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Domestic Factors in German Foreign Policy before 1914

WOLFGANG J. MOMMSEN

GORDON CRAIG recently deplored the fact that political history, and particularly diplomatic history, no longer attracts the attention of historians or the public as much as has been the case up to now. In his opinion there is no proper reason why this should be so; foreign relations and diplomacy matter very much indeed, and deserve to be studied by historians on their own merits, at least up to a point.¹ However, there are valid reasons why diplomatic history nowadays is in a sort of crisis, and why more and more historians have come to believe that it is not enough to study the diplomatic files, however diligently this may be done, and to inquire about the deeds and motives of the fairly small groups that monopolize decision-making in foreign relations. Most historians nowadays are agreed upon the principle that foreign policy must be explained just as much by finding the social and economic factors conditioning it, as by analyzing the activities going on the level of official diplomacy.

With regard to German historiography it may be said that for more than a century the principle of the "primacy of foreign policy" was considered as a fundamental truth, not only among professional historians, but also by the public. Ranke's famous statement that the internal structure of any state is conditioned by its foreign relations remained for a long period almost undisputed; the example of Bismarck seemed to have confirmed it absolutely.²

Revised and enlarged version of a paper read to the Conference of the Anglo-German Group of Historians at the Institute of Historical Studies in London on November 13, 1971. For helpful criticism as well as many suggestions I am indebted to Volker Berghahn, Paul Kennedy, Anthony Nicholls, Hartmut Pogge-v. Strandmann, and John Röhl.

1. Gordon A. Craig, "Political and Diplomatic History," in *Historical Studies Today*, ed. Felix Gilbert and Stephen R. Graubard (New York, 1972), pp. 356ff. (first published in *Daedalus* in 1971).

2. For a more systematic treatment of this issue see Hans Rothfels, *Gesellschaftsform und auswärtige Politik* (Laupheim, 1956), and, more recently, the contributions to this prob-

There has always been, however, a liberal tradition in German historiography which was reluctant to underwrite the principle of the "primacy of foreign policy" without reservation; in this context men like Droysen, Eyck, Ziekursch, Valentin may be mentioned. Even Meinecke, the historian of the ideology of the "reason of state," adhered to it only partially. Yet the first historian who really challenged the validity of the principle, and who depicted it as part and parcel of the conservative heritage, was Eckart Kehr, first in his study on the social background of German naval policies in the late nineties, and a few years later explicitly in an essay, "Englandhass und Weltpolitik," written in 1928. This essay was, in part, a critical corollary to Friedrich Meinecke's *Geschichte des deutsch-englischen Bündnisproblems*, published only a year before. Kehr stated bluntly that the Rankean principle of the primacy of foreign policy had become an important element of "the official philosophy of power and the political theory of the German Empire," because it was a useful ideological instrument to induce the bourgeois classes to join forces with the conservative ruling class in a common endeavor to keep down the working classes.³ Kehr went on to say that the animosity of German public opinion towards Great Britain, and also the deliberate abandonment of the alliance negotiations with Great Britain in 1898 and 1901, must be explained on social and economic grounds; in view of this he proclaimed—at least as regards relations with Britain and Russia—the principle of the "primacy of domestic politics," or to use the German phrase, "Primat der Innenpolitik."⁴

In the late twenties Kehr's argument went almost unnoticed. The rise of National Socialism then put an end to all serious scholarship of this bent in contemporary history. Only in the fifties was the discussion taken up again, one reason among others being that all attempts to deal with National Socialist foreign policy along the traditional lines of diplomatic history seemed to be futile. Yet for a variety of reasons which I cannot go into here, it was only in the sixties that Kehr was eventually

lem in *Die anachronistische Souveränität. Zum Verhältnis von Innen- und Aussenpolitik*, ed. Ernst-Otto Czempiel (Sonderheft 1 of the *Politische Vierteljahrsschrift*, 1969). See also Karl Dietrich Bracher, "Kritische Betrachtungen über den Primat der Aussenpolitik," in *Faktoren der politischen Entscheidung. Festgabe für Ernst Fraenkel zum 65. Geburtstag* (Berlin, 1963), pp. 115ff.

3. Eckart Kehr, *Der Primat der Innenpolitik*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Wehler (Berlin, 1965), p. 152.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

rediscovered. It may be said that nowadays his opinion that foreign policies are primarily determined by social and economic structures, and in particular by the social and political interests of the ruling elites, is shared by a great majority of historians, though in different degrees, and with different emphasis.

This is the case in particular with regard to recent research in the politics of the Wilhelmine Empire. For this reason, in the first part of this paper some of the various approaches are discussed which have been undertaken on the assumption that foreign relations and in particular German imperialism must be dealt with in terms of domestic developments rather than by describing the complicated network of diplomatic actions and counteractions. In broad terms there can be distinguished five different types of approaches. A special position is held in this context by Marxism-Leninism. According to the Marxist-Leninist doctrine, politics is, at least in the last analysis, always conditioned by the economic system; or, to put it more precisely, it is but a particular aspect of the class struggle, at least under the conditions of bourgeois capitalism. Under the rule of imperialist capitalism the state is, directly or indirectly, the instrument of the bourgeois classes, and its policies are bound to serve two purposes, firstly the suppression of the working masses to the benefit of the capitalists, and secondly the defense and, possibly, the extension of the economic interest of its own groups of capitalists against their capitalist rivals beyond the borders, by means of force. Moreover, since Hilferding and Lenin it is an accepted principle of Marxism-Leninism that the more advanced, that is to say the more monopolistic, capitalist systems are, the more aggressive and violent they become.

It is important in this context to realize that this applies in the same way to domestic politics and to international relations. For this very reason the Marxist-Leninist approach does not recognize a strict separation of internal and foreign policies; there can be no "primacy" of foreign or of domestic policy. Suppression of the working classes in the interior and exploitation of subjected peoples abroad are but the two sides of the same coin. Militarism, for instance, is just as much a symptom of increasing exploitation and deprivation of the working classes as of a particularly aggressive foreign policy.

This explanatory pattern appears to be consistent and cogent indeed. The idea that monopolistic capitalism is of necessity associated with aggression, imperialist ventures, and warlike tendencies on the one hand, and intensified suppression of the working classes on the other, is a stock

argument of Marxist-Leninist literature.⁵ But it is not true no matter how often repeated. Obviously capitalist systems are not always inclined in the same degree to take recourse to suppression in the interior and expansion abroad by means of brute force; rather there seems to exist a great variety of possibilities. It may furthermore be pointed out that even orthodox Marxist-Leninists find it harder nowadays to attribute the aggressive tendencies of capitalist systems to the intrinsic necessities of capitalist production as such. Few will maintain today that the law of diminishing profits forces the capitalists to take recourse to imperialist policies in order to survive; this causal relationship must be formulated in a much more subtle way, in order to avoid flagrant contradictions with the more recent history of capitalist systems. In fact, Marxist-Leninists themselves have long since been forced to look for additional arguments, in the same eclectic manner which in their view is typical for present-day bourgeois history. Lenin had already pointed out that capitalism leads of necessity to imperialist wars not so much because of the greediness of the capitalists and their desire to constantly expand their business, but because of the uneven development of capitalist economies, which results of necessity in an enormous disproportion of economic and hence political strength of the various rival capitalist powers.⁶ Yet similar arguments may be found today just as well with bourgeois economists, for instance, with Walt Whitman Rostow.⁷ Apart from that, disproportionate economic growth is a constant source of trouble in the socialist part of the world also; it does not seem to be a specific quality of capitalist systems. And if more recent Marxist-Leninist authors emphasize that imperialist policies were a convenient strategy on behalf of the bourgeois classes to irritate, split, and partially bribe the working classes, this does not seem to be a very specific argument either. Once the principle is accepted that there is not just one capitalism, but a great variety of possible social systems which are more or less organized along the lines of a capitalist market economy, and in which the actual political influence of the capitalists as such may be great or limited, it becomes obvious that the analytical power of the Marxist-Leninist pattern of explanation is indeed limited, at least as long as its propositions are not going to be differentiated substantially.

5. A good example can be found in Willibald Gutsche and Annelies Laschitzka, "Forschungen zur deutschen Geschichte von der Jahrhundertwende bis 1917," *Historische Forschungen in der DDR (Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft, Sonderband, 1970)*, p. 476.

6. Cf. Lenin, *Selected Works* (Moscow, 1967), I, 770.

7. *The Stages of Economic Growth* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 106ff.

Official Marxist-Leninist historiography so far is little inclined to modify its theoretical approach, as may be gathered from a recent study dealing with Wilhelmine Germany, *Deutschland im Ersten Weltkrieg*, published by a group of DDR historians under the chairmanship of Fritz Klein.⁸ This is a most important and extremely valuable analysis, yet apart from various declaratory statements which we come across again and again and which are only loosely connected with the narrative as such, it is difficult to discover its Marxist quality. In fact, the authors do not succeed in bridging the gap between the general postulates of Marxism-Leninism and the actual description of the course of events. Admittedly they strongly emphasize the repressive and reactionary character of the political system of Wilhelmine Germany, as well as the aggressive character of German foreign policies. They also make the most of the monopolist structures of the German economy. Yet they fail to make a clear-cut case with regard to the government's being at the mercy of the capitalists, as one would expect. Instead they dwell at great length upon the role of the working classes, and in particular the left wing of the Social Democratic Party. They also pay much attention to the peace movement, thus redressing the balance a good deal, compared with traditional German historiography. Yet in their methodological approach, the authors do not differ markedly from Western positivistic accounts of the same era. The devotional references to the basic truths of Marxism-Leninism tend to obscure this, yet any analysis of the methodology and the theoretical framework of the book reveals that these references have little actual connection with the text. Those who expect a coherent and cogent analysis of Wilhelmine politics from the Marxist-Leninist viewpoint will be disappointed. This is, however, not the authors' fault. Rather, we may conclude that the Marxist-Leninist pattern is too general, as well as too inflexible, and not differentiated enough, however valuable Marxist hypotheses may be in more detailed research.

It is therefore worthwhile looking for other, perhaps less prominent, and at the same time less ambitious approaches in recent research on Wilhelmine Germany by Western historians. It would seem to me that the following four types can be distinguished, among others:

1. The *socio-Marxist approach*, which emphasizes the influences of particular pressure groups that are interested in and likely to benefit

8. *Deutschland im Ersten Weltkrieg*, 1: *Vorbereitung, Entfesselung und Verlauf des Krieges bis Ende 1914*, by an *Autorenkollektiv* under the leadership of Fritz Klein (Berlin, 1968).

from imperialist policies; this approach is represented in particular by G. W. Hallgarten.⁹

2. The *moralistic approach*, or, as I have described it elsewhere, the “*gesinnungsethische*” approach, being primarily a critical analysis of the prevailing ideological (that is to say, antidemocratic) attitudes.¹⁰
3. The “*Kehrseite*” approach, if I may be allowed to coin a new phrase, which tends to explain developments in the political sphere as the outcome of the defensive strategies of the ruling classes against what may be called the process of democratization; at times this approach has rather strong Marxist undertones.¹¹
4. The *functional-structural approach*, which pays special attention to the functions and malfunctions of constitutional and governmental systems under the impact of the various social forces unleashed in particular by the advance of industrialization and mass culture, or to put

9. George Wolfgang Hallgarten, *Imperialismus vor 1914* (2 vols.; 2nd ed., Munich, 1963). *Idem*, *Das Schicksal des Imperialismus im 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt, 1969).

10. This approach is particularly well represented by the earlier works of Fritz Fischer and some of his students, in particular Imanuel Geiss and Klaus Wernecke. Most important in this respect are: Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht. Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914–1918* (3rd ed., Düsseldorf, 1968). *Idem*, *Der Krieg der Illusionen. Die deutsche Politik von 1911 bis 1914* (Düsseldorf, 1969). *Idem*, *Weltmacht oder Niedergang. Deutschland im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Frankfurt, 1965). Imanuel Geiss, “The Outbreak of the First World War and German War Aims,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1 (1966). *Idem*, *Julikerise und Kriegsausbruch 1914. Eine Dokumentensammlung* (2 vols., Hannover, 1963–64). Hartmut Pogge-v. Strandmann and Imanuel Geiss, *Die Erforderlichkeit des Unmöglichen. Deutschland am Vorabend des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Frankfurt, 1965). Klaus Wernecke, *Der Wille zur Weltgeltung. Aussenpolitik und Öffentlichkeit im Kaiserreich am Vorabend des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Düsseldorf, 1970). See also W. J. Mommsen, “The Debate on German War Aims,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1 (1966), 47ff.

