



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
Opening remarks at a debate with historians on the 150th
anniversary of the founding of the German Empire
at Schloss Bellevue
on 13 January 2021**

Helmut Plessner talked about the “belated nation”, Michael Stürmer referred to it as the “restless Reich”, Volker Ullrich wrote about the “Nervous Superpower” and Thomas Nipperdey spoke of the “authoritarian state before democracy”. Time and again, historians have portrayed the Empire as a problematic chapter in German history - not only, but also, while marking anniversaries.

Anniversaries occur as they will, Gustav Heinemann observed on the occasion of the centenary of the founding of the German Empire. Fifty years ago, the anniversary of the Empire’s unification was commemorated in a country that had been divided once again. Considering this, the dampened mood was understandable. Yet Heinemann’s unsettled feelings ran deeper than that. He did not believe festivities were in order to mark the founding of an Empire that one hundred years prior had admittedly brought about Germany’s external unity, but had given its citizens neither internal unity and freedom nor external peace.

When the time came to commemorate the proclamation of the Empire in Versailles on 18 January 1871, no one on either side of the border in post-war Germany – especially considering Germany was now partitioned – could relate to this idea.

Today, in the midst of a pandemic and with current travel restrictions and social distancing regulations, we are tempted to say that, now and then, anniversaries do not only occur as they will – they also come at inconvenient times.

It seems to me that, today, no one is calling for a national celebration of the founding of the Empire. 18 January is not a date that is truly part of our collective memory. What is more, anyone who is actually aware that Wilhelm I was proclaimed German Emperor on that

day at the palace of Versailles has, at best, mixed feelings about an event that, in one triumphant gesture, was designed not only to humiliate France, which had just been defeated in war, but also established an empire that ultimately would lead to a new war with that country.

We Germans have as little connection to the German Empire today as we do to the monuments and statues of kings, emperors and military commanders of this era. They are part of the urban landscape here in Berlin and in many other places – but they do not play a formative role. They seem to have become a mute backdrop, devoid of meaning to most people. Reconstructed buildings like the Stadtschloss in Berlin, which hark back to the Empire and its Prussian character, still need to find a new identity and purpose in today's democracy – and that is not easy, as we know and can see.

Our perspective on this era of German history is ambivalent – what with the wars that brought about unity through force, but most importantly the disasters of the 20th century. There is no unclouded view of the Empire – indeed, there cannot be – as we look back on it through genocide, two World Wars and a republic that was destroyed by its enemies.

But that is also precisely what makes looking back so necessary, interesting and instructive. Continuity and inevitability are, after all, not the same thing. Yes, it does exist, that Military Road that leads through all of the wars from 1871 to 1945. However, this does not mean there were no other paths that could have led in other directions and brought about a different course of events – paths one could have chosen. Those who want to read and understand history based only on its outcome forfeit all opportunity for insight, overlook room for manoeuvre and also shirk personal responsibility.

Ever since one has finally begun taking a direct look at National Socialism, it is no longer an "erratic boulder" that separates Germany's present from its past; ever since people are no longer denying what happened in "the house of a murderer" that Golo Mann in 1958 referred to as a "cursed house" left standing in the Germans' memory. "Let us not deny what occurred in it," Golo Mann demanded. "However, let us also not believe that all the paths of German history would necessarily have led to this bad ending. And let us not think and act as if we had no past at all [... for] history is not dead. It is through that which came before us that we have become what we are."

We gain a vivid awareness of our present also and especially through critical engagement with – and controversial discussion of – the past. All those who wish to defend the parliamentary system and democracy in our country must be acquainted with its history and the conditions it imposes, as well as with its enemies; they must sharpen their understanding of historic continuity and ruptures and look even

further back into the past – to the freedom movement, the Vormärz period and the German revolutions of 1848.

Anyone who believes National Socialism can be treated as a marginal note of German history is thereby simply ignoring much of the baggage in the form of militarism, national hubris, antiparliamentarianism and antisemitism, the roots of which go back, in part, to the German Empire.

