

WEST GERMANY

**THE POLITICS OF
DEMOCRATIC
CORPORATISM**



M. DONALD HANCOCK

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CHATHAM HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.
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Preface

This study of German politics is a product of a long-term personal and professional encounter with the requisites and prospects of German democracy. In the course of research, lectures, seminars, and extensive conversations with friends in both Europe and North America, I have sought to comprehend Germany's turbulent past, its ever-changing present, and its uncertain future. My ultimate conclusion is that the Bonn regime constitutes both continuity and a discernible break with historical political tendencies. Therein lies the qualified promise of West Germany as a model of relatively stable political, economic, and social change.

I am grateful to a number of friends and colleagues for their intellectual stimulation, insights, and encouragement. Among them are Dankwart Rustow, Karl Dietrich Bracher, Hans-Helmuth Knütter, Peter H. Merkl, Erhard and Heidrun Kehlen, Dietmar and Ingrid Geest, Manfred and Heike Schreiner, Lucian and Ingrid Kern, Heribert and Marianne Schatz, Gerd and Elisabeth Fork, Gisela and Klaus Siebel, Walter Wetzels, Gaines Post, Russell Dalton, Rudolf Wildenmann, Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, Dena A. Gustafsson, Robert D. King, Charles Delzell, Erwin Scheuch, and the late Otto Kirchheimer and Peter Christian Ludz. I am especially thankful to members of my family—Kay, Erik, and Kendra—for their support and patience.

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Contents

Preface	v
Introduction: West Germany in Comparative Perspective	i
1. Modernity Gone Awry: Political Discontinuity and National Division	5
<i>The Quest for National Unity. The Imperial Reich. World War I and the First Republic. From Weimar to the Third Reich. Nazi Totalitarianism. World War II and the Occupation. The Potsdam Conference: Consensus and Dissent. The Beginning of Divergence. The Founding of Separate Republics.</i>	
2. Consolidation and Legitimation: The Federal Republic's Formative Years	31
<i>Electoral Choices and Institutional Consolidation. Economic and Social Recovery. Cooperation with the West and the Restoration of Sovereignty. Consolidation and Legitimation.</i>	
3. The Constitutional-Institutional Framework: Policy-Making Actors, Structures, and the Judicial System	48
<i>The Debate on Principles. National, State, and Local Jurisdiction: The Legal Basis of Germany's "Cooperative Federalism." The Structure of Parliament. The Dual Executive. The Legislative Process. Executive Preeminence Versus Parliamentary Control. Public Administration. Policy Coordination. Civil Liberties and the Judicial System.</i>	
4. The Social Fabric of West German Politics: Organized Interest Groups and Political Parties	70
<i>Socioeconomic, Cultural, and Demographic Differentiation. Interest-Group Membership and Organization. The Mainstream Political Parties: Functions and Programs. The Greens. Electoral Behavior. Party Stability and Change.</i>	

5. Government and Opposition: Coalitions, Issues, and Policy Choices	97
<i>The Adenauer Era, 1949-63. From Erhard to the Grand Coalition. The SPD-FDP Coalition. The Restoration of Christian Democratic Leader- ship. Indicators of Policy Outcomes and System Change.</i>	
6. Democratic Corporatism in Practice: Economic Management and Performance	131
<i>Growth and Affluence. Organized Interest Groups and Policy Efficacy. The Rise and Fall of Concerted Action. Functional Equivalents and Economic Performance in the 1970s and 1980s. An End to the German Model?</i>	
7. Sociopolitical Outcomes: Achievements and Dissent	143
<i>Structural and Cultural Transformation. Social Services. Educational Reform. The German Model and Its Critics. Toward an Uncertain Future.</i>	
8. Prospects	152
Appendix: The Basic Law	157
For Further Reading	179
Index	183