11. Right now this is a very influential methodological approach. It has been taken up by a fairly wide range of scholars, though not always with the same degree of stringency and radicality. See in particular the more recent writings of Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Dirk Stegmann, Helmut Böhme, and, with some limitations, Volker Berghahn: Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Bismarck und der Imperialismus* (Cologne, 1969). *Idem*, *Krisenherde des Kaiserreichs 1871–1918* (Cologne, 1970). *Idem*, “Bismarcks Imperialismus und späte Russlandpolitik unter dem Primat der Innenpolitik,” in *Das Kaiserliche Deutschland*, ed. Michael Stürmer (Düsseldorf, 1970). Dirk Stegmann, *Die Erben Bismarcks. Parteien und Verbände in der Spätphase des Wilhelminischen Deutschlands. Sammlungspolitik 1897–1918* (Cologne, 1970). Helmut Böhme, “Thesen zur Beurteilung der gesellschaftlichen, wirtschaftlichen und politischen Ursachen des deutschen Imperialismus,” in *Der moderne Imperialismus*, ed. Wolfgang J. Mommsen (Stuttgart, 1971). Volker Berghahn, “Zu den Zielen des deutschen Flottenbaus unter Wilhelm II.,” *Historische Zeitschrift*, CCX (1970). *Idem*, *Der Tirpitzplan. Genesis und Verfall einer innenpolitischen Krisenstrategie unter Wilhelm II.* (Düsseldorf, 1971). *Idem*, “Flottenrüstung und Machtgefüge,” in *Das Kaiserliche Deutschland*, ed. Stürmer.

it another way, under the impact of modernization.¹² Here, the defense strategy of the ruling classes is considered as just one factor among others, the main argument being that disproportions between the social and political systems tend to lead to an increasing degree of open conflict, and to disturb the functioning of the governmental process, with the result that the recourse to war often is little more than a “Flucht nach vorn.”

It should be understood, however, that any classification of this kind will work only up to a point, for most historians tend to combine these approaches in one way or another, though with marked differences as to accentuation.

The position that can be dealt with most easily is perhaps the socio-Marxist. It is prominently represented in the works of George W. Hallgarten. Hallgarten was the first to try to describe German politics before the First World War in socioeconomic terms, and he also described the war itself as the logical outcome of imperialism. At first sight Hallgarten's concept of imperialism would seem to be very similar to the Marxist-Leninist one. However, a closer scrutiny reveals that he is narrowing imperialism down to a pattern of sinister political activities of particular business interests and pressure groups that seek to promote their own economic interests by inducing the men in power to pursue a policy of imperialist aggression. We find in Hallgarten's publications a personalistic version of the Marxist explanation of history; not the social structure of capitalist society as such, but rather the parasitical activities of particular individuals or groups are made responsible for imperialism. In view of this fact, it is not surprising to find that Hallgarten dissociates himself explicitly from Lenin's use of the term “imperialism,” which, as he correctly points out, applies to practically every country

12. Such an approach, although as a rule not applied to foreign policies as such, may be found with scholars like Gerhard A. Ritter, Hans-Günther Zmarzlik, John C. G. Röhl, Gustav Schmidt, and Hans-Jürgen Puhle. Cf. Gerhard A. Ritter, Georg Kotowski, Werner Pöls, *Das Wilhelminische Deutschland* (Frankfurt, 1965). Hans-Günther Zmarzlik, *Bethmann Hollweg als Reichskanzler 1909–1914* (Bonn, 1957). J. C. G. Röhl, *Germany without Bismarck* (London, 1967). *Idem*, *Zwei deutsche Fürsten zur Kriegsschuldfrage, Lichnowski, Eulenburg und der Ausbruch des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Düsseldorf, 1971). In his more recent publications Röhl, however, stands somewhat closer to the Fischer camp. Hans-Jürgen Puhle, “Parlament, Parteien und Interessenverbände 1890–1914,” in *Das Kaiserliche Deutschland*, ed Stürmer. Gustav Schmidt, “Deutschland am Vorabend des Ersten Weltkrieges,” *ibid.*

with a modern capitalist economy, irrespective of "whether or not the individual nation-state concerned is expanding or not."¹³

Hallgarten likes to elaborate on cases in which it can be shown that business interests and administrative activities were mixed together. He pays particular attention to personalities who, holding key positions in the government, exerted influence on decision-making in the interest of specific economic groups with which they were affiliated either directly or indirectly, and often by kinship rather than through financial participation. The "real villains," however, would seem to be, according to Hallgarten, the "new International" of the armament industries which, he argues, were "ten times more powerful than the Second and the Third Internationals."¹⁴

In accordance with this pattern of explanation Hallgarten makes the most of the admittedly fairly intimate connection between William II and Krupp. He also emphasizes strongly the key role of heavy industry in supporting Tirpitz's naval policies. And with regard to Germany's diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Empire he again considers personal connections between the Young Turks and high personalities on the German side as being of decisive importance. It cannot be said, however, that this approach is particularly helpful with regard to German foreign policy before 1914. Hallgarten's contention, to mention just one point, that High Finance induced Kiderlen-Wächter to embark upon his rather risky Moroccan policy in 1911 is somewhat misleading; it actually worked the other way round, as Germany's business interests in Morocco were used merely as a pretext for a diplomatic move which was intended to force the French to cede the French Congo to Germany in exchange for a free hand in Morocco. Any attempt to explain German foreign policy in the last decade before 1914 exclusively as a product of the influence of particular interest groups does not get very far. It cannot be said, for instance, that particular economic pressure groups had any direct influence on the decisions taken by the German government on the eve of the First World War, or that special attention was given to particular economic problems by the men in power at that very moment. As far as we can trace any influence of men from business circles in June and July 1914, they were working against rather than in favor of going to war in 1914. High Finance definitely resented the course of events, and the mood of the industrialists, as far as it was articulated at

13. *Das Schicksal des Imperialismus im 20. Jahrhundert*, p. 140.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

the time, does not seem to have been particularly warlike. The *Rheinisch-Vestphälische Zeitung*, at any rate, commonly considered a paper intimately affiliated with heavy industry, was one of the few papers which opposed the official line of support of Austria-Hungary against Serbia until late in July 1914.

The argumentation of Fritz Fischer appears to me to be much more important, and without doubt much more to the point. Whatever may be said about his opinions, he definitely deserves to be honored for having once more opened up the discussion of a vital issue which German historians had erroneously believed to be definitely settled. However, it remains to be seen whether his findings can also be considered the last word on German policy before 1914.

Fischer maintains that in the last analysis German foreign policy was the necessary outcome of an aggressive nationalism which pervaded almost all sections of German society and which, of course, was particularly strong among the ruling classes. In 1961 Fischer argued that Germany had been deliberately heading for a European war during the July crisis in 1914, in order to become a world power. Thereafter, step by step, he radicalized his position even more, eventually arriving at the thesis that Germany had decided upon going to war as early as 1911, or at any rate by December 8, 1912, in order to break out of the deadlock to which her previous attempts to acquire colonial territories and greater political influence overseas had led. He also maintained that the war aims Germany pursued after 1914 could be traced long before the war. He argued that this was particularly the case with regard to the acquisition of Longwy-Briey, but was also true with regard to the plan of establishing economic predominance on the European continent, possibly including the Balkans as well, by means of a German-led European Economic Association. In his most recent book, *Der Krieg der Illusionen*, Fischer assembled enormous source material, partially derived from Wernecke's study on German public opinion before 1914, in order to substantiate his thesis.¹⁵

It is not possible to present here a detailed critical analysis of Fischer's presentation of German politics between 1911 and 1915. Yet it seems obvious that he has been driven too far regarding his main thesis: Germany's "will to power." It may be said, for instance, that Fischer is not at all clear as to the question of which sections and groups of German

15. For Wernecke's book see n. 10.

society really advocated a policy of war in order to cut at one stroke the Gordian knot of German imperialism. Was it the government, the emperor, the military establishment, the Conservatives, the industrialists, or the nation at large, any one of them, or all of them? Actually Fischer's arguments constantly shift, charging at times one group, at times another with warlike tendencies; but they are never consistent in this respect. And he does not claim that the various groups and persons with which he is dealing were all, and at all times, committed to going to war. Although at many points we gain important new insights into what was going on, his overall thesis is far from clear.¹⁶ To mention just one point, Fischer attributes the greatest importance to the informal war council which William II held on December 8, 1912, in a sudden outburst of war panic; Fischer contends that the German Empire was henceforth resolved to take up arms as soon as a convenient opportunity turned up, and that the German public was systematically prepared for war. This interpretation has been supported recently by J. C. G. Röhl in a somewhat qualified way; Röhl also is inclined to take literally Tirpitz's words in the so-called "War Council" of December 8, 1912, that the German Fleet would be ready for war by June 1914.¹⁷ It is questionable, however, whether the decisions arrived at on this occasion were as

16. For a more detailed assessment of Fritz Fischer's views, as well as of their development, see Mommsen, "The Debate on German War Aims," and *idem*, "Die Deutsche 'Weltpolitik' und der Erste Weltkrieg," *Neue Politische Literatur*, xvi (1971), 482ff.

17. Cf. Fritz Fischer, *Krieg der Illusionen*, pp. 231ff. The account given by John C. G. Röhl, "Admiral von Müller and the Approach to War 1911-1914," *Historical Journal*, xii (1966), demonstrates that Walter Görlitz, the editor of the diaries of Admiral von Müller (cf. *Der Kaiser, Aufzeichnungen des Chefs des Marinekabinetts Admiral Georg Alexander v. Müller über die Ära Wilhelms II.* [Göttingen, 1965], pp. 124ff.), on which almost all our knowledge about this conference depends, omitted vital passages from the text, in particular the second half of the following passage, beginning with the words "aber er." This passage clearly shows Moltke in favor of a preventive war: "Der Chef des Grossen Generalstabs sagt: Krieg je eher, desto besser, aber er zieht nicht die Konsequenz daraus, welche wäre: Russland oder Frankreich oder beide vor ein Ultimatum zu stellen, das den Krieg mit dem Recht auf unserer Seite entfesselte. Nachmittags an den Reichskanzler wegen der Pressebeeinflussung geschrieben." It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the whole conference was dominated by the assumption that war might break out at any moment (as, indeed, it might have, for Europe was at the very height of a serious Balkan crisis), and that one vital issue was how to justify in the eyes of the German public a European war on behalf of Austria-Hungary's desire to create a semi-independent Albania. Hence the suggestion of William II: "Nun gehen Sie ordentlich in die Presse," according to Bethmann Hollweg's message for Kiderlen-Wächter of December 17, 1912. *Die grosse Politik der europäischen Kabinette* (Berlin, 1922-27), xxxix, No. 15553. Cited as GP.

crucial as Fischer, Röhl, and Geiss would have it. There is not the slightest evidence to support the argument that William II's excited order to prepare the country for war by means of an official press campaign was followed up by deeds. Neither can it be said that the German government henceforth was deliberately heading for war. The chancellor was informed of the conference of December 8 only eight days later, and even then only through semiofficial channels.¹⁸ If the so-called "War Council" had indeed arrived at the decision that Germany should go to war within eighteen months, and that adequate support for this policy should be secured in the country by a systematic press campaign, it would have been very strange indeed to leave the responsible statesman as well as the *Wilhelmstrasse* completely in the dark about it for more than a week! Two things can be gathered from the discourse at the conference of December 8, namely, that the military establishment seriously considered solving the problems of German "world policy" by a preventive war, and that Moltke was in favor of going to war as soon as possible, on the grounds that the German military position was deteriorating rapidly. The conference also resulted in accelerating the preparation of the new armaments bill, which had already been under way. Otherwise, the direct effects of the conference were negligible. The plan to introduce another navy bill was effectively checked by Bethmann Hollweg. He also prevented the implementation of the emperor's order "ordentlich in die Presse zu gehen," to the extent to which it had been taken seriously at all, quietly and effectively.¹⁹ There is little doubt that

18. As follows from the last document cited in n. 17, the chancellor learned not before December 16 that there had been a sort of "War Council." Admiral von Müller apparently did not refer to the "conference" at all when he wrote on the afternoon of December 8 to the chancellor pointing out that something should be done to influence the press in order to bolster up public opinion in respect to the possibility of a European war on behalf of Austria-Hungary at that juncture. This would seem to indicate that von Müller was indeed of the opinion that the result of the conference had been "gleich null"! It is, by the way, not likely that von Müller would have led Bethmann Hollweg astray on purpose in this instance, as he usually acted as the chancellor's ally against Tirpitz.

