

## Blood and Iron: The Rise and Fall of the German Empire 1871-1918

**Review Number:** 2466

**Publish date:** Friday, 7 October, 2022

**Author:** Katja Hoyer

**ISBN:** 9780750996228

**Date of Publication:** 2021

**Price:** £14.99

**Pages:** 253pp.

**Publisher:** The History Press

**Publisher url:** <https://www.thehistorypress.co.uk/publication/blood-and-iron/9780750996228/>

**Place of Publication:** Cheltenham

**Reviewer:** Joseph Cronin

The publicity surrounding the German empire has not been good lately, to put it mildly. In August 2020, several hundred members of the far-right *Reichsbürger* ('Reich Citizens') group tried to storm the German parliament building in Berlin. They did so while holding the red, white, and black flags of Imperial Germany. 'It is shameful', Foreign Minister Heiko Maas tweeted in response, 'to have flags of the German Reich in front of Parliament'.<sup>(1)</sup>

In Hamburg, meanwhile, a debate has been raging about what to do with the country's largest *Bismarck-Denkmal* (statue of Otto von Bismarck, Germany's first chancellor), which is currently being renovated. Should it be restored to its former glory? Should public money be spent on prettifying a monument to a warmonger and racist? Does the statue need to be recontextualised, perhaps with a plaque explaining Bismarck's deeds, or a memorial to the victims of German colonialism? Should it be pulled down entirely?<sup>(2)</sup>

If all this leads you to think that now is not a good time to publish a book about Germany's Second Reich, particularly one that seeks to highlight its positive aspects, then you'd be wrong. Katja Hoyer's *Blood and Iron*—her first book—has already become a bestseller in the UK. Its first edition sold out within days; this reviewer had to make do with an electronic copy. On the one hand, this is a great thing: it shows that there is still an appetite for German history amongst the British reading public. But it also raises questions. In a time of Black Lives Matter protests and a renewed focus on European countries' colonial atrocities, how should we understand Germany's imperial era? What lessons can we learn from it?

Hoyer takes a clear line on these questions. Although hers is a popular history book with a narrative style, she also puts forward an argument. Firstly, she dismisses the *Sonderweg* ('special path') approach: the idea that Germany's historical trajectory differed radically from that of other Western nations. This in itself is not unusual: in fact very few historians still defend the *Sonderweg*. The belief that Germany was on a downward slope towards Nazism from 1871 can easily be dismissed as teleological hindsight-ism. But Hoyer also rejects the approach on the grounds that it stresses *negative* continuities in German history rather than positive ones—a position she developed more fully in a recent article.<sup>(3)</sup>

Historians, Hoyer argues, have tended to view the *Kaiserreich* as a mere prelude to the Third Reich: seeing

in it the authoritarianism, top-down bureaucracy, rising nationalism, and xenophobia that would assume colossal proportions under Hitler (p. 52). In doing so, they have overlooked its more positive legacies: a nascent democracy, the beginnings of social welfare provision, and a fractious, albeit functioning multi-party system with a lively public sphere. It is these latter features that Hoyer brings to the fore in *Blood and Iron*.

I am only partly convinced by her thesis. Democracy and social welfare began in Imperial Germany, there's no doubt. The question is *why*. Because outcome is not the same as intention. Bismarck was no democrat. When he granted the vote to all adult men with the empire's founding in 1871 he did so thinking he could manipulate the newly enfranchised—peasants and industrial workers—into voting for his favoured conservative parties. Of course it didn't turn out that way, and Bismarck spent the rest of his chancellorship trying vainly—with increasingly draconian measures—to suppress Catholic and socialist political organisation. The plan went wrong, essentially, but Hoyer perceives these democratic buds as the product of Bismarck conceding to Germany's 'liberal traditions' (p. 9), an indication that he could see the way the wind was blowing, and was willing to adapt accordingly.

