

THE SILENT DICTATORSHIP

The Politics of the German High Command
under Hindenburg and Ludendorff,
1916–1918

Martin Kitchen

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To My Mother and Father

PREFACE

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INTRODUCTION

In the course of the First World War the structural weaknesses and contradictions within German society became increasingly acute under the strain of a war that affected all aspects of life. Just as the contradictions themselves had long been present, so the attempt to overcome them by means of a pseudo-plebiscitary military dictatorship of the High Command was the application of a form of rule that can be called characteristic of the Second Reich, even though in a drastic and critical situation it assumed a new and more radical form.¹

The fundamental cause of these problems lay in the course of Germany's economic development. Industrialisation occurred in Germany at a later date than in the other leading industrial states of the nineteenth century, and it was also more rapid and uneven. Social change and the growth of bourgeois liberalism lagged far behind the startling developments of industry. Concentration and monopolisation of industry was already far advanced before significant sectors of the economy had been fully industrialised. The result of this uneven development was the continuing existence of a large, though precarious class of petit-bourgeois artisans, a class that was constantly threatened with proletarianisation and loss of status, and which was therefore particularly susceptible to the anti-modernist and ultra-reactionary propaganda of anti-industrial conservatives. This petite-bourgeoisie could easily be mobilised by demagogic appeals for a struggle for God and King against a rapacious capitalism.²

At first it seemed that the conflict between the forces of production which were pressing forward, and the restorative social order that acted as a hindrance to further development, which had reached a political climax in the constitutional crisis of the early 1860s in Prussia, was solved by the *klein deutsche* solution of 1866. The victory over Austria effectively ended the constitutional crisis, gave Bismarck tremendous prestige and cemented Prussian domination in Germany and Junker domination in Prussia; but it soon became clear that Prussia had transferred its problems to Germany where they were to become even more intense. In the period of liberal free trade from 1866 to 1873, under the aegis of

Rudolph von Delbrück, the 'chief of general staff of the free traders', capital was released from the restraining influence of the state, and, given a further stimulus by the victory over France in 1870-71, further dramatic advances were made. The excitement and prosperity of the *Gründerjahre* helped to divert men's attention from the social question, and hence the effects of the great depression of 1873-96 were all the more acute.³

As a consequence of the depression the alliance of 1879 was formed under the shadow of protective tariffs: the alliance of 'rye and iron', of feudal estate and blast furnace, of the Junkers and industrial bourgeoisie. But the interests of these two groups were contradictory, and it was not long before it became apparent to the more far-sighted political scientists, among them Max Weber, that the economic forces that were unleashed by the unification of Germany under Prussia were likely to destroy the old and antiquated ruling class that was now no longer economically viable. The aristocracy, the officer corps and the bureaucracy could only preserve their predominance, in a period of rapid industrialisation and of universal suffrage, at the cost of creating further divisions and tensions within society, which were to prove increasingly difficult to master. Germany was thus plagued with divisions that could not be overcome without radical change and democratisation. There were the contradictions between Prussian hegemony and German federalism, between economic modernisation and constitutional reaction, between the bourgeois concept of legality and the demands of the military and bureaucratic elites, between agrarians and industrialists, and between bourgeoisie and proletariat, to name only the more obvious. These contradictions could only be papered over by frantic political juggling and the application of panaceas which in turn created further and more serious problems. The characteristic form of government in Germany from Bismarck to Hitler was thus bonapartism.⁴

It was Karl Marx who, in his brilliant essay 'The 18 Brumaire of Napoleon Bonaparte' gave classic expression to the theory of bonapartism. For Marx, bonapartism was a form of bourgeois rule in which the bourgeoisie felt unable to maintain its social position and had to relinquish political power to an independent executive authority. This form of rule was supported by peasants who upheld the bourgeois ideals of private property, but because they were not organised as a class were unable to enforce their class interests and therefore had to be represented. They thus looked up to authority

to 'send them rain and sunshine from above'. Bonapartist government was further supported by the class of *déclassés* whom Marx called *la bohème*. These were the rootless of all classes who lived in an ideological no-man's-land and who saw in the bonapartist state the possibility of finding a comfortable position within a grossly inflated bureaucracy. Here the petite-bourgeoisie, caught in the ideological crossfire of capital and labour, fearful of proletarianisation, yet hostile towards big capital, saw a gleam of hope. This alliance was held together by its own particular ideology. There was the resounding appeal to the glorious napoleonic tradition of nationalism, revolution and the victories of the army. Marx expanded his ideas on bonapartism in the 'Civil War in France' of 1871. In this essay he calls bonapartism 'imperialism', which he defines as 'the most prostitute and the ultimate form of state power which nascent middle class society had commenced to elaborate as a means of its own emancipation from feudalism, and which full-grown bourgeois society had finally transformed into a means for the enslavement of labour by capital'. The secret of this imperialism, or 'caesarism', was that it claimed to transcend the class divisions of society and act for the good of all. It claimed to rest on the support of the peasants, who were little concerned with the struggle between capital and labour; of the working class, who supported the destruction of parliamentarism which placed government in the hands of the propertied classes; of the bourgeoisie, because it guaranteed their economic position and relieved the threat of a democratic revolution; and finally it claimed to bring all these classes together in the pursuit of national glory. For Marx imperialism, or bonapartism, was the characteristic form of government when the bourgeoisie had lost or had not yet gained the ability to rule, and the working class had not yet developed enough to take its place.

