

The History of the German Foreign Office

An Overview

By Ludwig Biewer

At the beginning of 1995, the Foreign Office celebrated the 125th anniversary of its establishment.

Effective as of 1 January 1870, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Prussia was transformed into the Foreign Office of the North German Confederation, and its budget passed from the budget of the Kingdom of Prussia to that of the North German Confederation. By decree of 8 January 1870, which entered into force on 10 January 1870, the chancellor of the North German Confederation, Otto von Bismarck, gave this new authority the name "Foreign Office of the North German Confederation". This name, presumably chosen in analogy to the British Foreign Office in London, was to make it clear that the authority was subordinate to the chancellor. The Prussian Ministry for Foreign Affairs, for its part, had been established in the course of the major Prussian reforms of 1808 and traced its origins to the Prussian Cabinet Ministry of 1728.

The entire internal administration of the German Reich, although largely the responsibility of the constituent states (Länder), initially fell within the purview of the Chancellery of the Confederation and, later, the Reich, from which Reich authorities headed by state secretaries gradually emerged after 1878. These Reich authorities – such as the Reich authority of the Interior, the Reich Naval authority, the Reich authority of Justice, the Reich Treasury authority, the Reich Colonial authority, the Reich Railway authority and the Reich Post authority – were the forerunners of the Reich ministries established as from 1919 and the federal ministries established as from 1949.

After the Austro-Prussian War of 1866, the German states north of the Main River joined forces under the leadership of Prussia to establish the North German Confederation. Following the Franco-German War of 1870-71, the Confederation was enlarged by the accession of the southern German states to form the German Reich. The president of the North German Confederation was the king of Prussia, who after 1871 bore the title of German emperor (Kaiser). The only minister of this federal state was the federal chancellor (as from 1871 Reich chancellor), who was usually simultaneously the Prussian prime minister and foreign minister. Otto von Bismarck served as chancellor from 1862 to 1890. The federal (later Reich) chancellor also chaired the sessions of the Bundesrat (Article 15 of the Reich constitution), the

central body representing the princes and territories and the three free cities of Lübeck, Hamburg and Bremen joined in the North German Confederation and, later, in the German Reich (the kingdoms of Prussia, Bavaria, Saxony and Württemberg, the grand duchies of Baden, Hesse-Darmstadt, Oldenburg, Mecklenburg-Schwerin, Mecklenburg-Strelitz and Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach, the duchies of Brunswick, Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, Saxe-Meiningen-Hildburghausen, Saxe-Altenburg and Anhalt, the principalities of Lippe, Schaumburg-Lippe, Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt, Schwarzburg-Sondershausen, Waldeck-Pyrmont, Elder Reuss and Younger Reuss). The number of votes of the states in the Bundesrat varied according to their size and ranged from a minimum of one to a maximum of 17 for the power holding the presidency. i. e. Prussia. Counterbalancing the Bundesrat was the Bundestag (later Reichstag), a representative assembly elected in general, free, equal and secret elections (by all men over the age of 25; women did not acquire the right to vote until the elections to the Weimar National Assembly after the end of the monarchy).

Until the end of World War I, the structure and organization of the Foreign Office – with a few exceptions – remained largely the same as they had emerged in Prussia at the beginning of the 19th century. There were two divisions: Division I was the Political Division; Division II was responsible for all non-political matters such as external trade and consular affairs. The Political Division was under the direct supervision of the state secretary, who was the deputy of the head of the Foreign Office, i.e. the federal (later Reich) chancellor. The state secretary was in turn represented by the under-state-secretary, whose office had already been created in 1848.

From 1864 to 1881, the Political Division was headed by Maximilian (von) Philipsborn, who was ennobled in 1865. This industrious senior counsellor greatly feared Bismarck, however, and took pains to approach him only when the statesman was in a good mood. Indeed, it was strictly forbidden – and punishable by a fine – to disturb Bismarck between the hours of three o'clock and five o'clock in the afternoon. Aside from this foible, Maximilian von Philipsborn was a very capable civil servant whom Bismarck valued highly, even though on one occasion he sarcastically referred to him as a man of "much lip and little born".

