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# Introduction

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Why has a fascination with Germany under Otto von Bismarck and Kaiser Wilhelm II persisted to this day, even though a more recent and darker period of German history—the Third Reich—competes for attention? The following chapters provide their own answers to this question and suggest starting points for further study. They consider the German Empire (*das Deutsche Reich*) of 1871–1918, which emerged from the diverse collection of kingdoms, grand duchies, principalities, and free cities in central Europe. This new empire was a semi-parliamentary constitutional monarchy of about 41 million inhabitants (growing to over 65 million in 1914). It was founded in January 1871 not only on the basis of Bismarck’s ‘blood and iron’ policy in the 1860s but also with the support of liberal nationalists. Under Bismarck and Wilhelm II, Germany became the dynamo of Europe. Its economic and military power were pre-eminent; German science and technology, education, and municipal administration were the envy of the world; and its avant-garde artists reflected the ferment in European culture. But Germany also played a decisive role in tipping Europe’s fragile balance of power over the brink and into the cataclysm of the First World War, eventually leading to the empire’s collapse in military defeat and revolution in November 1918.

The chapters of this book offer thematic discussions of this tumultuous half-century of German development and consider competing scholarly interpretations of its significance. This introduction sets the stage for those discussions. It does so, first, by questioning the accepted chronological framing of the Bismarckian (1871–90) and Wilhelmine (1890–1918) eras. How can we best assess Imperial Germany’s place in the larger sweep of German history: by emphasizing continuity or rupture? Second, what happens

when we situate Imperial Germany outside the usual framework of the unitary nation state? One way to appreciate the diverse experiences of Germans living in the empire is to recalibrate our perspective to the subnational and transnational levels. This allows historians to explore local and regional peculiarities, on the one hand, and international and global influences, on the other. Third, historians have offered strongly divergent views about Imperial Germany's 'authoritarian' and 'modern' features and how best to study them. But which approaches and conclusions have stood the test of time? Which have brought the German Empire into sharper focus and which offer more ambivalent judgements? A last section introduces key themes that run like a red thread through the volume, suggesting why Imperial Germany is still so relevant and accessible to students in the twenty-first century.

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## Continuity and rupture

University students today belong to a generation born after the Berlin Wall was breached on 9 November 1989. Their teachers were socialized and, in many cases, trained as historians when the idea of a single German nation state still seemed far-fetched. This difference of outlook provides a welcome opportunity to rethink the ruptures of German history that *seem* self-evident—1815, 1848, 1871, 1918, 1933, 1945, 1989–90. With the demise of East Germany and formal unification of the two German states on 3 October 1990, the first unification of 1871 leapt again to the forefront of historical thinking about the significance of a large, unified, powerful nation state in the heart of Europe. In 1989–90 this nation state emerged with remarkable suddenness. But when we consider the prehistory of German unification in 1871, we see that stressing discontinuity too vehemently has its pitfalls.

If we work backward in time, we discover that the empire proclaimed in the Versailles Hall of Mirrors on 18 January 1871 adopted important institutions—a national parliament, for example, and a constitution—that had been devised four years previously at the birth of the North German Confederation. (The German Empire's institutional configuration is outlined in more detail in Chapter 1.)

The ‘novelties’ of 1867–71, however, need to be considered against a wider historical canvas. On that canvas we must find room for the Wars of Unification fought against Denmark in 1864, against Austria and her German allies in 1866, and against France in 1870–71. We also need to include Bismarck’s constitutional conflict with the Prussian state parliament (Landtag) after 1862; attempts by the middle-sized German states in the 1850s and early 1860s to chart a ‘third path’ to nationhood between the great powers of Prussia and Austria; the quickening tempo of political life during and after the revolutionary upheavals of 1848–49; Napoleon I’s reorganization of central European states in 1803–14; and the demographic and technological changes that fuelled Germany’s industrial revolution, stretching back into the eighteenth century and beyond. These considerations remind us that Germans, at the outset of their national history in 1871, still had one foot in a distant, pre-modern world.