19. Bethmann Hollweg succeeded in calming the emperor down by explaining that Grey's message was, after all, not all that disastrous, at least as long as Germany avoided all provocative steps (cf. memorandum of Bethmann Hollweg of December 18, 1912, *GP*, xxxix, No. 15560, pp. 9f.). He had already suggested to Tirpitz and Heeringen that they not launch an official propaganda campaign for new armaments; cf. memorandum of December 14, 1912, *ibid.*, No. 15623. It makes rather amusing reading to see that on this occasion the chancellor pointed out to both men: "Ich müsse aber mit allem Nachdruck verlangen, dass sie sich hinter meinem Rücken auch seiner Majestät gegenüber nicht bänden, dass von Vorarbeiten, die sie innerhalb ihrer Ressorts etwa vornähmen,

warlike tendencies were ascending both inside and outside official circles, but it is quite a different matter to say that the German government was bent on war from 1912 on.

It is also open to some doubt whether German imperialism had really come to a dead end by 1914, as is gloomily argued over and over again by Fischer. Germany's economic position in the Ottoman Empire had been consolidated, although this had necessitated some concessions both to French and British interests in this sphere. But it had *not* been diminished, even given the chronic problem of the relative scarcity of capital for "political" investments overseas.²⁰

It would appear that the very nature of Fischer's approach makes it difficult for him to give proper consideration to the forces of moderation. He draws his conclusions rather from what people said than from what they actually did. Thus, the aggressive nationalist outbursts of the politicians concerned are often taken as the whole of the story. On the other hand, it must be admitted that Fischer makes a serious attempt to

auch nicht das geringste in die Öffentlichkeit dringen dürfe, und dass ich irgendwelche Presstreiberei zugunsten der Projekte unter keinen Umständen dulden könne" (*ibid.*, pp. 147f.). None of these gentlemen would seem to have dared taking recourse to the arguments put forward by William II a few days earlier at the so-called "War Council" of December 8, 1912!

20. Fischer's interpretation rests upon the unspoken assumption that Germany had a position of predominant economic influence in the Ottoman Empire to start with, and that it was confronted with increasing competition by other industrial nations only in the last few years before 1914. In fact, all German enterprises in this area had been substantially dependent on assistance from the "Caisse de la Dette Publique," which was dominated by the French, and had been intimately associated with foreign, primarily French banking houses, in particular the Banque Ottomane. The earlier sections of the Bagdad Railway could not have been built without the substantial support of these groups. Cf. Donald C. Blaisdell, *European Financial Control in the Ottoman Empire* (New York, 1966), pp. 124ff. It may be further pointed out that the Germans succeeded in increasing their proportion of shares in the "Dette Publique" from an initial share of 8% to about 30% by 1914, and consequently their influence was substantially enhanced, although the French continued to be the strongest group of shareholders. Cf. Raymond Poidevin, *Les Relations Economiques et Financieres entre la France et L'Allemagne de 1898 a 1914* (Paris, 1969), p. 697. The separation of the respective economic activities of the Western powers which took place in the Ottoman Empire after 1909 did not necessarily imply an infringement on the German position. The treaty between a German and a French group on February 15, 1914, regarding their respective spheres of interest and economic engagement in the Ottoman Empire, as well as the agreement reached in March 1914 between the d'Arcy Group and the *Deutsche Bank* on the joint exploitation of the Mesopotamian and Anatolian oil fields, could have been more favorable to the German side, but the *Deutsche Bank* was thoroughly pleased with it. See, for instance, *GP*, xxxvii/1, No. 14888, p. 435. Fischer's presentation in *Der Krieg der Illusionen*, pp. 424ff., is rather misleading.

get beyond an interpretation dealing mainly with ideological aspects, at least in his "second" book, although not always with the same degree of success. Nonetheless, it seems warranted to conclude that he arrives at all too radical conclusions, mainly because he tends to isolate quotations of a nationalist or imperialist nature from the context, and bases his conclusions on those quotations rather than on a coherent analysis of the political and social structures.

There is still another point worth mentioning. The premise of Fischer's interpretation of Wilhelmine politics, that an aggressive nationalism lay at the bottom of all that happened, induces him to describe the actions of other powers as mere reactions prompted by German diplomacy itself. Yet neither French nationalism nor the growing militarist tendencies in Russia can be properly explained in such a way. A comparative study of European nationalism would reveal that the gradually growing participation of the masses of the population in the political process was everywhere accompanied by an intensified nationalism.

The "Kehrite" approach is in this respect much more rewarding, for it pays far more attention to universal factors such as industrialization—although it also tends to see things on a national level only. It is, furthermore, up to a point capable of explaining why imperialist tendencies of such magnitude developed particularly in Germany, in spite of the fact that a considerable proportion of the German people, in particular the working classes, would have none of it. German imperialism, according to this theory, was essentially a defensive strategy of the upper and middle classes against the Social Democrats and, in a wider sense, against the democratic tendencies of the age in general. There are, of course, differences in detail. Hans-Ulrich Wehler, for example, put forward the opinion that German imperialism resulted from a widespread feeling among the upper classes that the existing social order could be preserved only in a permanently expanding economy, and that therefore colonial and economic expansion had become a necessity, if not in objective economic terms, at any rate on sociopsychological grounds.²¹ This model, however, developed with regard to what Wehler calls "Bismarck's Imperialism," is not particularly suited for explaining German imperialism from the nineties on, since the two decades after 1894

21. *Bismarck und der Imperialismus*, pp. 17ff., where Wehler presents his theory on a more general basis. Cf. my review of Wehler's book in this journal, II (1969), 366ff. See also Wehler's introduction to *Imperialismus* ("Neue Wissenschaftliche Bibliothek," Cologne, 1970).

were a period of unprecedented and almost uninterrupted economic growth.²² More to the point is Wehler's sociopolitical version of the same model, which seems to be derived from Kehr, namely, the argument that imperialism was a means of maintaining the ruling classes in their privileged position and holding down the Social Democrats. This interpretation has been accepted in particular by Dirk Stegmann, Volker Berghahn, and Helmut Böhme, among others. According to them, the "agrarian-industrial complex" was the most important social force in Wilhelmine Germany, and German foreign policy was, more or less, shaped under the influence of this group.

According to this theory the politics of imperialism and the construction of a huge battle fleet were primarily means to unite the conservative and bourgeois sections of German society against their common enemy, the Social Democrats. We find this thesis already with Kehr, who wrote in 1928: "In der Miquelschen Sammlungspolitik liegen die letzten Gründe der Aussenpolitik des deutschen Reiches, die in den Krieg steuerte."²³ Stegmann's book, *Bismarcks Erben*, is more or less an elaboration of this thesis, based on an enormous amount of material. In the manner of the Fischer school, Stegmann excels in applying the principle of continuity; the *Sammlungspolitik*, inaugurated by Bismarck in 1879 and put on a more formal basis by Miquel in 1893, continued, according to Stegmann, right up to 1932, and he considers it to be an important precondition for the rise to power of National Socialism. Böhme does not go that far in his recent essay on German imperialism, and he is also somewhat more reluctant to put all the blame on the industrialists; yet in principle he takes an essentially similar line.²⁴ Berghahn, in his recent studies of German naval policy, is perhaps a little more cautious; he points out that Tirpitz's naval policy was not only antiparliamentarian in tendency, but that it also had a distinctive social-imperialist function.²⁵

22. This point is made also by Helmut Böhme, *op. cit.*, pp. 39ff.

23. *Op. cit.*, p. 150.

24. Böhme, *op. cit.*, pp. 48f. Böhme argues that German imperialism must be understood as "der Versuch der Staatsleitung und der sie tragenden Gruppen und Interessen..., im Gegensatz zum Entwurf 'des Sozialismus', die sozialen Veränderungen der sich durch die rasante Industrialisierung rasch wandelnden Gesellschaft nicht mit einer grundlegenden Reform, der Umwälzung der Eigentumsverhältnisse zu lösen, sondern mit Hilfe der Ablenkung auf Grossmacht- und Weltmachtpläne zu paralisieren, um auf diese Weise den innenpolitischen Status quo ohne Reformen zu erhalten."

25. Cf. Berghahn, "Zu den Zielen des deutschen Flottenbaus," pp. 34ff. *Idem*, *Der Tirpitzplan*, pp. 592ff. It may be mentioned that Berghahn maintains that Tirpitz's

How far do these models of explanation help us understand German foreign policy before 1914 better than before?

One point may be made right away. It would seem that both Stegmann and Böhme overrate the impact of the so-called *Sammlungspolitik* on German politics. Not fully convincing is Stegmann's elaborate attempt to show that, irrespective of the clash between the Conservatives and the business circles over the *Reichsfinanzreform* in 1909, there was from the early nineties an uninterrupted cooperation between the *Centralverband deutscher Industrieller* (CVdI, representing heavy industry) and the *Bund der Landwirte* (representing the agrarians). Yet even if one concedes for the moment that the coordinated activities of heavy industry and agrarians were indeed as far-reaching as Stegmann claims, why, then, did they achieve so little? Can the temporary halt in social legislation in 1914 really be considered as a first-rate victory? And can it really be said that the combined pressure of agrarians and industrialists was the only, or even the main factor which blocked progress in the constitutional field? It should be realized that the assumedly almighty CVdI manifestly failed even to gain substantial influence on the leadership of the National Liberal Party. Although the National Liberals became more inclined after 1912 to join forces with the Conservatives, they still objected to an outright reactionary policy, as advocated by the Conservatives and by the CVdI.

It follows from this that a more sophisticated explanation is needed than the "Kehrites" would have it in order to cope with the many-sided complex of German imperialism. In spite of Kehr's assertion to the contrary, there is no direct continuity from Miquel's *Sammlungspolitik* of the nineties to 1913.

There was, in fact, a substantial difference between Miquel's "Sammlung" of the "productive estates" in German society on an essentially reactionary platform, and the sort of *Sammlungspolitik* pursued by Bülow and Tirpitz, and in an even more straightforward manner by Bethmann Hollweg from 1909 on.²⁶ Miquel's concept was essentially anti-

strategy had failed by 1909; from then on it would seem no longer to have been a major factor in German domestic politics, although Tirpitz continued to be very popular with the parliamentary politicians.

