



## Postcards from Planet Jupiter

While traveling recently through Old Europe (to borrow Donald Rumsfeld's now shopworn phrase), I was led to reflect on the obtuseness of the secretary of defense's dismissive epithet. For nations no less than wine, some things improve in the cask. Age is not simply weariness; it also connotes a sense of limits, an awareness of mortality, greater calm in dealing with recurrent dangers, concern for one's progeny, and more care for posterity's benevolent judgment. It is a season, as Shakespeare affirmed, when ripeness is all.

So I pondered following a busman's holiday in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany. Friends and strangers alike fixed me with anxious eyes to ask what on earth was happening in America, and why Bush II was so brashly unlike Bush I. Yet my perceptions differed from those of a valued student of foreign affairs, Robert Kagan, a Washington policy analyst now living in Brussels. He claims in a new book that Americans are from Mars, Europeans from Venus. We do indeed seem to dwell on different planets, but *Venus*? Old Europe seems less an aging coquette than a twin of Jupiter: rotund and grave, girdled by many moons, wearied by the quarrels and liaisons of younger gods, yet capable when challenged of hurling an angry thunderbolt in the form of a veto. Moreover, older Europeans have learned firsthand that the sun eventually sets on all great empires, and that every rising power's folly is to believe it sits at the end of history.

### *Scrapping Bismarck's Diplomacy*

The perils of hubris struck me with peculiar force while visiting Bremen and Hamburg, from whose ports more immigrants came to the New World than from any other. These mighty Hanseatic trading cities epitomized the fast-forward expansion of the German Empire from its formation after the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71) until the catastrophes that flowed from Sarajevo. And nobody did more to propel Germany's rise than Prince Otto von Bismarck, whose deeds should be known to George W. Bush, since at Yale he studied Germany's past in a course taught by an astute historian, Henry Ashby Turner.

Bismarck's memory is preserved in a museum I sought out at his residence in Friedrichsruh, in the environs of Hamburg. Here one is reminded that a century ago all indicators on the bourse of power pointed to Germany's ascent: its swift victories in three European wars, its awesome military machine, its double-digit economic growth, a fertility rate that assured ample future manpower, all this plus Europe's finest scientific institutes, its ablest engineers, and its most literate populace. When the Nobel Prizes were launched in 1901, Germany swept the field in medicine, life sciences, physics, and chemistry. As significant, Germany possessed Europe's strongest Social Democratic Party, so well organized that Marxists confidently expected that founders of the first socialist state would speak German, not English or French, and certainly not Russian.

In 1888, the auguries for Germany were exceptionally favorable as Kaiser Wilhelm II succeeded to the throne at age 29. The new emperor exuded the outward assurance of a leader born to command. His grandmother was Queen Victoria, his uncle was the future

Edward VII, and every royal in Europe, ranging from St. Petersburg and Copenhagen south to Athens, was either his kin or his favor-seeker. Yet some also noted his tendency to swagger, his love of uniforms, his intellectual shallowness, and his repeated references to Germany's providential mission. Tellingly, his first proclamation as emperor was to his soldiers: "So we are bound together—I and the army—so we are born for one another, and so we shall hold together indissolubly, whether, as God wills, we are at peace or in storm."

It likewise soon became apparent that Wilhelm II bridled at his reliance on Bismarck, and on the complex web of alliances the aging Iron Chancellor had welded to prevent Germany's isolation. The young emperor, his courtiers and his advisors—most especially his *éminence grise*, Baron Friedrich August von Holstein, a crafty early edition of Karl Rove—itched to make their own mark, to ensure Germany a place in the sun (Wilhelm II's phrase). But the kaiser felt hemmed in by the Iron Chancellor's Triple Alliance with Austria-Hungary and Italy, and by the Three Emperors' Pact, binding Russia and Austria-Hungary to the German Reich.

### *"Deutschland über alles"*

In 1890, seizing on a minor contretemps, the emperor dismissed Bismarck, ending his 28-year tenure as chancellor, an event indelibly commemorated in a famous British cartoon, "Dropping the Pilot." It may well be that the Bismarckian order was fated to unravel anyway, as David Calleo and others have argued, given its complexity, its reliance on secret diplomacy, and the personal ties of a tiny ruling elite. Still, the speed with which the whole structure crumbled, and the scale of the devastating deluge that followed, was astonishing. In little more than two decades, Germany's drive for global supremacy led to the First World War and the eventual demise of four empires—the German, Russian, Ottoman, Austria-Hungarian—as well as the creation of today's Middle East, with its angry tangle of half-formed nations.

