
Introduction



Cornelius Torp and Sven Oliver Müller

I

What sort of structure was the German state of 1871? What sort of powers and phenomena dominated it? What sort of potential for development did it possess? What inheritance did it leave behind? How did it shape the future course of German history? These questions have been at the heart of numerous historical controversies, in the course of which our understanding of Imperial Germany has fundamentally changed. Modern historical research on the German Empire was shaped by two important developments.¹ The first was the Fischer controversy at the beginning of the 1960s, which put the question of the continuity of an aggressive German foreign policy from the First to the Second World War onto the agenda, thus providing one of the key impulses for research into the period before 1918.² The second was a complex upheaval at almost exactly the same time in the historiography of modern Germany in which a particular interpretation of German history before World War I played a central role. The advocates of this interpretation immediately referred to it as a “paradigm change,” a concept then in fashion.³ Indeed, surprisingly quickly, a group of young historians were able to establish across a broad front a new interpretation of modern German history, which broke in many respects with old traditions.

In their methodology, the representatives of the so-called “historical social science” (*Historische Sozialwissenschaft*) turned with verve against the interpretation which had dominated mainstream historiography up till then, which saw the dominant, most important historical actions and actors in politics and the state. These historians concentrated instead on the forces underlying economic and social structures and processes. They preferred social science theories to the hermeneutical methodology of historicism, and made Karl Marx and especially

Max Weber their theoretical figureheads. The new work brought forth a new historical “master narrative,” assembling lines of thought that already existed but which had not yet been put together in this condensed form. This narrative turned upside down the previous notion of a German *Sonderweg*, widespread in Imperial Germany, according to which Germany was superior to western societies. From the new perspective, analyzing Germany using the scale of an ideal development postulated by sociological modernization theory and in comparison to western societies which served as a reference, Germany possessed grave structural deficits in modernization, the origins of which lay deep in the nineteenth century. It was these deficits which in the final analysis paved the way for National Socialism.

The new, critical interpretations of German history were by no means fully successful; quite possibly their advocates remained a minority within the historical profession. However, these new interpretations were able to an extraordinary degree to force competing conservative interpretations into a defensive position and to promote an interdisciplinary research program which even their enemies were forced to participate in—if only to engage them in critical debate. Furthermore, the “historical social science” and the “*Sonderweg* historiography” had an impact far beyond the narrow boundaries of the discipline. Reflecting the political-didactic impetus of the protagonists, with this interpretation the German historical profession won back an authority in public political discourse it had previously lost. At the same time, the *Sonderweg* interpretation embedded itself deep into the dominant “official” picture of history in the Federal Republic of Germany.

The success enjoyed, at least for a while, by this interpretation can only partly be explained by the fact that it set forth a promising research agenda with considerable potential for innovation, that it created a bridge to related subjects in the social sciences, whose reputation at this time was growing immensely, and that its pioneers in the course of the expansion of the university system were quickly able to become professors and thus to provide the new “paradigm” with institutional security. More importantly, this paradigm supplied a new answer to the pressing question concerning the rise of National Socialism, an answer which many found convincing and which—in contrast to the interpretation which had dominated up till then, which had concentrated solely on the years leading up to the failure of the Weimar Republic—explained the historical faults of German history by looking at a longer, broader picture, reaching deep into the nineteenth century. At the same time, the *Sonderweg* interpretation made it possible to argue that 1945 was the end of a pathological path toward modernization, and that the political culture of the Federal Republic of Germany had broken with the disastrous German past. Thus, the historical interpretation completely turned the “*Sonderweg* model” on its head—a model which up till then had completely dominated historical interpretations, by acknowledging the total military and moral defeat in World War II; this reflected the upheaval experienced by German society. It also had a sort of therapeutic effect because it promised, fully in harmony

with the modernization euphoria and the surge of reforms in the 1960s and 1970s, that Germany was advancing toward a better future, down the path of western modernity.⁴

From the very beginning the German Empire was something like the favorite child of the historians interested in the *Sonderweg*. Most of them did not themselves conduct research on the history of National Socialism or even the Weimar Republic. Rather, they believed that they could find in the years before the traces of all those strains and burdens which pulled Germany after 1933 into the abyss. The question which all representatives of the *Sonderweg* thesis asked first and foremost is why National Socialism, with its devastating effects, came to power in Germany and only in Germany. Because of this question, politics was always seen as the most important realm. Even if they grappled with the economic development or the class structure of the German Empire, theirs was a very political economic and social history which, to put it pointedly, served to assist the explanation of a political phenomenon.

The new interpretation of the second German Empire was expressed most cogently in Hans-Ulrich Wehler's influential synthesis from 1973.⁵ The German Empire fell apart, one could read here, because of its basic dilemma: the "inability ... to adapt the structure of the state and society to the conditions of a modern, industrial state."⁶ Against the background of the synchronicity of the different "partial modernizations" postulated by modernization theory, Germany's path into modernity, characterized by the "simultaneity of the non-simultaneous (*Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*)," appeared to be an abnormal aberration with fatal consequences. According to this interpretation, the list of debts and deficits is long and weighed down not only the history of the German Empire, but German history beyond that: the forestalled parliamentarization and the democratization which was stuck in a rut; the weakness of political liberalism, which corresponded to a deficit of bourgeois values; the outmoded supremacy of pre-industrial norms and ideals and, finally, the anachronistic predominance of the old power elite, who defended tooth and nail their traditional dominant position and whose strategies to achieve this purpose were as successful as they were far-reaching.

