

The Peculiar Course of German History

The
Unpredictable
Past

Edgar Feuchtwanger warns against exaggerating the extent or significance of liberalism's failure in German history.

The weakness of German liberalism usually figures prominently in anything written about modern German history. It is also central to the thesis of a German *Sonderweg* (separate path), that German history, from at least the nineteenth century onwards, deviated significantly from more benign developments in Western Europe. The argument is that in Germany, as compared with France and particularly Britain, the middle class, the main carrier of the liberal idea, was weak. Hence the progress from absolute monarchy through parliamentary government to democracy was stalled. The revolution of 1848, meant to bring parliamentary government to Germany, was defeated. Instead Bismarck carried out a revolution from above on behalf of the Prussian military monarchy, whose powers therefore remained largely intact, when elsewhere monarchies became constitutional or were replaced by republics.

Historiographical Debate

This argument, or variants of it, became a virtual orthodoxy in writing on German history after the Second World War. There was an overwhelming need to find a satisfactory explanation for the rise of Hitler, with all the devastating moral and material consequences of the Third Reich for Germany in particular and for the world in general. Some nationalist and conservative German historians still tried to account for Hitler's rise as a kind of alien intrusion into the normal course of events. They wanted to rebut the view that something was flawed in the whole of Germany's modern development. For most observers, however, the treatment of Hitler as an unfortunate



traffic accident of history was not adequate and the 'weakness of liberalism' and '*Sonderweg*' theses seemed more satisfying.

More recently, these theses have themselves been questioned, most notably by two British historians, Geoff Eley and David Blackbourn, in *The Peculiarities of German History*. They argued that the idea of a German *Sonderweg* is only meaningful if there is a normal path to modernity. Modernisation is nowadays a well-established concept used by historians, signifying the various ways in which societies move from the pre-modern, pre-industrial state towards industrialisation, urbanisation and beyond. The British way - the first and therefore the classical model - from which the German is held to have deviated, is, however, merely another special development, for all national histories have their peculiarities. Moreover, the German middle class was by no means

as weak and constantly defeated as the proponents of the 'weakness of German liberalism' make out. Revolutions, like the French of 1789, are not necessarily the sign of a successful middle class, and nor was the failure of the 1848 revolution in Germany a conclusive defeat of the middle class. Revolution, a violent lurch in the normal evolution of history, is itself an idea fraught with difficulties of definition. In the decades after 1848 the German bourgeoisie still led the transformation of Germany into an industrial nation and even Bismarck had to make a pact with it.

Barricades were erected in Berlin on 19 March 1848. How far did the failure of the 1848 revolution, and thus the preservation of monarchical power, prevent Germany from following a 'normal' course of political progress?



This cartoon from 1875 of a 'united Germany' shows a bloated Bismarck in control of Europe and of much of the wider world.

The German historian most closely associated with the *Sonderweg* thesis, H.-U. Wehler, has also modified his views. He stated his theory of the political retardation of Germany most coherently in a book *The German Empire 1871-1918*, first published in German in 1973 and in English in 1985. He has now published a massive three-volume history of German society up to 1914. In it he lists a series of factors that distinguish Germany from Western European nations. They include the dominance of a charismatic personality, namely Bismarck, in the formation of the nation and the direct control by the monarch, rather than parliament, of the military. The predominance of the bourgeoisie was restricted, from above, not only by the survival of a powerful monarchy and

the aristocracy associated with it, but also, from below, by a strong and radical labour movement. It is obvious that many such factors were also present elsewhere in Europe, for example Italy, but in the case of Germany, which was larger and more powerful, military and imperialist ambitions could be greater and the consequences more far-reaching.

Bismarck and the Liberals

To assess the German situation realistically, we need to analyse a series of crucial factors and turning points in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Compared with Britain, Germany became an industrial and predominantly urban country relatively late in the day, mostly after the unification of 1871. In the earlier part of the nineteenth century industrial entrepreneurs and those connected with large-scale commerce were few and far between. The middle classes, or bourgeoisie, were distinguished from the classes below

them mainly by being educated and literate. For this reason there is a special term for them in German, which has no exact parallel in English, the *Bildungsbürgertum*. (*Bildung* means education in a very wide sense and *Bürger* means citizen). It was in this stratum of society that the advocates of German nationalism and liberalism were mainly to be found. What they wanted was a more unified German state with constitutional, parliamentary government. But there were also many of this educated middle class who were conservative and attached to the ruling dynasties of the existing small German states, as administrators and civil servants of various kinds.

