

The Authoritarian Countries

Three of the big European countries did not have fully developed parliamentary systems, that is, governments that depended on a majority vote in Parliament to legitimate their power, resigning when they lost the confidence of that body. In this lack they contrasted the evolution of governmental systems in Western Europe during the 19th century. Germany came closest to the Western model, but the Emperor named the Chancellor, who served at his pleasure. The German Reichstag attempted to achieve ministerial responsibility but failed to do so. In Austria-Hungary, a Parliament existed in both Hungary and Austria, but the King-Emperor called the shots. Further east, Russia did not have a Parliament until after the 1905 revolution.

Imperial Germany

During the last 30 years of the 19th century, united Germany made spectacular progress in the economic field, rapidly outpacing Britain and France and challenging them in the competition for markets. After Bismarck left office in 1890, this challenge extended to the colonial field as well. By the end of the century, Germany felt confident enough to challenge these nations for a world role.

Bismarck's Compromise



Within Germany, the major political problem was that the Chancellor was not responsible to Parliament but to the Emperor. Bismarck was able to survive until 1890 because he had enormous prestige in having been the architect of a united Germany and because of his relationship with William I. When William died and was replaced by his grandson, William II (William I was succeeded by his son, the liberal Frederick III, who died of throat cancer after only after a hundred days in power), the new Emperor forced Bismarck to resign.

A compromise between the middle classes and the old ruling classes marked Bismarck's rule between unification and 1890, but he did not attempt to weld them together. At the same time, he tried to keep the workers from voting Socialist by instituting a comprehensive social welfare program, the first, most widespread, and most famous in Europe.

In the long run, however, none of this would work. The Emperor had ultimate power. Bismarck himself exacerbated this situation by creating institutions that enhanced the Emperor's power. In 1878, for example, he introduced Secretaries of State for various functions who were responsible directly to the Chancellor and were independent of the Reichstag's scrutiny. For example, the Secretary of State for the navy (perhaps the most famous was Admiral Tirpitz (<http://www.worldwar1.com/biogtirp.htm>, father of the German High Seas fleet), who could determine naval policy independent of the Reichstag and the foreign office. Bismarck kept the autonomy of these officials in check, but after he was gone they played a crucial role in leading Germany to



imperialism and war without the possibility of being checked by the Reichstag. Bismarck was a reasonable leader and a brilliant diplomat, but he put together a system that only a Bismarck could run.

Bismarck's Policies

Bismarck feared the power of the Catholics, who were well organized in the Center Party. In order to weaken them, he adopted a policy of persecution known as the Kulturkampf [struggle for civilization]. This was one of the few battles he lost, and he did not succeed in breaking the influence of the Catholics. In 1878, he ended the Kulturkampf because he needed Catholic support for his tariff policy. In the same year, however, he began a fight against the Socialists and outlawed their party, but by 1890 he had lost this fight as well.

The crucial development that would fundamentally impact Germany and the world was the tariff policy and the compromise it produced.

The major reason for the tariff voted in 1879 was to protect the Junkers from grain imports. Grain could be grown in Russia, which had vast lands, shipped cheaply by rail to Germany, and sold there for less than German farmers could grow it. If a high tariff had not been enacted, the Junkers would have gone out of business. The Junkers had influence on the German government and, in addition, the government could not allow its grain growers to fail because, in case of war, Russian exports might end and Germany could be starved out. The problem was that the industrialists opposed a high tariff because it raised the



price of food, which meant that they would have to pay their workers more. The grand compromise was that the industrialists supported a higher tariff and the Junkers repaid them by supporting the building of a world-class fleet which would consume enormous amounts of steel and give industrialists lucrative government contracts. Moreover, since the tariff produced a lot of income, it gave the government virtual financial independence from the Reichstag, allowing it to act even more on its own.

The tariff policy, which continued after Bismarck left office, had major foreign and domestic policy impacts. In foreign policy, the building of a world-class fleet frightened the British, who could not keep pace with the Germans from an industrial viewpoint. If the British fleet that protected the island nation were overwhelmed, the Germans could land their superior army in England and easily defeat them. Bismarck promised the British that the German fleet would not become big enough to threaten the British fleet, but after he left, this promise fell by the wayside. The British, finding themselves challenged by a powerful German fleet, changed their policy of “splendid isolation” and contracted alliances in order to meet the challenge. Consequently, German tariff policy indirectly increased competition between the Germans and the British and contributed to the tensions that finally produced World War I.

In domestic policy, the compromise between the Junkers and the industrialists raised food prices in Germany. The workers, produced in increasing numbers by growing industrialization, had nowhere to turn except to



the Socialists because the government, Junkers, and industrialists had joined together against them. As the German Socialist Party grew to the largest in Europe, the government banned it, but since the Reichstag was elected by universal male suffrage, the Socialists and other opposition groups increased their representation.

