CHAPTER XI

Bismarck's Germany. III, Intellectual (1871-88)

In matters of the mind and spirit, as in matters political, the Germany of the late nineteenth century was divided against itself. The similarity does not stop there, because in intellectual matters as in political the casual observer saw a monolithic structure of science, study, research, and creativity, which looked solid and presented an aspect of unity to the outside world deceiving many of the ablest critics of the time. It has taken several generations and the collapse of the German state and society for historians to realize that there were many intellectual fissures in the German fabric. The historian of today is likely to look at nineteenth-century Germany with the thought of finding reasons for the collapse in the twentieth century. This type of history can be, and frequently has been, overdone. Perhaps this is why history has to be rewritten every generation. The difference between a history of Germany written by a non-German in 1912 and such a history written today is revealing. In the earlier work the motto on the title page might have been, "Hail to the Great Chancellor"; the later one might well read, "Why the Führer?" And much of this revisionist approach to German history has occurred in the realm of ideas.

There is little to be gained from a mere catalog of the names and major accomplishments of the German thinkers, writers, artists, composers, and scientists of this very full period. It appears more fruitful to single out a few of the more important or more typical of them to see what they can teach by way of understanding Bismarckian Germany more fully.

The official line of the time, the one most noticeable to the contemporary observer, was one of proud, self-satisfied confidence, rather noisy, often smug, frequently vulgar, always forceful. The words grandiose and colossal (in German grossartig and kolossal) come to mind. Such artistic
monstrosities as the Reichstag building, the Protestant cathedral, or the statues on the Sieges Allée in the Tiergarten, all in Berlin, seem symbolic monuments of this aspect of the period. The triumph of military might, the achievement of unity, the economic upsurge—all seemed to bear witness to the soundness of the old Prussian virtues: frugality, hard work, diligence, industry, discipline, and, it might be added, an almost complete lack of imagination or humor.

A literary work which reflects many of these typically parvenu virtues is the extremely popular novel by Gustav Freytag, *Soll und Haben* ("Profit and Loss"). This work is a monument of smugness and self-satisfaction. Had it been written in the United States, its author might have been Thomas Edison, Elbert Hubbard, Henry Ford, or Calvin Coolidge. A boy is left an orphan at a tender age by his father, a country clergyman, whose only heritage to his son is a letter recommending him to the care of an old friend, a successful businessman in the neighboring large town. The boy goes to the town, regretfully leaving behind the little girl to whom he is romantically attached. She is the daughter of the local squire, a feckless scion of old nobility, who, as the book progresses, tries to retrieve his waning fortune by establishing a sugar beet refinery on his estates, a project in which he fails because of a lack of business ability. He is then forced to put himself in the hands of the unscrupulous Jews. Having arrived in the town, the boy enters his father’s friend’s company and by dint of long hours, hard work, and obsequiousness, in due course makes good. His way is not without pitfalls however. He has to withstand the blandishments of high society when the girl’s family comes to town, the temptations of Bohemianism caused by the arrival of a ne’er-do-well relative of his employer, the evil machinations of the Jews, and the ferocious foreign nationalism of some extraordinary Polish revolutionaries. All the components are there: the rising middle class, the declining aristocracy, German nationalism, and anti-Semitism (an attitude observable in almost all lines of German thinking). Freytag was a very popular author and by no means the only representative of his type.

It was not only the writers of fiction who fell under the spell of the new success. Historians too succumbed to the siren call of the Prussian trumpet. The greatest of the historians of the period, Leopold von Ranke, is to be criticized less than others. However, even he, with his naive belief in objective history, sometimes struck a blow for the German idea. It is more particularly in the work of two of his contemporaries, Heinrich von Treitschke and Heinrich von Sybel, that we find the obeisance to Bismarck and Hohenzollern. Treitschke, one of the most popular professors at the University of Berlin, left as his most enduring work his
German History in the Nineteenth Century (which does not reach beyond 1847). This work, written with a sure touch for language, is the fruit of massive learning and scholarship: all that is Prussian, Protestant, and north German is good; all that is Austrian, south German, and Catholic is decadent and effeminate. Sybel was commissioned by the Prussian government to write a history of the unification and given access to many state documents seen by a scholar for the first time. His resultant multivolume Foundation of the German Empire, again profoundly scholarly and rarely inaccurate in matters of fact, is also a lyric account of the wisdom, skill, and power of the Prussian kingdom. These two historians and their fellows created the historiographical background for the world’s view of the German Empire which lasted at least until 1918 and to an extent until 1933.

