construction, with its obvious anti-British intentions, was bound to arouse deep suspicion in London and the feeling that Britain’s vital interests were being threatened. In military terms, the battle-fleet proved a complete failure. It was unable to affect significantly the course of the war at any point, and certainly did not succeed in turning events in favour of the Central Powers. As a revolutionary groundswell spread throughout the navy after the undecided Battle of Jutland in 1916, later to find its release in 1918, Grand Admiral von Tirpitz, professionally a failure, who had resigned as early as March 1916, took a step which was entirely consistent with his social and political outlook when, in 1917, he founded the proto-fascist German Fatherland Party.

6. Imperialism

Western imperialism, viewed here as both the direct and indirect, formal and informal rule exercised by industrial countries over undeveloped regions by virtue of their socio-economic, technological and military superiority, is a complex phenomenon. Its prerequisite is the process of industrialisation, which forms a watershed in world history and which, despite all the undeniable elements of continuity, distinguishes imperialism from earlier forms of European colonialism. It can best be discussed within a theoretical framework which— as outlined in the introduction in general terms — enables us to analyse the central and interrelated problems raised by it.

(1) Nowadays it must obviously seem inadequate to discuss imperialism purely in terms of ‘the economy’ or ‘industrialisation’. This is far too general an approach, leading to findings that are vague and usually inconclusive. Instead, we should try to comprehend, in terms that are as exact as possible, the significance of industrial and agricultural growth in those states which become involved in expansionist drives. It is in the historical nature of such growth that it follows an uneven pattern. The long-term secular trend of a continuously prospering economy shows only one side of the picture. Periodic interruptions to growth (e.g. recessions, depressions, seasonal fluctuations), variations in the business cycle (‘Kitchins’ over forty months, ‘Juglars’ over ten to eleven years, Kuznet’s twenty-year cycles, or even the long waves of ‘Kondratieffs’) — in short, the irregular rhythm of boom, crisis, downturn, depression, upturn is on the whole more important for contemporaries and historians than the mathematical and statistical overall trend which obscures the violent oscillations.¹

(2) Social change is one of the preconditions of the economic processes involved; but it also accompanies them and is affected by them. It should, therefore, be examined as a specific social structure in its own right. Changes in the constellations of social forces and the problems of a nation’s class structure become, therefore, the focus of analysis.

(3) This, in turn, raises the question of the political contest for the acquisition, maintenance and extension of opportunities to wield power. In other words, we must also analyse the inner dynamics of the ruling political system. At this point imperialism emerges as a strategy and means for defending and stabilising political domination, and must be seen against a backdrop of conflict generated by attempts of either upholding or changing the system. In this respect, domestic and foreign policy become two facets of one and the same national policy. In this context the effect of ideologies such as Social Darwinism can be determined. Their impact cannot be adequately accounted for if they are seen only as quasi-autonomous factors or dealt with purely in terms of the history of ideas. The approach adopted here enables us to account for the astonishing simultaneity and similarity of the West’s imperial expansion. If, on the other hand, one reduces the decisive driving forces behind imperialism to specific national ‘urges’, the historian’s concern with the particular is turned into a dogma. It leads inevitably to a distorted picture, since it makes a comparative analysis which can elucidate problems by stressing common structural elements difficult, if not impossible.

6.1 Uneven growth and the legitimising of political domination: social imperialism

If we adopt the above approach to imperialism, particular attention should be paid to two things when dealing with problems of economic growth. To begin with, the historically unprecedented dynamism of the industrial economies released forces which were widely perceived as compulsive drives emanating from the system itself. A pragmatic expansionism responded to these forces and led to the acquisition of new markets. These were secured either by informal means or by direct colonial rule over territorial possessions. There is no need to make a distinction here between the imperialism born of
economic depression (up to about 1895) and that born of the trend-period of economic prosperity which followed. Nor is there any point in denying the connection between imperialism and economic development. Empirically, the genesis of modern imperialism is inseparably linked — subjectively in the consciousness of contemporaries, but also objectively for subsequent research — with the variations in the economic cycle. This is true not only of Germany's imperialist expansion but equally valid for the American, French and Belgian cases, and — allowing for its divergent historical time scale — the British example as well. But even in the period of world-wide economic boom between 1896 and 1913, the most important element common to both phases of expansion was the experience of irregular growth, i.e. the constant difficulties of arriving at a rational advance calculation of opportunities for profit. This helps explain the high expectations placed in foreign trade, which virtually became an ideology in themselves. A trend-period of prolonged prosperity never implies a continuous development free from interruptions. After 1896 the upswing was interrupted by crises and, to some extent, depressions: in 1900-01, 1907-08 and 1913. These provided painful reminders that there was no such thing as a continuous and even rise in economic development. What is historically illuminating, indeed critical, is not only the losses involved in colonial trading (felt at the time, though calculable only nowadays), but the sometimes slight, sometimes exorbitantly high profit margins of parasitical groups representing vested interests. Equally important is the fact that for those involved in the decision-making processes the undeveloped regions of the globe appeared to offer new markets and investment opportunities, as well as the possibility of stabilising the domestic economy. The pragmatic expansion referred to was, therefore, part of those actions by which an emergent state interventionism, aimed at sustaining and controlling economic prosperity, sought to contain the effects of uneven economic growth. State-sponsored export drives and the acquisition of new markets, leading to an 'informal empire' or direct colonial rule, aimed at restoring and sustaining economic prosperity in a gradually expanding domestic market whose absorptive capacity was long underestimated. The material well-being of the nation came to depend on various forms of successful expansion, including, of course, trade with countries at a similar stage of development. It was also served by a preventive imperialism which tried to secure long-term opportunities by, for example, precautionary annexations of the kind envisaged by Lord Rosebery when he spoke of 'staking out claims for the future'.

