Looking forward

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Less than 48 hours separated the collapse of the German Empire from the last shot fired in the First World War. Kaiser Wilhelm II's decision to flee to exile in Holland and the proclamation of the German Republic from the balcony of the Reichstag occurred not long after midday on 9 November 1918. The armistice that ended the conflict was invoked at 11 a.m. on 11 November.

Germans who experienced the cataclysm of the 'the war to end all wars'—together with those who looked back fondly to the years before 1914, before the empire had begun to sink under the weight of its own conflicts and contradictions—agreed that a historical threshold of immense significance had been crossed.

[Before it went under,] there was peace and the world had an even tenor to its ways. From time to time there were events—earthquakes, floods—which stirred the sleeping world, but not enough to keep it from resuming its slumber. It seems to me that this disaster not only made the world rub its eyes and awake, but wake with a start, keeping it moving at a rapidly accelerating pace ever since, with less peace and happiness.

The preceding lines were written by a survivor. But they were not written by a survivor of the carnage on the Western Front, nor by someone who lived through the trauma of defeat and revolution in 1918. They were not even written by a German. As we read in the concluding line of this reminiscence—'To my mind, the world of today awoke on 15 April 1912'—this observer, Jack Thayer, had survived the sinking of the luxury liner *Titanic* on her maiden voyage across the Atlantic.[1]

The loss of life in the 'unparalleled' disaster of 1912—of 1,320 passengers and 915 crew, 1,503 people drowned—was soon eclipsed by the slaughter of 1914–18, when an estimated 70 million soldiers

were mobilized and over 10 million combatants and civilians were killed.[2] Still, the historical 'endpoint' of April 1912 provides food for thought for the historian of Imperial Germany. The *Titanic* took two hours and forty minutes to die, creaking and groaning before it finally cracked in two and sank. The death throes of the German Empire lasted much longer. Making a mockery of the 'women and children first' rule of ship-board evacuation, the death rate for children in third-class steerage was higher on the night of 14–15 April 1912 than for men in First Class. Class, gender, and generations in the empire often seemed topsy-turvy too.

The captain of the *Titanic* had wanted to set a speed record for crossing the Atlantic, though he was warned by a wireless dispatch from the French liner *La Touraine* on the afternoon of 12 April that a huge field of icebergs, with their tops visible slightly above the waterline, lay in its path. This message was acknowledged, with thanks, by the captain of the *Titanic*. Kaiser Wilhelm was as well informed by at least some of his advisors, who understood the economic consequences of building a German battle fleet and the diplomatic risks of *Weltpolitik*. It is perfectly legitimate to look to specific individuals and policy decisions to determine where Imperial Germany went off course. Yet a broader consideration of 'big structures, large processes, [and] huge comparisons'—as the historian Charles Tilly playfully put it—provides another way to get at what really matters in history.[3]

For passengers travelling in First Class, the evening meal on board the *Titanic* on 14 April included eleven courses. Nine wines were served. The menu included consommé Olga with sea scallops, poached salmon with mousseline sauce, and roasted squab on wilted cress. In Second Class, passengers made do with three courses. In Third Class, the main meal was served at noon.[4] German society seemed to be polarized between 'haves' and 'have-nots', but it was also becoming more finely layered. Historians cannot agree among themselves from which vantage point this social layering can best be assessed. While some scholars observe society and politics from the bridge of the ship of state, others claim that we can get down to the level of social reality only by prying open a window on lived experiences below decks. Cultural and intellectual contexts are also important. Theories of the elite, fear of rebellion amidships, conspicuous consumption,

a fascination with speed and technology, a distinctively modern wish to make one's mark in the world—these led to both fear and hyperactivity, inducing Germans to take increasingly risky gambles.

According to London's *Observer* newspaper, between 1913 and 1955 not a single book was written about the *Titanic* until Walter Lord's study, *A Night to Remember*, sparked a 'Titanic frenzy'—the frenzy that culminated in the public reception of James Cameron's Oscar-winning film in 1997.[5] When they were willing to think about it at all, where did contemporary Germans believe their nation's social, economic, political, and cultural transformation since 1871 had brought them? Why have differences of opinion about the significance of that transformation contributed so often to a scholarly frenzy among historians?[6] The preceding chapters have proposed answers to these questions by suggesting how elements of continuity and rupture can be assessed from different perspectives.