Introduction: West Germany in Comparative Perspective

For both domestic and comparative reasons, Germany is a compelling study of political change. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, Germany has experienced two abortive popular revolutions and four sweeping transformations initiated from above. Twice, German regimes have launched imperialistic wars, thereby profoundly altering the course of twentieth-century European and world affairs. Sharply contrasting leadership groups have exercised executive power during Germany's recurrent political upheavals. They have ranged from Prussian aristocrats during the Imperial period to the *Vernunftrepublikaner* (republicans of rational convenience rather than conviction) of the Weimar Republic, Nazi totalitarians in the 1930s and 1940s, Communist officials in the postwar German Democratic Republic in the East, and constitutional democrats in the Federal Republic in the West. Germany's historical discontinuities and political-military excesses amply justify continuing interest among scholars, journalists, and citizens in the perennial "German question."¹

At the same time, postwar West Germany has experienced a marked transformation in comparison with previous German regimes. Politically, the Federal Republic is a far more stable system than its democratic Weimar antecedent. From the founding of the Federal Republic in 1949 through the mid-1980s, extremist movements on the left and right all but disappeared as three political parties—the Christian Democrats, the Social Democrats, and the Free Democrats—succeeded in establishing themselves as West Germany's dominant political forces. The simplification of the party system facilitated in turn both executive coherence and the orderly transfer of government power at regular intervals comparable to the long-established practice of democratic governance in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Even the entrance of the pro-environmentalist, antinuclear Greens into the West German parliament following the March 1983 election testifies more to the "health and vitality of the postwar democratic order"² than to an incipient erosion of public support for fundamental constitutional-political principles, as explained in chapters to come.

West Germany's economic performance has proven to be of equal significance. The much acclaimed "economic miracle" of the 1950s and 1960s has given way to erratic performance patterns in more recent years. Since the mid-1970s, Germany has experienced consequences of successive oil price "shocks" of 1973-74 and 1979-80 similar to those in other industrial nations: sluggish growth, increased inflation, high unemployment, and recurrent budgetary deficits. Yet, in international comparison, the Federal Republic has fared better on most of these counts than other advanced democracies. Between 1970 and 1980, West Germany's average annual rate of economic growth of 2.6 percent was less than that of both the United States and Canada (3.0 percent and 3.9 percent, respectively) but higher than that of the United Kingdom (1.9 percent) and Sweden (1.7 percent). Its average annual rate of inflation of 5.3 percent during the same period was significantly lower than the average of 9.4 percent among the 25 member nations of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). With a per capita income of over \$14,600 in 1986, West Germany ranked alongside the United States, Canada, and the Scandinavian countries—and ahead of France and Britain—as one of the world's wealthiest industrial democracies. Only with respect to unemployment levels did Germany fail to sustain its exemplary standards of the 1960s and 1970s. In contrast to the 1.2 annual average rate of unemployed workers from 1959 through 1978, the unemployment level in the Federal Republic gradually inched upward to more than 9 percent by the mid-1980s.

The combination of postwar political stability and relative economic success has earned for the Federal Republic international recognition as "the German Model" (*das Modell Deutschland*) of advanced industrial society. Celebrated by the Social Democrats during the 1976 parliamentary campaign and alternately praised and criticized by domestic and foreign scholars in the interim,³ the concept of a "German model" of industrial democracy stands in marked contrast to other system abstractions—including the "Swedish model" of advanced welfare society, the "English sickness" (characterized by laggard economic performance compounded by recurrent labor unrest), and "Japan as Number One."

The purpose of this volume is to assess three fundamental aspects of the German model: (1) the underlying causes of West Germany's departure from the nation's historical record of political extremism and discontinuity; (2) the group, institutional, and cultural factors that account for contemporary patterns of policy making and system performance in the Federal Republic; and (3) the effects of domestic policy outcomes on West German society and its citizens. My thesis argument is that the institutional and performance characteristics of the German model constitute a distinctive form of postwar "democratic corporatism."