A study of the opposing movements is more difficult. In the first place they are variant, some insisting on different lines of approach from others. The only unifying thread is general opposition to Bismarck’s solution of the German question and a feeling of uneasiness caused by the triumphant materialism of the environment. There were also some who were on the whole unpolitical, influenced heavily by French literature of the period. They tended to start as naturalists in the Goncourt tradition and to end up as symbolists, affected by the general fin-de-siècle attitude. Examples of this group are Gerhart Hauptmann and Hermann Sudermann.

Perhaps more interesting and certainly more significant for the future of Germany is a group of thinkers who veered very far from the line set officially and proclaimed a Germany built around objectives far different from those of Bismarck. On the whole they were men who reasoned with their hearts (or guts) rather than their heads, who depended on emotion and instinct rather than on the calculated rationality of the contemporary Prussian state.

One of the earliest and most interesting of them was the turbulent revolutionary composer Richard Wagner. The very vicissitudes of his fevered life give some suggestion of his approach to artistic and political problems. Born into an impoverished musical family in Leipzig, he spent much of his young manhood fighting against the conservative musical bureaucracies of provincial German towns and trying to gain acceptance for his own characteristically styled “music of the future.” When he had achieved a certain degree of acceptance in Dresden in the forties, Wagner managed to get involved in the abortive revolt there in the spring of 1849, as a result of which he was exiled from the German Confederation and spent the following decade and more mostly in Switzerland. These years were active ones of composition, writing, and
amorous adventure. There followed some years of relative prosperity in Munich under the protection of the eccentric Louis II, who reveled in Wagner's re-creation of the legendary German past. However, the master's extravagance and flouting of moral convention brought this period to an end and led to a voluntary exile again in Switzerland, which was followed by the apotheosis of his last years in Bayreuth where he established the home of what he felt was the new German art, his festival theater for the performance of his music dramas.

Deeply imbedded in Wagner's spirit was the concept of the German Volk, a notion hard to make clear to the English speaker. Volk connotes more than nation or race or people; it is more than the sum of its individuals; it is a mystical commonality whose existence is its own defense. Wagner felt that the unique quality of the German Volk required it to have its own specific flowering in art. The art forms of the past were inadequate. The new form which was to express the German psyche was the Gesamtkunstwerk ("total art work"), in which each of the arts would have its place. Germany needed a national theater where her art could be performed in its total purity; Wagner apparently felt seriously that a consecrational festival of art would purify the German soul. For the subjects of his dramas he looked to the misty past of Germanic mythology; gods and goddesses, giants, dwarfs, and heroes and heroines, rather than commonplace Mímis or Carmens, flood his stages. This was a German world in which elemental passions could have free rein, before the limiting forces of Western, Roman, or Christian rationality curbed the magnificence of the full emotional expression of the blond tribesman of the primitive forests. It did not seem to occur to Wagner that it required the sophistication of modern symphonic orchestration and stagecraft to render his visions practicable.