That's still a perfectly legitimate argument. What's stranger is Hoyer's valorisation of Bismarck as a man and a statesman. This is a bold position to take, and an increasingly unpopular one, given how much his reputation has taken a battering lately. Hoyer describes Bismarck as a 'political genius' (p. 57) and 'one of the greatest statesmen of all time' (pp. 7, 62). I hasten to add that he was also a warmonger. Bismarck's 'wars of unification' have traditionally been depicted as clever diplomacy, but a lot of people died in this 'statemaking'. The belief that these deaths were necessary to achieve a unified Germany plays into a nationalist narrative: that nation-states are somehow inevitable, or at least that they are the best form of territorial organisation and governance. But let's face it, these soldiers died for nothing more than a concept. One that even the first Kaiser wasn't all that convinced by.

Something else that's come to light in recent decades is Bismarck's pivotal role in the German colonial enterprise. Again, the traditional interpretation is that Bismarck had no interest in acquiring overseas colonies. There's an oft-cited anecdote of him, circa 1888, waving his arms at a map of Europe before a bemused colonialist shouting 'This is my map of Africa!' But the argument that Bismarck was only interested in Europe doesn't wash anymore. He convened the notorious Berlin Conference in 1884, which divided the remaining colonisable territories of Africa between the European powers. Bismarck also presided over the beginnings of German colonialism, coming to see it, after his initial reluctance, as a useful means of galvanising public opinion as the country became increasingly factionally divided during the 1880s. (This was largely Bismarck's doing too.)

Hoyer implies that German colonialism only really got going after Bismarck left the stage in 1890, and that it was largely the brainchild of Wilhelm II and his inner circle (p. 137), but that wasn't the case. Bismarck willingly set a train in motion that would ultimately lead to a human catastrophe. In 1904, German 'protective forces' in the colony of South West Africa—set up in 1884—waged a so-called *Vernichtungskrieg* ('war of annihilation') against two indigenous peoples, the Herero and the Nama, after they had rebelled against colonial rule. The general in command of the German forces, a man called Lothar von Trotha, issued an infamous 'extermination order' containing the line 'I shall spare neither women nor children'. German troops thus drove the Herero and Nama into the Kalahari Desert and encircled them, going so far as to poison the water holes they were using. They also shot anyone who tried to escape.

The result of this offensive was genocide—the first of the 20th century. Some 70,000 people died from dehydration, starvation, and exposure to the elements. Sixty thousand of the victims were Herero (about 80 percent of their total population) and 10,000 were Nama (50 percent of their total population). Until the 1990s, historians tended to overlook this episode or, if they mentioned it, did so with a view to downplaying the extent of the violence. Since then, however, there have been some excellent studies by Jürgen Zimmerer, Isabel Hull, David Olusoga, and Casper Erichsen, to name a few, which have explored this genocide and its relationship both to contemporaneous forms of European colonial violence, as well as to the Nazi genocide of European Jewry in the 1940s.[\(4\)](#) Hull has identified the German military and political elite's predilection

for 'final solutions' as causal factors in both cases.

I can't help but think that Hoyer's aversion to anything even vaguely reminiscent of *Sonderweg* thinking was what led her to devote just half a sentence to the Herero-Nama genocide (p. 153). General histories have to be selective, of course, but this seemed like an unusually big omission, especially in the context of recent political, social, and scholarly developments. It would be unfair of me to compare Hoyer's oversight to Hellmut Diwald's 1978 book *Geschichte der Deutschen* ('History of the Germans'), which dedicated a mere two-and-a-half of its 768 pages to the Holocaust, but that's what came to mind. In Hoyer's case, a belief that historians have over-emphasised negative continuities in German history pushes her too far in the opposite direction, as if the bad things that happened were just isolated events.

