CHAPTER XIV

Wilhelmian Germany. I, Domestic (1890-1914)

The reign of William II was Bismarck's Germany without Bismarck, as very soon became apparent. In spite of the emperor's confident remarks, the new course of the nineties was an unsteady one both in domestic and in foreign affairs. Released from the despotic control of the old master, pressure groups began to make their influence felt, and the intrinsic weakness of the emperor allowed him to be pushed first one way, then the other by the forces surrounding him. The constitution which Bismarck had tailored for himself simply did not fit lesser men. The succession of four chancellors who sat in Bismarck's chair between 1890 and 1917 illustrates this point.

Emperor William picked as Bismarck's immediate successor, to institute the so-called "new course," General Leo von Caprivi, who held the post for four years from 1890 to 1894. Caprivi stepped into one of the most difficult positions imaginable and filled it with competence, if not brilliance. He was a regular army officer and member of the General Staff, who had a good deal of experience in army administration. Also he had served for some years as Chief of the Admiralty. (The Navy was so unimportant at this time that it was controlled by the Army.) He had been highly esteemed both by William I and by Bismarck, but had a becoming modesty which made him reluctant to accept the two big tasks of German chancellor and minister-president of Prussia.

A characteristic of the Caprivi administration is a rapid relaxation of the centralization which had existed under Bismarck, who had treated his various secretaries of state as underlings and had always refused them real ministerial status. Under Caprivi the secretaries of state played a more important role, partly because of the chancellor's lack of experience. This was particularly true in the field of foreign affairs, where Bismarck's son Herbert was succeeded by Freiherr Marschall von Bieber-
stein, who became a major figure in German diplomacy. The same weakening of control was apparent in the relationship between Prussia and the Reich. Bismarck, it is true, had not always acted as minister-president of Prussia, but he had remained in command. After 1892 the two offices were separated for the duration of Caprivi’s incumbency.

The principal immediate cause of the break between the emperor and Bismarck had been the “social question.” William was now determined to appear as the protector of the underprivileged and, in spite of the failure of his labor conference, in the early nineties secured the passage of a number of progressive laws dealing with factory conditions, hours of labor, and the like. He hoped this would, by anticipation of their program, render unnecessary the continuance of any measures against the socialists. As the years went on, however, election returns belied these hopes and William became gradually antisocialist and conservative. Much the same evolution of policy occurred on the subject of the national minorities within the empire. William tried at the outset to be very generous in his treatment of the French in Alsace-Lorraine and the Polish minority in Prussia. However, little gratitude or cooperation was shown by these groups, and the emperor in time grew anti-Polish and supported a stern policy after 1900.

Three major issues dominated domestic politics during the Caprivi era and illustrate changes in the German scene. They concerned schools, the army, and tariffs, which finally forced Caprivi to resign.

In 1892 the Prussian minister of education introduced an extremely reactionary bill, which would have placed Prussian education almost completely under the control of the Protestant and Catholic churches. In fact this bill seemed in many ways to make a complete farce out of the whole Kulturkampf philosophy. Since the Conservatives and Center dominated the Prussian parliament, it would have been possible to push the law through, as Caprivi tried to do out of a sense of loyalty to his minister. However, the bill caused such a furor throughout the whole country that the emperor reversed his support and had the government withdraw it. The minister of education resigned; Caprivi also offered his resignation, but it was not accepted. He did learn, however, how little he could depend on the loyalty of a monarch who was going about the land talking about divine right and announcing that he was sole master.

William II’s most sensitive concern was the condition of his armed forces. After 1890 he became nervous on this count, for he was alarmed at increases in the French army and also at the growing closeness of France and Russia. In 1890 Caprivi easily pushed through some moderate increases in the army, but three years later he ran into serious trouble in the Reichstag when he presented a bill to increase the army
by 70,000 men and to make various other expensive changes. The bill was voted down by the Center, still angry about the school bill, and the Progressives and Social Democrats, touchy about militarization. Caprivi replied with a call for a new Reichstag. The elections did not change the situation, except that the strength of the Progressive party was cut almost in half in favor of the Conservatives. Caprivi was able now to muster enough votes to get the military bill through, but it was a hollow victory because the success of the Conservatives at the polls presaged a major defeat for him in the more important field of commercial policy.