Sensitizing ourselves to continuities that span 1871 makes us sceptical of any neat separation between the Bismarckian and Wilhelmine eras. Associating epochs with their leading statesmen allows historians to explore the role of personality in history; it can also emphasize how different the German Empire looked in 1871 and 1918. But stressing the turning point of Bismarck’s departure from office in 1890 also has its drawbacks. It suggests, for example, that Germany in the 1870s and 1880s was mired in tradition and backwardness: it was neither ‘on the move’ nor ‘up to date’. By contrast—the argument continues—Kaiser Wilhelm II’s determination to make his mark on the world after 1890 and his moniker ‘Wilhelm the Sudden’ seemed to mirror the ‘new’ Germany. A dynamic, prosperous society, now largely concentrated in towns and cities, had already undergone the transformation to modern industrial capitalism and a modern class structure.

These contrasting views of the early and late empire are plausible, but they raise a number of objections, three of which deserve mention. First, alternative ways of slicing up the imperial epoch have been proposed. Some scholars have suggested that Bismarck adopted a conservative course only in 1878–79; before then, his policies had been remarkably innovative and even progressive. Others have argued that the ‘Great Depression’ of 1873–96, spanning the Bismarckian and Wilhelmine eras, imposes its own

unifying pattern on Imperial German history: during these middle years, socio-economic tension precipitated lower-middle-class resentments against the Jews and gave rise to a ‘political mass market’.<sup>1</sup> And once the First World War erupted in 1914, peacetime Germany seemed indescribably distant, as Jeffrey Verhey explains in Chapter 11. Another reason not to overdraw the ‘before’ and ‘after’ argument is that many seeds of German modernity which flourished in the era of Wilhelm II were planted before 1890: one thinks of Bismarck’s social insurance legislation, Germany’s bid for colonies, and universal manhood suffrage for national elections. Conversely, the modernity we associate with Wilhelmine Germany had its darker sides. These include the diffusion of militarist and nationalist values in German society; the yearning to be a ‘world power’, if necessary through reckless foreign adventures; the slackening of efforts to implement parliamentary democracy; and the belief that German culture could be preserved only through a war of titanic proportions. Finally, it is impossible to put contemporary Germans on the psychoanalyst’s couch; how, then, can we appraise their reactions to the accelerating pace of modern life—one of the hallmarks of modernity? Germans born after 1871 came to adulthood in the Wilhelmine era; but were they really more prone to ‘nerves’ and other modern disorders, as one scholar has argued?<sup>2</sup> Was the mixture of optimism and *Angst* in German society after 1900 very different from the hopes and fears for Germany’s future expressed in the 1870s?

To address such questions we need to keep Bismarckian and Wilhelmine Germany within a single interpretative frame. In that frame we need to place Germans who felt their nation was vulnerable, their society fragmented, their culture stifling; but we also need to include Germans who were proud to live in a strong and self-confident nation, who enjoyed individual and civil liberties in a tolerant, pluralist society, and who demonstrated their zest for innovation and appreciation for genius. Hence we must ask what Germans meant when they said they stood ‘on the threshold of a new age’ of German history<sup>3</sup>—an outlook voiced often in the Bismarckian era. As Edward Ross Dickinson suggests in Chapter 7, we should look to Wilhelmine rather than Bismarckian Germany to appreciate the significance of ‘reform’ as the watchword of a dynamic, optimistic, future-oriented Germany.

But if we paint the pre-1890 period as one of conventionality and mediocrity, we will never find a place for the reforming giants of that era—for the composer Richard Wagner, for the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, for Bismarck himself.