This aversion to negative continuities also extends to Hoyer's discussion of the 'Jewish question'. She rightly acknowledges that this did not begin in 1933 but in 1871, with the creation of the German Reich (p. 88). On the one hand, Jewish men were given full rights as citizens that year, but this emancipation also created a backlash. Because, if the German nation was based on its *Volk*—its ethnically defined people—then surely the Jews did not belong to it. Consequently, antisemitism became, as Hoyer puts it, 'acceptable in large swathes of the population' by the late 19th century (p. 146). She mentions antisemitism, usually in passing, on a handful of pages (pp. 89, 121, 127, 146, 191), but the rot, alas, went much deeper. As Peter Pulzer and others have shown, Germany had a healthy contingent of specifically antisemitic political parties by the late 19th century.<sup>(5)</sup> The term antisemitism itself was coined by a German journalist, Wilhelm Marr, in 1879 to describe a new attitude towards Jews. It had nothing to do with their religion, which could be changed, or their culture, which could also be changed. It was about their 'race', and this was immutable.

In the same year, Heinrich von Treitschke, a celebrated historian, publicly wrote that 'the Jews are our misfortune'. From 1888, Germany had an openly antisemitic emperor, at least in his private remarks. By 1916, in the thick of World War One, the German army commissioned a survey—the so-called *Judenzählung* ('Jew count')—to find out how many Jews were shirking military service. When it turned out that they weren't, the army tried to suppress the results.<sup>(6)</sup> In short, Germany was brewing a serious problem with Jews during the *Kaiserreich*, which is something Hoyer doesn't fully acknowledge. She depicts antisemitism in Imperial Germany as self-contained, an isolated phenomenon, as if what the Nazis introduced in 1933 was somehow unconnected.

Despite these criticisms, I should also say that I really enjoyed reading Hoyer's book. The writing is lucid and compelling. Hoyer is a superb stylist, and her pen-portraits are a marvel, striking just the right balance between salacious and historically relevant. The anecdotes about Bismarck and Wilhelm II alone make the book worth reading. This is the opposite of the kind of broad-brush social history I usually read (and write), and it's refreshing. Yes, it's largely the history of 'great men' (the nascent German feminist movement gets a brief mention, but it's dismissed as a 'tiny group' that did not represent the concerns of ordinary women, pp. 86-87), and it's the history of political elites and power play, but it's done very well, and that deserves credit.

There are three other outstanding features of the book. Firstly, its sophisticated treatment of German nationalism (pp. 16-37). Hoyer underscores the fact that neither Bismarck nor Wilhelm I were German nationalists (pp. 5-6) and charts the development of German cultural and linguistic nationalism, including the role played the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales (pp. 19-20). Secondly, Hoyer's account of Germany's rise as an economic powerhouse (pp. 74-80, 117-123), and, finally, her blow-by-blow account of the First World War, told in unsparing detail (the whole of chapter 5). If I were asked the perennial question 'would you recommend this book to your students?', my answer would be a wholehearted yes. After all, there's no point in recommending a book that you expect students to accept uncritically.

One could nonetheless accuse me of reviewing this book in entirely the wrong spirit, as if it were an academic history book rather than a popular one. But I think that would be doing a disservice to Hoyer. This is proper history, as the book's extensive bibliography attests, and Hoyer doesn't shy away from engaging

with the big debates. Along with the *Sonderweg*, she takes a clear position on the origins of the First World War, asserting that Germany was not primarily responsible for its outbreak (p. 168). I disagree with the notion that Germany's 'blank cheque' to Austria-Hungary in July 1914 was intended to *avoid* a war with Russia. But, as I don't have the expertise to back myself up on this, I won't try to.

In the end it was the question of the *Kaiserreich*'s place in German history—only mentioned on a couple of pages but, more implicitly, the *leitmotif* of the entire book—that I had to take issue with. Because, when it comes to historical continuities, it depends on where you look. You can point to nascent democracy, social welfare measures, and workers' organisation, as Hoyer does, or you can point to growing nationalism, factionalism, antisemitism, and xenophobia. All were present in Imperial German society. National Socialism was based on the latter currents; it nurtured and harnessed them to atrocious ends. But that's not the whole story. You can also see continuities between Imperial Germany and West Germany, particularly under Konrad Adenauer, who himself was a product of the *Kaiserreich*. Or even with the German Democratic Republic, whose criminal code was based on Imperial Germany's. In short, it's never a straight line leading out from the past—it's more like an inkblot with tendrils that spread out in all directions.