This dark picture of the German Empire as a backward-looking entity, ruled by sinister powers, has often been criticized and relativized, first, by a heterogeneous group of German historians. Thomas Nipperdey complained that by privileging only one of the possible lines of continuity, namely that which centered on 1933, the period before 1914 was degraded to a mere prehistory of National Socialism, that interpreting and explaining phenomena solely from the perspective of how these phenomena stabilized power underestimated and did not pay proper attention to either the accomplishments or the dynamic development of the German Empire.⁷ Nipperdey, and especially historians such as Andreas Hillgruber and Klaus Hildebrand, also criticized Wehler's insistence on the "primacy of domestic politics," a thesis which Wehler and others developed on the basis of work done by the historian Eckart Kehr, who died in 1933. According to this thesis, the foreign policy of the German Empire resulted from the status quo

policies of the Prussian-German ruling establishment, which was plagued by the nightmare of a social revolution, and which attempted to divert internal tensions by concentrating on foreign problems.⁸ Wehler's critics insisted on the autonomy of foreign policy and saw the international system as central, as a factor which explains a great deal.⁹ However, it could be argued that by interpreting Germany's foreign policy between 1871 and 1914 as being derived from its particular location in Central Europe critics did not truly distance themselves from the idea of a German *Sonderweg*. Instead of an explanation of the *Sonderweg* based on social structures and internal politics, they put forth an explanation of the German *Sonderweg* based on its geographical position.

Quite a different sort of criticism has come since the end of the 1970s from a group of English historians. Richard Evans, David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley have argued against the importance which representatives of the "historical social science" and those who support the idea of a *Sonderweg* have assigned to the elites of the German Empire and to the thesis of social control exercised from above. They argued that it was not "manipulation from above" which was the defining characteristic of Wilhelminian Germany but rather self-organization "from below."¹⁰ They also criticized the claim that there were pathological characteristics among the German ruling and social structure before 1914, the thesis that there was a German *Sonderweg* extending far back into the past which flowed into National Socialism, as well as the assumption of a positive, "normal path" in the West.¹¹

This critique became more powerful as the empirical work on the history of the bourgeoisie, which had been initiated in the 1980s and 1990s above all by prominent representatives of the *Sonderweg* interpretation, concluded that, although one could perhaps speak of a special orientation toward the state, one could not speak in general of a weakness of the bourgeoisie or of a "deficit of bourgeois values" in nineteenth and twentieth century Germany.¹² Perhaps the most significant revision was to the "feudalization thesis." According to this thesis, which had already been put forward by contemporary liberals, the bourgeoisie in the German Empire of its own free will embraced and submitted to the norms and the lifestyle of the aristocratic elites, demonstrating a specific German willingness to be subservient. Upon closer investigation it turned out that the bourgeois adoption of noble norms and styles of life, leading to a symbiosis of parts of the upper bourgeoisie and of the nobility, took place throughout Europe. Indeed, it appears that the "ennoblement" of the bourgeoisie took place later in Germany and was less developed than, for example, in England or France.¹³

In the meantime the smoke from the historiographical battles of the past few decades has cleared. Has the master narrative of the German *Sonderweg* also moved on, or does it continue to shape our historical understanding of Imperial Germany? Paradoxically, it seems both are true. Proponents of the *Sonderweg* thesis still hold to it and continue to use it as the foundation of their new historical syntheses of the German Empire during these years. However, one should not be deceived by this. We have witnessed a defensive movement in which the phalanx

of historians in favor of the *Sonderweg* thesis, once so proud, have been reduced to individual combatants. Furthermore, we have seen that the prestige of the *Sonderweg* thesis has been declining, that its proponents are staging a well-ordered retreat to the narrow realm of state power.¹⁴ What speaks in favor of the continuing influence of the *Sonderweg* interpretation, even if only indirectly, is that even those who have openly come out as its opponents have found it very difficult to escape its narrative logic. This is true, for example, for Thomas Nipperdey's history of the German Empire, large sections of which can be read as a counter-proposal to the *Sonderweg* narrative and which as a result remains deeply indebted to this narrative.¹⁵ Perhaps even more important is the fact that the thesis of the German *Sonderweg* and the questions which this interpretation raises continue to structure the historical research on the German Empire. What we understand or do not understand especially well about Germany during these decades—where the specialized research has pointed out conspicuous blind spots—this is to a large degree the legacy of a master narrative and the controversies it provoked which is already over forty years old and which has turned a bit grey at the edges.

II

It cannot be overlooked, however, that our present view of Imperial Germany has moved away in many important regards from the questions, debates and lines of division associated with the *Sonderweg* paradigm. On the one hand, a fundamentally different interpretation of modernity has become increasingly important. On the other hand—directly related to this, although not completely submerged in it—new questions and methodologies have become increasingly important to the historians of modern Germany.

