Introduction

Annika Mombauer and Wilhelm Deist

In March 1960 Gerhard Ritter noted in the preface to the second volume of his work *Staatskunst und Kriegshandwerk* that during his studies of the Wilhelmine era he had become aware of 'much darker shadows' than his generation and that of his academic teachers had considered possible.[1] Following more than forty years of intensive research, this dark vision has noticeably expanded and has been put into even sharper relief – and as such is in stark contrast with accounts of the Kaiserreich which focus on developments in the economy, in industry and technology, the sciences and culture. The shadows apply to aspects of the Reich's constitutional law, and to its political structures and their consequences which, according to Wolfgang Mommsen, have resulted in a 'relatively high immobility of the . . . system'.[2]

A significant factor of that system, however – Wilhelm II as German Kaiser – embodied anything but immobility. His incessant activity necessarily had to lead to tensions whose general and specific effects within the system, and within society as a whole, have by no means yet been analysed to a sufficient degree by historians. The following volume presents a further step in that direction. Based to a large extent on new archival sources, the essays in this collection illuminate different aspects of Wilhelm II's 'personal rule', both in domestic and foreign policy, focusing particularly on the time after the turn of the century when the monarch was increasingly confronted by national and international limitations to his desire to rule Germany personally.

John Röhl, the historian to whom this volume is dedicated, has been striving for decades to understand and explain the Kaiser's role, making extensive use of the indispensable tools of the trade: written contemporary

[1] Gerhard Ritter, *Staatskunst und Kriegshandwerk. Das Problem des 'Militarismus' in Deutschland*, vol. II, *Die Hauptmächte Europas und das wilhelminische Reich (1890–1914)*, Munich 1960, p. 8.
[2] Wolfgang J. Mommsen, 'Die latente Krise des Wilhelminischen Reiches', in his *Der autoritäre Nationalstaat. Verfassung, Gesellschaft und Kultur im deutschen Kaiserreich*, Frankfurt 1990, p. 291.

evidence and their judicious interpretation. In the second volume of his impressively wide-ranging biography of Wilhelm II, he has described the monarch's intentions by the term 'personal monarchy'. Quite apart from the irrational idea that a rapidly developing industrial nation like Germany, with her complex economic and social structures, could be ruled by a quasi-absolutist monarchical regime, any such attempt was already bound to fail because of the Kaiser's personality, as John Röhl has already clearly demonstrated in his many publications on the subject.

However, despite such shortcomings of personality, it cannot be denied that, in the first decade of his rule, Wilhelm II managed to approach his goal in regard to important decisions. In his disputes with Chancellor Bismarck in the spring of 1890 a decisive role was played by the cabinet order of 8 September 1852, according to which Prussian ministers were only allowed to report to the monarch in the presence of the Prussian Minister President. Only if this were adhered to – claimed Bismarck – could he accept responsibility for governmental policy, and he demanded that the same should apply to the State Secretaries of the Reich *vis-à-vis* the Chancellor. With Wilhelm's decisive refusal to go along with this suggestion (favouring instead a so-called *Immediatsystem* in which his subordinates reported only to him), his 'personal regime' was ushered in, while at the same time the Prussian state ministry as an advising and decision-making institution was stripped of its political power, as would be demonstrated during the 1890s.

Wilhelm consciously combined this *Immediatsystem* in Prussia's and the Reich's civilian executive with a military equivalent, based on his extra-constitutional right to command the army (*Kommandogewalt*), a decision that had grave consequences not only for personnel policy, but also for the political culture and structure of the Reich. On the one hand, Wilhelm II thus managed to secure his power over the military and civilian leadership and effectively exercised his own personnel policy with the help of his cabinets. On the other hand, this very leadership found itself in a position of dependency on the monarch which far exceeded the loyalty that was normally accorded a head of state. The result was Byzantinism in the Kaiser's immediate and wider surroundings, a fact which finally, albeit to a lesser extent, also began to affect the country's middle classes, and that was repeatedly criticized by contemporaries. The effects of this system on the Berlin administration are highlighted by Katharine Lerman's contribution to this volume. But the Kaiser's public addresses, his desire for public celebration and recognition, and his sometimes ridiculous self-display, already began to ring hollow before the war, and aside from the sycophants

and courtiers, there was increasing public criticism, as Bernd Sösemann's study of the media's perception of public celebrations in the pre-war years demonstrates.

