CHAPTER IX

Bismarck’s Germany. I, Political (1871-88)

From its foundation until his dismissal in 1890, the German Empire was dominated by Bismarck. He held the position of Reichskanzler ("imperial chancellor") during the whole period and was usually also minister-president of Prussia. The Bismarck of the seventies and eighties was different from the earlier man. His personality remained dominant and overbearing, becoming more irritable as he aged, but his objectives had changed. In the sixties he pursued an aggressive ruthless policy aimed at unification. After 1871 he pursued a Friedenspolitik ("policy of peace") in order that the new German state might digest the achievements of the earlier period. The man who had with calculation risked war now became the man who would do almost anything to avoid war. He conceived his purpose to be the consolidation of past gains and the maintenance of Germany’s military and economic strength. So massive and awesome was his personality, so obvious his achievement, that the world saw in Germany a great monolith of strength and power. It was not until after 1918 that, upon closer examination, a number of cracks and crevices were seen in the structure, weaknesses which Bismarck was often able to disguise but which in the course of time became too gaping for further patchwork. This generalization is true of many aspects of the German state and is not least discoverable in the spectrum of political parties with which the chancellor had to deal.

On the far right of German politics—if we do not count the completely intransigent Poles, Danes from north Schleswig, French from Alsace-Lorraine, and Guelf supporters of the former king of Hanover—the two conservative parties, the Conservative and the Reichspartei, found their places. One might expect the Conservative party, whose members were mostly Prussian aristocrats from the same stratum of society as Bismarck himself, to be a main support for the chancellor. This was not the case. The Conservatives had two major interests: Prussia, and their agricultural livelihoods. As far as the first was concerned,
they felt that Bismarck had neglected purely Prussian concerns in favor of general German ones; they viewed the new empire with a good deal of mistrust. On the second count, they feared that Bismarck was favoring the new commercial and industrial interests too much and that this would redound to their own disadvantage. Furthermore, they were suspicious of Bismarck’s campaign against the Catholic church in the mid-seventies, fearing that the same attack could be made against their beloved Lutheranism. It was not until Bismarck’s watershed year of 1879 (when the question of the protective tariff, so dear to the agrarians, arose) that the Conservatives shifted from opposition to support of the government. One of their leaders was Roon, the great minister of war. For a time he served as minister-president of Prussia, but in the end he definitely turned away from his old colleague Bismarck.

Perhaps the principal example of Bismarck’s acrimony toward the Conservatives occurred in his handling of the affair of Harry von Arnim. Arnim, a young, talented, and quickly promoted member of the diplomatic service, was given the difficult post of ambassador to France after the Treaty of Frankfurt. He cut a considerable swath in French political circles and had the reputation of favoring the return of a monarchy in France. This conflicted with Bismarck’s policy, for the chancellor felt that a republic was a weaker form of government than a monarchy, and above all, he wanted a weak France. Thus he supported the republicans and was at odds with his ambassador. Further he believed that conservative circles were grooming Arnim to succeed him as chancellor. This was too much. So Bismarck sent to Paris a young, brilliant misanthrope, Fritz von Holstein, to spy on Arnim, who was admittedly careless about leaving valuable documents around. Holstein amassed evidence of many misdemeanors; Bismarck recalled Arnim and tried him for treason. He was found guilty, escaped from Germany, and lived the rest of his life in exile. Many Conservatives felt that Bismarck had hounded Arnim for personal reasons, and the affair increased the tension between him and the far right.

The Reichspartei consisted of conservatives of a bit more liberal hue than the members of the Conservative party. It was not so exclusively Prussian in character but drew on nobility from other parts of the empire. These differences account for its orientation. It was a supporter of Bismarck, although in the eighties its membership in the Reichstag was so small as to make it unimportant.