To turn to the first point: the concept of modernization which informs the *Sonderweg* theorizing—which sees modernization as a coherent and largely positive, Western process of development, characterized by industrialization, by the building of political classes, by urbanization, by the expansion of political participation, by the building of nation-states and by secularization—has lost a great deal of its attraction. Only at the beginning, in the debates of the 1980s, were historians especially interested in what modernization destroyed in regard to the traditional ways of life, turning a history of progress into a history of loss.¹⁶ In a second step, the ambivalence of modernity, as well as the manifold forms which it could assume, moved to the forefront. It found its expression, for example, in the concept of “multiple modernities,” developed by Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, which was directed against the assumption of a common, homogenous modernity.¹⁷

Especially influential was a reading of modernity which emphasized its negative, anti-emancipatory characteristics. Is it an exaggeration to see in this modernization paradigm, with its dark tones, already the shadowy outline of a new, alternative master narrative of modern German history? No longer are the social-economic processes of the “modernization” of the nineteenth century at the

center of interest, but rather the nature of the “modernity” of the twentieth century, with the discourses which characterize it. Among the key elements of modernism according to this understanding are, on the one hand, a deep pessimism, a feeling of fundamental insecurity and of being threatened, the consciousness of a permanent crisis, brought forth by the decline of traditional values and structures and the emergence of a new, chaotic way of life, with new problems. This, however, is linked at the same time—this is one of the paradoxes of modernity—to extreme optimism, to a belief in the feasibility of things, that is, to the belief that it is possible to create order in societies which have gotten out of control. One can accomplish this with various sorts of models of social rationalization: city planning, health policy, education, the welfare state, etc. Modern social sciences have an important role to play here. First, they identify, define, classify and systematize the new threats and problems. Second, they “discover” the “solutions” to these and supply new technologies for their “control.” This is especially true of the so-called “human sciences” such as eugenics and the biology of races, which, since the early twentieth century, have grown enormously, and which, through their biopolitics based on their reading of Darwin, shaped in important ways the contemporary perception of the crisis. They also supplied the means to overcome social problems which they had identified as pathological.¹⁸

Michel Foucault and Zygmunt Baumann were the leading theoretical figures of this dark concept of modernity; but it is based as well on a new reading of Max Weber, concentrating on his pessimistic, dark conceptions.¹⁹ The first one to apply this perspective fruitfully to German history was Detlev J.K. Peukert, two decades ago.²⁰ The difference between his image of modernity (as well as the image of many who came after him) and that of the *Sonderweg* historians could not be greater. According to Peukert, the “project of modernity” is not characterized by the individual being freed from traditional bonds through liberalization and social reform, rather, it is characterized by the pathologizing of difference, social discipline, and increasing institutional pressure. From this perspective, systematic exclusion, concentration camps and the Holocaust no longer seem to be atavisms, not even regrettable aberrations, which could eventually be overcome, but are rather modernity’s genuine sign, its most basic product. National Socialism, with its crimes, is no longer seen as something that needs to be explained through the incomplete modernization of Germany and the anachronistic persistence of pre-modern relics in society and in the political system. Rather, the National Socialist genocide, with its racist logic of selection and its use of the most modern technologies of extermination, is seen as the most terrible expression of an extreme, radical modernity. Thus, the crimes and brutality of the German case are not unique but rather an example of an ever-present potential which is always and everywhere capable of making itself manifest.²¹

Closely tied to this different understanding of modernity is that in the last few years the vanishing point of German historiography has changed.²² To be sure, National Socialism is still the pivotal point of the historiography of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; however, one is increasingly less interested in explaining

its rise and its establishment, in short, in explaining how things led up to January 1933. The key period now appears to be 1939–1941, the starting point of the National Socialist policy of genocide, with the beginning of World War II and the military campaign against the Soviet Union. From this perspective, quite different questions and themes in regard to the history of the German Empire have moved into the focus of historical interest. Historians have looked more intensely than ever at the First World War with its experience of violence and its mental dispositions. Furthermore, historians have placed the discourse of those biopolitical experts in eugenics and demography, in criminology and in social reform in the decades before 1933 at the centre of their interest, arguing that they contributed to the National Socialist policy of exclusion and extermination—to what degree is still a matter of controversy—by preparing the soil for it ideologically.²³

For the historiography on Germany from 1870 to 1918 this means a shift in the research interests. This shift expresses itself in a moderate and a radical version. According to the moderate version, the German Empire remains important, even given the new understanding of modernity. However, this is not true for the period when the German national state came into being, or, indeed, of the whole Bismarck era, which, from the perspective of bio-politics and a disciplinary society, appears to belong to quite a different epoch. Instead, the period since the 1890s appears to be the key historic period, even if one conceives of modernity in the alternative way sketched above. It marks in many ways “a departure into modernity.” One thinks here of the enormous increase in the importance of the natural and social sciences and the opinion of experts, of the beginnings of the welfare state, but also, if one looks beyond the limits of the biopolitical “paradigm” and takes into consideration the manifold dimensions of modernity, of the emergence of modern mass culture and the Belle Époque of globalization.

More drastically, one could describe the present trend in the historiography as a “goodbye to the nineteenth century” (Paul Nolte). Whereas the nineteenth century with its successful or unsuccessful “double revolution” (Eric Hobsbawm) in economics and politics is the key period of the “*Sonderweg* history,” historians are now focusing more and more on the twentieth century—with World War I as the turning point. For Germany this tendency to explain the twentieth century from developments within itself means that increasingly the National Socialist policy of genocide and its direct pre-history has moved to the forefront of the historian’s interest. One can see in this, on the one hand, the expression of a necessary and unavoidable historicization of the twentieth century. On the other hand, we must continue to ask critically whether by forgoing long-term explanations there has not been a regrettable loss of historical depth of focus.