Marx never applied his analysis of the class structure of the France of Napoleon III to the Germany of Bismarck, but his model is of considerable importance for the understanding of the Second Reich. It was Engels who saw the striking similarity between the two regimes. Writing to Marx in April 1866 he said that:

it is increasingly obvious that the bourgeoisie does not have what it takes to rule directly, and as there is not an oligarchy as there is in England which can take over the job of running the state and society, in return for generous payment, therefore a bonapartist semi-dictatorship is the normal form of rule; it looks after the great

material interests of the bourgeoisie, often against the will of the bourgeoisie, but it does not allow them any part of government. On the other hand this dictatorship is bound in turn to adopt the material interests of the bourgeoisie, however reluctantly.⁵

Engels pointed to Bismarck's manipulative use of universal suffrage, certainly in the tradition of Louis Napoleon, and described bonapartism as the 'true religion of the modern bourgeoisie'.

Marx and Engels were by no means alone in thinking that the key to Bismarck's policy, both foreign and domestic, lay in his attempt to create, in Wilhelm Liebknecht's words, 'a princely insurance company against democracy'. Jacob Burckhardt, for example, believed that Bismarck's foreign policy was conducted in order to 'solve internal difficulties', and that his wars were fought to counteract the pressures of democracy and social change.⁶ At the same time the true nature of his rule was disguised to a considerable extent by the fact that he appeared as the Kaiser's faithful servant and adviser, the protagonist of conservative and traditional policy; but what often appears as paradoxical in Bismarck's policies, the curious combination of the conservative and the radical, was all part of his bonapartist approach.

The new tariffs of 1879 gave the industrialists and the agrarians the protectionism they demanded, and the anti-socialist laws reinforced their position against the demands of the working class. Repression against the labour movement became all the more necessary for Bismarck as the direct result of the protective tariffs was a worsening of the condition of the working class. For Bismarck the anti-socialist laws were a 'prophylactic institution' against danger from the left, and it was in exactly the same sense that he instituted his social reforms, which were the price he had to pay for overcoming the increased tensions within Germany caused by his economic policy.⁷ In his social policy he freely admitted the influence of Napoleon III, for he admired the skilful way in which Napoleon had taken the wind out of the left's sails by rendering most Frenchmen dependent on the state, by making France a nation of *rentiers*. For Bismarck, a state pension was an excellent price for the ruling class to pay for social quiet, for he argued that when a nice little pension was at stake few would risk revolutionary violence against a benevolent state.

The combination of protective tariffs, repression of the labour movement and social legislation proved inadequate as a means of overcoming the intensified social divisions of Germany during the great depression. More radical tricks were needed. Among such devices

Bismarck was perfectly prepared to use anti-semitism for his own political purposes.⁸ Anti-semitism could play a useful role in a bonapartist state in that it could provide a scapegoat for social ills. Social aggressions could be diverted from their objective source and directed towards a group, in this case the Jews, that had nothing whatever to do with the objective cause of the aggressions. In Bismarck's Germany, the Jews played a particularly convenient role in that they could be identified to a certain extent with the 'spirit of capitalism', and could thus be used to mobilise and radicalise the discontented *declassés* against the modern age. By stimulating reactionary politics, anti-semitism could in turn discredit the bourgeois democracy of the industrial state. Anti-semitism furthermore was used to obfuscate class divisions. Race was intended to transcend class, and hatred of the Jews could be transformed into hatred of Bismarck's political opponents.

Bismarck never used anti-semitism as ruthlessly for his own political aims as it was later to be used in Germany, and he was in no sense a rabid anti-semite, knowing full well that radical anti-semitism could get out of hand and could present further problems to his regime, rather than help to strengthen the established order. He preferred to use foreign policy to reinforce his position at home. Just as in 1866 and 1870-71 he had used the crises with Austria and France to the advantage of his domestic policies, so with his imperialism and his manipulative use of foreign political crises, either real or deliberately fabricated, he was to attempt to buttress up the social *status quo* against the unrelenting forces of change.⁹ The problems that beset such a policy were greater than ever. Foreign policy could be used to neutralise domestic political tensions, but there was an ever narrower field for manoeuvre. Bismarck's need to preserve the peace in Europe was such that there could be no repeat of the Schleswig-Holstein crisis, the Austro-Prussian war, or the Franco-Prussian war. At the same time the tensions at home that needed to find some outlet were to become ever more severe, particularly in the period of economic stagnation from 1882-86.

Bismarck's imperialism offered some relief to the economic and structural problems of the Reich. Foreign trade, state intervention in economic affairs and the beginnings of a formal empire offered some hope to the advanced capitalism of Germany that was caught in a cyclical depression. Imperialism also provided a useful means of disguising class divisions in a society that was becoming increasingly polarised as political reform became a pressing need. Imperialist enthusiasms, heightened by a crude anti-English nationalism, were the

effective ingredients of the political strategy of Bismarck and his successors.¹⁰ Social imperialism was thus part of an attempt to preserve the social *status quo* at a time of rapid economic advance and social change. As the need for fundamental change in the structure of German society became more and more acute, so the attempts to divert this political energy outside the Reich in the pursuit of imperialist goals became all the more frantic.

If bonapartism in Germany was the result of an attempt to reconcile economic modernisation and the preservation of the social *status quo*, it was also constitutionally the only truly adequate form of government. The pluralist society is the most effective form of bourgeois democracy in that the opposition groups are effectively institutionalised and integrated into the larger society. The opposition is loyal. This characteristic form of government has little in common with the constitutional practice of the Second Reich. By labelling the opposition groups as 'enemies of the Reich', and by excluding them from effective participation in political life, Bismarck blocked a significant social safety valve and hampered the political and constitutional development of Germany, so that it was soon to become hopelessly inadequate for the needs of a modern industrial society. Germany was without institutionalised means of integration, and with its anti-parliamentary and conservative constitutional structure, integration had to be provided by a figure who could inspire general approval and acclamation. Constitutionally it was the Kaiser who was called upon to unite the divergent elements of a socially and economically divided society and because of his particular position he might be able to help the people forget their differences and unite in a national group against enemies, real or imaginary, at home and abroad. Here a bonapartist element was immanent within the system, and William II's particular brand of charismatic leadership and popular absolutism in the early years of his reign was a perfectly adequate interpretation of his constitutional function. Indeed during the war, when the Kaiser relinquished his authority, the integrating role of the monarch was no longer in effect, and the problems that this created for the conduct of the affairs of state were considerable.¹¹