Corporatism is admittedly an ambiguous and controversial concept. Originally employed to describe decision-making linkages among autonomous "corporations" in late medieval Europe, the term was coopted by twentieth-century fascist rulers such as Italy's Benito Mussolini to justify all-encompassing policy coordination and societal domination by a single authoritarian party. In more recent decades, American and European scholars have applied the concept to assess various modes of interest group "intermediation" and/or participation in the policy-making process in the advanced industrial democracies of Western Europe and elsewhere.⁴ Critics have responded by characterizing postwar corporatist policy-making arrangements as nefarious forms of interest group and government control of rank-and-file workers and other citizens.⁵

Corporatism has thus assumed both authoritarian and nonauthoritarian forms in diverse historical and contemporary settings. In this volume, I utilize "democratic corporatism" to mean the approximate equivalent of Gerhard Lehmbruch's notion of "liberal corporatism,"⁶ an institutionalized arrangement whereby government officials, employer groups, organized labor, and other socioeconomic associations voluntarily participate in making (and in some cases implementing) economic and social policies. Democratic corporatist policy-making arrangements exist in a number of West European countries, notably Austria, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. Democratic corporatism is distinctive in the Federal Republic primarily for two reasons: (1) The national government, rather than organized interest groups (as in Scandinavia), plays the central role in initiating major policy decisions; and (2) corporatist linkages have varied over time with respect to their degree of formality versus informality in the national decision-making process.

Knowledge about Germany's historical discontinuities and its postwar institutional and policy-making transformation is essential for understanding the Federal Republic's present-day role as one of the Atlantic Community's most important political and economic partners. West Germany is not only one of the world's most prosperous nations; it is also, with France and the United Kingdom, one of the principal actors within the European Community (the Common Market). West Germany's efficient and well-equipped Bundeswehr is the strongest European component of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and thereby constitutes a major factor in the strategic balance of forces between West and East.

For multiple political, economic, and foreign policy reasons, then, the Federal Republic of Germany commands serious attention by students of comparative politics, enlightened citizens, and national policy makers. It is indeed crucial to know why *Bonn ist doch nicht Weimar* (Bonn is not Weimar after all)⁷ and to acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses of the current political regime.

Notes

1. A classical liberal view of the "German question" is presented in Ralf Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967).
2. David P. Conradt, "Changing German Political Culture," in *The Civic Culture Revisited*, ed. Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980), 265.
3. Various American and West German scholars assess facets of the "German model" in Andrei S. Markovits, ed., *The Political Economy of West Germany: Modell Deutschland* (New York: Praeger, 1982).
4. Excellent collections of original and reprinted essays on postwar variants of corporatism can be found in Philippe C. Schmitter and Gerhard Lehmbruch, eds., *Trends toward Corporatist Intermediation* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1979); Lehmbruch and Schmitter, eds., *Patterns of Corporatist Policy-Making* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1982); and Ulrich von Alemann and Rolf G. Heinze, eds., *Verbände und Staat: Vom Pluralismus zum Korporatismus: Analysen, Positionen, Dokumente* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1979). Another good overview of the corporatist literature is Reginald J. Harrison, *Pluralism and Corporatism: The Political Evolution of Modern Democracies* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1980).
5. Leo Panitch, "Recent Theorizations of Corporatism: Reflections on a Growth Industry," *British Journal of Sociology* 31, no. 2 (1980): 161-87.
6. In distinguishing between "liberal" and "authoritarian" corporatism, Lehmbruch emphasizes that the "new corporatism" of Western and Northern Europe has remained embedded in a system of liberal constitutional democracy, comprising institutional rules such as freedom of association." Lehmbruch, "Liberal Corporatism and Party Government," *Comparative Political Studies* 10 (1977): 91-126. Reprinted in Schmitter and Lehmbruch, *Trends toward Corporatist Intermediation*.
7. The originator of the concept "Bonn is not Weimar" is presumably Fritz Rene Allemann, author of *Bonn ist nicht Weimar* (Cologne: Kippenheuer & Witsch, 1956). More recently, Charles Maier has emphasized historical continuities between the two systems in his chapter, "Bonn ist doch Weimar: Informal Reflections on the Historical Legacy of the Federal Republic," in Markovits, *Political Economy of Germany, 188-98*. Even Maier, however, concedes that fundamental contrasts exist between the two regimes. That is my contention as well.

