

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 2

“A Place in the Sun”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

In the first decade of the twentieth century, imperial Germany ranked alongside the top nations of the world, in fields as diverse as science, art, education, and, of course, military power. Pretty good for a country that was only thirty years old. Two areas in which Germany was an acknowledged leader were philosophy and music. The titan of German philosophy was Friedrich Nietzsche, who passed away in 1900, but whose work was, and is, still carefully studied and debated. The big name in music in Germany in 1900 was Richard Strauss. In 1896, in a happy confluence, Richard Strauss composed a tone poem based on Nietzsche’s *Also sprach Zarathustra*. The opening bars of that work remain among the most recognizable music in the classical canon.

Welcome to Germany, a country on the move. And welcome, to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme, “Also sprach Zarathustra” variation]

Episode 2. A Place in the Sun.

Germany in 1901 was the greatest, most advanced country in the world, as measured by any conceivable metric. Hey, you don’t have to take my word for it, go ask any 1901 German. A lot of Germans felt that way, and while Germany *exactly* been #1 in *everything*, it was certainly a country to be reckoned with in most areas. In 1901, Germany was highly industrialized, and its economy was growing faster than Britain’s, then the richest country in the world. Germany had twice as many college graduates per capita as did Britain, and less of the stark income inequality than the British had to reckon with.

Consider science; 1901 was the first year the Nobel Prize was awarded. Now, there are three science prizes: physics, chemistry, and medicine; and also literature and the peace prize. In 1901, German scientists won two out of the three science prizes. In the first ten years that the Nobel Prize was awarded, German scientists picked up ten out of a possible thirty science prizes, including a sweep of the three categories in 1905. Germans also won three of the first ten prizes in literature. No German was awarded a peace prize during this time, however; you can make of

that what you will. But no other nation can match that record; the British collect seven prizes during this same period, the French six, the Americans two. Yes, Germany dominates the sciences.

On a personal note, when I was in high school back in the 1970s, and I was choosing a foreign language to study, I was advised that if I was interested in science and technology (which I was) I should study German. Now, this advice was about 70 years out of date when they gave it to me, but at least it gives you an idea of the long shadow that German science casts over the twentieth century.

Two of the most important movements of the nineteenth century were nationalism and romanticism. Arguably, they're the same movement. Perhaps nationalism is just the political expression of romanticism, or maybe romanticism is the artistic expression of nationalism; either way, no nation better illustrates these movements than Germany.

In our day, we are often encouraged to think of nationalism as a bad thing, particularly in connection to Germany. And certainly, nationalism can be abused, as it was in Germany. But think what a German nationalist would say about the nineteenth century. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Germany was a collection of small and weak states, ruled by self-serving princes and bullied by neighboring, more centralized powers, like France and Austria. Yes, I know last time I said Austrians are Germans, but bear with me here. Look how quickly Germany climbed to the rank of world power once it's united. It's hard to deny that Germany is a greater nation in unity than it is segmented into little principalities. Small principalities, each with its own individual ruler, with its own government, with its own taxes, and tariffs; these were an obstacle to the development of Germany. Nationalism inspired the German people to look beyond the well-being of their own region, and think more broadly about the German nation. The result was a burst of creativity and prosperity that benefitted not only Germany, but the whole world. In 1901, Kaiser Wilhelm II famously declared, "we have conquered for ourselves a place in the sun." That's the good side of nationalism.

Before the nineteenth century, nations were more typically defined by imperium. Now, I mentioned that Latin word in the last episode, and I said it was the source of our English word "empire", and I went on to say it wasn't exactly what the Latin word meant. What the Latin word actually means is the scope of authority of an individual. So, a nation is the region that its ruler controls. That's how you get a patchwork empire like Austria-Hungary. Austria-Hungary is a good example of the old way of looking at things. Austria-Hungary is a nation because it is a patch of territory ruled over by its emperor. The languages, cultures, or values of the people living in that territory, and whether they agree or not, is considered beside the point.

