

Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898)

Otto von Bismarck created and molded the German Empire. He was a powerfully built Prussian Junker who was sophisticated, intellectual, and sensitive to the point of hysteria; but he was also a despairing conservative who had no faith in the future, and like Metternich saw the new movements of liberalism and democracy as evil. He had a singular goal: the unification of Germany. This unity was realized in such a way as to make Prussia supreme in Germany, the King supreme in Prussia, and Bismarck essentially supreme over the King. Understanding the art of possible, he waged a series of wars that were calculated to forge the new nation, and then he developed a system of alliances to secure the status quo and preserve his creation. His system of alliances preserved peace, but it also created the imbalance and tension that was, in large part responsible for World War I. As a Junker he understood absolute obedience to his sovereign and was schooled in a toughness of mind that allowed him to batter down any politician or theory that dared to cross him. Thus he crushed any moves toward a more democratic government. As a sensitive intellectual he was determined to stay in power to insure the continuation of his treasured German Empire. In 1890 in confrontation with a new Ruler Bismarck was dismissed from his position as Imperial Chancellor. The machinery that he had introduced to continue a world with himself at the helm, now fell into more unreliable hands. And thus a British politician could say of him "He made Germany great and Germans small."

Kaiser Wilhelm II (1859-1941)

Wilhelm became German Kaiser (Emperor) and King of Prussia in 1888 and reigned until his fall at the end of World War I in 1918. He was a megalomaniac whose madcap personality also fit the expressions of intense German nationalism that antedated the Great War. German nationalism needed a figure of heroic proportions who would lead the new country to deeds of romantic glory. Wilhelm fit the bill with his grandiose belief in his own importance, his love of uniforms, and his intense restlessness. Familiar problems led him to an endless desire to best his English relatives (through his mother he was the grandson of Queen Victoria) and find a place in the sun for the German Empire. The imperial government forged by Bismarck had placed supreme executive and military power (Kommando Gewalt) in the hands of the Kaiser; and once Bismarck was gone, the Ruler could in fact exercise these unrestrained. As he himself said, "As for having to sink my ideas and feelings at the bidding of the people that is a thing unheard of in Prussian history or the traditions of my House. What the German Emperor, King of Prussia thinks right and best for his people he does." Determined to show imperial might, he pursued a course of "Weltpolitik" (world politics) that had no real goals beyond "glory." In so doing, he created numerous moments of international tension, which could be summed up by the comment of the British politician, Earl Grey: "The German Emperor is like a battleship with steam up and screws going, but with no rudder, and he will run into something someday and cause a catastrophe."