During the decade of the seventies Bismarck looked for his principal support to the National Liberal party which at that time was the largest single party in the Reichstag. It was mainly the party of big business and industrial interests, which were rapidly becoming so very important. The
Prussian members of it were the group of liberals who, at the time of the Indemnity Bill of 1866, had voted in favor of Bismarck. In doctrine they were allied to the main tenets of Manchester liberalism, laissez faire or free trade. They were psychologically in sympathy with the anti-Catholic legislation because of their typical nineteenth-century liberal anticlericalism. They were also in sympathy with the general spirit of material progress and expansion, which Bismarck seemed to symbolize at the time. By the end of the decade, however, the alliance between Bismarck and the Liberals was wearing thin, and the final break came when Bismarck espoused the cause of the protective tariff. This was a complicated story, but in the end Bismarck decided to accept the support of the Conservatives and the Center. After 1879 the Liberal party went downhill in its electoral support, and liberalism became a dying philosophy in the empire.

The question of protectionism arose partly out of the peculiar financial arrangements for the support of the empire. Bismarck was fundamentally uninterested in economic problems and had no hesitation in saying so. During the first decade and more of his tenure of office he had been mainly interested in diplomacy and had relegated domestic questions to trusted subordinates. In the middle seventies, however, he began to realize the precarious nature of imperial finances. In addition to certain fixed sources of revenue, the empire had to rely on donations, called matricular contributions, made by the individual states each year to cover the imperial deficit. Bismarck disliked this system, which he felt lessened the dignity of the empire and looked like a charitable handout. Bismarck felt that if the imperial government could get the proceeds of the customs duties, it might become self-supporting. He was encouraged in his views by the agrarian interests, which were becoming more and more alarmed at the dumping on the German market of large amounts of agricultural produce underselling the local product. The introduction of a tariff bill in the Reichstag caused a parliamentary battle, which Bismarck won only at the expense of exchanging the support of the National Liberals for that of the Conservatives and the Catholic Center. This was the political watershed of his domestic policy. Even at that cost he did not achieve all he wanted, for the bill which the Center was willing to accept differed from Bismarck's original project since the Center, which had federalist rather than centralist views, wanted to preserve the principle of the matricular contributions, although granting increased revenue for the imperial government.

The other liberal group in the Reichstag, composed largely of those who had refused to vote for the Indemnity Bill in 1866, underwent various changes of name but can be conveniently described as the Progres-
sive party. It came the nearest to representing real democracy in Germany as an American or Englishman would recognize it. Needless to say, this was a party of opposition to the government. It fluctuated very much in strength from election to election, but regularly in the person of its eloquent leader, Eugen Richter, provided liberal and democratic objection to most of the chancellor's projects.

The Catholic Center party was a unique group. While it was legally founded only in 1870, its roots go back at least to 1848. The exclusion of Catholic Austria from Germany made the remaining German Catholics, who constituted about one-third of the population of the empire, fearful that they would be submerged by Protestant Prussia; so they felt they should organize as a unit. Socially speaking, the Center was the least homogeneous of the German parties. Unlike the others it had neither a class nor an ideological basis, except for the common Catholicism of most (but by no means all) of its members. Its strength was drawn from such disparate elements as the heavy industrialists of Silesia and the west, the Catholic aristocracy and peasantry of the south, and the increasing Catholic industrial proletariat, particularly in the Ruhr area. Thus it was a microcosm of German society. The party's heterogeneity made its policy flexible. It always possessed a right wing of conservative agrarians and a left wing of advanced social thinkers, which eventually crystallized into the Christian Trade Union movement. Thus the party was susceptible of coalition either to the left or the right; generally in the imperial period it was to the right. In addition, in the person of its leader, Ludwig Windthorst, the Center had a brilliant parliamentarian, who was able and willing at times to challenge even the champion, Bismarck. During the seventies, owing to Bismarck's campaign against the Catholic church in Germany (the Kulturkampf), the Center was in bitter opposition to the government. However, as the decade wore on this situation changed, partly as a result of the emergence of the Social Democratic party, partly because of the defection from Bismarck of the National Liberals. In 1879 the Center made an arrangement with the Conservatives and became a government party for awhile. At that time the Catholic agrarians saw eye to eye with their Protestant colleagues and helped Bismarck in his struggle over the tariff so that he would call off his war on the Catholic church. Windthorst's policy was usually to keep the Center party in the middle, where it could ideally maintain a sort of balance of power. In spite of the rapprochement with Bismarck, German Catholics continued to feel treated as second-class citizens. Catholics received far fewer important posts in the government than their numbers seemed to demand. The Catholics realized and resented this; thus there was always a latent hostility to the empire and its institutions,
which lessened loyalty. The result of this attitude is to be seen in the events of the late World War I and early Weimar periods.

