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Introduction

The subject of this book is the men who 'surrounded' Kaiser Wilhelm II, his *Umgebung,* or entourage. They were mostly noble, mostly military, and in an unparalleled position because of their proximity to the Emperor to imprint their peculiar vision of the world upon German policy. Theirs is a paradoxical tale, about power and its limits, about social prestige and intimations of its decay. More than anything else, theirs is the story of unintended consequences, efforts to preserve which brought on ruin, or, in Bismarck's colorful phrase, 'suicide for fear of death.'[1]

The story of this elaborate suicide takes place against the background of a profound reinterpretation of the German Empire, which began with the 'Fischer controversy.'[2] In 1961, Professor Fritz Fischer argued, in *Griff nach der Weltmacht,*[3] that Germany had purposely launched World War I in order to establish German hegemony over the European continent. Although such a view was not uncommon among non-German historians, it created a furor among Fischer's conservative colleagues.[4] For one thing, Fischer's argument emphasized the similarities between the Empire's foreign policy and Hitler's and, by extension, suggested that the Second Reich had played an essential role in preparing for the Third. While some of Fischer's assertions (especially those in his second book[5]) remain controversial, he and his allies ultimately routed their conservative opponents and snapped the older tradition of German historiography. In this vacuum a new school soon developed. It selected tools from some of the social sciences (particularly economics and sociology) and applied them to the problems Fischer had raised. It focussed upon continuity, not just in external affairs, but also in the internal socio-political patterns that had caused Germany's ruinous foreign policy. The object was to isolate and to analyze the long-term domestic 'power structures' behind the events of 1870 to 1945.[6] The *Kaiserreich* was to be interpreted according to its role in this larger schema.

This new historiographical school has rapidly become the 'new orthodoxy.'[7] Although it is sometimes called the 'Kehrite' school, after Eckart Kehr, a radical historian of the 1920s,[8] its foremost practitioner is Hans-Ulrich Wehler. Wehler's book, *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich 1871–1918*,[9] presents in one place the main arguments and methodological preoccupations of the group. *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich* is a provocative, polemical, and merciless dissection of the Empire. It provides the first systematic structural analysis of the Second Reich,[10] and does so with such sweep, vigor, and clarity that, for the time being at least, no one can approach the history of the period without engaging Wehler's interpretation.

For Wehler, the Empire's salient structural fact was the continued social and political predominance of Prussia's landed nobility in a time of rapid industrialization and social change. The newly unified Germany was a thinly veiled autocracy, a 'military despotism' designed to preserve Prussia, its monarchy, and its Junker supporters from the political and social challenges of industrialism. Wehler points out that one of the many advantages democracy holds for a modern society is that, by giving every organized group some access to power, it increases cross-class communication and leads to greater legitimacy for the government and greater rationality in its decision making.[11] The Wilhelminian decision makers, however, tried assiduously to avoid the democratic solution. Instead, clinging to power with whitened knuckles, they fought popular and democratic forces, they muffled, frustrated, and twisted them into channels that seemed less dangerous to the monarchy and the Junkers. Wehler's Empire appears to be an almost perfectly ordered hierarchy in which the Junkers subordinated institutions (church, school, the law) and other classes (the bourgeois strata, peasantry and, less successfully, the working class) to their own interests. The attempts of the Junkers and their industrial bourgeois allies to manipulate this hierarchy produced the crucial events of the prewar years: high tariffs, the building of the battle fleet, 'social imperialism,' legislative paralysis, and, finally, World War I.[12] The irony is that these efforts failed to save the monarchy, but succeeded in destroying the democratic potential latent in German society. The Empire is historically important, then, because it paved the way to the Third Reich, both negatively, by eliminating the democratic alternative, and positively, by supporting authoritarianism and hypernationalism.