Universal suffrage proved to be a useful implement of Bismarck's bonapartist rule. By granting universal suffrage Bismarck had drawn the sting from the liberals and had even gained the reputation in some conservative circles of being a dangerous liberal himself. Universal suffrage also gave the regime a pseudo-plebiscitary dimension that could be used to maintain the *status quo*. But universal suffrage was not

without its obvious dangers when, as a result of a dramatic population change and increase, rapid urbanisation, and a significant growth of the wage earning class, the calculations on which it was based were proved false. Germany was no longer an agricultural country but an industrial state. Bismarck had enfranchised a conservative peasantry, and could therefore accept Lassalle's challenge to grant universal suffrage. Now universal suffrage was to become the weapon of an ever-increasing industrial proletariat led by a vigorous and well-organised political party. The 'red peril' was now both a useful myth and an alarming possibility. Bismarck and his successors had two answers to this problem — repression and the concentration of forces of the anti-socialist and anti-democratic parties: on the one hand the anti-socialist laws, the anti-subversion bill (*Umsturzvorlage*), the penitentiary bill (*Zuchthausvorlage*), the *Lex Arons* and the anti-socialist activities of the army; and on the other hand the concentration of the bourgeois parties, the compromise of political principles and interests in defence of the existing order, the policy of *Sammlungspolitik*.¹² The alliance of Junkers and industrialists supported by the small entrepreneurs and artisans was at best a marriage of convenience of the parties of order, but it could not overcome the often conflicting interests of the partners. By 1890 it was in ruins, was revived again under Miquel, but was further weakened with the collapse of the Bülow Block.

Sammlungspolitik, in spite of its ups and downs, and the fundamental contradictions on which it was based, was the characteristic political alliance of the era. Bonapartism, counter-revolution and *Sammlungspolitik*, aimed against England and Russia abroad and the proletariat at home, as Eckart Kehr argued, had to be constantly stimulated if it were not to fall apart. Prestige politics and social policy as insurance against social change were thus designed to hold this alliance together. As social stresses became greater, Bismarck's imperialist formula no longer seemed adequate. Something more drastic and dramatic was needed. 'World Politics', the bid for world power, was the new and more aggressive form of German imperialism.

The outward and visible expression of 'World Politics' was the fleet of Admiral Tirpitz, whose naval programme is a vivid expression of the politics of the ruling class of Wilhelmine Germany.¹³ Tirpitz was determined that the fleet should be used to provide a 'great new national task which will bring economic gain and act as a powerful palliative against educated and uneducated social democrats'. In another passage Tirpitz wrote that the naval programme would place the 'social order in quarantine'. But his programme went further than a mere preservation

of the social *status quo*, it was also politically reactionary. He attempted to revive Bismarck's recipe of an *Aeternat*, a perpetual naval bill that would obviate the need to secure Reichstag approval for the navy estimates, and thus severely limit the power of parliament. But Tirpitz's cure made the disease worse. The financial problems of the Reich dashed his *Aeternat* scheme and intensified the struggles between the opposition parties in the Reichstag and the proponents of a vast naval programme; and even more serious was the fact that however successful the fleet programme might be in achieving its domestic political aims, in foreign policy it was to exacerbate relations with England, provide evidence of the virulence of German imperialism and raise the possibility of a world war.

The mass support for the naval programme was provided by the Navy League (*Flottenverein*) which was but one of the many highly organised and effective interest groups of the post-Bismarckian period.¹⁴ The interest groups were an alternative though often complementary means of circumventing the Reichstag and strengthening the bonapartist elements of the regime. They were a more strident and ultimately more dangerous form of political organisation. As Germany's wealth and population grew there was a vast increase in government funds, and as the bonapartist approach called for vigorous government intervention and social legislation it was caught in the unfortunate contradiction of thus strengthening to some degree the legislative body that it was attempting to weaken. The interest groups, organised on a mass scale, provided a form of anti-parliamentary pseudo-democratisation that seemed to offer a useful alternative to bourgeois democracy. The most significant of these groups politically was the Farmers' League (*Bund der Landwirte*). It was the first successfully organised mass organisation of this type. Its ideology was nationalistic, *völkisch*, social-darwinist, middle class and anti-semitic. Its political aims went far beyond the mere maintenance of agricultural interests, for its ultimate goal was a counter-revolution that would destroy industrial society. Its racism, anti-pluralism, cultural pessimism and its deliberate attempt to obfuscate class divisions gave to its ideology a distinct proto-fascist flavour. There is, moreover, a clear influence of such ideas on the thinking of the High Command (OHL), shown particularly in some of the more extreme memoranda of Colonel Bauer, which shows that the protagonists of total war, of the full exploitation of industrial technology could find an anti-industrial and anti-modernist ideology appealing, without stopping to consider the radical contradictions that such a combination of ideas involved.¹⁵

Just as bonapartism was incapable of resolving the social and political problems which it could merely obscure, so the interest groups proved to be an inadequate safeguard against the development of industrial society. The inability of the ruling class to stop the inevitable course of economic and social change, and the fact that their recipes often did little more than exacerbate the situation, gave them a sense of growing frustration. The fear of revolution at home, and a growing fatalism towards the inevitability of a European war, made many feel that a *coup d'état* from above was the only viable alternative to revolution from below.¹⁶