Starting early in the 1890s, Germany seemed to burst assertively everywhere on the world stage. Bismarck's attempts to placate Great Britain yielded to blunt provocations, and then to a costly naval race that Wilhelm II vowed he would win. Germany's pact with Russia, the linchpin in Bismarck's structure, was not renewed. By 1893, the old chancellor's worst nightmare materialized as republican France moved toward an *entente cordiale* with czarist Russia, an odd coupling that paved the way for the Great War.

"No one could accuse the Germans of lack of energy," writes Gordon Craig in his standard Oxford history. "In April 1894 they filed a claim for the sole possession of the Samoan Islands, in June they protested the legality of an Anglo-Congolese treaty concluded the previous month; and in the autumn of the year they quarreled with the British over the recognition of the Sultan of Morocco, the boundaries of the Sudan, the future of Portugal's colonies, and the policy to be adopted toward Turkey as a result of the Armenian massacre."

In 1898, the kaiser toured the Middle East, entered Jerusalem on horseback, proclaimed himself champion of 300 million Muslims, and conjured visions of a Berlin-to-Baghdad railway. In north China, German breweries and Lutheran churches sprang up in Shantung, the German enclave in which the fanatic Boxers first rebelled against "foreign devils" in 1899. A year later, a multinational peacekeeping force led by a German, Field Marshal Count von Waldersee, crushed the Boxer Uprising and sacked Peking. Meanwhile, German traders and agents moved deeper into east, west, and southern Africa, a forward policy underscored in 1895 by the celebrated "Kruger telegram" in which Wilhelm II implied he would back the Boer president Paul Kruger against Britain. And nervous Europeans noticed that Germany had adopted as its unofficial anthem "Deutschland, Deutsch-

land über alles,” with its first verse celebrating the Fatherland and its four rivers—the Maas, the Etsch, the Memel, and the Belt—none of them in Germany.

In all this, Wilhelm II benefited from the autocratic political system that Bismarck had devised. As defined by the historian Fritz Stern, the system combined constitutional absolutism with democratic trappings. Socialists and liberals could indeed sit in the Reichstag, but they had no voice on military and foreign policy, which were judged the province of the kaiser, the chancellor, and the general staff. Thus Prussian warlords with negligible accountability fixed the course, and then escaped the blame, for the blunders (e.g. unrestricted submarine warfare) that ordained Germany’s defeat in the First World War.

### *Fischer Maps the Fatal Course*

It was not until after the Second World War that a German scholar of high standing, Fritz Fischer (1908–99) documented the feckless extremism of Wilhelmine diplomacy. Himself a conservative and a professor of history at the University of Hamburg, Fischer sired a storm in 1961 with *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (Grasp for world power), or as put more mildly in its English title, *Germany’s War Aims in the First World War* (1967). Drawing on long-sealed records and unpublished memoirs, Fischer demonstrated that German leaders planned to establish an imperium of staggering dimensions, extending in Europe alone from the Balkans to the Baltic: “Command of the eastern Mediterranean was to compel the adherence of Greece, while dominion of the Black Sea guaranteed the economic mastery of the Ukraine, Crimea, and Georgia, and command of the Baltic compelled Sweden and Finland, with their riches, to take the German side. On top of all this was the reward of at least economic hegemony in Rump Russia.”

For such heresies, patriots excoriated Fischer, yet over time he carried the day, winning the approval of the student generation that now governs Germany. More than anyone, by exposing the bungling adventurism of Wilhelm’s circle, he discredited the legend that craven civilians were to blame for Germany’s defeat in 1918. Fischer’s name still resonates at his old university, where my wife and I met with Prof. Angelika Schaser, who has succeeded to both his academic chair and his office. Her field is contemporary history, closing a circle in Germany, where the Nazi era is now being thoroughly combed by younger scholars.