The *Kulturkampf*, Bismarck’s attack on the Roman Catholic church, is generally regarded as one of his least successful undertakings. On the surface it seems hardly credible that the astute and subtle chancellor would take a series of gratuitous actions without necessity, which would be bound to alienate a very considerable portion of the population from him and his government. Perhaps the best analysis suggests that the modern highly nationalistic state finds itself almost in the nature of things forced to oppose and attack any such great international organism as the Catholic church (or for that matter international socialism). This may be the best explanation at the philosophical level, but there are other approaches. During the sixties the papacy, under the aggressive direction of Pope Pius IX had undertaken a series of forceful acts somewhat in contrast to the defensive attitude that had been characteristic of the papacy in earlier decades. The struggle with the house of Savoy over the unification of Italy, the *Syllabus of Errors*, the definition of the Immaculate Conception, and above all, the definition of Papal Infallibility at the Vatican Council in 1870—all bore witness to a Catholic renaissance. These moves alarmed non-Catholic political figures. Contemporary journals witness the widespread fear that every few days the Pope might issue some infallible statement, which would bind all Catholics, on almost any subject. This was of course a complete misunderstanding of the doctrine, but it was often heard. With this sort of possibility Bismarck had no patience. He was determined to be master in Emperor William’s house and would brook no division of authority with the pope or anyone else. A possible lever for Bismarck entered the scene with the formation of the “Old Catholics,” a group which refused to accept the dogma of Infallibility. In addition to the foregoing considerations, there were others concerning foreign policy, always Bismarck’s principal interest. In the European system of the moment Germany was most at odds with the two highly clerical states, France and Austria-Hungary. It was to be feared that the German Catholics, sympathetic to their Catholic neighbors, might be a source of disaffection and disloyalty at home. It was necessary then, reasoned Bismarck, to take preventive action against a possible Catholic plot which might undo the work of the preceding difficult decade.

Bismarck didn’t wait long after the Treaty of Frankfurt to launch his offensive against the new Center party. In the summer of 1871 he abolished the Catholic section of the Prussian ministry of culture and education on the grounds that it was pro-Polish. Shortly afterwards he delivered on the floor of the Reichstag a stinging attack on the Center in
general, and Windthorst in particular, and secured a law outlawing the Jesuit order. Most of the succeeding repressive legislation was passed by the Prussian parliament rather than by the Reichstag, because matters concerned with such subjects as education were the responsibility of the individual states. In the month of May in 1873, 1874, and 1875, under the direction of Adalbert Falk, Prussian minister of culture and education, a number of laws were passed which are collectively known as the May Laws. They instituted civil marriage, withdrew state support from recalcitrant clergy, placed all clerical education and appointments under the state, dissolved most religious orders, and instituted penal regulations to punish offenders. Before long many priests and bishops were in prison and the situation had become unbearable. Together with these acts went a great deal of talk and agitation. For example, the famous scientist, Rudolf Virchow, described the campaign as a Kulturkampf, or struggle for civilization against alleged Catholic obscurantism. Bismarck himself in a public speech stated that he would not go to Canossa, recalling the humiliation of the German emperor Henry IV before Pope St. Gregory VII in the eleventh century. He described the struggle as just one more act in the endless drama of the conflict between state and church for freedom of action.

