

David Stevenson

Review essay: Germany's fragile rise

**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation: Stevenson, David (2017) *Review essay: Germany's fragile rise*. [Journal of Strategic Studies](#), 41 (1-2). pp. 326-331. ISSN 0140-2390
DOI: [10.1080/01402390.2017.1419545](https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2017.1419545)

© 2017 [Informa](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/86520/>

Available in LSE Research Online: March 2018

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final accepted version of the journal article. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

Xu Qiyu, *Fragile Rise: Grand Strategy and the Fate of Imperial Germany, 1871-1914*. Translated by Joshua Hall. Foreword by Graham Allison. (Belfer Center Studies in International Security, the MIT Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 2017). Pages xx + 341. UK hardback price £26-95. ISBN 9780262036054. Originally published in Chinese by Xinhua Publishing House.

It has become almost a cliché to compare today's Sino-American relationship with that between Germany and Britain before 1914. Graham Allison has led the trend, highlighting the danger of a 'Thucydidean Trap' whereby rising and declining Powers (or revisionist and hegemonic ones) are predestined to clash and often to fight. His *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: New York, 2017), now a best seller, sets out the case. Much of this commentary on this theme, however, has come from the US. In fact in 2003 the Chinese Politburo did commission a study of nine nations that had become Great Powers, which in documentary form was shown on China's leading television channel (Allison's foreword to Xu, p. viii), while Chinese President Xi Jinping has taken to invoking Thucydides, although it seems primarily as a means of warning the Americans (translator's note, p. xiii). Moreover, Xu Qiyu, Deputy Director of the Institute for Strategic Studies at the National Defense University in Beijing, has published the book under review. As the translator points out, although Xu is not a spokesman for the Chinese Government he is a People's Liberation Army officer and a senior defence intellectual. In China his book has gone through two editions with a print run of 15,600 copies. Xu has presented an online lecture series on Wilhelmine Germany whose introductory instalment has obtained nearly 115,000 views (p. 294). His book is therefore evidence of serious Chinese interest in the First World War analogy, and is the most scholarly study of pre-1914 Germany yet published in the PRC.

Fragile Rise will be scoured for its insights as a political parable. But as a historical monograph it has considerable strengths. Xu points out that he is not a professional historian, but he has travelled outside China and read widely. Although he does not use archival sources, he has immersed himself in the inter-war documentary collections such as *Die Grosse Politik der Europäischen Kabinette* and the *British Documents on the Origins of the War*. He draws on classics such as William L. Langer's *The Diplomacy of Imperialism*, A. J. P. Taylor's *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848-1918*, and Paul Kennedy's *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860-1914*, and the book rests on a solid grounding in Western historical scholarship from the 1930s to the 1980s. It also mentions more recent work, though does not, for example, encompass the 'Zuber Debate' on German war planning. None the less, it presents a carefully researched and well-paced and crafted narrative and analysis of German foreign policy – and necessarily therefore of European diplomacy as a whole - between 1871 and 1914.

Xu's book shows few traces of Marxist influence. He explicitly denies the applicability of Lenin's theory of imperialism either to Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's bid for colonies in 1884-85 or to the *Weltpolitik* ('world policy') of Bismarck's successors. He scarcely mentions class conflict, preferring to adopt 'the term ideology, in the broad sense, as a replacement for the phrase "social forces"' (p. 68). Among the most powerful such ideologies in the period under study were nationalism, imperialism, and socialism. Xu sees them as malleable, however, and although increasingly constraining German leaders they still left the latter freedom of action. His book is therefore fundamentally about leadership: and more precisely about how leadership was present under Bismarck but woefully lacking after Bismarck's fall.

Bismarck is in many ways the book's hero, described as the greatest statesman of the nineteenth century and comparable only to Metternich (on whom Xu has been influenced by Henry Kissinger's