Wagner's ideas are most completely represented in his last two musical achievements, Der Ring des Nibelungen (composed of the four units, "Das Rheingold," "Die Walküre," "Siegfried," and "Die Göttterdammerung") and Parsifal. The Ring begins in the depths of the Rhine, where three unexplained mermaids bewail the theft by a malicious dwarf from the underworld of the hoard of gold which it was their responsibility to guard. Whoever steals or possesses the gold must renounce love. The first criticism of mammon and materialism thus appears at the outset. We are then whisked to the skies where we find that the chief of the gods, Wotan, has compromised himself and his fellows by an ungodly and un-free act. He has contracted (and the motive for contract in the orchestra is the most sinister motive in the Ring) a pair of outsize giants to build him a castle in the skies, in return for which he will deliver to them the goddess of love. The castle, Valhalla, is finished and the goddess is
handed over, but the gods find that without love they are losing their youth. The giants are then asked what they will accept in place of the goddess. They reply that they will accept the gold hoard recently stolen from the Rhine by the dwarf. This involves Wotan in further deceit, for he must now compound his worship of mammon by stealing the gold from the dwarfs. This he does with the help of the guileful god of fire, Loge (the only intelligent person in the whole drama). The giants accept the gold, and the curse on it starts to work immediately as one giant kills the other and, transforming himself into a dragon, heads for a cave in the forest to guard his treasure.

Wotan now decides to adopt a long-term policy to salvage as much as possible from the debacle he foresees. He begets two earth children, who in turn become the parents of the greatest hero of the world, Siegfried. We first see Siegfried as a beamish boy bouncing on the stage with his playmate, a bear. In the course of that act a good deal is sung about Siegfried, but it turns out that his most outstanding characteristic is that he is fearless. Happily for his reputation no comment is made about Siegfried's intellectual qualities; it is his fearlessness that is important. This virtue qualifies him to awaken a sleeping maiden, the formerly godlike Brünnhilde, who for disobedience has been deprived of her godhood and put to sleep surrounded by fire until someone freer than the god, Wotan, awakens her. It is notable that fearlessness and physical prowess give Siegfried this power of freedom. Finally in the last drama the world is consumed by flame and a new dispensation begins because humanity has been redeemed through love, though it is never quite clear what sort of love is involved.

A similar emphasis is to be seen in Wagner's last drama, Parsifal, which he calls a "consecrational festival drama." In the first act we find that the guardians of the Holy Grail are in unhappy straits as the result of the sin of their leader, Amfortas. One of the older guardians predicts that this can be cured only through the ministrations of a "guileless fool." Relatively soon thereafter Parsifal makes his appearance trying to shoot a sacred swan with his bow and arrow. There can be no question that the words "guileless" and "fool" apply accurately to this young man. He is given a chance to attend the celebration of the mysteries of the Grail, but so guileless is he that he doesn't even bother to ask what he has witnessed, a condition precedent to the redemption of the knights, which is thus postponed for about twenty years. Again the emphasis is upon emotion, faith, and physical strength rather than reason. Much the same thing is to be seen in Wagner's other works, notably Tannhäuser, Lohengrin, and Tristan und Isolde.

The thrilling mastery of musical composition which Wagner possessed
so richly and the revolutionary intensity of his music divided musical Germany into two camps, one worshiping him and the other despising him. In the last decade of his life, with the help of his devotees, Wagner established his festival town in the little city of Bayreuth in northern Bavaria, and there he directed the production of his dramas and in his home welcomed the growing circle of admirers who made the pilgrimage to the Meister until his death, which occurred in Venice in 1883. The circle continued to exist under the leadership of Wagner's widow, Cosima, daughter of the composer Franz Liszt and former wife of the Wagnerian conductor Hans von Bülow whom she left to the scandal of society to marry her lover, the Meister.

