

Section 1: The Second Reich – society and government in Germany, c.1900–1919

Revised

The constitution of the Second Reich

German unification, 1871

The Second Reich is the name given to the unified German state that was established following Prussia's victory in the Franco-Prussian War 1870–1871. German-speaking states, with the exception of the Austrian Empire, unified under Prussian dominance. These states had previously been connected by a **customs union** and now they came together in a political and military union with the Prussian king as Emperor or Kaiser of Germany.

Prussia

Established in 1525, Prussia was a German state that rose in power and status through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Following German unification, Prussia comprised 65 per cent of the surface area of unified Germany and 62 per cent of its population. Consequently, Prussia dominated the Second Reich.

The constitution

The architect of both German unification and the constitution of the Second Reich was the dominant German politician of his age, Otto von Bismarck. Of Prussian origin, Bismarck sought to protect the power of Prussia and the Prussian ruling elite in his constitution, while allowing an element of popular democracy. The powers and role of each part of the political system of the Second Reich are outlined below. You will see how the constitution operated in practice later on in this section.

The Kaiser

The Kaiser, who constitutionally had to be the Prussian monarch, was **sovereign** in the Second Reich and the constitution granted him significant powers. The Kaiser was Commander-in-Chief of the army and in charge of foreign policy. The Kaiser appointed and could dismiss the Chancellor (Prime Minister) and government ministers. The Kaiser could also **dissolve** the Reichstag (parliament) and was president of the **Bundesrat (federal council)**. Germany was ruled by Kaiser Wilhelm II from 1888 to 1918.

The Chancellor and the ministers

The Chancellor was responsible for presenting **legislation** to parliament and the Chancellor and ministers implemented laws. The Chancellor and ministers were not accountable to parliament, only to the Kaiser. Kaiser Wilhelm II tended to appoint members of the Prussian aristocracy, the **Junkers**, to these positions.

The Reichstag

The Reichstag, or parliament, was the democratic element of the German constitution, as its members were elected. All men over the age of 25 had the vote. The Reichstag could vote to accept, reject or amend legislation.

The Bundesrat (federal council)

The Bundesrat contained representatives appointed by regional state assemblies and along with the Reichstag also held legislative powers. The Bundesrat could initiate legislation and if fourteen or more members of the Bundesrat voted against a law it could be **vetoed**. Bismarck engineered the composition of this body to ensure the dominance of Prussian **conservatives**. Many of the powers of the Kaiser were supposed to be shared with the Bundesrat, but the composition of the council meant that Kaiser Wilhelm II was able to control it.

The federal state

To reflect the independent origins of parts of the newly unified Germany, the constitution was a federal one, within which individual states had considerable powers to determine the nature of their local political arrangements and to run education, health care and local policing.

The army

The German army was accountable only to the Kaiser and swore an oath of allegiance to him and not to the government.

Political developments

Social and economic change produced greater **polarisation** of German politics.

The left

A growing urban working class led to the expansion of **left-wing** political organisations. By 1900, Germany's trade union movement was the largest in the world and the main left-wing party, the **SPD**, saw their support increase substantially. The growth of the working class and the growth of the left provided a social and political challenge to Germany's conservative elite. The consequences of this for the political system are explored on page 12.

Election results for the SPD 1887–1912

Party	1887**	1890	1893	1898	1903	1907	1912
SPD seats in the Reichstag*	11	35	44	56	81	43	110***
Percentage of the vote (rounded)	0.03%	0.9%	11%	14%	20%	11%	28%

*Out of a total of 397 seats

**Anti-socialist laws that limited the possible representation of the SPD were in place in 1887

***The SPD were now the largest party in the Reichstag

The right

The changing economic and social situation in Germany also caused a rise in **nationalist politics** with elements in the German Conservative Party (DKP) moving in an extremist direction. The parties that represented the new business elite, such as the NLP, became increasingly conservative. Right-wing **pressure groups** sought to protect the social elite from free market policies and also to promote nationalism and colonial and military expansion.

Political parties and pressure groups in the Second Reich

The DKP – German Conservative Party

This party represented *Junkers* and was strong in Prussia. The party often had links with the government. From the 1890s, elements within the DKP became more radical and **anti-Semitic** elements were inserted into the party's constitution.

FKP – Free Conservative Party

Supported by industrialists and landowners, the party had broad geographical support.

NLP – National Liberal Party

Represented bankers and industrialists. Supported economic and political **liberalism** but over time the NLP's political agenda came to be similar to that of the DKP.

The Centre (Zentrum/Z) Party

This party represented German Catholics (around a third of Germans). It consistently received approximately a quarter of votes in Reichstag elections. The party usually worked more with conservative parties, but at times (for example over the budget in 1906) sided with the SPD. Thus the Centre Party often held the **balance of power** in the Reichstag.

The SPD – Social Democratic Party

The SPD theoretically had revolutionary aims. However, the party was mainly moderate and reformist.

The Agrarian League

Formed as a pressure group in 1893 by *Junkers* seeking **protectionist** measures against competition. The League also had a nationalist and anti-Semitic bent. The League had links with the DKP.

The Central Association of German Industrialists

This powerful group called for tariffs to protect German industry from foreign competition. The organisation gave funding to a great many conservative members of the Reichstag.

The Navy League

The Navy League campaigned for German naval expansion. The League was very popular and had a membership of around 1 million.

The German Colonial League and the Pan German League

These two right-wing groups supported German colonial expansion. The Pan German League, whose members in the Reichstag were usually National Liberals, also sought a dominant role for Germany in Europe.

The Second Reich by 1914

Historians debate how the political system of the Second Reich operated and where power lay in this system.