But the various economic motives behind this expansionism, however prominently they may figure in economic theories, represented only one element behind imperialism. The desire, indeed the decided aim, of legitimising the status quo and the political power structure by a successful imperialism was intimately bound up with an expansionist programme. The intentions behind Germany's overseas expansion, and the function it performed, served the interests of a 'social imperialism'. This amounted to a conservative 'taming' policy which sought to divert abroad reform attempts which found their expression in the emancipatory forces of liberalism and the socialist workers' movement, and endangered the system. It was a defensive strategy which aimed at the social goal of a conservative Utopia and attempted rigidly to defend traditional structures against continual change. It made use of modern propaganda techniques, but aimed at preserving the inherited pre-industrial social and political structures of the Greater Prussian Empire, while defending the industrial and educated middle classes against the rising proletariat. Social imperialism could be applied on several fronts. It promised either real gains from overseas which could be exploited for the purposes of domestic politics, or it held out the rewards of activity — often no more than the illusory successes of activity for its own sake — which could effectively provide ideological satisfaction in terms of national prestige. It was this precisely this calculation which made social imperialism an ideology of integration which could be deliberately applied from above to combat the antagonisms of German class society. It diverted the political activities of the bourgeoisie into a substitute sphere and practically became 'the areas in which it's accommodation . . . to the existing national state, its structures and needs' took place.2 At the same time, the more far-sighted large-scale agrarian producers found that social imperialism offered them a new guarantee for the maintenance of their position of social and political domination in the shape of a socially reactionary Sammlung policy with its programme of overseas expansion.

Economic and social imperialism, as an instrument for stabilising and legitimising political domination, is associated with the birth of modern state interventionism, as outlined above (II.2) In a system of state-regulated capitalism political authority is increasingly legitimised by the political leadership's efforts to ensure constant economic growth, and, in so doing, to maintain the essential conditions for social and political stability. This, together with the manipulat-
ory technique of social imperialism, consistently formed the basis of Germany's overseas expansionist policy. At a time when the traditional or charismatic authority of the government was being challenged, Bismarck's early economic and social imperialism was designed to improve the conditions for stability on behalf of the economic interest groups and social allies of the neo-conservative 'joint-protectionist' front of 1879 (Hans Rosenberg). It hoped to defuse the conflicts which had grown since 1873 over national income distribution and redirect political and psychic energies towards new and distant goals which would provide rallying-points. It would also revitalise ideas of a 'national' mission and the 'national' interest. The overall effect would be to consolidate the position of the authoritarian head of state, and with it that of the privileged social groups upholding his rule.

The problems caused by uneven economic growth and the need to legitimise Bismarck's Bonapartist rule coincided, and, as events were to show, made an imperialist policy appear inevitable. After the six-year-long depression up to 1879 had made way for a short-lived recovery, a further depression between 1882 and 1886 proved to be a traumatic experience in this respect (as was also the case in the USA and France). A broad ideological consensus, which had been emerging since the late 1870s, cut across pressure groups, the press, the Reichstag and the civil service. It was most prevalent in the 'strategic critique' (Ludwig) of politicians supporting the 1879 Sammlung. This consensus united the growing demand for a stepping-up of foreign trade with that for fresh colonial acquisitions. Both were intended to help Germany out of the economic crisis and reduce social conflict at home. 'If regular, broad outlets are not created' to cope with 'the overproduction of German labour', ran one typical forecast, 'we shall move with giant strides towards a socialist revolution'. Some liked to use the analogy of 'safety-valves', comparing Germany's internal development to an overheated boiler. The President of the German Colonial Association (Deutscher Kolonialverein) of 1882, Prince Hermann zu Hohenlohe-Langenburg, was convinced 'that we in Germany cannot combat the danger of social democracy any more effectively' than by the acquisition of colonies. Apart from the direct economic advantages to be gained, the intensive agitation for colonies also promised 'greater security against communism' as a consequence of overseas expansion. The connection between economic prosperity and a situation of internal social stability was always present in the minds of the exponents of this ideological consensus.

It was also in Bismarck's mind when, encouraged by the favourable international situation and confident of success in view of the state of the economy, the existing ideological climate and the Reichstag election results of 1884, he combined his foreign trade policy, which had been building up over the years, with his methods for stabilising the domestic situation, and augmented them with a colonial policy. In a short space of time between 1884 and 1886 Germany acquired its 'protectorates' in South-West Africa, Togoland, the Cameroons, East Africa and the Pacific. Originally intended to be run by private syndicates enjoying the state's protection, they had almost all become Crown colonies by 1889. This was because the interested parties had balked at the initial costs involved and had expected the state to take over the expense of improving the infrastructure as well as provide protection against foreign competition. In any case, rebellions inevitably led to military interventions which involved the state. Apart from Samoa in the Pacific and Kiaochow, with its 'protected zone', in China, little was added to the German Empire's first colonial acquisitions. Small parts of its African territories were gained later by way of concessionary agreements. Even in the 1880s the setting up of formal colonial rule would probably not have come about, had it not been for the intense competition from Germany's rivals who were advancing into the world's markets because of similar pressures. The advantages of an 'informal empire' were ever-present in Bismarck's thinking throughout his political life. In this respect, the 'Congo free-trade zone' and China's 'open door' corresponded most with his own ideas. But, caught between the pincers of international pressures and international competition, he decided to follow a policy of establishing protectorates which soon ended up becoming colonies of the German Empire. However, by virtue of his exceptional authority, he was still in a position to stem any dangerous overflow of the drive for colonial expansion which might provoke direct conflict with Britain or France. This was shown quite clearly, for example, in his refusal to establish protectorates over certain areas and in his opposition to the idea of a Central African Empire (Mitteleuropa), as proposed by Carl Peters and his Society for German Colonisation (Gesellschaft für deutsche Kolonisation) of 1882. This attitude, however, made him powerful political enemies at home who appreciably strengthened the coalition of forces which prepared the ground for his dismissal. His successors proved incapable of continuing to play the role of lion-tamer as effectively as he had done, especially when the antagonisms within Germany's class society
increased and confronted them with problems for which the growth of the SPD was only the visible sign.

