

# Germany before 1914: social reform and British emulation

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## Germany before 1914: social reform and British emulation

Casting an eye over social policy blurs the lines of Anglo-German relations before the First World War

### Executive summary

- *Britain's commemoration of the First World War must avoid depicting Imperial Germany as a simplified, demonised, or monolithic enemy. To do so brings with it the danger of distorting modern perceptions of Germany as well as misrepresenting Britain's role in the Europe of a century ago.*
- *The drives for social reform in pre-war Britain and Germany underline a similarity between the two former empires that, although well serviced by scholarly literature, is being forgotten in public memory.*
- *Fears of shifts in voter sentiment are driving the British government to appear cool on the idea of Europe. The memory of the First World War is now in danger of being used in a campaign to bolster an idea of outmoded Britishness and reactionary Euro-scepticism.*
- *Any attempt to advance a 'just war' hypothesis must address Britain's own imperial and colonial problems both before and after 1918.*

Rival interpretations of the First World War have already begun to fuel fresh debate over how the conflict should be remembered. The most inflammatory [contribution](#) of the New Year came from British Education Secretary Michael Gove who railed against 'left wing academics' and 'versions of the past designed to belittle Britain and its leaders' at the beginning of January. The Education Secretary's polemic sparked a flurry in the press. However, at the heart of this debate lies something a lot more serious than rival interpretations of

'Blackadder goes forth'. In the context of the upcoming Scottish referendum, the erosion of the Conservative vote at the hands of British nationalism, and the consequent drive to appear cold and sceptical on Europe, commemorating the First World War raises some issues that are far from archaic.

This is no time for jingoism. By taking stock of the events of a century ago, we are reflecting on the formative events that ended the long nineteenth century and set the tone and pace of the twentieth. In revisiting the simplistic 'us' versus 'them' narrative of the war, the British education secretary's comments touch upon a century-old and enduringly polarising cleavage over the suitability of the German social model to Britain. The question managed to divide Cabinet and fuel much academic debate in the years before the First World War. We must be extremely cautious that, in re-visiting the world of 1914, the society of pre-war Britain and pre-war Europe is not occluded or warped by the fog of war.

### **A forgotten side to Anglo-German relations?**

While we are in the mood for remembering, it might be well to remember that David Lloyd George – the Prime Minister who presided over the imposition of impossible reparations and a formal attribution of 'war guilt' at Versailles in 1919 – did more than any other British politician to import to Britain and Ireland a system of social welfare derived from the German model in the years before 1914.

The period between defeat in the second Boer war and the outbreak of the First World War was one in which British society grappled with a multitude of social and economic questions; it was also one fertile with new ideas and open to radical solutions to the problems of a declining empire overseas and a disunited society at home. To underline just how far Anglo-German relations had deteriorated in the years before the war, in August 1908, Lloyd George, as the newly appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer, visited Germany in his search for a model for Britain's proto-welfare state.

### **Lloyd George in Germany**

On his tour, Lloyd George visited factories, insurance organisations, and labour exchanges. In Berlin he met the future wartime Chancellor, Bethmann-Hollweg, as well as the leading Social Democrat, Eduard Bernstein. On leaving, he declared himself 'tremendously impressed with ... the whole machine'. For Lloyd George and many other liberals, the Bismarckian system of addressing social grievances with state-socialist policies such as national insurance, healthcare, and pensions came to be seen as the solution to Britain's early-twentieth century ailments. In a more Machiavellian sense, progressive social policy was used in both empires to check the growth of the embryonic socialist and trade unionist movements. In these years, killing with kindness was a tactic equally popular between Tories and Liberals as it was between German Chancellors and British Prime Ministers.

### **Adapting Bismarck for Britain**

Upon his return from Germany, Lloyd George began to deliver his vision of German social policy with the passage of the Labour Exchange Act (1909) and the National Insurance Act (1911). For all the Prussian militarism and fear of naval expansion that began to dominate political discourse after the Agadir crisis of 1911, in the early days of the Liberal era, we must realise that certain influential figures in government saw German society as something to be copied rather than combated. German naval expansion remained a persistent cause for British concern but the minority sentiment of conciliation can be summed up by Lloyd George's comments to the Viennese *Neue Freie Presse* in 1908 where he first aired his desire for an *entente* with Germany akin to that which already existed with France. The Chancellor of the Exchequer expressed his wish that Germany and Britain could devote themselves 'wholly to the tasks of peace, of progress and of social reform'.

In 1911, a Cabinet sub-committee actively began to explore the possibility of just such a formal accord between the two empires. Their work was ultimately abandoned by the pace of international developments. John Grigg, one of Lloyd George's best-known biographers, explains how, by the summer of 1911, Lloyd

George was forced to take a firmer public stance on Germany, although Grigg claims that the attentive reader of Lloyd George's statements would have found no real alteration from the substance of Lloyd George's German policy as it stood in 1908. In the face of continued German naval expansion, Grigg concludes, Lloyd George's attitude 'was that of a reluctant realist.'