There are good reasons why we have gathered here today: Each generation faces new questions and poses its own questions to history. The question of what tradition reunified Germany chose to follow thirty years ago – that question has been answered. It is the tradition of freedom, of democracy and of a peaceful order in Europe. But that does not yet render obsolete critical engagement with the history of the German Empire and how it was founded.

On the contrary, this period must be re-examined today. It is worth tracing how it followed, and broke with, its own historical traditions. That is especially true now – because, after all, we are asking very similar questions in our day and age, such as:

How the German Empire rose to become a global military and economic power is in many ways reminiscent of the rise of China today; modernisation and rapid change fuelled anxiety, nationalism and populism – we see similar reactions today, brought on by globalisation and societal transformation; and, last but not least, Christopher Clark and Hélène Miard-Delacroix, for example, have even drawn parallels between the personality and mode of governance of Wilhelm II and the outgoing US president. If I also look at the erosion of the international order, then we must ask ourselves: is there a danger that global politics will revert to national egotism and the brutal logic of power, with all respective internal and external implications – such as the power plays that previously led to a World War?

Just the small circle that has gathered here today has collected a great many answers and insights in this regard. Thank you very much for accepting our invitation and for – insofar as possible – coming to Berlin, the old capital of the vanished state of Prussia.

I do, however, believe one cannot be of two minds about the Prussian authorship of this day of commemoration: Establishment of the German Empire, as it was proclaimed on 18 January 1871, was driven by Prussia – aside from the fact that actors in other places had hopes of unifying the German states. And nowhere else, possibly with the exception of Potsdam, are the vestiges of Prussia, and those who inherited them, as present as they are here in Berlin.

And yes, some things have reappeared before our eyes, have emerged as a two-faced, historicised and modern reconstruction, such as the Stadtschloss in Berlin of the House of Hohenzollern.

What could be a better example of how history extends into the present than the idea of the Humboldt Forum. It is a place with a name that reminds us of the Prussian tradition of enlightenment and specifically also one where the imperial legacy of German colonialism can be viewed and questioned – as well as a place that now, already before it opens to the general public, is also provoking discussion. Dealing with history in the present, and with our colonial history, remains both a challenge and a challenging learning process.

Similar to the newly erected palace, I think the House of Hohenzollern's Empire has two faces. During its nearly half century of existence, it was both reactionary and modern, and it was found to contain quite opposite traits by such different characters as Heinrich and Thomas Mann; one saw it as an institution in which violence reigned and freedom was suppressed, while the other in 1914 still called it a "social empire" that was worth defending in a "large-scale, completely decent, and even festive people's war".

Hardly any German would later go on to revise his judgment as thoroughly and publicly as did Thomas Mann. When endorsing the Weimar Republic in 1922, he explained that democracy was more in line with German culture and tradition than the Wilhemian era's obscurantism.

In fact, the long-hoped-for and previously unsuccessful unification of the Empire that Bismarck achieved in accordance with Prussia's designs gave rise to impressive developments; the "revolution from above" prepared the ground for economic, scientific, technological and cultural progress.

The legislation and jurisprudence of the Federal Republic of Germany, too, still follows in the tradition of the Empire. The civil code, along with the origins of administrative jurisdiction and Bismarck's social legislation, formed the groundwork of Germany's legal history. Its basic structures still apply today, although many legislative layers and necessary adaptations have been added.

The universal suffrage for men that was introduced in the North German Confederation in 1867 and in the German Empire in 1871 was considered the most progressive of the time. It may be the best example of the ambivalence of the Empire's political development.

For Bismarck, the right to vote was above all things intended to serve his own purposes. He had hoped to garner the votes of the conservative male rural population. He by no means wanted a democracy in which the people's elected representatives determine the government's actions. You all have heard the quote: "It is not by speeches and majority resolutions that the great questions of the time are decided ... but by iron and blood," Bismarck once said, putting

both his views and his contempt for the parliament and democracy on display.

Now it may be a quirk of history that only part of Bismarck's intention came to pass.

Suffrage was a key factor in the politicisation of society, in strengthening the opposition, in the formation of a party system and for developing Germany's parliamentary tradition. Here, I am thinking of important members of parliament of very different political persuasions, such as Ludwig Windthorst, Eugen Richter or August Bebel.