Given Wagner's belief in the blood and the physical aspects of life, it is no surprise that he was a leading anti-Semite, although there is just a possibility that he may have been half Jewish himself. He crusaded constantly against the alleged Jewish influence in music and politics and against banking and industrial progress which he felt to be a result of Jewish mammonism. Wagner ran across the work of an eccentric Frenchman, Count Alfred Gobineau, who in the fifties had written Essai sur l'inégalité des races ("Essay on the Inequality of Races"), and thought highly of it. He even invited Gobineau to Bayreuth. A cult devoted to the virtues of the progressive Aryans grew up around Gobineau and close to the Wagner group. In the nineties a Gobineau society was even established. However, probably the most notable contributor to German racist ideas at the time was a renegade Englishman named Houston Stewart Chamberlain. Chamberlain was distantly related to that family of hardware manufacturers which was later to furnish Great Britain with a colonial secretary, a foreign secretary, and a prime minister. He went to Germany, fell in love with it, transferred his allegiance, married one of Wagner's daughters, and eventually settled in Bayreuth. In 1899 he published his major achievement, the Foundations of the Nineteenth Century, a long and rambling work in which he identifies Gobineau's Aryans with the Germans and reassures the world that the German stock can be cleansed from such impurities as have crept into it in the course of the centuries. He prophesied a future German domination of the world and preached a type of expansionism which was sharply opposed to the kleindeutsch solution of Bismarck and the peace policy of the old chancellor. It is interesting to note that in the 1920's, when Hitler's name was first becoming known, Chamberlain was still alive and wrote to the new Führer, acclaiming him as the leader who was to come.

It was at a far higher level than the foregoing that the major revolutionary philosopher of the period, Friedrich Nietzsche, operated. Very few figures in modern times have been as influential as he, and yet he
has not been widely understood. An unsystematic and obscure thinker whose semipoetic and semiprophetical prose increases the difficulty of comprehension, he has been vulgarized and cheapened by many of his readers to such an extent that he is at least as important for what people thought he meant as for what he actually did mean. Nietzsche was increasingly appalled by tendencies he observed in the world about him and was a devastating critic of modern culture. He hated all things in our society which lead to a leveling of men and culture. Thus democracy and socialism were anathema to him. He hated bourgeois morality and the gentle virtues of meekness and humility. Therefore, capitalist industry and especially Christianity were among his targets. The very titles of some of his works (e.g., The Reversal of all Values, Beyond Good and Evil) betray his thoroughgoing iconoclasm. Nietzsche received his academic training in classical philology and published his early works on ancient Greece, for which he had had a great enthusiasm. However, the Greece he loved was the archaic period of Greek history, the heroic age, an age supposedly composed of warriors and unfettered Dionysiac revels, an age not yet bound by the stultifying rationalism later imposed by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and above all, not crushed by the servile morality of Christianity. This same line of thought can be traced throughout Nietzsche’s later writing. He calls for aristocrats of the spirit, an elite of freedom, action, virility, and will. The power of the will is a consistent theme (one of Nietzsche’s works is entitled The Will to Power). He developed the concept of the superman (Übermensch) who was to be the moral giant whose type might still regenerate the sick world, not the physical blond beast of the Nazi caricature. Anti-intellectual and amoral, Nietzsche put his trust in instinct, faith, and will. He struck sharply at the roots of the classical Western tradition of rationality and Christianity.

In view of this, it is not surprising that Nietzsche became an early disciple of Wagnerianism. As a young man he spent idylic visits with Wagner and Cosima at their retreat at Triebsegen on Lake Lucerne. There the friendship between the young enthusiast and the middle-aged master ripened into a species of hero worship. Wagner’s hopes for the emancipation of the German Volk found immediate response from Nietzsche, who was also thrilled by Wagner’s resuscitation of the heroes of German mythology. Siegfried, indeed, is perhaps the most perfect approach to the superman. In later years Nietzsche went to Bayreuth to hear the Ring. The relationship changed abruptly, however, when in 1882 Nietzsche made the pilgrimage to Bayreuth to hear the first performance of Parsifal. This work filled him with contempt. He left the festival town immediately, exclaiming that Wagner in his old age had
knelt before the cross. There ensued a bitter exchange of polemic and venom in which Nietzsche had the advantage because he outlived Wagner in sanity by six or seven years. In 1889 Nietzsche was confined to a mental institution where he remained until his death in 1900.