Germany represents a more modern concept of a nation. Germany is a nation because it encompasses the German people. They are a *people* with a common language, a common culture, a common heritage, and here is a more natural basis for defining a nation.

And when you say the word “natural” this leads you directly to romanticism. Romanticism and art turns away from the formality and structure, and seeks the traditional and natural. Think of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, the late eighteenth century composer. [Overture to *Die Zauberflöte* plays in background.] His music is highly structured, highly formalized; it fits in perfectly with powdered wigs, tricornered hats, and topiary gardens. Naturally, Mozart composed in Vienna, under the patronage of the Emperor.

Nineteenth century romanticism took art in a new direction. [Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 6* plays in background.] Romantic literature and poetry sought exotic locations, violence, drama, and triumph over adversity. Romantic art sought action, and lots of stormy weather. Romantic composers sought contrast, passion, dynamism, and they were always interested in hearing folk music. Think Beethoven; Beethoven was democrat, he didn’t believe in aristocratic patronage, so he worked alone, supporting himself from the income he made composing music, and set the template for every starving artist who followed him.

[*Fantasia* from *Siegfried* plays in background.] The apotheosis of German romanticism is the music of Richard Wagner. Wagner dispensed with the last remnants of classicism in music, broke every rule of harmonic progression, and in the *Ring Cycle* provided Germany with a national epic in the form of a *four day* opera. [*Fantasia* plays to completion.]

Romantic artists were drawn to myths, legends, folk tales, and folk music, and in this way, their art fits hand in glove with the rising nationalism in Europe. Rossini’s opera *William Tell* inflamed the passions of Swiss nationalism, and I bet you can hum the overture. When Giuseppe Verdi died in 1901 Italians poured into the streets by the thousands, shouting “viva Verdi” and singing his arias, which had become the music of Italian unification. Verdi’s very name became a slogan for Italian unification.

The Belgian revolution began with a riot in an opera house. And romantic nationalist music was not limited to existing nations. In 1901, the music of composers such as Jean Sibelius, Edvard Grieg, Bedřich Smetana, and Antonín Dvořák expressed the dreams of nationhoods for the many peoples of Europe who did not yet have their own countries: the Finns, the Norwegians, the Czechs, the Irish, the Jews.

The anthem of German unification in the nineteenth century had been “Die Deutschlandlied”, the “Song of Germany”. You probably know it by its first line, “Deutschland über alles”, although that is not technically its title. The song is not calling for Germany to triumph over other nations; it is the singer’s declaration that Germany is more important than anything else, a radical statement for a citizen of one of those principalities in the nineteenth century. The first stanza has

gone out of fashion because it proclaims a very broad definition of Germany, and the second stanza has gone out of fashion because it's sexist. The third stanza is the national anthem of Germany today.

I would play it for you, but in 1901 the "Song of Germany" is not yet the German national anthem. The tune to the "Song of Germany" by Franz Joseph Haydn was originally composed as a birthday song for Kaiser Franz II, the last Holy Roman Emperor. In 1901 that song, "God Save Emperor Franz", was the national anthem of Austria. The national anthem of Germany in 1901 was "Heil dir im Siegerkranz", "Hail to Thee in Victor's Crown". I would play that for you, but the melody is the same as "God Save the Queen" or "My Country, 'Tis of Thee", so I don't think it makes a good example. So instead, here's "Wacht am Rhein", "The Watch on the Rhine", which is not Germany's national anthem, but was a popular patriotic tune at the time.

[music: "Die Wacht am Rhein"]

"Dear fatherland rest easy, fast stands and true the watch on the Rhine." This song is a bit more militaristic than "Das Deutschlandlied". Reference to the Rhine might seem romantic to a German, but you can understand why the French would find it particularly annoying because, hey, look at a map and tell me who the watch on the Rhine would be watching. In fact, I think it's safe to say that if a group of drunken German soldiers started singing "Wacht am Rhein" in, just to pick a random example, a café in French Morocco, you shouldn't be surprised if the rest of the patrons promptly stand up and drown them out by singing "La Marseillaise". And if you don't know what I'm talking about, you really do need to go watch the 1942 film *Casablanca*. Like, right now. Go ahead, I'll wait.

