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Binoy Kampmark. “No peace with the Hohenzollerns’: American Attitudes on Political Legitimacy towards Hohenzollern Germany, 1917-1918.” *Diplomatic History* 34:3 (November 2010): 769-791. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-7709.2010.00895.x. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2010.00895.x>.

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Review by **Andrew G. Bonnell**, University of Queensland

Binoy Kampmark’s very stimulating article on American attitudes on political legitimacy towards Hohenzollern Germany raises a number of interesting questions.

One of these questions concerns the genealogy of the concept of the “pariah state”, and the implications of that concept for the conduct of international relations. The brandishing of the term “pariah state” is something that readers may associate with George W. Bush’s stigmatization of certain states as constituting an “axis of evil”. Before that, there was Ronald Reagan’s use of the term “evil empire” and the application of the label of rogue state to regimes from Central America to Libya. The stigmatization of a state as a pariah, and thus beyond the pale of the normal conduct of diplomacy, was used in some of these cases as a license for overt invasion, bombing, or more covert forms of attack, within or outside the framework of international law. While this use of the concept of the pariah or rogue state has been associated in recent decades with unilateralist and more or less militaristic administrations, the provocation inherent in Kampmark’s article is the suggestion that the denial of the political legitimacy of the Imperial German state by the administration of Woodrow Wilson, that advocate of liberal international organisation, might be a precursor to these instances. In turn, Wilson’s denial of legitimacy to the Kaiser’s Germany had earlier precedents in the diplomacy of the United States, especially in the Western hemisphere.

Other questions, of particular interest to someone like myself, with a specialist interest in Imperial Germany, include: How well-informed was Wilson about the internal politics of Imperial Germany? How well did he understand the domestic political opposition to the Kaiser’s autocracy, and the democratic revolution of 1918/19? And how consistent, and

feasible, was the attempt to distinguish between the Kaiser's regime and the German people in wartime propaganda?

The issue of how well-informed Wilson was on the politics of Imperial Germany may be secondary to Kampmark's primary concern with the question of political legitimacy, and the denial of legitimacy to a wartime adversary. He has, however, written elsewhere on one of Wilson's potential principal informants on Germany, the Ambassador James W. Gerard.¹ As a former U.S. Ambassador to Berlin, Gerard was generally well-informed about the German political system and the country's political parties, although he did tend towards the kind of essentializing views on national character that were not uncommon in this period: Gerard thought that Germans' heavy consumption of meat and beer made them aggressive. Gerard's understanding of the limitations on the power of Germany's Reichstag, especially its lack of effective oversight over the military, was more germane to the question of the legitimacy of the German political system. In this respect, Gerard's judgements about the strength of militarism had a sound basis in his knowledge of the Imperial German political system, and did not just reflect national stereotypes.

Kampmark identifies Secretary of State Robert Lansing as a key influence on Wilson's views on German autocracy and militarism, even if Lansing was one source among many. Other sources included the internationally-minded American independent socialist George D. Herron, who, based in Geneva, was in a good position to furnish Wilson with knowledge of the German Social Democratic Party, even if Herron proved too unorthodox a "back channel" for dealings with representatives of Germany's old regime (as documented by Klaus Schwabe). Herron also came to favour a heavily punitive peace settlement with Germany. There was also good published intelligence on German politics available at the time: Edwyn Bevan of the Political Intelligence Department of the British Foreign Office published an impressively documented book on the German Social Democrats in mid-October 1918. As Douglas Newton has shown for British policy towards the German Revolution, sound intelligence on the political forces coming to the fore in the German Revolution did not, unfortunately, lead to more conciliatory policies towards a democratic German government.² Of course, Wilson himself, as a political scientist who could read German (even if he did not much enjoy it) was personally better informed than some other American presidents have been about other countries. What all this suggests is that knowledge and good intelligence do not necessarily lead to enlightened policies (which is not of course an argument in defense of inadequate or manipulated intelligence as a basis for action).

