

BLOOD AND IRON

**THE RISE AND FALL OF
THE GERMAN EMPIRE
1871-1918**

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Trees for Life

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INTRODUCTION

On the bright, cold winter morning of 17 January 1871, Wilhelm I, King of Prussia, had a moment of crisis. Eventually, the old man lost what self-control he still had and began to sob, 'Tomorrow will be the unhappiest day of my life! We are going to witness the burial of the Prussian monarchy and this, Count Bismarck, is all your fault!' The 73-year-old king was an unlikely candidate to assume the mantle of the mystical Kaiser who would arise one day to unite all Germans. Yet this was precisely what was now expected of him. The next day, on 18 January 1871, around noon, several hundred Prussian officers, members of the nobility and representatives of all the German regiments that had fought in the Franco-Prussian War gathered in the Hall of Mirrors of the Palace of Versailles. The sound of marching bands drifted into the magnificent room through the tall windows and mingled with the excited chatter of the waiting crowds. Then the large double-doors at the end of the dazzling hall opened, and Wilhelm I, Crown Prince Friedrich and the representatives of the German states entered in a ceremonial procession. A strained, expectant silence fell. There was a sense

that those present were witnessing a historical moment, one of mythical proportions.

Wilhelm had managed to pull himself together and stiffly accepted the title that was offered to him formally by the German princes during the ceremony. And yet there was already a sense that the journey ahead would not be easy for the newly formed nation. At its helm would be a monarch who had refused the title 'German Kaiser' and only reluctantly accepted the more neutral 'Kaiser Wilhelm'. He would forever remain a Prussian king first, second and third. Otto von Bismarck, the architect of the fledgling state and its first chancellor, was also not a nationalist. To him Germany was an extension of Prussian power and influence. He had even chosen the date for the proclamation of the German Empire to coincide with Prussia's national day. Together, king and chancellor were now trying to reign over a political construct whose more reluctant southern member states had only joined to protect fellow Germans from the perceived threat of French invasion that Bismarck had so cleverly engineered. This made for a somewhat fragile and potentially short-lived bond that the Iron Chancellor had to fight hard to maintain. He had not even dared to hold the ceremony for the proclamation of the German Reich in any of the German states. Instead, it took place at the Royal Palace of Versailles, the heart of the defeated nation France. A fitting symbol for the centrality of the notions of struggle and war to the new Germany.

On the one hand, Bismarck could work with centuries' worth of myth-making to build a nation out of the patchwork of individual states. In its first years and decades, the German Empire busied itself to build monuments to ancient legends that were supposed to give meaning and collective memory to the newly formed Germany. Wilhelm I was even declared to be the reincarnation of the medieval king Friedrich Barbarossa.

In a German version of the Arthurian legend, Barbarossa was said to be asleep under the Kyffhäuser mountains in Thuringia, destined to return one day and restore Germany to its greatness. A vast monument to this effect was erected in the 1890s. This sense of a shared mythology was added to by many great German thinkers – among them the Brothers Grimm – who had long argued that German culture, language and historical tradition form a stronger bond than local particularism. Furthermore, the irresistible economic currents of the industrial revolution that had swept through Western Europe for over a century demanded greater coordination of resources, manpower and policy if the German states did not want to fall further behind their French and British neighbours. The rising middle classes saw the immense potential of the natural resources, favourable geography and work traditions of the German-speaking lands. If only they could be unlocked through unification.

On the other hand, cultural, economic and political ties were not enough. As Bismarck himself pointed out in his famous 1862 speech, it would take war to unify the German people. That proved as accurate before 1871 as it did after. When Bismarck decided to forge a brand-new nation state in the fires of war against Denmark, Austria and France, he created a Germany whose only binding experience was conflict against external enemies. Holding the conglomerate of what had been thirty-nine individual states together under one federal government proved difficult, and cracks began to appear before the ink on the new constitution had dried. He understood that the nation had not been moulded into one smooth whole over centuries but was really closer to a mosaic, hastily glued together with the blood of its enemies. Bismarck therefore sought to perpetuate the struggle in order to preserve his new Germany.

This was a risky strategy. The Iron Chancellor was an astute politician, perhaps one of the greatest statesmen of all time, and

he understood how fragile the so-called Concert of Europe was in 1871. To introduce a new major power into the very heart of it was akin to placing a child with a trumpet into the midst of a world-class symphony orchestra. He knew the new-comer had to be quiet for some time until she had learned her craft and earned the respect of the established players. Bismarck could therefore not seek external conflict again anytime soon. Instead, he focused on internal enemies against whom he could unite the majority of the German population. The new state now encompassed many ethnic minorities such as Polish, Danish and French communities, against which Bismarck could create the contrast of German citizenship. When compared to a Frenchman, Germans would see themselves as Germans rather than Bavarians or Prussians. In addition, religion seemed another useful battleground. Two-thirds of the population within the German Empire were Protestant and one third Catholic. By secularising German society, Bismarck sought to replace religion with national sentiment, thereby creating new identity references and reducing differences between Germans. Lastly, the internationalism of the socialist movement seemed a dangerous counter-current to national identity. Bismarck declared socialists enemies of the state and so could use this too to keep the struggle of all Germans against common enemies alive.