Did you enjoy it? Told you so. And here's where we get to the problem with nationalism. One person's patriotism is another person's insult. The assertion of my nationalism can be taken as opposition to your nationalism. I'd like to think that in our time we've come to recognize, maybe grudgingly, that my sense of nationalism shouldn't infringe on yours, and my patriotism has to be respectful of your patriotism, but in 1901 that was not the prevailing sentiment at all. The nineteenth century had seen Charles Darwin articulate his theory of evolution by natural selection, and by the beginning of the twentieth century, the rise and fall of nations was seen in the same context. If my country got bigger and stronger, it's because we're fitter than you. If your country is getting weaker and smaller, it's because you are a failure. This is in no way what Darwin meant of course, but the idea emerged all the same.

In episode one, I talked about the map of Europe in 1901, and how we see on that map we see a small number of sprawling empires, rather than the larger number of ethnic groups we see today. We modern people might look at that 1901 map and think it inevitable that those large states would come apart, but people in 1901, when trying to envision the world of 2001, would have been more likely to guess that there would be an even smaller number of even larger states. The

rulers of the great powers of 1901 saw as their obligation to ensure that when 2001 rolled around, their country would be one of the ones still on the map and getting bigger, rather than one of the ones that was getting smaller, or had disappeared altogether.

And that brings us to Nietzsche. Now, as I said, Nietzsche's work is complex and still controversial, but here I go anyway. An important part of Nietzsche's philosophy was the "will to power" and the concept of an "Übermensch", a "super man". Nietzsche argued that we should regard humanity not as an end result, but rather the transitional state to something better, the superman. He believed that the will to power was what drove people forward, to improve themselves, to become better and stronger, to achieve that ideal of the superman. He also argued that conventional morality, to the extent it attempts to hold back the better among us, is morally wrong and counterproductive.

I gather it remains a controversial question whether and to what degree Nietzsche was influenced by the work of Darwin. For me, it's hard to imagine that Darwin's work did not play an important role in Nietzsche's thinking. And Nietzsche's philosophy fits in nicely with the rising nationalism in Germany in the early twentieth century.

Now I need to emphasize that, although it's undeniable that Nietzsche's philosophy has gotten mixed up with some of the uglier features of German nationalism, Nietzsche himself was not much of a German nationalist. Born in Prussia prior to German unification, he renounced his German citizenship when he got a teaching post in Switzerland, just as Albert Einstein would a few decades later. Nietzsche didn't show a whole lot of love for Germany. It's said that he called "Deutschland über alles" "the most ridiculous slogan in the world." Nietzsche liked to claim he was actually Polish and that the family name was originally "Nietzky", although this claim has zero historical basis. He's also on the record as saying that Germany was a great nation only because its people had so much Polish blood in them. Heh, some German nationalist.

But although it seems clear that neither Nietzsche nor Charles Darwin saw their own work as a justification for expanding national borders, imposing colonial rule over foreign peoples, and generally being a jerk of a nation, it seems equally clear that a lot of other people read their work that way. And in this dog eat dog, looking-glass world of early twentieth century nationalism, your country has to run as fast as it can just to stay in the same place.

And so, Britain, the wealthiest and most powerful nation in the world in 1901, finds itself nervously looking over its shoulder at Germany. After all, the German economy was growing faster than the British economy, the German army was much larger than the British army, the Germans were rapidly expanding their navy; what would you think?

I'll tell you what William Le Queux thought; in 1906 he published a novel entitled *The Invasion of 1910*. The book is an invented history of a future invasion of Britain by Germany. The *Daily Mail* serialized the novel and advertised it in London by hiring men to walk the streets of the

capital in German military uniforms, complete with spiked helmets. In the novel, Britain suffers a conventional military defeat only to rally and expel the invaders by guerilla warfare. There was also a German edition, although in that version Germany wins. And as you may know, in 1984 there would be an American feature film version with different bad guys entitled *Red Dawn*.