If today our understanding of the German Empire is in many regards quite different from that three decades ago, this is—as suggested above—not only because our understanding of modernity today is much more multi-faceted and problematic than before, but is in part as well because the historiography in this

period, in a series of methodological “turns” and changes in perspectives reinvented itself a number of times. To name just some of the keywords here, without making any claim to completeness: the cultural turn, gender history and trans-national history. The increasing importance of cultural history with its claim to write not only the history of a certain sector but to be a general historical approach has moved people’s modes of perceptions and thoughts, the form in which they make sense of the world around them, their practices and their shared norms and values to the center of historical research. At the same time, cultural history has attempted to keep step with the “holistic turn” in epistemology, by emphasizing the degree to which previously reified social entities are constructed and by studying the interaction between the “subjects” and the “objects” of history.²⁴ Gender history has shown the degree to which the attributions “feminine” and “masculine” are historical categories, which vary over time, and has turned the attention of historians to the symbolic and practical significance of gender-specific patterns.²⁵ Trans-national history questions the national historical perspective, with its self-evident assumption that the nation-state is the framework of historical analysis; this assumption has had an unbroken line of tradition in German historiography from the historicism of the late nineteenth century up through the “historical social science” and its critics. Trans-national history has concentrated on the transfers and constellations which transcend borders, on the effect of the colonies on the colonizing societies, and on the integration of the German Empire in the process of globalization.²⁶

These innovations, in part intertwined with each other, in part taking place after each other, have had two sorts of influences on the panorama of the German Empire we have today. On the one hand, they have contributed to moving our perceptions away from the idea that the German Empire was a historical epoch *sui generis*. The de-politicization of the historiography of the German Empire in comparison to the “*Sonderweg* history” or, rather, its changing political connotations, the prominence of numerous new themes, all of which have had their own “time”—all this has meant that classical political caesurae, classical political boundaries are increasingly seen as less important and time periods which transcend them are becoming more important. On the other hand, there has been an enormous pluralization of the approaches, methods and themes in the historiography of the German Empire. This pluralization shows clearly that the narrative of a modernity characterized by discipline and compulsion has, till now, not been able to take the place of a paradigm which dominates broad sections of the research, such as was the case for social history and the “*Sonderweg*” thesis in the 1970s. All in all, this suggests that what is occurring here is less a “paradigm change” than the end of the “master narratives.”²⁷

This development can be criticized for a growing lack of consensus concerning the relevant research questions and research topics as well as the decreasing ability of the different branches of historical research to communicate with each other. One can also ask, as has Volker Berghahn, if historians have not lost sight of the “big” questions such as those concerning the origins of World War I, as a result of

their enthusiasm for deconstruction, local agency and contingencies, in short, if we are not in danger of having “lost sight of the forest because we are so firmly focused on the trees.”²⁸

However, on the other hand, it can scarcely be denied that the new perspectives on the period before 1918 have achieved a great deal. The German Empire today appears much more complex and rich in nuances; it is less the authoritarian power state and is viewed less from a Prussian perspective than was the case only a couple of decades ago. The increase in the number of approaches and in the objects of study has led to the competition of multiple narratives, so that neither “never-ending shades” of grey determine the image of the German Empire, as Nipperdey claimed, nor that black-white dichotomy which he accused his opponents of in general and Wehler in particular.²⁹ Rather, our image is a mixture of bright colours, which—if that is at all possible—describe the historical reality better than was previously the case.

III

The present state of the historical research into the German empire, open, pluralistic and innovative in its methodology, is reflected in this volume. At the same time, this collection of essays demonstrates the degree to which the contemporary research builds on previous work and the degree to which we are still today affected by traditional questions. The variety of topics collected here is considerable: from social history to military history, from cultural history to economic history. Furthermore, the historians employ quite different methodologies in how they approach their topics. All of these approaches share an awareness of the historiographical tradition in which they stand, just as they are open and transparent in regard to the most important interests which inform their own work and their historical conditionality. That their own perspectives and interpretations themselves reflect the context in which they were written and that this itself needs to be historicized—these historians consider this self-evident.

This collection of essays brings together the work of experts, both young and old, on the history of Germany from 1870 to 1918 and links established questions with new approaches. Even where it seems that the “classical” questions and themes are at the center of interest, this collection of essays often opens up a new perspective on them—looking at cultural transfers, for example, from the standpoint of a broader understanding of the political opens up new and surprising perspectives on the history of the German Empire.

We concede that the collection presented here only partly reflects the present state of the historical research on the German Empire. In part this is because the historical debates of the last few years shed light on certain topics, leaving other topics—despite there having been much good research—in the shade. All the same, some will regret a number of empty spaces: for example, the history of the working class or foreign policy. There are also a number of topics in economic,

intellectual and gender history which have not been treated here. To a large degree these gaps, as well as the topics that were chosen, can only be explained as the editors' decision, which is to a certain degree always subjective and arbitrary.

We have concentrated on four research perspectives, which have played a special role in the last few years: first, the place of the German Empire in German history; second, the relationship between society, politics and culture; third, the history of military violence and militarism with a concentration on World War I, and, last but not least, the trans-national integration of Germany against the background of the "first globalization."

1. *The Place of Imperial Germany in German History*

In the past three decades it has become increasingly less clear what sort of state the German Empire actually was—culturally, politically and socially. The picture of an economically well-developed, but politically and socially backward Germany, a picture we had believed to be well founded, has become increasingly confused. At the same time, and this is closely related, the historical site of the German Empire and the significance assigned to it in the course of German history, has undergone many important changes. Those authors who analyze this complex set of problems refer repeatedly to two aspects which are of crucial importance for the changing interpretation of German history between 1870 and 1918.