The empire's other bookend, 1918, also prompts reflection about the periodization of modern German history. It is difficult to corral the divergent interpretations according to which the German Revolution of 9 November 1918 constituted the death of the empire, the birth of the Weimar Republic—or no real break at all. The first point to stress is that a few days of revolutionary action in 1918 did not bring about the collapse of Imperial Germany: that required four years of unprecedented slaughter and deprivation during the First World War. The war has rightly been described as '*the great seminal catastrophe of the twentieth century*'.<sup>4</sup> This suggests, incidentally, why counterfactual arguments about what Imperial Germany might have looked like in the 1920s without the experience of 'total war' offer so few insights. Yet from continuities stretching beyond 1914–18 we can draw divergent conclusions. To cite one intriguing line of argument, historians have reconsidered the 'German way of war', which unleashed genocide against the Herero and Nama peoples in Africa in 1904–7 and, after 1 August 1914, perpetrated atrocities in Belgium, France, and Russia. This evidence has rekindled debate about Europe's 'Thirty Years War' in the twentieth century and the role of racist thinking in an alleged German tendency to seek 'absolute destruction' of the enemy.<sup>5</sup> However, a more convincing conclusion is that the German army's misdeeds before November 1918 bear little resemblance to—and thus fail to explain—the Wehrmacht's complicity in the extermination of European Jews during the Second World War.

As this example suggests, the trajectory of German history towards some defining 'endpoint' has consistently drawn historians' attention back to Imperial Germany to uncover the roots of the Third Reich's crimes—or the Federal Republic's success. Some scholars believe that national unification in 1990 illuminates the 'real' significance of 1871. For others the appropriate endpoint is 1941, when the invasion of the Soviet Union (Operation Barbarossa) and the construction of the first death camps in Poland established historical markers against which Germany's warlike and 'eliminationist'<sup>6</sup> tendencies can be measured. But it is another

terminus that has made Imperial Germany so contentious over the past half-century. This is the endpoint of 1933, signifying Hitler's appointment as chancellor and the beginning of the Nazi regime. Because Nazism represents the single most compelling problem of German history, 1933 is paradigmatic: it 'ended' any possibility that Germans could implement liberal democracy, resist the lure of Hitler, and escape the darkest stain on their history.

The imperial era figures centrally in every variant of this story. Why? Because Germany's course towards disaster was allegedly set between the middle of the nineteenth century and 1918. This interpretation constitutes the core of the thesis that German history was deflected from the 'normal' course towards modernity followed by other Western nations and took its own 'special path', or *Sonderweg*. How did this happen? According to the *Sonderweg* thesis, the failure of liberal democracy to take root in Germany was caused by the lack of a bourgeois revolution, as had occurred in England and France; by the survival of pre-industrial elites who continued to dominate key positions of power; by the friend-foe polarities conjured up by Bismarck to rally in-groups and target 'enemies of the empire'; and by myriad other manipulative strategies to preserve monarchical and executive power. Many chapters of this book refer to the *Sonderweg* thesis and to the substantial challenges it has faced since the 1980s. For now it is important to note that both the proponents of the *Sonderweg* and its critics agree that continuities and national comparisons are valid: they disagree mainly about *which* continuities and *which* comparisons are important. Thus discussion of the *Sonderweg* is not inadmissible; only the demand that it be accepted or rejected as an all-or-nothing proposition should be resisted.

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## 'Playing with scales'

What happens when we refuse to accept that the best way to study the history of people living in a given territory is within the frame of the nation state? One answer is to place a national history within a constellation of histories conceived on a different scale, and then engage in the 'play of scales' (*jeu d'échelles*) that

