

German Historical Institute  
London

**THE 1993 ANNUAL LECTURE**

Reich – Nation-State – Great Power  
Reflections on  
German Foreign Policy  
1871-1945

by  
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London 1995

Published by  
The German Historical Institute London  
17 Bloomsbury Square  
London WC1A 2LP  
Tel: 0171 - 404 5486 Fax: 0171 - 404 5573

ISSN 0269-8560  
ISBN 0 9521607 3 0

## I

Germany burst onto the international political stage with unexpected suddenness in 1871. The new actor was a nation-state, a great power, and, for what it was worth, a Reich. In the context of Europe, the Germans coming together as a nation was little more than catching up with the normal state of things. Nor was Germany's appearance as a great power anything out of the ordinary. What did seem strange was the idea – both portentous and difficult to interpret – of a Reich. Its grandiose name conferred upon the *kleindeutsche* German state a dimension of uncertainty pointing to the limitless, to something greater than, and not sufficient unto, itself. From the start, the existence of modern Germany posed a fateful question: did this 'predominant'<sup>1</sup> power fit into the geographical, political, and 'spiritual map'<sup>2</sup> of Europe? For the next eighty years, this question was to haunt Germany's adventurous, even perilous, course, which finally ended in the deepest infamy.

The future was, quite naturally, uncertain when the German Reich embarked upon its own national path, in other words, when Germany set about doing what all other states had long been doing. But a number of problems separated the newcomer, Germany, from its neighbours among the great powers. Years ago, an American historian wrote that modern Germany 'was born encircled'.<sup>3</sup> Under changed historical circumstances, it suffered from the legacy of this restriction throughout long periods of its history.

In Helmuth Plessner's classic phrase, Germany was a 'verspätete Nation',<sup>4</sup> a belated nation. Its citizens suffered visibly, but this flaw was difficult to eradicate. They lacked the necessary composure and tended to over-react in eccentric ways. Historians in general agree<sup>5</sup> that modern Germany was 'incomplete', both at home and in the

image it presented abroad. For years, the goals of unity and freedom, neither fully achieved, were separated. It has been pointed out, quite correctly,<sup>6</sup> that from the start modern Germany was an 'awkward size'. It was too strong not to upset the balance of power on the Continent, and too weak to exercise hegemony over Europe. Moreover, the uncheckable advance of material progress – a mixed blessing, especially economic growth – posed a greater challenge to modern Germany than to any other state. Indeed, it almost threatened its existence. The fact that the advantages and disadvantages, the driving force and the restlessness, the blessings and curses of Germany's civilization, which was in many respects exemplary, were so close to each other was problematic to say the least for a nation-state which was still rather insecure and needed consolidation as much as flux. Finally, modern Germany lacked an 'obvious' sense of mission.<sup>7</sup> Compared with the British and American civilizing mission, with the French republican programme of citizens' and human rights, and the grimly aggressive Panslavism and Communism of the Russians and the Soviets, the German Reich had nothing but its statehood.<sup>8</sup> All in all, the burdens which Bismarck's state had to shoulder from the start were enormous. But they were part of its existence, forming the 'normality of Germany's extraordinariness'.<sup>9</sup> To balance these factors out was the art of statecraft.

Germany's already difficult mandate was made even harder by the fact that the nation-state, which it had achieved late, was not yet able to claim historical legitimacy. In trials of strength such as international crises or even a large war, the German nation-state was more at risk than was the case with the five other Great Powers of nineteenth-century Europe. The feeling that the nation-state was merely a – potentially threatening – episode was its constant companion, and the resulting lack of clear

direction had a confusing impact on the whole. The German Reich therefore often lived with 'poison in its pocket'.<sup>10</sup> It frequently indulged in a dangerous 'philosophy of being surrounded',<sup>11</sup> and in situations of crisis displayed an unpredictable tendency to seize the bull by the horns.