26. This interpretation is to some extent in agreement with Berghahn, who also suggested in a recent article, "Das Kaiserreich in der Sackgasse," *Neue Politische Literatur*, xvi (1971), 497ff., that one ought to distinguish between a "kleine Sammlung," as suggested by the agrarians and by heavy industry, and a "grosse Sammlung," as pursued by Tirpitz

parliamentarian, and was directed largely against the rising power of the Reichstag; he suggested not only an "adjustment" of the Electoral Law of the Reichstag on the Prussian pattern, but also an outright reactionary policy of suppression in regard to the Social Democrats. This political strategy was deliberately abandoned after about 1898 in favor of a much more elastic course that was able to put up with the existing constitutional framework, and to come to terms again with the Reichstag—or rather with the bourgeois parties in the Reichstag—while abstaining from any renewal of specific anti-socialist laws. Yet, instead of making constitutional sacrifices to the Reichstag, Bülow and Tirpitz embarked upon a policy of popular imperialism, including the construction of a "bourgeois" battle fleet, which was designed to bring about a realignment of the middle parties with the government under the banner of a plebiscitarian *Kaisertum*.²⁷ This did not rule out a partial modernization of the political system, even at the risk of irritating the Conservatives to some degree. Bülow succeeded, by playing the nationalist, imperialist tune, in stabilizing the system of imperial rule and checking the rising power of the Reichstag, at least for the time being. This explains why under Bülow *Weltpolitik* in the proper sense was actually pursued somewhat halfheartedly and without any realistic plan. In his opinion, it was primarily a means of alleviating political and social tensions at home by turning public attention to overseas problems. He was therefore more interested in prestigious results which increased the popularity of the government at home than in the actual acquisition of particular overseas territories. Imperialist expansion was not an aim in itself, but rather a means of bolstering the prestige of the emperor and the political system, which had suffered a great deal in the years since

and Bülow. It should be noted, however, that the difference is one not only of degree but of quality, in that the latter version sought to include the majority of the middle classes and the Center Party. Stegmann, of course, consistently confuses the two types of *Sammlungspolitik*, to the detriment of his argument.

27. For Bülow's intention to revitalize the "personal rule" of William II see Röhl, *Deutschland ohne Bismarck. Die Regierungskrise im Zweiten Kaiserreich 1890–1900* (Tübingen, 1969—the German ed. of the book referred to in n. 12), pp. 123f., 147f., 251ff. As early as 1896, shortly before he became Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Bülow confessed that the solution of the constitutional problems could be found only in a "Royalismus sans phrase" (*ibid.*, p. 187). In 1897 he argued, "Ich lege den Hauptakzent auf die auswärtige Politik. Nur eine erfolgreiche Aussenpolitik kann helfen, versöhnen, beruhigen, sammeln, einigen" (*ibid.*, p. 229). The antiparliamentary tendencies of Tirpitz's naval policies are documented by Berghahn, "Zu den Zielen des deutschen Flottenbaus," pp. 36ff., and *Der Tirpitzplan*, pp. 14ff.

1892. Consequently, it is hardly surprising that the Bülow administration could never make up its mind as to where German colonial activities should be concentrated. It also always hesitated to go ahead with colonial policies if they might impair the assumedly independent position of Germany between the "British Lion" and the "Russian Bear." On the other hand, the "sham" imperialism of Bülow matched the long-term goals of Tirpitz's naval policies, for the latter required relative tranquillity and peace until the battle fleet was strong enough to risk an encounter with the British navy. After the abortive attempt to undermine the Entente Cordiale in 1905, Bülow became increasingly concerned about the deterioration of Anglo-German relations; in 1908 he confronted Tirpitz with the question whether a submarine fleet would not serve Germany's strategic interests better than a battle fleet.²⁸

In the first decade of the twentieth century, however, German imperialism definitely became more than a skillful contrivance to make a hitherto unpopular government popular again. Imperialism now became a serious concern of the middle classes, and not only out of fear of the Social Democrats. Imperialism was now associated with modernization and industrialization, and thus it got a distinctly anticonservative tinge. While the imperialist ideology helped the integration of the middle classes into the existing political framework, at the same time it greatly enhanced their political influence, at the expense of the conservative nobility. It is by no means surprising that the Reichstag elections of 1906, which were fought explicitly on the issue of imperialism, resulted in a Conservative-Liberal coalition which required sacrifices on both sides. Yet this combination was not to last long. Domestic issues once more became dominant, and the fragility of the "Bülow Block"

28. Bülow to Tirpitz, December 25, 1908, in Otto Hammann, *Bilder aus der letzten Kaiserzeit* (Berlin, 1922), p. 148: "Ew. pp. enthalten sich aber einer Meinungsäusserung darüber, ob, angesichts der von Ihnen selbst hervorgehobenen derzeitigen grossen Überlegenheit der englischen Flotte über unsere Streitkräfte zur See—eine Überlegenheit, die überdies das englische Volk auch für die Zukunft unter allen Umständen aufrechtzuerhalten entschlossen scheint—es unseren Schlachtschiffen überhaupt möglich sein würde, entscheidend in Aktion zu treten. Ist aber die Befürchtung gerechtfertigt, dass unsere Flotte in ihrer gegenwärtigen Stärke von den übermächtigen englischen Seestreitkräften blockiert in unseren Hafen zurückgehalten werden würde, müssen wir mit der Wahrscheinlichkeit rechnen, in einem Seekrieg mit England vorläufig auf die Defensive angewiesen zu sein, so entsteht die Frage, ob sich nicht empfiehlt, der Verbesserung unserer Küstenbefestigungen, der Vergrösserung unseres Bestandes an Seeminen und der Schaffung einer starken Unterseebootflotte unsere Aufmerksamkeit zuzuwenden, anstatt uns ausschliesslich auf die Vermehrung von Schlachtschiffen zu konzentrieren...."

became apparent at once. Mainly because the Conservatives were not prepared to pay their share of the bill, they brought Bülow down in 1909, with the help of the Center Party, on the issue of the *Reichsfinanzreform*.²⁹

From 1909 onwards it becomes even more difficult fully to account for the developments in German foreign policy by referring only to the now so fashionable catchword "social imperialism." It cannot be said that it was the most reactionary sections of German society that were clamoring the loudest for territories overseas. The most outspoken supporters of an effective, if not aggressive German *Weltpolitik* were the upper middle classes, represented by the National Liberal Party, considerable sections of the intelligentsia (which were conspicuously numerous in the Pan-German League and the Navy League), and parts of the petty bourgeoisie. It was only in 1911 that the Conservatives came around to an unreserved support of an outright imperialist policy, although they continued to distrust industrialization, which appeared to be the twin brother of imperialism.³⁰ Their support of a nationalist imperialism resulted from opportunist calculations, for they hoped by doing this to regain their hold on the electorate. This hold was rapidly dwindling away, due to the increasing political mobilization of those groups of the population which hitherto had been largely apathetic and without much interest in political affairs. The rapid industrialization was about to break up even the last remnants of a tradition-bound society in which the word of the landlord was more or less willingly accepted as binding for everybody.

The repeated attempts of the Conservatives, as well as of the more reactionary groups of German industry (represented in particular by the *Centralverband deutscher Industrieller*, or rather its dominant right wing), to bring about a new "Sammlung" of the "productive estates," that is to say, a realignment with the upper middle classes on a joint political

29. Cf. Peter Christian Witt, *Die Finanzpolitik des Deutschen Reiches von 1903 bis 1913. Eine Studie zur Innenpolitik des Wilhelminischen Deutschland* (Lübeck, 1970), pp. 303f.

30. In fact, imperialist issues had played a rather secondary role in the Conservative ideology so far. The Conservative Party up until then had always taken the official line in imperialist issues, rather than putting pressure on the government. Although the *Bund der Landwirte* adhered to a rather aggressive version of nationalism, the Conservatives had no concrete ideas as to what kind of imperialist policy should be pursued; when their own economic interests were likely to be involved they opposed rather than supported imperialist ventures. See also Hans-Jürgen Puhle, *Agrarische Interessenpolitik und preussischer Konservatismus* (Hanover, 1966), pp. 96ff., 241f.

platform, did not get very far. The National Liberals, for one, refused to join forces with them, for they regarded their taking part in a policy of repression in social as well as in constitutional matters as almost suicidal. They preferred to maintain their position as principal champions of what they called a reasonable and efficient German imperialism, combined with a policy of piecemeal modernization in domestic and constitutional affairs. The government of Bethmann Hollweg did not let itself be drawn in such a direction either, although it was ready to compromise with the Conservatives wherever this seemed possible. It is not surprising, therefore, that those sections of German society that stood for a policy of outright social imperialism became more and more ardent opponents of the government, on foreign issues as well as on domestic ones.

Precisely because Bethmann Hollweg (who in June 1909 had succeeded Bülow as chancellor) refused to embark on a policy of reckless imperialism associated with the straightforward suppression of the Social Democrats and other progressive forces at home, he was soon assailed by the Conservatives and parts of the upper bourgeoisie. This is borne out by the course of events from 1909 on. In the summer of 1909 manifest doubts as to whether the previous strategies of German diplomacy had been wise coincided with a severe internal crisis; for the first time in German history a chancellor had been forced to resign, if only indirectly, by a hostile coalition of parties. From the point of view of the ruling elite this was indeed a grave situation, because the Conservatives had thrown in their lot against the government and at the same time had antagonized at least a considerable section of the middle classes and the business community. Not a few people correctly assumed that the eventual outcome of the affair would be a gigantic victory of the Social Democrats at the polls, as most of the new taxes had been put on the shoulders of the masses of the population.

If, at the turn of the century, Bülow had succeeded in preventing an open conflict with the Reichstag by playing the imperialist tune, Bethmann Hollweg decided not to embark upon such a frivolous policy—with one notable exception with which we shall soon have to deal. He believed that the political situation after the crisis of 1909 was not a propitious moment for an adventurous foreign policy, and that time would be required to let things calm down again at home. Bethmann Hollweg's primary concern in the years from 1909 to 1911 was the stabilization of the position of the German Empire within the system of powers. Germany backed out of the somewhat odd position on Morocco

which she had assumed at Algeciras, in spite of the noise the Mannesmann Brothers made on behalf of it. The government also tried to bring about a *détente* with Russia, an undertaking which initially appeared to have worked quite successfully. Otherwise, Bethmann Hollweg worked hard to improve relations with Great Britain, even after a not very sensible attempt to negotiate a neutrality agreement in return for a moderate limitation of naval construction had failed.³¹

The chancellor considered an understanding with Great Britain necessary above all to minimize the danger of a European war in which Germany might easily become involved growing out of a conflict between Austria-Hungary and Russia in the Balkans.³² Still, a greater degree of security in Europe would also make it much easier to realize some of Germany's colonial objectives. The main goal of the government was the eventual creation of a coherent German Central Africa, through the acquisition of some of the Portuguese, Belgian, and French territories in this area. Apart from this, the government worked hard to strengthen, and whenever possible to expand, the German economic involvement in the Ottoman Empire.

Bethmann Hollweg assumed that for such a policy of moderate expansionism "without war" British support might come forward. He was fully aware, conversely, that a reconciliation with Great Britain was not an easy thing to bring about, if only in view of the rather Anglophobe attitude of German public opinion. He hoped that sooner or later the public would realize that there was no real alternative to such a political course. It is debatable how much chance there was for the realization of this political concept, in view of the fact that neither the emperor nor the middle classes was prepared to accede to a substantial reduction of the German naval armament program, a precondition for any rapprochement with Great Britain. Whatever chance there was, it was fatally reduced by the disastrous results of Kiderlen-Wächter's all too Machiavellian Moroccan policy of 1911.

In many respects, the Agadir crisis of 1911 must be considered the great divide in German politics before 1914. The shrewd calculations of

31. A detailed, if uninspired, account of these negotiations is given by Alexander Kessler, *Das deutsch-englische Verhältnis vom Amtsantritt Bethmann Hollwegs bis zur Haldane Mission* (Erlangen, 1938). See also Hans Joachim Henning, *Deutschlands Verhältnis zu England in Bethmann Hollweg's Aussenpolitik 1909-1914* (published doctoral thesis, Cologne, 1962).

32. See in particular Bethmann Hollweg's memorandum for Kiderlen-Wächter, April 5, 1911, *GP*, xxviii, No. 10347, p. 409.

Kiderlen-Wächter turned out to be absolutely wrong. Kiderlen-Wächter had optimistically assumed that a definite settlement of the Moroccan question would make a rapprochement with Great Britain easier.³³ In fact, the bold "forward move" of July 1, 1911, not only led to a serious deterioration of Anglo-German relations, but also brought about an outcry of German public opinion against Great Britain, alleging that she always stepped in whenever a chance turned up for Germany to score a success overseas.