In keeping with the separation of the Foreign Office into two divisions, there were two clearly distinct career tracks: the diplomatic track, which was the domain of the aristocracy, and the consular track. As far as the aristocratic dominance in the diplomatic track is concerned, one must bear in mind that this was the custom in all European states at the time; as a rule, the envoy or even ambassador was the personal representative of the German or Prussian monarch

to the monarch of the host country and was fully conscious of this role and station. In addition to the two separate career tracks mentioned earlier, there was a third, namely that of the dragomen. The dragomen were legal experts and interpreters for Oriental languages whose services were required in their host countries for legal transactions.

In 1879 Division I (Political Division) was split into two parts, A and B. Division I A continued to be responsible for diplomatic and political matters, whereas the newly created Division I B (Central Division) was in charge of personnel and financial matters. In 1885 legal matters were detached from Division II to establish a new Division III (Legal Division). A legal division had already existed in Prussia from 1854 to 31 December 1863. In 1890 a Colonial Division was created as well, which became an independent Reich Colonial Office in 1907. During World War I, in the year 1915, a new Division IV (Press Division) was created. This Press Division had evolved from the "Literary Office" of the Bismarck era, which had later come to be termed the Press Section. After 1870 it gradually became customary for the counsellors in the various divisions to be delegated specific competence for certain regions or specialties. This led to the emergence of sections.

All of the paperwork for the entire Foreign Office was handled by a single central office which simultaneously served as the mailroom for incoming and outgoing mail, the filing department and the archives. Not until 1920 was this central office eliminated and replaced by filing departments and record offices for the new divisions, the special sections and the Political Archives.

The headquarters of the Foreign Office were located in the modest palace at Wilhelmstrasse 76. This building had already housed the Prussian Ministry for Foreign Affairs since 1819 and also served as the residence of the minister (later chancellor) until the end of the 19th century. It was consequently unbearably crowded, a highly unsatisfactory situation that could not really be alleviated until 1945. As time went on, more and more building complexes had to be purchased or rented to meet the Office's space requirements, so it ultimately came to occupy a multitude of properties scattered all over Berlin. During the Bismarck era, the four to six counsellors of the Political Division and a roughly equal number of assistants had to make do with two rooms and two cubbyholes. No conference rooms were available for their use when receiving visitors, and the dark, cluttered hallways were only a very poor substitute. "The Wilhelmstrasse" – these words came to be synonymous with the Foreign Office – was furnished in a spartan Prussian fashion with a motley assortment of furniture representing every conceivable style in vogue since the 18th century. Along the walls of the room in which

members of foreign missions waited for a meeting with the Reich chancellor or the state secretary, for instance, there were seats varying greatly in age as well as a table with a tabletop featuring a stone mosaic "graced" with a grease spot that defied removal. This was the table with the "historic spot". Only in the area occupied by the Office's highest-ranking staff was the hallway carpeted with red runners, a fact which led this tract to be jokingly termed "the wine division". The other parts of the building, where the staff had to make do with waxed, polished or oiled bare plank floors, were logically called "the beer divisions". The area occupied by the offices of the personnel division and the head of personnel was termed "the Wailing Wall". And, finally, the rooms in which the daughters of the former Prussian Foreign Minister Count Christian Günther von Bernstorff had resided after 1819 were more or less affectionately called the "countesses' kennel".

Prior to the outbreak of World War I in 1914, the personnel at the headquarters of the Foreign Office – which, after all, was the foreign ministry of a major power – consisted of the following: one state secretary, one under-state-secretary, four directors, three assistant directors, 21-28 counsellors, 23 "permanent assistants" and 18 junior officers without established posts. From 1871 to 1914, the entire German diplomatic service (without consuls and dragomen) consisted of only 350 civil servants in higher service.