### **Intellectual interest in the German model**

Behind Lloyd George was one of the most renowned and well respected authorities on German economic and political thought in the era: William Harbutt Dawson. Although another civil servant, W.J. Braithwaite, was more involved in aiding Lloyd George with the actual drafting of the 1911 National Insurance Act, it was Dawson who provided the intellectual basis and inspiration for the adoption of the German model. Lloyd George consulted Dawson on the question of Germany's compulsory insurance system after he had successfully steered the non-compulsory 1908 Old Age Pensions Act through parliament. Having been an integral advisor to Lloyd George from 1908 onwards, Dawson also found renewed popularity with the British reading public who became eager to learn more about Germany's social insurance model and the organisation of the second Reich more generally.

Dawson had abandoned a career in journalism in 1886 to become a lifelong student of German social policy. He published extensively on the topic and, as his biographer Jörg Filthaut points out, in works such as *Bismarck and state socialism: an exposition of the social and economic legislation of Germany since 1870* (1890), his arguments were 'pragmatically adapted to British conditions'. Like many late-Victorian liberals, Dawson was grappling with the question of how the Liberal party could adapt to the new realities of an emergent labour movement, declining international competitiveness and, since 1884, an extended electoral franchise. Filthaut explains how Dawson's solution was one that incorporated a degree of state intervention into a free-trade framework. This same basic philosophy gained official Liberal party sanction with the unveiling of the 'Newcastle programme' in 1891, a framework that informed much of the Liberal party's policy right up until 1914.

The outbreak of the First World War provoked a crisis of conscience in those Britons who had enthusiastically seen Germany as a model society in the pre-war years. Among these was Dawson, who defended his position in a pamphlet *What is Wrong with Germany?*, published in 1915. Here he asserted that there were really two Germanys: one good and one bad, respectively epitomised by Otto von Bismarck and Kaiser Wilhelm II.

Dawson's belief in an 'other' Germany was not without basis. The German Reichstag had, since 1912, been dominated by the Social Democrats – pacifists who had resisted the Kaiser's war policy up until a point where their hatred of Tsarist Russia induced them to vote in the war credits necessary for Germany to go to war. Before waves of cultural mobilisation had brought the German people firmly onto a war footing, election statistics show that Dawson's 'other' Germany was the one the people chose. Even as late as the end-days of July 1914, hundreds of thousands attended anti-war rallies sponsored by the Social Democrats in Germany, decrying warmongering on both sides.

In 1912, Germany's last pre-war election, the Social Democrats won the largest share of the vote (34.8 percent), becoming the largest party in parliament for the first time in their history. Theirs was a vision that valued social welfare over social Darwinism and which preferred national insurance to nationalist militarism. That same vision of society won a landslide in Britain in 1906 and – with Irish support – Asquith's reforming government managed to hold onto power after passing through the gauntlet of two general elections during 1910.

Focussing on the human side of pre-war Europe, before they were drilled into being soldiers, the citizens and subjects of both the German and British Empires were concerned with domestic and social policy in an era where fears of dreadnaughts and the erosion of naval supremacy had not yet totally consumed the public mind. In these forgotten days, social reform sparked animated debate in both parliaments. Equally, plays such as George Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara* (1906) addressed the prevailing questions of welfare and class conflict

in front of a backdrop of industrialised arms production; a metaphorical microcosm of contemporary British and European society. Eventually, nationalism and imperialism fuelled conflict and régime change across Europe for more than two decades after 1914 and there was no desire to be reminded of the socially orientated policies of the *ante-bellum*. In this climate, past similarities between victors and vanquished were quietly forgotten in the aftermath of the trenches.

### **Beyond 1918**

From the armistice to appeasement, it was largely unfashionable to revisit the German model when discussing British social policy. In any case, tailored versions of pre-war German policies were now embedded in British legislation at a time when the politics and economy of Weimar Germany were hardly models worthy of emulation. However, the memory of Germany's pre-war social structures endured in the mind of another British admirer, William Beveridge, whose 1942 report was influenced by, among other things, his own encounters with and travels in pre-1914 Germany alongside his work in implementing a German-style system of labour exchanges in Britain while at the Board of Trade. Beveridge had come into the civil service after his talents were recognised by another enthusiastic social reformer: Winston Churchill.

Churchill and Lloyd George, the two future Prime Ministers of Asquith's 1908 Cabinet, entered into their closest period of collaboration in tackling what Churchill called 'the untrodden field of politics': social reform. Unlike others in that Cabinet, these two Liberal-radicals were steadfast in their belief in the merits of state-intervention on the German model; a view not shared by all their Cabinet colleagues but one which won out in the passage of subsequent legislation.