6.2 Wilhelmine 'world policy' as domestic policy

As events soon revealed, not only had the economic imperialism of the 1880s pointed the way for future developments to take, but the social imperialist technique of government began to determine the shape of things to come. Henceforth, imperial policy continually and deliberately fell back on the latter, once Caprivi's uphill struggle of partially adjusting economic conditions to the realities of Germany's industrial development had been thwarted by the agrarians. Miquel's Sammlung rested, as he himself said in 1897, on diverting 'revolutionary elements' towards imperialism, in order to turn the nation's gaze 'abroad' and bring 'its sentiments ... on to common ground'. This functional advantage of social imperialism was also part of Holstein's thinking (from the 1880s) when he argued that 'the government of Kaiser Wilhelm II needs a tangible success abroad which will have an effect at home. This success can come about only as the result of a European war, a world historical (weltgeschichtlich) gamble, or else some acquisition outside Europe'.7 Between 1897 and 1900, by acquiring Kiao-chow in the Shantung Treaty, German policy in China took account of these strategic considerations, as did the emerging naval construction programme. This sort of thinking was also clearly in evidence among the so-called 'liberal imperialists' like Friedrich Naumann, Max Weber, Ernst von Halle (Tirpitz's chief propagandist) and the political scientist, Ernst Francke, to name but a few. A successful social policy alongside an increase in parliamentary influence would make it possible to conduct a powerful Weltpolitik by first satisfying the workers. In this case internal reform would underpin imperialism as the main priority, for the integration of the social classes was seen as the prerequisite of strength abroad. Weltpolitik would, moreover, facilitate an effective social policy through tangible material concessions. Successes abroad were expected to lead to a kind of truce on the home fronts. Admittedly, these Liberals did not participate in the decision-making processes of the German monarchy; but they did lend their support to the expansionist programme to which Berlin was committed.

The true significance of Wilhelmine 'world policy' can, it seems, be appreciated only if viewed from the perspective of social imperialism. Its precipitate character should not obscure the fact that it was based on the deliberate and calculated use of foreign policy as an instrument for achieving domestic political ends. Whenever concrete economic interests were not involved, the prestige element figured even more prominently than ever. As the professor of law at Freiburg University, Hermann Rehm, said with considerable foresight in 1900, 'only the idea of Germany as a world power is capable of dispelling the conflicts between rival economic interests in internal affairs'.8 The problem was not just one of overcoming conflicts by means of Sammlung policy, but as much a matter concerning rights of political participation and social equality for the workers, against whose political representatives it was easy to mobilise a 'pro-Empire' imperialism after 1884. In view of the nation's internal fragmentation into a class society and the strong tensions between, on the one hand, the authoritarian state, the ruling elite of landowners and the feudalised bourgeoisie, and, on the other, the advancing forces of parliamentarisation and democratisation, it seemed to the Berlin politicians, operating within their own horizon of experience, that there was no alternative to the 'taming' policy of social imperialism in terms of the success it promised. From their defensive positions they no longer wanted to — nor could they — modernise Germany's social and political constitution to the extent required. It was this seeming lack of any alternative which proved to be the decisive factor, and a most unfortunate one at that; for it was not left to their free decision, as many have argued since, to exercise moderate restraints by scaling down Germany's overseas involvement. As a result of Germany's social and political tensions, there was a constant pressure from within the system to fall back repeatedly on the proven technique of social imperialism. To this extent, von Waldersee hit the nail on the head when he set his hopes on 'a foreign policy' which would have 'a positive effect on internal conditions', and thought it 'a sign of malaise that we cannot help ourselves out of the situation through our domestic policy'. Surveying the situation from his position at the centre of decision-making machinery Bülow also insisted that 'only a successful foreign policy' could 'help, reconcile, calm, rally and unite'.9 All this serves to emphasise the objective function of Wilhelmine world policy's frantic and hazardous desire to be 'part of the . . . lion'. It also throws light on the avowed purpose of Germany's decision-makers and, thus, their conscious intentions. Shortly before the outbreak of war in 1914, Bülow, for example, showed unsurpassed candour in setting out the detailed arguments for this 'vigorous national policy' in his widely-read book, German Policy. Weltpolitik
was presented as the ‘true antidote against social democracy’. This amounted to an admission that the way of domestic reform was bankrupt. At the very least, it implied the abandonment of attempts to establish a modern society of freely participating citizens. From the 1880s onwards, social imperialism remained embedded in German politics as a pattern of political behaviour. With the abrupt transition from Bismarck’s Bonapartist rule to the polycracy of the Wilhelmine era, ‘the tendency grew to naturalise’ the inherited ‘deep discrepancy between the social structure and a political order which had hardly taken account of the changed social situation since the industrial revolution’. This was done by ‘diverting internal pressures outwards in a social imperialist fashion’ which concealed ‘the long overdue reform of Germany’s internal structure’. Can one find a more convincing interpretation than this of German ‘world policy’ as domestic policy? Or, to put it differently, of ‘world policy’ as a continuation of the defence of the domestic status quo in the world arena?

One thing should, nevertheless, be noted: however clearly this social imperialism represented in functional terms a conservative response to the challenge of the problems posed by a class society and its anachronistic distribution of power, it should not be reduced solely to its manipulatory element. Economic interests in a narrow sense almost always played their part and helped justify overseas expansion. While Germany’s China policy after 1897 certainly provided an opportunity for brilliant moves on the chessboard of domestic politics, the Shantung Treaty, which arranged the ‘lease’ of Kia-chow, also secured one of China’s richest provinces for German economic penetration. It gave heavy industry and an ailng railway construction industry at home the prospect of a share in the opening-up of the massive Asian market. We cannot ignore the political aspects of the Berlin–Baghdad Railway scheme either; but it also provided tempting opportunities for specific economic interests which were always served by this kind of expansion. If the political leadership often pushed economic interests to the fore, exaggerated their importance and formally egged on businessmen into entering agreements, the state soon followed in their footsteps once they had acquired importance and influence abroad. If one narrows down the question to determining the relative importance of the different factors which motivated imperialist expansion, and attempts the same regarding the decisions that were made, the conclusion will be that the element of social imperialism was either dominant or at least of equal importance alongside economic factors prior to 1914. In the final phase of Imperial Germany’s expansionist policy, namely the formulation of its war aims in the First World War, social imperialism again assumed prime importance.