the French historian Jacques Revel once advocated.<sup>7</sup> In Chapter 10, Sebastian Conrad considers Germany's place in Europe and the world. Other chapters also assess the repercussions of transnational entanglements. For example: could a 'Bismarckian' style of diplomacy have channelled and accommodated global pressures after 1890? Was the search to define 'German' art in a world of nations, examined by Celia Applegate in Chapter 5, likely to foster a distinctive national culture? But it is also possible to place Germany in a smaller frame and explore its *subnational* regions and localities. Consider the themes that typically interest the historian of politics: they look quite different when we view them from the perspective of the rural county seat, the small-town mayor's office, the council chambers of a middle-sized city, or the Bavarian state ministry. This example is drawn from the political realm, but readers willing to make similar spatial leaps will find other examples in every chapter of this book. Our authors do not privilege the local and the regional at the expense of national and global contexts: this is certainly not the way to navigate what has been called the 'spatial turn' (an approach that explores 'space', 'place', and 'territoriality' in history by taking geography seriously). Instead, playing with scales is akin to looking through a kaleidoscope: each slight twist reorients our understanding of German histories in subtle ways, rearranging shards of historical evidence and casting them in a new light. This change of perspective is especially useful when we consider questions of locality, identity, and mobility.

In the German Empire, what made a person refer to a particular place as home? 'Home' might simply be one's place of birth. But a *sense* of 'home' might result from a language shared with neighbours, or attachment to a familiar landscape, or feeling secure within the kind of confessional milieu described by Christopher Clark in Chapter 4. Alternatively, it might be captured in a piece of music, or a painting, or the weekly meeting of 'regulars' at the *Stammtisch* of the local pub. All of these stimuli could be a marker of identity; but all were coded in more than one way. Where you were born had a different meaning if you had migrated to a new city, province, or federal state. Representing the 'national interest' in parliament became more difficult when voters demanded attention to local issues, as Thomas Kühne explains in

Chapter 8, or when class, confessional, or ethnic tensions mobilized new solidarities. It makes little sense, therefore, to assume the primacy of national allegiance or to impose national patterns on the everyday experiences of Germans in extraordinarily diverse situations. When playing with scales or giving the kaleidoscope a twist, the point is not to suggest that one measure or pattern reflects a truer image than another, but rather that each one refracts a familiar picture of Imperial Germany in fresh and interesting ways.

If all this twisting and turning and leaping tempts readers to leave the nation behind, they do so at their peril. Our authors offer many signposts that point back to the nation and its role in German history. During the imperial era, nationalism grew more significant as an idiom of public activity and as an issue on which major political conflicts and controversies turned. State ministers, party leaders, members of voluntary associations, reform activists, and many others tested different ways to finesse the dilemma of a divergence between the interests of the authoritarian state and what *they* defined as the national interest. Thus nationalism became more contested over time, as did the alleged benefits of ethnic homogeneity or social cohesion on a national scale. Many of the following chapters ask whether it is still helpful to speak of a national economy, a national electorate, or a national culture at all. They thereby underscore the difficulty of finding ‘German’ uniformity within local and regional diversity.

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## Contesting the past

The authors of this volume are well placed to synthesize existing scholarship on Imperial Germany, take stock of new findings, and identify open questions for future research. They represent diverse historiographical traditions in Canada, the United States, Great Britain, and Germany. They are a relatively young group, and they are all engaged in teaching undergraduates. They are also close to the archives, actively involved in pioneering research in their chosen field. Because they are alive to the complexity of Imperial Germany and the divergent means historians use to explain that



complexity, they see no need to try to manufacture an artificial consensus about the German Empire. Collectively they opt for two kinds of openness: towards historical contingency, in the sense that contemporary Germans could not know the future that awaited them; and towards interpretative plurality, in the recognition that competing methods, theories, and schools of historical explanation complement each other—at least in the long run.