1. Modernity Gone Awry: Political Discontinuity and National Division

From the perspective of the late twentieth century, 7 May 1945 stands out as modern Germany's most important historical watershed. On that date the High Command of the German Wehrmacht unconditionally surrendered to the Western Allies in a spartan ceremony at Rheims, France.¹ Thus the totalitarian regime of Adolf Hitler's "Thousand Year Reich" came to an ignominious end, its war machine shattered on both the Eastern and Western fronts and its cities in rubble. With the Reich's capitulation and the death or arrest of most of its former leaders, the military forces of the United States, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union moved into their respective zones of occupation to begin their joint administration of the prostrate nation.

The capitulation by no means meant, as the British historian A.J.P. Taylor initially prophesized, that "German history had run its course."² Germany remained at the geographical crossroads of Central Europe, its material resources and remaining industry still with extraordinary economic potential. Despite staggering wartime losses, Germany retained a population of over 70 million citizens. Most adult Germans were highly literate, disciplined, and technologically skilled—thereby possessing the requisite qualities of economic and social modernity.

Nevertheless, the piercing silence of defeat—following 12 tumultuous years of Nazi dictatorship and a massive war effort—signaled the abrupt beginning of an uncertain political future for the Germans. A few political activists dared to hope that the end of hostilities would mark the emergence of a peaceful and democratic Germany. Many feared a vengeful occupation in retaliation for Hitler's brutal aggression. Most seemed too dazed to care.

How had it happened? Not only Hitler's rise to power in 1933 and his barbarization, first of Germany, and later of much of Europe—but also the historical pattern of instability in German politics that had preceded National Socialism? Equally important, what lessons would the occupation powers and the Germans themselves draw from such historical queries in seeking to prevent the future resurgence of German militarism and imperialism? These ques-

tions were hardly academic in the formative months after May 1945, for contrasting responses to them proved decisive in determining the postwar course of German political development.

The Quest for National Unity

Unlike the English and the French, the Germans had failed to establish a unified national kingdom prior to the emergence of political liberalism and the first stirrings of industrialization. This historical omission was rooted in the inability of the titular emperors of the Holy Roman Empire (established in A.D. 962) to fashion a cohesive secular state through the centralization of executive authority at the expense of regional and local princes. The result was that political power remained highly decentralized among the rulers of hundreds of small kingdoms, principalities, duchies, and city-states.

The Reformation, symbolically proclaimed by Martin Luther in 1517, further accentuated Germany's political and territorial fragmentation. In part out of a genuine desire to reform religious practices associated with the Catholic church, and in part to advance their own political ambitions, a number of north German princes severed their ties with Rome. Recurrent conflict between defenders of the two faiths, culminating in the Thirty Years War of 1618-48, brought not only the physical destruction of much of Germany but also permanently sealed a north-south division between Protestants and Catholics.

Only with the rise of Prussia during the eighteenth century did Germany begin its hesitant march toward national unity under recognized central authority. Lacking national frontiers and possessing only two cities of note (Berlin in the center of Brandenburg Province and Königsberg on the Baltic coast), Prussia was a formless, largely Protestant kingdom that encompassed extensive forests, numerous lakes, and fertile agricultural tracts. Controlling most of its economic and political resources were the Junkers—aristocratic heirs of thirteenth-century Order of Teutonic Knights whose self-proclaimed task had been the colonization of east-central Europe. Imbued in most instances with a stern mixture of Protestant asceticism and feudal values of fealty and personal honor, the Junkers constituted a cohesive social class that governed paternalistically over Prussia's more numerous agricultural workers.

