

BISMARCK'S IMPERIALISM 1862-1890 *

I

INTRODUCTION

GERMAN IMPERIALISM DURING THE BISMARCKIAN ERA REMAINS A controversial topic.¹ There is disagreement about both its underlying causes and development, and its historical significance. Numerous problems still remain a *terra incognita* for the historian. Above all the question of the continuity of German imperialism from the time of expansion through free trade in the 1850s and 1860s up until Hitler's *Ostland* imperialism still requires close investigation; only the main lines of development can as yet be clearly discerned.

The present state of the debate is in part due to the fact that until a few years ago the most important historical sources — state papers and manuscript collections — were still inaccessible to scholars. Since this is no longer the case, it is possible to make a fresh attempt to analyse these problems, proceeding from surer foundations². This, however, is only one prerequisite, albeit an important one. Very much more to blame for the present state of research into German imperialism has been the lack of an adequate theory.

This is the reason why important inter-relationships and possible explanations have so far been overlooked. The historiography of imperialism urgently needs a critical historical theory before it can provide illuminating analyses and explanations of socio-economic and political processes. I have tried elsewhere to develop in detail such a critical historical theory of imperialism, based on that nineteenth-century phenomenon which was most decisive for world history — namely industrialization, and its attendant social and political

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¹ This essay summarizes some interpretative results of my researches into German imperialism prior to 1890, published as *Bismarck und der Imperialismus* (Köln, 1969; 2nd edn. 1970). This book also contains a history of the relevant events, which is here left out: pp. 194-407. For a definition of the concept of imperialism, *ibid.*, p. 23.

² The book is based, apart from published material, on the unpublished documents of the Prussian and Imperial administrations, some federal German states and the Hanseatic towns, as well as numerous manuscript collections of leading politicians (including the Bismarcks), of important figures in the economy and administration, and of several journalists and makers of public opinion: cf. *ibid.*, pp. 517-66.

developments.³ Such a theory, like any theory in the social sciences, has to satisfy certain requirements: first, it has to combine a maximum of empirically obtained and verifiable information with as much explanatory power as possible; second, it should cover a variety of similar phenomena — it must in this case enable the historian to compare the modern western forms of imperialism. From this theory of imperialism — which aims to establish a link between the problems of economic growth in industrialized countries and the changes in their social and political structure — two elements call for discussion here, which are particularly important for the explanatory model.

1. One of the dangerous legends of contemporary development-politics is the belief that rapid economic growth promotes social and political stability, and inhibits radical and irresponsible policies. Historical experience has shown however that rapid growth produces extremely acute economic, social and political problems.⁴ Germany is a particularly illuminating case. Here, after the breakthrough of the industrial revolution 1834/50-1873, industrialization was necessarily associated with a large number of profound difficulties in Germany's internal development. More than half a century ago, Thorstein Veblen stated the basic problem: the absorption of the most advanced technology by a largely traditional society within a then unprecedentedly short time. And one of the most important contemporary experts on the problems of economic growth, Alexander Gerschenkron, had the German experience particularly in mind, when he propounded his general theory that the faster and the more abrupt a country's industrial revolution, the more intractable and complex will be the problems associated with industrialization.⁵

³ Cf., the detailed discussion, *ibid.*, pp. 14-33, as well as the introduction to H.-U. Wehler, ed., *Imperialismus* (Köln, 1970), pp. 11-36.

⁴ Cf., M. Olson, "Rapid Growth as a Destabilizing Force", *Jl. Econ. Hist.*, xxiii (1963), pp. 529-52; R. G. Ridker, "Discontent and Economic Growth", *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, xi (1962), pp. 1-15; also, generally, J. C. Davies, "Towards a Theory of Revolution", *Amer. Sociol. Rev.*, xxvii (1962), pp. 1-19; L. Stone, "Theories of Revolution", *World Politics*, xviii (1966), pp. 160-76; C. Johnson, *Revolutionary Change* (Boston, 1966). A very stimulating pioneer study into these aspects of modern German History is H. Rosenberg, *Grosse Depression und Bismarckzeit* (Berlin, 1967).