The action against France on the Moroccan issue was not initiated by any economic interest groups; on the contrary, the Mannesmann Brothers, who really had a stake in southern Morocco, were deliberately left out of the game. A banking group in Hamburg was to supply, at the request of the Foreign Office, a convenient pretext for the German intervention, but in doing so they were left completely in the dark as to the real objectives of the government.³⁴ Much the same was true with regard to the press and even the Pan-German League, which were both officially encouraged to take a hard line on the Moroccan issue in order to scare the French into ceding the Congo as an appropriate compensation.³⁵

The whole affair was undoubtedly undertaken, among other reasons,

33. Cf. *GP*, xxix, pp. 107–108, note, and Kiderlen-Wächter's telegram for Schoen, June 30, 1911, where an allusion is made to his intention "das Marokkopproblem endgültig als Reibungsfläche aus der internationalen Politik auszuschalten," *ibid.*, No. 10578, p. 155. See also Bethmann Hollweg's declaration in the Reichstag on November 9, 1911: "Marokko war eine dauernd schwärende Wunde in unserem Verhältnis nicht nur zu Frankreich, sondern auch zu England." "Die Erledigung der Marokkoangelegenheit [reinige] auch in unseren Beziehungen zu England den Tisch." *Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstages*, vol. 268, p. 7713 A, B.

34. This is demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt by Alfred A. Vagts, "M. M. Warburg & Co. Ein Bankhaus in der deutschen Weltpolitik 1905–1935," *Vierteljahrsschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, xlv (1958), 253ff. Cf. the diaries of Dr. Regendanz, who acted as an agent for the German government, F. W. Pick, *Searchlight on German Africa. The Diaries and Papers of Dr. Regendanz* (London, 1939). See also Joanne St. Mortimer, "Commercial Interests and German Diplomacy in the Agadir Crisis," *Historical Journal*, x (1967), who, however, substantially overrates the importance of the business groups behind Dr. Regendanz.

35. The frivolous press policies of Kiderlen-Wächter were heavily criticized by the Reichstag as early as 1912. Cf. debates in the Budget Committee, as well as the Reichstag debates on February 17, 1912, *Verhandlungen des Reichstages*, vol. 283, pp. 96Aff. A full account of Kiderlen-Wächter's press politics now in Wernecke, *op. cit.*, pp. 26ff. Details as to Kiderlen-Wächter's negotiations with Class also in *Die Bürgerlichen Parteien in Deutschland*, ed. Dieter Fricke et al. (Leipzig, 1970), I, 11f.

with an eye to the forthcoming Reichstag elections.³⁶ The cautious attempts of the chancellor to launch as an official election slogan the preservation of the present system of economic treaties had gotten but a meager reception, and a handsome success in foreign policy would have been welcome indeed. However, the modest results of Kiderlen-Wächter's diplomacy could not stand a comparison with the expectations of public opinion, which had been deliberately boosted by the government's own press policies. The domestic situation got completely out of control. The government was assailed from almost all quarters of German society for its allegedly "weak" policy. It was the Conservatives and the National Liberals who now embarked upon an avowedly imperialist course. At the culmination of the crisis, heavy industry also spoke up strongly in favor of what may be called a "forward" policy. The military establishment was also not satisfied with the course of events; Moltke maintained that Germany should have gone to war rather than sell out on what he believed to be dishonorable terms.³⁷ Tirpitz, on his part, quickly seized the opportunity to request a new naval bill.

Bethmann Hollweg was alarmed by the warlike spirit prevailing in important sections of German society, and he spoke out strongly against it.³⁸ But this was of little avail. Although there was no unanimity as to which objectives German policy should go after, the conservative and bourgeois classes tended to agree on one point: that Germany should act more vigorously whenever a new opportunity arose to acquire new territories abroad, perhaps even at the risk of a major war. Thus as early as 1912 there developed a political constellation which foreshad-

36. Cf. Kiderlen-Wächter's memorandum for William II, May 3, GP, xxix, No. 10549, p. 108: "Unsere öffentliche Meinung würde mit alleiniger Ausnahme der Sozialdemokratischen Partei das einfache Geschehenlassen der Dinge im Scherifenreich der Kaiserlichen Regierung zum Vorwurf machen, während andererseits mit Sicherheit angenommen werden darf, dass praktische Ergebnisse manchen unzufriedenen Wähler unstimmen und den Ausfall der bevorstehenden Reichstagswahlen vielleicht nicht unwesentlich beeinflussen würden."

37. Helmuth von Moltke, *Erinnerungen, Briefe, Dokumente 1877-1916* (Darmstadt, 1922), p. 362.

38. Cf. Bethmann Hollweg's speech in the Reichstag on November 9, 1911, in *Verhandlungen des Reichstages*, vol. 268, p. 756A, and also his letter to Eisendecker of November 16, 1911, in Nachlass Eisendecker, 1/1-7, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Bonn: "Krieg für die Gebrüder Mannesmann wäre ein Verbrechen gewesen. Aber das deutsche Volk hat diesen Sommer so leichtfertig mit dem Kriege gespielt. Das stimmt mich ernst; dem musste ich entgegentreten. Auch auf die Gefahr, den Unwillen des Volkes auf mich zu laden."

owed the situation that existed in the first years of the war. On the one side we find a government which, although in favor of an expansionist policy, attempted to pursue an essentially moderate course. On the other side there were strong groups within the upper classes, supported by important sections of the parties, which advocated a vigorous foreign policy, and which entertained the notion that if Germany could not get her way otherwise she should not shrink from taking up arms. In this struggle, the "civilian" government did not succeed in getting its views accepted; rather, it was driven step by step in the opposite direction.

This can be explained only by taking into account the peculiar nature of the political system of Wilhelmine Germany in the prewar years. Since the turn of the century the internal situation had undergone substantial changes, and it may be said that the governmental system was no longer in line with the social structures emerging in the course of an accelerating process of industrialization. The social basis of traditional conservatism was dwindling away. It was not only the shift from a primarily agricultural society toward urban industrialism which made life more and more difficult for the Conservatives. It was rather the increasing speed of social mobilization, associated with a growing diversification of incomes, which cut into those sections of the population which up to then had been oriented to traditionalist values and life-expectations. From the socioeconomic point of view, the upper middle class was about to become the dominant group in German society. It was only the rapid growth of the working-class movement which afforded the conservatives another lease on political predominance. But the speed of social change should not be overrated. The advance of industrialization was rapid enough to frighten the traditional sections of German society very much indeed; but its actual impact was not yet strong enough effectively to undermine their respective social positions altogether. In 1910 Germany was—in Rostow's terms—"a mature industrial economy."³⁹ However, this does not mean that it was a fully developed industrial *society*. Measured in socioeconomic terms, the agrarian and, in particular, the petit-bourgeois sections of German society were still in the majority, as is indicated by the statistical figures concerning the average size of business enterprises before 1914, which was still sur-

39. *The Stages of Economic Growth*, p. 116.

prisingly low. It is these social groups which were all too ready to lend their support to traditionalist and conservative politics, and upon whose sympathy the pseudoconstitutional governments of Bülow and Bethmann Hollweg could still count.

The traditionalist sections of German society were still remarkably strong, yet were no longer a sufficient basis for an outright conservative policy. Neither did the opposite possibility exist. The parties which could be called "progressive," namely the Social Democrats, the Progressives, a part of the National Liberals, and to some degree the left wing of the Center Party, were on the ascendant, but for the time being did not possess a majority. In the middle range, their chances seemed to be very good indeed; but even as late as 1912 it did not pay to display too progressive an attitude. In spite of their great success in the Reichstag elections of 1912, the Social Democrats and the Progressives were unable to exert any substantial influence on actual legislation. The political influence of the Social Democrats stood almost in inverse ratio to their numerical strength, for the government took care not to introduce any bill which could be passed only with their support. Whenever the bourgeois parties were about to join forces with the Social Democrats on a particular issue, the government almost always succeeded in bringing them to heel again by pointing out that such behavior was contrary to the national interest. The National Liberals had to consider that a great many of their voters were rather traditionalist. Consequently, they were particularly reluctant to join forces with the Left, as this might have resulted in a breakup of the National Liberal Party. The Social Democrats were not inclined to join a "coalition from Bassermann to Bebel" either, even if this had been within their reach. Both the Social Democrats and the National Liberals were tied down by traditional attitudes which made any compromise extremely difficult. This situation was intensified by the socioeconomic situation: after 1909 class conflicts had again become more tense. The employers tried to check the rise of the trade unions by the use of effective counterorganizations; and they used all their means of influencing public opinion to bring a stop to "Sozialpolitik." On the other hand, real wages, after a period of almost continuous rise, had again become almost stagnant, largely as a result of rising food prices. Active social reformers like Lujo Brentano and Max Weber were extremely worried whether the trade unions still had a fair chance against the employers; Weber complained late in 1912 that social reform was no longer fashionable, and tried in

vain to create a propaganda organization to make it popular again.⁴⁰

The almost complete deadlock in parliamentary politics which was caused in part by the antagonism between the Social Democrats and the liberal parties originated, in the last analysis, in the deep antagonisms within German society, which had been intensified by the momentous economic growth. None of the major political groups, the Conservatives, the bourgeois parties, or the Social Democrats, were at that time in a position to alter things substantially. The Conservatives, supported by the right wing of the Prussian National Liberals, controlled a strong defensive position thanks to their enormous strength in both houses of the Prussian *Landtag*. The Center Party and the National Liberals, although less and less inclined to join the conservative camp, were not strong enough to pursue a policy of moderate reform and at the same time to check effectively the further growth of the Social Democrats. The latter party was given almost no chance to exercise an effective influence on the course of politics, and the Social Democrats were rightly worried by symptoms which indicated that the potential reservoir of voters was approaching the point of exhaustion.

It was only this situation which enabled the semi-authoritarian government of Bethmann Hollweg to carry on in spite of its unpopularity in all political quarters. To put it another way, the stalemate of the party system was the main source of Bethmann Hollweg's relative strength. Apart from that Bethmann Hollweg was able to muster some support from those sections of the middle classes which still considered party politics "dirty business." Occasionally he appealed directly to these sections of the community to dissociate themselves from what he called the fruitless striving of the parties and to lend him their support.⁴¹ It is fully in line with such a calculation that Bethmann Hollweg thought it best to keep clear of the parties as much as possible, and if possible to restrict the influence of the party leaders on the actual decision-making. However, maintaining a policy "above the parties" was bound to multiply the inherent evils of all authoritarian rule. Official policy and party politics were pursued side by side, with insufficient communication between them. This was the case in particular with foreign policy. Tradi-

40. Cf. W. J. Mommsen, *Max Weber und die deutsche Politik 1890-1914* (Tübingen, 1959), pp. 133-35.

41. He appealed, for instance, to men like Delbrück and Lamprecht to support the official scheme of a "Vermögensabgabe," in order to find the financial means for the armament bill of 1913 in a politically acceptable form.

tionally the Reichstag had no say at all in these matters, and so the chancellor did not care to inform the party leaders properly about the actual difficulties of German foreign policy; superficial consultations, followed up by appeals for support on national grounds, were still considered sufficient. Under these conditions the party leaders could afford to give themselves up to a rather irresponsible nationalist agitation, all the more so because they had to compete with extraparliamentary associations like the Pan-German League and the *Wehrverein*. As there was no proper exchange of political opinions between the government and the country at large, the gap between the ideologies of the day and the realities became wider and wider.

The stalemate between the various political groups was accompanied by sterile agitation and effectively blocked the way for any substantial change in the constitutional structure; but it did not necessarily strengthen the position of the government. On the contrary, as the government had to manage without any solid support by any of the Reichstag parties, it became increasingly dependent on the goodwill of the high bureaucracy, of the officer corps, and, in a wider sense, of the Prusso-German aristocracy. Without their support, the government had little chance of surviving the repeated onslaughts of the Reichstag, or of holding its own against the radical agitation of the Pan-German League and similar extraparliamentary political associations, and the less direct pressure of the *Centralverband deutscher Industrieller*.