First, they emphasize the relevance of the definitions, concepts and categories developed by contemporaries and the following generations for our understanding of the German history of these years, or, indeed, for our understanding of history at all. This can be shown in an exemplary fashion with the concept of sovereignty and the competing constructions of the "nation."³⁰ Of crucial importance for our interpretation of the German Empire remains—as sketched out in detail above—the definition of the concepts modernization and modernity. The essays collected here not only reflect the shift in the focus of the historiography of the German Empire toward a paradigm of modernity with negative accents, and discuss the problems arising from that shift,³¹ they suggest as well an alternative understanding of modernity, one which puts the German Empire into a quite different light. One author, for example, defines modernization, following the approach of sociological systems theory, as the increasing social differentiation of functional sub-systems with a corresponding method of reproducing self-observation.³²

Second, the contributions make clear the importance of historiographical traditions. Only by understanding the decline of the Whig interpretation of history among British historians can one understand why British historians have made such an important contribution to the debate on the German Empire since the late 1970s.³³ The importance of the historiographical traditions is shown further by the fact that for most historians the *Sonderweg* narrative remains a central reference point. Even those who have distanced themselves from the narrative include it as a set piece. As a result, historical revisionism means—and this is true as well for the "critical" historiography of Germany during the 1960s

and 1970s—never completely replacing one point of view with another, as is suggested by “paradigm change,” but rather the sometimes quicker, sometimes slower, sometimes ephemeral, sometimes fundamental modification of traditional historiographical traditions.³⁴

2. *Politics, Culture, and Society*

Historians no longer focus so strongly on social structures, conceptualized and understood as objective facts existing independent of the individual actors, but are rather turning increasingly to actors, behavior patterns and social practices. It is clearer than ever that societies have to be conceptualized as communicative communities, politics as a context of social actions, and culture as a framework of interpretations of meaning which shape our perceptions of reality. In this section new perspectives on classical areas of tension and conflict—such as the public sphere and media culture, the nobility and the bourgeoisie, or violence and order—have enhanced and expanded historical research: social history has been enriched by cultural historical interpretations, class as a category has been revised by investigating new social groups, the understanding of power relationships and institutions has been supplemented by the analysis of patterns of practices and receptions. What is important now is to bring politics, society, and culture as a pluralistic cross section back into the center of the history of the German Empire.

The German Empire in this volume is no longer just the product of the manner of its construction, but is rather seen as an epoch of constant political and social change. With their analysis of political developments, debates, and problems, the authors of this volume bring before our eyes a state which, even given all the incrustations, cannot be seen as a stiff and sclerotic power structure. Although one can have wonderful arguments about whether or not it still makes sense to describe this state as authoritarian, it is important to place the concept of the authoritarian state within the framework of the processes of the fundamental politicization and the social and political upheavals taking place at the same time. The political scandals of the era, which were transmitted into the public sphere through mass communication, mass media and mass politics, could not be put down with the means customarily used for political repression. An international comparison shows the ambivalence in regard to political violence. In Germany during these years, violent political conflicts were, for example, less common than in the Third French Republic; when they took place, however, the government responded with much more force than was the case in France.³⁵

The authors here have questioned many of the judgements of the older historiography. Our understanding of the everyday living conditions of the Prussian nobility or of the new forms of communication and conflict among the bourgeoisie has been revised, and approaches and ideas with which we were well acquainted have been questioned and analyzed, opening up new perspectives for future research.³⁶ Something similar can be said for the work which describes the religious history of the German Empire not as a process of secularization, but as

part of a neo-confessional age, lasting from 1830 till 1960.³⁷ From the perspective of gender history and in a Western European comparison, it is clear that the mere existence of a strong anti-feminist movement such as existed in Germany and in Britain cannot be considered evidence of a society's backwardness, but rather of its ability to undergo reforms, indeed, that there was a high chance that the reforms toward much more gender equality would be successful.³⁸

A further focus of the present research into the history of the German Empire is the history of the cultural reception of political and social phenomenon. Here, researchers are less interested in institutions than in practices, and the degree to which cultural processes are interwoven with political and social developments becomes quite clear. The most important conflicts in German society turned out to be shaped essentially through the meanings given to them. Cultural preferences, for example, in the changing patterns of the reception of music, were linked inseparably with national demands, which for a long time were only a topic in classical political history.³⁹

3. War and Violence

In the last few years, research into the history of the First World War, its preconditions and its consequences, has formed an important starting point for the new interpretation of the German Empire. Historians have been most interested in the changes in the history of experience and in the history of mentalities caused by the "total war."⁴⁰

The focus here has been on militarism and the practice of military violence in Germany from 1870 to 1918, especially in World War I, and its power to shape the future course of German history. Lines of continuity between the First and the Second World War are suggested, for example, by the unlimited submarine warfare of the years 1915 to 1918. In this interpretation, the German approach to naval warfare in World War I appears not as the expression of a specific German militarism, but rather marks a significant break with the military ideas and practices of the pre-war years. Submarine warfare was part of a brutalization of war, a tendency which could be observed in the other nations fighting the war as well. In contrast, there is quite a different result if we look at the military culture of the German army, paying special attention to the characteristics of a specific German culture of organization. Here the lines of continuity extend far beyond the end of the Wilhelminian Empire in 1918. A direct comparison of the German War Crimes in the north of France and Belgium during 1914–15 and the war of extermination in Eastern Europe after 1941 shows similarities and lines of continuity, as well as, however, radically qualitative differences.⁴¹

That the search for lines of continuity was not just a privilege of the research into the *Sonderweg* comes out clearly in the contributions in this volume. Here, other lines of continuity, closely connected with the problems of war and violence, are at the center of attention. The concept of the "Second Thirty Years War" between 1914 and 1945, which is widespread among historians and which has

been critically discussed here, extends the historical legacy of the German Empire well into the twentieth century.⁴² Just as in the 1970s, the explosiveness of the historical judgement of the German Empire lies less in its own history than in the history of the events that happened after it.