## II

Otto von Bismarck pursued a foreign policy of *Saturiertheit* (saturation) in order to deal with the consequences of founding the German nation-state. As time passed, the other European powers increasingly came to value the German state. At home, by contrast, it was soon seen as a burden, which was more and more unwillingly carried because it imposed immobility. 'Here everyone, really, is in favour of war', Friedrich von Holstein, the Chancellor's aide who was also secretly scheming against him, stated quite correctly in 1888, 'with the more or less sole exception of H[is] H[ighness], who is making the most extreme efforts to keep the peace.'<sup>12</sup> In fact, Bismarck was in many respects acting contrary to the 'spirit of the times', which passionately demanded political domination.<sup>13</sup> And there can be no doubt that crucial steps which Bismarck, whose concern for the *status quo* can be called almost panicky, took or neglected to take in foreign and domestic policy were backward-looking in contemporary terms. What he thereby averted or repressed was, from the same perspective, forward-looking. But the former served peace abroad, while the latter put it at risk.

To be sure, Bismarck's calculated strategy of demonstrative renunciation signified an indirect loss of power because in the age of imperialism all powers were seized by a rampant desire for territorial acquisition.<sup>14</sup> The tempting alternative of impetuous expansion, which strident voices from all sides were demanding, would, of course, have been mortally dangerous. Bismarck's well-consid-

ered policy of moderation had both life-preserving and life-threatening consequences. The factors upon which Germany's claim to be a great power rested and which encouraged its awareness of itself as a Reich threatened the existence of the nation-state, while what was advantageous for the nation had long since been inadequate for Germany as a great power and a Reich. In short, the incompatibility between internal and external objectives – maintaining peace and the *status quo* by renouncing freedom and expansion – revealed a clear dilemma, which was inevitably aggravated as the country demanded other solutions, forward-looking and compelling, to the mounting problems of domestic and foreign policy.

Providing these answers fell to the lot of Count Caprivi, Bismarck's successor as Chancellor of the Reich. Hints of these solutions were immediately visible in the popular 'new course' for Germany's foreign policy proclaimed by the young Kaiser William II. His cheerful promise to lead the Germans towards 'glorious days'<sup>15</sup> was more in keeping with the collective feeling of yearning than the lame policy of bloodless stagnation which had characterized the past under Bismarck. For the one-sided interpretations of those who came later were far from the truth. The German Reich was anything but internally sick and externally weak, and it was certainly not marked by death. On the contrary. Healthy, powerful, and vigorous, it cast off the shackles of an obsolete regime and looked with curiosity at far distant shores. At the time, hardly anyone among those who were tired of the strict rule of old Daedalus suspected that the passionately desired new start would end like the arrogant act of young Icarus.

What changed in foreign policy during Caprivi's short period of office? The aim of Bismarck's rather opaque policy of alliances had been not to allow Germany to survive a future armed conflict, but to prevent such a clash

in the first place. It was therefore largely inappropriate for dealing with the *casus belli*. The new Chancellor, however, who was always expecting a 'war on two fronts' 'next spring',<sup>16</sup> was completely unable to understand Bismarck's policy. He was sincerely convinced that the existing system of alliances needed to be completely revised, because 'at the crucial moment', it would 'isolate' Germany, and 'because it does not allow us to be the friend of our friends, and the enemy of our enemies'.<sup>17</sup> Caprivi's genuine attempts to achieve reliable alliances, to which the famous 'Rückversicherungsvertrag', the reinsurance treaty, was sacrificed, strengthened the general trend towards armed peace, a condition which gradually merged into a tacit state of war. Military balance took the place of political balance, and a state of provisional flexibility was replaced by definitive rigidity.

From a present-day perspective, Caprivi's foreign policy had a number of highly modern features. Honest successor to the Reich's founder, who had achieved mythical status during his own lifetime, Caprivi himself based his foreign policy upon military deterrence and an export drive. A straightforward soldier who was unable to make much of Bismarck's contradictory but harmonious power games of balance and counter-balance, Caprivi was firmly convinced of two things. First, that 'every political issue' can ultimately be reduced 'to a military factor',<sup>18</sup> which is why he almost unreflectively ranked strategy ahead of diplomacy. And secondly, he shared the progressive view, which was gradually gaining general acceptance, that 'nowadays, domestic and foreign policy' build upon 'questions relating to political economy'.<sup>19</sup> For him, therefore, economic issues to a large extent displaced political decision-making. From now on we can observe the star of politics waning as Mars and Mercury waxed. This dubious phenomenon was by no means limited to the Reich,

but it affected the development of Germany, which was highly dependent on the success of superior statesmanship, much more strongly than that of its neighbours. Caprivi did not go far enough for those who favoured industrial development and social mobility, but he went too far for those who clung to agrarian interests and the social *status quo*. Therefore, he finally had to go.