In 1874 there were only four embassies (London, Paris, St. Petersburg and Vienna), 14 ministerial posts (Athens, Bern, Brussels, The Hague, Constantinople, Copenhagen, Lisbon, Madrid, Rome, Stockholm, Peking, Rio de Janeiro, Washington and the Vatican), eight ministerial residences, eight Prussian ministries to German states (Darmstadt, Dresden, Hamburg, Karlsruhe, Munich, Oldenburg, Stuttgart and Weimar), seven consulates-general with diplomatic status (Alexandria, Belgrade, Bucharest, London, New York, Budapest and Warsaw), 33 consulates headed by a career consular officer and four vice-consulates headed by a career consular officer. By 1914 the ministerial posts in Rome (Quirinal), Constantinople, Madrid, Washington and Tokyo had been raised to embassy status as well, so that in 1914 there were nine embassies, 23 ministerial posts, seven ministerial residences, 33 consulates-general and slightly more than 100 consulates headed by a career consular officer. The oldest embassy is the one in London, which was established in 1862 during the Prussian era. The ambassador in St. Petersburg drew the largest salary, namely 150,000 gold marks per year, whereas the ambassadors in London, Paris and Vienna each drew a salary of 120,000 gold marks per year. The state secretary of the Foreign Office, by contrast, received only 50,000 gold marks per year. These salaries were far lower – in some cases as much as fifty percent lower – than those of the top British or French diplomats.

Around the turn of the century, criticism of the Foreign Office and its structure began to be voiced. Representatives of business and industry complained about the diplomats' lack of knowledge about and disregard for the international economy, world trade and their conditions, and these voices became louder and more numerous as World War I continued. Germany's defeat in 1918 strengthened the position of those in the Foreign Office who wanted to heed this criticism. The spokesman for the reformers was Privy Councilor Edmund Schüler, who became assistant director of the Central Division in 1918 and director in 1919. He proceeded to carry out the comprehensive reform of the entire foreign service that came to bear his name, the "Schüler'sche reform".

In 1918 the separation of career tracks was abolished. The dragomen were eliminated, and the diplomatic and consular services were merged to form the single foreign service as it exists to this very day, subdivided into ordinary, intermediate, higher intermediate and higher service. In the spring of 1920, the specialized divisions I A and II were abolished. They were initially replaced by six departments for individual countries or groups of countries, but the number was reduced again to three at the beginning of 1922. The Central Division and the Legal Division continued to exist; the latter, however, was smaller than in the past. A new Cultural Policy Division was created primarily to aid Germans abroad, and a new "Group W" was established to handle economic issues that could not be handled by the country departments. A new Division X (External Trade Office) was created to facilitate the practical promotion of trade and develop an external trade information system. This failed to achieve the desired results, however, so Division X was abolished at the end of 1921 when the number of country departments was reduced.

Until 1918, matters of ceremony, rank and etiquette were handled by the Royal Prussian Lord Marshall's Office. After the abolition of this office, such matters fell to the "Special Section E", which had been detached from the Central Division in 1923. This Special Section E reported directly to the state secretary and was ultimately enlarged in 1938 to form a Protocol Division headed by a "Chief of Protocol" (a title that had already been in existence since the 1920s).

After World War I, an initially very strong wave of democratization swept across Europe. French took a back seat to English and the national languages as the language of diplomacy. Interpreters were thus needed at international encounters, and in 1921 the Foreign Office established its own "Language Service" with a permanent staff of interpreters and translators.

With the transition to a republic, the Foreign Office found itself increasingly forced to deal with domestic political developments as well. This task fell to the "Special Section D", the "Germany Section". Another special section was responsible for the League of Nations. The creation of these many different divisions and special sections made the Foreign Office far larger and more unwieldy than it had been during the imperial period.

New means for coordinating the work of the Office and its senior staff were therefore necessary. An "Office of the Reich Minister" was consequently created to function as the central policy coordination office, and an "Office of the State Secretary" was created as well. Daily conferences for the directors were initiated during which the state secretary discussed all important political and organizational questions with the division heads and issued instructions. This institution, which exists to this very day, soon acquired the somewhat disrespectful moniker "morning chapel". Although the Schüler'sche reform had a number of flaws that required correction, it nevertheless created certain basic structures for the Foreign Office, many of which have proved their worth over the years and still exist today.