6.3 Social Darwinism and pan-Germanism as imperialist ideologies

In his Principles of Realpolitik, published in 1853, Ludwig August von Rochau recommended contemporaries to adjust to the existing realities of the new configuration of interests in the post-revolutionary era. Nevertheless, he admitted that ‘ideas ... have always had as much power as their holders care to vest in them. Therefore, the idea that ... inspires an entire people or epoch is the most substantial of all political forces’. One such idea, often said to have possessed this power during the age of Western imperialism, was Social Darwinism: the transfer to the social and political sphere of Darwin’s biological theories of ‘natural selection’ and ‘the survival of the fittest’ in ‘the struggle for existence’. After the 1870s and 1880s this Social Darwinism spread throughout the Western industrialised nations where it exerted a considerable influence before reaching its apogee in the radical racist ideologies of National Socialism. It provides the historian with an excellent example of the indissoluble interconnection of influential ideas with social development, and an ideological critique is particularly suitable for placing Social Darwinism into this context.

Marx and Engels grasped the connection early on. In 1862 Marx commented: ‘It is noticeable that Darwin recognises among plants and animals his own English society, with its division of labour, competition, opening-up of new markets, “inventions” and the Malthusian “struggle for existence”.’ It is Hobbes’s bellum omnium contra omnem, and it reminds one of Hegel’s Phenomenology, where bourgeois society figures as “spiritual animal kingdom”, while with Darwin the animal kingdom figures as “bourgeois society”. “The whole Darwinian theory of the struggle for existence”, Engels wrote in the mid-1870s, “is simply the transference from society to animate nature of Hobbes’s theory of bellum omnium contra omnem and the bourgeois economic theory of competition, as well as the Malthusian theory of population. Once this feat has been accomplished ... it is very easy to transfer these theories back again from natural history to the history of society, and altogether too naive to maintain that thereby these assertions have been proved as eternal natural laws of society.” Like Nietzsche and Spengler after them, both men recognised in Social Darwinism an eminently suitable “system for justify-
ing bourgeois capitalism' (H. Plessner). In addition, they set out a framework for its analysis which can scarcely be improved upon even today.

By reading Malthus, who as an amateur natural historian believed he had deduced his ideas from nature, both Darwin and the biologist, A.R. Wallace (whose researches led Darwin to publish his *Origin of Species*), were inspired at a psychologically critical stage in their work to developing their own theories of evolution. It cannot be said that these evolved purely from their own findings. Darwin, who stood Malthus on his head, himself became the first Social Darwinist when he advanced the rise of the so-called 'Aryan race' in Europe and particularly the United States, as conclusive proof of the validity of his theories as applied to human society. It could even be said that he openly prepared the way for a racist interpretation of Social Darwinism. No doubt this world-view (Weltanschauung) based on the circular conclusions of Malthus and Darwin through to a vulgarised version of Social Darwinism, which presented itself as a summit of scientific reasoning, struck a responsive chord in providing a justification for bourgeois economic activity and the competitive capitalist system, the absolutism of the entrepreneur and national self-assertiveness. As a manifestation of the decline of positivism, it banished hopes for a more open society and put the fixed laws of an anti-egalitarian system of a social aristocracy in its place. Its functional significance lay in the fact that it enabled the ruling élites to appear compatible with progress, while providing a justification for the immutability of the status quo. At the same time, it allowed the emancipatory aspirations of the workers or colonial peoples to be dismissed as the futile protestations of inferior subjects in the struggle for existence. Vested with an aura of 'irrefutable' scientific knowledge, it was this versatility of application that gave Social Darwinism its power in its very real connection with the ruling interests. As an ideology which proved virtually ideal for justifying imperialism, it was kept alive by a host of popularisers in the industrialised nations. If one were to remove it from its specific social context, it could be evaluated as an independent factor. But this would lead only to its being seen as a mere distortion of pure science and would fail to account for its social impact.

Similarly, pan-Germanism can be seen as a variation of attempts to justify imperialist expansion, and one that drew increasingly on racist theories for this purpose. A weed like this could only flourish in such lurid colours in a specific social environment. The processes of economic concentration and social polarisation were to some extent reflected in the 'preferential position befitting one's own nation'. Economic progress and the subjugation of overseas territories seemed attributable to the 'special natural qualities' of the nation, 'that is, its racial characteristics'. At any rate, enormous claims were made on the basis of this belief. Racist pan-Germanism, which would 'cure' the world (Paul Rohrbach), gave rise to a pseudo-scientific 'concealed justification' for ongoing expansion. It demanded sacrifice for the sake of a 'higher common interest' — that of a Teutonic world mission. The originally circumscribed idea of the 'nation' was placed 'in the service' of these new goals as 'a propelling force', within the blurred parameters of which everyone from a banker like von der Heydt to a rabid nationalist schoolteacher, from a swaggering soldier to a middle-class enthusiast of colonialism, could project his own aspirations. Although it has not yet proved possible to demonstrate conclusively that pan-Germanism had a direct influence on Berlin's political decision-making machinery, it was an important factor in the public opinion of groups loyal to the Empire. For political reasons it was very rarely criticised by the government. It flourished mainly in the upper and middle classes who had a strong influence on public opinion and received its main backing from their militant organisations like the Pan-German League, the Navy League and the Army League. Without doubt it was one of the poisonous ingredients in that ideological mishmash which later propelled the völkisch nationalists and whose extremism was supposed to make good its obvious intellectual inferiority.

### 7. Foreign Policy

#### 7.1. Foreign policy in the system of states

Germany's emergence as a Great Power in Central Europe between 1866 and 1871 encountered no serious objections from either Russia or Great Britain. It might almost be said that they 'allowed' it to come into being. The new German Empire took up its position in the existing international system, whereupon the other states responded by adjusting themselves to the new arrangement with moves and counter-moves in keeping with the system's traditionally competitive structure. The position approaching hegemony which Imperial Germany attained in terms of political and economic strength was played down by Bismarck in his claim that Germany had reached
'saturation' point. However, the fact that within the space of a few years Berlin had become the venue for the most important international conferences of the time clearly showed how the centre of gravity had shifted. As in a system of interconnecting pipes, the equivalent in the external sphere of Bismarck's socially conservative 'taming' policy at home was, after 1871, a policy of inertia on the European stage aimed at consolidating what had been gained. If the continued existence of the Bismarckian Empire was not to be jeopardised again by a militant foreign policy of calculated risk like that of 1864 to 1871 — and this was completely ruled out by the conservative priority of preserving the system — three possible strategies were left for Berlin to follow. The aim was still one of diverting 'the ominous consequences' of the German Empire's creation 'into the international sphere' while bringing about an equilibrium in the initially 'unsettled situation among the concert of powers' at the same time as preserving the 'outmoded social order'.