For the statesmen and government officials who had to work within this *Immediatsystem*, a further consequence was the fact that each concentrated solely on the task they had been given, thus losing sight of the overall picture. As a consequence, for example, Schlieffen was able to develop his operational plan without the need to consider political or economic realities or possibilities, while at the same time Tirpitz developed his own plan for a battle fleet. Yet there never was any attempt to co-ordinate both initiatives, least of all subjugate them to a general strategic concept, and neither Schlieffen nor Tirpitz considered it important to discuss his plan with the other. The navy played a particularly important role in the Kaiser's scheme, and here he felt in his element when it came to decision-making, as Michael Epkenhans outlines. But the Kaiser also considered himself a military man, and often attempted to circumvent responsible politicians and diplomats with the help of his military entourage. An example of this was the way he sought to instrumentalize military attachés, as Matthew Seligmann's study of British attachés demonstrates.

According to his own conviction, only the Kaiser had responsibility for co-ordinating the political actions of the Reich's executive, and yet he failed totally in this role. Detrimentally, the Reich did not possess – particularly due to the monarch's claims to personal rule – any other co-ordinating body that could have taken over this task. The Kaiser's infamous order of 1 August 1914 to send 'his troops' east is another perfect example of the ill-effects of his personal rule. The episode demonstrates both how he understood his role as supreme warlord of the army (whose right it was to give such orders), and the fact that he was completely unaware of the army's strategic plans (which at that time no longer included a contingency plan for a deployment in the east). Unaware of the details of German war planning, and even having been deliberately kept in the dark about some of its details, he nonetheless reserved for himself the right to give such orders.

Personnel decisions, like the search for a suitable successor to Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg during the war, are another example of the way Wilhelm II exercised power. As Holger Afflerbach's analysis of the Kaiser's role as supreme warlord during the war illustrates, the process of elimination until one had arrived at a candidate that Wilhelm did not object to (even if only on the basis of a proposed candidate's short frame!) stood in no relation to the significance of appointing the fifth successor to Bismarck.

It is this which John Röhl has aptly termed the Kaiser's 'negative personal rule'.[3]

Such examples demonstrate that Wilhelm II's will to rule, as epitomized in the idea of 'personal monarchy', resulted in a ruling structure of an essentially polycratic nature which made it impossible to speak generally of a unified government. Even Bülow's concept of 'Weltpolitik' became an illusion, as is demonstrated by Annika Mombauer's account of the Kaiser's role in the events surrounding the China expedition of 1900, and by Roderick McLean's discussion of the events and results of the Björkö agreement. Wilhelm's often ridiculous behaviour in relation to other monarchs and rulers emerges from these accounts, and particularly starkly from Ragnhild Fiebig-von Hase's investigation of the relationship between Wilhelm II and Roosevelt in the pre-war years.

Finally, the First World War became the nemesis for this system of government. Although Wilhelm II remained the indispensable tip of the pyramid of power, in terms of his actual power only the realm of personnel decisions remained, while the Kaiser increasingly lost his symbolic, unifying power. At the very end, in November 1918, as Isabel Hull outlines, Wilhelm managed to avoid being instrumentalized by the officer corps of his army (normally the actual guarantor of the Hohenzollern monarchy) by refusing to sacrifice himself for the greater good of Germany by seeking death in the battlefield by way of a 'death ride'. Nor was he willing to abdicate, even if this might have been a way of preserving the Prussian monarchy. Wilhelm's role during the First World War is further illuminated by Matthew Stibbe's account of the Kaiser's part in the decision for unlimited submarine warfare, while Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann highlights some of the criticisms of the Kaiser that were voiced after the war in his study of Walther Rathenau's critical position *vis-à-vis* the monarch.

During the forty years that John Röhl has studied the Kaiser, his choice of subject was at times very much out of favour with many critics and colleagues, but it is now once again in vogue. It is to no small extent due to John Röhl's efforts that it is becoming increasingly difficult to write the history of Wilhelmine Germany without the Kaiser. In that context, Jonathan Steinberg's *Laudatio* evaluates John Röhl's contribution to our knowledge of Imperial Germany, while Volker Berghahn's contribution provides an overview of recent historiographical debates and points the way forward for further studies of Wilhelmine Germany.