⁵ T. Veblen, *Imperial Germany and the Industrial Revolution* (1915; Ann Arbor, 1966); A. Gerschenkron, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962); *id.*, *Continuity in History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968); *id.*, "Die Vorbedingungen der europäischen Industrialisierungen im 19. Jahrhundert", in W. Fischer, ed., *Wirtschafts- und sozialgeschichtliche Probleme der frühen Industrialisierung* (Berlin, 1968), pp. 21-8. Generally D. S. Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus. Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present* (Cambridge, 1969). With regard to the

(cont. on p. 121).

After the period from the onset of the German Industrial Revolution until the second world economic crisis of 1873, there followed a period of intensive industrialization, punctuated by lengthy interruptions in the process of economic growth (the three industrial depressions of 1873-79, 1882-86 and 1890-95, together with the structural crisis of agriculture from 1876 onwards), and accompanied by social upheavals in which many contemporaries saw the approach of social revolution. In other words, the problems of uneven economic growth, together with all its effects, were of immense importance in Bismarck's Germany.⁶ It was also as a reaction against this partly rapid, partly disturbed, in any case uneven growth that the system of organized capitalism of the large-scale enterprises developed as a means of bringing about stability and the social control of industrial development. Organized capitalism grew up in the period before 1896 (that "watershed between two epochs in the social history of capitalism", as the young Schumpeter called it),⁷ so that one can see the period from 1873 to 1896 as an extremely difficult structural crisis in the development of the modern industrial system. The same period saw the beginnings of the modern interventionist state, which similarly sought to master the problems of uneven industrial growth. Both

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country of the first Industrial Revolution cf. in particular T. S. Ashton, *Economic Fluctuations in England, 1700-1800* (Oxford, 1959); A. D. Gayer, W. W. Rostow, and Z. Schwarz, *The Growth and Fluctuation of the British Economy, 1790-1850* (Oxford, 1952), 2 vols; R. C. O. Mathews, *A Study in Trade-Cycle-History. Economic Fluctuations in Great Britain, 1833-42* (Cambridge, 1954); J. R. T. Hughes, *Fluctuations in Trade, Industry and Finance. A Study of British Economic Development 1850-1860* (Oxford, 1960); J. Tinbergen, *Business Cycles in the United Kingdom, 1870-1914* (Amsterdam, 1951); W. W. Rostow, *British Economy of the 19th Century* (London, 1948); *id.*, "Business Cycles, Harvests, and Politics, 1790-1850", *Jl. Econ. Hist.*, i (1941), pp. 206-21. A bibliography of studies on the so-called "Great Depression" is in Wehler, *Bismarck*, p. 509, and S. B. Saul, *The Myth of the Great Depression, 1873-96* (London, 1969), whose arguments I do not find convincing. The (in my view) most important studies about U.S.A., Russia, France, Italy, Austria, etc. are cited in Wehler, *Bismarck*, pp. 509 f. A general discussion is to be found in H.-U. Wehler, "Theorieprobleme der modernen deutschen Wirtschaftsgeschichte (1800-1945)", in *Festschrift für H. Rosenberg* (Berlin, 1970), pp. 66-107, also printed in *id.*, *Krisenherde des Kaiserreichs, 1871-1918* (Göttingen, 1970).

⁶ Cf., B. Semmel, "On the Economics of Imperialism" in B. Hoeselitz, ed., *Economics and the Idea of Mankind* (N.Y., 1965), pp. 192-232; A. G. Meyer, *Leninism*, 3rd edn. (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), pp. 235-73; and T. Kemp, *Theories of Imperialism* (London, 1967). When D. S. Landes "Some Thoughts on the Nature of Economic Imperialism", *Jl. Econ. Hist.*, xxi (1961), pp. 496-512, derives imperialism from "disparities of power", then he is basically linking it to the problems of uneven growth: cf., Wehler ed., *Imperialismus*; a more detailed account of the problems of German economic growth, Wehler, *Bismarck*, pp. 39-111.