The idea of a *coup* was fraught with obvious dangers, the more so as those who had helped to intrigue against Bismarck feared that he might return as a '*coup d'état* chancellor', hardly an attractive prospect. A modified form of the *coup d'état*, which would have involved repressive legislation passed by the Reichstag, met with strong opposition and had to be abandoned. As the social democrats grew in strength it became obvious that the only viable Reichstag alignment would have to involve a break with the conservatives and a commitment to parliamentary reform — but such a policy would be considered capitulation, and Bethmann Hollweg was certainly not the man to engineer such a drastic political change. Frustration at the inability of bonapartism, *Sammlungspolitik* and the interest groups to provide viable solutions to the problems that beset an entrenched conservative order led to the characteristic politics of the Wilhelmine era — the politics of 'full steam ahead', the *Flucht nach vorn*. This was to give an even more aggressive accent to the necessary corollary of such radical conservative politics, the anti-English, anti-Russian and anti-proletarian thrust of imperial Germany. This in turn was to lead Germany into a war which was intended to strengthen the social *status quo*, but which Germany was objectively bound to lose.¹⁷

At first it seemed that the war was to achieve everything for which peacetime politics had striven so hard. The war seemed to provide a solution to the racial, class and economic problems of the Reich, and was an admirable substitute for the hopes and aspirations of those who thought in terms of a radical change in society. Many socialists had thought that governments would not go to war because they feared that it would lead to revolution. In fact the reverse was true. The declaration of a national defensive war, the end of party political strife in the *Burgfrieden*, and the war aims dangling like an enormous imperialist carrot in front of the noses of the German people, were all the natural consequences of these prewar developments. In August 1914 it seemed,

to use Toennies' terminology (which in turn was so much a product of the age) that society (*Gesellschaft*) had become a community (*Gemeinschaft*), thus reversing a trend which Toennies found distasteful but inevitable in capitalist society. In spite of all divisions men were united in a common purpose, and the field grey uniform seemed to disguise class differences. This feeling was further heightened by the initial successes of German arms, the speedy defeat of Belgium, the march on Paris and the victory of Tannenberg in the east. The daring war plan of Graf Schlieffen, a *va banque* strategy which was the military expression of the politics of the age, seemed to be working its magic. A dead man's dream of a gigantic Cannae seemed near to realisation. But it soon became clear that the French could not be outflanked. Errors of planning and execution and the shortage of men and materials made it impossible for Schlieffen's plan to be realised, and in spite of the extraordinary efforts of the German troops, it was the Germans who were in danger of being outflanked by the French. At the Marne it was the French, not the Germans who won a decisive battle. The Schlieffen plan was in ruins. Both sides now tried to outflank the other in the 'dash for the sea', but neither side was successful. Germany had placed all her hopes on a swift victory in the west as the only way out of her precarious position. Now she was forced to fight a trench war and was locked in a battle of materials in which she was almost certain to be defeated. The situation was all the more serious in that the Austrian offensive in the east had also proved a failure. Both the Serbians and the Russians in Galicia had repulsed the Austrians and inflicted heavy casualties, and there was soon a distinct possibility that the Carpathian front would not hold.

Falkenhayn, who had hoped to break through at Ypres, and thus escape from the *impasse* that some more far-sighted men realised would result in the defeat of Germany, failed in his objective. The dreams of world politics were dashed, and to add insult to injury, the Japanese government declared war on 23 August and quickly seized Kiautschou and the German possessions in the South Seas. Yet although the frustration of the German war plan was an indication that the strategic and operative aims of the army were out of all proportion to the economic and human resources of the country, this fact only made the ruling class more determined to fight until Germany had achieved an indisputable position as a world power. They now found themselves in the paradoxical position of demanding more excessive war aims as the weakness of Germany became more obvious. Economic and military shortcomings were thus used as evidence not that Germany should

attempt to negotiate a peace on the basis of the *status quo*, but that it should continue to fight so that her position would be impregnable in the next, and hopefully final battle for world power. Although many were aware of the precarious position of the Central Powers, the nationalists feared nothing more than a 'too hasty peace'. At the same time the parties of the *status quo* argued that the war would have to be fought to the bitter end for fear that the alternative would be social revolution. Victory would secure the social, political and economic domination of the 'national' parties. A peace that did not compensate for the sacrifices which had been made, it was argued, would cause such bitter resentment that it would spark off a revolution. Thus the war was continued for world power and the preservation of the *status quo*, but with totally inadequate means for the achievement of these aims. As the war continued the stresses and strains, which many had hoped the war would cure, were in fact intensified by the war itself; the means chosen to overcome them were incapable of providing a solution, and indeed further intensified them.

Moltke's successor as chief of general staff, Falkenhayn, no longer believed that the war could be won in a decisive battle, the more so after the appalling blood letting at Langemarck and the failure of the Ypres offensive. He now believed that the only hope lay in a strategy that would steadily weaken the enemy – *Ermattungsstrategie*. He hoped that a series of limited operations, aimed at tactical objectives, would gradually weaken the enemy and force the Entente to sue for peace. Falkenhayn felt, as had Schlieffen before him, that the decision would have to be sought in the west, but with a different strategy. Conversely Hindenburg and Ludendorff, flushed with their recent triumph, still believed in Schlieffen's concept of a battle of annihilation, but felt that it would have to be fought in their own theatre of war, in the east. Hindenburg and Ludendorff were however denied a repeat performance of the battle of Tannenberg, their initial and spectacular victory. The winter battle in Masuria, although it drove the Russians out of East Prussia, could not be followed up to gain the strategic objective of an encirclement of the Russian army. The Austrian operations in the Carpathians ground to a halt with heavy losses, but in April 1915 the German and Austro-Hungarian attack on the Russian lines at Gorlice was successful, and a breakthrough was achieved along thirty miles of the front. This was followed by further successes which resulted in the Central Powers occupying Warsaw and Brest Litovsk by August. But these successes in the east meant that there were inadequate reserves in the west where the German lines were constantly attacked, and the

operations at Arras, La Bassée, Artois and the Champagne could only be halted by placing an almost intolerable strain on the German troops. The pause in the fighting on the western front in the winter of 1915-16 came not a moment too soon.