In February 1919, in the course of the Reich's transition to a parliamentary system, the Foreign Office became a Reich ministry. The previous state secretary became the Reich minister, and the under-state-secretary became the state secretary. When Gustav Stresemann was appointed foreign minister in 1923, the foreign service had a staff of 2,031: 1,330 at the headquarters and 701 at a total of 112 missions abroad. The state secretary of the Foreign Office at the time was Carl von Schubert, who held this office from 1924 to 1930. His successor under a number of different foreign ministers was Bernhard Wilhelm von Bülow, who died all too soon on 21 June 1936. As state secretary of the Foreign Office during the transition from a democratic republic to a dictatorship, Bülow decisively influenced the policies of his ministry. He was firmly opposed to National Socialism and sought to limit its influence on the Foreign Office and foreign policy as much as possible. Even he, however, was unable to prevent over 120 tenured civil servants in the higher service from being sent into involuntary early retirement as a consequence of the 1933 Civil Service Restoration Act and the 1935 Reich Citizenship Act. The SS was very skillful in influencing the foreign service, and through the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (Reich Central Security Office) it succeeded in seconding its own people to a number of embassies as police attachés. After 1933, the old guard of career diplomats found themselves faced with unwanted competition from the "Auslandsorganisation der NSDAP" (the organization for the development of the National Socialist German Workers' Party abroad). In 1937 the head of this organization, Gauleiter Ernst Wilhelm Bohle, became "Head of the Auslandsorganisation in the Foreign

Office" and was incorporated into the structure of the Foreign Office as an additional state secretary. He was responsible for what was then called Germanic affairs abroad, in other words, for the development of the NSDAP machinery abroad.

The World Economic Crisis and its consequences for the German Reich forced the Foreign Office to consolidate its resources and streamline its organization. This led to yet another restructuring reform that resulted in the establishment of five departments: 1. Personnel and Administrative Department (Pers); 2. Political Department (Pol); 3. Economic Department (W; as from 1941: Ha Pol); 4. Legal Department (R); and 5. Cultural Policy Department (Kult). Protocol and the Germany Section continued to exist alongside these five departments.

In 1938 Joachim von Ribbentrop was appointed Reich Minister for Foreign Affairs or, as he preferred to call himself, "RAM" (the German acronym for Reich Foreign Minister). In the following years, the size of the foreign service staff increased by 143% from 2,665 in 1938 to 6,458 in 1943, although the number of missions abroad decreased markedly after 1939 as a consequence of World War II. Towards the end of the war, the Berliners' commentary on this development was merely a dry and laconic: "Just don't know what to make of it – the German Reich is getting smaller and smaller and the Foreign Office is getting bigger and bigger!"

To cultivate contacts with the NSDAP and its organs – the SS, the SD and the Reichssicherheitshauptamt – the Germany Section was developed into an entire department that was placed under the direct control of Ribbentrop in 1943 and subdivided into the groups "Internal Affairs I" and "Internal Affairs II". This department was also responsible for handling "Jewish affairs", which consequently implicated the Foreign Office in the "final solution to the Jewish question". The whole tragedy of the Office during those years is revealed by the files of the Internal Affairs Department in the Political Archives of the Foreign Office: These contain the only surviving record of the Wannsee Conference of 20 January 1942, during which the so-called "final solution to the Jewish question" – and thus the systematic mass murder of millions of people – was resolved. In this same collection of files, however, one can also find evidence that courageous, determined diplomats dared to help people in distress, and that their efforts were also successful. After the outbreak of the war in 1939, a new Information Department was created for propaganda purposes. A Radio Department was detached from the Cultural Policy Department for the same reason.

Several diplomats actively participated in the resistance movement against the National Socialist regime and had to pay for this with their lives. Among the most prominent of them

were Count Albrecht von Bernstorff, Eduard Brücklmeier, Hans-Bernd von Haeften, Ulrich von Hassell, Otto Kiep, Herbert Mumm von Schwarzenstein, Count Friedrich-Werner von der Schulenburg and Adam von Trott zu Solz. The small number of active members of the resistance from the foreign service shows that the Foreign Office was no stronghold of resistance to brownshirt tyranny between 1933 and 1945. Yet it was by no means a National Socialist authority controlled by the SS either. The truth lies somewhere in between: Among the German diplomats there were a few determined opponents and a number of fanatical adherents to National Socialism, but there were also a great many people who just went with the flow, people who were indifferent, and people who either wanted or were forced to make their peace with the regime one way or another. In this respect the foreign service was no better but also no worse than the rest of the Germans.