Yet these parliamentarians rose to prominence above all by opposing the government – because they never had the opportunity to actually govern. In Bismarck's world, it was the government that controlled parliament, not vice versa.

Even with suffrage and the Reichstag, there was no democratic process that could resolve social conflicts and thereby keep the nation unified. Instead, the internal unity of the Empire had to be guaranteed by fending off external enemies, and marginalising supposed internal ones. Depending on the prevailing circumstances, this would be to the detriment of the Polish and Catholic parts of the population, and of the Social Democratic opposition – and ultimately to the detriment of the Jewish population, with Jews formally having equal rights but at the same time increasingly becoming the targets of antisemitism.

The conclusions that one can and wishes to draw from this development do touch on a very topical issue: a nation is not built on ethnic or religious uniformity, and patriotism is not a privilege of those on the political right. Universal suffrage alone will not constitute a democracy. If a society's democratisation, the emergence of a civil society, the exercise of free speech and the right to co-determination – if all this is not reflected in parliament's role, that is, if parliament is permanently shut out in this regard, then mere periodic exercise of the right to vote can also support an authoritarian regime. In the long run, such a "guided democracy" cannot provide a truly stable, unifying foundation for society.

There is of course far more than one answer to why the German Empire – despite the progress it achieved and the ways in which modernity is in its debt – ultimately failed to stand the test of time, and we will certainly hear some very different ones during today's discussion.

On one of these, however, there is nearly universal agreement, namely "war" as a glorified, founding myth – and, above all, the specific Prussian brand of militarism.

From the very beginning, there was opposition to unification of the Empire by fighting three wars, proclaiming it on French soil and

obtaining it at the cost of France's enmity. The proclamation of Wilhelm I to German Emperor caused unease even in his own family. The crown prince feared that Bismarck's blood and iron politics – in his words – had not only made the Empire "great and powerful" but had also robbed it of its friends, the world's sympathy and its "good conscience".

According to Heinrich August Winkler, due to the prominent social role played by the military and officer corps, and especially due to the supreme power of command of the Prussian king, an element of absolutism was still present in the German Empire. The greatest burden the republic that succeeded the Empire would have to bear was most likely the fact that the parliament was not called on to assume responsibility until the old elite had exhausted its possibilities. Behind this lay an attempt to place the blame for the German Empire's military defeat in the First World War on its democratic elements. What later became known as the stab-in-the-back myth and would be a rallying cry for right-wing extremist enemies of the Republic was from the very start a heavy burden for the Weimar Republic, and thus for democracy, to bear.

This burden was, for the most part, manifest contempt by the German Empire and its elites for pluralism and democracy – and that is something that had an effect not only during, but also beyond the Weimar Republic. Heinrich August Winkler got it right when he wrote that "the German answer to freedom, equality and fraternity – the quintessence of Western democracy – was, simply put, order, discipline and inwardness". Wilhelm II ridiculed parliament as the "Reich's monkey house". The rejection of democracy as foreign and non-German proved to be fatal. Germans are not being oblivious to history when they struggle – as indeed they must – with the legacy of the Empire. An empire that, ultimately, can only be assessed in an ambivalent way.

So the question is: Are we today – at a time when political debate most frequently refers to the German Empire uncritically and apologetically – in need of a "politico-historical intervention"? Do we need to ward off current neonationalist tendencies, and should we maybe alter our approach in doing so? Anyone who categorically says "no" must do so with tremendous confidence in the power of – not only their own – democratic institutions to resist pressure. Anyone who considers this question to be alarmist may also be ignoring the incredible contempt that those who oppose democracy have for its institutions. The sight of imperial war flags on the steps of the Reichstag building, the images of the attempt to storm it a few months ago, and those of the recent storming of the US Capitol should certainly serve as a warning against being overly confident. Democracy needs not only self-assured, but also enlightened, intelligent and unyielding defenders.

Addressing the legacy of the German Empire – all the way down to the present day and the Federal Republic of Germany – therefore remains important. We should not be perplexed and helpless in the face of this heritage. We should understand and contextualise it, make it speak to us and learn from it – for the present and for the future.

That is what I intend to do now with my guests.