The commercial treaties on a most-favored-nation basis signed by Germany all expired in 1892. The future seemed to hold the alternatives of tariff wars or else partial reductions in tariffs on the basis of reciprocal trade agreements. Caprivi leaned toward the latter, because, although he was not an economist, he recognized the importance of industry and the working man to Germany. He was not oblivious of agrarian problems but felt that Germany needed the improved and efficient agriculture which the rigors of less protection might achieve. Thus in 1892 he concluded a number of trade treaties with neighboring nations, which were enthusiastically ratified by the Reichstag and earned him the title of count. In the next year he expanded his program to include several other nations, in particular Russia, against which Germany had been waging a tariff war. Needless to say, the Caprivi policy raised a storm among the conservative agrarians of the east, who saw their comfortable privileged position seriously endangered. Their protest took the form in early 1893 of the foundation of the Bund der Landwirte ("Agrarian League"), which for years to come was to exercise strong influence in a very conservative direction. Its lobbying succeeded in achieving the passage of a number of laws to help agriculture, and it never ceased in its efforts to get rid of Caprivi. In this it was assisted by the Prussian finance minister, Dr. Miquel, and others. The emperor, too, seemed to be tiring of his chancellor. Caprivi became sick of the struggle and, together with Count Botho von Eulenburg who had been minister-president of Prussia since the education bill fiasco, resigned in October 1892. The emperor accepted the resignation without objection.

To succeed Caprivi William picked Prince Chlodwig zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst, a seventy-five-year-old Bavarian liberal Catholic. Hohenlohe had had a distinguished career in the service both of Bavaria and of the empire. He had served for a time as head of the Bavarian government, succeeded von Arnim as ambassador to France, and more recently had filled with a good deal of tact the difficult post of Statthalter ("governor") of Alsace-Lorraine. Hohenlohe was a cultured gentleman of the
old world, cool, moderate, and conservative, but too aged for heavy responsibilities, in particular to curb the impetuous master whom he had to serve and who was becoming more irresponsible in his utterances every day. He brought an element of stability to his office, but was overshadowed by the emperor and by some of his subordinates (e.g., Marschall and his successor Bernhard von Bülow in the foreign office, and Admiral Tirpitz at naval headquarters).

The domestic events of the administration of Hohenlohe, which lasted for six years (1894–1900), are not on the whole of great interest. The chancellor tried to preserve a course of moderate conservatism, moving with the emperor away from the semiliberal period under Caprivi. He attempted to get from the Reichstag an antirevolution law, which, however, failed to pass because of its arbitrary and extralegal character. In 1896 the new civil code for the empire was adopted, but in this juristic triumph Hohenlohe himself played little part. With one exception the major events of the period fell in the realm of foreign affairs.

The exception is the beginning of the construction of the new German navy, a development which was to have exceedingly important repercussions on a world-wide scale. From the moment of his accession to the throne William II had been ashamed of his German navy and anxious to do something about it. He loved the sea and was a fervent participant in yachting activities, including visits to the regattas at Cowes on the Isle of Wight. In 1895 at the opening of the Kiel Canal, and in 1897 at the celebration of the diamond jubilee of Queen Victoria, the emperor lamented publicly the poor showing which the old shabby German vessels made among those of other nations. He enjoyed himself mouthing bellicose statements about naval matters, the most famous being “Germany’s future lies upon the sea.” In the mid-nineties international events and colonial activities seemed to reinforce the need to increase the navy. Luckily for the emperor the right man lay at hand. In 1897 William appointed Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz head of the admiralty to create a great navy. Tirpitz was one of the outstanding men of his time. Deeply conservative but highly intelligent, he was determined to build a large fleet, including plenty of battleships, and to make the navy popular in Germany. In the succeeding year the Naval League was founded and became an influential pressure group, composed of distinguished persons who occupied themselves by creating naval propaganda which reached down to the humblest Germans. About the same time the first naval bill was presented to the Reichstag. This bill provided for a costly seven-year program of shipbuilding and expansion. Hohenlohe supported it without much interest. It passed with the support of the right-wing parties; the Center was divided; the Progressives and Social Democrats voted
against it. This was a pattern which was to persist. Instead of waiting seven years for a further request for appropriations, however, Tirpitz readied a new bill which was presented and passed in 1900. The German navy was coming into existence with a tremendous initial impetus, supported to the funnels by the enthusiastic emperor. It hardly need be added that this enthusiasm was not shared abroad, especially in London. However, William was not going to let anything stand in the way of his beloved navy, which rapidly assumed size and efficiency.