Both the high bureaucracy and the officer corps, however, became more and more worried about the increasingly rapid advance of democratic ideas within German society. The officer corps was particularly sensitive to this trend; it therefore reacted disproportionately against any encroachment on its traditional rights by the Reichstag or public opinion. Bethmann Hollweg had a very difficult time clearing himself of the charges made against him in military quarters and court circles that he had not defended the rights of the army energetically enough during the debates in the Finance Committee of the Reichstag on the armament bill of 1913.⁴² William II considered the *Kommandogewalt* the

42. Cf. Bethmann Hollweg to Eisendecker, undated (July 1913), *Nachlass Eisendecker*, 1/1-7: "Der Kaiser ist wieder hochgradig nervös. Jeder törichte Beschluss, den die Reichstagskommission in der Wehrevorlage fasste, und es sind ihrer allerdings genug, reizt ihn aufs Äusserste und er möchte am liebsten jeden Tag auflösen oder doch mit der Auflösung drohen . . . ich kann mir nicht verhehlen, dass dem Kaiser meine Art, Politik zu treiben, von Tag zu Tag unerträglicher wird." See also Kurt Stenkewitz, *Gegen Bajo-*

last vestige of supreme monarchical power. The chancellor therefore could not prevent an extension of the sphere to which the *Kommandogewalt* was held to apply, an extension which took place not so much in constitutional law as in actual practice, however strongly the Reichstag took objection.⁴³

William II and the military establishment considered it the most important task of any chancellor to keep the Reichstag in check. Yet it became more and more evident that this was an impossible task, even under such favorable conditions as those of Wilhelmine Germany. The general trend toward more popular, if not democratic, forms of government made itself felt in German society as well as elsewhere, and resulted among other things in an enhanced self-consciousness of the Reichstag. It was no longer possible to discard the political requests of the Reichstag altogether. Conversely, the Conservatives and their fellow travellers were panic-stricken, and at least some of them felt that they were standing with their backs to the wall. In such a situation it was difficult to work out compromises, both on the social level and on the political level. The government was aware of this implication of the overall sociopolitical constellation, and therefore it decided to follow what it believed to be a neutral course. Bethmann Hollweg dared not seek political support on the Left; even if he had liked this idea—which, of course, he did not—it would have been difficult to pursue such a political line in view of the still intransigent attitude of the Social Democrats. On the other hand, he refused to join forces with the Right and embark upon a straightforward policy of repression of the Social Dem-

nett und Dividende (Berlin, 1960), pp. 117f., and Kuno Graf Westarp, *Konservative Politik im letzten Jahrzehnt des Kaiserreichs*, 1 (Berlin, 1935), 238.

43. This trend of affairs is reflected in the Reichstag debates about various motions which suggested a more precise definition of the sphere to which the *Kommandogewalt* was supposed to apply, on January 23, 1914, and May 5 and 6, 1914; *Verhandlungen des Reichstages*, vol. 252, pp. 6730ff., and vol. 294, pp. 8480ff. On May 6, 1914, von Falkenhayn, the new minister of war, defined the royal privileges in such a way as fully to justify the semi-independent positions of the *Kaiserliches Militärkabinett* as well as of the War Ministry with regard to the Reichstag: "Die Befugnisse des Königs von Preussen gegenüber der bewaffneten Macht Preussens, sowie den ihr durch Konventionen angegliederten anderen Staaten sind in der Verfassung enthalten und durch die Reichsverfassung erweitert, aber in keinem Punkte eingeschränkt worden. Seine Majestät der König und Kaiser übt diese Befugnisse innerhalb der Gesetze völlig selbständig aus. Ein Mitwirkungsrecht des Reichstages besteht dabei in keiner Weise, obschon natürlich nicht bestritten werden soll, dass der Reichstag zuständig ist, bei seinen gesetzgeberischen Arbeiten seine Wünsche in Bezug auf das Militärwesen zur Sprache zu bringen." *Verhandlungen des Reichstages*, vol. 294, p. 8515B. See also Zmarzlik, *op. cit.*, pp. 135f.

ocrats and the democratic tendencies alike, although considerable sections within the ruling bureaucracy demanded this, and although the Conservative Party and important interest groups, in particular the CVdI, tried to push the government in this direction. The reason Bethmann Hollweg resisted such a policy, although he gave in at some points, is obvious: it would have resulted in further antagonizing the political parties and would have made it even more difficult to bring about a realignment of the bourgeois and Conservative parties, which he assumed would be the only way out of the present dilemma. In this sense Bethmann Hollweg's "policy of the diagonal," which did not please anybody, was a genuinely conservative policy.

The dissent within the ruling elite as to whether this kind of policy was right made itself felt, of course, in the sphere of foreign policy just as much as in internal affairs. In a way, Bethmann Hollweg deliberately discounted public opinion in matters of foreign policy, but he could afford to do so only if all sections of the government were willing to take a common stand on controversial issues vis-à-vis public opinion. The chancellor, however, became less and less capable of seeing that this principle was adhered to.

The chancellor believed that the only way out was to conduct foreign policy in almost absolute secrecy, holding back from the public at large, and even from the party leaders, all but the most elementary information. Bethmann Hollweg was fully aware that by doing this he exposed himself to vicious attacks from Conservatives and extreme nationalists alike, as his policy inevitably appeared to outsiders inconsistent and weak. In spite of this unfortunate fact, he refused to put forward any specific program. He did not act upon suggestions by Rathenau⁴⁴ to give the country a lead in matters of foreign policy, being convinced that publicity was bound to impair the chances of ultimate success. Riezler wrote at the time, not without some conceit, that only a foreign policy which did *not* care for the applause of the public, and which was *not* heading for quick results, was likely to achieve anything worthwhile.⁴⁵

To put things another way: Bethmann Hollweg never tried and consequently never succeeded in selling his policy to the country at large, and for this reason he was largely at the mercy of the various groupings

44. Cf. Walther Rathenau, *Tagebuch 1907-1922*, ed. Hartmut Pogge-v. Strandmann (Düsseldorf, 1967), p. 182.

45. "J. J. Ruedorffer" [Kurt Riezler], *Grundzüge der Weltpolitik* (Berlin, 1913), p. 229.

within the ruling elite. For the time being his political concept was accepted by the emperor and, though not without some misgivings, by the military establishment and the conservative bureaucracy. This was all the more true because Bethmann Hollweg had reluctantly given in to the requests of the navy as well as the General Staff by increasing both the army and the navy in 1912, and by putting through parliament another considerable increase of the army in 1913. A strong army was, up to a point, in line with his political concept, for he considered the strong, unassailable position of the German Empire on the European continent as the fundamental prerequisite for an expansive foreign policy elsewhere.⁴⁶ On the other hand, he sincerely believed that an improvement in Anglo-German relations would be the key to a solution of the difficult problems German diplomacy was facing. Better relations with Great Britain would serve two purposes. First, they would reduce the danger of a European conflagration, and this would enable Germany to steer somewhat more confidently through the troubled waters ahead, with a crisis-ridden Austria-Hungary as ally and a rapidly rising Russia as a possible enemy. Second, there was reasonable hope that Germany could secure some of her colonial objectives with British assistance, in particular in Central Africa, but also in the Near East and perhaps even in China.⁴⁷

Bethmann Hollweg could reckon at least to some degree on the support of the National Liberal and Center parties, although the Anglo-phobia prevailing there was difficult to overcome. Furthermore, he was able to establish fairly intimate relations with some of the major banking houses; they could be induced, up to a point, to invest in the spheres of interest the government attempted to peg out in Africa and elsewhere in rather sophisticated diplomatic negotiations—even though the prospects for returns on such investments were gloomy indeed, apart from the fact that capital was scarce anyway.⁴⁸ Relations with big industry, however, were by no means good; and many of the industrial-

46. Cf. Bethmann Hollweg's speech in introducing the army bill on April 22, 1912, *Verhandlungen des Reichstages*, vol. 284, pp. 1300Bff.

47. This strategy is perhaps revealed most clearly in a letter of Jagow's to Eisendecher of July 24, 1913, *Nachlass Eisendecher*.

48. A satisfactory study of this aspect of German politics is lacking so far. Some useful information may be gathered from Vagts, *op. cit.* Up to now we have had to rely on Poidevin (above, n. 20) and a survey by Wolfgang Zorn, "Wirtschaft und Politik im deutschen Imperialismus," in *Wirtschaft, Geschichte und Wirtschaftsgeschichte, Festschrift zum 65. Geburtstag von Friedrich Lütge* (Stuttgart, 1966), pp. 340ff.

ists were not at all interested in a German Central Africa. Their interests were more in the Near East, so far as they had any definite interests at all.⁴⁹ Some people, such as Rathenau, came around to the idea that it might be more useful to concentrate economic activities on the European continent, rather than pegging out claims for posterity overseas.⁵⁰ Bethmann Hollweg did his best to set the stage for a continuation of German economic penetration of the Ottoman Empire, though he took care to let the British have a share in this too. But it was only under the pressure of war that he joined the camp of the advocates of a European Economic Association dominated by Germany, as an alternative to old-fashioned territorial imperialism.⁵¹

There can be no doubt that the government of Bethmann Hollweg did not seriously contemplate attaining any of its objectives by war until May–June 1914—with the possible exception of a liquidation of the Ottoman Empire taking place without the Germans getting a proper share.⁵² Bethmann Hollweg was confident that he could get along without a war, although by the end of 1913 he became increasingly worried about the deteriorating position of the German Empire within the European system of powers. He stuck to a peaceful policy, all the more so because he was convinced that the existing political order

49. Cf. Böhme, *op. cit.*, pp. 42f.

50. Walther Rathenau, "Deutsche Gefahren und neue Ziele," in *Gesammelte Schriften. Zur Kritik der Zeit, Mahnung und Warnung* (Berlin, 1925), pp. 272, 276. Cf. also *idem*, *Tagebuch*, pp. 168f., containing notes about a discussion on this topic with Bethmann Hollweg.

51. Fischer argues that Bethmann Hollweg acceded to the idea of a Central European Economic Association under German leadership as early as 1912; it seems doubtful, however, that Rathenau's note "Bethmann allgemein einverstanden" indicates anything more than a vague sympathy with these ideas. There is, in fact, no indication that the decisions of the government were influenced at all by such ideas. Fritz Fischer suggested in his article, "Weltpolitik, Weltmachtstreben und deutsche Kriegsziele," *Historische Zeitschrift*, vol. 199 (1964), pp. 324ff., as well as in his *Der Krieg der Illusionen*, pp. 368ff., that the "Mitteleuropapläne" and the plans for a German Central Africa were but two sides of the same coin. It would seem to the present author that Egmont Zechlin's objections to this interpretation, in "Deutschland zwischen Kabinetts- und Wirtschaftskrieg," *Historische Zeitschrift*, vol. 199 (1964), pp. 398ff. are on the whole correct. Fischer's reply in *Der Krieg der Illusionen*, pp. 529f., is rather unconvincing. Even in September 1914 the *Reichsamt des Innern* thought that such plans were unrealistic, and suggested that the existing system of bilateral trade treaties should be continued.

52. See, for instance, Jagow to Lichnowsky on January 23, 1913, *GP*, xxxiv/1, No. 12718.

probably would not survive a war.⁵³ Fritz Fischer has argued again and again that Bethmann Hollweg's repeated attempts to negotiate a neutrality agreement with Great Britain were part and parcel of a policy of expansion by means of war. Britain should be made to stand aside in order to allow Germany safely to crush France and Russia—this, he maintains, was the core of German calculations.⁵⁴ This is, however, not borne out by the sources.⁵⁵ It will have to be admitted that a neutrality agreement—or something coming fairly close to it—played, so to speak, a token role in the internal struggle between Tirpitz and William II on one side, and Bethmann Hollweg and the Foreign Office on the other. This state of affairs existed behind the scenes during and after the visit of Lord Haldane to Berlin in February 1912. The group in favor of a hard line was not willing to make substantial sacrifices in naval construction unless the British would indicate that they were willing to change substantially their allegedly unfriendly attitude toward Germany. The inconsistent attitude of the German Foreign Office during February and March 1912 with regard to how much should be asked from the British government in return for a naval agreement cannot be explained except as a reflection of the ups and downs of the internal struggle going on in Berlin.