The way was now open for a completely different, truly daring, and ultimately disastrous experiment. Pursuing its famous Tirpitz plan<sup>20</sup> involving gigantic naval armaments, the German Reich went on a 'cold offensive'<sup>21</sup> during Bülow's period in office, initiating a "'dry" war'<sup>22</sup> against Britain. Without having earned its spurs on the Continent, Germany rushed into a world-historical finale. Regarding its battle fleet as a 'sort of replacement for alliances',<sup>23</sup> Germany did not suspect that it would become a vehicle driving the country into isolation. In reaching for the stars, Germany forgot that it stood on shaky ground. Unnoticed, the ambitious challenger planned to hurry through the high-risk zone as long as it was itself vulnerable, and until the new weapon was ready for use. In temporarily protecting its innocent seclusion, which was conspicuous to the point of being suspicious, the restless Reich set about revolutionizing the world of states, turning its order upside down and trying to push itself right to the top. The deluded upstart was convinced that it would be Britain's successor.

Of course, believing that one's powder can be kept dry until one chooses to set it off is to put one's trust in blind faith. Regardless of international reactions, Germany's attempt to take the world by surprise, disguised as something totally harmless, had to fail because the German nation itself, without being fully aware of it, made a substantial contribution to its failure. The monarch, parliament, and the public, thoughtlessly and blusteringly,



paid homage to the idea of world politics – a thought that spread unease and was dangerously woolly. Consequently, against its will but of necessity, the secretly re-arming nation became the object of general attention and suspicion. In order not to separate artificially what naturally belongs together, we should here mention the rampant nationalism which was running wild and becoming more and more poisonous. In foreign policy its impact was destructive, but at home it contributed to the necessary consolidation of the young nation.

None the less, the special, and potentially dangerous, even disastrous quality of Germany's imperialism was that it challenged Britain, which ruled over vast tracts of land and sea, by building up a provocatively large naval force on Britain's own doorstep. Germany thus placed a question mark over the insular invulnerability of the world's leading power. When the Germans set about conquering an empire, they jeopardized precisely the thing that they wanted to secure and expand – namely, great-power status and the nation-state.

Their own decisions and actions, taken on their own responsibility, meant that within the first ten years of the new century, the Germans were excluded from the international community and faced a hostile formation around them. But fundamentally misunderstanding the real situation, the Germans saw themselves as encircled. To the self-deluded, it seemed that the only way to break what contemporaries called the 'iron ring'<sup>24</sup> was to take energetic action. To recognize that cracked ice is not made more solid by furiously stamping on it was, it seems, beyond their cognitive abilities.

The grave situation which Bülow, who had failed all round, left behind in 1909 was not the inevitable legacy of the founding of the Reich by Bismarck, but the result of wrong decisions made under William II. The difficult

circumstances under which Germany had started out had deteriorated dramatically into a life-threatening situation.

The new German chancellor, Bethmann Hollweg, otherwise a rather circumspect man, set out with determination to solve the German dilemma. He considered pursuing a foreign policy option favouring Britain, which, in terms of domestic policy, seemed to be compatible with parliamentarism, the coming thing. A cautious politician who favoured *détente*, Bethmann Hollweg tried to put a stop to the 'latent war'<sup>25</sup> and to the crippling arms race with Britain. Instead, he wanted to pursue an international policy without war at Britain's side. He speculated on making profits abroad in the hope that their momentum would lead to successes at home. The uncertain success of his controversial attempt depended entirely on the maintenance of peace abroad. So long as it was justifiable, he did all he could to avoid the decisive battle which ever shriller voices within the Reich were demanding. For there was one matter on which Bethmann Hollweg, an incorruptible judge, had no illusions, unlike his contemporaries. 'In any future war which we embark upon without a pressing reason', he warned his sabre-rattling opponents, who were threatening a *coup d'état* (led by the immature crown prince, a loud-mouthed playboy), 'it is not only the Hohenzollern crown which will be at stake, but also the future of Germany.'<sup>26</sup>

