Bismarck managed to give the impression that he disagreed with the Kaiser on a foreign policy issue and resigned. After Bismarck's resignation (March) the anti-socialist laws were allowed to lapse.

He retired to his estate where he attacked the policies of Kaiser William and his ministers. He hoped to be asked to return to power but the summons never came and he died in 1898.

**Assessment**
Bismarck was idolized by millions of Germans who rejoiced in his successful policy of unifying Germany. He towered over his contemporaries “a giant among pigmies” (Carr). Like all great men he had his personality defects. He was petty, vindictive and ruthless in his treatment of those who stood in his way. No other German exerted so profound an influence on German history in the 19th century. When he came to power Germany was a collection of states; when he left office Germany was a united nation feared and respected by the Great Powers. He undoubtedly committed many blunders especially in his handling of the Church and the working class and his defense of the interests of the Junker class. Yet on the other hand he helped to promote the modernization of Germany and was responsible for a social welfare system that gave working people some limited stake in the survival of the Empire.

William Carr: A History of Germany
Meet the web creator

Last modified 5 January, 2011