4. *The German Empire in the World*

Macro processes, described with the terms globalization, Europeanization and international migration, have become increasingly important in the last few years. This has had significant consequences for our understanding of the German Empire. Changes in the everyday experiences of historians caused by these macro processes have inspired historians increasingly to question whether or not the nation-state should be the referential framework for the history of the German Empire. Furthermore, historians have increasingly paid attention to phenomena and relationships which transcend the boundaries of the nation-state. At present, historians consider analyzing trans-national contacts and processes of exchange to be one of their most important tasks. At the same time they are increasingly investigating patterns of reciprocal perception and how these have changed over time. Thus, studying the interaction of American and German business elites before World War I as well as the American perception of the German industrial world has shed new light on the German economic system.⁴³

Important impulses for the present upswing in trans-national history have come from postcolonial studies, which thematized the social and cultural consequences of colonial rule and which have played a central role especially in Anglo-American research. The “postcolonial” perspective directs our attention to the colonial discourse, with its binary oppositions and the principles inscribed in this discourse concerning the construction of the “other.” This perspective revises the perception of colonial relationships as a one-sided influencing of those being colonized by the colonizers and emphasizes the reciprocity of the colonial exchange and the hybridity of the identities which come about through it. What was the impact of the colonial experiences on justice and politics, on the society and culture of Germany? To what degree did new forms of demarcation, new images of fascinating foreignness and ethnic inequality distributed through the mass media shape the political culture of the German Empire? Given the short-lived and not very successful history of the German colonial experience, the question is also asked whether an approach which assumes that in the German case the colonial experiences had an influence analogous to that of the colonial experiences for great imperial powers such as England or France, with their long imperial tradition, is in danger of vastly overestimating the significance of colonialism for Germany.⁴⁴

Globalization, which was highly developed in the years before World War I, appears to have been very important. This can be shown paradigmatically by looking at trans-national mass migration, which was closely linked with the internal migration and which thoroughly shook up traditional ways of life and

values. Its consequences for the discourse on citizenship law and on nationalism allows us to see that the establishment of the nation-state as a territorial regime did not simply precede processes of global integration but can only be adequately understood in its complex interplay with them.⁴⁵ On the other hand, the development of a global market for capital, for factors of production, and for goods had a lasting and profound effect on Germany, for Germany was highly integrated into these markets. Because globalization had a quite different impact on the incomes of various social groups, it produced a profound shift in social and internal political power relationships and increasingly limited the German government's autonomous room to maneuver in its trade policy.⁴⁶

Fifty years ago, the Fischer controversy gave the impetus for in-depth historical research into the history of Germany from 1870 to 1918. Since then our understanding of the history of this era has changed many times and in many important ways. At present there is no single dominant historical perspective on the German Empire; rather, there are a number of narratives from completely different perspectives, which at times compete with each other and at times live peacefully with each other, side by side. The fact, however, that the history of the German Empire is still able to supply new material for new historical controversies and debates shows its continuing relevance. The future of historical work on the German Empire appears today to be more open than ever before. All that is certain is that in the future two factors will continue to determine the narratives which historians compose of the German Empire: the weight of the historiographical tradition on which they build, and the changes in their own research interests that they bring to the German Empire and which allow us to continue to discover new aspects of its history.

Notes

1. For views of the German Empire before 1960 see E. Frie, *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich* (Darmstadt, 2004), 2–10; M. Jefferies, *Contesting the German Empire, 1871–1918* (Malden, MA, 2008), 7–18. The authors would like to thank Dirk Bönker for his critical remarks and productive suggestions.
2. The bone of contention was F. Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht. Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914/18* (Düsseldorf, 1961); edited version in English as *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (London, 1967).
3. Cf. T.S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), 2nd ed., (Chicago, 1970). Kuhn developed the concept to explain developments in the natural sciences. Since its publication, the degree to which this concept can be applied to the humanities and the social sciences has been a topic of heated debate.
4. See D. Langewiesche, "Der 'deutsche Sonderweg.' Defizitgeschichte als geschichtspolitische Zukunftskonstruktion nach dem Ersten und Zweiten Weltkrieg," in *Kriegsniederlagen. Erfahrungen und Erinnerungen*, eds. Horst Carl et al. (Berlin, 2004), 57–65; id., "Über das Umschreiben der Geschichte. Zur Rolle der Sozialgeschichte," in *Wege der Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, eds. J. Osterhammel et al. (Göttingen, 2006), 67–80; T. Welskopp, "Identität ex negativo. Der 'deutsche Sonderweg' als Metaerzählung in der bundesdeutschen Geschichtswissenschaft der siebziger und achtziger Jahre," in *Die historische Meistererzählung. Deutungslinien der deutschen*