But there was a large degree of hostility to Bethmann Hollweg's policy of *détente* backed by power, and this at times brought it to the brink of failure. Admiral Tirpitz continued to play his deadly game of armaments poker with the coldly calculating obsession of a fanatic. Every rivet that was hammered into a German battleship, as the then First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, later wrote about the connection between the arms race and the

creation of alliances,<sup>27</sup> forged closer links between the Triple Entente of France, Russia, and England. His diagnosis was a justifiable over-simplification of something which was, in reality, much more complicated. From 1912 the army, which had long been neglected in favour of the navy, was at last brought up to strength. This justified initiative went along with a rampant militarization of society, and the German officer corps was more and more inclined to look favourably upon a preventive war. Any sober considerations were hysterically thrown out of the window. None the less, until well into the summer of 1914, it seemed that there was a chance of realizing the passionately desired settlement with Britain. Of course, from May 1914 on Bethmann Hollweg was highly disturbed to hear the bad news, through 'secret disclosures',<sup>28</sup> that the rival world powers Britain and Russia were negotiating a bilateral naval convention with an anti-German thrust, behind Germany's back. The Chancellor's foreign policy was at stake!

Bethmann Hollweg had long since come to terms with the fact that the German Reich was not exactly popular in Europe. He had admitted as much to the German ambassador to St Petersburg on 30 July 1912.<sup>29</sup> Speaking with sober realism, Bethmann Hollweg had said: 'We are too strong for that, too much of a parvenu, and altogether too loathsome.' The only conclusion which could be drawn always pointed in the direction of an understanding with Britain. And that was now in danger of suddenly coming to grief.

But international developments were not the only reason for the failure of the agreement with Britain to materialize. For a long time it had been undermined by a domestic trend which eventually destroyed it. This movement had originated in the unresolved opposition between 'statecraft and the trade of war'.<sup>30</sup> With 'almost

grotesque unnaturalness',<sup>31</sup> the German army's operational plan named after its inventor, Graf Schlieffen, provided only for an attack on the west, regardless of where armed conflict broke out on the Continent. At the same time, the German Reich attempted to achieve a reconciliation with Britain, which in its turn could not leave France and Belgium in the lurch when they were invaded by Germany. The trade of war grievously disturbed the art of statecraft. Blind faith in arms as the only way of settling matters proved to be disastrous, and the demand for war, growing among the military and the general public, threatened to overcome the resistance persistently shown by the civilian leaders of the Reich. At times, all Bethmann Hollweg could do was to express the profound complaint that the Germans, who had not long been part of the global rivalry between the powers, were politically inexperienced. 'We are a young people', he wrote,

and perhaps still have too much naive faith in force, underestimate more subtle means, and have not yet learned that what force can achieve, force alone can never maintain ... We have not come far enough yet. Because of our innermost nature ... we are not yet sure enough, or aware enough, of our national ideal. It is probably the peculiarity of our ... individualistic and unbalanced culture that it does not possess the same suggestive power as that of the British or the French.<sup>32</sup>

When the fateful shots at Sarajevo gave the Austrians and Germans a chance to embark upon the July Crisis, the former challenger, now driven into a corner, vacillated between defensive and offensive action. Although Germany did not bear sole guilt for the First World War, the responsibility for taking the initiating action clearly lay with Germany.