Firstly, it would be possible to follow the traditional principle of reaching agreement on defining spheres of influence in order to avoid or reduce friction with rival powers. Secondly, the precarious possibility existed of playing off the interests of one Great Power against the other and of diverting these rivalries to the geographical periphery of Germany's sphere of influence or into imperialist expansion. Thirdly, potential enemies could be countered with quick pre-emptive strikes, thus nipping prospective alliances in the bud. This could well conjure up the danger of these very alliances being formed from a fear of being threatened by Germany at some point in the future. For this reason, the third possibility was never considered by Germany's leaders for over forty years because of the unforeseeable risks involved, though after Moltke's time this option was often advocated by the military. The two other strategies did play their part. As is well known, Bismarck tried for years to put into practice his idea of diverting competing interests to the periphery. This thinking runs like a thread through his endorsement of French colonial policy in North Africa and Indo-China to his position on the problem of Egypt and the conflict of interest between Russia and Britain in Central Asia. His favoured tactic became risky, however, when Germany's interest in a programme of overseas expansion increased, i.e. when the social imperialist character of Bismarck's 'world policy' virtually dictated the necessity of constant foreign involvement. Since German foreign policy soon lost its static character imposed by the notion of 'saturation', this tactic could be in the nature of only a temporary expedient. The carving out of permanent geographical spheres of interest was essentially frustrated by forces at work within Germany itself. Scarcely had half a dozen years passed since 1871 before it became clear that an expanding industrial capitalism was giving the lie from within to all the claims that Germany had reached a state of 'saturation'. While it is true that no new territorial claims in Europe were officially envisaged, the dynamism of industrial development took no account of national frontiers. The qualitative change in Germany's foreign trade interests which had come about during the period of advanced industrialisation introduced a disturbing factor into foreign policy which the traditionalists in the Wilhelmsstrasse, accustomed to thinking in national terms, probably underestimated. The Austro-German negotiations of 1878 and 1879, which finally produced the Dual Alliance in October 1879, revolted at first around the larger issue of a projected customs union which would have created a massive Central European bloc as a domestic market for German industry. Until the caesura of 1887, Russo-German relations reflected these economic problems, as did Germany's growing involvement in the Balkans. Early German imperialism, protective tariffs, Caprivi's trade agreements, and so on, all demonstrated each in their own way the continuing and apparently unstoppable involvement of Germany in the world economy and its markets. Compared with this reality, the relatively static concept of Germany as a 'satiated' state soon showed itself to be wholly inappropriate.

The overall defensive strategy which combined social conservatism at home with a foreign policy of avoiding conflict abroad was exposed to constant erosion from the end of the 1870s onwards. This cannot be put down primarily to the other participants in the international system or to mistakes and miscalculations by their leaders. The erosion was, as the last six years of the Bismarck period already seemed to demonstrate, a logical outcome of Germany's internal social and economic problems together with the need to redefine its main areas of interest. As outlined above, German imperialism can be seen on the one hand as a defensive strategy in domestic politics. On the other hand, it introduced an aggressive component into Germany's foreign relations. This ambivalence can be observed on more than one occasion. Indeed, the Janus-faced character of such intentions and actions are virtually the hallmark of the period after 1879. They can be adequately explained only by an analysis of what Kehr called 'the home front' of foreign policy. To use makeshift phrases like 'basic power politics' comes nowhere near to explaining the real problem. What additional light does this
approach throw on the subject? Does it imply the existence of a dubious 'ideal type' of political behaviour or a similarly dubious socio-psychic constant which defines the enjoyment and exercise of power — as in Hobbes's 'restless desire for power after power' — as a primordial instinct, in short an anthropological factor? Should we not rather investigate class-based systems of social values and norms, processes of political socialisation and uses of stereotyped language, in whose ciphers are contained beliefs and unconscious assumptions, with a view to laying bare the different conceptions of power held by the various social groups? Should the concept of 'power' not be set as precisely as possible in its social context, i.e., in the web of interests surrounding it? Should we not try to discover the functional nexus of structures embodying political domination, so that this ahistorical notion of 'basic power politics', which is allegedly not subject to change, may be replaced as soon as possible by an analysis of how it manifests itself in concrete situations, thus rendering the term superficial? The concern for 'the eternal recurrence of the identical' (Nietzsche) in history, implicit in the idea of a 'basic' power instinct, may fascinate the behavioural scientist. If, however, the historian contents himself with this kind of terminological shorthand, he fails to undertake an investigation into its concrete manifestations and produce a systematic explanation of it in a framework of historical theory. It is worthwhile, therefore, taking serious note of the judgement of a man who can hardly be accused of prejudice when approaching this subject: 'One will not become acquainted with the world', said Leopold von Ranke, 'if one cares to take only internal relationships into account. We note the external ones as well, but then only as secondary. They are transient, the former are enduring.'

7.2 Foreign policy under the 'primacy of domestic politics'

The unstable mechanics of foreign policy, its anaemic kinetics of action and reaction and diplomatic procedures for the avoidance of conflict or its escalation, are deliberately not pursued in this enquiry. A wealth of literature awaits anyone who, for example, wishes to learn more about the Bismarckian system of alliances or Wilhelmine diplomacy. The configurations of forces behind these alliances at any particular time lead us directly back to the primary 'enduring' conditions — that is, back to the primacy of domestic politics. This can be shown by a cursory look at the problems which influenced Germany's relations with the three Great Powers: France, Great Britain and Russia.

