

Introduction

JOHN C. G. RÖHL

On the fragrant wooded hills of Corfu, overlooking the sea to Albania and mainland Greece, stands the Achilleion. It is a slightly dilapidated gambling casino now, but it has seen better days. For it was once the summer palace of the peripatetic Empress Elisabeth of Austria and then, after her assassination, the property of the equally restless Kaiser Wilhelm II, the last German emperor and King of Prussia. In this magical setting, a dozen historians from America, Britain and Germany assembled for a week in early September 1979 to debate – in the Kaiser's bed-chamber, as it happens – the curious and complex character of this monarch, his influence on Germany's erratic and fateful policies, and his relationship to the society over which he ruled for three decisive decades, from 1888 to 1918. This book contains the papers delivered and discussed in Corfu, duly revised in the light of those debates and of subsequent reflexion.

The idea of holding a colloquium on the Kaiser was hatched in circumstances very different from those at Corfu. In the winter semester of 1977–8, the editors of the present volume jointly directed an experimental interdisciplinary seminar at the University of Freiburg on 'Kaiser Wilhelm II as a cultural phenomenon'. The ambitious twofold aim reflected their respective enthusiasms: it was, first, to assess the recently published correspondence of Prince Philipp zu Eulenburg,¹ the Kaiser's closest friend for twenty years and the power behind the throne for much of that time, and, second, to broaden the angle of vision normally adopted by historians, to take in literature, art and music, semiology, cultural anthropology and social psychology, in an effort to gain a profounder insight into the unique political culture, at once brilliant and bizarre, of Wilhelmine Germany. Our students, trying manfully to follow the exploration of such uncharted territories with the aid principally of Hans-Ulrich Wehler's popular textbook *Das deutsche Kaiserreich 1871–1918*² – which barely even refers to the Kaiser – were, not surprisingly, soon lost and bewildered. Less predictably, perhaps, the venture met with considerable suspicion and even hostility from a number of fellow historians. One announced, with evident satisfaction, that it was no longer possible to teach such history at a German university. Others argued that everything worth knowing about

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the Kaiser and his court had been discovered long ago, that a preoccupation with such matters was dangerously retrogressive and 'personalistic' and would distract attention from the collective responsibility of the German people – or at least of the elites who had manipulated them – for past catastrophes, and that to emphasise the monarchical aspects of Wilhelmine political culture was to be 'historicist' and to weaken the relevance of historical study to an understanding of contemporary politics.

Such were not, needless to say, the intentions of the Freiburg seminar or of the Corfu colloquium, and they are most certainly not the inferences to be drawn from this book. All the essays break new ground, and most of them are based on extensive archival research. One of the authors is engaged on a full-scale scholarly biography of Wilhelm II using for the first time (among other sources) the material in the Royal Archives at Windsor; another is writing the first-ever 'psychobiography' of the Kaiser; a third has recently completed a major social history of the imperial entourage; a fourth has analysed the decision-making process in the crucial years (1900–9) when Bülow was Chancellor; a fifth has just written a magisterial survey of the rise of the Anglo-German antagonism in the half-century before the First World War. These and other important new works will be published in the near future, and are bound to deepen and change our view of Wilhelm II and his times. The chapters which follow give an advance indication of their findings. Nothing could be further from the truth than that there is little more to be learnt about the Kaiser and his role in government and society.

How, then, can we account for the relative neglect, until now, of a subject of such obvious fascination and importance, and for the belief, current in some quarters, that a concern with it is somehow worthless or illegitimate? Three schools of thought have, broadly speaking, dominated German historiography in sequence since 1945, and all three have had their (very different) reasons for playing down the significance of Wilhelm II. The conservative–nationalist, apologetic school of historians were in undisputed mastery until the mid 1960s. For self-evident political reasons they attempted to demonstrate that Hitler had been a wild satanic demagogue akin, they argued, to Danton and Lenin, an aberration quite out of line with the mainstream of German history embodied in Luther, Frederick the Great, Freiherr vom Stein, Bismarck, Bethmann Hollweg, Hindenburg and the German resistance movement. It would have suited their purposes very well to have been able to include the last reigning Hohenzollern in that pantheon of Borussian heroes, but they realised only too well that a critical biography of Wilhelm II would have snapped their reassuring chain of 'great Germans'. So he was passed over in embarrassed silence, or else declared to have played little or no part in the direction of

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affairs, even though contemporaries had seen in him ‘the most important man in Europe’ and, later, wished to hang him.

