
Political and diplomatic history are enjoying a revival in Germany after years of the focus being on social history. History is never a closed story. There are always new interpretations as additional evidence is discovered. Each new generation of historians asks different questions. German foreign policy, and for that matter, William II, and all aspects of Wilhelmine society are the subject of an increasing number of studies. However, the political and diplomatic history being written today is quite different from that written in the inter-war period, or even that which set off heated debates among German historians in the 1960s and 1970s. The new political and diplomatic histories have benefited a great deal from the research that has been done in the past twenty years. In addition, much new archival material has come to light and some of the older material has been reworked from a different perspective.

Social history, while interesting and adding to our understanding of Germany’s past, failed to come to grips with the overarching themes of history with which political and diplomatic historians deal. Alltagsgeschichte failed to live up to its potential because of the questions it asked, the methods it employed, and its theory. While the avant-garde scholars of Alltagsgeschichte in Germany have turned to the new cultural history, the history of experience (Erfahrungsgeschichte), microhistory, or gender history, a number of other historians have braved the current and produced outstanding political and diplomatic histories.

Konrad Canis, in this comprehensive and stimulating overview of the period from the fall of Bismarck to the onset of Weltpolitik, falls into the latter group, and makes a major contribution to our understanding of this important era of German history. His book covers in minute detail one segment of Klaus Hildebrand, Das vergangene Reich. Deutsche Außenpolitik von Bismarck bis Hitler 1871-1945 (1995), and Wolfgang J. Mommsen, Das Ringen um den nationalen Staat. Die Gründung und der innere Ausbau des Deutschen Reiches unter Otto von Bismarck, 1850-1890 (1993), and the sequel covering the years 1890 to 1918 that was published in 1995 (Bürgerstolz und Weltmachtstreben. Deutschland unter Wilhelm II, 1890 bis 1918).
The thesis presented by Canis is one that William L. Langer worked with on a much broader scale in the 1930s in his *The Diplomacy of Imperialism 1890-1902* (1935). Canis’s presentation is concerned only with Germany. It goes into more detail, and is based on archival research not available to Langer, and secondary accounts published recently. The conclusion he arrives at in this provocative, well researched account is that during this twelve year period events were set in motion that culminated in 1914 in the outbreak of the First World War.

Canis’s goal is to counter the teleological approach of the 1960s and 1970s. However, he succumbs somewhat to this temptation himself in his conclusion which will be discussed below. In this clear account Canis has crafted a cogent, intensively researched argument against Hans Ulrich-Wehler’s theory of social imperialism. Arguing against Eckard Kehr’s theory of *Primat der Innenpolitik*, Canis presents a convincing case that it was not domestic policy that drove German foreign policy in this period. Canis also distances himself from Fritz Fischer, the structural continuity thesis, and the idea of *Sammlungspolitik*, all of which dominated German historiography from the 1960s to the 1980s. Canis deciphers the complex issue of the impact of *Sammlungspolitik*, inaugurated in 1897, and its relationship to German foreign policy. According to the theory of *Sammlungspolitik* reliable elements in German political life rallied together with the aim of defending the Kaiser’s government. The goal was to defuse the conflict of interest between the industrialists and the agrarians. In some respects it was a revival of the Bismarckian alliance of iron and rye. The building of the fleet satisfied the industrialists while the agrarians found security in the high tariffs imposed on foodstuffs.

Throughout his study Canis makes comprehensive use of recent secondary literature along with new archival research to produce reasoned insights and analysis. Some of his interpretations in this stimulating book are the synthesis of other work supplemented with his new research. He makes use of work by Geoff Eley, David Blackbourn, David Kaiser, and Katherine Lehrman to demonstrate that the tariff issue was highly divisive rather than one that brought parties together. Naval expansion was not an integral part of *Sammlungspolitik*. Feudalization of the bourgeoisie was not a valid concept, nor was it a goal of *Weltpolitik* to prolong the ascendancy of the Junker class in German economic and political life. The interpretations
arrived at by Canis would not have been possible if he had not synthesized the work of his fellow historians.

If the impetus for Weltpolitik did not come from social imperialism, Prinzip der Innenpolitik oder Sammlungs- politik, what were the engines that drove German foreign policy in these years? In his balanced and dispassionate style Canis presents his interpretation of what drove German foreign policy during these critical years. He concludes that the driving force behind Weltpolitik was Germany’s desire to expand economically. Naval development was a corollary of economic expansion. There was the desire to expand Germany’s influence wherever possible in the belief that other major powers, particularly England, would recognize Germany’s greatness. The navy would be the instrument needed to unseat England from its position of world power. A successful policy of Weltpolitik would result in increased prestige and economic benefits for Germany while bolstering the position of William II and the monarchy.

Britain as an economic power peaked in 1865 and by the 1890s was being challenged by Germany, the United States, and to a lesser extent by Japan in the Far East. Germany was forced to expand or decline. Weltpolitik was necessary to expand German influence beyond the continent of Europe. If Germany continued to focus its interest on the continent of Europe as Bismarck had done, its imports and exports would decline. By 1887-88 even Bismarck was having doubts that he could hold his system together and keep it focused on the continent of Europe. The Bismarckian system could not have survived the 1890s as the Eurocentric world view gave way to an international system into which the United States, Japan, and China injected new variables in the power equation. Weltpolitik was the German answer to the changing system, and it was embraced by William II with the accord of the majority of the German people.