Since the 1980s many approaches that once fired the imaginations (and poisoned the pens) of historians have fallen from favour, while others have come to the fore. But if theoretical and methodological premises are constantly changing, the task of locating the German Empire in the longer course of modern German history has certainly not been swept off the table. According to some scholars, the *Sonderweg* controversy is now dead, or seriously deflated. According to others the debate about Imperial Germany's multivalent modernities should be allowed to die of its own lethargy. Still others believe historians' most pressing task is to answer the question 'Why did Germany go to war in 1914?' Each opinion can be overstated, and each elicits varying (and fluctuating) support among scholars on either side of the Atlantic. Every nation's history is unique; but historians of Germany are not likely to abandon the search for longterm clues to why only Germany embraced Nazism in 1933. According to one recent assessment,<sup>8</sup> the German Empire has never looked more modern to historians than it does today, but the interpretative pendulum may now have swung too far. And if relatively few scholars still regard the causes of the First World War as the most interesting or important aspect of Imperial German history, it should not be forgotten that Germany's decision for war in 1914 was the issue that first opened up the field for sustained scrutiny in the early 1960s. At that time the Hamburg historian Fritz Fischer proposed that an aggressive German policy in 1914 and the quest for vast territorial annexations resembled Hitler's war aims after 1939.<sup>9</sup> The Fischer controversy then dovetailed in the 1970s with an increasingly sophisticated and forceful elaboration of the *Sonderweg* concept.

The idea of Germany's 'special path' was integral to a pioneering work of synthesis on the German Empire published in 1973 by the Bielefeld historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler.<sup>10</sup> But by 1980 it

had been challenged by two British historians, David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, whose book *The Peculiarities of German History* suggested that Wehler had used inappropriate comparative yardsticks to measure Germany's 'misdevelopment'.<sup>11</sup> They criticized Wehler's still-life portrait of a drab, brutish empire dominated by 'pre-modern' elites. They also refused to accept the prevailing emphasis on what *didn't* happen in German history—as with Wehler's theses about the 'backwardness' of the political system, the empire's 'imperviousness' to reform, and the 'deficit' of bourgeois influence. Instead Blackbourn and Eley argued that Imperial German society was far more dynamic, progressive, and beholden to bourgeois interests and values than Wehler's account allowed. This challenge provided one impetus for collaborative research projects on the German middle classes (*Bürgertum*) in the 1980s.<sup>12</sup> Drawing on other national historiographies was another way to advance the field. Gradually local and regional studies—though never lacking in the German historical tradition—grew in number and sophistication, as did studies of gender, masculinity, religion, antisemitism, colonialism, transnationalism, and much more. It is not easy to chart these scholarly innovations on a timeline, but the trend has been towards a plurality of methods. Abandoning the quest for a meta-narrative and surrendering the assumed priority of a national paradigm have been helpful steps forward. Even as research on the German bourgeoisie reached its peak in the 1980s it was being superseded by the 'new cultural history', gender studies, the 'linguistic turn', 'virtual history', the 'spatial turn', the 'visual turn'—the process continues.

Some historians have reacted to methodological pluralism by wringing their hands and decrying the fragmentation of the discipline: 'What does it all mean?', they ask. They also worry that clear dividing lines can no longer be drawn between orthodox and revisionist interpretations, and that grand synthetic works may be passé. A more positive assessment is widely shared among historians who believe that research in their field, as in every other sphere of scientific inquiry, is always work in progress. Fitting comfortably into this mould, the authors represented in this volume assess the historiographical 'state of the art' about the contradictions and tensions found in Imperial Germany. They provide firm statements—original but not quirky—about where consensus among

historians can be found and where it cannot. In doing so they celebrate the fact that familiar problems, when addressed from new vantage points, continue to make this period of German history so interesting.

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## Key themes

Despite the variety of topics discussed in the following chapters, four central themes stand out. Identifying these themes at the outset draws an interpretative arc from the beginning of the book to its end and illustrates how the individual chapters speak to each other.