A succession of strong-willed rulers forged out of Prussia's limited resources one of Europe's most powerful states. Frederick William and his son, Frederick I—who was crowned the first king of Prussia in 1701—initiated far-reaching bureaucratic and military reforms in their efforts to increase Prussian security. Building on these measures to establish a well-equipped standing army led by a new professional officer corps, the second Prussian king, Frederick the Great

Modernity Gone Awry: Political Discontinuity and National Division

(1740-86), launched successful military campaigns against Austria and Poland. The result was that Prussia more than doubled its size by the end of the eighteenth century and emerged alongside Austria, Britain, France, and Russia as a major European power.

The French Revolution of 1789 and Napoleon's rise to power a decade later profoundly affected subsequent German political development. Following his defeat of Prussia and Austria, Napoleon dissolved the Holy Roman Empire in 1806 and created the Confederation of the Rhine as a buffer between France and the two largest German states. The Confederation did not survive Napoleon's own defeat in 1814, but French efforts to redraw political boundaries in west-central Europe were partially sanctioned when delegates to the Congress of Vienna (1814-15) agreed to reduce the number of German states to 38. At the same time, they created a loosely united German Confederation under Austrian leadership to replace the defunct Holy Roman Empire.

An important indirect consequence of the revolutionary events of 1789-1814 was the rise of a liberal movement in Germany. Its adherents were primarily youthful intellectuals inspired by French ideals of constitutionalism and nationalism to criticize traditional forms of political authority and the absence of national unity. The number of liberal dissidents steadily increased as a politically conscious middle class emerged out of Germany's incipient industrialization, urbanization, and expansion of secondary and higher education. Tension between the liberal reformers and the nation's autocratic ruling classes sparked revolutionary upheaval in 1848. The various German rulers hastily agreed to elections to a national constituent assembly.

Tragically, the liberals failed in their efforts to achieve German unity. By the time members of the National Assembly in Frankfurt decided to exclude Austria from the proposed federal Reich, Germany's monarchists had regained their courage. The Prussian king contemptuously rejected an offer from the National Assembly to assume the crown of a German Empire and ordered his troops to suppress liberal supporters of a national constitution. The result was a paralyzing blow to German liberalism from which it never fully recovered.

Following the liberals' defeat, Prussia reverted at first to a policy of unrelieved traditionalism. Continuing processes of industrialization and social mobilization gradually yielded a liberal majority in the Prussian parliament, but the absence of constitutional provisions for executive accountability effectively insulated the Prussian ruling class from democratizing inroads. Nonetheless, a conservative counterelite began to emerge during the 1850s whose spokesmen rejected the change-resistant rigidity of the Prussian establishment. Hardly liberal democrats, they nevertheless borrowed from the revolutionaries of 1848 the vision of a unified German Reich under Prussian leadership.

Perfectly exemplifying the new "national" conservative was a nonconformist Junker, born in modest family circumstances in 1815, named Otto von Bismarck. A friend of the king's brother, Wilhelm (prince of Prussia), Bismarck studied law in Berlin and Göttingen. Even as a student, Bismarck displayed the personality traits that were later to characterize his political career—stubborn determination, unpredictability, aloofness, and—when pressed by circumstances—brilliant performance.

As Prussian representative to the German Confederation from 1851 to 1859, Bismarck acquired an intense contempt for "Austria's airs as 'the presiding power'" and resolved to assert his full diplomatic powers to promote "the aggrandizement of Prussia" at Austria's expense.³ This policy terrified many traditional Prussian conservatives, who maintained a romantic deference to Austria's executive role within the Confederation. Accordingly, Prince Wilhelm, who became regent in 1858, reassigned Bismarck as Prussian ambassador to Russia. But Wilhelm recognized in Bismarck a determined and skillful leader, and after his coronation as Prussian king in 1861 Wilhelm repeatedly summoned the rebellious Junker to Berlin for policy consultations. In 1862, in an effort to deal with a recalcitrant liberal majority in the Prussian parliament, Wilhelm appointed Bismarck minister-president and foreign minister.