writings). Bismarck is praised for having developed and pursued a 'grand strategy' that safeguarded Germany's gains from the wars of unification and enabled its economic expansion. The 1875 'War in Sight' crisis taught Bismarck that the diplomatic methods he had pursued in the 1860s were no longer appropriate, and the priority now must be to head off the danger that Germany's rise would provoke a hostile combination. Although no single document set out the grand strategy that Bismarck evolved, Xu insists that there was such a strategy and that the June 1877 Kissingen Dictation was its most cogent formulation. In this text Bismarck identified the 'nightmare of hostile coalitions' (p. 35), and envisaged forestalling it by keeping the other European Powers aligned with Germany or at least divided from each other. On this basis he developed 'the largest, most complicated diplomatic project in the history of modern international relations' (p. 37), starting with an 1879 alliance with Austria-Hungary, and continuing via the Three Emperors' League (with Austria-Hungary and Russia), and alliances with Romania and Italy. One of his principles was not to force the pace, on the grounds that 'arbitrary interference in the course of history, on purely subjective grounds, has always resulted in the shaking down of unripe fruit ... the gift of waiting until a situation develops is an essential requirement of practical politics' (p. 51). The 1882 Egyptian crisis bore out this doctrine by creating an opportunity for lasting division between Britain and France – the latter remaining Germany's most irreconcilable antagonist, but now isolated. Not only this, but having established his system Bismarck was able to maintain it (albeit with increasing difficulty) until he left office in 1890. Foremost among the attributes that enabled him to do so were an unsentimental realism, self-restraint, and an appreciation of the limits to the possible. In addition Bismarck had control over his diplomats and ministers, and if he needed (as he did over the conclusion of the Austro-Hungarian alliance) he could face down Emperor Wilhelm I. In contrast he could not dictate to Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, the Chief of the General Staff and Germany's senior strategic planner, but Moltke kept Bismarck informed, and largely accepted the priority of preserving the status quo. He revised Germany's planning on the basis that in a war against France and Russia Germany would first seek victory in the east, using the newly acquired and heavily fortified Alsace-Lorraine to hold off the French, although he doubted that a decisive, annihilating success was attainable. Not entirely by design, Germany's diplomacy and its military strategy were in reasonable harmony.

Xu's turning point comes in 1890. He sees the change as partly emanating from underlying social forces, as Germany grew more urbanized and prosperous and its public opinion more articulate. He describes it as a 'cartellized society', in which the weakness of mediating agencies such as political parties allowed excessive scope to single-issue pressure groups like the Navy League. German nationalism became more tinged with Social Darwinism and racism, and German imperialism more insistent on extra-European expansion, as well as on a sentimental policy of prestige. Moreover, Emperor Wilhelm II, who after 1890 replaced Bismarck as Germany's most influential statesman, was in many ways the antithesis of the old Chancellor. Like other commentators, Xu has barely a good word for Wilhelm: the new sovereign was 'vain, shallow, impatient, and capricious' (p 95). Wilhelm weakened such co-ordinating mechanisms as existed in the government structure. Ministers could report direct to him and by-pass the Minister-President, and the heads of military and naval agencies also gained the right of direct access, while a coterie of household advisers by-passed official channels. The tasks of inter-agency arbitration and co-ordination fell to Wilhelm, who was unfit to execute them. The consequence was not so much a distorted grand strategy as no strategy at all, and a succession of short-term expedients, most of which made Germany's situation worse. Bismarck, argues Xu, had failed to train up competent successors, or to educate officials and the public in the subtleties of his policies. Within a few years of his fall, his successors had allowed Russia to gravitate into alliance with France, while Germany's actions in the Kruger Telegram affair of

1896 both damaged relations with the British Government and irremediably alienated British public opinion.

From here on Xu traces a series of policy departures that reached their culmination in 1914. The first was *Weltpolitik*, which he dismisses as precisely the sort of gesture politics that Bismarck had condemned, pursued largely for home consumption and lacking substantive goals, but further alienating Germany's neighbours. The second was Alfred von Tirpitz's battleship building programme, covertly anti-British from its inception and with the Second Navy Law in 1900 becoming openly so. Xu sees this policy as the nearest approximation to a grand strategy after Bismarck, but one that unlike Bismarck's was bound to fail, not least because Germany lacked the financial resources to be a leading military and leading naval Power simultaneously, and because the British consistently built more powerful warships – even, Xu suggests, doing so more cheaply as the competition intensified. None the less, Tirpitz was skilled in managing the Kaiser and the Reichstag and in mobilizing public opinion, and he resisted German diplomats' attempts to improve relations with London. Indeed, by 1907 the combination of *Weltpolitik* with navalism had elicited precisely the sort of encircling coalition – the 'Triple Entente' of France, Russia, and Britain – that Bismarck had dreaded. Chancellors Bernhard von Bülow and Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg saw the danger, but Xu considers Bülow as too obsequious to the Emperor and Bethmann as too weak and inexperienced to be able to rein Tirpitz in.