In Imperial Germany change was not always sudden. It invariably resulted in transformations and adaptations that brought the old and the new together. Contemporary Germans liked to emphasize their sense of rupture when it symbolized progress and national achievement: hence the celebration of Bismarck's role in 'forging' the German Empire. Germany's rivalry with France was nothing new, as the trope of the 'eternal enemy' (*Erbfeind*) suggested; but the seizure of Alsace and Lorraine complicated matters, and Prussia's quasi-hegemony in central Europe was so startlingly new that Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli told the British House of Commons in February 1871 that a German 'revolution' had just occurred.[7] These developments forced Germans (and others) to recast their expectations for German policy with a suddenness that was bound to be disquieting. The state had not previously refused intervention in society or the economy, but its claims and accomplishments in the imperial era broke all previous limits. The cultural ideals of classicism and romanticism were revived, with or without the 'neo-' prefix; but after 1890 the avant-garde was 'out there'—in front—further than ever before, creating its own backlash but unstoppable nonetheless. Faith in German philosophy, literature, rationalism, and idealism persisted, but it

was now faith tinged with anxious appraisals of what values would stand the test of time.

Should we continue to look for turning points? There are too many candidates. In any case, in society, the economy, and cultural affairs, change occurs more slowly (generally), more quickly (sometimes), and less obviously (always) than a focus on political turning points can allow for. Examining political culture helps in this regard, accommodating the interpenetration of tradition and change. So does a reconsideration of Germany's international situation in transnational and global contexts.[8] Diplomacy can be seen in terms of crises and U-turns, caused by Bismarck's dismissal in 1890 or by ill-considered adventures that had to be reversed; but we must not lose sight of underlying fundamentals that guided German statesmanship throughout the imperial era. The same is true of the empire's constitutional system, which by and large was accepted after 1900. Localism never became irrelevant either: 'When contemporary Germans were forced to consider the ambiguities of place, they realized that a concern with the local . . . often created an expertise or a niche that had not existed before. Thus, they found that they could claim local memories as markers of erudition or as inspiration for commercial entrepreneurship, even as they also shared in national memories (or hopes) of grandeur.'[9] Only the diminishing upward mobility of the lower middle classes and the growing gap between the very rich and the very poor remind us not to prize the 'modern' distribution of opportunity too highly.

After 1900 the pace of change quickened. The period of slower economic growth (1873–96) was left behind and prosperity began to trickle down to the lower classes in the form of rising real wages, better health care, and education reforms. Cultural 'secessions' occurred more frequently, with each new artistic genre distinguishing itself from its predecessor in more radical ways. Social conflict was more dramatic than in the 1870s, although the bourgeoisie was busy building bulwarks of security above and below. Politically and diplomatically, it became difficult after 1905 to discern a way forward, although Germany drew back from the brink of war again and again. The head of state was mentally unstable, yet he seemed able to mirror many of the empire's most rational aspects. Prussia had been left in the dust, but not quite. Revolution

and the workers' state were still visible on the horizon, but they were receding. The military was a source of pride or embarrassment, but it was neither irrelevant nor the guarantor of national security. In the war of the sexes and in the struggle to appropriate custodianship of the symbols of nationhood, it was growing more difficult with each passing year to be the 'whole man' or to embrace the 'whole nation'.

Was Imperial Germany headed for disaster from the moment of its birth in 1871? The question's premise is wrong: Germany's subsequent history held myriad possibilities, and even in 1918 the outcome of the Weimar Republic's many crises could not have been predicted. However, the sociologist Max Weber and others were not mistaken in 1917 when they identified patterns of German development since 1871 that pointed away from a democratic future, no matter whether Germany won or lost the war.[10] *Because* it lost, something close to a worst-case scenario unfolded.

We previously identified the pervasiveness of conflict in Imperial Germany as a recurrent theme in this volume. Keeping historical contingency in mind underscores the frequency with which conflict in Imperial Germany gave rise to dilemmas that had unforeseen and paradoxical consequences. A brief recap confirms that such dilemmas and paradoxes were addressed in each of this book's eleven chapters. Thus:

1. Bismarck claimed that Germany was a 'satiated nation' but he was forced always to grope his way towards new solutions to intractable problems: by 1890 the departure of the 'indispensable' founder was largely unlamented.
2. Wilhelmine Germany could seem powerful and parochial at the same time, allowing Germans to identify with their smaller homeland or with the larger nation, as the situation demanded; moreover, even the most conspicuous aspects of change were shaped by elements of order and tradition.
3. Industrialization changed almost everything and eliminated nearly nothing. It did not lead to the homogenization of workplace experiences, of economic sectors, or of regions, and it did not smooth relations among classes and ethnic groups; rather, it increased differentiation and conflict.