Alternatives which had been debated during the last peacetime years in an atmosphere full of nervous tension

did not stand a chance against government policy. For example, the German Wehrverein (Army League) demanded brashly that civil society be transformed into a militaristic 'armed society',<sup>33</sup> permanently ready to take up arms. The observation made above also applies to the development of a new type of economy, which promised to transform the traditional concept of power. This development was suddenly interrupted. Its highly promising potential was summed up most aptly by Hugo Stinnes when, in September 1911, he advised Germany to shun military adventures. It was his optimistic opinion that 'another three to four years of peaceful development and Germany will be the undisputed economic master in Europe.'<sup>34</sup> None the less, the political tradition which had grown over centuries of European history asserted itself as always. It was concentrated in the highly powerful concept of prestige, and was by no means limited to the economic benefits of modernity. Thus within the framework of national history the Germans' behaviour in terms both of madly daring action and despairing reaction, before and during the war, was quite normal in the context of what had so far been generally accepted – as far as war, the state of emergency *par excellence*, can be considered normal at all.

In August 1914 the great power Germany prepared to take a risky step – it tried to rise from being a nation-state, via the exercise of hegemony, into a world power. In doing so it ran the mortal risk that the Reich might come to an end as a great power and a nation. Until 1916-17 the war aims debate, which got wildly out of hand, concentrated, among other ideas about the future shape of 'greater Germany',<sup>35</sup> on the historically derived notion of a *Mittel-europa* dominated by Germany. This was to be completed by the acquisition of overseas possessions. After the intoxicating illusions of a rapid victory had disappeared

into the mud of bloody trench warfare, however, Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg increasingly favoured a peace of the Hubertusburg type. Late in October 1916 he explained to a committee of the *Bundesrat* that survival equalled victory, an idea which did not enjoy much contemporary popularity. 'If we survive this superior force and come out capable of negotiation', he said, 'then we have won.'<sup>36</sup>

Bethmann Hollweg, driven out in the summer of 1917, was unable to put this courageous idea into practice against the furious resistance of a rag-bag of war-aims enthusiasts. In 1917-18, during the last literally mad rush of the war, which had now become a world war, three fundamental options for German foreign policy and the conduct of the war emerged. First, with almost pathetic helplessness Richard von Kühlmann, the newly appointed foreign secretary, pursued the already lost goal of securing a proper place for Germany as a great power within the traditional framework of 'old Europe'. In his view, the important thing was to preserve the 'condition' of the Continent 'as it had been for the last forty years'. In retrospect it seemed quite advantageous; it had not been 'so unbearable' after all.<sup>37</sup>

Secondly, an embryonic trend towards the new, progressive, and forward-looking in foreign policy emerged, foreshadowing the policy of the Weimar Republic. Enlightened representatives of industry, among them Max Warburg, reformers in the German foreign office such as Wilhelm Solf, and Social Democrats, left liberals, and members of the Centre Party advocated a fundamental transformation of foreign policy. They demanded that it be reformed both economically and under international law.

And thirdly, General Ludendorff, in the grip of a truly Napoleonic ambition for conquest, argued for a continental empire on the territory of a conquered Soviet Russia.

This seductive idea pointed far beyond the present towards an ominous future. In the deceptive twilight between apparent triumph and real defeat, the 'short-lived [historical] vision'<sup>38</sup> of a German empire in the east was conjured up. It promised to guarantee German strategic invincibility, to allow Germany to be self-sufficient in armaments, to provide space for *völkisch* experiments in migration, settlement, and colonization, and to 'breed the people who will be needed for further fighting in the east'.<sup>39</sup>

Between the lost past and an uncertain future, a certainty emerged in the oppressive present of the continuing war. The unforeseen collapse of Russia had provided hints which gradually gave way to certain, bitter knowledge when the Americans took the world-historical step of entering the war on the side of Britain and France. 'Despite our Austrian alliance, we were not strong enough to stand between two world powers such as England and Russia', was the perceptive comment of Philipp Eulenburg, a former friend of Kaiser William II who later fell into the deepest disfavour.<sup>40</sup>