Xu also discusses German military planning, and paints a picture of Count Alfred von Schlieffen (Chief of the General Staff in 1890-1905) that will be familiar to readers of the literature published between the 1950s and the 1980s. He appears not to have consulted more recent material, and says little about Schlieffen's successor, Helmuth von Moltke the Younger. None the less, his portrayal reinforces the impression of a fractured system of government. Schlieffen believed the military should operate as independent technicians, seeking absolute victory, and he reoriented war planning so as to smash France in the opening battles, allowing little scope for improvisation in the event of French counter-attacks and disregarding Germany's manpower and logistical deficiencies. As the 1914 war approached German possessed only one military strategy, and its leading military officials increasingly viewed a general European conflict as inevitable. To complete his story Xu analyses the pre-war diplomatic crises, arguing that the Bosnian crisis in 1908-09 drew Germany's leaders into unconditional support for Austro-Hungarian aggression in a way that Bismarck had always resisted; and that the Second Moroccan (or Agadir) crisis of 1911 generated such an outcry against what was perceived to be a climb-down that the government would find it difficult to justify a compromise outcome again. In contrast the Balkan Wars of 1912-13 (whose importance much recent research has underlined), are relatively marginalized, and Xu does not discuss the 'War Council' of 8 December 1912 or the evidence (admittedly unconvincing to this reviewer) that Germany premeditated the 1914 war. Instead he sees the 'blank cheque' to Vienna of 5-6 July 1914 as a miscalculated effort to stage a localized war between Austria-Hungary and Serbia. This interpretation is in line with the book's general message that Germany's problem after 1890 was lack of co-ordination and incompetence. None the less, once the localization strategy was evidently failing and Russia came to Serbia's support, Wilhelm and his advisers hesitated only momentarily before plunging on into the disastrous conflict that would check and reverse their country's fragile rise.

Xu provides no conclusion, although his preface offers clues to his tale's meaning. Whereas Bismarck was 'always ready to accept imperfect or uncertain results' (p. xviii), later German leaders sought certainty and came to believe that war was inevitable, to the extent that this became a self-fulfilling prophecy. They operated within a climate of mounting xenophobia in which, to cite Thucydides

'Prudent hesitation [came to be seen as] specious cowardice ... the advocate of extreme measures was always trustworthy; his opponent, a man to be suspected' (p. xviii). In Kissinger's formulation, men like Tirpitz sought 'absolute security' for Germany, which meant absolute insecurity for everybody else. The book's translator (who is to be congratulated), Joshua Hill, still sees 'an optimistic element in this history: Germany's leaders failed to find a grand strategy for themselves, but China need not fall into the same trap' (p. xvi). Allison similarly concludes that although 'China's rapidly growing economic and military power will inevitably create structural stress between China and the United States ... prudent diplomacy and astute statesmanship can meet this challenge' (p. ix). It is part of Xu's message that an increasingly nationalist public opinion makes the task harder, and political leaders need not only to be cautious and prudent but also able to co-ordinate and if necessary control their governmental apparatuses (which implies that greater democracy and openness may not necessarily favour stability). Responsibility for a peaceful outcome, moreover, rests on both sides. Indeed, it may be shared between multiple governments, in a complex environment such as pre-1914 Europe or East Asia now. Xu could have analysed further the possibility that no statesman could have dominated European diplomacy by the 1900s in the way that Bismarck managed in the 1880s. In fact yet another of Thucydides' warnings – which President Xi has alluded to – is the danger that alliances will enable small Powers to draw big ones into conflict. Xu surveys the European Powers as a whole as well as Germany, and he goes out of his way to commend the quality of British statesmanship, at least as manifested through the analyses in the Whitehall files. Actually, however, Britain emerges from his account as intransigent, offering no compromise over naval or colonial policy. Interestingly, the book offers little advice, implicit or explicit, for the status quo Power as opposed to the revisionist one. Yet given its warning of the dangers represented by capricious, attention-seeking leaders, it is as much to Washington as to Beijing that Xu's messages should be directed today.

David Stevenson

Department of International History

London School of Economics and Political Science