- John Röhl suggests that the Kaiser built an autocratic semi-absolutist system within which his militaristic and conservative agenda was advanced, the Reichstag sidelined and liberal and democratic forces weakened.
- The Second Reich could also be seen as a failing system that was unable to cope with the political and social challenges that a modernising economy had produced. Hans-Ulrich Wehler argued that Germany was dominated by powerful conservative forces, such as the army, that were not democratically accountable.
- Christopher Clark argues that the system was too fluid and the Kaiser too erratic for personal rule by Wilhelm to have been possible. Clark is more positive than Röhl or Wehler about the strength of liberal elements in Germany at this time.
- Geoff Eley and David Blackburn have emphasised the scale and range of political participation in the Second Reich: they focus upon the impact of **politics from below** rather than **politics from above**.

Entrenched autocracy, elite dominance or a growing democracy?

Evidence that Germany was an autocracy

- The Kaiser had the power to appoint the Chancellor and ministers and the power to dissolve the Reichstag. The Kaiser shaped the composition of the government 1896–1897 and 1905–1906, and dissolved the Reichstag in 1906. He also forced von Bülow to resign after the *Daily Telegraph* Affair.
- The Chancellor and ministers were not accountable to the Reichstag. Bethmann lost a vote of no-confidence in the Reichstag and remained as Chancellor.
- The army was only accountable to the Kaiser and so was not affected by the Reichstag's criticisms following the Zabern Affair in 1913.

- The country followed the Kaiser's political agenda, for example in **Weltpolitik** (see page 24).

Evidence that Germany was dominated by a conservative elite

- The agenda of the conservative elite was followed in naval, militaristic and colonial expansion. This was reflected in colonial policies and in the Naval Bill of 1906.
- Conservative pressure groups like the Agrarian League and the Central Association of German Industrialists successfully **lobbied** for increased agricultural tariffs in 1902.
- The power of the Bundesrat meant that the government was dominated by conservatives.
- A conservative Prussian elite dominated the state in the army, judiciary, civil service and government.

Evidence of democracy and liberalism in Germany

- The Reichstag was democratic in the sense that all classes of men had the vote.
- The Reichstag was able to reject legislation and did so in 1906 when they rejected colonial policy.
- The Reichstag were increasingly assertive, as can be seen from their stance on the 1906 budget, their criticisms of the Kaiser in the wake of the *Daily Telegraph* Affair in 1908 and their censure of Bethmann in 1913.
- The ruling elite had to respond to pressure from below (from left-wing political movements and the working classes) for social reform.
- The press criticised the Kaiser, for example after the *Daily Telegraph* affair.
- Political participation was high: the trade union movement was large, pressure groups influential and women participated in political movements despite not having the vote.
- There was a **plurality** of interests in the state: Catholics had the Centre Party; workers the SPD; farmers the Agrarian League.

The impact of the First World War on Germany

Initially the war appeared to have united Germans but, as the strain of fighting heightened, tensions and disagreements resurfaced.

The economic impact of the war

Fighting the war was an enormous economic strain. Only 16 per cent of the £8.4 million cost of the war was met by taxation: **war bonds** were also used and money printed. Printing money led to **inflation**: the **mark** declined in value by 75 per cent between 1913 and 1918. The KRA, War Raw Materials Department, had some success in supplying the German army but German agriculture was not **mobilised** effectively and there were food shortages.

The social impact of the war

The impact of the war was often severe. Two million soldiers were killed and 6.3 million were injured. With inflation and tight controls on wages, living standards fell by 20–30 per cent. Shortages caused by the war effort and by the British blockade of German ports led to the ‘Turnip winter’ of 1917 when turnips were the main food available. Food and fuel shortages caused misery, and even starvation, and exacerbated the impact of the **Spanish flu pandemic** in 1918.

The political impact of the war

Initial unity

At the start of the war, Germany appeared politically unified: a **Burgfriede**, or political truce, was declared and the Kaiser, addressing the Reichstag, announced that ‘I know no parties anymore, I know only Germans’. However, this situation did not last: the view of the left that only **defensive** war was justified was not compatible with the aim of many on the right for a war of expansion and conquest (a **Siegfriede**).

Growing disunity

By 1917, 42 SPD deputies had broken away to form the anti-war and radical socialist **USPD**. Mounting concern about the war led to a Reichstag vote, the ‘peace resolution’, which urged the government to try to negotiate a peace settlement. The left and the centre won the vote by 212 to 126.

The war saw the formation of the communist **Spartacist League** who agitated for **social revolution** and an end to the war. Discontent among German workers rose from 1916, as workers were prevented from freely changing jobs under the terms of the Auxiliary Service Law of December 1916. There was, by 1918, widespread discontent and in January 1918 there were significant strikes in many areas, such as one in Berlin for five days involving half a million workers. The war had started by unifying the political scene but, by 1918, political polarisation was greater than it had been before the conflict.

The ‘silent dictatorship’

During the war, the government became increasingly authoritarian and militaristic. The Kaiser was sidelined by the military and, by 1916, Supreme Commanders Generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff were essentially in charge of the country, running what has been characterised as a ‘silent dictatorship’. An isolated Bethmann was forced out of office by the Generals and Georg Michaelis and then Georg von Hertling became Chancellors. Michaelis and von Hertling were regarded as puppets of Ludendorff and Hindenburg. Military government exacerbated political and social tensions.

The impact of impending defeat

Germany’s impending defeat came as a great shock to many Germans. This contributed to the outbreak of the revolution and the acceptance of the ‘**stab in the back myth**’.