Beyond the sphere of power politics, another flaw in the precarious existence of the now mortally weakened colossus in the centre of Europe emerged even more obviously than before. When Wilson and Lenin, under the influence of their domineering ideologies, each claimed history for himself in twin-like incompatibility, the Germans could not compete. Neither the 'ideas of 1914', which accompanied the beginning of the war, nor demands for a 'national Socialism', which emerged at its end, were able to challenge those with a universal vision. Rather colourless and inward-looking, these German ideas lacked a wider resonance. In fact, a memorandum of October 1918 by the French foreign ministry insisted that 'to ensure a permanent peace for Europe, Bismarck's

work must be destroyed'.<sup>41</sup> The fact that this did not happen may seem like the repeated 'miracle of the House of Brandenburg',<sup>42</sup> but it was even less of a miracle than Prussia's salvation in the Seven Years' War. A stable Germany was simply indispensable as a counterweight to revolutionary Russia, whose expansionism could easily have filled the power vacuum in central Europe caused by economic and social chaos. Germany was seen as capable of playing this role as it had become a parliamentary state, and was soon to become a republic. To the unexpectedly favourable external conditions was added the unshakeable desire of those at home. The opposition of 1914, foremost among them the SPD, and especially those who had been vanquished in 1866, the Catholics and Socialists, saved Bismarck's Reich. Where the old Hohenzollern monarchy failed, the young nation succeeded.

At first glance, the history of Weimar foreign policy reveals nothing but enormous burdens: Versailles, separatism, and reparations, which forced the humiliated and truncated nation-state to its knees. In the terrible crisis year of 1923, 'the end of Germany' really seemed to be imminent.<sup>43</sup> This radical goal was pursued mercilessly by a victorious France, which was concerned about its security literally beyond Judgement Day. Without recognizing what had been laid down at the end of the war and in the Peace Treaty, the fearful power, aiming to exercise hegemony, was unable to rid itself of a fatal obsession with dismembering its mysterious neighbour to the east, using a new Peace of Westphalia as the instrument of execution.

Given the wretched everyday lives of the Germans, however, two factors went strangely – and one must add, unfortunately – unnoticed: first, the fact that the continued existence of the undivided nation-state was by no means to be taken for granted, but was something extraordinary; and secondly, the state which had got away with



it again, a state which continued to be a potential great power, had in fact improved its position. Germany no longer faced pressure from two fronts – Russia and France. It no longer had the tiresome obligation to take its Austrian-Hungarian ally into consideration, and in the long term, the new states of eastern central Europe tended to lean towards the German Reich rather than towards France, which had championed them and helped them to come into existence.

Yet from the start the Weimar Republic had to live with only half a *raison d'état*! It had to stand up to the Western powers, Britain and France, with grim determination. These nations provided the domestic model for Weimar Germany, because as the protector of the Versailles order, the Entente stubbornly opposed any revision of the boundaries of the German Reich. This fundamental contradiction between the motives of Weimar domestic and foreign policy contributed to 'Germany's special position in world politics during the 1920s'.<sup>44</sup> Lying between east and west, both of whom competed for the Germans' goodwill, indeed, for the German soul, Germany's special position offered tempting opportunities and, at the same time, harboured many dangers. The Reich did in fact resemble the 'rider in the story, at whose side trot those who want to woo him for themselves', as Stresemann complained with unmistakable pride in the summer of 1925.<sup>45</sup> The courted country, however, also faced the danger which Karl Radek had pointed out in *Izvestia* on 18 January 1925 – that is, the danger of falling between two stools.<sup>46</sup>

However, Gustav Stresemann's republican foreign policy succeeded in pulling together a number of diverse, and often antagonistically divergent factors into a synthesis pointing to the future: current chances for an alliance between the Soviet Union and Britain, the historical legacy