[3] John C. G. Röhl, *Kaiser, Hof und Staat*, Munich, 4th edn 1995, p. 126.

Perhaps the most important task of any biographer of Wilhelm II is to explain how the German Empire ended up in the catastrophe that would spell its downfall: the First World War. In his many publications, John Röhl has already outlined the Kaiser's crucial role in influencing German decision-making. In many ways, his forthcoming third volume, focusing in much more detail on the Kaiser in those significant pre-war years, is the most important, and the one most eagerly awaited by other historians of Wilhelmine Germany.

To congratulate John Röhl on the occasion of his sixty-fifth birthday, a number of his friends and former students undertook to examine aspects of Wilhelm II's rule in those crucial later years, and the following contributions demonstrate across a wide range of topics how important it is to write the history of Wilhelmine Germany with due consideration for the country's last monarch. The editors and authors of this volume are looking forward with high expectations to further results of John Röhl's impressive biography and wish him the necessary strength to complete this important work. They hope that their own contributions to the study of Wilhelm II in this volume may have added to it in a small way.

Reflections on John Röhl: a Laudatio

Jonathan Steinberg

My ancient *Dr Smith's Smaller Latin–English Dictionary* defines a *Laudatio* as 'a praising commendation, a eulogy or a panegyric', and that is what I intend to write in the next few pages. This pleasant task has its difficulties. I have no distance, either temporal or personal, from the subject. I propose to comment on the work of a distinguished colleague, who is a direct contemporary (we started graduate study together) and a friend. I am also quite unashamedly an admirer. What John Röhl has accomplished demands that 'praising commendation' which Dr Smith suggested. His is an unusual career, which indeed deserves to be heartily commended.

The electronic catalogue at the University of Pennsylvania's Van Pelt Library lists eleven titles under John Röhl's name. All of them deal with the political history of the German Empire from 1888 to 1918. John Röhl has spent his entire career and his very considerable intellectual energies on 'Germany after Bismarck', as he called his first book. Thirty years of history have been the subject of nearly forty years of research and writing. The ratio of life to subject must be unusual, though not unique. In American history, crowded with practitioners as it is, careers spent on the Civil War, Jacksonian Democracy, the New Deal or the Second World War occur frequently and there the ratio of life to subject is even more dramatic. On the other hand, the scale of events like the American Civil War or the New Deal and the number of participants compensate for the brevity of the period; breadth makes up for length.

The Röhl case is different. To say that John Röhl has concentrated on thirty years of German history understates the peculiar character of his enterprise. In effect, he has worked exclusively on Kaiser Wilhelm II and his part in German history. In his first book he looked at the way government worked in the early years of the Kaiser's reign. The first seventy pages of *Germany without Bismarck* offer as sharp and lucid an analysis of the ramshackle structures that Bismarck bequeathed to his successor as can be

found anywhere.[1] It is elegantly and lucidly written and retains a vividness that the older among us can only wish for in our own works. Take a typical passage, chosen literally at random:

> As Bismarck grew older, the Government's dilemma presented itself with increasing clarity. Bismarck's autocracy was intolerable and his pedantic insistence on formal distinctions seriously hindered efficient government. There was a widespread feeling that the Government must accustom itself to take decisions collectively, as other governments did. And yet Bismarck's autocracy was necessary to hold the conglomerate departments together.[2]

The Bismarckian legacy has rarely been so neatly summarized. The Kaiser inherited the problem, and, with the interlude of the Weimar Republic, so did Hitler. The legacy of the 'genius-statesman' led to the atrophy of those collective habits of consultation which marked the evolution of other European bureaucracies. The scramble for the attention of the 'All-Highest' in the Kaiser's day was simply a transformation of those traditions of absolutism which Bismarck had himself inherited and which reached back to the time when the young Friedrich II in 1740 abolished the Tabakskollegium of his father and put an abrupt end to consultative procedures. Interminable committee meetings, mountains of minutes, and ponderous decision-making no doubt are bad things but they prevent worse ones, as the catastrophes of Prusso-German history only too vividly illustrate. If every petty bureaucrat 'works toward the Führer', as Ian Kershaw has taught us to think, a Hobbesian war of all agents within government against all other agents must result. Radical solutions, dramatic initiatives, and harebrained schemes help to grab attention in the competition for 'All-Highest' decision. Contradictory forces push the government out from steady policies and produce uncertain lurches and unstable execution of those policies that survive. Lord Haldane reported to London in 1912 that above a certain level in German government there was 'chaos, absolute chaos'.