France

The decision to annex Alsace-Lorraine in 1870 rested on a variety of motives. Domestic political considerations, in the broadest sense, together with military demands were far more important than the general notion of improving Germany's strategic position and external security vis-à-vis a traditionally more powerful France. The separation of these regions from France was carried out against the will of the vast majority of their inhabitants and permanently damaged Franco-German relations. To some extent the return of the 'imperial province' to France was still an aim behind the fighting in the First World War forty-five years later. In view of its fateful consequences for foreign policy, it would have been sensible to have revised the decision of 1870–71. However, this would have been suicidal in its effect on Germany's domestic politics. These consequences were immediately recognised. The argument that the annexation had been necessary in order to provide a 'material guarantee' against future French aggression was dismissed by Marx in the autumn of 1870 as a pretext for 'the feebleminded'. He saw that in military terms the campaign of 1870 had shown the ease with which France could be attacked from German territory. German history itself, from the time after the Treaty of Tilsit, testified to how a defeated nation would react to dismemberment of its territory. Was it not an utter 'anachronism', he asked, 'to make military considerations the principle by which the boundaries of nations are to be determined?' Austria would then have been justified in claiming the line of the Mincio, and France the left bank of the Rhine. 'If boundaries are to be determined by military interests, there will be no end to claims raised, because every line drawn by the military is necessarily faulty and can be improved by annexing some more outlying territory; and, moreover, they can never be fixed finally and fairly, because they are always forcibly imposed on the vanquished by the victor, and so already carry within them the seeds of a new war.' The taking of Alsace-Lorraine, Marx concluded, would virtually turn war into a 'European institution', since France, even after a sham peace which could at best be only a truce, would demand the return of its lost eastern provinces. That meant perpetuating war between two of the great European nations and their ruin as a result of 'reciprocal self-mutilation'. Until then, he feared, Prusso-Germany's 'military despotism' would stiffen in order to maintain its hold on Western Poland. What was decisive in Marx's view was the spread of conflict to the east. He saw this prospect as 'unavoidable',
since 'the war of 1870 carried a war between Germany and Russia in its womb just as surely as the war of 1866 had carried that of 1870'. There was no doubt that Germany would have to defend its conquests, either as 'the obvious lackey of Russian aggrandisement', or else by arming itself 'not for those of half-baked "localised" wars, but for a racial war against the allied races of the Slavs and Latins'. And in such a war on two fronts against a Franco-Russian alliance the German Empire would go under.3

Few predictions of this clear-sighted critic living in his London exile were to be realised as fully as this one. Apart from Marx, only the Baltic German writer, Julius von Eckhardt, recognised in a similarly sceptical vein and at an early juncture, the problems of assimilation posed by the 'imperial province', the permanent hostility of neighbouring states armed to the teeth and the danger signs of a Franco-Russian alliance. Bismarck might for a time rely on the slogan, as brutal as it was foolish, of 'let them hate me as long as they fear me'; or issue the directive: 'In everything that does not concern Alsace, I should like a conciliatory approach towards France.4 But his was not the way to heal the breach, and already during the 1880s even the ranking German military shared the criticisms that were levelled against the annexation of 1870. They deplored the 'European quandary' they had got themselves into as a result of conquering Alsace-Lorraine, since it had established 'a permanent state of war between France and Germany. As early as 1892, Moltke feared a war on two fronts, and five years before the conclusion of the Franco-Russian military agreement of 1872 Bismarck admitted to the Russian Minister of War 'that in the not too distant future we shall have to face a war against both France and Russia simultaneously'. It was going to be 'a war of survival'.5 This was how, seventeen years after the annexation, and twenty-seven years before the outbreak of the First World War, Bismarck described the dangerous long-term effects of the decision of 1870.

The suggestion was often made from a variety of different quarters that the problem of Alsace-Lorraine, which prevented an improvement in Franco-German relations — thus jeopardising the peace of Europe — should at least be neutralised. There was talk of this in the Reichstag, where Wilhelm Liebknecht took up the subject, and even in a diplomatic démarche from Vienna in 1897. But just as French nationalism rejected any compromise after the turn of the century, insisting on the return of the provinces, so in Germany any questioning of the status quo on this matter was taboo. In 1905, after the first Moroccan crisis had passed, the Chief of the General Staff, von Schlieffen, soberly worked out the alternatives. Germany had either to fight a preventive war against France or finally come up with a new settlement for Alsace-Lorraine. No other options were open to imperial policy.6 Since Berlin never seriously considered finding a new modus vivendi with France, the alternatives were narrowed down even further at a critical point in time. There was now only one possible option.

Great Britain The persistent legend of the British Empire as 'rerdigious Albion', following Germany's development after 1871 with suspicion and intrigue until it achieved the latter's 'encirclement', has long obscured the fact that it was Berlin that first rejected serious cooperation and then made it simply impossible. Certainly, the deep-seated antagonisms that existed during the nineteenth century between the British and Russian world empires, between the whale and the bear, were a constant factor which always had to be taken account of in the design of German foreign policy. Nevertheless, Germany's freedom of action in the late nineteenth century became considerably broader in scope, as the period 1884 to 1889 testifies. More important, however, than these antagonisms or any geopolitical considerations was the fear felt before 1890 by Bismarck and the 'strategic clique' around him of the liberalising repercussions that might result from any Anglo-German cooperation. It was not trade rivalry, which became apparent only gradually, that proved to be the most important factor here. It was the contrasting political values of the two countries — that is, their quite different historical traditions, political cultures and their underlying social configurations. The historical alternative to Germany's Bonapartist semi-dictatorship and rule by pre-industrial oligarchies was, in the first instance, a parliamentary monarchy, regardless of whether its character was determined by 'National' and/or 'Progressive' Liberals. The Constitutional Conflict and the strength of the National Liberals in the early 1870s meant that, unpredictable obstacles aside, a transition to a parliamentary monarchy could become a reality. Neither Bismarck nor the Liberals could rule out the possibility. The latter could still count on widespread support in the towns of South Germany and west of the Elbe, as the election results of 1881 and 1884 testified. We need only speculate on a few of the possible consequences which might have resulted from Crown Prince Friedrich taking over the government after the two assassination attempts on his father, Wilhelm I, to realise how unstable the balance of power was in Berlin. Whatever one makes of hypothetical
questions of this kind, Bismarck took political liberalism seriously as an opposition force, along with the imponderables that could work in its favour, for example, the Anglophile sympathies of the Crown Prince and his English wife, the continuous object lesson provided by English parliamentary life, and the symbiosis of the English landed aristocracy and the commercial and industrial middle classes, so different from Germany. These were the straightforward factors which, if there were a closer association between the two countries, would be predictable but extremely difficult to control. At the beginning of the 1880s 'the Crown Prince hadn’t become ill yet', Herbert von Bismarck is reputed to have said. 'We had to be prepared for a long reign, during which English influences would dominate'; by which he meant the so-called 'English intimacy' resulting from Crown Princess Victoria’s presence in Berlin and the threat of a liberal prime minister in the style of Gladstone emerging in Germany. In view of 'our internal situation', Bismarck thought this worrying. The Chancellor himself is reported to have had a conversation with Ambassador von Schweinzeit in which, like his son, he considered occasional political friction with Britain necessary 'to keep alive German annuity with England'. This would inhibit 'the influence of British ideas of constitutionalism and liberalism in Germany'. What Bismarck hated about Gladstone was not just that he stuck to his principles and believed that politics served moral ends. He also saw in him, quite rightly, a great rival counterpart representing a bourgeois liberalism that was much closer to the people and more in keeping with the powerful currents of the age. Bismarck would not, therefore, allow Anglo-German relations to develop beyond a certain point, namely that of a restrained coexistence which appeared compatible with conflict of a limited nature. And if the sheer presence of the vast Russian Empire on Germany's eastern border appeared to justify his adopting this stance, it was more the result of the shared conservativism of the eastern monarchies and the Tsarist autocracy than any consideration of it as a potential power factor. As for the legitimising effects of political traditions, the keeping of a conscious distance from London was part and parcel of Bismarck's strategy during his period of office, as was the Anglophobia that resulted from conflicting colonial interests between 1884 and 1889.