The vignettes that open each chapter illustrate the pervasiveness and far-reaching ramifications of *social and economic change* in Imperial Germany. They also illuminate the interpenetration of everyday life and high politics. We often see that the socio-economic ‘predicament’ of ordinary Germans shaped their attitudes towards cultural and political change. Germany’s socio-economic development is the focus of Brett Fairbairn’s analysis in Chapter 3, which provides a transition from Katharine Anne Lerman’s and Mark Hewitson’s overviews of Bismarckian and Wilhelmine Germany to the more thematic chapters that follow. But these first three chapters are no less interpretative than the others. They highlight the historical significance of social transformations resulting from population growth and increased mobility, Germany’s transition to an industrial capitalist economy, and the centrality of work to the everyday lives of the overwhelming majority of Germans. As traditional social bonds were loosened or dissolved, Germans sought to resurrect older solidarities or create new ones. Often the operation of unfamiliar market forces frustrated such attempts. Like the advance of industrial capitalism itself, processes of expansion, innovation, and penetration increasingly locked Germans into networks of social activity that made them less autonomous as individuals, though they could prove empowering as well (this ambiguity is especially evident in Angelika Schaser’s chapter on gender). The advance of science and technology, particularly in transportation and communication, brought

both problems and benefits that were distributed unevenly. By the midpoint of the Wilhelmine period, globalization had introduced transnational flows of people and products that were being felt by all Germans in their daily lives, regardless of whether they cared about colonies or ‘world policy’ (*Weltpolitik*).

*The German middle class and the state* both loom large in these chapters. Of course, to speak of either the bourgeoisie or the German state in the singular is to begin on the wrong foot. Imperial Germany’s federal structure demands that we differentiate between the ‘imperial’ (Reich) government in Berlin and the governments of the two dozen states—Prussia, Bavaria, Saxony, and others—that made up the empire. It is also prudent to speak of the middle ranks or middle strata of German society, even though the foreign terms that historians often use to describe these groupings (bourgeoisie, *Bürgertum*) belie this plurality. The German middle classes were finely layered, and that layering was always in flux. Yet considered as a group, bourgeois Germans were disproportionately influential in the economic and cultural life of the nation and in its administration at the local and regional levels (for example, playing a dominant role in municipal councils). Indeed, in comparison to members of the middle classes in other Western nations, those in Germany were conspicuously ‘close’ to the state or attuned to state interests. They were often employed by the state, as in the case of soldiers, civil servants, and school-teachers; or they relied on its preferment—for example, when industrialists sought state contracts, professors sought university chairs, or commercial councillors sought titles and decorations. The state penetrated into the lives of middle-class Germans to a degree that has rightly captured historians’ attention. Nevertheless, this is not to argue that such groups and individuals were lackeys of the state. Middle-class Germans often chose to forego official distinctions and patronage, coveting their independence and autonomy. They were also able to distinguish more clearly than historians sometimes imagine between elements of state authority they could endorse and those they could not. Thus Germans could embrace the monarchical principle but excoriate Wilhelm II for his personal and political blunders; they could take pride in an efficient Prussian bureaucracy but feel outrage at the haughty demeanour of a post-office clerk; they could respect and perhaps even revere the army as the

guardian of the nation but feel acute embarrassment when military arrogance got out of hand. In each instance, were Germans displaying their affection for the state, trying to rein it in, or doing both at the same time? Elements of each view can be found in the chapters that follow.

*Conflict*—imagined and real—was ubiquitous in Imperial Germany. Less clear is whether the passing of the years made conflict more onerous for contemporaries or significant for historians. Compared with the revolutionary and military events of 1848–49 and 1864–71, the 1870s and 1880s might appear as an age of equipoise, when the first duty of every citizen was to remain calm. One of Bismarck’s biographers labelled these decades periods of ‘consolidation’ and ‘fortification’—not terribly exciting interpretative keys either.<sup>13</sup> But looking beneath the surface calm of Bismarckian Germany reveals a quite different picture, shot through with contradictions, conflicts, and crises. Contradictions resulted from attempts both to entrench and to extend the international and constitutional agreements achieved at the time of unification. Conflict was inevitable when the effects of rapid economic, social, cultural, and political change became self-reinforcing and as a younger generation of Germans sought new challenges to match the great deeds of their fathers. Crises arose whenever Bismarck felt his authority to be in jeopardy. Then, after 1890, the anxiety that other nations were denying Germany its ‘place in the sun’ became more pervasive. The belief that social conflict was growing and that Germany’s national mission had been left unfinished in 1871 made Germans strive even more earnestly for togetherness at home and expansion abroad. Military motifs about ‘embattled’ Germany and its struggle for existence in a hostile world fired the imagination of radical nationalists, as Roger Chickering explains in Chapter 9; but they also fuelled confessional conflict, class conflict, party conflict, and the ‘war between the sexes’. How do we assess the significance of all this turmoil?