There were thus two schools of strategic thinking which were in increasing opposition to each other.¹⁸ Hindenburg and Ludendorff still believed in the possibility of a decisive battle that would win the war, and thought in terms of a vast operation to outflank and encircle the enemy. They were supported by the Austrian chief of staff, Conrad, who constantly plagued Falkenhayn for reserves from the western front so that he would be able to mount a large-scale offensive in northern Italy that would force Italy out of the war, make possible a massive joint attack on France that would lead to victory in the west, and above all boost the morale of Austria-Hungary which was threatening to fall apart under the stress of war. Falkenhayn still believed that his strategy of slowly weakening the enemy offered the only viable military solution. However much the Central Powers needed a decisive victory, this could not be even operationally mounted without building up sufficient reserves, and these reserves would have to come in large part from the trenches of the western front. Falkenhayn knew that he could not spare the men, and Hindenburg and Ludendorff, when they were appointed to the supreme command, soon realised that his judgement had been correct, even though they had constantly and often viciously attacked him for failing to give them the support which they felt they deserved.

If the strategy of the decisive battle was based on a serious underestimation of the situation on the western front, and could provide no satisfactory solution to the problem of defeating Britain and France, the *Ermattungsstrategie* was based on equally fallacious principles. In a war of attrition the Central Powers were bound to be defeated, for they were unable to call upon the almost unlimited reserves of men and material available to the Entente. The desperate attempts to overcome the logic of this situation by unrestricted U-boat warfare, by the Hindenburg Programme and the auxiliary labour law were all inadequate.

In 1916 Falkenhayn tried to find a middle way. He did not believe that it would be possible to force a breakthrough on the western front as had been achieved in the east at Gorlice, but on the other hand he wished to gain the initiative with a more active strategy. Convinced that it was on the western front that the war would have to be won, he decided on a massive attack on the fortress of Verdun. In order for his

plan to work he insisted that Verdun did not have to be taken, but rather that it should be constantly threatened, thus dragging more and more French reserves into the trap. The local army commanders, however, were determined to take the fortress. There was thus further confusion in a plan that was at best the result of desperation rather than clear and logical thinking, and which was highly ambiguous. Verdun soon threatened to become another Ypres, and Falkenhayn's reputation, which had never recovered from his set-backs in November 1914, suffered a further decline. The losses at Verdun on both sides were dreadful, the operation marking a new and ghastly phase in the history of warfare. The German high command refused to call off the offensive, fearful that an admission of failure after such a costly operation would have disastrous consequences. Although Verdun had strained the French army, and had called upon the last of the French reserves, the German army was in turn seriously weakened and was unable to exploit the advantages of this situation at any other point on the western front.¹⁹

The offensive against Verdun did much to upset the Entente's plans for an offensive in 1916, but while the attack on Verdun was still in progress the battle of the Somme began. Again the losses were appalling, the number of losses (killed and wounded) on both sides being about one and a quarter million, but the Entente was no more able to achieve its objectives than the Germans had been at Verdun. Although the line was held, the military position of Germany was now very serious. Verdun had failed, the battle of the Somme hung in the balance, and the successful use of tanks by the British army was a particular threat. In the east the Russians mounted the Brusilov offensive with considerable success. The Austrians lost 200,000 as prisoners, and had to evacuate Southern Galicia and the Bukovina. The Italians were also successful in their operations against the Austrians; in August Gorizia was taken by the Italians. Shortly afterwards Rumania declared war on the Central Powers. Such then was the military background of the appointment of Hindenburg and Ludendorff to the High Command on 29 August 1916.

The politics of the High Command under Hindenburg and Ludendorff must be seen against the background not only of the failure of the strategy of Moltke and Falkenhayn, but also in the wider perspective of the problems facing German society since Bismarck. They were called upon to engineer the decisive battle that Falkenhayn had failed to produce, and they were to restore unity to a badly divided nation. They were needed to deliver the decisive victory that would

secure the achievement of the extensive war aims of the ruling class, and which it was hoped would cement the social *status quo*. The enormous popularity of Hindenburg, who had become a figure of almost mythical proportions, gave the supreme command a plebiscitary dimension which was to be exploited to the full by the military propagandists and chauvinist politicians. The country was to be united behind Hindenburg to achieve the 'Hindenburg Victory' which would provide a panacea to all Germany's problems.

No one was more fully aware than William II of the implications of Hindenburg and Ludendorff's appointment. He had failed to provide the leadership that was essential if there was to be administrative and political integration. In the 1890s William II had, to a certain extent, been the 'National Emperor', but in wartime the 'Supreme Warlord' was pushed into the background. William was aware of his shortcomings, but he did little more than write irascible and often foolish marginal notes on official papers, and indulge in periodic sabre rattling. He knew that Hindenburg and Ludendorff's appointment, accompanied by public clamourings on their behalf, was likely to have serious consequences for his constitutional position. Reluctantly conceding the public request for their appointment, William II knew that he was travelling further than he wished along the road to 'democracy', even if in practice that democracy was to be a form of military dictatorship. Bismarck had been careful to disguise the true nature of his bonapartist rule behind a discreet monarchical and traditional cover. Hindenburg and Ludendorff had few such scruples. Their 'state socialism' went far further than Bismarck's cynical manipulations of Lassallian ideas. Their ideology of the equality of field grey was far more extreme than Bismarck's appeals to the 'productive classes'. Their imperialist aims were far more extensive, just as the *Vaterlandspartei*, their main political support, was a radical version of *Sammlungspolitik*. The politics of the High Command under Hindenburg and Ludendorff were a militarised form of bonapartism. Their form of military dictatorship was as incapable of solving the problems of Germany at war, as was Bismarck's rule of solving the peacetime difficulties that beset an entrenched and outmoded social order. The intensification of those difficulties under the stress of the world war, and the violence of the remedies proposed by the High Command, only served to make the situation worse. The gulf that separated the excessive war aims from the possibility of achieving them could never be bridged, but those aims could also not be abandoned without changing the power constellation of the Reich. This interaction of social, political, economic and military forces makes

the politics of the High Command under Hindenburg and Ludendorff unusually complex, but this complexity is an indication of the significance of the period for an understanding of the course of German history since Bismarck.