of power and freedom, and the gaping contradiction between Reich and Republic. The only means that the long-standing foreign minister had at his disposal for pursuing foreign policy was economic might – the ‘only area in which we are still a great power’.<sup>47</sup> None the less, his foreign policy goals were ambitious: to restore the nation-state and its dominance in central Europe. Although these ideas might seem terribly old, Stresemann’s method for putting them into practice was engagingly new. Tenaciously and patiently, he worked with Europe, not against it, towards achieving lasting compromises rather than opportunistically snatching at dubious successes. In other words, to identify the almost protean diversity of Weimar revisionism solely with the continuing, discredited tradition of power politics is to miss essential elements of the historical phenomenon. The old and the new, inherited ideas and new initiatives, tradition and fresh departures all existed at the same time. Sometimes they worked against each other, but all in all, they fused together in a specific way which gave them historical autonomy. To be sure, German foreign policy makers lost valuable time. In the hopelessly poisoned area of seemingly overdue revision, the Western powers were too hesitant in making indispensable concessions. Under the impact of world-wide economic crisis, the notoriously unstable Republic went out of control. At home, anti-parliamentarianism came more strongly to the fore than had already been the case; abroad, naked egoism became increasingly and disturbingly noticeable as other states, too, swallowed more and more of the poison of nationalism.

Heinrich Brüning and his foreign minister, Curtius, wanted to pursue ‘domestic policy through foreign policy’.<sup>48</sup> Their intention was to forge ‘a weapon’ ‘out of the sickness’ of economic weakness,<sup>49</sup> in order to cast off

at last the tiresome obligation to pay foreign reparations. Bernhard von Bülow, the new deputy minister in the German foreign office, made a snap judgement which proved not only to be wrong, but also to have grave consequences. 'The confusions of our domestic policy ... do not serve us badly in foreign policy.'<sup>50</sup> Brüning, lacking all charisma and known as the 'Hungerkanzler', was soon accused of being unsuccessful,<sup>51</sup> not least because of his foreign policy. His successors, von Papen and von Schleicher, were surrounded by the whiff of failure. They were forced to concentrate on domestic policy, where, as a horrified observer confided to his diary on 12 July 1932, 'a St Bartholomew's night' takes place 'day by day and Sunday by Sunday'.<sup>52</sup> On the whole, authoritarian cabinets pursued a foreign policy which differed both from that of Stresemann and that of Adolf Hitler. It was autonomous; all in all, it brought more disadvantages than advantages; and while it was undoubtedly extremely nationalistic, it was by no means National Socialist.

To become aware of these specific differences was almost impossible for contemporaries, both within Germany and outside its borders. The complex descent into the Third Reich, ending in disaster, was an apparently seamless and almost unnoticeable transition. For a long time existing conditions unintentionally provided a foil to the deviant. Almost unnoticed, Germany strayed from its own path onto a *Sonderweg*, a special path. Gradually and abruptly at the same time, the general aspects of German history passed over into the uniqueness of Hitler's evil deeds.

The idea of a nation-state and great power, of predominance in central Europe, and even of European hegemony are all part of the history of Europe, although they certainly harbour grave problems and the danger of armed conflict. To think and act in this way was part of the path

followed by Germany, a path which other peoples, led by similar motives, driven by similar aims, and tempted by similar desires, had already embarked upon. What confused the senses and the spirit about Nazi foreign and racial policy, what was truly diabolical about it, was that seemingly familiar historical phenomena apparently continued to exist under the totalitarian dictatorship. In fact, however, they forfeited their historical, and not least their moral dignity to a dogma which took over everything, and finally proved to be utterly destructive.

Against this background, Hitler's heinous attempt to overcome the disadvantages of Germany's traditional position as a central European power ('Mittelmacht-fatalitäten'),<sup>53</sup> once and for all, by means of blood and violence, armed conflict ('Waffenkrieg'),<sup>54</sup> and racial warfare ('Rassenkrieg'),<sup>55</sup> can be seen as the final act in the German tragedy, which provides a historical object lesson on the dangers of living under permanent pressure. In other words, on the path linking Bismarck with Hitler, a path which by no means represented a necessary connection, what was objectively achieved was not only subjectively squandered, but what was subjectively desired was, in many cases at least, objectively simply out of reach. But this historical insight dawned too late. For before this happened, the dictator had achieved what none of his predecessors had been able to manage. The *Anschluß* of Austria, which was also an Austrian *Anschluß*, fulfilled an essential part of the bold dream of 'Groß-deutschland', of Greater Germany, which had been dreamed by the delegates to the Paulskirche.<sup>56</sup> Of course, it lacked the parliamentary and democratic legacy of that solemn occasion. Since the middle of the last century, this goal had always been blocked. And now, the unique chance of 1938 was squandered because Hitler wanted something else, because even his conservative support-