In 1949, the Federal Republic of Germany was founded. Initially, however, it was not sovereign: Under the Occupation Statute of 1949, the three Western victorious powers of World War II retained competence for foreign affairs. An office was merely established in the Federal Chancellery to liaise with the three powers' supreme representative body, the Allied High Commission. By virtue of the Petersberg Agreement of 22 November 1949, however, the Federal Government headed by Chancellor Konrad Adenauer was already conceded the right to establish consular and commercial relations with those countries where such a step seemed sensible. Even earlier, on 1 November 1949, a mission of the young Federal Republic had been established to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in Paris. This is the oldest German mission to an international organization; by the end of 1994 there were ten such missions. At the end of 1949 an "Organization Office for the Consular/Commercial Service" was created in the Federal Chancellery, and on 16 June, 28 June and 7 July 1950 consulates-general were opened in London, New York and Paris. Later that same year, consulates-general were opened in Istanbul, Amsterdam, Brussels, Rome and Athens. On 1 April 1950 the liaison office for the Allied High Commission and the Organization Office were merged to form an "Office of Foreign Affairs" in the Federal Chancellery. This office was enlarged by the addition of a cultural division, a protocol division, and a training facility for young diplomats. Initially located in Speyer, this "German Foreign Service Training School" was moved to Bonn in 1955, where it was first housed in the "barracks" on Raiffeisenstrasse and, after 1972, in a modern complex in Bonn-Ippendorf.

The first revision of the Occupation Statute on 6 March 1951 brought the Federal Government the crucial breakthrough in its efforts to achieve freedom of action in the field of foreign policy: On 15 March 1951 the Foreign Office was reestablished as a federal ministry. The

existing Office of Foreign Affairs in the Federal Chancellery was thereupon detached from the Chancellery and incorporated into the new Foreign Office. Federal Chancellor Konrad Adenauer became the first Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs and served in this dual capacity until 1955. Dr. Walter Hallstein, a distinguished professor of law, was appointed State Secretary of the Foreign Office and held this office until 1958. Together with Adenauer, Hallstein played a key role in rebuilding the foreign service.

The reestablishment of the Foreign Office was welcomed by all the important political forces of the Federal Republic. The new ministry reassumed the old name "Foreign Office" with the tacit unanimous approval of the Deutscher Bundestag (the German parliament) and settled into its headquarters in Bonn, a new building overlooking the Rhine on the former Koblenzer Strasse (now Adenauerallee).

In addition to the office at the Federal Chancellery, two other bodies were incorporated to form a broader foundation for the newly reestablished Foreign Office: the German Office for Peace Questions in Stuttgart, which had been founded in 1947 by the minister-presidents of the constituent states (Länder) and was largely concerned with the collection and compilation of documents on issues of relevance to a peace settlement in Europe, and the Directorate-General V (External Trade), which had likewise been established in 1947, operating at the Executive Council of the United Economic Area in Frankfurt am Main – the forerunner of the Federal Republic of Germany and its government.

The Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany started out with 330 established posts at the headquarters (129 of which were in the higher service) and 433 established posts at the missions abroad (147 of which were in the higher service). In 1951 diplomatic relations were established with eleven countries: Belgium, Brazil, Denmark, Canada, Greece, Italy and the Netherlands (embassies) as well as Ireland, Luxembourg, Norway and Sweden (legations). Consular missions were established in Atlanta, Basle, Bombay, Milan, Marseille, Pretoria, San Francisco and Zurich. Chargés d'affaires were appointed that same year to serve at the governments of the three powers France, Great Britain and the United States of America; in 1953 they received the personal title of ambassador. Upon the entry into force of the Bonn convention in 1955, which granted the Federal Republic of Germany sovereignty to the extent possible at the time, the offices of these three chargés d'affaires were transformed into embassies and Heinrich von Brentano was appointed Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs.