Bethmann Hollweg was unable at this time to carry out his policy. However, the failure of the Anglo-German negotiations in 1912 did not discourage him. He still thought that an improvement of relations with Britain, accompanied by colonial concessions, was within reach. Naturally, he came to be considered inside the ruling elite as an essentially pro-British statesman, and his political fortunes came to be tied up with the development of Anglo-German relations. Early in December 1912 Sir Edward Grey conveyed to the German government an explicit warning that in case of a European war developing from the Balkan

53. Cf. Bethmann Hollweg to Lerchenfeld, June 6, 1914 (author's translation): "... the emperor had not undertaken a preventive war, and neither was he going to do so. There were, however, circles in the empire who assume that a war might lead to a healthier state of affairs in Germany—in the conservative sense. He—the chancellor—thinks that on the contrary a world war with all its unpredictable consequences is likely to enhance the power of the Social Democrats—as they are preaching peace—tremendously, and might lead to the destruction of some thrones." *Bayrische Dokumente zum Kriegausbruch und zum Versailler Schuldspruch*, ed. Pius Dirr (4th ed., Munich, 1928), No. 1, p. 113.

54. *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, pp. 59ff.; *Der Krieg der Illusionen*, pp. 85ff., 182, and *passim*.

55. Bethmann Hollweg's own position may be gathered from his memorandum for Kiderlen-Wächter of April 5, 1911; *GP*, xxviii, No. 10441, pp. 408f.

crisis, Great Britain would come to the assistance of France and Russia. In court circles this was considered positive proof that Bethmann Hollweg's expectations as regards Great Britain were unfounded (which, as a matter of fact, was not the case), and as mentioned already the emperor at once consulted Tirpitz and the military leaders, behind the back of the "civilians," as to how to prepare the country for the European war which in his opinion seemed imminent.⁵⁶ Bethmann Hollweg's prestige was at a low ebb. Although the chancellor soon regained ground, he henceforth was aware how unstable his position had become.

It must be realized, moreover, that since 1913 Bethmann Hollweg's moderate course had been challenged increasingly by a considerable section of the ruling elite, in particular by the General Staff. And, as has been shown above, the latter's influence had risen substantially. The military leaders were seriously worried about the reappearance of Russia as a first-rate military power, and—as we know now beyond doubt—they were harboring the idea of a preventive war against Russia and France, for within a few years the Schlieffen Plan would no longer work. Moltke, so far as we can see from the scattered sources, became increasingly annoyed with the diplomats, who kept saying that since relations with Great Britain were improving the dangerous period ahead could be overcome.⁵⁷ It is possible that the article of an *Oberleutnant* Ulrich published in March 1914 in the *Kölnische Zeitung*, which brought about a heated press controversy between German and Russian newspapers, had been initiated by somebody close to the German General Staff; although any proof for this is lacking, it seems possible, since this article expressed the fears and apprehensions in German military quarters rather precisely.⁵⁸

It is at this point that pressure from the public at large also has to be given proper attention. The relations among the military establishment, the court, and the Conservatives were, of course, fairly intimate. In conservative quarters, as well as in the Pan-German League, the assumption was indeed widely held that a war was likely to have a healthy

56. Compare above, pp. 12–14, and nn. 17–19.

57. Cf. Conrad von Hötzendorf, *Aus meiner Dienstzeit, 1906–18* (Vienna, 1921–23), III, 670.

58. A detailed account is given by Wernecke, *op. cit.*, pp. 244ff. There is, however, absolutely no evidence to support Wernecke's and Fischer's contention that this "press war" was staged deliberately in order to prepare the German public for war. Cf. *Der Krieg der Illusionen*, pp. 542ff.

effect on German national character. Furthermore, a war appeared to be convenient in order to set the clock in the interior "right" again.

It goes without saying that this is only a part of the story. For the belief that the diplomatic situation had deteriorated alarmingly in the last years, and that a European war was imminent, had spread to a considerable proportion of the middle classes too. The warlike message of Friedrich Bernhardt's *Germany and the Next War*, which was couched in a language that may be called a peculiar mixture of the bourgeois cultural heritage and militant nationalism, did not fail to have some impact on the German intelligentsia. Yet the pressure exerted on the government by important sections of German society in favor of a tough line in matters of foreign policy does not suffice to explain the course of events which eventually led to the outbreak of the First World War. The popularity of imperialism accounts for much of what happened, but there is no evidence that specific influences of this kind played a major role in the deliberations of the German government on the eve of the war. It was, rather, the crisis of the governmental system as such which induced the men at the top to take refuge in an aggressive political strategy.

It has been pointed out already that the government of Bethmann Hollweg could not count on the support of any of the major political groupings in the Reichstag or in the country at large. For this very reason it was more dependent than any government since Bismarck on the goodwill of the conservative establishment, and in particular the entourage of William II, which was connected with the former through a great many social connections. Since 1913 the Conservatives had launched a series of vitriolic attacks against the chancellor, and had tried to convince the emperor that he was neither tough enough with the Social Democrats nor effective in holding the Reichstag parties in check. The Pan-German League hoped to exploit this situation. In October 1913 Class attempted to bring about the fall of the chancellor; with the assistance of the Crown Prince, a long memorandum in which General von Gebsattel assailed the supposedly weak foreign policy of the chancellor was brought to the attention of the emperor.⁵⁹ Although Wil-

59. For the opposition of the Conservatives see Westarp, *Konservative Politik*, I, 182ff. The repeated attempts of the Conservatives in the Reichstag after 1913 to blame the government for its weak attitude toward the Social Democrats were mainly designed to undermine Bethmann Hollweg's prestige within the establishment. For the Gebsattel affair see H. Pogge-v. Strandmann, *Erforderlichkeit des Unmöglichen*, pp. 16-31.

liam II was not yet prepared to dismiss his chancellor, the position of Bethmann Hollweg was precarious indeed, and he had to fear the charge that his foreign policy was both weak and ineffective.

By far the most serious challenge to Bethmann Hollweg's foreign policy came, however, from the General Staff. The military leaders were extremely concerned about the prospect that the main premise of the Schlieffen Plan, namely, a slow Russian mobilization which would allow the German Army to crush France before the Russians became an effective military danger, was being undermined by the progress of Russian armaments, and in particular by the completion of the railways in western Russia. Their apprehensions were not reduced by the rather ambiguous official Russian reaction to press charges that Russia was preparing a war against Germany. In May or June 1914 Moltke therefore suggested that the government ought to bring about a war, while Germany was still in a position to win it.⁶⁰ Obviously, the idea of a preventive war was gaining ground in governmental quarters. Even William II, who despite all his militaristic pathos was essentially in favor of peace, was in doubt as to whether it might not be wiser to take up arms before the Russian armament program was completed, as he confided to Warburg in June 1914.⁶¹

Outside the inner circle of the government other considerations also came into play. Quite a few people, such as Heydebrandt und der Lasa, maintained that a war would be a splendid opportunity to smash the Social Democrats.⁶² Bethmann Hollweg was furious about such "nonsense,"⁶³ presumably because he was aware of the consequences for his political position if such views were taken up by the emperor. Bethmann Hollweg emphatically denied that a European war would strengthen the case of the conservatives. Rather, it was likely to benefit the Social Democrats; it might even result in the dethronement of some monarchs.⁶⁴ The somewhat scanty sources do not allow all too radical

60. Cf. Moltke's talk with Jagow in May or June 1914, published by Egmont Zechlin, "Motive und Taktik der Reichsleitung 1914," *Der Monat*, xviii, No. 209 (February 1966), pp. 92-93.

61. Vagts, "M. M. Warburg" (above, n. 34), p. 353.

62. Cf. Riezler Diary, entry of July 25, 1914. Now published in Kurt Riezler, *Tagebücher, Aufsätze, Dokumente*, ed. Karl Dietrich Erdmann (Göttingen, 1972). Heydebrandt's statement, to which Bethmann Hollweg referred during July 1914, must have been made some time before that date, as Heydebrandt was not in Berlin then, and was politically inactive for the time being.

63. *Ibid.*

64. Statement to Lerchenfeld, quoted above, n. 53.

conclusions; yet it can be gathered from them that Bethmann Hollweg and Jagow apparently had a difficult time fending off such ideas. They were careful to make clear that they were not, in principle, against the idea of a preventive war—any other stand might have been interpreted as weakness—yet they nonetheless took exception to the suggestion of solving the problems of German diplomacy by a preventive war. Their main argument was that in view of the improving relations with Great Britain it would be folly to pursue such a policy.⁶⁵

The strength of the position of the chancellor within the complicated governmental system of Wilhelmine Germany depended to a very large degree on his status as responsible leader of foreign policy. William II did not like the idea of changing the chancellor primarily because he feared the repercussions in diplomatic relations. In this respect, the fairly positive image which Bethmann Hollweg enjoyed in Great Britain was of great importance. Under such conditions the news about a forthcoming Anglo-Russian naval agreement—which had reached Berlin in May 1914 through a spy in the British Embassy in Saint Petersburg—had a disastrous effect on the domestic position of the chancellor. And just as in December 1912, the protagonists of a “forward policy” again got the upper hand. Bethmann Hollweg’s main argument against a preventive war, namely, that the British government would help in preventing the Russians from going to war, had gone to pieces overnight. Even worse, the British seemed to be about to join forces once and for all with the Russians and the French; and this played into the hands of those who argued that since the military situation of the German Empire was getting worse and worse it would be better to fight the assumedly “inevitable” war as soon as possible. This situation is rather frankly alluded to in Bethmann Hollweg’s message to Lichnowsky for Sir Edward Grey of June 16, 1914.⁶⁶

Bethmann Hollweg was well known for his essentially pro-British orientation. Therefore, the sudden collapse of his hope that a rapproche-

65. This is indicated by a remark of Moltke’s to Conrad, in which he tried to explain why the German government was reluctant to act upon the idea of a preventive war. Moltke complained that “we always expect a declaration of neutrality from Great Britain which she, however, will never give.” Cf. Conrad von Hötzendorf, *op. cit.*, III, 670. In May or June 1914 Jagow took a similar line, insofar as he argued against Moltke’s plea for a preventive war and that it would be wiser to sit back. Owing to the improving relations with Great Britain, a European war had become less likely, and, at any rate, would possibly be less serious. See n. 60.

66. GP, xxxix, No. 18883, pp. 628ff.

ment with Great Britain was within reach was grist to the mills of his domestic foes. For this reason Bethmann Hollweg was not very outspoken about his own estimate of the British attitude toward Germany in the event of a European war. It is worth noting that the chancellor did not reckon with British neutrality in a European war, although this was believed by many people at the time (and subsequently by many historians). In his opinion, more intimate relations between the German Empire and Great Britain would help to stabilize the German position on the continent, and reduce the danger of a European conflagration over a new Balkan crisis. Furthermore, it would ease German economic and political expansion overseas. Bethmann Hollweg was, however, well aware that the British would never allow Germany to crush France while standing aside themselves. The most the chancellor expected was that Great Britain might remain neutral in the initial phase of a European war, while trying to bring about a diplomatic solution. In 1914 he counted on British help in avoiding a European war, but not on British neutrality, all the more so because all available information pointed to the contrary.⁶⁷ The assumption that Great Britain might remain neutral did not play a key role in German calculations on the eve of the First World War. Rather, the opposite is true. It was the startling news that

67. Contrary to Albertini and Fischer, the German government did not base its political strategy on the assumption that Great Britain would remain neutral in the case of a major European war, although it naturally attempted to do its best to bring it about when the crisis came. In the secret debate in the Budget Committee of the Reichstag on April 24, 1913, Bethmann Hollweg pointed out clearly that Germany could not count on British neutrality in case of war. Cf. Dieter Groh, "Die geheimen Sitzungen der Reichshaushaltskommission am 24. und 25. April 1913," *Internationale Wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, No. 11/12 (April 1971). On June 5, 1914, Bethmann Hollweg said to Bassermann: "... wenn es Krieg mit Frankreich gibt, marschiert der letzte Engländer gegen uns." Cf. Bassermann's letter to Schiffer, June 5, 1914, Nachlass Schiffer 6, Hauptarchiv Berlin. This is also confirmed by Lerchenfeld's report of June 4, 1914: "Was England betrifft, so lauteten seine [i.e., Bethmann Hollweg's] Ausführungen ungefähr dahin: Zu allen Zeiten habe die britische Macht immer gegen die stärkste Macht auf dem Kontinent gestanden. Zuerst gegen Spanien, dann gegen Frankreich, später gegen Russland und jetzt gegen Deutschland. England wolle keinen Krieg. Er—der Reichskanzler—wisse bestimmt, dass die englische Regierung in Paris wiederholt erklärt habe, dass sie keine provokatorische Politik und keinen vom Zaun gebrochenen Krieg gegen Deutschland mitmache. Aber das hindere nicht, dass, wenn es zum Kriege käme, wir England nicht auf unserer Seite finden würden." Cf. *Bayrische Dokumente zum Kriegsausbruch*, No. 1, p. 112. As early as December 1912 the chancellor had held a similar position, as can be gathered from a letter to Eisendecker, December 18, 1912, and Bethmann Hollweg's memorandum for William II, December 18, 1912, *GP*, xxxix, No. 15560.