In the revolution of 1848 it was the liberal members of this middle class and also liberal sections of the aristocracy who tried to put the idea of a united, constitutionally governed Germany into practice. They failed, not surprisingly. It was too much to expect the creation of a nation and its internal constitutional reform to take place simultaneously. The existence of two European great powers, Austria and Prussia, as well as of a number of smaller states with a long historical identity, blocked the establishment of a unified state. Most of these countries were absolute monarchies and to turn them into constitutional states, while at the same time subordinating them to a greater national union, proved impossible. The German bourgeoisie, more than the British, was still up against unreconstructed monarchies and aristocracies. To confront them, the bourgeoisie needed the help of radical, democratic forces from the lower social strata. Yet it already felt threatened by these forces and was therefore half-hearted in using them against the existing order.

The failure of the revolution of 1848 did not mean that either the bourgeoisie or liberalism was conclusively defeated. In the 1850s the industrialisation of Germany started to take off and in some parts

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of the country, notably the Prussian-controlled Rhineland, an entrepreneurial, commercial middle class, similar to the one that existed in Britain, became important. By the end of the 1850s such people were in the van of the resumed drive for a more unified, constitutionally governed Germany. It was, however, again not this liberal middle-class movement that was able to take the decisive steps towards the establishment of a united Germany. The initiative passed to Bismarck, whose main aim was to preserve the Prussian monarchy and particularly its control over the military. The appointment of Bismarck as Prussian Prime Minister in September 1862 is often taken as another turning point, comparable to the failure of the 1848 revolution, when the chances of liberal parliamentary government in Germany were fatally damaged.

It is true that the Prussian army, acting on policies mainly devised by Bismarck, now played the major role in unifying Germany. The opening round was a war against Denmark in 1864, which ended the rule of the Danish kings in Schleswig-Holstein. In 1866 the conflict between Austria and Prussia, about which of them should rule Germany, was resolved in a second war. After being defeated at Sadowa in July 1866, the Habsburg Empire ceased to be a German power and North Germany was united under Prussia. A third successful war against France brought the South German states, other than Austria, into a united Germany.

These wars could not have been fought without the support of the German liberal national movement. When they saw that Bismarck was in fact carrying out one part of their aims (national unity), they put their second aim (constitutional government) on the back burner and made their peace with Bismarck. When the majority of the Prussian liberals fell in with Bismarck's scheme of a semi-constitutional government after the war of 1866 it can be interpreted as another retreat and defeat of German

liberalism. The constitution of the North German Confederation, later extended to the German empire of 1871, provided for a chancellor to head the executive government. He was appointed and could be dismissed by the Emperor, but not by the Reichstag, the federal parliament.

It was, however, still not a conclusive defeat. Most of those liberals who in 1866 made their peace with Bismarck were not giving up on their principles, as some historians have interpreted it. They simply felt that persistence in opposition to the now sensationally successful Prussian Prime Minister would marginalise them. In collaborating with him they could still hope to make a crucial contribution to shaping a united Germany. Eventually there would be a time after Bismarck, when the principles of liberal parliamentary government, which many regarded as still completely in tune with the times, would come into their own again. In fact the National Liberal party, in which those liberals who accepted the Bismarckian settlement came together, played a very important role in the Reichstag in passing the legislation that turned the united Germany into an effective market economy. If there is one element that has survived from the united Germany formed in 1871 and torn apart in the disasters of the twentieth century, it is the powerful industrial economy of present-day Germany. The foundations of it were laid by the National Liberals in collaboration with the Bismarck Government.

The liberals' hope that their ideas on the constitution and on government would ultimately prevail was to be disappointed. Bismarck survived in power until 1890, far longer than could have been anticipated. In 1873 the onset of a severe economic slump dealt a heavy blow to the liberal ideology. By 1879 Bismarck had ended his collaboration with the National Liberals and initiated a more

conservative phase, replacing free trade with protective tariffs. Nor was there a move towards full-scale parliamentary government. Bismarck manipulated the political system by bringing his charisma as the heroic founder of the Reich into play and by arousing the fears of the middle classes against alleged internal enemies, above all socialists. An intolerant, aggressive nationalism began to take hold of many sections of the German public. The army, whose victories had brought about German unification, enjoyed high prestige and the military values of obedience, order and hierarchy were cherished. The military had direct access to the Emperor and were scarcely under civilian political control. This semi-authoritarian form of government was felt to be suitable for Germany, a country facing enemies on all sides, while the democracy and individualism of western countries were despised as selfishness and greed run riot. German culture was regarded as superior and more profound than that of France or the Anglo-Saxon countries. As one well-known German commentator put it, the Germans were heroes when the British were merely traders. The Germans were proud of their *Sonderweg*.