Bismarck utilized his dual assignment, first, to resolve the parliamentary conflict with the liberals in favor of the monarchy, and, second, to launch an activist foreign policy. In the first of a series of bold diplomatic and military moves, he invited Austria in 1863 to join Prussia in a joint campaign against Denmark to force the Danes to relinquish sovereignty over the north German duchies of Schleswig and Holstein. Following Denmark's defeat and Prussian-Austrian occupation of the two duchies, Bismarck surreptitiously goaded the Austrians into war in 1866. He declared the German Confederation dissolved and, following Austria's decisive defeat, established a Prussian-dominated North German Confederation in its place. Only the kingdom of Bavaria and the duchies of Baden and Württemberg remained outside the new union.

Prussia's spectacular military successes of 1864 and 1866 not only dazzled Bismarck's domestic opponents but also provoked the deepening antipathy of neighboring France, governed since 1848 by Napoleon III. Fearful that the growth of Prussian power would diminish French influence in Europe, Napoleon declared war on Prussia in July 1870. The French move completed Bismarck's unification strategy. Immediately, the three south German kingdoms allied themselves with Prussia, and together their armies carried the battle through the heart of France to Paris itself. The Prussians and their German allies resoundingly defeated the French and surrounded the French capital. When the city's radical republican defenders capitulated in January 1871, Bismarck prevailed

on the Bavarian king to urge Wilhelm to accept the crown of a unified German Reich. Somewhat reluctantly, Wilhelm agreed, and on 18 January 1871 he was crowned German emperor in the glittering halls of the former residence of French kings at Versailles.

The Imperial Reich

With the proclamation of the Imperial Reich, Germany achieved formal political unity under recognized national authority. As Dankwart Rustow notes, both of these conditions are essential for successful political modernization: the former "to lay the foundation for a secure sense of nationality," the latter to facilitate cooperation among citizens and the provision of essential public services.⁴ Yet, for a combination of reasons, the Imperial system lacked the capacity to attain effective political modernity comparable to that in Britain or (after the turn of the century) the Scandinavian countries. As a result, Imperial Germany ultimately proved only a transitional regime.

A basic flaw of the new constitutional order was its highly authoritarian character. This feature was most clearly evident in the structure of executive authority. Bismarck rejected the concept of parliamentarism as it had evolved by then in Britain in favor of a dual executive that was wholly independent of representative institutions. Central political authority was vested in the German emperor (the kaiser), who possessed sweeping powers to appoint Cabinet officials, command the armed forces, make alliances, and declare war. In his dual role as king of Prussia, Kaiser Wilhelm simultaneously governed over internal Prussian affairs. The imperial chancellor and chancellor of Prussia (Bismarck), meanwhile, was responsible for the day-to-day supervision of domestic and foreign affairs. In both roles, the chancellor was appointed by the kaiser and was accountable to him alone. Together, the kaiser and the imperial chancellor thus easily dominated national politics.

Augmenting Imperial Germany's executive authoritarianism was Prussia's preponderant power in relation to the various smaller kingdoms, grand duchies, duchies, principalities, and "free cities" that made up the German Reich. Each of these units was represented on the basis of population in an upper house designated the Bundesrat. Membership in the Bundesrat varied from 1 seat allocated the smallest principalities to 17 seats for Prussia. This formula easily allowed Prussia the dominant voice in Imperial Germany's legislative process, as the consent of the Bundesrat was required for the passage of all bills.

Alongside the Bundesrat, an outwardly democratic legislative body existed in the form of a popularly elected lower house, the Reichstag, whose members were chosen on the basis of manhood suffrage. But the Reichstag's legal com-

petence was severely restricted. Deputies were empowered to vote on tax bills and appropriations, but they were explicitly excluded from control over all-important issues of foreign policy and military affairs.

The sum of these institutional arrangements was a concentration of political power in the hands of Germany's new breed of conservative modernizers. Like their stoic forebears who had settled the agricultural plains and forests east of the Elbe River, members of the empire's political elite fervently believed in feudal virtues of service, loyalty, and paternalism. Moreover, they considered themselves a natural governing class. Accordingly, they rejected liberal demands for constitutional government on the British model, thereby denying political equality and participatory rights to the mass of Germany's citizens.