In the 1890s, commercial rivalry in the world's markets increased dramatically. Above all, German policy embarked on a collision course with Britain's vital interests when the decision was taken to expand the battle-fleet. From the time of the first Supplementary Navy Bill of 1900, there was no doubt as to Germany's aims, with their sometimes openly declared, sometimes carefully concealed, aggressive intent. Nor was there any inclination in London to meet this new danger with a trusting naïveté. Germany's naval policy was too unmistakably bound up with the image of 'the enemy across the Channel' for the British to sit back and wait for things to happen. Bearing in mind the domestic political dimensions of the 'Tirpitz-Plan', as well as the German decision not merely to yield to the international trend of battleship-building but, without cause from London, to arm against Britain on such a massive, concentrated scale, we can see how Germany's moves on the chess-board determined the rules of the game up to 1914.

Russia. As for Russia, there were of course the social and ideological factors of the 'monarchical principle' common to both countries, as well as the bond uniting the accomplices in the Polish partitions. Together these created certain affinities. But political, military and economic interests advised caution on the part of German policy with regard to its massive neighbour in the east. The expansion of Greater Prussia between 1864 and 1871 had been allowed to proceed, partly owing to Russia's acquiescence. 'That the Russians let us take Alsace-Lorraine', Bismarck admitted, 'was directly due to Alexander II's personal policy.' Export considerations and the General Staff's planning also induced a policy of cooperation with the least possible friction: But friction was never far from the surface. The disappointment which the outcome of the Congress of Berlin meant for St Petersburg's policy was blamed, perhaps too one-sidedly, on the 'honest broker' of the Wilhelmstrasse. The German tariffs on agricultural produce, in force after January 1880, directly affected Russian grain exports which had already been forced to fight hard for the lion's share of the German market following the arrival in Europe of American wheat. In 1885 Germany's tariffs were trebled. In March 1887 they were almost doubled again. German agricultural protectionism with its inevitable, indeed conscious, anti-Russian intentions, reflected the social configuration of forces in Germany since the end of the 1870s and was seen as an unavoidable necessity by the leadership. Its impact on Russia was painful for the following reason: the first steps towards modernising the Tsarist Empire after the débâcle of the Crimean War were increasingly dependent upon the country's successful industrialisation. The financing of this came largely from the proceeds of Russia's agricultural exports. To the extent, however, that high tariff
walls made access to the neighbouring, receptive German market extremely difficult within the space of a few years, one of the main props of Russia’s intended modernisation — and with it all the hopes of the Tsarist oligarchy in its internal and external affairs — began to totter. A growing Germanophobia, which German diplomats could not avoid noticing, was accurately put down to ‘the question of grain tariffs’. Yet Germany’s internal power relationships ruled out the possibility of any reversal of Bismarck’s policy, despite the explosive effect it was having abroad.

Worse still, six months after the third tariff increase, Bismarck’s government delivered a serious blow to the second prop of Russia’s early industrial modernisation programme. Lacking liquid capital of its own, Russia depended essentially on capital from foreign sources. By 1887 the German money market had come to occupy a key position. At a time when savings bank deposits in Prussia amounted to no more than 2.2 billion marks, between 2 and 2.5 billion marks’ worth of Russian securities were in German hands. In November 1887, however, a virtual ban was placed on trading in Russian securities on the Berlin stock exchange. Bills of exchange were no longer honoured and Russian stocks were no longer recognised as guaranteed, safe investments. This led to a panic on the Berlin stock exchange, resulting in a massive drain of funds to Paris where some of the French banks took on most of the Russian government securities. This meant that Berlin itself partly laid the economic foundations of the Franco-Russian alliance. Thus, a financial war broke out on top of the tensions over agricultural tariffs at a time when Russia, after 1890, was on the brink of its own industrial revolution. This meant that, in a phase when its need for capital was almost without limit, only the way to Paris remained open. The City of London was closed to Russian loans and an abandonment of the Tsar’s modernisation programme was no longer politically possible.