In this sense Röhl's work has always been 'structural' and never entirely 'personalistic' as his critics of the 1970s complained. I recall, but cannot locate, a German review of one of John's books, which began 'der personalistische Ansatz John Röhls ist unhaltbar' (John Röhl's personalistic approach is untenable). Like many such lapidary judgements, time has undone it. During the 1960s and 1970s it sounded plausible, if sharply

[1] John C. G. Röhl, *Germany without Bismarck. The Crisis of Government in the Second Reich, 1890–1900*, London 1967.
[2] Ibid., p. 25.

formulated. Historiography occupied itself with 'forces and factors' and not with human agents. It seemed odd even at the time that the twentieth century, which had been overshadowed by larger-than-life human beings – Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Mao, Roosevelt, Churchill, De Gaulle – should have spawned a generation of historians who rejected biography as a tool. Perhaps the one had caused the other. In addition, a kind of diluted Marxism mixed with prejudices about 'history from above' went with the new plate-glass universities and their radical student activism to create an attitude which led its holders to condemn the personal, the biographical, and the political as reactionary by definition. 'History from above' meant 'politics from above'. Radicals rebelled against such structures in the political sphere and restored the presence of subaltern and forgotten groups in their writing. The intellectual Right took a certain sardonic delight in asserting the 'primacy of politics' as if they had discovered the ultimate weapon in the battle of the books.

By the 1990s those lines of battle began to blur. The collapse of the communist bloc certainly accelerated the discrediting of all 'systematic' theories of social and historical causation, especially those which relied on impersonal factors like class and other socio-economic categories. Purely socio-economic arguments faltered in the presence of the murder of the Jews. Structuralists had a hard time finding socio-economic causes for the policy. Even Nazi bureaucrats themselves, especially those in the economic ministries, despaired of a regime which murdered vital artisans in the occupied Soviet Union because they were Jewish. How could economic rationality be used to explain the way the SS in 1944 exterminated the Jewish diamond cutters in an SS-owned diamond business?[3] Something was going on that purely analytic categories could not explain. As Jane Caplan shrewdly observes in her introduction to Tim Mason's *Nazism, Fascism and the Working Class*, even Mason, the most brilliant of the British Marxist historians of Germany, could not find an inner rationality in the murder of the Jews:

> He admitted that he was psychologically incapable of dealing with the record of inhumanity and suffering generated by Nazi anti-Semitism, and subjecting it to the kind of critical analysis that he believed was the only path to historical comprehension.[4]

[3] Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde: die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weissrussland 1941 bis 1944*, Hamburg 2000, p. 292 and Walter Naasner, *Neue Machtzentren in der deutschen Kriegswirtschaft, 1942–1945: die Wirtschaftsorganisation der SS, das Amt des Generalbevollmächtigten für den Arbeitseinsatz und das Reichsministerium für Bewaffnung und Munition, Reichsministerium für Rüstung und Kriegsproduktion im nationalsozialistischen Wirtschaftssystem*, Boppard am Rhein 1994, p. 367.

[4] Tim Mason, *Nazism, Fascism and the Working Class*, edited by Jane Caplan, Cambridge 1995, p. 22.

In the 1990s, biography emerged again as a major tool of historical analysis. In the twelve years since 1990 Ian Kershaw has produced his impressive two-volume study of Hitler,[5] Paul Preston his great biography of Franco,[6] Ulrich Herbert a study of Werner Best of the SS,[7] Joachim Fest a new biography of Albert Speer,[8] and in 2002 a brilliant new biography of Mussolini by Richard Bosworth was published.[9] Most of these historians started out as 'structural' historians, as Bosworth himself admits. They were scholars for whom analysis of forces and factors took precedence over the purely biographical. Nor has this been confined to historical writing. In philosophy, too, the biographical has begun to displace the purely analytical approach to the work. As Danny Postel wrote in a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the American equivalent of *The Times Higher Education Supplement:*