Exhausted by age, the pressures of the new German international activity, and the vagaries of the emperor, Uncle Chlodwig, as the empress called him, retired in late 1900 and died shortly thereafter. He was succeeded as chancellor by a man much more interesting and much more controversial, Prince Bernhard von Bülow. Bülow, a north German who was chancellor for nine years (1900–1909), was the son of one of Bismarck’s secretaries of state for foreign affairs. He had entered the diplomatic service as a young man and had served in almost all of the principal capitals of Europe, eventually becoming ambassador to Italy and later succeeding Marschall in 1897 as secretary of state for foreign affairs. He enjoyed a great reputation during his lifetime; it was the publication of his memoirs after his death that showed the essential smallness of his character. He was cultured, supple, and diplomatic; his finesse in manipulating people was considerable; but beneath the charming façade was a narrowness of vision which renders untenable the comparisons with Bismarck which were frequently heard during his chancellorship.

As in the Hohenlohe administration, the main interest of Bülow’s period lies in the field of foreign affairs. However, there were some important domestic developments. At one moment in 1908 a stronger chancellor than Bülow or a more aggressive Reichstag might have achieved parliamentary responsibility, but both failed to take advantage of the situation.

By the turn of the century the emperor’s early liberalism was almost dead, and the influence of the conservative pressure groups was ever increasing. This is shown by the action taken on the perennial issue of the protective tariff. A new tariff law was passed in late 1901, which not only pleased the Agrarian League by raising substantially the duties on agricultural products but also satisfied the organized industrialists by granting their similar demands for high tariffs. The diplomatic Bülow was determined to cause as little opposition as possible. He had learned the lessons taught by the fate of his predecessors. Another evidence of conservatism and favoritism to the east-Elbian agrarian class was Bülow’s policy toward the Poles in West Prussia and Posen. Here, where mort-
gages were frequently foreclosed on land owned by Poles, German colonists were encouraged to settle on favorable terms with the aim of re-colonizing these territories with Germans and reducing the Polish population to a semiservile peasantry. On the other hand, the social legislation of the time of Bismarck was not only retained but expanded, and an abortive effort was even made to change the outworn Prussian three-class franchise. The years from 1900 to 1906 were fairly peaceful parliamentary years with the control of the Reichstag in the hands of the Conservatives and the Center, who usually worked in harmony with Bülow.

The change came in 1906 over a series of colonial problems. For some years there had been uprisings of the natives in German East Africa and German Southwest Africa, culminating in the rebellion of the Hereros in the southwest, a revolt which was very serious and threatened the extermination of the German population. The blame for this unhappy situation was widely laid on the German merchant colonists, who were accused of behaving with inexcusable brutality toward the natives. The Social Democrats and, more particularly, the Center started a drive against the government’s colonial policy which went even beyond the bounds of an investigation and demanded various privileges for Catholic missions in addition to a thoroughgoing reform of the colonial administration. Here was an opportunity for the second-class citizens (Socialists and Catholics) to assert themselves in a situation which had humanitarian overtones. It was also an opportunity to attack indirectly the spirit of militarism, which seemed rampant in the nation. Bülow introduced a bill to appropriate special funds to crush the native revolt, but it was refused by the alliance of Social Democrats and Centrists. Immediately he took action by dissolving the Reichstag and ending his cooperation with the Center. The election of 1907 was gratifying to the government because the Social Democrats suffered the loss of about half of their seats and Bülow was able to construct a majority, the so-called Bülow-block, of Conservatives and National Liberals. The rebellion in Africa was brought to a bloody conclusion by the slaughter of thousands of Hereros, but at least the appointment of Dernburg to the colonial office led to a far better administration of the subject areas.

The year 1908 brought a climax to the emperor’s dangerous habit of irresponsible, off-the-cuff remarks, which usually managed to irritate the sensibilities of important people. On October 28 the London Daily Telegraph published an interview with William which has almost undisputed claim for pre-eminence in foolish and injudicious language. In this interview William made the claim that he was a sincere friend of England and the English people but that he was an untypical German,
for the German people were inimical to Britain; he claimed that he had his hands full trying to keep Anglo-German relations on a warm basis. He said further that when the British were at their lowest ebb in the Boer War, he had worked out with his staff and sent to his grandmother Victoria a plan of campaign against the Boers. How remarkable it was, he mused, that this plan was startlingly like the strategy which the British later used successfully against their enemies. It should be added that this singular interview followed hard on the heels of a new and frightening navy bill.