NOTES

1. As yet there has been no satisfactory study of the effects of the world war on German society. A. von Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, *The War and German Society*, New Haven 1937, offers some suggestions for lines of research. Jürgen Kocka, *Klassengesellschaft im Krieg 1914-1918*, Göttingen 1973, provides some useful material but gets tied up into some curious methodological knots. Marc Ferro, *The Great War 1914-1918*, London 1973, is a provocative essay.
2. See particularly: H. Böhme, *Deutschlands Weg zur Grossmacht*, Cologne 1966; H. Böhme, *Prolegomena zu einer Sozial – und Wirtschaftsgeschichte Deutschlands in 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt 1968; P. Benaerts, *Les Origines de la grande industrie allemande*, Paris 1933; H. Bechtel, *Wirtschaftsgeschichte Deutschlands*, Munich 1956; K.E. Born, 'Der soziale und wirtschaftliche Strukturwandel Deutschlands am Ende des 19 Jahrhunderts', *Vierteljahrsschrift für Sozial – und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, 50, 1963; A. Gerschenkron, *Bread and Democracy in Germany*, Berkeley 1943; G.W.F. Hallgarten, *Imperialismus vor 1914*, 2 Vols., Munich 1963; T.S. Hamerow, *Restoration, Revolution, Reaction. Economics and Politics in Germany*, Princeton 1958; W.G. Hoffmann, *Das Wachstum der deutschen Wirtschaft seit der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin 1965; W.G. Hoffmann, 'The Take-off in Germany', in *The Economics of Take-off into Sustained Growth*, ed. W.W. Rostow, London 1963; Hans Rosenberg, *Probleme der deutschen Sozialgeschichte*, Frankfurt 1969; W. Zorn, 'Wirtschafts – und Sozialgeschichtliche Zusammenhänge der deutschen Reichsgründungszeit 1850-1879', *Historische Zeitschrift*, Band 197, 1963; Wolfgang Sauer, 'Das Problem des deutschen Nationalstaates', *Politische Vierteljahrsschrift*, Band 3, 1962.
3. H. Rosenberg, *Grosse Depression der Bismarckzeit*, Berlin 1967; K.W. Hardach, *Die Bedeutung wirtschaftlicher Faktoren bei der Wiedereinführung der Eisen – und Getreidezölle in Deutschland*, Berlin 1967; also S.B. Saul, *The Myth of the Great Depression 1873-1896*, London 1969 with a useful bibliography.
4. E. Engelberg, 'Zur Entstehung und historischen Stellung des preussisch-deutschen Bonapartismus', in *Beiträge zum neuen Geschichtsbild*, hrsg. F. Klein, J. Streisand, Berlin 1956; H. Gollwitzer, 'Der Cäsarismus Napoleons III im Widerall der öffentlichen Meinung Deutschlands', *Historische Zeitschrift*, Band 173, 1952; for a contrary but unconvincing view see: A. Rein, *Bonapartismus und Faschismus in der deutschen Geschichte*, Göttingen 1962; and A. Rein, *Die Revolution in der Politik Bismarcks*, Göttingen 1957. For the relationship between bonapartism and fascism see Martin Kitchen, 'August Thalheimer's Theory of Fascism', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, I, 1973.
5. Engels to Marx 13-4-1866, *Marx-Engels-Werke*, Vol. 31, p. 208.
6. Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Bismarck und der Imperialismus*, Cologne 1969, p. 456.
7. See particularly H. Heffter, 'Bismarcks Sozialpolitik', *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 3, 1963; W. Vogel, *Bismarcks Arbeiterversicherung*, Braunschweig 1951; A. Manes, 'Arbeiterversicherung in Deutschland', *Handwörterbuch der Staatswissenschaften*, Band I, 1903; H. Rothfels, 'Bismarck's Social Policy and