Nietzsche was dimly aware in his last months of sanity that he was beginning to attract an audience, which had not been the case before. During the nineties he became a rage, for his writings were exciting, obscure, and somehow dangerous. The cult of Nietzsche spread throughout the world and with it the misunderstanding of what he was aiming at. The physical emphasis and the talk of violence, virility, and will are easy to vulgarize. Thus Nietzsche has become one of the most misunderstood thinkers and indeed hailed as a prophet of Nazism, from which his sensitive spirit would have revolted as the height of vulgarity and just that aspect of the modern mass world which he loathed. His reputation is an ironic one.

Wagner and Nietzsche are both figures of first rank in the history of music and philosophy respectively, so they tend to hold the center of the stage in this phase of the intellectual history of Germany in the late nineteenth century. They were by no means alone in their opposition to Bismarck's solution of German unity nor to the trends of the times. Several other lesser-known thinkers and publicists sowed some of the seeds that were to sprout in the twentieth century. One of these was Constantin Frantz (named at birth Gustav Adolf Constantin). Frantz, the son of a Protestant clergyman, was born in 1817, educated at Halle and Berlin, and after extensive travels in central and southeastern Europe became an official for a number of years in the Prussian diplomatic service. During the mid-fifties and sixties he lived in Berlin and made a livelihood from writing, but after 1871 he retired from the capital of the hated new empire and lived his last years near Dresden, where he died in 1891. He is a classic example of the *grossdeutsch* thinker in the period after 1870. Frantz insisted that Bismarck had contradicted all important tendencies of German development by settling for an empire containing far from all Germans, an empire which by its rationality, its Prussian domination, and its modernity cut squarely across the traditional, instinctive, and organic qualities of true Germanism. He objected to democracy and elections as being simply the counting of heads without regard for enduring values. For Frantz the magic word was federalism. He envisaged a central European empire including all the peoples of Austria-Hungary and even France grouped about Germany as a womb and center. There was to be a monarch, but he was not to be absolute; yet there were to be no elected officials. The solution of this dilemma was to be a council of men picked from the great institutions of the
state to advise the monarch and make decisions. Frantz leaves us to guess just which institutions they were to be, except that he specifically rules out the universities, for which he had a particular dislike. There is an almost airy dismissal of the practical difficulties that would be involved in a solution of this kind, but so entrenched is Frantz in the last backwash of Hegelian idealistic romanticism that he almost gives the impression that these practical matters are beneath the attention of the higher spirits. Frantz has remained a guiding star for many later deutsch thinkers and has experienced a revival since 1945 in the effort to discredit all German developments since 1871 as mistakes for which Bismarck must bear much of the blame.

An even more extreme example of pure German racialism was Paul de Lagarde (born Paul Bötticher), whose major work Deutsche Schriften ("German Writings") has been a sort of Bible for racists. Lagarde was an academic personality who taught for some time at the University of Göttingen in the field of oriental studies. However, his name will be remembered for his worship of the German race. It is extraordinary to what degree his ideas were later embodied in the Nazi doctrine. Although he admired Bismarck's achievement, it was for him at best a first step. In particular, he disapproved of Bismarck's willingness to compromise, the characteristic which most historians consider one of the chancellor's most outstanding qualities. Lagarde was expansionist and pointed out the problems of a rapidly growing race hemmed in by arbitrary and un-historic frontiers, a notion to become so familiar later under the label of Lebensraum. He condemned all non-German institutions that had crept into German life (i.e., Roman law, the Roman Catholic church, and even German Protestantism because it had been divisive in German development). He seems to have influenced Nietzsche in his dislike for both democracy and industrialism and preached instead the doctrine of return to the soil as a step toward the purification of the race. He even went so far as to anticipate the future S.S. (Schutz Staffel) plan of setting up semimonastic schools for the training of the elite of the next generation.

A somewhat different line was taken by Julius Langbehn, whose controversial work Rembrandt als Erzieher ("Rembrandt as Teacher") appeared in 1890. Langbehn differed from both Frantz and Lagarde in that while he fell behind none in his admiration of the German race, he did not hold Bismarck responsible for the modern illnesses which all three detected. In fact, he tended to glorify Prussianism and entertained the strong possibility that Germany would become the Greece of the modern world. However, the Germany of his time was just a start for the Germany of the future. Langbehn robbed the Dutch of Rembrandt,
whose artistic insight and intuitive understanding of humanity made him a model for future Germans.