In theory, the Emperor appointed the government, but a confidence vote against the government would have produced a crisis. By 1890, 40% of the popular vote opposed Bismarck and the time could be foreseen when he would have lost the vote. To avoid this, Bismarck came up with a scheme to abolish universal suffrage, but when he revealed it to the young Kaiser William II, the Emperor balked at extending the crisis. He therefore asked Bismarck to resign, which he did in 1890.

After 1895 and into the new century, the government had a majority in the Reichstag thanks to the cooperation of the Center Party and would have been put in the minority had it lost Center support. What would have happened if the government had ever lost a majority? Would it have led to a German revolution?

Beleaguered Austria

As previously explained, Austria (and Austria-Hungary's) primary problem was its multinational character and its refusal to allow different ethnic groups to participate in wielding real power.



After 1867 when the Hungarians were accepted into the ruling group, Austria-Hungary resisted demands by the subject nationalities for equal rights and/or independence. What made the situation volatile during the late 19th and early 20th centuries was that these demands on behalf of the Slavs were supported by a foreign country, Serbia, which hoped to annex the Slavic parts of the Empire and create a large South Slav state. Serbia was in turn strongly supported by Russia. The Austrians feared that if the Slavs achieved independence (as the Italians had), other groups would follow and the Empire would break up. They therefore vowed to resist all demands and, in order to contrast the Russians, agreed to an alliance with the Germans. The Russians, finding themselves threatened by the Austro-Germans, allied with the French. These power groups and the issues involved would be crucial for the coming of World War I.

Austria-Hungary had other serious problems. Its economy was generally backward, although some areas of the Empire began to industrialize. It had a complicated constitutional system, but the King-Emperor was absolute, although he acted with the consent of the ruling elite in Austria and Hungary. The parliaments in both countries, however, had little real power and the monarch was able to keep them in check.

Resistant Russia



Russia resisted the trend toward parliamentary democracy seen in the West and, to some degree, even in Germany, but it did pass through a period of reform and impressive economic development during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Emancipation of the Serfs

The reactionary Nicholas I was succeeded by his more enlightened son Alexander II in 1855 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_II_of_Russia). Believing that the state would suffer if he did not undertake reforms to modernize it, Alexander emancipated the serfs in 1861. This move, however, created new problems because it left serfs who had worked in households landless. Moreover, those former serfs who were allotted the lands that they worked were saddled with annual payments for 49 years (the government paid the landlords for the lands they lost to the serfs and the serfs had to reimburse the government, with interest). The immediate economic effects of freeing the serfs were unfavorable at first, but production stabilized. However, problems connected with their liberation remained for years. In addition to emancipating the serfs, a number of other reforms were also passed during Alexander's reign, including reform of the judiciary, local government, and higher education.

The period between 1855 and 1871 may be considered the period when Russia's modernization began. After 1871, there were few reforms and more turmoil. Emancipation had whetted people's appetite for more land and

revolutionary organizations such as “Land and Liberty” flourished. Some of these organizations turned to violence and in 1881 Alexander was assassinated by the “People’s Will” organization.

The Industrial Revolution

Alexander’s son Alexander III

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_III_of_Russia) determined to reverse the liberal policies of the early part of his father’s reign and tightened the reins of control; unlike his successor, he was generally successful at doing this. He suppressed intellectual life through censorship and educational restrictions to block the spread of Western ideas. Revolutionary organizations practically disappeared. Alexander also restricted local government and persecuted religious and national dissidents. Because a Jewess had been involved in his father’s murder, he engaged in pogroms and anti-Semitism, endemic in Russia.

The reign of Alexander III was also marked by the dawn of the industrial revolution in Russia. Between 1881 and 1904, imports of raw cotton doubled; from 1889 to 1895, production of pig iron and oil tripled; between 1889 and 1902, railway mileage practically doubled. The number of industrial workers employed by large industrial units rose to over two million.

This economic progress occurred with the help of the state. Sergei Witte (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sergei_Witte), who would remain a crucial figure in Russia into the 20th century, directed state intervention in industrial affairs and



avored foreign investment. Despite Russia's amazing economic development, and despite some attempts at labor legislation, working conditions remained very poor. Unions were banned and strikes were legally punishable. The great development of industry and the miserable conditions encouraged the growth of radical movements oriented toward revolution, including the Marxists.

Alexander III died in 1894. He presided over the last effective era of despotic rule. He left his ineffective successor Nicholas II—the last Tsar—an empire which resisted political reform while encouraging technological change.