- the Problem of State Socialism in Germany', *Sociological Review*, 30, 1938; F. Lütge, 'Die Grundprinzipien der Bismarckschen Sozialpolitik', *Jahrbücher für Nationalökonomie und Statistik*, 134, 1931; G. Adler, *Die imperialistische Sozialpolitik*, Tübingen 1897.
8. See particularly P.W. Massing, *Rehearsal for Destruction*, in German as *Vorgeschichte des politischen Antisemitismus*, Frankfurt 1959; Max Horkheimer, 'Die Juden und Europa', *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, Jahrgang 8, 1939, Heft 1 and 2; M. Nitzsche, *Die handelspolitische Reaktion in Deutschland*, Stuttgart 1905; H.J. Puhle, *Agrarische Interessenpolitik und preussischer Konservatismus im Wilhelminischen Reich*, Hanover 1966; Rosenberg, *Grosse Depression*.
 9. Wehler, *Bismarck und der Imperialismus* is an excellent modern study of the problem of Bismarck's imperialism with a valuable bibliography. For a brief account of his findings see Hans-Ulrich Wehler, 'Bismarck's Imperialism', *Past and Present*, 1970.
 10. Eckart Kehr, *Primat der Innenpolitik*, Hrsg. H.U. Wehler, Berlin 1965, particularly the article 'Englandhass und Weltpolitik'; P.R. Anderson, *The Background of Anti-English Feeling in Germany 1890-1902*, Washington 1939.
 11. The latest study of the 'personal regiment' of William II is J.C.G. Röhl, *Germany without Bismarck*, London 1967.
 12. Dirk Stegmann, *Die Erben Bismarcks*, Köln 1970.
 13. Eckart Kehr, *Schlachtflottenbau und Parteipolitik 1894-1901*, Berlin 1930; Kehr, *Primat der Innenpolitik*; Volker R. Berghahn, *Der Tirpitz-Plan. Genesis und Verfall einer innenpolitischen Krisenstrategie unter William II*, Düsseldorf 1971; Volker R. Berghahn, 'Zu den Zielen des deutschen Flottenbaus unter Wilhelm II', *Historische Zeitschrift*, 210, 1970.
 14. See particularly H.J. Puhle, *Agrarische Interessenpolitik*; Dirk Stegmann, *Die Erben Bismarcks*; A. Kruck, *Geschichte des Alldeutschenverbandes 1890-1939*, Wiesbaden 1954; Dieter Fricke, 'Der Reichsverband gegen die Sozialdemokratie', *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, Heft 7, 1959; K. Saul 'Der Deutsche Kriegerbund. Zur Innenpolitischen Funktion eines nationalen Verbandes im kaiserlichen Deutschland', *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen*, Heft 2, 1969; A. Galos, F.H. Gentzen, W. Jakobszyk, *Die Hakatisten. Der Deutsche Ostmarkenverein 1894-1934*, Berlin 1966; H. Kaeble, *Industrielle Interessenpolitik in der wilhelminischen Gesellschaft*, Berlin 1967; H. Nussbaum, *Unternehmer gegen Monopole*, Berlin 1966; Leo Müffelman, *Die wirtschaftliche Verbände*, Leipzig 1912; M.S. Wertheimer, *The Pan-German League 1890-1914*, New York 1924. As yet there is no detailed study of the Navy League (*Flottenverein*), Wilhelm Deist's forthcoming study of naval propaganda will therefore fill a significant gap.
 15. This same contradiction existed within nazi ideology, when anti-capitalist ideology could be used for its demagogic effect but could not be allowed to go too far. See R. Kühnl, *Die Nationalsozialistische Linke*, Meisenheim, 1966.
 16. E. Zechlin, *Staatsstreichpläne Bismarcks und Wilhelms II 1890-1894*, Stuttgart 1929; J.C.G. Röhl, 'Staatsstreich oder Staatsstreichbereitschaft?', *Historische Zeitschrift*, Band 209, 1969.
 17. Fritz Fischer, *Krieg der Illusionen*, Düsseldorf 1969.
 18. Karl Heinz Janssen, *Der Kanzler und der General*, Göttingen 1967; G. Ritter, *Staatskunst und Kriegshandwerk*, Vol. 3, Munich 1964; *Deutschland im ersten Weltkrieg*, Vol. 1, Berlin 1968.
 19. Alistair Horn, *The Price of Glory, Verdun 1916*, London 1962; Hermann Wendt, *Verdun 1916. Die Angriffe Falkenhayns im Maasgebiet mit Richtung auf Verdun als strategisches Problem*, Berlin 1931; J. Pericard, *Verdun*, Paris 1933.

1 THE APPOINTMENT OF HINDENBURG AND LUDENDORFF

As the war entered its third year the military position of Germany was becoming increasingly critical. The massive offensive against Verdun on which the OHL had pinned such high hopes became a bloody and costly stalemate. The British offensive on the Somme placed the German forces on the western front in a precarious situation. In the east the Russian offensive under Brusilov was so successful that Austria-Hungary seemed to be on the verge of collapse. These military set-backs to the Central Powers on both the eastern and the western fronts encouraged those countries which were considering joining the war on the side of the Entente. Both Rumania and Italy had declared war, tempted by extravagant promises for a generous settlement when the fighting was over, and convinced that Germany was near collapse. Thus by the summer of 1916 the initiative was clearly in the hands of the Entente. German strategy had been based on an underestimation of the strength of the Entente, and an overestimation of the capacity of the Central Powers to provide men and munitions. An increasing number of people were beginning to feel, if only in brief moments of disquieting insight, that the impossible could happen, that Germany and her allies might be defeated and would have to negotiate a peace that would dash the imperialist dreams for a Europe dominated by Germany.

Austria-Hungary was in a parlous state. Shortages of food and munitions, the demoralisation of the army, the incompetence of much of the officer corps and the startling success of the Russian offensive all served to heighten the tensions and contradictions within the state that many had hoped the war would help to conceal. During the Brusilov offensive it was reported that Czech and Ruthenian soldiers deserted *en masse* to the enemy, the first ominous signs that national differences threatened the continuation of the Austrian war effort. The war minister Krobatin felt that the situation was so critical that a catastrophe was imminent.¹

In Germany the euphoria and the exaggerated hopes of the early months of the war were giving way to widespread cynicism and to increasingly frequent outbreaks of hysteria. Under the strain of two years of war and the failures of 1916 the political truce of August 1914 was rapidly crumbling. There were the first political strikes, protests