Just how thoroughly became evident during our visit to the Research Institute for Modern History in Hamburg, where every available document plus hundreds of oral histories dealing locally with Nazi times are available on open shelves crowding four large rooms. We met as well with Dr. Rolf Rietzler, a retired editor of *Der Spiegel*, who changed his academic focus and switched universities to study with Fischer, and who today is completing a memoir based on his paternal generation’s recollections of the Hitler era in Catholic southern Germany. And Fischer’s spirit could be sensed in the Bismarck Museum at Friedrichsruh, where the old chancellor is memorialized, warts and all, and where near the exit, one finds a blowup of that famous cartoon, “Dropping the Pilot,” beside a label quoting a French member of parliament declaring in March 1890, “Germany with Bismarck was a great power with a clear direction. Germany without Bismarck is a problem.” Itemized nearby are the fateful steps leading to Sarajevo.

En route to Bremen, we paused in Essen to see Villa Hügel, the hilltop castle erected by the Krupp dynasty in the 1870s, shaped in the overbearing luxe style once favored by Germany’s industrial barons. The villa is more like a gusty railway terminal than a residence, and provision was made for Kaiser Wilhelm II to come directly by train to a suite kept perpetually ready for his impromptu visits. The Ruhr furnaces of Germany’s major arms manufacturer from 1870 to 1945 have long since gone cold, and what remains of the

Krupp fortune passed to a foundation established by Alfried Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach. He was the Krupp sentenced at Nuremberg in 1947 for his war crimes, then released from prison three years later for Cold War reasons. After his death in 1967, his foundation generously funded scientific research, scholarship programs, health services, sports, and the fine arts—just the metamorphosis, one might assume, that Americans would applaud.

Instead, Donald Rumsfeld likened Germany to Cuba and Libya after Chancellor Gerhard Shroeder in an overheated election debate warned against American “adventurism” in Iraq. So irritated was the secretary of defense that he declined to shake hands with the German minister of defense at a NATO meeting. It would take a Swift to do justice to this latest turn in German-American relations. For much of the past century, Germans were with some reason stereotyped as incorrigible militarists, the willing executioners of Jews and Slavs, the martial aggressors who waged unprovoked wars against half of Europe. So widespread was this perception that influential Americans a decade ago opposed Germany’s fast-track unification. Op-ed articles then claimed that even German children playing in a sandbox were more aggressive than non-German youngsters. Now some of the same voices decry Germany’s reputed pacifism, its collusion with its historic adversaries, France and Russia, in placing too high a value on peace and compromise. (This despite Germany’s peace-keeping role in former Yugoslavia, its military presence in Afghanistan, and its cooperation in tracking al-Qaeda operatives.)

### *Remembering Old Germany*

We tend to forget what war waged by the Old Germany—the pre-Hitler Germany—was really like. Chemical weapons, though banned by the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, were first used by Germans on April 22, 1915, against Franco-Algerian troops at Ypres. Chlorine gas, which Churchill called “this hellish weapon,” was developed at the suggestion of Germany’s leading arms manufacturer, Gustav Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach, in hopes of ending the stalemate on the Western Front. Its inventor was Fritz Haber, a Nobel Prize-winning chemist who happened to be Jewish. “It would appear,” writes Fritz Stern in *Einstein’s German World* (1999), “that neither Haber nor those closest to him...worried about the legal and moral issues involved, such was the brutish atmosphere of war. Gas warfare did not prove decisive, though its horror—the terrifying choking, the blinding, the deaths, the experience even of survivors of a living death—has become an inextinguishable part of our collective memory, an early instance of science put to satantic service.”

So horrified was Clara Haber by what her husband had done that after a stormy argument in May 1915 she killed herself with Haber’s army pistol. Do we truly want Germans to worship Mars again? Isn’t it possible to differ civilly on the vexed question of Iraq without stooping to insults and rudeness? After all, it was not some sniveling Old European who remarked that Washington tended to expect its European partners to salute and shut up, as if they were in the Warsaw Pact. Instead, it was former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski who ventured that devastating comparison during a CNN interview. If the Germans, who were the first to use weapons of mass destruction, hesitate to wage a preventive war, their objections deserve something better than a snarling rebuke. ●

—Karl E. Meyer

*Note:* In an article in the London *Spectator* (March 22), the Defense Department advisor Richard Perle hails the demise of the United Nations, “the chatterbox on the Hudson [*sic*],” and implies that Washington should now liberate other states with weapons of mass destruction. The voice is Perle’s; the spirit is Kaiser Bill’s.