ers, quite a number of whom were to become his victims within the foreseeable future, had no intention of being content with what had been achieved. For his part, the tyrant abused the idea of the Reich because he saw the Greater *German* Reich merely as one stage on the break-neck rush into the Greater *Germanic* Reich.<sup>57</sup> As so often in the history of the 1930s, torn between war and peace, a number of factors were superimposed upon each other: what was wanted by many in Germany; what the despot had been able to achieve without shedding blood; and what the *Führer* really wanted, which was not achievable without a toll in lives.

In this historical context *one* remarkable fact stands out clearly, setting the Hitler period apart from other eras of German history in terms of continuity and discontinuity in foreign policy. A few years after his 'seizure of power', Hitler, who stopped at nothing, had already left Germany's traditionally restricted position behind. He had more room for manoeuvre externally than any other chancellor before him. Thus it was the destructive excess of his historical vision which was the crucial factor in making him the driven victim of his own aims. This vision drove him relentlessly from one conquest to the next, and repeatedly encouraged him to resort to expedients which, almost immediately, turned out to be bottle-necks. In the end, he had no other option but the one which, right at the beginning of his breath-taking career, he had freely chosen: that is, either to elevate the German Reich into a world power, or to plunge it into ruin. Although he only narrowly missed achieving either aim, the unprecedented catastrophe Germany faced in 1945, quite apart from its loss of morale, threw it back a hundred years in terms of national policy. As the Cold War began, all that remained of the Reich, the great power, and the nation-state was the 'German question'.

### III

The year 1945 witnessed the end of something which had started seventy-five years before. The Reich had passed away. Just a few years after this turning point of world historical significance, Reinhard Wittram considered it unlikely that within a wider European context, the Reich 'can once again be reduced to a matter of statehood, with statehood simultaneously being reduced to a function'.<sup>58</sup>

The idea of Germany as a great power also fell victim to the collapse of the dictatorship, which left the Germans 'redeemed and destroyed at the same time'.<sup>59</sup> For a long time, great power status remained out of the question for the Germans. Any such notion relating to the unconditionally vanquished state was treated with general suspicion by the rest of the world.

In the eventful sequel to the Second World War, Germany as a nation-state was divided several times. Apparently dead, it had not died. For a state organization remains a political, social, and, to some extent, even a psychological necessity for a nation. As a genuine creation of the modern period, originally serving the rational centralization of a motley tradition, it also balances the equalizing tendency of modernism, which tends towards global conformity. At the same time it protects the historical value of diversity against the overwhelming pressure towards uniformity.

This is true of Germany, especially as Bismarck's state was by no means condemned to death from the start. On the contrary, it proved to be thoroughly viable and capable of development. Nor was its downfall, in many respects unparalleled, the necessary consequence of a fundamental flaw. It had enormous latitude in foreign policy decision-making, facing the choice between irreconcilable opposites – saturation and expansion, *détente* and attack, community of interests and going it alone, he-

gemony and racial domination – in short, between peace and war, life and death. This provides almost crushing evidence for something that some historians, trying to be too clever by half, often overlook. Without wishing to deny the interdependence of the domestic and foreign life of a state, it is absolutely clear that the main factor in the failure of the German Reich was its international relations and foreign policy decisions, not its domestic conditions and social dislocations.

‘The tragedy of the individual’, Ernst Robert Curtius, scholar of Romance languages and literatures, once remarked, ‘ends with death.’ ‘The tragedy of nations’, by contrast, ‘may contain resurrections.’<sup>60</sup> What will become of the re-unified nation-state of the Germans from this perspective lies in an uncertain future. Only one thing is certain: the new Germany, too, will have to find the necessary balance with the Hobbesian conditions of the world of states. Quite often, this resembles a compromise with what is unavailable. In order to pass the test, historical insights which can offer a wider perspective are indispensable. They may emerge from reflections on the history of German foreign policy between 1871 and 1945.

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