4. Secularization and religious revival were intertwined; the processes of milieu formation and political mobilization were dialectically interdependent; and confessional conflicts among Protestants, Catholics, and Jews fostered both bitterness and calls for tolerance.

5. Both conformity and variety characterized Germany's cultural scene: rebellious secession movements displayed impeccable establishment credentials even as the definition of Germany's cultural leaders grew more contentious.

6. Gender distinctions—monolithic yet ambiguous—were maintained and challenged at the same time: anxieties about gender roles grew as both sexes sought to fulfil their 'national duties'.

7. Local initiatives and voluntary associations gave members of Germany's broad reform movement an alternative to party politics; but both fragmentation and coordination helped integrate them into a formalized political realm where national priorities became paramount.

8. 'Pillarized' social groups and political parties survived as 'pluralization' gained ground; nevertheless, the proliferation of voices that demanded to be heard had its own destabilizing effect, and it remained unclear before the war whether the 'politics of togetherness' was likely to lead to a democratic or totalitarian future.

9. The Wilhelmine state's mobilization of public opinion behind an aggressive foreign policy created a backlash in which radical nationalists challenged the state's authority, despite official efforts to instil military values and propagate gender-coded military tropes.

10. As Germany's 'global entanglement' drove it 'out' into the world, the world also reached deep into Germany and helped shape bourgeois ideals of independence and a civilizing culture; thus the process of constituting the nation was a product of globalization, not its prerequisite.

11. During the First World War, the ideal of social cohesion was tested and found wanting; Germans' recognition that they shared a common fate could not invest the 'people's community' with meaning: the nation was more divided than ever when peace broke out in 1918.

What do all these historical paradoxes and ambiguities signify? One answer is that partisanship and polarization were not incompatible with the search for a transcendent national community. On the contrary: conflict fostered and accelerated that search. Germans' faith that the future would be better than the present was inspiring, but it was also chimerical. Bourgeois reformers, Imperial Germany's modernizers par excellence, epitomized the optimistic view, even though it was precisely within bourgeois ranks that crucial debates about the meanings of modernity were taking place. But against what international standards did bourgeois and other Germans measure the success of their state, and their society, in defending ideals that citizens of another nation termed 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness'? Whether or not historians believe that most Germans were comfortable with the quality of life and the liberties they had won by 1914, and even if the mass of the population did not articulate this question because it was remote from their quotidian concerns, scholars have not yet probed very far into the psychology of the matter. Germans were worried about modernity because it had a homogenizing effect, but also because it led to clearer differentiation between the winners and losers of modernization. Fear of fragmentation troubled Germans when they considered the consequences of mass politics, but the perception that German society was becoming 'atomized' under the impact of industrialization and urbanization also had profound effects in the intellectual and cultural realms.

Another answer is that unresolved tensions not only led to conflict but also increased the likelihood that radical political ideas and practices would be proposed to overcome disunity and dissent within the national community. Here we are advancing into largely uncharted terrain. What level of violence existed in Imperial Germany, and in what circumstances was it condemned or condoned? We know a great deal about the state's campaigns against Catholics, Poles, and other minorities. We know rather less about the everyday forms of legal discrimination, workplace subordination, and physical intimidation experienced by German girls and women. We lack comprehensive studies of ordinary Germans' reactions to the use of violence by the army, the police, and political rowdies. And we know *much* less about Germans who ostracized, persecuted, silenced, harassed, beat, or murdered

Social Democrats and Jews. Until such issues are addressed more systematically and comprehensively by historians, we are unlikely to understand Germans' own estimation of the moral standing of their society, measured against what one historian has termed 'the decent opinion of mankind'.[11]

Much evidence in this volume suggests that that self-estimation was too high. This immediately raises the question of what moral yardsticks we can legitimately use to draw such comparisons, and *that* question has almost limitless ramifications. Nevertheless, historians should not be dissuaded from posing the question by the difficulties inherent in judging whether Imperial German society was more equitable than other societies.[12] Doing so could help us understand why the authoritarian state had not toppled before 1918, despite the tremors generated by social, economic, cultural, and political modernization. Both stories—the triumph of modernity and the long shadow cast by authoritarianism—are true. But when kept separate, their plot lines are too neatly drawn to depict an era when boundaries were fluid, beliefs were in flux, and conflict was the only constant. Rejoining these stories opens up possibilities for measuring Imperial German society against standards of human conduct that, while not timeless or universal, are being debated as vigorously in the twenty-first century as they were in the nineteenth.