Wehler's interpretation has naturally elicited opposition. His critics all agree that it is too sweeping. Taken together, they identify three

areas in which the breadth of his argument creates problems. The first of these is continuity. Viewing the Empire in the context of the Third Reich inevitably sets a *telos* toward which the whole system seems to be developing. Teleology encourages determinism as well as underestimation both of tendencies peculiar to the *Kaiserreich* and of possibilities inherent in that society which went unrealized after it ended.[13]

Second, there is the problem of uniformity: Wehler's Empire is too much the seamless web. In his account one finds little reference to differences among the ruling strata, of non-Prussian states, of groups whose experience is not easily assimilated into Wehler's analysis,[14] or of independent, non-manipulated activity by autonomous groups.[15] One misses, in short, the complexity and contradictions characteristic of any human society.

Finally, many critics have trouble accepting historical causality located at a level as abstract as Wehler's. He is primarily concerned to explain how Wilhelminian society and government worked to support the nobles and their allies. The actors are the 'ruling elites,' or sometimes 'the upper classes,' but rarely the individuals or organizational fractions that show up in the documents. The tendency is to explain events according to fairly abstract social forces, which does not explain how these forces actually worked, or who, exactly, made them up.

One might sum up these various criticisms by saying that Wehler's necessarily abstract analysis of the Wilhelminian system preceded the minute historical investigations on which it should have been based. Hans-Günter Zmarzlik has compared our knowledge of the Empire to the map of Africa before it was fully explored.[16] Patches of colored information drift in a sea of white ignorance, except, of course, that the mapmakers had the advantage of knowing the outline of their continent, whereas for historians the outline, or interpretation, first emerges from the interaction among all of the parts. The metaphor has its limits, but it does underscore the fact that imperial Germany so far has been unevenly studied at best and that in this sense overarching theories may be premature.

But there are also dangers inherent in some of the criticisms directed against Wehler. Chief among these is the temptation to discard systemic analysis altogether, because it is too abstract, and to revert to the older historical methods that it replaced. Such temptations are already clear in the calls for a return to 'objectivity.'[17] This road leads to a history satisfied with depicting particularity. If it attempts to integrate the pieces of the mosaic, it usually does so in a static way, because

its units are the pieces themselves, rather than the changing relationships among them.

Some young British historians have begun to revise Wehler by other means. First, they use social history to describe Germany 'from the bottom up,' a process that helps to fill in some of those white spaces on the Wilhelminian map.[18] Their efforts contrast with the Wehlerites' conception of social history, which concentrates on economic structures and their translation into political power. This approach represents a considerable advance over the old idealist historical tradition, but it is still history 'from the top down.'[19] Second, these younger historians have widened Wehler's theoretical scope by using other approaches, for example Gramsci's idea of hegemony.[20] Both of these kinds of revisions will ultimately do much to correct our picture of the Empire, although neither has so far been able to shake Wehler's basic thesis about the defensive nature of the *Kaiserreich*.[21]

This study also takes Wehler's structural and theoretical preoccupations seriously. It proceeds from the premise that the way to overcome the limitations of the method is not to abandon it, but to expand it. The chapters which follow do this in a slightly different way from the one chosen by the young British historians. Rather than adding other structures to the ones upon which Wehler concentrates, this study attempts to discover structure or pattern at a level closer to actual human activity. It tries to connect the social forces so prominent in Wehler's book to the people whose actions expressed them. For it is people who make history, but they do so neither as free-willed individuals (as liberals suggest), nor as social automata. Wehler's analysis errs in the latter direction, because it approaches people's actions from the outside in. That is, Wehler begins with the functional effects of activity and then reasons backwards to the origins or causes. On the abstract, functional plane, his arguments make sense. But they do not convincingly explain why people did what they did: what their motives were, how these motives were formed, and how people acted upon them. For example, Wehler's functionalism allows him to rest content with the high-level motive of class interest. But class interest is a complicated and ill-understood phenomenon. Even when an individual articulates class interest in a systematic way, there are other motives no less real, powerful, and structural, in the sense that they are continuous, patterned, and socially produced. These other determinants include patterns of personality and friendship, of deference and service, of institutional training and affiliation, and of family network. These structures close down certain possibilities for action or decision

making and make others likely or probable. And these structures change slowly, as they jostle one another, combine differently, or as circumstances bring some into relief and momentarily overshadow others. In fact, it seems likely that class interest is actually one aggregation of these smaller patterns, the sum total at the end of the complicated process of their interaction. The following chapters will look at that process from the inside out. They will try to reverse Wehler's procedure, or, put another way, they will break down his large structures into the smaller ones that, it is argued, produced them.