⁷ J. A. Schumpeter, *The Theory of Economic Development* (N.Y., 1961), p. 67.

the interventionist state and organized capitalism saw a pragmatic, anti-cyclical economic policy as an important means of stabilization. Therefore, both attached decisive importance to the promotion of an export offensive and to the winning of foreign markets — either through the methods of informal empire or through direct colonial rule. This was considered of decisive importance both for economic prosperity and for domestic social stability — for the same reasons a sort of law of the increasing importance of foreign trade during times of economic depression and crisis still seems to be valid today. The welfare of the country was therefore made dependent on the successes of informal and formal expansion. Since the preservation of the traditional social hierarchy was often the dominant motive behind expansion, one is justified in talking of a social imperialism. In Germany, there began to develop a broad ideological consensus of agreement to this effect from the end of the first depression (1878-9) onwards, and subsequent German overseas expansionism rested upon this consensus.⁸

2. Bismarck's greater Prussian Imperial State as founded in 1871, was the product of the "revolution from above" in its military stage. The legitimacy of the young Reich had no generally accepted basis nor was it founded upon a generally accepted code of basic political convictions, as was to be immediately demonstrated in the years of crisis after 1873. Bismarck had to cover up the social and political differences in the tension-ridden class society of his new Germany, and to this end he relied on a technique of negative integration. His method was to inflame the conflicts between those groups which were allegedly hostile to the Reich, *Reichsfeinde*, like the Socialists and Catholics, left-wing Liberals and Jews on the one hand, and those groups which were allegedly loyal to the Reich, the *Reichsfreunde*. It was thanks to the permanent conflict between these in- and out-groups that he was able to achieve variously composed majorities for his policies. The Chancellor was thus under constant pressure to provide rallying points for his *Reichspolitik*, and to legitimate his system by periodically producing fresh political successes. Within a typology of contemporary power structures in the second half of the nineteenth century Bismarck's régime can be classified as a Bonapartist dictatorship: a traditional, unstable social and political structure which found itself threatened by strong forces of social and political change, was to be defended and stabilized by diverting attention away from constitutional policy towards economic policy,

⁸ In detail, Wehler, *Bismarck*, pp. 112-93; on social imperialism, pp. 112-20.

away from the question of emancipation at home towards compensatory successes abroad; these ends were to be further achieved by undisguised repression as well as by limited concessions. In this way also the neo-absolutist, pseudo-constitutional dictatorship of the Chancellor could be maintained. By guaranteeing the bourgeoisie protection from the workers' demands for political and social emancipation in exchange for its own political abdication, the dictatorial executive gained a noteworthy degree of political independence *vis-à-vis* the component social groups and economic interests. And just as overseas expansion, motivated by domestic and economic consideration, had become an element of the political style of French Bonapartism, so Bismarck too, after a short period of consolidation in foreign affairs, saw the advantages of such expansion as an antidote to recurring economic setbacks and to the permanent direct or latent threat to the whole system and became the "Caesarist statesman".⁹

Early German imperialism can also be viewed as the initial phase of an apparently contemporary phenomenon. Jürgen Habermas has demonstrated recently how, under the present system of state-regulated capitalism, political power is legitimized chiefly by a deliberate policy of state intervention which tries to correct the dysfunctions of the economy — in particular disturbances of economic growth — in order to ensure the stability of the economic system. The demand for "legitimation" to which these societies are subject, leads to a situation in which a "substitute programme" replaces the discredited ideology of the liberal-capitalist market economy. Ruling élites are thereby obliged to do two things if they wish to preserve the

