

**IMPERIAL GERMANY  
(1871-1918): OTTO  
VON BISMARCK'S  
DOMESTIC POLICY:  
PATERNALISTIC STATE  
SOCIALISM**



# IMPERIAL GERMANY (1871-1918): OTTO VON BISMARCK'S DOMESTIC POLICY: PATERNALISTIC STATE SOCIALISM

## Description

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the major elements of Otto von Bismarck's domestic policy for the German Reich during his time as Chancellor, focusing on the specifics of his old-age pension fund, his universal government medical insurance for all Germans, and the implementation of universal male suffrage.

## Subjects

European History, World History, Economics

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Bismarck Memorial, Berlin
- Bismarck statues around Germany

## Essential Questions

- Who was Otto von Bismarck?
- What were the major provisions of Bismarck's Domestic Policy for the newly united Germany?
- What is the legacy of Bismarck's social programs, both for Germany and for the world?
- Was Bismarck's "State Socialism" a prelude to later 20th century economic ideas such as corporatism, fascism and National Socialism?

## Academic Summary

I do not think that doctrines like those of "Laissez-faire" . . . should be applied in the State, and especially in a monarchically, paternally governed State. . . . Our kings (Prussian and now German) have secured the emancipation of the serfs, they have created a thriving peasantry, and they may possibly be successful--the earnest endeavor exists, at any rate--in improving the condition of the working classes somewhat. . . . Give the working-man the right to work as long as he is healthy; assure him care when he is sick; assure him maintenance when he is old. If you do that, and do not fear the sacrifice--or cry out "State Socialism" (as soon as) the words "Provision for old age" are uttered,--if the State will show a little more Christian solicitude for the working-man, then I believe that the gentlemen of the Wyden Program (the socialist program of the Social-Democratic Party) will sound their bird-call in vain, and that thronging to them will cease as soon as the workingmen see that the Government and legislative bodies are earnestly concerned for their welfare. . . .

*Otto von Bismarck, Speech before the Reichstag, 1884*

A remedy cannot alone be sought in the repression of Socialist agitation. There must be simultaneously the positive advancement of the welfare of the working classes. And here the case of those work-people who are incapable of earning their own livelihood is of the greatest importance.

*Kaiser William I, Speech before the Reichstag, 1879*

That the state should interest itself to a greater degree than hitherto in those of its members who need assistance, is not only a duty of humanity and Christianity by which state institutions should be permeated but a duty of state-preserving policy whose aim should be to cultivate the conception and that too among the non-propertied classes, which form at once the most numerous and the least instructed part of the population that the state is not merely a necessary but a benevolent institution.

*Kaiser William I, Speech before the Reichstag, 1881*

In 1871, after over one thousand years of political bickering and jostling, the Germanic states finally unified behind one flag. Led by the will of Prussia's "Iron Chancellor", Otto Von Bismarck, the German Reich accomplished in a less than a decade what had taken the rest of the major European powers hundreds of years: world notice. It was the fastest rise of a true world power in modern history. Bismarck today is probably best known around the world for his foreign policy and his "Blood and Iron" style of governing. Some opinions on Bismarck are based on subsequent events that happened long after Bismarck was gone (two world wars), while others are grounded in Bismarck's own words and political style. What is sometimes forgotten, however, was that Bismarck (and Kaiser William I) tried to unite all Germans of all classes under a paternalistic social system that provided for their medical, accident and retirement needs. He also championed universal male suffrage (as long as the results of everyone voting could be controlled – in reality his support of extending the suffrage was probably

done as a way to garner proletariat support without giving up much). While these programs certainly seem reasonable to most people today, one must remember that Bismarck proposed these measures in an age of laissez-faire capitalism and restrictive voting requirements that severely limited an average man's participation in the electoral processes such "democratic" countries as France, Britain and the United States. In Europe, only Switzerland and Greece had universal male suffrage by 1875. The prevailing economic and political theories of the time, not only in Europe, but also around the civilized world, said that governments should be for the elite taxpaying members of society, and thus those governments shouldn't interfere with business or labor relations. Bismarck's policies went against those ideas. Why?

The newly created German Empire in 1871 was a land seething with potential social unrest. As the most industrialized nation on the continent, Bismarck's Germany had more members of the urban proletariat than any nation in Europe. Marxist and Socialist advocates were calling on the working class across the Reich to rise up and to take control of their own destinies. Bismarck and Kaiser William I had forged this new empire through Realpolitik and war, not through any up-swelling grassroots effort coming from the German people. Creating Germany was easy... governing the new Reich was more difficult. Bismarck turned to a type of "paternalistic" socialism as a way to control the proletariat, while at the same time, by creating a culture of dependence by the proletariat, the chancellor was able to foster German nationalism among all classes of people. Germany cared about its people. Its people needed to care about the fatherland.

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the major elements of Otto von Bismarck's domestic policy for the German Reich during his time as Chancellor, focusing on the specifics of his old-age pension fund, his universal government medical insurance for all Germans, and the implementation of universal male suffrage.