Similarly, the British writer and social satirist H. H. Munro, who wrote under the pen name Saki, published a novel entitled *When William Came*. It describes a future London under German occupation; ironically, Saki would be killed in World War I.

There are many other examples of these military science fiction invasion stories published in Britain at about this time, and we should also consider H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds*, which was first published in 1897, in this light has a more metaphorical expression of invasion anxiety.

Germany's determination to become a naval power wasn't helping any, nor did the habit of German officers of toasting "der Tag", that is, "the day", in other words, the day the war with Britain starts.

But it's not as if the Germans thought triumph was inevitable. They were looking over their shoulders too, at the Russians. Russia had a larger population than Germany, and the gap was growing. In 1901, Russia was seen as a backward and undeveloped country, but although its industry was miniscule, it was growing, and although its population was spread out over a large area, Russia was building more miles of railroad track every year, and trains would be a great way of pulling together huge numbers of strong young Russian men and depositing them on Germany's front door, wouldn't they?

So just as people in Britain were looking at economic and demographic projections and worrying about Germany, so were Germans looking at equally depressing economic and demographic projections and worrying about Russia. The difference from the German point of view is that Britain is a country with a large navy and a large colonial empire. You can still see lots of room for growth, a lot of untapped potential. Germany, in contrast, was late to the party. Yes, Germany had a colonial empire, consisting of some territories in Africa; Togo, Cameroon, and today what we would call Namibia and Tanzania, and some holdings in the Pacific, but there was nothing like what Britain and France enjoyed.

To the east was Russia, the sleeping bear; to the south was Italy and Austria; to the west lay France, still bitter over the Franco-Prussian War; and Britain lay in the North Sea, blocking Germany's access to the world beyond.

And so that's how Germany in the early twentieth century is either a rising power on the cusp of world domination, or a short-changed and put-upon people encircled by hostile neighbors, depending on your point of view. This would not be the road to good diplomatic relations. And

while we're on the subject of inept diplomacy, now would be a good time to mention the man whose name appears next to "inept diplomacy" in the dictionary.

Friedrich Wilhelm Viktor Albert von Prussian, he who will come to be known as Kaiser Wilhelm II. He was born on January 27, 1859. His mother was Victoria, eldest daughter of Britain's Queen Victoria, who had wed the grandson of the King of Prussia when she was 17-years-old. Victoria did not like Germany, she did not trust Germans, and she wasn't shy about saying so. I guess you could say her son inherited her tactlessness.

She became pregnant for the first time at the age of 18, and through some combination of a sense of isolation that came from being a recent immigrant to a new country that she didn't like very much, and the pervasive prudishness of the times (this is the daughter of *the* Victoria we're talking about) she refused medical examinations and wasn't comfortable even discussing her pregnancy with doctors. Her labor was ten hours of excruciating pain, by the end of which the doctors feared that both the child and the mother would be lost.

The problem was that the child, a baby boy, was a breech birth. He was born bruised, limp, and not breathing. Happily, a nurse rubbed and slapped the baby repeatedly, and eventually he began to cry. The doctors, nurses, and family rejoiced, but in all the excitement, it took a few days before anybody noticed that the baby's left arm had been seriously injured in the delivery. Nerves were damaged, and the arm would never function properly.

In adulthood, Kaiser Wilhelm II would not have use of the limb, which was six inches shorter than his right arm. He developed a skill in posing for pictures while posting his left hand in his right, or placing his left hand on the hilt of a sword, a cane, a bannister, or some similar prop, to create the illusion of a healthy limb. You can see this in any picture of the Kaiser.

Wilhelm had a lonely childhood, as was true more often than not for royals in his time. He seldom saw his father, and his mother, Victoria, developed a habit of criticizing anything and everything German. For the first ten years of his life, young Wilhelm was subjected to an endless variety of bizarre treatments intended to heal that left arm. Everything from surgeries, to muscle stretching machines, to inserting the arm into carcasses of dead animals, to binding Wilhelm's right arm to his side on the theory that with only his left arm free, somehow he'd magically learn how to use it.