When Wilhelm II took to the throne in 1888, the tumultuous Year of the Three Emperors, he quickly clashed with Bismarck over the issue of German unity. He recognised the same problem – economic and cultural common ground would not be enough to hold the Second Reich together – but found Bismarck's solution of Germans battling each other abhorrent. Wilhelm wanted to be the Kaiser of all Germans, beloved by his subjects. If his grandfather Wilhelm I refused to be the incarnation of Friedrich Barbarossa, it would fall to him to lead his

people back to greatness. Instead of looking for enemies within the Reich, he argued, Germany must fight for its place among the great nations externally. This would forge a bond of blood and iron so strong that it could never be destroyed again. The idea that Germany's external struggle for 'a place in the sun', an empire on a par with those of Britain and France, would lead to internal unity was, of course, flawed and ultimately fatal for the Second Reich. However, at 27, the hot-headed young Kaiser lacked the political acumen of the Iron Chancellor. The latter resigned from political office as a bitter and resentful man in 1890 and left Wilhelm to take the reins of an unstable nation. There had never been a Germany without Bismarck, and when the experienced and brilliant old statesman resigned, an uncertain future dawned.

Wilhelm quickly found out that the perpetual dividing factors of religion, class, geography, culture and ethnicity – to name but a few – could not just be erased by the sheer force of personality and royal charisma he undoubtedly thought he possessed. Socialists kept on striking, Catholics still looked at the Prussian king with suspicion, and Polish separatists continued to demand their own state. Perhaps they could all be convinced that Germany was everything if they had an empire of which to be proud. Wilhelm's blunderous quest for 'a place in the sun' would eventually lead the young nation into a struggle that brought it to the brink of destruction.

When the First World War broke out in 1914, Kaiser Wilhelm was initially shocked. The Balkan war he had hoped for had suddenly turned into a large-scale European conflict. Nonetheless, he still saw an opportunity to finally bring all Germans together. On 1 August 1914, he declared, 'today we are all German brothers and only German brothers'. While recent research has dispelled the myth of widespread euphoria at the outbreak of war, there was nonetheless a feeling that the 'fatherland' had to

be defended. In the end, however, the First World War proved to be too much blood and iron for the young state. In November 1918 the German nation lay defeated, its crown knocked off its head, its shield and sword cracked and its spirit broken. The arch enemy France stood ready to destroy and dismantle it, arguing that nothing but further bloodshed would ever come from a state whose national identity was built on war. The Second Reich would be destroyed where it was first proclaimed – in the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles.

But Britain and the USA saw another Germany in the smouldering ashes of the Second Reich. The seeds of democracy and economic prosperity that had been sown by Bismarck had led to the slow and tender growth of a different national vision for Germany, one that would find its identity and its place amongst the nations of the world through trade, stability and democracy. They were right, but it would take another conflict that even overshadowed the horrors of the First World War for Germany to shake off its violent and militaristic beginnings.

The German Empire was perpetually plagued by the conflicts inherent in the process of its creation. On the one hand, Bismarck acknowledged liberal traditions by introducing universal male suffrage, which allowed for the evolution of a genuinely pluralistic multi-party system, but on the other hand, this system came under constant strain from the Prussian authoritarianism at the top. The indefatigable struggle of conflicting identities that rivalled and sometimes overshadowed national identity led to Bismarck and Wilhelm II both deliberately perpetuating conflict in order to create a platform against which unity could be created. Neither established a prosperous and united state in their own times but (willingly or not) they both helped sow the seeds for the economic and democratic powerhouse Germany was to become eventually.

THE UNIFICATION OF GERMANY 1815-1871

-  Prussia, 1815-1866
-  Annexed by Prussia, 1866
-  Joined Prussia in forming the North German Confederation, 1867
-  Joined with Prussia to form the German Empire, 1871
-  Alsace-Lorraine ceded to German Empire by France, 1871
-  German Confederation, 1815-1866

GREAT
BRITAIN

• London

• AMSTERDAM
KINGDOM OF THE
NETHERLANDS

BELGIUM

PARIS

LUXEMBOURG

BAVARIAN
PALATINATE

BAVARIA

WÜRTTEMBERG

BOHEMIA
MORAVIA

AUSTRIAN

VIENNA

PEST

BUDAPEST

HUNGARY

OTTOMAN
EMPIRE

VENICE

MILAN

TRIESTE

SWITZERLAND

KINGDOM OF
SARDINIA

LYONS

STRASBOURG

ALSACE

BADEN

LORRAIN

LOTHARINGEN

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MOSEL

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