ИЕС ИНСТИТУТ ЗА ЕВРОПСКЕ СТУДИЈЕ
INSTITUTE OF EUROPEAN STUDIES

National Scientific Conference

GERMAN INTELLECTUALS (1871–1933): BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Institute for European Studies, December 10, 2026

CALL FOR PAPERS

The period spanning from the unification of Germany in 1871 to the collapse of the Weimar Republic in 1933 represents one of the most prolific eras in the history of European intellectual thought. It was during these very decades that some of the key concepts and theoretical frameworks—which would come to define the social sciences and humanities of the 20th century—emerged; these include discourses on modernity, capitalism, bureaucracy, nationalism, culture, religion, the state, and scientific methodology. During this period, Germany became not only the political and economic centre of Europe but also one of the world's primary hubs for scientific and intellectual endeavour.

The formation of the German Empire in 1871 marked a turning point in international relations. Drawing upon the traditions of Prussian militarism, a powerful German military—having emerged victorious from the wars of the 1860s and 1870s—initiated an arms race involving both land and naval forces, thereby challenging the United Kingdom as its principal rival. A unified Germany emerged as a great and powerful state, becoming—within just a few decades—a major rival to other powers, both politically and economically. The foreign policy of Chancellor Bismarck placed Germany at the epicentre of political affairs. Consequently, two major international conferences concerning the Balkans and colonial issues were held in Berlin during the 1870s and 1880s. Seeking its own "place in the sun" ("Platz an der Sonne"), the German leadership embarked on a colonial race. However, this political and military strength would not have been possible without a solid economic foundation. By the eve of the war, the German Empire ranked among the world's three most developed economies—surpassed only by the United States and the United Kingdom—while numerous German inventors gained renown for their contributions to advancing industrial production. Although the German Empire had already established itself as a leading European power under Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, his policy was primarily focused on the internal consolidation of the newly created state, the strengthening of its industrial economy, the modernization of its administration, and the preservation of the European balance of power. With the accession of Wilhelm II to the throne, a significant shift occurred: the policy of "Weltpolitik" marked an abandonment of Bismarckian restraint in favor of imperial expansion, intensive naval rearmament, and an effort

to secure Germany a place among global colonial powers. This context saw the development of major infrastructure projects—such as the Berlin-Baghdad Railway—alongside the political tensions that would gradually lead to the outbreak of the First World War.

Germany entered the First World War as the dominant political and military power in continental Europe (excluding the UK). However, the war ended ignominiously after four years; Kaiser Wilhelm II—who was also King of Prussia—was forced to flee the country, and the state endured a series of internal upheavals driven by both leftist and rightist forces. Following the loss of territory, economic collapse, and the turmoil of 1918–1923, the new "German Reich" (the official name of the Weimar Republic) gradually entered a phase of normalization and stabilization. This phase was embodied by Germany's long-serving Foreign Minister, Gustav Stresemann, who managed to reach a compromise with France and the United Kingdom despite a challenging foreign policy climate. The death of Stresemann and the onset of the Great Depression in 1929 once again exacerbated internal tensions within the country. The rise of Nazism, the formation of a coalition against the Social Democrats and Communists, the subsequent accession of the Nazis to power in 1933, and the policy of "Gleichschaltung" (coordination/standardization) completely transformed the existing social relations.