In the event, the apologetic school was discredited not by revelations about Wilhelm or any other individual, but much more massively by the uncovering of the expansionist drives of Wilhelmine society as a whole. In the course of the great ‘Fischer controversy’ of the 1960s, it was established beyond reasonable doubt that Germany’s aims in the First World War had been broadly similar to those she had pursued under Hitler, that she bore a major share of the responsibility for causing the First War (as well as the Second), and that most if not all of the expansionist policies followed by her generals and statesmen in the years 1914–18 had had their origins in demands voiced in the pre-war period.³ Fritz Fischer and his colleagues were not by any means hostile to a consideration of the role of personalities.⁴ Their approach in fact involved a vast and painstaking (and sometimes rather unstructured) compilation of innumerable individual aspirations. But they were understandably incensed when their opponents sought to belittle the deep continuities which they had discovered, by contrasting the *personal* qualities of Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg with those of the evil Hitler. Much of the current hostility in Germany to political biography must be seen as a reaction to past abuse, and as a residue of those traumatic debates of the 1960s.

The Fischer controversy set the scene for the emergence of the third school, the ‘new orthodoxy’ – as it is now widely known – of *Sozialgeschichte*, or ‘critical social history’. Though Fischer’s main concern had been with war aims and the origins of war, and though he had employed the traditional – and in the circumstances the only effective – method of quoting extensively from documents, he had realised from the outset how inseparable foreign policy was from internal drives and conflicts. By juxtaposing the views of industrialists and press barons, agrarian agitators, party politicians and Pan-German propagandists with those of monarchs, statesmen, generals and diplomats, he showed that the policies of the latter could only be understood in a wider social context. And by widening the focus to take in society as a whole, he indirectly demonstrated the limitations of the chronological approach, and showed the need for a more structural interpretation. The way was now clear for a complete *bouleversement* of the traditional values of German historiography. Reacting allergically to the older generation’s exclusive pre-occupation with great men, with the State and with foreign affairs, the post-Fischer historians turned all this upside-down. ‘Great men’ became evil geniuses like Bismarck, and evil geniuses ‘extraordinarily weak dictators’ like Hitler; the State became merely an instrument for preserving the domination of an anachronistic agrarian–industrial elite; and foreign

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policy was declared to have had no independent status of its own: everywhere and always it was subjected to the *Primat der Innenpolitik*, the primacy of domestic politics. Wilhelm II, strangely, remained the unperson he had been in the old orthodoxy. The root cause of the German catastrophe from Bismarck to Hitler was now seen not in the policies and errors of statesmen, but in a peculiarly German constellation of broad economic and social forces resulting from Bismarck's solution to the German question in the years 1866–71. By entrenching the feudal Junker aristocracy in the citadels of power at a time when rapid industrialisation was already well under way, the argument ran, Bismarck not only ensured the warping of the German mind for generations to come but determined the pattern of politics in the Kaiserreich: the Junkers, unable to rule entirely on their own, made various 'pacts of rye and iron' with the heavy industrialists; together, these 'pre-industrial' and 'agrarian–industrial elites' evolved strategies of 'secondary integration' such as *Sammlungspolitik* and 'social imperialism' in order to 'manipulate' the rest of German society into accepting their continued domination; genuine reform was averted; instead, aggression and conflict were deflected outwards, first into colonial adventure, then into *Weltpolitik* and the Grand Battlefleet, finally into war and the conquest of Europe.