- Nationalgeschichte nach 1945*, eds. K.H. Jarausch and M. Sabrow (Göttingen, 2002), 109–39; J.J. Sheehan, “Paradigm Lost? The ‘Sonderweg’ Revisited,” in *Transnationale Geschichte. Themen, Tendenzen und Theorien*, eds. G. Budde et al. (Göttingen, 2006), 150–60.
5. H.-U. Wehler, *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich 1871–1918* (1973), 6th ed., (Göttingen, 1988); engl. *The German Empire 1871–1918* (Leamington Spa, 1985).
 6. Wehler, *Kaiserreich*, 18.
 7. See T. Nipperdey, “Wehlers ‘Kaiserreich.’ Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 1 (1975), 539–60.
 8. See E. Kehr, *Der Primat der Innenpolitik*, ed. H.-U. Wehler (Berlin, 1965); H.-U. Wehler, *Bismarck und der Imperialismus* (1969), 2nd ed., (Frankfurt, 1985).
 9. See only A. Hillgruber, “Politische Geschichte in moderner Sicht,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 216 (1973), 529–52; K. Hildebrand, “Geschichte oder ‘Gesellschaftsgeschichte’? Die Notwendigkeit einer Politischen Geschichtsschreibung von den internationalen Beziehungen,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 223 (1976), 328–57; id., *Deutsche Außenpolitik 1871–1918* (München, 1989).
 10. See R.J. Evans, ed., *Society and Politics in Wilhelmine Germany* (London, 1978); G. Eley, *Reshaping the German Right. Radical Nationalism and Political Change after Bismarck* (1980), 2nd ed., (Ann Arbor, 1991); D. Blackbourn, *Class, Religion, and Local Politics in Wilhelmine Germany. The Center Party in Württemberg before 1914* (Wiesbaden, 1980). Cf. also W. Mock, “‘Manipulation von oben’ oder Selbstorganisation an der Basis? Einige neuere Ansätze in der englischen Historiographie zur Geschichte des Deutschen Kaiserreichs,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 232 (1981), 358–75.
 11. See D. Blackbourn and G. Eley, *Mythen deutscher Geschichtsschreibung. Die gescheiterte bürgerliche Revolution von 1848* (Frankfurt, 1980); republished in English in expanded form as *The Peculiarities of German History* (Oxford, 1984). For a retrospective view cf. the email interview with Blackbourn and Eley in *German History* 22 (2004), 229–45.
 12. The literature on the German bourgeoisie is now enormous. An introduction to this literature can be found in the summary of the work of the Collaborative Research Centre in Bielefeld (*Sonderforschungsbereich*) on the modern bourgeoisie in P. Lundgreen, ed., *Sozial- und Kulturgeschichte des Bürgertums* (Göttingen, 2000).
 13. See, e.g., H. Berghoff and R. Möller, “Unternehmer in Deutschland und England 1870–1914. Aspekte eines kollektiv-biographischen Vergleichs,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 255 (1993), 353–86; H. Berghoff, “Aristokratisierung des Bürgertums? Zur Sozialgeschichte der Nobilitierung von Unternehmern in Preußen und Großbritannien 1870–1918,” *Vierteljahrsschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 81 (1994), 178–209; D.L. Augustine, *Patricians and Parvenus. Wealth and High Society in Wilhelmine Germany* (Oxford, 1994).
 14. See H.-U. Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, vol. 3 (Munich, 1995), 1250–95.
 15. See T. Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1866–1918*, 2 vols. (Munich, 1990/1992). Cf. also P. Nolte, “Darstellungsweisen deutscher Geschichte. Erzählstrukturen und ‘master narratives’ bei Nipperdey und Wehler,” in *Die Nation schreiben. Geschichtswissenschaft im internationalen Vergleich*, C. Conrad and S. Conrad (Göttingen, 2002), 236–68; Welskopp, “Identität,” 128f.
 16. See e.g., Alf Lütke, ed., *Alltagsgeschichte. Zur Rekonstruktion historischer Erfahrungen und Lebensweisen* (Göttingen, 1989).
 17. See only S.N. Eisenstadt, ed., *Multiple Modernities* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2002); id., *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities* (Leiden, 2003).
 18. See only E.R. Dickinson, “Biopolitics, Fascism, Democracy: Some Reflections on Our Discourse about ‘Modernity,’” *Central European History* 37 (2004), 1–48; P. Nolte, “Abschied vom 19. Jahrhundert oder Auf der Suche nach einer anderen Moderne,” in: *Wege der Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, 103–32; L. Raphael, “Radikales Ordnungsdenken und die Organisation totalitärer Herrschaft: Weltanschauungseliten und Humanwissenschaftler im NS-Regime,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 27 (2001), 5–40.
 19. See, e.g., M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (1975) (London, 1977); Z. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, 1989); D.J.K. Peukert, *Max Webers Diagnose der Moderne* (Göttingen, 1989).
 20. See in particular *ibid.*, S. 102–21.