> The past two decades have seen a veritable explosion in biographical studies of philosophers. Since 1982, more than 30 biographies of philosophers have appeared. Of those, 20 have been published in the past decade, a dozen just since 1999. And more are in the works. Some see the trend as principally a reflection of currents in the publishing world, while others say it is a direct result of conceptual shifts in philosophy and in intellectual life more generally. But as the books keep coming, sceptics remain unpersuaded that this biographical 'turn' is of any philosophical importance.[10]

John Röhl anticipated this 'biographical turn' almost by default. He found his subject in the 1960s and has not left it for four decades. When it was unfashionable, he did it; now that it has become fashionable, he still does it. The German edition of Röhl's huge new biography of Kaiser Wilhelm II appeared in 1993[11] and the English version in 1998.[12] Both versions run to nearly 1,000 pages with notes and bibliography and end on 15 June 1888, when Wilhelm's father, the ill-fated Friedrich III, died and Wilhelm became, as Röhl writes, 'German Kaiser and King of Prussia, Summus Episcopus and Supreme War Lord'.[13] His first act was to order the

[5] Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889–1936: Hubris*, New York 1998; Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936–45: Nemesis*, New York 2000.
[6] Paul Preston, *Franco: A Biography*, London 1993.
[7] Ulrich Herbert, *Best: biographische Studien über Radikalismus, Weltanschauung und Vernunft, 1903–1989*, Bonn 1996.
[8] Joachim C. Fest, *Speer: eine Biographie*, Berlin 1999.
[9] Richard J. B. Bosworth, *Mussolini*, London 2002.
[10] Danny Postel, 'The Life and the Mind', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 7 June 2002, p. A.16.
[11] John C. G. Röhl, *Wilhelm II, Die Jugend des Kaisers, 1859–1888*, Munich 1993.
[12] John C. G. Röhl, *Young Wilhelm: The Kaiser's Early Life, 1859–1888*, translated by Jeremy Gaines and Rebecca Wallach, Cambridge, UK and New York, 1998.
[13] Ibid., p. 824.

Charlottenburg guard to surround the palace to prevent his mother, the Empress Friedrich, from getting her and her husband's private papers out of the new Kaiser's control. It was an ominous opening to a fateful reign and the book ends with a prophecy from Friedrich von Holstein, the grey eminence of the German foreign office, who noted in his diary a month earlier:

> Today the Kaiserin is reaping what she formerly sowed with her ostentatious contempt for everything that is German. But the people who are now gratuitously insulting the Kaiserin will get their own back under Wilhelm II; he will show them what a monarch is. That is the nemesis of world history.[14]

When I compare the grand new biography *Young Wilhelm* of 1998 with *Germany without Bismarck* of 1967, there is a subtle but marked shift of emphasis. The early book used the personalities to understand the structures of rule. The latest work aims

> to set the characters on the stage and let them speak for themselves, which, in their abundant letters and diaries, the Victorians and Wilhelminians did with quite extraordinary clarity, colour and persuasive power – though of course without knowing their future, which is our past.[15]

Its central theme, Röhl writes, is the 'bitter conflict' between parents and child; in other words the biography tells a story and lets the reader get to know the personalities involved. Its impetus seems to me to lie much less than it once did in conventional historical matters – to what extent had Bismarck's constitutional arrangements failed even before he fell from power in 1890 – than in bringing to life the historical characters. In the preface to the German edition, Röhl quoted a maxim of Heraclitus, 'the soul of another person is a distant continent that cannot be visited or explored' and expressed the hope that he had 'managed to narrow the gap between ourselves and that "distant continent"'.[16]

In this last phrase we get close to what for me remains the enigma at the core of John Röhl's work: what has kept him fascinated and engaged in writing the same story over and over again? Is the Kaiser really that interesting? The quality of the prose in the latest work suggests quite unequivocally that for John Röhl he is. The thirty years between first and latest books have not dimmed his literary skills.

If any historian can be said to have an archival 'green thumb', John Röhl is the one. In the four decades of his research Röhl has collected tens of

[14] Friedrich von Holstein, *The Holstein Papers*, edited by Norman Rich and M. H. Fisher, Cambridge 1955–63, vol. II: *Diaries*, p. 377.
[15] Röhl, *Young Wilhelm*, p. xiii. [16] Ibid.