This new *Sozialgeschichte* is evidently very different from 'social history' in any of the senses commonly used further West: from 'history with the politics left out', for instance, or the history of social relationships, or of everyday life. Inspired primarily by American sociological theory as it had evolved under the influence of the writings of Max Weber (and to a lesser extent Karl Marx), it leans more towards what C. Wright Mills called 'Grand Theory' and 'Abstracted Empiricism' than it does towards Charles Seignobos's concept of history as 'la science de ce qui n'arrive qu'une fois'. Nevertheless, it has become immensely influential in Germany. Advanced with enviable energy (and on occasions also with a terrifying savageness),⁵ it has established itself as the orthodox interpretation not only of Imperial Germany but of earlier and later decades as well. German students have seized upon it as a clear, simple and comprehensive explanation of what went wrong. Numerous monographs have appeared within the framework of the new model, valuably illuminating previously neglected aspects of German society. The work of unjustly forgotten historians has been rediscovered and vigorously championed. Heated theoretical debates – about the connexion between politics and economies, for example, or between foreign policy and internal affairs – have led to a welcome explication of implicit values and unspoken assumptions. Naturally, because the new model is all-embracing and seeks to reduce the complexities of modern German history to a few abstract formulae,

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criticism has been plentiful and sharp. The emphasis on sociological and political generalisation has inevitably produced a certain disregard for nuance and detail, for the unique and the particular, which many would regard as the very essence of history: some historians have consequently complained of the over-simplification and foreshortening of 'continuity' in German history by the new school;⁶ others of the almost total neglect of the regions;⁷ yet others of its failure to account for the autonomous ideology and activism of radical nationalist groups;⁸ others again have pointed to the need to see German society 'from below' as well as 'from above'.⁹ The predominance of one type of sociological model has blinded German historians to recent trends within sociology and political science away from abstract generalisation, as well as to the possibility of fruitful co-operation with related disciplines other than sociology. The theoretical debates have tended to develop their own dynamics, pushing both sides into extreme and ultimately arid and unrealistic positions.¹⁰ Too often, empirical evidence and theoretical exposition coexist between the covers of one work like two people in a miserable marriage, with a bare minimum of contact. The signs are multiplying that the theoretical synthesis was attempted far too early, before sufficient evidence had been gathered: one monograph after another appears to challenge this central tenet or that fundamental belief of the new orthodoxy, putting it into the untenable position of resisting new ideas and new approaches in the name of 'progress'.¹¹ Nevertheless, the achievement of the new 'critical history' is considerable, and no historian of modern Germany can avoid coming to terms with it.

Easily the most brilliant and prolific exponent of the new view is Professor Hans-Ulrich Wehler of Bielefeld University. Although he has written on an impressive range of subjects including – interestingly, in the context of this book – several essays on the relationship between psychoanalysis on the one hand and history and sociology on the other,¹² it is his vision of the power-structure of the Second Reich which most directly concerns us here. It holds the key to understanding why the iconoclastic post-Fischer generation followed the pre-Fischer generation in writing the history of the Kaiserreich without the Kaiser, and why they decry the efforts of others to do so as mere *Personalismus*.

Wehler's analysis of Bismarckian constitutional realities, which he has studied in greater depth than the Wilhelmine period, begins promisingly enough.¹³ The new Reich was, he writes, a *Königsherrschaft*.

The Prussian monarch not only controlled the three pillars of the absolutist state – Army, Bureaucracy, Diplomacy – within the hegemonial state [Prussia] which comprised two-thirds of the Reich; as Reich monarch he also controlled the administrative apparatus of the new Reich offices, the military, and foreign

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policy. . . The Prussian King and German Kaiser, by virtue of his executive powers over these three pillars, therefore possessed the 'decisive and ultimately determining' influence within the Reich constitution.

In the new 'autocratic, semi-absolutist' German Reich, therefore, the 'instruments of power of the old *Obrigkeitsstaat*' continued to be 'controlled by the monarch (and his advisers!)'.