Wilhelmine Germany

The decline of liberalism was also due to the rapid pace of industrialisation and modernisation. Developments that were stretched over many generations in Britain, were compressed into a short space of time in Germany, and were therefore more difficult to adjust to. Groups that felt themselves to be losers, mainly the lower middle classes, for instance craftsmen, artisans and small traders displaced by the factory system or department stores, sought scapegoats, such as Jews or socialists. They became a breeding ground for extreme nationalist, racist and anti-Semitic doctrines. The rapidly growing numbers of factory workers gave rise to a mass socialist party, the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). The German Reichstag was elected by



Hitler photographed next to a bust of Bismarck. Nazi propagandists liked to portray the Führer as the successor to a pantheon of absolutist Germanic heroes. In reality, however, Bismarck had been unable to ignore the importance of German liberals.

Prussia, two-thirds of Germany, the parliament, the Landtag, was still elected on a very restricted franchise. It controlled many important areas of domestic policy, as similar parliaments did in other parts of Germany. While the universal male suffrage applied in Reichstag elections made the socialists into the largest party in the federal parliament by 1912, they had only a handful of seats in the Prussian Landtag. Some on the Right wanted to do away with parliaments altogether and they were often the same people who believed that a successful war would solve Germany's problems.

Nevertheless, the weakness of liberalism and penetration of the middle classes by feudal-militaristic values, factors emphasised by historians like Wehler in their earlier work, is not the whole story. Even in the narrow sense of political parties calling themselves liberal, these remained vigorous at the municipal level. In the federal, devolved German system, city government was of great importance. At the national level a liberal party uniting various previously divided sections experienced something of a revival immediately before 1914. Many such liberals wanted to do away with anomalies like the Prussian restricted franchise. The Reichstag, although never achieving a breakthrough to full control of the executive, became increasingly powerful and no chancellor could survive for long if he was unable to work with it. The rule of law prevailed, even if imperfectly. The upper echelons of the German middle classes were self-confident and in many respects superior in wealth and

universal male suffrage, a franchise much wider than that existing in Britain before 1918. Bismarck hoped that it would work against the middle-class liberals, but in fact it facilitated the growth of the SPD. All efforts by Bismarck and his successors to suppress this party failed. An anti-socialist law in force from 1878 to 1890 prevented the socialist party from functioning freely, but could not stop it from fighting elections. Oppression merely served to turn the party towards radical opposition to the existing political system and towards the adoption of a revolutionary Marxist ideology and rhetoric. This in turn alarmed most of the rest of society and made them more receptive to right-wing nationalist and racist ideologies. Germany never had a party like the

British Gladstonian Liberal party, a coalition of working and middle-class supporters.

The political situation in Wilhelmine Germany, the period between Bismarck's fall in 1890 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, became polarised. This contributed to the bellicose nature of German foreign policy, as governments sought to divert internal tensions by successes abroad. No progress was made before 1914 in what became the two most obvious features of German political backwardness, compared with the West. First, there was no full parliamentarisation of the system: the German chancellor, head of the executive, continued to be appointed and dismissed by the monarch, not by parliament, as in Britain. Second, in

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influence to the old aristocracy surrounding the Emperor and his Court. Culturally Germany was a country where experimentalism in the visual arts and music flourished and where there was a strong vein of social criticism in literature. All this limits the ability of an over-arching theory of a German *Sonderweg* to explain the situation. It was more a case of great tension between modernising and backward-looking tendencies.

War and the Republic

German domestic tensions were temporarily overcome by an upsurge of patriotic fervour on the outbreak of war. Even the socialist party supported the war and without that support it could not have been fought. The 'spirit of 1914' was always invoked by the nationalist, right-wing section of opinion in their efforts to obliterate the deep divisions in German society, not least by the Nazis when they came to power 20 years later. Yet this spirit was short-lived and perhaps never as widely shared as was made out. As the war caused growing hardships the old divisions broke into the open again. The German semi-authoritarian system proved less successful than the Western parliamentary systems in mobilising the nation for war; and, when defeat came, it collapsed very swiftly. Monarchies that had existed for the better part of a millennium were thrown into the dustbin of history.