What other research agendas might be explored by future students of Imperial Germany? A prime candidate is Germans' experience of 'total war'. A prodigious number of books on the German home front in 1914–18 have appeared over the past fifteen years, often drawing inspiration from similar studies done by historians of other combatant nations. Perhaps the war years will finally be properly integrated into histories of the imperial era. Moving in the opposite direction, over-concentration on the 1890s as the decade when mass politics was allegedly born and the political nation allegedly reconstituted suggests that budding PhD students should be encouraged to tackle the under-researched 1870s and 1880s. Nor has the promise of the history of everyday life (*Alltags-geschichte*) been realized for the German Empire, particularly when compared to similar work done on the early-modern and Nazi periods. Because the critics of *Alltagsgeschichte* partially succeeded

in marginalizing it in the 1980s, we still lack basic studies of life in small-town, village, and rural Germany. The importance of understanding Prussia's role within the federation has been widely acknowledged for years; indeed, German scholars have recently offered pointed reminders, directed at critics of the *Sonderweg*, that the survival of Prussia constituted one of Imperial Germany's most important peculiarities.[13] A major study of Prussia has just appeared, authored by one of our contributors.[14] However, we have no reliable and comprehensive guide to the interplay of conflict and compromise among the other leading federal states or between them and Prussia. The Mecklenburg grand duchies in northern Germany, for example, have constituted a kind of 'no-fly zone' for historians. Full-length studies of the National Liberal and Christian Social parties constitute other lacunae. These topics are likely to loom large in future research on the prospects of democracy in pre-1918 Germany—as long as historians continue to address the question of exactly what they mean by democracy and democratization.

New sources will also drive future research, as they always do. The integration of literary sources is still relatively undeveloped in Imperial German historiography. Personal memoirs and political correspondence have long supported the writing of diplomatic history, but in other types of analysis they are less often used. The study of novels and poetry also has much to offer, as shown, for example, by a recent collection of essays on Germany's two unifications (1871 and 1990) by a team of historians, political scientists, and literary scholars.[15] Another neglected source is the reports of diplomatic envoys stationed in Berlin, Munich, Dresden, Stuttgart, Karlsruhe, and other federal capitals. These diplomats did not only represent foreign governments; the German states also exchanged envoys among themselves. The project to publish the reports of British envoys stationed in Germany now covers the period 1815–66; its continuation up to 1918 will provide a mother lode of new material.[16] But the situation reports and public opinion surveys written by their German counterparts make possible another kind of historical 'triangulation', even though the term does not convey the number of perspectives available.

Lastly, the expansion of the Internet as a research tool and the development of new classroom technologies will provide students

unprecedented access to documentary and visual sources. In only the past five years the variety and sophistication of primary source materials available for researchers online has grown immensely.[17] URLs crop up in the footnotes of published works with increasing frequency; historical encyclopaedias on digital media are proliferating; and broadband connections make high-definition images, videos, and audio clips widely accessible at relatively low cost. The confluence of these developments is making even the 'traditional' political history of Imperial Germany come alive for a new generation of scholars, teachers, and the lay public — right before their eyes. Visual sources already allow us to reassess how the sinews of authoritarianism wove around and through German society. We can now count faces in the crowd, we can see whether they recoiled from brandished sabres and galloping horses, and we can even detect the slightest of bows as they dropped their ballot in the ballot box. By launching our browser we can embark for Versailles and peel back layers of meaning from Anton von Werner's three paintings of the *Kaiserproklamation* of 18 January 1871.[18] We can step across the virtual threshold of the Bavarian State Library and read every Reichstag speech delivered between 1867 and 1895.[19] And by wandering into the digital workshop of Heidelberg University we can parse the political subtext of every satirical cartoon published in *Kladderadatsch* between 1848 and 1944.[20] These examples only hint at the diversity of visual sources already available; but they demonstrate why culture in general and visual culture in particular properly belong in every historian's toolkit.[21]

By integrating older and newer approaches to the history of the German Empire, our authors have attempted to offer fresh insight into the broader sweep of modern German history. Collectively they have cast a distinctive, overarching argument that Germany could have been authoritarian and modern at the same time. They have posed difficult questions about individual liberty, public responsibility, and social fairness in new ways, meeting the historian's obligation to explain, assess, and judge history, not just chronicle it. The tracks on which German history was running between 1871 and 1918 were not leading directly towards Nazism and the Holocaust. Indeed, Germans would have registered genuine

and legitimate astonishment if they had been told in 1871 that Auschwitz was even one of the endpoints awaiting them on their historical journey. The notion that the barbarity of the Third Reich was their *most likely* future would have strained their credulity to the breaking point. It should strain ours as well. That is why the chapters in this volume begin the process of emplotting the story of Imperial Germany differently. They view the imperial period as a transitional epoch when Germans were exploring how best to reconcile tradition and change, as an era when tensions and conflict had many possible outcomes, *and* as an object worthy of study in its own right.