Few historians would wish to quarrel with this assessment, or indeed with Wehler's view that in the first twenty years of its existence it was in practice not the King-and-Kaiser but Bismarck who controlled the instruments of power, whatever the constitution or the theorists – or for that matter Bismarck himself – might say to the contrary. In support of his argument, Wehler provides an impressive list of quotations to illustrate how contemporaries groaned under the suffocating weight of the Iron Chancellor's authority. At that point, however, Wehler declares himself less than fully satisfied with his first definition, sensing it to be, as he puts it, 'too personalistic', and anxious to generalise from the historically specific to a more abstract and more widely applicable model. He therefore complements his initial assessment by applying to it Marx's celebrated analysis of the regime of Napoleon III in France. The resulting final definition of Bismarck's system of government is hybrid, and consequently cumbersome and controversial. It reads:

a Bonapartist dictatorial regime, bolstered by plebiscite, within the framework of a semi-absolutist and pseudo-constitutional military monarchy which favoured the traditional elites but which, undergoing rapid industrialisation and thus partial modernisation, also allowed some partial influence to the bourgeoisie and the bureaucracy.

This definition has in turn engendered heated controversy, some seizing on it as the key to a Marxist interpretation of Bismarck's regime,¹⁴ others arguing that Marx's analysis did not even fit Bonapartist France, and that its application to Bismarckian Germany is so unhistorical as to be worse than useless.¹⁵ We for our part need only note that there is evidently no necessity in principle for Wehler to argue that Kaiser Wilhelm II reigned but did not rule. His model, as the above passages show, is perfectly compatible with the idea of a powerful leader, and no one, after all, would argue that Wilhelm's powers ever exceeded Bismarck's. In so far as there are ideological motives behind Wehler's diminution of Wilhelm II's role, they presumably stem from the belief that his model could more readily be applied to the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich if its ties with the unique institutions of monarchy were loosened. Other than that, his picture of the Kaiser as a shadowy figure without influence must be based on his reading of the empirical evidence; and that evidence now points conclusively in the opposite direction, as the essays in this book indicate.

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In contrast to his clear, confident and well-documented section on the Bismarckian era, Wehler's treatment of the Wilhelmine constitution is hesitant, confused and unsupported by documentation.¹⁶ After the young Kaiser's dismissal of Bismarck in March 1890, Wehler declares, the German Reich went into 'permanent crisis'. Henceforth

the Prussian–German power-pyramid lacked an apex. Both in real terms and in terms of atmosphere, a power-vacuum arose, which diverse personalities and forces tried to fill. Since neither they nor the parliament succeeded for any length of time in so doing, there arose in Germany, behind the façade of a grandiose [personal] regime, a permanent crisis of state which led to a polycracy of rival power-centres.

It is true, Wehler argues, that for a brief period after 1890 the Kaiser made a bid to establish his 'personal rule'. But by the dawn of the new century at the latest, this 'basically anachronistic game' had failed. Wilhelm simply lacked the ability to direct Reich policy, to exercise *Kommandogewalt* as head of the Army, and to carry out his representative duties. 'The last Hohenzollern Kaiser was incapable of ruling the Reich monocratically', he writes. Historians should, he says, not be blinded by the 'Byzantine word-play' of the emperor's 'advisory clique', which 'surrounded the decision-making process with the illusion of the Kaiser's powers to decide'. Admittedly, even after 1900 the Kaiser frequently overstepped the boundaries set by the constitution, made full use of the considerable constitutional powers at his disposal, and in countless strident speeches continued to give vent to his bizarre notions of Kaiserdom. But this was all a sham. As the War was to reveal, Wilhelm II was never more than a *Schattenkaiser* – a shadow emperor – without say or significance in German affairs.

It was not Wilhelm II who impressed his stamp on Reich policy but the traditional oligarchies in conjunction with the anonymous forces of the authoritarian polycracy. Their power sufficed even without a semi-dictator [Bismarck], although with the help of a Bonapartist strategy, to defend the citadel of power – however fatal the consequences.