21. For the preceding paragraph see the contribution to this volume by Helmut Walser Smith.
22. For the concept of the “vanishing point” see H.W. Smith, “The Vanishing Point of German History. An Essay on Perspective,” *History and Memory* 17 (2005), 269–95.
23. See only D.J.K. Peukert, *Grenzen der Sozialdisziplinierung. Aufstieg und Krise der deutschen Jugendfürsorge, 1878–1932* (Cologne, 1986); P. Weindling, *Health, Race, and German Politics between National Unification and Nazism, 1870–1945* (Cambridge, 1989); G. Eley, “Introduction 1: Is There a History of the Kaiserreich?,” in *Society, Culture, and the State in Germany, 1870–1930*, ed. G. Eley (Ann Arbor, 1996), 1–42, here: 24–31; S. Stöckel, *Säuglingsfürsorge zwischen sozialer Hygiene und Eugenik* (Berlin, 1996); M. Kappeler, *Der schreckliche Traum vom vollkommnen Menschen: Rassenhygiene und Eugenik in der sozialen Arbeit* (Marburg, 2000); P. Becker, *Verderbnis und Entartung. Eine Geschichte der Kriminologie des 19. Jahrhunderts als Diskurs und Praxis* (Göttingen, 2002). For an overview of the recent literature see Dickinson, “Biopolitics.”
24. See only U. Daniel, *Kompendium Kulturgeschichte. Theorie, Praxis, Schlüsselwörter* (2001), 5th ed., (Frankfurt, 2006); M. Bevir, “Meta-Methodology: Clearing the Underbrush,” in *The Oxford Handbook for Political Methodology*, ed. J.M. Box-Steffensmeier et al. (Oxford, 2008), 48–70.
25. See only U. Frevert, “Mann und Weib, und Weib und Mann.” *Geschlechter-Differenzen in der Moderne* (München, 1995); K. Canning, *Gender History in Practice. Historical Perspectives on Bodies, Class and Citizenship* (Ithaca, 2006); K. Hagemann and J. Quataert, eds., *Gendering Modern German History. Rewriting Historiography* (New York, 2007).
26. See, e.g., S. Conrad and J. Osterhammel, eds., *Das Kaiserreich transnational. Deutschland in der Welt 1871–1914* (Göttingen, 2004); Budde et al., eds., *Transnationale Geschichte*.
27. See also K. Ledford, “Comparing Comparisons. Disciplines and the Sonderweg,” *Central European History* 36 (2003): 367–74; J. Retallack, ed., *Imperial Germany 1871–1918* (Oxford, 2008); G. Eley and J. Retallack, eds., *Wilhelmism and Its Legacies. German Modernities, Imperialism, and the Meanings of Reform, 1890–1930* (New York, 2003); Jefferies, *Contesting*.
28. V.R. Berghahn, “The German Empire, 1871–1914: Reflections on the Direction of Recent Research,” *Central European History* 35 (2002): 75–81, here 77; cf. also M.L. Anderson, “Reply to Volker Berghahn,” *Central European History* 35 (2002), 83–90.
29. Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1866–1918*, vol. 2, 905.
30. See the contributions to this volume by Dieter Grimm and John Breuilly.
31. See the chapter by Helmut Walser Smith.
32. See the contribution by Benjamin Ziemann.
33. See Richard J. Evans, *Cosmopolitan Islanders. British Historians and the European Continent* (Cambridge, 2009).
34. Cf. also M. Bevir, “On Tradition,” *Humanitas* 13 (2000), 28–53.
35. See the contributions by James Retallack and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt. Cf. also K.H. Jarausch and M. Geyer, *Shattered Past. Reconstructing German Histories* (Princeton, 2003); M. Kohlrausch, *Der Monarch im Skandal. Die Logik der Massenmedien und die Transformation der wilhelminischen Monarchie* (Berlin, 2005); F. Bösch, *Öffentliche Geheimnisse. Skandale, Politik und Medien in Deutschland und Großbritannien 1880–1914* (Munich, 2009).
36. See the contributions by Stephan Malinowski and Manfred Hettling.
37. See the chapter by Olaf Blaschke; as well as id., ed., *Konfessionen im Konflikt. Deutschland zwischen 1800 und 1970: ein zweites konfessionelles Zeitalter* (Göttingen, 2002).
38. See the chapter by Ute Planert; id., *Antifeminismus im Kaiserreich. Diskurs, soziale Formation und politische Mentalität* (Göttingen, 1998).
39. See the contribution by Sven Oliver Müller; M.P. Steinberg, *Listening to Reason. Culture, Subjectivity, and Nineteenth-Century Music* (Princeton, NJ, 2004); H.E. Bödeker, ed., *Le concert et son public. Mutations de la vie musicale en Europe de 1780 à 1914 (France, Allemagne, Angleterre)* (Paris, 2002).
40. For a concise overview of World War I research, see the contribution by Roger Chickering.
41. See the contributions by Dirk Bönker, MacGregor Knox, Roger Chickering and Alan Kramer. Cf. also I.V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction. Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, 2006); A. Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction. Culture and Mass Killing in the First World*

- War (Oxford, 2007); S.O. Müller, *Deutsche Soldaten und ihre Feinde. Nationalismus an Front und Heimatfront im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Frankfurt, 2007).
42. See the contribution by Jörg Echternkamp. Cf. H.-U. Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, vol. 3, 1250–95; id., *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, vol. 4 (Munich, 2003), 985–94.
 43. See the contribution by Volker Berghahn.
 44. See the chapter by Birthe Kundrus; id., *Moderne Imperialisten. Das Kaiserreich im Spiegel seiner Kolonien* (Cologne, 2003).
 45. See the contributions to this volume by Sebastian Conrad and Thomas Mergel. Cf. also S. Conrad, *Globalisierung und Nation im Deutschen Kaiserreich* (Munich, 2006); D. Gosewinkel, *Einbürgern und Ausschließen. Die Nationalisierung der Staatsangehörigkeit vom Deutschen Bund bis zur Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, 2nd ed., (Göttingen, 2003); E. Nathahns, *The Politics of Citizenship in Germany. Ethnicity, Utility and Nationalism* (Oxford, 2004).
 46. See the contribution by Cornelius Torp; id., *Die Herausforderung der Globalisierung. Wirtschaft und Politik in Deutschland 1860–1914* (Göttingen, 2005).