Again we must not ignore the role of Germany’s middle classes in determining whether conflict was successfully accommodated. Paradoxically, the bourgeoisie contributed both to the pluralization and polarization of contending classes and ideologies. Sometimes middle-class Germans appear to be complacent and conformist,

seeking to avoid conflict at every turn; sometimes their anxiety and arrogance come to the fore as bourgeois canons and boundaries are challenged and become more porous. Yet it is impossible to overlook the bourgeoisie's faith in progress, its enthusiasm for experimentation, its ability to poke fun at itself. These contending propositions are actually two sides of the same coin, allowing us to see middle-class Germans as reluctant modernizers. They embraced change to accommodate conflict, but at the same time they sought to monitor, control, and channel it. Acknowledging this dual strategy to deal with conflicts generated by a highly dynamic society is ultimately more helpful than rehearsing the older view that Germany diverged from other nations because its bourgeoisie was economically strong but politically weak. One of Blackbourn's and Eley's most important arguments was that even a modern, dynamic, self-confident bourgeoisie may feel that its interests and values are accommodated under an authoritarian system of government that falls short of some normative liberal democratic ideal.

Imperial Germany has often been described as Janus-faced. The idea that Germany faced both forward and backward is suggestive of the tensions permeating imperial society, but recently it has tended to lead historians into the trap of blinkered, binary thinking. One symptom of this problem is that students and scholars are often asked to choose whether the German Empire was *authoritarian or modern*. Another symptom is the persistent notion of a sharp dividing line around 1890, where everything 'before' is seen as unmodern and everything 'after' hypermodern. These either-or choices and discontinuities are untenable. Nevertheless, attentive readers will find elements of this authoritarian/modern dualism throughout this book: every author considers these descriptors and explores the interpretative sparks that fly between them. These sparks correspond to actual conflicts that arose in Imperial Germany when the hammer of change struck the anvil of tradition. This metaphor, too, can be stretched too far; yet it directs our attention towards reforming conservatives and conserving liberals who, like the 'white revolutionary' Bismarck,<sup>14</sup> forged a transitional, protean form of German authoritarianism in the unification era and then sought to remould it into new and more durable forms in subsequent decades. Insofar as a preference for stasis and

motives for reform could be reconciled—and often they could not be—it became more likely that Imperial Germany's authoritarian political system could survive in the modern age.

This is not the only way to assess the durability of the empire's founding political configuration or the longterm consequences of 'skirted decisions' in 1871.<sup>15</sup> Some of our authors acknowledge the empire's modernity as a central issue but mainly to say that it is not as central as historians once believed. Others break down authoritarian structures, roles, and habits of mind into their component parts and explore their implications—for example, as reflective of strong yearnings for a unified national community. Above all, these chapters demonstrate why neither German authoritarianism nor German modernity can be frozen in time. They evolved constantly and reciprocally. Modern technologies, the expanding role of the state, and evolving social relationships forced traditionalists to work out new strategies to defend the principle of authority. Conversely, the weight of tradition, the preference for gradual change, and the persistence of familiar identities, belief structures, and class distinctions forced modernizers to reassess and recalibrate their forward progress. Another useful way to think about this reciprocal relationship is to abandon the search for victims of either modernization or the authoritarian state; instead these chapters focus on the agency of Germans who took practical steps to determine their own future. By considering each group's aspirations, readers will discover how flesh-and-blood Germans breathed life into a dynamic, flexible, even consensual form of authoritarianism—one that differs substantially from the fascist and totalitarian models with which it is so often confused.