Although Churchill eventually cooled on his initial zeal for social reform, he was integral to the early phase of converting Cabinet to adopting a stylised version of German social policy; a system distinguished from organic British antecedents by the principles of compulsion, universality, and collaboration between worker

and employer. As E.P. Hennock explains, the radical social reformers – most notably Lloyd George and Churchill – managed to convert the government to adopting the German model within a remarkably short period of time, from June to December 1908.

### **Playing the blame game with history**

Returning to the present, Mr Gove is worried that our understanding of the First World War has been ‘overlaid with misunderstandings and misrepresentations’. His own counterparts in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office are concerned that this domestic row over commemoration will damage present-day Anglo-German relations, and arguably they are right. Fritz Fischer’s mid-century hypothesis which appeared to cement the German war guilt thesis has lost its supposed irrefutability in the decades since it first set historians astir. Most recently, Christopher Clark’s *The Sleepwalkers: how Europe went to war in 1914* has given a far more nuanced view of the origins of the conflict.

The blame game, like patriotism, will only be drummed up by those with an eye on the politics of the present. Not everything that we owe to our forbearers was won by them down the barrel of a gun. Social reformers in Britain, Germany, and across Europe in the last century worked peaceably in the belief that they were moving people, not just nations, out of poverty and towards material betterment.

### **The myth of British exceptionalism**

As to Britain’s ‘special tradition of liberty’ to which Mr Gove refers, this might be better understood by comparing the philosophies of Burke and Bentham with those of Hegel and Kant. There was no liberty in conscription. Whatever the merits of this policy on the island of Britain, the conscription of colonial troops into Europe’s war can hardly be defended by the outmoded cry of ‘*dulce et decorum est...*’

In exploring more fully the question of liberty, Mr Gove might wish to consider the complexities of the British Empire when formulating his curriculum on the interwar world. There is little glory from the British perspective in teaching how

President Wilson's ideal of self-determination jarred uncomfortably with Britain's response to the demands and democratic mandates coming from India and Ireland; demands Westminster chose to ignore after 1918. 'Liberty' was a concept reserved for the supposedly oppressed subject peoples of vanquished nations. In the empires of the victors, liberty ended up being taken, at further cost of life and limb, when it was not granted through legislation.

Returning to Germany, it is important to de-simplify any picture of a Prussian Junker-state bent on land and naval supremacy. Indeed, as Richard Evans has pointed out in his scholarly and measured [response](#) to Michael Gove's initial invective, the German Empire enjoyed universal adult male suffrage at a time when 40 percent of adult British and Irish males still awaited their opportunity to participate in electoral politics. To ignore the 'other' Germany is to reconstruct a bogey-man that has more to do with life after 1933 than it does with a misunderstood society that shared many of the attributes – as well as the failings – of the British Empire prior to 1914. The men and women who died in the First World War do not need to have their eradication justified; rather they should be remembered for their innocence, their youth, and their commitment to each other. When one begins to speak of patriotism, one must make certain that there is no call for it to be re-visited '*pro patria mori.*'

### **Conclusions**

In taking lessons from history, there are clear similarities between the Europe of today and the Europe of the early twentieth century. In outlining the proximity between German and British efforts to address social policy in a world where international relations increasingly consumed public and political discourse, it is important to remember the nuances of a more convivial Anglo-German relationship such as outlined here.

It is critical too that the politicians of today are not seduced by the idea that banging the nationalist drum is an easy route to votes and popularity. The problems of sickness, infirmity, and unemployment remain universal to governments and electorates everywhere. The desire to sweep internal discord

under the carpet of simplistic and antagonistic nationalism was just one of the reasons Europe went to war in 1914. While war may not be on the horizon in 2014 as it was in 1914, the desire to unite populations through fear of the 'other' remains a persistent trope, and one that should not be tolerated by the modern body politic which is better informed, globally connected, and (hopefully) more enlightened than the civilisation that tore itself apart in the First World War.

### **Further reading**

**Christopher Clark**, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London, 2012)

**W.H. Dawson**, *The evolution of modern Germany* (London, 1909) ([click for e-book](#))

**Dominik Geppert and Robert Gerwarth (eds)**, *Wilhelmine Germany and Edwardian Britain: essays on cultural affinity* (Oxford, 2008)

**John Grigg**, *Lloyd George: the people's champion, 1902-1911* (London, 1978)

**E. P. Hennock**, *British social reform and German precedents: The Case of Social Insurance 1880-1914* (Oxford, 1987)

**William Mulligan**, *The origins of the First World War* (Cambridge, 2010)