Clearly, this cannot be the last word on so crucial an issue as that of who controlled the levers of power in the most dynamic empire in Europe during the decades leading up to the First World War. It raises many more questions than it answers. By what standards was the German Reich in 'permanent crisis'? Do we possess a notion of the 'normal' degree of chaos in any political system, against which Wilhelmine Germany might be measured? Why were criticisms of the Kaiser so remarkably muted, except for certain specific complaints at certain moments in time? Why were reformism and 'attentism' predominant in the SPD if the crisis was so profound, and why were many of the Socialist leaders still monarchist in

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1918?¹⁷ Where, after 1897, are the ministerial resignations to indicate the continuance of governmental crisis behind the façade? Who exactly were the ‘anonymous forces of the authoritarian polycracy’ who allegedly manipulated the entire restless nation of some sixty millions with the aid of a Bonapartist strategy? How, and by whom, were they appointed? Who were the ‘traditional oligarchies’ and ‘pre-industrial elites’, and by what mechanisms did they decide on the strategies to be adopted? Who arbitrated between the courses advocated by the ‘rival power-centres’? Who comprised the Kaiser’s ‘advisory clique’ with its penchant for ‘Byzantine word-play’? How did all these groups and forces relate to one another – and to the Army and Navy chiefs and the members of the so-called ‘responsible government’? And what of Kaiser Wilhelm II, who stood at the centre of all these faceless forces and factors? By what criteria, precisely, may he be judged not to have exercised ‘personal rule’, when contemporaries inside and outside the Reichstag were convinced that he did? Why were men of such different political persuasions as Friedrich Naumann in 1900 and Maximilian Harden in 1902 – neither of them exactly members of the monarch’s Byzantine advisory clique – of the opinion that there was ‘no stronger force in present-day Germany than the Kaiser’,¹⁸ and that ‘all the important political decisions of the past twelve years have been made by him’?¹⁹ Why did the English radical John Morley think him ‘the most important man in Europe’,²⁰ and the English historian Sir John Wheeler-Bennett, who visited him in Holland shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, refer to him as ‘the man who dominated the political stage of Europe for thirty years’?²¹ Why, finally, did the American scholar Norman Rich, after more than a decade studying and editing the papers of Friedrich von Holstein, come to the conclusion that there was an urgent need ‘to assess fully the crucial part played by Wilhelm II in German politics’? For it was the Kaiser, Rich writes, who was

the ultimate authority in the Empire and who insisted on exercising that authority; it was he who dismissed Bismarck, for better or for worse; it was he who demanded simplicity in German foreign policy and who not only countenanced but encouraged the break-up of Bismarck’s alliance system; it was he who was primarily responsible for ruining Germany’s relations with Britain by his ill-considered statements, by his reckless quest for colonies, and by his disastrous fleet programme; it was he, far more than Bismarck, who fostered the quality of grovelling servility in the German administration and who would only tolerate sycophants or mediocrities in his immediate entourage and in the highest positions of the German government – including the German army.²²

This book will give preliminary answers to some of these questions.

Behind these numerous issues of detail lie more fundamental differences of interpretation. Proponents of the new *Sozialgeschichte* dismiss the

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approach adopted in this volume as ‘personalistic’. That, clearly, is a matter of definition and judgment. Not only is the individual’s place in history one of the most commonly debated of all historical issues; it is part of an even wider debate about free will versus determinism, nurture versus nature, spirit versus matter. Moreover, the controversy over whether historians should abstract from the particular or emphasise the uniqueness of a given moment in the past is as old as the historian’s craft itself. There is no accepted neutral position, and everyone’s view on these issues must in some measure be governed by political persuasion and personal perception of the world. The new orthodoxy in Germany employs the term *Personalismus*, or *Personalisierung*, without further definition as one of abuse, to indicate that an opponent is guilty of exaggerating the part played by individuals in history at the expense of impersonal social and economic forces. It is important to realise, however, that it does so from such an extremely de-personalised and abstracted position that, from that vantage point, almost any concern with the personal and particular in history must appear ‘personalistic’. Indeed, that charge has even been levelled against an American historian (much to his bewilderment) who had designed a highly abstract politological model to account for the failure of the German bourgeoisie to legitimise its rule in the Weimar Republic.²³