It seems clear that Bismarck totally misunderstood the Catholic church. As the years went on, he realized that he was only solidifying opposition not only from the Center but also from many of the Conservatives and the more radical Liberals, the former because they feared for their Lutheran church, the latter because these laws were a grave infringement of a basic liberty. Therefore, in the later years of the decade he cast about for a graceful exit from the persecution. An opportunity arose in the death of Pope Pius IX in 1878 and the accession of the flexible and diplomatic but firm and highly intelligent Leo XIII. The new pope wrote to Bismarck the very day of his election. Little by little the two began to understand each other. Bismarck now began to feel the need of support rather than opposition from the Center party, the second largest party in the Reichstag. His alliance with the National Liberals was reaching its last days because of the tariff issue. Further, and this was an important consideration, Bismarck detected the growth of another group much more sinister in its implications than the Catholics and one which the Catholics could be counted on to oppose, namely the Social Democratic party, which had recently reorganized itself and was beginning to appear as a threat. All of these considerations prompted him to retreat from the untenable position into which he had maneuvered himself. The retreat was not dramatic but gradual. During the decade after 1878 most of the laws of the seventies were gradually repealed,
and in the late eighties Leo XIII was able to say that the *Kulturkampf* was a thing of the past. In this whole affair Bismarck made one of his worst miscalculations. It seems to bear out the old maxim: "*Qui mange du pape en meurt.*" ("He who tries to eat the pope, dies of it.")

The seventies saw also the rise of the party furthest to the left on the German political scene, a party which was to give Bismarck much cause for alarm during the remainder of his ministry. The German Social Democratic party is a complex organism since it had a dual origin and descends from two men opposed in personalities and some of their policies. The effort to compromise between the traditions of Karl Marx and Ferdinand Lassalle is the thread which binds German socialist history together and which eventually becomes decisive in the period when the Social Democrats held the future of Germany pretty much in their hands, the period from 1918 to 1923.

Ferdinand Lassalle deserves the credit for the foundation of the first party of laborers in Germany. Born of a comfortable Jewish family in Breslau, Lassalle grew up as a dilettante, a littérat, an extravagant dandy in Berlin. He served a jail sentence for meddling in revolutionary activities and later amused himself with the study of law. His notoriety and fame in Germany arose first from the fact that he espoused the cause of the wealthy Countess Hatzfeld who was trying to obtain a divorce. Lassalle took the lady under his legal wing and after years of litigation managed to win her case. After that he had no problem of financial support. During the fifties he turned his errant mind to the "social question" and devised a philosophy aimed at the amelioration of labor. He was a strong believer in universal suffrage and in the organization of the laboring class as a political party and pressure group which would demand a better place in society for itself. He did not, like Marx, envisage the overturn of society and government; indeed he looked forward to a period when a government influenced by labor would exist and a close benevolent and paternalistic relationship would develop between the two. It was this pro-state bent that was to be Lassalle’s most heretical legacy to German Social Democracy from the Marxist point of view. Lassalle and Bismarck had a number of conversations and apparently found that their ideas were not hopelessly at odds; in fact, in later years Bismarck publicly acknowledged his admiration for Lassalle. In 1863 Lassalle started seriously to organize the party he had planned. The General German Workers’ Association was founded at Leipzig, and for months Lassalle toured the German industrial districts, making speeches and trying to increase the membership of the new group. It did not grow rapidly at first, but the seed was sown. Lassalle had only a short time to perfect his organization, because in
the summer of 1864 he got involved in a sordid love affair and was killed at the age of thirty-nine in a duel by the Romanian noble fiancé of his sweetheart. The Association continued, however, led by some of Lassalle’s friends and financed by Countess Hatzfeld. It grew gradually during the decade of the sixties.