A reading of Canis’s book prompts a number of questions. Was Germany the conscious creator of Weltpolitik or was it driven to this course by economic necessity? Were Bülows and William II merely catalysts that aided the forces that created Weltpolitik? Was Germany’s fate determined by other nations whose policies it could not control, but whose actions led it to Weltpolitik? What choices did Bülows and William II have between Weltpolitik and its alternative of keeping focused on the European continent? Were Bülows and William II aware of the risks of Weltpolitik and the serious consequences such a policy
might have for the future? To what extent did they actively influence Weltpolitik? Canis concludes that the aim of Weltpolitik was not war or the acquisition of territory, but to find markets for Germany’s increasing industrial output as well as sources of raw materials necessary to fuel its expanding industry. Unfortunately everywhere it turned it came into conflict with England, France, or Russia. The risks of Weltpolitik were great. But the alternative to not embarking on such a policy was unthinkable.

Canis points out that Germany embarked on a policy of Weltpolitik fully aware that it might come into conflict with other powers. ‘Germany’s striving for supremacy in Europe was linked with the desire for recognition as an equal in world politics. For the other powers, especially for England and Russia, this ambition had more far-reaching consequences than any desire for supremacy in Europe’ (p. 136). ‘England, in particular, was not prepared to recognize Germany’s claims as justified’ (p. 136). Thus from the outset of Weltpolitik Germany found itself in conflict with England. However, the rewards anticipated from Weltpolitik would justify any animosity it might engender. ‘Economic expectations, notions of politics conferring prestige, and hopes for the future of domestic society gained momentum’ (p. 138).

By the summer of 1897 Bülow and William II had agreed on the course of action to be taken regardless of the risk. Bülow noted: ‘I had to oppose England in order to make space in the sun’ (p. 229). They knew that England was their primary rival and that a new course would set off ‘commercial rivalry of “immense force”’ (p. 228). The alternative was not suitable. Canis notes: ‘Without a considerable increase in foreign trade, without the struggle for world markets, Germany would not be the equal of the other industrial nations, and would deline into a second-rate power. Export policy and the policy of a world power were, for Germany, two sides of the same coin’ (p. 141).

England, on the other hand, was also in a position where it either had to meet the German and American challenges or abdicate its position on the economic throne of the world. It had to maintain its naval supremacy to ensure its survival, as it needed foodstuffs and raw materials from abroad as well as foreign markets for its finished products. By the 1890s England was already falling behind Germany and the United States in industrial production and population growth. It viewed Germany’s 1898 naval programme with great apprehension.
Philipp Eulenburg had predicted as early as 1895 that England would be Germany’s deadly enemy on the commercial front, although it was a policy of William II’s to improve relations with it in the hope that perhaps an alliance could be achieved. Also in 1895 Marschall noted in the Reichstag the German position in South Africa: ‘We are not seeking any political influence there, we do not want to change conditions there; on the contrary, we want to maintain the territorial, political, and economic status quo, and believe that this will serve our interests; we want to maintain the economic relations that we have established in South Africa, and which are enjoying a steady growth. These are our interests, and we want, and intend, to protect them’ (pp. 143-4).

Germany feared expanding Japanese influence in the Far East. If a Sino-Japanese alliance should be concluded, it could ‘squeeze German trade and German industry out of East Asia’ (p. 154). Germany needed ‘a German base in China’ (p. 163). South America was also important to Germany. ‘South America, the Middle East, and East Asia are of particular interest to the Reich, which by establishing bases there wants to achieve a global economic balance which is to guarantee the industrial future of Germany’ (p. 227).

Wherever Germany attempted to expand its economic sphere of influence it met opposition. Therefore a fleet was needed to protect its interests. ‘Weltpolitik was the real aim; the fleet was to be the most important means of coercion in achieving this, for in the past, maritime inferiority had repeatedly been held responsible for the fact that England had not accepted Germany’s international political ambitions’ (p. 255). As the historian Dietrich Schäfer noted: ‘We need to be feared – then we will not be attacked’ (quoted on p. 335). Canis concludes that economic matters were the driving force behind Weltpolitik. ‘After the turn of the year 1900 to 1901, foreign policy came further under the influence of economic issues, and under the pressure of the need to make decisions in line with economic policy. The economic crisis deepened, and discussion focused on the decline in exports’ (p. 356).

Canis ends his study with an Ausblick that he entitles ‘Der Weg in die Isolation’. He introduces this with ‘Die Weichen waren 1902 gestellt’ (p. 396). While I have no argument with his conclusion, he is looking at events teleologically. By 1902 it was not possible to predict that Germany, by 1908, would find itself isolated on the continent of
Europe and shut out of further gains in the Far East. In 1902 Germany still had options open. The Björkö conference had not yet taken place, nor had Algeciras, nor the failure of Germany to achieve an alliance with the United States. Although the fleet was being built in 1902 it was not until 1907-08 that the naval race with England heated up. In 1902 William II was still optimistic that an alliance with England could be achieved. By 1902 neither the Anglo-French nor the Anglo-Russian alliances had been concluded.

Germany’s defeat at Algeciras in 1906 and its failure to gain a German-American-Chinese alliance against Japan in 1907-08 were the real turning points in German diplomacy after the turn of the century. These two defeats frustrated the policy of Weltpolitik and led to disillusionment and a crisis of confidence among the German people in their Kaiser and his policies. From this point on there was a paranoid conviction that Germany had been encircled on the Continent and excluded from the Far East. None of this was evident by 1902. By 1908 the die was cast. Germany was encircled on the Continent and shut out of the Far East. The naval race had heated up. Also by 1908 William II knew that he could not hope to achieve an alliance with England, the United States, or Russia. All of this was still possible, though, in 1902. This book should be translated into English so that a much wider audience will be able to access the tremendous amount of information and the new interpretations it contains.

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