against the continuation of the war for what seemed to an ever larger number of people to be the selfish aims of a greedy clique, and against the shortages and privations which the government seemed either unable or unwilling to control. At the other end of the political spectrum the Pan Germans and the heavy industrialists were organising themselves to engineer the overthrow of the chief of the general staff and the chancellor, both of whom seemed to stand between them and the realisation of their ambitious annexationist dreams. Meanwhile the chancellor, Bethmann Hollweg, attempted with his 'politics of the diagonal' to steer a middle course and to achieve a liberal compromise, a policy which was doomed by its very nature to failure. He feared that the Pan Germans with their shrill demands ruined any chance for a separate peace with Russia, and he hoped that by playing down the issue of war aims he might be able to appease his critics on the left. Backed by the propaganda efforts of the German National Committee (*Deutsche Nationalausschuss*), Bethmann Hollweg attempted, with singular lack of success, to achieve national unity and restore the *Burgfrieden*. These efforts were derided by the Independent Committee for a German Peace (*Unabhängige Ausschuss für einen deutschen Frieden*), the organisation of the extreme annexationists lead by Dietrich Schäfer. Indeed the squabbles between the *Nationalausschuss* and the *Unabhängige Ausschuss* were symptomatic of the deep-seated divisions on tactical issues which were to become vital issues in German politics in the final two years of the war. In the summer of 1916 there was, however, a fundamental agreement between the two camps on one crucial question. For the realisation of the schemes of either party Germany would have to win a military victory, and without a change in the supreme command this was unlikely to be achieved. Agreement on this issue enabled Bethmann Hollweg to stay in power for one further year, but it meant that Falkenhayn could no longer remain as chief of the general staff. That he would be replaced by Hindenburg and Ludendorff, the victors of Tannenberg and popular idols, was almost a foregone conclusion. Their appointment, however, did not end the differences between the moderates and the extremists, but proved to be a decisive victory for the extremist faction within the ruling class with whom Ludendorff particularly had the closest associations.

The dismissal of Falkenhayn was thus caused by a many-sided attack, the result of some very curious alliances, and it was to backfire with disastrous effect on many of those who took part in the plotting. In this respect the affair was a dress rehearsal for the July crisis of 1917 which was to lead to the overthrow of Bethmann Hollweg.²

Falkenhayn had never been a popular figure. He had first become widely known when as war minister he had defended the excesses of the army in Alsace-Lorraine during the Zabern affair. His ferocious language in the Reichstag on this occasion had won him some sympathy in the army and the undying hatred of many parliamentarians, but even his admirers were put off by his coldness, sarcasm and snobbish aloofness.³ Many senior officers regarded him as a pusher and a careerist, characteristics which were particularly repugnant to an officer corps that clung to its aristocratic image. He had in fact had a remarkably rapid career for a Prussian officer, becoming chief of general staff at the age of 52, a younger man than any of the army commanders and commanding generals. With his attack on Verdun a ghastly failure, which he obstinately refused to admit, and with the Russian breakthrough in the east coupled with the British attack on the Somme, Falkenhayn's position was indeed precarious. Unable to move troops to the east he enraged Hindenburg and Ludendorff who were convinced that he was determined to spoil their chances for another spectacular victory; the high hopes for the western front dashed, he was increasingly criticised by senior commanders. Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria had grave reservations about his capabilities since the days of Ypres. The war minister, Wild, whose attitude towards Falkenhayn was highly ambivalent, felt that he was fundamentally a 'weakling' (*Schlappschwanz*).⁴

Many politicians had little love for Falkenhayn. Those on the left could not forget Zabern; the right resented his inability to create the military conditions for the realisation of their war aims programme. Many politicians were also suspicious of Falkenhayn's political ambitions, and rumours that he wished to become chancellor continued to circulate.⁵ He treated the politicians with haughty disdain, refusing to keep them properly informed and constantly dabbling in political matters. It is one of the supreme ironies that many politicians, from Bethmann down, plotted to overthrow Falkenhayn so as to stop military interference with political matters, and to replace him by Hindenburg and Ludendorff whose political meddling was never surpassed, before or after, in the history of the German army.

Yet Falkenhayn was not without powerful friends, and the struggle for his dismissal was likely to be long and tough. Colonel Marschall of the military cabinet was a devoted friend to Falkenhayn and one of the few men who clearly saw the danger inherent in the appointment of Ludendorff — whose boundless ambition and pride would most likely lead him to continue to fight the war until Germany was ruined and

exhausted.⁶ His strongest support came from the Kaiser himself, who, in spite of nagging doubts and frustration, continued to support his chief of general staff until the very last moment. Falkenhayn was careful to cultivate good relations with William, always appearing as the humble servant of the 'Supreme Warlord', but never in fact allowing any interference in military affairs by the monarch. There was nothing in Falkenhayn of Hindenburg's deliberate acting up to public opinion which posed such a threat to the traditional position of the monarch with regard to the power of command. Whereas William never regarded Falkenhayn as a threat to his authority, he knew that such a threat emanated from Hindenburg and Ludendorff, and he clung to his chief of general staff knowing that the change would undermine his own position and introduce into the system an element of plebiscitary democracy that was abhorrent to him.

Bethmann Hollweg's motives for plotting the overthrow of Falkenhayn were complex. There had long been differences between the two. The chancellor resented Falkenhayn's interference in political affairs and had serious reservations about his military abilities. He had bitter clashes with Falkenhayn over the issue of submarine warfare and over the Balkans.⁷ It has even been argued that Bethmann wished to get rid of Falkenhayn so as to make possible a peace of renunciation (*Verzichtfrieden*) under the leadership of the enormously popular and respected Hindenburg, but this is not convincing, even though he certainly considered this aspect of the question and had suggested that the German people under Hindenburg would accept 'any peace that bears his name'.⁸

The chancellor's main concern was for an eastern strategy that would force Russia to make a separate peace, and thus enable Germany to complete the victory in the west, using unrestricted submarine warfare if necessary.⁹ For this policy Hindenburg and Ludendorff's strategy seemed ideal; Falkenhayn's had already proven bankrupt. Hindenburg and Ludendorff were the men of Tannenberg, Falkenhayn of Verdun. The tremendous reputation of Hindenburg would serve to paper over the divisions which were becoming all too apparent within German society, restore the *Burgfrieden*, placate the left and silence the chancellor's critics on the extreme right. With Hindenburg and Ludendorff the chancellor hoped to achieve the war aims which he had outlined as early as September 1914. He had no intention of hiding behind Hindenburg's back, abandoning his war aims programme and negotiating a peace on the basis of the *status quo*. At the same time Bethmann hoped that he would be able to use Hindenburg to convince