⁹ Cf., W. Sauer "Das Problem des deutschen Nationalstaats", in *Moderne Deutsche Sozialgeschichte*, ed. H.-U. Wehler, 3rd edn. (Köln, 1970), pp. 407-36; H. Gollwitzer, "Der Cäsarismus Napoleons III. im Widerhall der öffentlichen Meinung Deutschlands", *Historische Zeitschrift*, clxiii (1952), pp. 23-75, particularly pp. 65 ff; E. Engelberg, "Zur Entstehung und historischen Stellung des preussischdeutschen Bonapartismus", in *Festschrift für A. Meusel* (Berlin, 1956), pp. 236-51; F. Borkenau, "Zur Soziologie des Faschismus", *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft*, lxxviii (1933), pp. 527-44. In detail, Wehler, *Bismarck*, pp. 180-93, 454-502. As far as I can see, there is no modern analysis of Bonapartism as a type of rule that is related to particular phases of economic growth — at least in the France of Napoleon III, and in Bismarck's Germany; how would Schwarzenberg, Prim and Disraeli fit in? Unfortunately, there is no such analysis in T. Zeldin, *The Political System of Napoleon III* (London, 1958). The classical analysis can be found in K. Marx, "Der 18. Brumaire", *Marx-Engels-Werke*, viii (Berlin, 1962), pp. 115-207. Cf. however, J. S. Schapiro, *Liberalism and the Challenge of Fascism. Social forces in England and France, 1815-1870* (N.Y., 1949), pp. 308-31; R. Gripenburg and K. H. Tjaden, "Faschismus und Bonapartismus", *Das Argument*, xxxi (1966), pp. 461-72; O. Bauer *et al.*, *Faschismus und Kapitalismus* (Frankfurt, 1968), pp. 5-18, 19-38.

system and their own vested interests. First, they must ensure that favourable “conditions for stability be maintained for the entire social system and that risks for economic growth be avoided”. Second, they must “pursue a policy of avoiding conflict by granting compensations in order to ensure the loyalty of the wage-earning masses”. Thus, planned “scientific and technological progress”, the main productive force of our times, and a steady rate of economic growth, assume increasingly the function of “legitimizing political power”. These problems do not have an exclusively modern significance. Their historical genesis can be traced back to the last third of the nineteenth century. In Germany, as has already been stated, their origins can be clearly traced back to the Bismarckian era. It may be illuminating to view German imperialism during these years — like many other actions of the developing interventionist state — as an attempt on the part of her ruling élites to create improved conditions favourable to the stability of the social and economic system as it stood. They had realized that the traditional and charismatic authority of the government was losing its effectiveness.

In creating better conditions for social and economic stability, they thus hoped to take the heat out of internal disputes about the distribution of the national income and of political power, and at the same time provide new foundations for the rule of an authoritarian leadership and of privileged social groups. Bismarck’s Bonapartist and dictatorial régime together with the social forces which supported it, and later on particularly the exponents of *Weltpolitik*, expected that economic and social imperialism would legitimate their authority. Critical observers at the time also recognized this fact quite clearly.¹⁰

From a consideration of these two theoretical questions — first, the problems of uneven economic growth, and second, the need for an authoritarian system to legitimate itself — there emerges one fundamental point for the following discussion: German imperialism is to be seen primarily as the result of *endogenous* socio-economic and political forces, and not as a reaction to *exogenous* pressure, nor as a means of defending traditional foreign interests. This interpretation is specifically directed against the notions recently put forward by

¹⁰ J. Habermas, *Technik und Wissenschaft als “Ideologie”* (Frankfurt, 1969), pp. 48-103; Habermas is partly following C. Offe, “Politische Herrschaft und Klassenstrukturen”, in D. Senghaas ed., *Politikwissenschaft* (Frankfurt, 1969), pp. 155-89. Cf. generally J. K. Galbraith, *The New Industrial State* (N.Y., 1967); A. Shonfield, *The Changing Balance of Public and Private Power* (London, 1965); A. Löwe, *On Economic Knowledge* (N.Y., 1965). For contemporary reaction in the 1880s, cf. Wehler, *Bismarck*, p. 479, *et passim*.