[1] This passage and a number of following details are drawn from Michael Kesterton, 'Social Studies', *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 14 April 1997, sec. A.

[2] In addition, 20 million combatants were permanently disabled. The war cost an estimated US$208 billion. Stig Förster, 'Introduction', in Roger Chickering and Förster (eds), *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914–1918* (Cambridge, 2000), 6.

[3] Charles Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (New York, 1984).

[4] Rick Archbold and Dana McCauley, *Last Dinner on the Titanic* (New York, 1997).

[5] Walter Lord, *A Night to Remember* (New York, 1955). This book spawned revised and illustrated editions published in 1976, 1987, and 1998, as well as video recordings and multimedia CD-ROMs, before its success was eclipsed by Cameron's *Titanic*.

[6] The best guide is now Matthew Jefferies, *Contesting the German Empire, 1871–1918* (Oxford, 2007).

[7] Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates*, Ser. III, vol. cciv, February–March 1871, pp. 81–2, speech of 9 February 1871.

[8] Besides works listed under 'Further reading' for Chapter 10, see Gunilla Budde, Sebastian Conrad, and Oliver Janz, *Transnationale Geschichte. Themen, Tendenzen und Theorien* (Göttingen, 2006).

[9] David Blackbourn and James Retallack, 'Introduction', in Blackbourn and Retallack (eds), *Localism, Landscape, and the Ambiguities of Place: German-Speaking Central Europe, 1860–1930* (Toronto, Buffalo, London, 2007), 19. See also Michael B. Klein, *Zwischen Reich und Region. Identitätsstrukturen im Deutschen Kaiserreich (1871–1918)* (Stuttgart, 2005).

[10] Max Weber, 'Parliament and Government in Germany under a New Political Order' (orig. 1917), in Weber, *Political Writings*, ed. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge, 1994), 130–271, esp. 172.

[11] The term is used by Margaret Lavinia Anderson in *Practicing Democracy: Elections and Political Culture in Imperial Germany* (Princeton, 2000), 19.

[12] A provocative new assessment is offered in Helmut Walser Smith, *The Continuities of German History: Nation, Religion and Race across the Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge and New York, forthcoming 2008).

[13] See inter alia Hartwin Spenkuch, 'Vergleichsweise besonders? Politisches System und Strukturen Preußens als Kern des ''deutschen Sonderwegs'' ', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 29 (2003), 262–93.

[14] Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600–1947* (Cambridge, MA, 2006).

¹⁵ Ronald Speirs and John Breuilly (eds), *Germany's Two Unifications: Anticipations, Experiences, Responses* (Basingstoke and New York, 2005). See also Klaus Amann and Karl Wagner (eds), *Literatur und Nation. Die Gründung des Deutschen Reiches 1871 in der deutschsprachigen Literatur* (Cologne, Weimer, and Vienna, 1996).

¹⁶ Sabine Freitag *et al.* (eds), *British Envoys to Germany, 1815–1866*, 3 vols to date (Camden Fifth Series, vols 15, 21, 218) (Cambridge and New York, 2000–6). For a project résumé by the current editor, see Markus Mößlang, 'British Envoys to Germany—Britische Gesandtenberichte aus den Staaten des Deutschen Bundes (1816–1866). Ein Editionsprojekt des Deutschen Historischen Instituts London', *Jahrbuch der historischen Forschung in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Berichtsjahr 2002* (Munich, 2003), 28–33.

¹⁷ A large collection of primary sources in both German and English is now available online on the website of the German Historical Institute, Washington, DC. For volumes 4 and 5 of the collaborative project entitled 'German History in Documents and Images', see James Retallack (ed.), *Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany (1866–1890)* and Roger Chickering (ed.), *Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War (1890–1918)*, http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/. Among many virtual museums—most of which require German language skills—one of the most extensive is hosted by the German Historical Museum in Berlin, http://www.dhm.de/lemo/html/kaiserreich/.

¹⁸ For the third, most famous version, http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=1403, with links to the other two.

¹⁹ http://mdz.bib-bvb.de/digbib/reichstag/.

²⁰ http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/helios/digi/kladderadatsch.html.

²¹ For English and German introductions to the history of visual culture, see Deborah Cherry (ed.), *Art—History—Visual—Culture* (Malden, MA, 2005) and Gerhard Paul (ed.), *Visual History. Ein Studienbuch* (Göttingen, 2006).