

Wilhelminism and Its Legacies: German Modernities, Imperialism, and the Meanings of Reform, 1890-1930

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Abstract

More than three decades have now elapsed since the Fischer Controversy dramatically opened Imperial Germany (1871-1918) for serious historical research. The emerging new orthodoxy of the mid-1970s held that German history was stamped by a calamitous misdevelopment in contrast to the healthier trajectories of societies further to the west. But since that time, constructive critiques of this perspective have suggested that the sources of Germany's domestic and international crises from the 1890s to 1914 need to be reassessed. In particular they have to be disengaged from normative assumptions about other states' development; from the deterministic grip of Hitler's seizure of power in 1933; and from the longer history of the Kaiserreich itself, in which a distinctive Bismarckian configuration of politics allegedly prevailed up to 1918. Featuring cutting-edge research by scholars in Britain, Germany, Canada, and the United States, this volume pushes forward this reassessment by focusing on the era of Kaiser Wilhelm II's rule and its immediate aftermath.

The individual essays offer a number of perspectives on the concept of Wilhelminism, with which Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, an Oxford historian and mentor to all contributors, identified a key motif of German society and politics in these years. Based on evidence of an explicit and self-confidently bourgeois formation in German public culture and of its reformist potential, these essays explore the contrast between the imagery of Germany's dynamic modern economy and historians' continuing reliance on models of a political system characterized as sclerotic and unchanging.

Given the surprising persistence of this disconnect between actual social-economic modernity and continued analytical emphasis on political backwardness, the purpose of this volume is to explore a variety of ways in which elements of the modern emerged in the social and cultural realms but also in politics and international relations. In so doing the contributors push forward the process of opening up the political history of Wilhelmine Germany for alternative readings. By illustrating how new scientific, industrial, and international developments combined to impress contemporaries with the growing possibilities for meaningful, comprehensive, rational reform, this volume proposes a more complex and differentiated understanding of Wilhelmine Germany.