Great Britain was apparently about to join the opposite camp that set things in motion. It added additional strength to the argument of the domestic rivals of the chancellor that it might be wiser to forestall the formation of a more definite entente, which would encourage Russia to go ahead with warlike measures, by launching a preventive war as soon as a convenient opportunity was at hand.⁶⁸

This is borne out by the course of events which culminated in the decision of Germany to let the Austrians and Hungarians have their punitive war against Serbia, whatever the eventual outcome might be, although the government was well aware that an Austro-Serbian conflict could easily escalate into a European war. Up to then German diplomacy had pursued a relatively pro-Serbian course; several times it had prevented the Austrians from interfering by force in the conflicts of the Balkan states. To the dismay of the Austrians, Berchtold had been told over and over again that it might after all be best to come to terms with Serbia in some way or other. In the first days after Francis Ferdinand's assassination the *Wilhelmstrasse* seems to have stuck to its previous line. This was indicated by the attitude of the Russophobe Tschirschky, to which early in July the emperor took violent exception. The decision to give Austria-Hungary a sort of "blank check" was a major shift in German policy, and it is reported that Bethmann Hollweg agreed to it only after some hesitation.⁶⁹ In principle this decision was reached *before* Count Hoyos arrived in Berlin on July 5—presumably around the 2nd or 3rd.⁷⁰ This decision amounted to a sort of compromise between the position to which the chancellor and the Foreign Office had adhered hitherto and the General Staff's position that Germany should not work for peace if there was an opportunity to have right now the big showdown with Russia and France which they assumed would come anyway within the next few years. Bethmann Hollweg himself admitted (as he confessed later)⁷¹ that, provided that the generals' estimate of the situa-

68. Hence, it is not the effect of the Anglo-Russian naval negotiations on foreign relations as such, as in particular Zechlin argues—cf. "Deutschland zwischen Kabinetts- und Wirtschaftskrieg" (above, n. 51), pp. 348ff.—that really matters, but rather its effect on the domestic situation.

69. Report of Koester, July 20, 1914, *Deutsche Gesandtschaftsberichte zum Kriegausbruch 1914. Berichte und Telegramme der badischen, sächsischen und württembergischen Gesandten aus dem Juli und August 1914*, ed. August Bach for the *Auswärtige Amt* (Berlin, 1937), No. 5.

70. See also Fritz Fischer, *Der Krieg der Illusionen*, pp. 688–89.

71. Cf. a report by Haussmann, February 24, 1918, quoted in Wolfgang Steglich, *Die Friedenspolitik der Mittelmächte 1917/18*, 1 (Wiesbaden, 1964), 418.

tion of the Central Powers and the warlike tendencies of Tsarist Russia was correct, it might indeed be better to have the war at once rather than later. Consequently, Bethmann Hollweg embarked upon a "diagonal" course, that is, to let Austria act as an "agent provocateur," and make the Serbian war a test case regarding the question of whether Russia was bent on war anyway, or not.⁷² In doing so he satisfied the request of the military establishment that Germany should *not* avoid a war, if it was in the offing, without fully endorsing their strategy, which was bent on a preventive war. He assumed that Russia was not ready for war, and that there was a genuine chance of breaking the ring of the Entente powers without a European war. Although all persons involved in this decision were fully aware of the fact that a Serbian action by Austria-Hungary could provoke a European war—in which case the chancellor expected Russia to begin the war within days⁷³—he and the Foreign Office, at least, assumed that the Russians would back down, all the more so since neither France nor Great Britain was enthusiastic about going to war on behalf of Serbia.⁷⁴ It may be pointed out that a declaration of the British government to the effect that Great Britain

72. It is impossible in this context to give a full account of the political calculations of the German government in July 1914. I hope to do this in a forthcoming study, *Die Politik des Reichskanzlers von Bethmann Hollweg als Problem der politischen Führung*. In the meantime, the reader may be referred to Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Das Zeitalter des Imperialismus* (Frankfurt, 1968), pp. 272ff., and "Die latente Krise des Wilhelminischen Reiches 1909–1914," *Handbuch der deutschen Geschichte*, ed. Leo Just, Section IV, II (Frankfurt, 1972). As regards the German intention to consider the Serbian issue a "Prüfstein" of Russia's warlike intentions, see Hoyos's notes about his interview with Victor Naumann, in *Österreich-Ungarns Aussenpolitik*, ed. L. Bittner (Vienna and Leipzig, 1930), VIII, No. 9966, and Alfred von Tirpitz, *Erinnerungen* (Leipzig, 1919), p. 227.

73. Riezler Diary, entry of July 23, 1914.

74. It has been argued time and again, in particular by Fritz Fischer and Imanuel Geiss, that the plan to isolate the Serbian war was not only a gross illusion, but was little else than a convenient pretext. It would seem, however, that the inner circle around Bethmann Hollweg did indeed believe in the possibility of getting along without a European "conflagration," as the chancellor used to put it. That this assumption was at any rate subjectively honest is borne out, for instance, by calculations in governmental quarters that, provided the crisis passed without a European war, Germany might even conclude an alliance with Russia, at the expense of Austria-Hungary. Cf. Riezler Diary, entry of July 23, 1914, and the statement of Bethmann Hollweg to Theodor Wolff on February 5, 1915, which confirms Riezler's notes: "Ich habe Sasonow dann während der Krise—dies ganz unter uns—sagen lassen, er möge doch die Österreicher ihre Strafexpedition machen lassen, der Moment würde kommen, wo wir uns arrangieren würden. Natürlich nicht auf dem Rücken der Österreicher, aber gewissermassen auf ihren Schultern." Theodor Wolff, *Der Marsch durch zwei Jahrzehnte* (Berlin, 1936), p. 442.

would not remain neutral would not have altered the course of events a bit. On the contrary, it would have been grist to the mills of Moltke, and would have amounted to a further strengthening of his argument that in view of the steadily deteriorating position of the German Empire it was better to fight now, at a moment when in his opinion the war could still be won decisively within months, rather than later.

The political calculation of the German government amounted to gambling with very high stakes indeed. Bethmann Hollweg himself called it "a leap in the dark" which was dictated by "most severe duty."⁷⁵ The chancellor's position was no longer strong enough to get any alternative accepted by the inner ring of the ruling elite. His plan was a fairly precise reflection of the deep division within the government itself. It was a compromise between two rival schemes. It did not directly work for war; rather, it favored a diplomatic solution of the crisis. Still, it satisfied the request of the military establishment insofar as it did nothing to avoid war. The attempt to maneuver Russia into a position in which *she* would have to decide about peace or war was not dictated only by the consideration that otherwise the Social Democrats might not rally behind the government. It was equally influenced by the calculation that only in this way could the forthcoming crisis be exploited diplomatically, and with the afterthought that, provided the Russians shrank back from extreme measures, the fears of the German General Staff could be positively disproved.

Hence, it was not so much lust for world power as weakness and confusion which induced Bethmann Hollweg to embark upon such a political strategy. The contradictions which can be discovered in the calculations of the German government in July 1914 are a rather precise reflection of the sharp antagonisms within the German ruling elite. It must be added, however, that this was possible only because those groups which were part of this elite (namely, the upper stratum of the governmental bureaucracy, the General Staff and behind it the officer corps, and the conservative entourage of the emperor) enjoyed a political influence which was out of proportion to their actual importance in German society as a whole. This was partly due to the fact that the stalemate on the level of parliamentary politics had enabled the government to carry on with its policies as if nothing had happened at all. It is noteworthy that the government could afford to disregard entirely the

75. Riezler Diary, entry of July 14, 1914.

opinions of the party leaders in July 1914.⁷⁶ Indeed, there is no evidence that any of the party leaders was given the opportunity to have a say in the decisions of the government. The chancellor seems to have been confident that at least the bourgeois parties, with the possible exception of the Progressives, would support a bold course in preference to a policy which would pass over the opportunity of Sarajevo without any attempt to come to Austria-Hungary's assistance, and to exploit the crisis to the advantage of the Central Powers.⁷⁷

It is doubtful whether Bethmann Hollweg, even if he had cared to consult the party leaders, would have found among the bourgeois parties wholehearted support against the champions of a preventive war. But surely the party leaders would not have agreed to a crisis strategy which was so designed as to please both the hawks and the doves, and which for this very reason was bound to fail. This is, of

76. In a way the Social Democrats must be excluded insofar as the government approached Haase, and a few days later the *Parteivorstand*, although only Südekum was available. With regard to the negotiations of the government with the Social Democrats, there is a controversial literature which may be superseded by the forthcoming study of Dieter Groh, *Negative Integration und revolutionärer Attentismus. Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie am Vorabend des 1. Weltkrieges 1909–1914* (Berlin, 1973). In the meantime, see his "The Unpatriotic Socialists and the State," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1 (1966), and "Negative Integration und revolutionärer Attentismus," *Internationale wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, No. 15 (1972). Little is known about contacts of the leading members of the bourgeois parties with the government. Westarp reports that he paid a few visits to the *Wilhelmstrasse* during the crisis, but apparently he was not told much (cf. *Konservative Politik*, 1, 407). Heydebrandt, the leader of the Prussian Conservatives, was as late as August 3 still totally uninformed about what had been going on on the diplomatic stage (cf. letter of Heydebrandt to Westarp, August 3, 1914, Heydebrandt–Westarp correspondence; I am indebted for this information to *Freiherr Hiller von Gärtringen*, University of Tübingen).

77. With regard to the attitude of the parties toward Bethmann Hollweg's policies in July 1914 we still have to rely largely on guesswork. Their overall attitude can nonetheless be rather clearly ascertained. The Conservatives were all in favor of a "forward policy"; it was, however, only fairly late that they actually began to press for war. It would seem that in the first weeks of July the *Post*, a leading conservative newspaper, was rather reluctant to join the chorus of pro-Austrian voices (cf. Jonathan French Scott, *Five Weeks. The Surge of Public Opinion at the Eve of the Great War* [New York, 1932], pp. 138, 191ff.). The National Liberals wished to have the energetic Tirpitz as chancellor rather than Bethmann Hollweg (cf. Bassermann to Schiffer, June 5, 1914, cited above, n. 67). They surely would have welcomed a policy which seemed to act upon the allegedly extremely successful strategy followed during the Bosnian crisis of 1908 once again. The Center Party, on the other hand, was since 1912 definitely in favor of any policy which was avowedly designed to assist Austria-Hungary. It is therefore not surprising to see that the Catholic press also took a similar line in the July crisis (cf. E. Malcolm Carroll, *Germany and the Great Powers, 1866–1914* [New York, 1938], pp. 747ff.).

course, a rather speculative argument. Yet one point can safely be made, namely, that the desperate attempts of the government of Bethmann Hollweg to prevent any substantial constitutional change in the face of a more or less hostile Reichstag made it extremely dependent on the goodwill of those small groups within the German upper class which favored a policy of suppression in the interior just as much as a tough line in foreign politics.

In the last analysis, we may conclude, the causes of the First World War must be sought not in the blunders and miscalculations of the governments alone, but in the fact that Germany's governmental system, as well as Austria-Hungary's and Russia's, was no longer adequate in the face of rapid social change and the steady advance of mass politics.