¹ Binoy Kampmark, "James W. Gerard: His Image of Imperial Germany" at http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/archives_roll/2003_01-03/kempmark_gerard/kampmark_gerard.html

² Edwyn Bevan, *German Social Democracy during the War* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1918); Douglas Newton, *British Policy and the Weimar Republic, 1918-1919* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

Wilson declined to pursue a policy of seeking directly to foment revolution in Germany or Austria-Hungary, at least partly because of a fear of the potential spread of Bolshevism.³ William Bullitt, according to Schwabe, grasped the difference between Central Europe's moderate Social Democrats and Bolshevik revolutionaries in his advice to the State Department,⁴ but he could not affect the momentum towards a punitive peace settlement. The distinction that Wilson's wartime rhetoric had often made between the Kaiser and his militaristic ruling class and the German people as a whole did not translate into any effective solidarity with a democratic German government. As Kampmark suggests, the distinction between the Kaiser and the German people could lead to a condescending portrayal of the latter: one is reminded of Cold War stereotypes of the basically good-hearted but perennially oppressed and deeply stolid Russian people labouring under the yoke of their regime.

In part, the failure to do more to support the post-November 1918 German democracy stemmed from anxieties about Bolshevism. This aspect of Wilsonian peacemaking – the need to offer a competing principle of legitimacy in international affairs to that propounded by Lenin, is somewhat occluded in Kampmark's article, but in an essay on legitimacy and international relations, Arno Mayer's thesis of a contest between Wilson and Lenin might still merit a note. In part, this failure to support democratic forces in Germany more effectively can be seen against the escalation of wartime anti-German propaganda as the demands of total war led to a more totalizing image of the enemy as "Other", in which the German state's shortcomings in the sphere of democratic legitimacy became just one among a whole set of negative characteristics (a complex recently explored by Jason C. Flanagan).⁵

There are mitigating factors behind the failure of United States policy under Wilson to do more to support democratic forces: if Allied propaganda went overboard in many respects in lurid depictions of German atrocities, there were real crimes committed in the German occupation of Belgium and Northern France, and the economic impact of the German exploitation of these territories was devastating. The stubbornness of Tirpitz and the naval command in their pursuit of unrestricted U-boat warfare in the Atlantic almost drove the liberal German Ambassador to the United States, Count Bernstorff, to despair, as he worked unsuccessfully to keep the United States out of the war. One outcome of German acts like espionage missions in the Americas and the submarine campaign was to

³ Klaus Schwabe, *Woodrow Wilson, Revolutionary Germany, and Peacemaking, 1918-1919* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), pp.45-46.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.119-120.

⁵ Jason C. Flanagan, *Imagining the Enemy. American Presidential War Rhetoric from Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush* (Claremont, CA: Regina Books, 2009), Ch.1, and "Woodrow Wilson's 'Rhetorical Restructuring': The Transformation of the American Self and the Construction of the German Enemy", *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 7:2, 2004, pp.115-148.

undermine Americans' trust in liberal and enlightened German representatives like Bernstorff. Similarly, the opportunism of some German parliamentarians like Matthias Erzberger who had supported peace resolutions only to then endorse the grasping annexationist Brest-Litovsk Treaty (and the equivocal stance of Majority Social Democrats on this issue) can have done little for the credibility of Germany's parliamentary leaders as the events of 1918 unfolded. These factors might be kept in mind in judging Allied policy towards the fledgling Weimar Republic.

Nonetheless, Kampmark's article does point to an important conclusion: if the invocation of the principle of democratic legitimacy becomes a mantle of righteousness which serves mainly to cloak oneself in superior virtue against an adversary, rather than leading to genuine efforts to support popular sovereignty where democratic forces do emerge, the ostensible objective of promoting democratic values is unlikely to enjoy lasting success.

Dr. Andrew Bonnell is Senior Lecturer in History at the University of Queensland. His publications include *The People's Stage in Imperial Germany* (IB Tauris: 2005) and *Shylock in Germany. Antisemitism and the German Theatre from The Enlightenment to the Nazis* (IB Tauris: 2008), and numerous articles on modern German history. He has just completed an edition of *An American Witness in Nazi Frankfurt: The Diaries of Robert W. Heingartner, 1928-1937* (Peter Lang, 2011, available shortly), the diaries of a U.S. consular official based in Germany during the Depression and the early Nazi years and is currently working on Robert Michels and his political and intellectual connections in pre-1914 Germany and Europe.

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