functional value and where class integration was seen merely as a prerequisite of world power was an idea expounded with particular clarity and persistence by Weber and v. Halle. Admiral v. Tirpitz produced a classic statement of social imperialist aims when he said that "in this new and important national task of imperialism and in the economic gain that will result from it, we have a powerful palliative against both educated and uneducated social democrats".⁴⁴

If Wilhelmine *Weltpolitik* stressed the prestige factor more strongly than hitherto, the socio-psychological explanation of it, which emphasizes the growing nationalism, the feeling of overflowing vitality and the wanton urge of self-assertion associated with the economic boom since 1896, does not suffice. To this must be added the social-historical explanation that the policy of *Weltpolitik* had its origins in the internal class divisions and in the social and political tensions between on the one hand the authoritarian state, the landed nobility and the feudalized bourgeoisie, and on the other hand, the advancing forces of parliamentarization and democratization and, most important, the social democratic movement towards emancipation. This policy was intended to heal or at least to cover up the internal divisions by diverting attention overseas and by achieving prestigious successes or tangible advantage through imperialist policies. Bülow, following in the footsteps of Miquel, asserted that "only a successful foreign policy can help, reconcile, conciliate, rally together and unify". Holstein too was thinking of this motif when, on account of the hopelessly confused domestic situation, he declared,

Kaiser Wilhelm's government needs some tangible success abroad which will then have a beneficial effect at home. Such a success can be expected either as a result of a European war, a risky policy on a world wide scale, or as the result of territorial acquisitions outside Europe.⁴⁵

IV

CONCLUSION

Having looked ahead at the Wilhelmine period, the foundations of which were undoubtedly laid in the Bismarckian era, we may now summarize the most important aspects of German imperialism under Bismarck.

⁴⁴ Miquel, 22 November 1897, according to Böhme, p. 316; cf., Kehr, *Primat der Innenpolitik, passim*; id., *Schlachtflottenbau und Parteipolitik* (Berlin, 1930); A. Gerschenkron, *Bread and Democracy in Germany*, 2nd edn., (N.Y., 1968) pp. 46 ff.; F. Meinecke, *Geschichte des deutsch-englischen Bündnisproblems, 1890-1901* (Munich, 1927), pp. 6, 8; also Schmoller, *Charakterbilder*, p. 41; cf. Wehler, *Bismarck und der Imperialismus*, pp. 498 ff; Tirpitz, *Erinnerungen*, 2nd edn. (Leipzig, 1920), p. 52.

⁴⁵ J. Röhl, *Deutschland ohne Bismarck* (Tübingen, 1969), p. 229 (Bülow, 1897); Holstein to Kiderlen, 30 April 1897, Kiderlen Papers (supplied by H. Böhme).

Political Economy: Bismarck's policy of pragmatic expansionism was one aspect of his policy of giving state support to Germany's foreign trade; it was also part of his experimental anti-cyclical policy (not then theoretically worked out) whereby the growing interventionist state risked the transition from informal empire to formal colonial rule and thereby sought to ensure for the expanding system of advanced capitalism, particularly during times of economic hardship, a steady growth rate, commercial outlets abroad, and an extension of markets beyond national boundaries. The pressure of forces inherent in the economic system can here be seen clearly at work.

Domestic policy: Imperialism served as a means of integrating a state torn by class differences, whereby the enthusiasm for colonies and crude anglophobe nationalism could be manipulated as crisis ideologies for electoral and party political purposes in particular. Using the policy of expansion, the Prusso-German "revolution from above", supplemented by bonapartist techniques of rule, was continued — under the conditions of advanced industrialization, in the form of social imperialism.