Although they differ on how this worked in practice, most historians agree that the discrepancy between the economic and the sociopolitical system was the fundamental dilemma of the *Kaiserreich*. 'The swift industrialization of imperial Germany is one of the commonplaces of contemporary history.'[22] Very shortly after Wilhelm II's accession to the throne, Germany had 'tipped over' into a predominantly industrial economy.[23] But the social and political structures were much slower to change than the economic system.

Under absolutism, the east Elbian nobles, the Junkers, had entrenched themselves with the crown's blessing in the central institutions of the Prussian state: the army officer corps, the higher bureaucracy, the diplomatic corps, and the Court. Their economic base lay in agriculture. The 'agricultural revolution' of the early nineteenth century expanded the wealth of many landowning nobles and allowed them to enter the period of intensive industrialization from a position of strength.[24] Otto von Bismarck added to that position by defeating their main political opponent, the liberal bourgeoisie, and by providing the Junkers with the starring role in the three wars of German unification, through their leadership in the victorious army. Bismarck completed his work by creating an arbitrary constitution, which left the political privileges of the nobles largely untouched.

Despite Bismarck's efforts, the nobles' secure world began to dissolve in the last half of the nineteenth century. The economic basis of their political power collapsed when they were unable to compete with the vast grain exports from America and Russia. Only huge state subsidies out of the consumer's pocket kept the Junkers afloat. As Wilhelm's reign drew on, the discrepancy between what the Junkers produced and what they extracted from society increased. At the same time, the bourgeoisie made increasing inroads into their institutional preserves. More and more untitled names cropped up in the diplomatic service, the officer corps, and the bureaucracy. Typically, the Junkers continued to monopolize the highest, most powerful, and most

prestigious positions. But they were more successful in some branches, for example, diplomacy and the army officer corps, than in others, such as the navy or bureaucracy, where the Junkers conducted a rear-guard action from the Prussian Ministry of the Interior.[25] In retrospect, we know that the mere replacement of Junkers by bourgeois had no necessarily progressive effect upon these institutions.[26] The Prussian nobility still retained political strength far in excess of its productive role in society. It was still the foremost *Stand,* politically and socially. Nonetheless, the bourgeois march through the institutions frightened the Junkers (and the Crown) with the specter of future powerlessness. By Wilhelm II's reign, the Court remained the last, untouched bastion of Junker hegemony.

Thus, the great paradox of the *Kaiserreich* and the major determinant of its domestic and foreign policy was the discord between its modern economy and its less than modern socio-political structure. This discord produced, through frustration among the 'outs' and fear among the 'ins,' internal tension which the political stalemate could not resolve at that level. The solution to these tensions was sought instead in foreign affairs, with results that culminated in the collapse of the system. One must ask why the representatives of premodern Germany were unable to confront their political problems more directly (and successfully). What factors hindered them from making a smoother adjustment to the demands of the modern industrial world? Historians have addressed these questions in recent studies by examining the diplomatic and officers corps and the bureaucracy.[27] However, they have largely ignored the Court. At most, they have rifled it for an influential individual here or there, but they have never studied the Court as a system. It is important to do so, however, for Bismarck's constitution placed inordinate potential power in the Kaiser's hands. This, in turn, made the Court the home of Wilhelm's most intimate advisers, the fount of overarching policy and the (often unsuccessful) coordinator of the other Prusso-German institutions of government. In addition, the Court was the officer corps' major conduit to the Emperor, and, thus, represented the major way in which the much vaunted military influence became actual. Finally, the Court is our best opportunity to see how the most strategically placed nobles responded to the challenges of the modern age.