It was a tragedy that a fully parliamentary, democratic system, the Weimar Republic, came into existence only as a result of defeat and national humiliation. We can never now know whether a model more akin to those prevailing in the West could have evolved in Germany if there had been no war. We do know that the Weimar Republic was born in adversity and in the early 1920s and again after 1929 encountered further extreme turbulence. It managed to survive the troubles of hyperinflation in its early

years, but it succumbed to the Great Depression a few years later. By the 1932 a majority of the German electorate had turned against parliamentary democracy, more than a third voting for the Nazis and a sixth for the Communists. It had become very difficult to save democracy and the rule of law, the latter in particular being an essential component of liberalism. Therefore it cannot be denied that at this point liberalism was weak in Germany, whereas in Britain, the USA and France, countries scarcely less exposed to economic hardship than Germany, it was robust enough to keep the existing political systems going. However, even at that late stage it was by no means certain that the German crisis would be resolved by giving power to Hitler.

After Hitler



After the total collapse of the Third Reich in 1945, something the Germans often call 'zero hour', some of the obstacles that had inhibited the development of the liberal state in Germany finally disappeared. Elements of the feudal-military complex that had survived the defeat of 1918 and had made life difficult for democracy in the Weimar period were now also consigned to the dustbin of history. An obvious example was the Prussian landed aristocracy, known as the Junkers, in the areas east of the river Elbe. They had been the backbone of monarchical power before 1914 and were still influential after 1918. They were now driven out by the Russian occupation and their estates confiscated. Few Germans felt

after 1945 that their *Sonderweg*, if there was one, had many positive features. The inclination to despise western democracy as disorderly and greedy all but disappeared and Germans were now keen to see themselves as an integral part of the West. Such were the ideas and values in the ascendant in West Germany. The reunification of 1990 all but swept away what had existed in the East and, for good or ill, extended the West German system over the rest of the country.

Conclusion

The theories of the weakness of German liberalism and of the German bourgeoisie, and of a German *Sonderweg*, are useful tools in making sense of German history over the last two centuries. They should not, however, become straitjackets or dogmas. Liberalism was undoubtedly weaker in Germany than in Western Europe or Scandinavia. Conditions in the USA, an immigrant country, are in any case very different. But there were enough countervailing factors in German society to make 'weakness of liberalism and of the bourgeoisie' not fully adequate as an overall explanation for the troubled course of German history. Again and again there were points where history, but for chance or accident, might have taken a different turn. Even then Germany would probably not have simply followed the Western model. Nationalism was the strongest emotion propelling the emerging mass societies all over Europe in the later nineteenth century. A fully parliamentary Germany would still have been highly nationalistic. After 1871 Germany became sufficiently powerful to have aspired to hegemony in Europe. The temptation was therefore always strong for the Germans to overplay their hand, and even a parliamentary and increasingly democratic system might not have restrained them.

Timeline

- 1815 German Confederation established
- 1848 revolution breaks out in most German states
- 1849 Frederick William IV ends hopes of establishing a unified Germany by refusing the imperial crown offered by the Frankfurt Parliament
- 1858 New Era in Prussia revives liberal hopes
- 1862 Bismarck appointed Prussian Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs
- 1864 Prussia and Austria go to war with Denmark over Schleswig- Holstein
- 1866 Prussia defeats Austria at Sadowa (Königgrätz); Prussian liberals end conflict with Bismarck Government by accepting indemnity law
- 1867 Constitution of the North German Confederation adopted
- 1870 Franco-Prussian War leads to establishment of German Empire
- 1878-9 anti-socialist law and protective tariffs mark break between Bismarck and the National Liberals
- 1890 Bismarck's fall
- 1910 SPD and trade unions organise mass demonstrations and strikes against restrictive Prussian franchise; German left- liberals reunite in Progressive Party
- 1912 SPD becomes largest party in Reichstag elections
- 1914 On outbreak of war SPD votes for war credits
- 1918 revolution overthrows all German monarchies
- 1919 democratic constitution adopted at Weimar
- 1923 hyperinflation destroys German currency
- 1929 beginning of Great Depression
- 1932 Nazis become largest German party; remaining liberal parties receive only 2 per cent of the vote
- 1933 Hitler becomes chancellor
- 1945 total German defeat ends Third Reich
- 1949 West German constitution adopted at Bonn
- 1990 German reunification

Further Reading

Geoff Eley and David Blackbourn, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford University Press, 1984)

Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *The German Empire 1871-1918* (Berg, 1985)

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Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Imperial Germany 1867-1918: Politics, Culture and Society in an Authoritarian State* (Edward Arnold, 1995)

James J. Sheehan, *German Liberalism in the Nineteenth Century* (Methuen, 1982)

Peter Alter, *The German Question and Europe: A History* (Edward Arnold, 2000)

William Carr, *The Origins of the Wars of German Unification* (Longman, 1991)

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