More than once this introduction has cited portents of a calamitous future awaiting Germans after 1918. If this appears to read history backwards, the historian John Breuilly has offered useful counsel: 'There is nothing wrong in principle with hindsight; indeed it is difficult to see how the historian could or should dispense with it. The major advantage the historian has over those he or she studies is knowing what came afterwards and it is not an advantage to be lightly thrown away.'<sup>16</sup> However—Breuilly continued—what must be resisted is the tendency to regard

the actual outcome as the only *possible* outcome at any given point in time. The history of Imperial Germany is a book whose final chapter, because it was unknown, fostered both unease and excitement among contemporaries. Germans shortly before the war had every right to be astounded by how much had changed since their parents or grandparents had experienced unification in 1871, and how rapidly. They sensed that the future was becoming less predictable with each passing day. Yet even though historians now emphasize the diversity, dynamism, and paradoxes of German development in the imperial era, they have not lost sight of what did *not* change quickly or fundamentally between 1871 and 1918. Would the authoritarian or the modern features of the German Empire become more pronounced in the future? In the early twentieth century this question remained tantalizingly open.

<sup>1</sup> Hans Rosenberg, 'Political and Social Consequences of the Great Depression of 1873–1896 in Central Europe' (orig. 1943), in James J. Sheehan (ed.), *Imperial Germany* (New York and London, 1976), 39–60.

<sup>2</sup> Joachim Radkau, *Das Zeitalter der Nervosität. Deutschland zwischen Bismarck und Hitler* (Munich, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> As one liberal newspaper editor wrote shortly after the Austro-Prussian War: 'Never in my life did I breathe fresher, more invigorating air than that which blew across the north of Germany in the late fall of 1866. . . . We stood on the threshold of a new age, of a time "which still promised wonders".' Julius von Eckardt, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1910), i. 56–7.

<sup>4</sup> George F. Kennan, *The Decline of Bismarck's European Order: Franco-Russian Relations, 1875–1890* (Princeton, 1979), 3, emphasis in the original.

<sup>5</sup> Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY, 2005); cf. works cited in 'Further reading' for Ch. 10.

<sup>6</sup> This refers to the central thesis of Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> See David Blackbourn, *A Sense of Place. New Directions in German History*, The 1998 Annual Lecture of the German Historical Institute, London (London, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Sven Oliver Müller and Cornelius Torp, 'Einleitung', in Müller and Torp (eds), *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich in der Kontroverse. Probleme und Perspektiven* (forthcoming, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (orig. German edn 1961) (New York, 1967).

<sup>10</sup> Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *The German Empire 1871–1918* (orig. German edn 1973), trans. Kim Traynor (Leamington Spa, 1985).

<sup>11</sup> David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (orig. German edn 1980) (Oxford and New York, 1984).

<sup>12</sup> See the useful résumé in Jonathan Sperber, 'Bürger, Bürgertum, Bürgerlichkeit, Bürgerliche Gesellschaft: Studies of the German (Upper) Middle Class and Its Socio-cultural World', *Journal of Modern History*, 69 (1997), 271–97.



<sup>13</sup> Otto Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany*, 3 vols, vol. 2, *The Period of Consolidation, 1871–1880*, and vol. 3, *The Period of Fortification, 1880–1898* (Princeton, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> Lothar Gall, *Bismarck: The White Revolutionary* (orig. German edn 1980), trans. J. A. Underwood, 2 vols. (London, 1986).

<sup>15</sup> Wolfgang J. Mommsen, 'The German Empire as a system of skirted decisions' (orig. German 1978), in Mommsen, *Imperial Germany 1867–1918: Politics, Culture, and Society in an Authoritarian State*, trans. Richard Deveson (London, 1995), 1–19.

<sup>16</sup> John Breuilly, 'Introduction', in Breuilly (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century Germany: Politics, Culture and Society 1780–1918* (London, 2001), 4.