An explosion followed in both the British and the German press, and German political leaders took the worst view of the way in which the German people had been laid open to ridicule. Bülow offered to resign and was vague about the matter. The fact emerged, however, that the text of the interview had twice passed across his desk at his country place in the Frisian Islands, where he was rather neglectful of business, and that it had also been examined by the foreign office before publication. This compounded the damage. A few days after the publication of the interview Bülow faced an angry Reichstag, in which each party tried to outdo the others in attack. He tried to pour as much oil as possible on the troubled waters and promised on behalf of the emperor a greater future reticence. Soon afterwards the emperor returned from a trip and, shocked at Bülow's cowardice but frightened by the stir he had caused, signed a statement promising to observe his constitutional responsibilities and publicly approving Bülow's action. From this time on there was little affection between emperor and chancellor, and it appears that the emperor was just waiting for a propitious opportunity to rid himself of his former favorite. The importance of the incident is that, when for once William was abashed, it might have been the psychological moment for the government and the Reichstag to make a decisive thrust for ministerial responsibility. That this did not occur can be laid to Bülow's dislike of party government and also to the Reichstag's habit of subservience to authority.

Bülow lingered on as chancellor for some months longer. He fell from power after a defeat on a fiscal measure. In order to finance the increased expenses of the army and navy, the government proposed an inheritance tax. This bill was, of course, very unpopular with the right of the house and it failed. Deserted by his own favorite parties as well as by the emperor, who had not forgiven him for the events of the previous autumn, Bülow offered his resignation in July 1909 and disappeared for some years from public life.

The last chancellor before the war was Dr. Theobald von Bethmann- Hollweg. Bethmann was a very different type of man from Bülow. His
background was in the domestic civil service, and in particular the service in and around Brandenburg. He knew little of the problems of Germany in general, let alone foreign nations. He was scholarly, quiet, and businesslike, a great contrast to the quick and witty Bülow. He probably bored the emperor, but he seemed to grow with the years until during the war he emerged as a competent thinker, without, however, the force of character to make his conclusions accepted.

Bethmann's characteristic "too little and too late" attitude was illustrated in his handling of the domestic problems which arose in the years before 1914. One of these affected him in his capacity as minister-president of Prussia. The undemocratic character of the Prussian franchise had long been commonplace to all observers. The conservative groups were represented in the Prussian parliament out of all proportion to their numbers, while the Social Democrats with all their votes had hardly any representation. Early in his administration Bethmann tried to correct this abuse and in 1910 offered a bill to the Prussian parliament on the subject. However, the bill attempted to cure only a few of the cumbersome technicalities of the system and not the roots of the problem. Even so, the Prussian Conservatives would have nothing to do with it and defeated it. No change was made in the Prussian voting system until the panicky days just before the armistice in 1918.

Much of the interest of the Bethmann administration before the war lies in the province of Alsace-Lorraine. This area had been ruled as a federal district by the imperial government from Berlin. Now the government proposed to give it a constitution so that it might take its place on a basis of equality with the other German states. In 1911 a constitution was passed by the Reichstag, and it appeared as if Alsace-Lorraine might be better integrated into the Reich. However, as was so often the case in Germany, the lack of co-ordination between the military and civilian interests became apparent. In 1913 a storm arose over an incident that occurred in the little town of Zabern (Saverne), where an arrogant young officer behaved in a brutal manner toward some of the local townsfolk. Martial law was proclaimed when the citizens protested, and the affair reached the ears of the Reichstag where the left parties protested to the extent of a vote of no confidence in the government. This of course had no legal effect but showed some of the friction in Berlin. The garrison was removed from Zabern, but some months later its commanding officer was decorated. The whole problem of military vs. civilian authority was far from solved. The events of the war were to bring it into higher relief.

The last Reichstag election under the empire was held in 1912. Every important party in the country, except one, lost seats. The Social Demo-
crats increased their delegation from forty-three to one hundred ten, almost a third of the whole, and became the largest single party. Their losses of 1907 were more than repaired, and Germany went into the greatest war thus far in history with one-third of the population voting for the antigovernmental socialists and another third, the Catholics, restive in what they felt was an inexcusably inferior position.