This dynamic period in German history was accompanied by numerous social—and, consequently, intellectual-theoretical—contradictions. Long-standing confessional divisions between Roman Catholics and Protestants culminated in Bismarck’s "Kulturkampf" policy. Rapid industrialization gave rise to a working class, whose political mobilization was harnessed by the Social Democrats. Simultaneously, certain conservative segments of society—both during the Imperial era and the Weimar Republic—found themselves marginalized. These contradictions shaped the dynamics of German intellectual thought. Ever since the university reforms in Prussia at the beginning of the 19th century, the German lands had consciously worked toward the creation of a distinct class of intellectuals. Composed primarily of university professors, scholars, and public figures, this class was rooted in the traditions of the "human sciences" ("Geisteswissenschaften") and played a pivotal role in the nation’s social life. Supported by a robust system of "Gymnasien" (secondary schools) and universities, the German elites were carefully educated within Romantic and idealistic traditions—guided by the concept of "Bildung": a form of higher education dedicated to understanding the world. Consequently, a distinct class known as the "Bildungsbürgertum" (educated bourgeoisie) emerged in Germany, whose worldviews were shaped by the prevailing currents of the German educational system at the time. Drawing upon the reforms of Wilhelm von Humboldt, the Prussian university model was founded on the principle of an inseparable unity between teaching and scientific research ("Einheit von Forschung und Lehre"), as well as on the academic freedom of both professors and students ("Lehrfreiheit" and "Lernfreiheit"). The university was no longer conceived merely as a venue for the transmission of knowledge, but as an institution where knowledge was continuously generated through research and critical discourse. It was precisely this model that propelled German universities to become Europe’s leading centers of scholarship, attracting students and academics from across the globe.

This highly influential class of German intellectuals sought to provide a robust theoretical response to profound social transformations and contradictions. Their focus lay on the consequences of rapid industrialization and the emergence of a substantial working class—the political mobilization of which became a critical state concern. At the same time, attention was directed toward Germany’s relations with other great powers—both in terms of its

interactions with liberal states (the United States, the United Kingdom, and France) and the question of entering the race for colonial possessions. Naturally, a central place in intellectual debates was occupied by the question of the distinction of German "Kultur"—both in a civilizational sense (vis-à-vis the rest of the Western world) and in a theoretical sense (how to formulate the social sciences while moving away from the positivist model dominant in France and the UK). Intellectuals adopted conservative, liberal, and social-democratic—or leftist—positions, vigorously debating their views in the public sphere. It was in this context that the greatest names in the social thought of the time—Max Weber, Werner Sombart, Georg Simmel, Ferdinand Tönnies, Marianne Weber, and many others—produced their work. It was precisely during this period that they wrote their most significant works, engaging in dialogue with influential European authors such as Marx, Comte, Durkheim, and Spencer. All these issues were discussed through the lens of the tension between traditional and modern value systems —unquestionably the leading theme in German intellectual circles of that era.

Given that Germany was an exceptionally fertile intellectual landscape between 1871 and 1933, interest in these authors shows no signs of waning even today. We therefore invite you to participate in the national scholarly conference, "German Intellectuals (1871–1933): Between Tradition and Modernity", which will be held at the Institute for European Studies in Belgrade on December 10, 2026. At the heart of these discussions lies the question of how to understand modernity—whether as a necessary break with tradition, or as a process in which traditional forms of thought and social life are continuously reshaped and imbued with new meanings. Consequently, the conference theme is not limited to individual authors or theoretical schools; rather, it encompasses the full spectrum of intellectual responses to the challenges of the modern era. We invite historians, philosophers, sociologists, political scientists, legal scholars, Germanists, historians of ideas, theologians, and researchers from other related disciplines to contribute their work toward re-examining one of the most significant periods in European intellectual history.

Please submit the topic and an abstract of your presentation (up to 250 words) by November 20, 2026, to the following email addresses: petar.pero.curcic@gmail.com and natasa.jovanovic@f.bg.ac.rs.

The conference program will be available by December 8, 2026. Authors may submit the full text of their presentation no later than May 1, 2027, for publication in the conference proceedings.

Authors are encouraged to frame their presentations within the context of the following sub-themes:

1) Intellectual and ideological struggles in Germany between 1871 and 1933

2) The formulation of the social (human) sciences through the lens of the German concept of "Kultur": methodological and thematic issues

3) Germany’s foreign policy orientation and its relations with other powers

4) The specific characteristics of German (belated) imperialism

5) Germany’s economic progress leading up to the First World War

6) The mobilization of the working class and its active potential

7) Dynamics within German universities

8) Value-based divisions: modernity, tradition, the relationship between culture and civilization, the first wave of feminism, etc.

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