## **Objectives**

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the details of Bismarck's domestic plan for the German Reich after its creation in 1871.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how Bismarck used his domestic plan to create a culture of dependence on paternalistic socialism among the German proletariat, and how he then used this dependence to unite all social classes around his ultimate goal of German nationalism.

## Procedure

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: What role should government play in providing a social safety net for the working class or poor? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture – Brief overview of Bismarck’s program of “State Socialism”. (20 min)
- Video – Bismarck’s Domestic Policies (10 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on Bismarck’s domestic policies, taking notes as appropriate. (15 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles for homework the night before class to prepare for class discussion.
- Group Activity – Discussion: Bismarck’s “State Socialism” (15 min)

### III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail how did Otto von Bismarck use his policies of “State Socialism” – namely universal suffrage, expanded national healthcare and an old-age pension system – to effectively create a culture of dependence in the proletariat, and by doing so was therefore able to foster German nationalism among all classes of people?

## Extension

### On tour: Bismarck monument in Berlin

While on tour, students in Berlin can visit the Tiergarten, where they can see sights such as the Brandenburg Gate and Potsdamer Platz. The park also contains the Bismarck Memorial, a prominent statue, to the Iron Chancellor and architect of modern Germany. The statue was originally located in front of the Reichstag before the Second World War, but was moved in 1938 under Hitler’s project to recast Berlin as “Welthauptstadt Germania” (World Capital Germany). Ironically, moving the memorial to its present location probably saved it, as its former home was completely destroyed during the war. Students looking closely, however, can see some damage from shrapnel caused by Allied bombing and Soviet Red Army shelling of the city.

## Web Links

### Lesson Plan Websites

- [history.hanover.edu/courses/excerpts/111bis2.html](http://history.hanover.edu/courses/excerpts/111bis2.html)  
Excerpts from Memoirs by Otto von Bismarck (primary source) – excellent primary source. Details Bismarck’s social programs.
- [www.forgottenbooks.org/readbook\\_text/Socialized\\_Germany\\_1000316894/177](http://www.forgottenbooks.org/readbook_text/Socialized_Germany_1000316894/177)  
Socialized Germany (primary source)
- [germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=1809](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1809)  
Bismarck’s Reichstag Speech on the Law for Workers’ compensation, 15 Mar 1884 (primary source)
- [germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=584](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=584)  
A Workplace Accident: A Hamburg Shoemaker’s Plea for Assistance and a Senator’s Response (primary source)
- [www.historyhome.co.uk/europe/bisdome.htm](http://www.historyhome.co.uk/europe/bisdome.htm)  
Bismarck’s Domestic Policies, 1871-1890 (website) – from historyhome (UK) website by Marjorie Bloy
- [mathewson.hubpages.com/hub/Bismarcks-Domestic-Policies](http://mathewson.hubpages.com/hub/Bismarcks-Domestic-Policies)  
Bismarck’s Domestic Policies (website)
- [orderedliberty.wordpress.com/2013/08/02/bismarck-and-living-under-state-socialism-by-ismael-hernandez-president-freedom-virtue-institute/](http://orderedliberty.wordpress.com/2013/08/02/bismarck-and-living-under-state-socialism-by-ismael-hernandez-president-freedom-virtue-institute/)  
Bismarck and Living under State Socialism (web article)
- [www.blacksacademy.net/content/3429.html](http://www.blacksacademy.net/content/3429.html)  
Universal male suffrage in Wilhelmine Germany from 1871 (web article)
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video) – great 2 minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA – highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=nrA6FRfjJZA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nrA6FRfjJZA)  
Bismarck’s Domestic Policies (video)

### Background Information

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otto\\_von\\_Bismarck](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otto_von_Bismarck)  
Otto von Bismarck – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State\\_Socialism\\_\(Germany\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State_Socialism_(Germany))  
State Socialism (Germany) – Wikipedia article
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/germany/country\\_profile](http://passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/germany/country_profile)  
On the Road: Germany (country profile) – from Passports Educational Travel

### Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/german-unification-under-bismarck](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/german-unification-under-bismarck)

### German Unification in 1871

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/bismarck-berlin-conference-1884](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/bismarck-berlin-conference-1884)  
Imperial Germany (1871-1918) – Otto von Bismarck: Berlin Conference of 1884
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/bismarck-paternalistic-state-socialism](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/bismarck-paternalistic-state-socialism)  
Imperial Germany (1871-1918) – Otto von Bismarck: Paternalistic State Socialism
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/bismarck-triple-alliance](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/bismarck-triple-alliance)  
Imperial Germany (1871-1918) – Otto von Bismarck: Triple Alliance
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/marx-and-engels-communist-manifesto](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/marx-and-engels-communist-manifesto)  
Karl Marx and Fredrich Engels – the Communist Manifesto

### **Key Terms**

- Otto von Bismarck
- Socialism
- State Socialism
- Universal Suffrage