History is not some occult glass-bead game played by mandarins according to esoteric rules. Its subject is the sum total of human experience, endeavour and folly, and any method or approach found to dissipate the mists of ignorance in the world today may well prove helpful in the study of the past. If personalities are, by common consent, of some importance for the understanding of world politics today – if it matters whether Mao Tse-tung is alive or dead, and whether Deng Xiaoping or the ‘Gang of Four’ succeeded him; if it makes a difference whether the Ayatollah Khomeini or President Bani-Sadr has the greater say in Iran; if it is of interest whether Richard Nixon took the advice of Haldeman, Ehrlichman and Dean, Harold Wilson that of his ‘kitchen cabinet’ in the backroom of 10, Downing Street, and Brezhnev that of the old gang from Dnepropetrovsk – then surely personalities played some role in Wilhelmine politics too: surely it mattered whether Bismarck or Wilhelm II stood at the centre of the stage, whether the Holstein clique in the Wilhelmstrasse or Waldersee and the military attachés or the artistically-inclined Liebenberg Circle or the tall, aristocratic *Flügeladjutanten* in their splendid uniforms, had the monarch’s ear. To argue that it did not would seem extraordinarily dogmatic and narrow-minded, particularly at a time when there is a growing trend among sociologists away from the abstractions of the functionalist approach towards studying social life ‘from within’, and

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among political scientists towards viewing decision-making processes from what Graham Allison calls the 'palace perspective'.

One might indeed argue that personalities and group dynamics played an even greater part than is usual in the remarkably unfinished and unstructured Reich put together by Bismarck, with its twenty-two monarchies and three Hanseatic republics, each with its own government, administration and legislature, a few even with their own army corps and postage stamps, most exchanging ambassadors with one another – and a few with foreign countries – as if they had never ceased to be sovereign states. Abstract models seem particularly inappropriate to explain the full complexity of a political culture in which the Prussian 'pro-consul' in Munich could, by diplomatic skill as much as by the might of the hegemonial state he represented, keep in office for years on end a Liberal government in Bavaria against both the ultramontane majority in both houses of the Bavarian Landtag and the predilections of the House of Wittelsbach;²⁴ in which a bottle of Steinberger Kabinett sent by the Kaiser to Bismarck could unnerve the official Reich government more than any speech in the Reichstag; in which, as Holstein complained, the Kaiser had the habit of 'selecting his ministers like mistresses';²⁵ and in which accusations of homosexuality levelled against two of the Kaiser's closest friends by a Jewish journalist could cause total disorientation and usher in the gravest domestic crisis in the pre-war history of the Reich.²⁶

There can be little doubt that, to capture the full complexity and richness of German high politics in that period, the traditional skills of the historian – of tracking down elusive documents and evaluating them with subtlety and sensitivity – will remain essential. If anything, he may be enticed further inward, to discover the real driving force behind political behaviour as distinct from mere public ideology, and in that case may find concepts evolved by psychology and literary scholarship of greater help than sociological models. At some point, however, the historian will wish to set his empirical discoveries in a broader context, and it is at that stage that he might well find inspiration in the work of sociologists and social anthropologists, even if his subject is a monarch. Indeed, sociologists and anthropologists have extensively studied the social function of kingship, the operation of the 'kingship mechanism', the social role of the king and the 'role strain' which arises when conflicting expectations exist of the proper behaviour of the office holder; they have examined the importance of myths, public ritual and belief systems in the preservation of social structure. Even court favourites have a particular function to fulfil, as Peter Burke has reminded us. The favourite, he writes,

was a social role with definite functions in that microcosm of the social system, the court. Kings, like other people, needed friends; and, unlike other people, they