One witness recounts Victoria chastising her children for dipping their cakes into their tea, saying, "none of your nasty German habits at my table!" She drilled into Wilhelm the greatness of the Royal Navy, and liked to dress him up in sailor suits, apparently intended to counterbalance all the times Wilhelm had to dress up in the Prussian army uniforms.

He grew up with deep resentments toward his mother, and perhaps unsurprisingly, developed a love-hate relationship with Great Britain. He loved the sea, he enjoyed yachting, and of course

he would reign over imperial Germany during a huge naval buildup, which he would explicitly associate with his British ancestry. But there was distinct element of competition here; he was not trying to imitate Britain, he was trying to beat it. He desperately wanted to beat his British relatives in those yacht races, and he desperately wanted a bigger navy than the British had.

At the age of 20, Wilhelm was made a lieutenant in the first regiment of foot guards, he was grateful for the opportunity to get away from his mother. His fellow officers were fellow nobles like himself; politically right-wing, smugly aristocratic, and they all looked up to the prince. Wilhelm later said, “in the Guards, I really found my family, my friends, my interests, everything which I had up to that time had to do without.” It was during his army days that Wilhelm went from being a polite and reserved teenager to the strutting Prussian that we all know and love.

As Kaiser, Wilhelm did German diplomacy no favors. I could rattle off a set of examples here, but I'd rather wait until these stories come out in context as our narrative moves forward. But here's one story I can't resist telling right now: it was 1908, and the Kaiser consented to give an interview to the British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph*. Relations with Britain are strained at this time, remember, this is the era of those invasion novels. So, the Kaiser took it upon himself to go on a “charm offensive” and take his case directly to the British people. Here is one excerpt from that interview:

“You English are mad, mad, mad as March hares. What has come over you that you are so completely given over to suspicions quite unworthy of a great nation? What more can I do than I have done? I declared with all the emphasis at my command... that my heart is set upon peace, and that it is one of my dearest wishes to live on the best of terms with England. Have I ever been false to my word? Falsehood and prevarication are alien to my nature. My actions ought to speak for themselves, but you listen not to them but to those who misinterpret and distort them. That is a personal insult which I feel and resent. To be forever misjudged, to have my repeated offers of friendship weighed and scrutinized with jealous, mistrustful eyes, taxes my patience severely. I have said time after time that I am a friend of England, and your press... bids the people of England refuse my proffered hand and insinuates that the other holds a dagger.”

It was an interview that was not so much *charm* as it was, well, *offensive*. The Kaiser's effort to reach out to the British ended up reinforcing all their worst suspicions. Even in Germany the interview was regarded as a disaster.

I would like to take a moment here to introduce a recurring feature on *The History of the Twentieth Century*: the Kaiser Wilhelm II Award for Making an Ass out of Yourself. And the very first Kaiser Wilhelm Award, for all but declaring war on the United Kingdom in the course of an interview when he was supposed to be reassuring them, is hereby presented to: Kaiser Wilhelm II.

[sound effect: cheers]

Richard Strauss met the Kaiser for the first time in 1899, and experienced the Kaiser's unique brand of, ahem, "charm" firsthand. Strauss was by then already regarded as Germany's greatest composer. Some called him Richard II, the great Richard Wagner being Richard I. Strauss was also conductor of the Berlin Royal Opera, and when the Kaiser asked for him one night following a performance of Carl Maria von Weber's then 78-year-old opera *Der Freischütz*, one of the Kaiser's favorites, the Kaiser used the occasion to denounce modern music, rounding out his complaints by telling Strauss that the composer himself was "one of the worst". The Kaiser declared modern music worthless, and declared, "I prefer *Freischütz*!" Strauss politely replied, "I also prefer *Freischütz*," but he left the meeting deeply disappointed in his sovereign.

