HISTORICAL PROFILES / Germany

The political context: from the Congress of Vienna to the Weimar Republic

The Congress of Vienna in 1815 established the German Confederation, consisting of many soveriegn states, free cities and kingdoms. Demands of the bourgeosie for national unity, a guarantee of human rights and political co-operation culminated in a national uprising, reaching a peak in March 1848 with the building of barricades in Berlin. On May 1848 the National Assembly came together, but reforms were obstructed by Austria and Prussia and the revolution was ended in 1849. In 1866 the German Confederation was dissolved under Bismarck, the minister president, because of war between Austria and Prussia, which the latter won. The German Confederation was replaced by the North German Confederation (Norddeutscher Bund). The Franco-Prussian War (1870–71) brought the German states together to fight and beat the French, leading to the establishment of a united German Empire with the Prussian King Wilhelm I proclaimed emperor. The new state was a constitutional monarchy with a parliament. World War I began in 1914, triggered in part by the murder of the Austrian successor to the throne in Sarajevo. When the war ended in 1918, the defeated Germany had to give up some territories and its colonies, pay reparation and demilitarise under the Treaty of Versailles. From 1918 to 1933 the Weimar Republic provided the new political model as Germany's first democratic constitution.

Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898)

1879/94

Industrialisation: the route to a modern society

Industrialisation in Germany began in the early 19th century and with the building of the railways from the 1830s, more and more goods were produced and transported by machine. By the middle of the 19th century Germany was becoming an industrialised state. The German Empire was increasingly integrated in the world economy (exemplified by Germany's funding and engineering of the Baghdad Railway from the 1900s), and its exports rose. By 1900 its economy was the largets in Europe.

Accident in a machine factory

1889

The social situation: between hope and disappointment

Germany's population grew rapidly in the the 19th century and the expanding economy and industrialisation changed how this population earned its livelihood. There was considerable migration from the countryside to urban areas, where most industry was located. Poor employment conditions and low wages were ignored by the state for a long time but the revolution of 1848 gave the impulse for union organisation. However, many people emigrated, especially to the USA, to avoid economic hardship and unemployment, with numbers increasing dramatically from the 1870s. The social environment and life of the people changed radically. Other technical inventions, growing food production developed alongside progress in medicine and hygiene.

Robert Koch

About 1905