The constitution of the German empire was introduced by the statesman Otto von Bismarck in 1871. It united 26 German states into a single federal nation and was widely respected for balancing democracy with monarchy. This mixture of elements has sparked lively debates over the extent to which the Kaiserreich (German empire) was a democracy and the breadth of the kaiser’s power. This constitution was replaced by the Weimar Constitution in 1919.

The Reichstag (Imperial parliament)
The Reichstag could accept or reject the laws proposed by the imperial government. It could also veto treaties agreed by the kaiser. The Reichstag could not force the chancellor to resign.

The Bundesrat (Federal council)
The Bundesrat (sometimes known as Reichsrat) had the power to veto laws even if they were approved by the Reichstag. The Bundesrat could also veto the kaiser’s declaration of war when the war was not defensive.

Germany’s 26 states
Appoint

Elect
Summons and dissolves

The cabinet (A committee of senior ministers)
The cabinet and the cabinet were responsible for the day-to-day running of the German imperial government. The government was responsible for proposing laws for the approval of the Reichstag (parliament).

The German electorate (Men over the age of 25)
The electorate voted for the Reichstag every 3 years, or when the kaiser dissolved the Reichstag.

The kaiser (German emperor)
The kaiser, as head of state, was the head of the German armed forces and in charge of foreign affairs. He could declare war or negotiate for peace.

Appoints and dismisses

The imperial chancellor (Head of government)
The first chancellor of the German empire, Otto von Bismarck

A painting of Kaiser Wilhelm II, the last German emperor

20th Century History Review
April 2014

Robin Bunce