Now, if the Kaiser disapproved of Strauss's music in 1899, one can only imagine what he made of Strauss's opera *Salome*, which premiered in 1905. Strauss's opera takes as its text the German translation of Oscar Wilde's play. You probably know that Oscar Wilde, who died in 1900, was a popular playwright in London of the 1890s, until he was revealed to be gay and sentenced to prison for his homosexuality. Strauss was being deeply provocative by using *anything* by Oscar Wilde, but particularly *Salome*, Wilde's version of the story of King Herod Antipas, the first century king of Galilee, who reputedly divorced, married his brother's wife, lusted after his niece, and ordered up John the Baptist's head on a platter. Not content with these indiscretions, Wilde had added into the story adultery, homosexuality, necrophilia, basically a catalog of everything you aren't supposed to talk about in stuffy, traditionalist, Wilhelmine Germany.

Of course, homosexuality may have been unmentionable, but it was not unheard-of. In 1902, Friedrich Alfred Krupp, head of the famous German steel and armaments company, politician and advisor to the Kaiser, killed himself after the Social Democratic magazine *Vorwärts* outed him. Krupp spent months every year on the Italian island of Capri [/'kɑ:pi/] (and yes, I know, Italians pronounce it /'kapri/, but hey, I'm not Italian). Anyway, it seems Krupp mostly went to Capri for the purpose of spending some "quality private time" with young Italian men. If you've listened to *The History of Rome* podcast, you may recall the Emperor Tiberius had villas on the very same island which he used for a very similar purpose about 1880 years earlier.

Krupp had been popular on the island, his free-spending habits may have had something to do with that, and, uh, by the way, consensual sex between people of the same gender was perfectly legal in Italy at the time, in fact Capri had something of a reputation as a destination for sex tourists, but homosexuality was a no-no in Germany. The political left could not attack the Kaiser directly, but a super-rich arms dealer of the Kaiser made a pretty good proxy.

The Social Democrats... well they actually supported legalizing homosexuality, which made all of this a little bit hypocritical, but not any more hypocritical than the right-wing newspapers who defended Krupp, and also went so far as to chastise the left for impoverishing the poor people of

Capri by scaring off the tourists. The Kaiser spoke at Krupp's funeral, he denied the magazine's accusations, and condemned the Social Democrats for making them, but it was probably true. For example, Krupp's will contained substantial bequests to two young men who lived on Capri.

In 1907, three of the Kaiser's closest friends and advisors were accused of homosexuality. The Kaiser distanced himself from them at once, but the resulting libel trials extended over two years, it was in the newspapers over and over again, and it did a lot to tarnish the reputation of the Kaiser and the aristocracy. The fact that the *Daily Telegraph* interview came out in the middle of all this didn't help any, and there was actually some talk that maybe it was time for the Kaiser to abdicate.

So, you have to wonder whether Richard Strauss had any inkling of this in 1905 when he wrote *Salome* as the text for his next opera, and intended the whole thing as a sly satire of Kaiser Wilhelm and his court.

So, there's Germany in the early twentieth century. Arrogant, but insecure. Confident, but paranoid. Autocratic, but rocked by scandal. Bound by tradition, primed for social revolution. Germany may be an extreme example, but her peers among the great nations share many of these conflicting traits. And as I suggested earlier, this is a volatile mixture, the early twentieth century isn't the golden age some people make it out to be, nor is it a world of innocence. In fact, it's a world headed for a catastrophe, but can a catastrophe truly be called a catastrophe when the world's leaders can see it coming, and their armed forces are still raising toasts to der Tag?

We'll have to stop there for today, but I hope you'll join me next week on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we take a look at the Philippines, a distant and neglected archipelago, about to find itself caught in the middle of a war between a declining power and a rising one. That's next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. In fairness to the Kaiser and his musical tastes, I should mention that one Russian critic similarly remarked that, "a singer in a German opera these days couldn't ask for a glass of water without employing a fistful of sharps and flats." The Kaiser wasn't the only one who had issues with modern music; another critic compared the experience to listening to Richard Strauss's music to "having June bugs stuck down his pants". The name of that critic was Franz Strauss, Richard's father. Richard loved to tell that story. Franz Strauss died too soon to hear a performance of *Salome*; come to think of it, maybe that was all for the best.

[music: Closing Theme]