The fact that considerable space has been given to several representatives of the opposition to the new empire and of the cult of the German race should not obscure the fact that these people did not represent the dominant and obvious attitudes of the new Germany. For the bulk of the population, unthinking or self-satisfied, they were prophets without honor. Yet after disaster hit the shiny new empire in 1918, more and more it was these men rather than their formerly accepted contemporaries who commanded the attention of the reading public.

On the surface all was well in the spiritual life of Bismarck's Germany, as well as in its political and economic life. The universities continued to flourish and to produce important scholars in all the intellectual disciplines. It is hardly necessary to comment on German pre-eminence in the natural sciences. Foreign students flocked to the German centers of learning. The United States viewed Germany as a model of administration, social legislation, and educational technique. Vienna became the world's medical center; she was shortly to launch Sigmund Freud on his stellar career. Such geniuses as Robert Koch and August von Wassermann loom as large in the history of medicine as Louis Pasteur. In physics, chemistry, mathematics, and the biological sciences German research was of the first order, as for example in the work of Hermann von Helmholtz. Much the same was true in the humanities and social studies. Philology, history, sociology, anthropology—all of these profited from German thought. In addition to the "political" historians already noted, mention should be made of Theodor Mommsen, whose Roman History has remained standard. There was noticeable, however, the tendency for the scholar in Germany to remain aloof from political affairs. He was even aloof from his students, an awesome god attired in frock coat and top hat, who upon occasion in a very formal atmosphere cast the pearls of his erudition. His library or laboratory was his world; there are many students of Germany who feel that the learned world voluntarily abdicated from the position it might have claimed, and was therefore unconsciously contributory to the perversion of learning which was to be such a scandal in the twentieth century.

In the world of fine arts Germany in the last third of the nineteenth century produced much activity, but very little of first rank except in music. The architecture of the time was heavy, eclectic, and pompous. In Berlin there appeared a heavily ornamented, massive, and overbearing style; in Bavaria some of the same, plus some copying of earlier styles, and the unique wildly romantic castles dreamed of by Louis II. Colossal statues of Germania, William I, and later Bismarck were very popular
and reached their absurd climax in the statues of his forebears with which William II enriched the Tiergarten in Berlin. In painting, Germany did not seem to draw much inspiration from the rich new movement in France. She developed no Cézanne, no Van Gogh, not even a Whistler. However, some creditable, if uninspired, academic canvases were painted, especially in Munich, which both in the plastic arts and particularly music was rapidly earning herself the position of the artistic capital of Germany.

The musical side of the picture was, as usual, the brightest. Wagner and Brahms both lived into the imperial period, the latter, of course, in Vienna. In fact, most of the important composers of the time were affiliated with south Germany and Austria. Outstanding among them were Anton Bruckner and Gustav Mahler, who continued the great Viennese tradition although influenced by Wagner, and Richard Strauss, a follower of Wagner, whose more important work did not appear until the twentieth century. Not only was composition at a high level but also performance. Opera companies, symphony orchestras, conductors, singers, and instrumentalists reached new heights and found wide acceptance and support from a musical German public. The revolutionary theatrical techniques of Wagner and the increasingly rich and complex instrumentation of the composers of the period led to new triumphs. Munich, Vienna, Berlin, and Dresden, all supported by their governments, offered outstanding musical fare and drew audiences from the whole world, as well as performers (for example, at a later date two Americans, Geraldine Farrar in Berlin and Maude Fay in Munich). The establishment of musical festivals, of which the Bayreuth festival was the prototype, was another characteristic of the period to continue and increase as time went on.

Once again, in another aspect of life, we see apparent success and achievement on the surface; but in matters of the spirit there was also a lurking undercurrent, hardly perceived at the time, which gradually spread its infection. Today Wagner and Nietzsche are remembered, while Gustav Freytag is almost forgotten.