Several of the factors behind this ruthless German policy concerning the movement of capital can be identified as belonging to conventional, foreign policy practice. Bismarck’s drastic medicine was supposed to dampen down a pan-Slavism which appeared belligerent, but was doubtless exaggerated. It was also intended to undermine the Francophiles in St Petersburg, thus strengthening the Germanophiles, by a drastic demonstration of the importance of Germany’s friendship. Finally, there was the idea of discouraging Russia’s expansionist policy in the Balkans which conflicted with Austrian interests. It was a case of ‘consistently’ holding down ‘Russia’s credit’ in order ‘to calm down its belligerence, and, if

possible, counteract its effects’. At least this was how the harsh measures were defended by the Russophobe Secretary of State at the Berlin Foreign Office.¹⁰

However, this readiness to take on the undeniable and unpredictable risks of ‘brinkmanship’ in foreign trade relations was more the result of factors stemming from the domestic political situation. The massive economic interests of the East Elbian grain producers and the accompanying social and political concerns of the land-owning stratum demanded agricultural protection. But they also deemed it necessary to exclude their Russian competitors from the German money market which was helping to finance railway construction in Western Russia. This was a development which also aroused the fears of the military. For its part, export-oriented industry had long since declared that retaliatory measures against Russian import duties were long overdue, since these had been rapidly increasing ever since 1877. German exports to Russia fell by half between 1880 and 1887, from a 24 per cent share of Germany’s total foreign trade in 1875 to only 5 per cent in 1885. The two crucially important interest groups within the conservative Sammlung policy could be tied even more closely to Bismarck’s government as a result of increased tariffs. At the same time, the crisis in Russo-German relations, together with the fabricated danger of a war with France, worked politically to ensure the safe passage through parliament of the proposed increase in army strength, approved in November 1887 by the so-called ‘cartel Reichstag’. Bismarck, to be sure, opposed those who advocated a ‘preventive’ winter campaign by Germany in the east with his categorical refusal to contemplate any attack of this kind, arguing that ‘we can . . . only lose and shall gain nothing’. But the economic cold war also had the effect of weakening these demands, by showing Bismarck’s readiness for concessions to the hard-liners.¹¹ Thus we can discern the overall strategy which united both domestic and foreign policy. And we can also see the aggressive consequences of measures taken for the defence of the status quo; for in these was expressed the dialectic of the conservative Utopia. Anachronistic power relationships were so unconditionally preserved that ‘the very means which Bismarck employed to preserve the peace . . .’ became a factor which ‘contributed to threatening the peace’.¹² Regardless of whether the Chancellor might have originally trusted himself to correct a manoeuvre leading once more to a collision with Russia, or whether he believed it possible to separate foreign policy from foreign trade relations, the effects were to prove extremely unfortunate after 1887. Instead of providing the stopgap
moratorium of the Reinsurance Treaty with the only possible firm economic base the intransigence of the agrarians would permit, namely Russia’s reliance on the German capital market, Berlin itself placed the seal of success on the negotiations for the Franco-Russian alliance. German policy not only increased the danger of a war on two fronts; it practically guaranteed it. In 1887 the points were set for 1894 and 1914. It seemed that the chief priority of maintaining the social and political system, as defined by Berlin, permitted no other possible alternative. Over and above this, the decisions of 1887 and their consequences prevented any possibility of the Russian market’s becoming the great continental alternative to overseas imperialism for the export of manufactured goods and capital. From now on this route was barred.

8. The First World War: escape forwards

During the Weimar years after the First World War, a passionate debate took place in Germany, in which almost every German historian of note attempted to refute the moral and legal accusations of war guilt contained in Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles. In the ‘July crisis’ of 1914, so the argument ran, the German Empire had acted in self-defence, especially in the face of the advancing Russian ‘steam-roller’. Later, through no fault of its own policies during the war, it finally succumbed to the superior might of its enemies. The view which gained most acceptance in the 1930s, particularly in English and American research, was that all the European capitals, Berlin among them, shared equal responsibility for the breakdown in diplomacy in 1914. This comforting opinion, which removed the burden of sole responsibility, was put forward with some effect in the voluminous narratives of von Wegerer, Fay, Renouvin and others. No critical research on the subject was possible under National Socialism, and the excesses of the Nazi dictatorship raised more urgent problems for historical research in the immediate period after 1945. It was not until 1961 that the work of the Hamburg historian, Fritz Fischer, appeared, entitled Germany’s Bid for World Power (Griff nach der Weltpmacht, now translated as Germany’s Aims in the First World War). As a massive critique of the conduct of Germany’s leaders in the summer of 1914 and their uncompromising war aims policy up to 1918, it provoked an acrimonious discussion. Although Fischer’s thesis that, as in 1939, Germany bore the main share of guilt in 1914 was open to various criticisms on both theoretical and empirical grounds, the strident, venomous, nationalistic tone adopted by most of his critics showed it was high time that the taboos on this subject from the inter-war period were finally dispelled. Once the initial excitement had died down, two opposing schools of thought confronted each other. The first insisted not only on the accuracy of Fischer’s overall criticisms, but accepted that Germany had deliberately prepared, and indeed planned for war in the years before 1914. Its protagonists argued that a continuity of aggression had existed throughout the entire period of the German Empire’s existence. The other side, while gradually conceding a great deal, insisted on drawing a distinction between vague expressions of opinion, not necessarily involving any form of commitment, and consciously taken political decisions; between calculations made in peacetime and the actual implementation of plans in wartime; between expansive imperialist aims and a fictitious monolithic unanimity. In the final analysis they stressed the defensive character of the political decisions made in Germany at the time.¹

8.1 Aggressive policies of defence

Neither of these two schools, whose positions are simplified here to highlight their differences, can provide a definitive explanatory model which adequately accounts for the peculiar blend of aggressive and defensive elements in the making of German policy. There can be no serious doubt about the ‘will to become a world power’ which was shared by the bourgeoisie and influential sections of the old ruling elites and which became increasingly evident after the 1880s. But showing a determination to belong to the small circle of Great Powers in the international political system, is a long step away from planning to unleash a war long in advance. It is also too hasty a conclusion and one which empirical studies have not yet verified. As for Germany’s expansionist aims in 1914, it is necessary to distinguish clearly between formal and informal influences. For example, the active involvement of German firms and German banks in French industry gave rise to a specific web of interests; but this had no direct relevance for plans involving annexation. True, there was excited talk here and there about acquiring France’s ore deposits in the Longwy-Briey basin, or of the need to take over Antwerp’s port installations. Pan-German spokesman demanded the annexation of the Flemish part of Belgium. But it is a myth that, as a result, war was deliberately planned and engineered by the