By 1976, the staff of the Foreign Office totalled 6,518 (1,272 of whom were in the higher service). 1,920 (452 higher service) were employed at the headquarters and 4,598 (818 higher service) at the 195 missions abroad. In 1990, the year of Germany's reunification, the staff numbered 7,827 (1,501 higher service), 2,552 (649) of whom worked in Germany and 5,275 (852) at the 214 missions abroad. By 1994, 11,310 people were employed in the German foreign service, 2,776 of them at the headquarters and 8,543 at the 232 missions abroad.

It should be mentioned just as an aside that the diplomatic services of Great Britain and France, for instance, are considerably larger (15,421 and 17,950 respectively!). The substantial size of today's staff is attributable to the development of a dense network of relations among the nations of the world and to their increasing interdependence, which is much more pronounced than before 1939, especially as a consequence of the steady progress of European unification, the proliferation of international organizations and – since 1960 and with renewed intensity since 1990 – the emergence of new states that need our solidarity and assistance.

From the very beginning, the organizational structure of the Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany resembled that of the earlier Foreign Office:

Directorate-General 1	Central Directorate-General (personnel and administration)
Directorate-General 2	Political Directorate-General (initially responsible for liaison with the Western powers, German questions, consequences of the war and international organizations)
Directorate-General 3	Directorate-General for States (initially responsible for all bilateral relations, then responsible for relations with non-European states and renamed Political Directorate-General)
Directorate-General 4	Directorate-General for Trade Policy (later Economic Directorate-General)
Directorate-General 5	Legal Directorate-General
Directorate-General 6	Cultural Directorate-General
Directorate-General 7	Protocol (long referred to as O: Protocol)

During the years 1958 to 1962, a special Directorate-General for the East (Directorate-General 7) was established to accord due attention to the special situation and interests of the Federal Republic of Germany in connection with the desired reunification of Germany. In 1963 a Policy Planning Staff was instituted to elaborate long-term concepts and studies

independently of the various directorates-general and the political staff of the minister and the state secretaries.

Between 1963 and 1972, however, the directorates-general were somewhat different from those in the years before and after:

Directorate-General Z	Central Directorate-General
Directorate-General I	Political Directorate-General
Directorate-General II	Directorate-General for States (later renamed Political Directorate-General 2)
Directorate-General III	Directorate-General for Trade and Development Policy
Directorate-General IV	Cultural Directorate-General
Directorate-General V	Legal Directorate-General

To alleviate the workload of the federal ministers, parliamentary state secretaries were introduced in some ministries in 1966 (including the Foreign Office) and in the rest of the ministries in 1969. Since 1972 the Foreign Office has had two; in accordance with international practice they have held the title Minister of State since 1974.

In 1965 the Foreign Office took due account of the changing global situation and the increasingly vigorous pursuit of a policy of détente by creating the office of a Federal Government Commissioner for Disarmament and establishing a division (later a directorate) under his purview. In 1981 the Commissioner was allocated a directorate-general of his own, Directorate-General 2 A, which was enlarged in 1990 by the creation of a second directorate.

In 1991 an ambassador was appointed Federal Government Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and placed in charge of a special working group.

In light of the progressive unification of Europe, a separate Directorate-General E (European Directorate-General) was created on 1 April 1993 from working units of Political Directorate-General 2 and Directorate-General 4 (Economic Directorate-General).

The Foreign Office took due account of the ever-greater importance of the United Nations (UN) and the entire complex of humanitarian aid in our crisis-stricken world by creating a new Directorate-General for the United Nations, Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid. This Directorate-General, which was likewise created from working units of Directorates-

General 2 and 4 and incorporated the Task Force for Humanitarian Aid, took up its work on 15 February 1995. At the same time, a Minister of State became Commissioner for Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid.

The history of the Foreign Office is very closely intertwined with the history of Germany and Europe and mirrors its ups and downs. Any tradition-minded supreme federal authority does well to recall its past. Such recollection is also instructive and may perhaps enable the observer caught up in the turmoil of current events to view things somewhat more calmly and dispassionately. The history of the Office is no claim to glory, but it is certainly not a blot on the record either. Rather, it is an incontrovertible and in many respects typical chapter of German history since 1870.