Toward the end of that decade, as a result of the publication of the first volume of Das Kapital in 1867, the doctrine of Karl Marx, hitherto little known in Germany, started to spread and to compete with Lassalle thought. The two men most closely associated with the introduction of Marxism as a political force in Germany were August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht, both of whom had spent some time in the Lassallean camp. Bebel, a product of the working classes, was an admirable organizer. Liebknecht, a revolutionary from the days of ’48, had known and admired Marx while in exile in London. Both of them were suspicious of the statist character of Lassalle’s doctrine and decided to establish a pure Marxist party, which they did in August 1869 at Eisenach. For several years there were two competing parties claiming the allegiance of the proletariat.

Finally in 1875 the two groups met together at Gotha to hammer out a unified program, and the German Socialist party, properly speaking, came into existence. The program had to be a compromise, and many overtones of Lassalle can be detected in it though it pays lip service to Marxism. Marx himself was very dissatisfied with it and wrote a severe criticism of the Gotha program.

During the seventies the votes of the socialists increased with growing industrialization and particularly as an aftermath of the depression of 1873. In the election of 1877 the socialists returned twelve members to the Reichstag. Bismarck viewed this development with grave misgiving and resolved to find an opportunity to squelch this new, potentially dangerous group. The occasion arose in 1878. In that year two attempts were made on the life of the emperor. The first left him unscathed, but the second wounded the old man badly. Neither of these attempts was directly traceable to the socialists, but Bismarck used them as a pretext for dissolving the Reichstag and calling new elections, which resulted in a gain for the right-wing parties and a loss of three seats for the socialists.

Promptly Bismarck placed before the chamber a project for an anti-socialist law and secured its passage by the votes of the two conservative parties and the increasingly demoralized National Liberals. The law was very stringent. It prohibited socialist meetings and publications and provided that a state of siege could be proclaimed for enforcement. The law was renewed three times and remained in force until 1890. During that period the only place where socialist oratory could be legally heard
was on the floor of the Reichstag itself, where the socialist members were protected by parliamentary immunity.

As was the case with the broadside attack on the Catholics, the anti-socialist law failed miserably in its purpose. Between 1878 and 1890 the socialist vote increased from just over three hundred thousand to almost one and one half million, while the party's membership in the Reichstag jumped from nine members to thirty-five.

During the eighties Bismarck continued to rule for the most part with the alliance of Conservatives and Centrists, which had been formed at the time of the tariff controversy. Most of the major events of this period were in the field of foreign policy and will therefore be discussed later. The one major domestic contribution of the early eighties was the series of social security laws which were enacted, but they too will be described in another connection. In 1887 the chancellor enjoyed his ultimate triumph and undertook his last shift in party alignment. On this occasion the issue was the so-called Septennate, or bill by which army estimates would be considered by the Reichstag only every seven years. This proposal harked back in a sense to the period of the constitutional conflict in Prussia in the sixties. Bismarck called a new election and secured the passage of his bill by the Cartel, or coalition of Conservatives and National Liberals; the Center once more passed into opposition in spite of a suggestion from Pope Leo XIII that it support the chancellor. This achievement did not mean, however, that liberalism was rejuvenated. It meant rather that the liberals, having lost their élan some years before, were just submissive to the increasingly autocratic Bismarck. This was Bismarck's last victory. The next year his beloved old William I died, and gradually the supports were pulled from beneath the founder of the empire.

Taken in balance, Bismarck's achievement as a domestic political statesman cannot be praised unqualifiedly. It is true that in almost every major issue he managed to get what he wanted. However, he left behind him a heritage of discontent and bitterness veiled by his apparent outward success. The increasingly important Social Democrats were irreconcilable opponents of the regime. The Catholics, one-third of the population, were in opposition and chronically resentful of neglect. The Progressives always voted against the government. The National Liberals had lost, or been deprived of, their chance to make liberalism a vital force in German society. Only the Conservatives were dependable. As long as the old master with a vitriolic tongue and cynical shrewdness was there to dominate events, a façade of success and power could be maintained. Yet the days were drawing close when he would no longer be there.