Social Structure: Social imperialism served to defend the traditional social and power structures of the Prusso-German state, and to shield them from the turbulent effects of industrialization as well as from the movements towards parliamentarization and democratization; last but not least, it served to keep the bonapartist dictator in power. As a diversionary tactic, social imperialism temporarily fulfilled its most important function in slowing down the process of social and political emancipation. From the time of the second founding period of the *Reich*, the concept of social imperialism remained a blueprint for political action. In this respect it is of fundamental importance to any consideration of the question of continuity in modern German history. "After the fall of Bismarck, there was a growing inclination to neutralize" the inherited "deep discrepancies between the social structure and the political order, which had barely taken into account the changed social situation brought about by the industrial revolution"; this neutralization was "achieved by diverting the pressure of interests towards objectives abroad — in the sense of a social imperialism which helped to conceal the need for the long overdue reforms of the internal structure of Germany". Especially Tirpitz understood Germany's imperialism together with its new instrument of power, the battle fleet, in this sense; he too was aiming for a conservative utopia, but one in which the place of the pre-industrial élite was to be taken by the propertied and educated bourgeoisie. These motive forces continued to propel Germany's policies on war aims and

annexations during the First World War, for these policies too demonstrably aimed at postponing further the much delayed internal restructuring of Germany. Once more a successful expansionist and foreign policy was supposed to be a substitute for a modern domestic policy; it was supposed to conceal both the fatal shortcomings of the hegemonic Prussian state and the paralysis of Imperial policy.⁴⁶

Even the débâcle of 1918 did not yet finally destroy the seductive force of this same policy — that of delaying emancipation at home by means of expansion abroad. One last extreme effort was added, not many years later, to the fateful continuity of this policy pursued since the 1870s. In German overseas policies under Bismarck, a form of pragmatic expansionism which was determined by the real or imagined pressures of the industrial system, was combined with a form of social imperialism, which served as a model for later rulers, who could justify their political decisions by referring to the legitimizing precedents of the Bismarckian era. It certainly always remains a problematical undertaking to pass judgement on the long-term effects of the thoughts and actions of individuals, and on the degree to which they are responsible for them. But equally undeniable is the dominating influence of successful political actions and the ideological arguments used to justify them, particularly during a founding period and particularly when those actions were initially protected from criticism by the overwhelming authority of a dominant personality — even though the success may later turn out to have been illusory and even disadvantageous. If one then pursues this historically specific line of development — namely, the social imperialist opposition to the emancipation process in German industrial society — then one will be able to trace a line linking Bismarck, Miquel, Bülow and Tirpitz to the extreme social imperialism of the National Socialist variety, which once again sought to block domestic progress by breaking out first towards the *Ostland*, and then overseas, thus diverting attention from the loss of all liberty at home and once again reinforcing the spell of

⁴⁶ K. D. Bracher, *Deutschland zwischen Demokratie und Diktatur* (Munich, 1964), p. 155, cf. pp. 12, 151, 182 ff; *id.*, "Imperialismus", in Bracher and E. Fraenkel, eds., *Internationale Beziehungen* (Frankfurt, 1969), p. 123. On the problems of continuity see V. Berghahn, *Deutsche Rüstungspolitik, 1898-1908*, (Mannheim, Unpubl. Phil. Habilschrift, 1970); *id.*, "Zu den Zielen des deutschen Flottenbaus unter Wilhelm II", *Hist. Zeitschr.*, ccx(i) (1970), pp. 34-100; H. Bley, *Kolonialherrschaft und Sozialstruktur in Deutsch-Südwestafrika, 1894-1914* (Hamburg, 1968); K. H. Jansen, *Macht und Verblendung, Kriegszielpolitik der deutschen Bundesstaaten, 1914-18* (Göttingen, 1963); F. Fischer, *Krieg der Illusionen, Die deutsche Politik von 1911 bis 1914* (Dusseldorf, 1969); *id.*, *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, 3rd edn. (Dusseldorf, 1964); F. Stern, *Bethmann Hollweg und der Krieg: die Grenzen der Verantwortung* (Tübingen, 1968), pp. 22, 38, 45.

a conservative utopia. "However long and circuitous the path leading from Bismarck to Hitler may have been" — these words of Hans Rothfels can be repeated in this consideration of the continuity of German policy — "the founder of the *Reich* appears to be the man responsible for a change of policy, responsible at least for legitimizing a policy, the ultimate and fatal consummation of which has, in our own time, become all too obvious".⁴⁷