The evolution of the Social Democratic party during the reign of William II is a complex one. It did not simply follow the straight Marxian line. The first reason for this is that the Lassallean influence with the concept of the strong state remained influential. Secondly, Marxism in Germany suffered at least as much as elsewhere the series of heresies and schisms which plagued all social democracy during this period. Furthermore, the rapid growth of the party, its close affiliation with the trade union movement, and its presence in the Reichstag prevented the maintenance of the degree of aloof orthodoxy which Lenin insisted on in the underground Russian branch. There was a whole range of doctrines, but three positions in particular stand out. The furthest left, associated with the names of Karl Liebknecht and the brilliant Polish Jewess, Rosa Luxemburg, was frankly revolutionary and wanted to make use of violence and the weapon of the general strike. In a more moderate position, hoping to serve as a bridge between the two extremes, stood the famous theoretician, Karl Kautsky, whose doctrine probably most nearly approximated orthodox Marxism. Kautsky called for economic progress toward a socialist community but did not lose sight of the basic concept of the class struggle. Further to the right was the revisionist group, whose most articulate leader was Eduard Bernstein. Bernstein, impressed with the growth of the party and its invasion of the bourgeois parliamentary world of the Reichstag, looked for no catastrophic switch to the classless society but rather envisioned socialism as an indefinitely advancing tide, achieving victory after victory but not necessarily by force. This revisionist line coincided most conveniently with the trade union philosophy and became in the years leading up to 1914 the dominant trend in German socialism, although the disputes at party meetings were often acrimonious in the extreme. Under the guidance of Friedrich Ebert, Bebel's successor in the party leadership, the revisionist position usually won out. Within the ranks of the Social Democratic party the divisions were already discernible which were to lead, after the war started, to the secession of the Independent Social Democrats from the parent party and later to the secession of the Spartacus League from the Independents.

As the forces of the left were lining up for the conflicts that were to come, so were the forces of the right. Mention has already been made of the significant growth of pressure groups, specifically the Agrarian
League and the Naval League. There were two others, in particular, which were outstanding in representation and importance. One of these was the *Bund der Industriellen* ("League of Industrialists"), an opposite number to the Agrarian League, composed of the leading captains of industry who often co-operated with their rural counterparts. More interesting, however, was the famous *Alldeutscher Verband* ("Pan-German League"), founded in 1893, though a parent organization had already been in operation for a few years. The Pan-German League was a peak organization for the various right-wing, nationalist pressure groups. It set itself the task of reawakening the German people to an understanding of their unique importance and to measures which would implement the spread of German nationalism throughout the world. The Pan-Germans did not regard German nationality as ending at the frontiers of the Reich. They were much interested in German ethnic groups throughout Europe and the world and had in mind unifying these far-flung people under the standard of German *Kultur* ("culture"). The League was purposely kept small, but its membership was distinguished and influential and thus disproportionately significant. It issued a weekly paper and a large variety of publications on subjects concerned with German nationalism, colonialism, the armed forces, and the like. It organized lectures and meetings and in general kept up a steady barrage of propaganda to keep the mind of the population always focused on Germany's increasingly pre-eminent position in the world. Its first important leader, Dr. Ernst Hasse, was succeeded in 1908 by Dr. Heinrich Class, who in the war years was to be a leading fighter in the cause of the annexation of conquered territory.

Still further to the right was the rise of organized anti-Semitism in the reign of William II. Much of this activity is associated with the name of Adolf Stöcker, court preacher in Berlin, who founded the Christian Social party. He won the attention of the future William II before he became emperor, but Bismarck was violently opposed to Stöcker and warned the prince to keep away from him. In the years after 1887, however, there was always at least one anti-Semitic member of the Reichstag and at times the number reached as high as sixteen. Another figure associated with anti-Semitism during that period was Friedrich Naumann, who seceded from Stöcker's party in 1896 and formed the National Social Association, which, while it stressed German nationalism and expansionism, did not favor overt persecution of the Jews. Naumann eventually drifted into the Progressive party and as a publicist influenced a number of members of the younger generation including his biographer, Theodor Heuss, president of the German Federal Republic from 1949 to 1959.
The lines of cleavage which were perceptible in the Bismarck period became much more clearly defined in the reign of William II. All that was needed was the broad catalyzing action of war to bring them into combat. The struggles of the Weimar Republic were not forged out of new materials. The elements were all present in the last years of imperial Germany.

Yet on the surface things looked serene. Germany still retained her formidable appearance to the outsider and even to most Germans. Figures could be adduced to show that economic and industrial progress was still continuing on a great scale. Learning, both in and out of the universities, was impressive and drew scholars in all fields from the whole world. In the area of literature and the fine arts there was noticeable a certain refining of the vulgar exuberance of the earlier period. Under the influence of such poets as Rainer Maria Rilke and Stefan George, a new aestheticism was apparent. As for prose, Jacob Wasserman and the brothers Thomas and Heinrich Mann were beginning to publish novels with more than a touch of social criticism. In music the exciting operas of Richard Strauss (Der Rosenkavalier, Salomé, Elektra, and Ariadne auf Naxos) appeared shortly before World War I. It looked as if Germany were about to enter a new era of cultural as well as economic supremacy. However, the shots which killed Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his wife on June 28, 1914, were to bring these aspirations to an end and launch Germany on one of the most catastrophic periods which any nation in history has suffered, a period which may not yet be ended.