The institutionalized contradiction between a governing autocratic elite and Germany's powerless middle and lower classes was the principal factor preventing the Reich's transition to stable modernity. Economically and socially, Imperial Germany experienced rapid development. Workers employed in agriculture, forestry, and fishing still made up the largest occupational category in the early 1880s, but by 1907 industry had become the dominant economic sector. In combination with improved sanitation facilities and better health care, industrialization encouraged an increase in population from 41 million in 1871 to nearly 63 million by 1910. Industrialization and population growth were accompanied by continuing urbanization, with the percentage of Germans residing in metropolitan areas jumping from a minuscule 5.5 percent in 1871 to 23 percent by the turn of the century.

Politically, however, Imperial Germany became increasingly beset by domestic and external conflicts. A key measure of impending political discord was growing popular support for three opposition political parties: the Progressive Liberals, whose leaders criticized the autocratic structure of the Reich in the name of classical liberal demands for constitutionalism and individual freedom; the Center party, which was founded in 1870 to defend the social and political interests of the country's Catholic minority; and the Social Democratic party (SPD), which was established in 1875 to represent industrial workers.⁵ Because all three parties espoused fundamental ideological alternatives to the Imperial system, Bismarck strove throughout his tenure as imperial chancellor to restrict their influence. He coerced, first, the Catholic Center party, and, later, the Social Democrats. At the same time, he introduced legislation during the 1880s to establish state-sponsored insurance programs for illness, industrial accidents, and retirement in a cunning but ultimately fruitless attempt to wean rank-and-file workers from the Social Democratic movement.

Despite these stick-and-carrot measures, antiregime forces continued to gain in popular support. As a group, the Progressives, the Center, and the Social

Democrats increased their combined popular support from 38 percent in 1871 to an absolute majority in 1881. By 1912, the Social Democrats alone amassed nearly 35 percent of the popular vote to become Germany's largest political party.

As long as Bismarck remained chancellor, his personal prestige and skillful conduct of public policy enabled him to contain the inherent contradictions within the Imperial political system. But after the death of Kaiser Wilhelm and the coronation of his grandson, Wilhelm II, in 1888, Bismarck's status became precarious. He and the young and headstrong new emperor repeatedly clashed over policy issues, resulting finally in Bismarck's dismissal in 1890. Well-meaning but lesser men followed him in office, thereby helping provoke international tensions that ultimately brought about the demise of the empire.

World War I and the First Republic

With the ascension to power of Wilhelm II, Imperial Germany entered a new phase of foreign policy belligerence. Romantically impressed by the earlier valor and colorful precision of the Prussian army, the new kaiser adopted a strident stance toward other European powers that personified a growing spirit of German militarism. Thus he abandoned what had been a defensive foreign policy under Bismarck in favor of a "new course" that aimed at securing Germany's status as a major world power. To that end, Wilhelm II encouraged the expansion of Germany's modest colonial empire to encompass far-flung African and Pacific possessions. The empire's imperialist aspirations led to an ambitious program of naval armament that greatly alarmed the British—until then, the supreme naval power in Europe—and thereby encouraged the formation of an anti-German coalition made up of Britain, France, and Russia.

Growing tension among the European powers erupted in World War I in August 1914. The war actually involved two struggles in one: (1) an Austrian attack against Serbia (now part of Yugoslavia) in retaliation for the assassination in Sarajevo of the Austrian crown prince by Serbian nationalists; (2) an effort by German nationalists to defeat France and Russia as a means to establish Imperial Germany as the dominant power in central Europe and thereby shore up its tenuous domestic status.⁶ Hopes for an early victory were dashed as the Western campaign ground to a halt in northeastern France in a bitter war of attrition, stretching on for more than four dismal years of senseless bloodshed and grim acrimony on both sides.

As the conflict dragged on, a growing minority of Social Democrats began to oppose the war effort. By 1916, the SPD openly split over the issue. A group of radical dissidents who were expelled from the party for their refusal to support further war credits established the Independent Social Democratic party