I'll end with another visual metaphor. In a famous essay, the historian Helmut Walser Smith proposed the concept of 'vanishing points'—a term borrowed from art—to explain the ways historians of Germany have viewed the country's past. In historical study, a vanishing point is 'a focus of research that structures the whole image'.<sup>(7)</sup> According to Smith, historians of modern Germany have, whether they acknowledge it or not, been guided by temporal 'vanishing points' when writing their histories: whether 1914, 1918, 1933, 1939, 1941, 1945, or 1989. The year they choose is the 'point', in their mind, that all events lead towards. I suggest that Hoyer has added a new vanishing point to that list: 2005, the year Angela Merkel's chancellorship began. This is the kind of strong, stable, sensible leadership Hoyer believes Germans instinctively crave (p. 62), and it also provides a positive continuity from the *Kaiserreich* to the present day. The trouble with that is, there's a lot that's intervened in the meantime.

## Notes

1. 'German leaders slam extremists who rushed Reichstag steps', *Deutsche Welle*, 30 August 2020 <<https://www.dw.com/en/german-leaders-slam-extremists-who-rushed-reichsta...> [2] [accessed 9 April 2021].[Back to \(1\)](#)
  2. 'Hamburger Bismarck-Denkmal: Streit um die Zukunft', *Norddeutscher Rundfunk*, 11 July 2020 <<https://www.ndr.de/nachrichten/hamburg/Hamburger-Bismarck-Denkmal-Streit...> [3] [accessed 9 April 2021]; 'Erste Konzepte für das Hamburger Bismarck-Denkmal', *Norddeutscher Rundfunk*, 7 December 2020 <<https://www.ndr.de/nachrichten/hamburg/Erste-Konzepte-fuer-Hamburger-Bis...> [4] [accessed 9 April 2021].[Back to \(2\)](#)
  3. Katja Hoyer, 'Germany's pre-Nazi history: Rethinking the Second Reich', *HistoryExtra*, 12 March 2021 <<https://www.historyextra.com/period/modern/second-reich-germanys-pre-naz...> [5] [accessed 9 April 2021].[Back to \(3\)](#)
  4. Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller, eds, *Genocide in German South-West Africa: The Colonial War of 1904–1908 and Its Aftermath* (London, 2008); Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, 2005); David Olusoga and Casper W. Erichsen, *The Kaiser's Holocaust: Germany's Forgotten Genocide and the Colonial Roots of Nazism* (London, 2011).[Back to \(4\)](#)
  5. Peter Pulzer, *The Rise of Political Anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), pp. 72–120.[Back to \(5\)](#)
  6. Werner T. Angress, 'The German army's "Judenählung" of 1916: Genesis – consequences – significance', *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, 23 (1978), 117–138.[Back to \(6\)](#)
  7. Helmut Walser Smith, 'The vanishing point of German history: An essay on perspective', *History and Memory*, 17 (2005), 272.[Back to \(7\)](#)
-

**Source URL:**<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2466>

### **Links**

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/358878> [2] <https://www.dw.com/en/german-leaders-slam-extremists-who-rushed-reichstag-steps/a-54758246>> [3] <https://www.ndr.de/nachrichten/hamburg/Hamburger-Bismarck-Denkmal-Streit-um-die-Zukunft,bismarckdenkmal216.html>> [4] <https://www.ndr.de/nachrichten/hamburg/Erste-Konzepte-fuer-Hamburger-Bismarck-Denkmal,bismarckdenkmal220.html>> [5] <https://www.historyextra.com/period/modern/second-reich-germanys-pre-nazi-history/>>