The reluctance of historians to deal with the Court is partly a result of their position on the question of whether or not Wilhelm ruled. For if he did not, the argument goes, then it hardly matters who were his friends and advisers or whether they influenced him, or he them.

Contemporaries were convinced that, between the years 1890 and 1908, Wilhelm did indeed rule. The *Daily Telegraph* Affair[28] is the expression of their outrage that Wilhelm not only ruled, but ruled badly. In the early 1920s, historians largely shared their contemporaries' interpretation. Later on, however, this consensus vanished. Until the mid-1960s, Erich Eyck stood virtually alone in his conviction that there had been a personal regime.[29] Many historians have insisted that a 'personal regime' must mean Wilhelm had conscious, logical, political plans, which he consistently effected, often against the constitution and the ministers. Otherwise, although they might grant that Wilhelm had intervened periodically, they could not grant that he had governed. At the same time, it was impossible to show that anyone else had. In that case, it is clear that these standards for personal rule, indeed for governance as a whole, are impossibly rigid, and do not adequately describe the complexity of Wilhelminian decision making.

In 1967, John Röhl reopened the debate on personal rule. He based his work on the vast correspondence of the Kaiser's closest adviser, Philipp zu Eulenburg. These papers have turned out to be the single richest source on imperial decision making during the 1890s. They make clear that, especially in personnel matters, the policies of Wilhelm and his advisers were far more detailed and consistently carried out than historians had previously thought.[30] These personnel changes resulted in government so closely attuned to its Kaiser, that he rarely felt the need to intervene. These are the years when Germany embarked upon Wilhelm's great dreams, the navy and *Weltpolitik,* the dreams which shortly became the Empire's final nightmare. Indeed, a host of the most salient, defining characteristics of Wilhelminian governance in the years before 1914 have the Emperor at their center: the power of the military, the influence of unofficial friends at the expense of ministers, the proliferation of *Immediatstellen* (the right to see the Emperor without a minister being present), the noncoordination of policy which resulted from that, the solutions to problems that were never considered because, to the Emperor and his friends, they were unthinkable.[31] Any historical analysis of Wilhelminian decision making must be able to explain all of these qualities. Whether the whole 'then qualifies as "personal rule" is of secondary importance only.'[32]

The content of the debate on decision making has been changed somewhat by the modern, social-science-oriented focus on 'elites.' This is a progressive step because it recognizes the existence of something

more subtle than a monolithic 'ruling class.' It also suggests non-political angles (education, group psychology, group dynamics), which one might study for a more accurate picture of the top of the socio-political hierarchy. This orientation frees one from the limitation imposed by an exclusive focus on the traditional objects of political study, power brokerage and interest politics. However, the potential of this approach has not been fully realized. For if the term 'elite' is not rigorously defined, it is merely a more up-to-date way of repeating the semantic confusion in which the contemporaries indulged when they used the word *Umgebung*.[33] Konrad Jarausch uses 'elite' (undefined) as a kind of *deus ex machina* which periodically intervenes to destroy Bethmann Hollweg's politics, thus exonerating the Chancellor from his failures.[34] For Hans-Ulrich Wehler, 'elite' encompasses the entourage, Chancellor, ministers, the leaders of the interest and agitation groups, and the heads of the military.[35] Wolfgang J. Mommsen includes the 'upper stratum of the governmental bureaucracy, the General Staff, and behind it the officer corps and the conservative entourage of the Emperor.'[36] Mommsen and Wehler thus part ways over the inclusion of specifically industrial interests in their definitions of elite. This is an important distinction because it indicates how far the respective authors believe the military and agrarian interests had relinquished control to the capitalists. Recently, British historians have widened 'elite' still further, because they believe that the Reichstag and the political parties were considerably more important politically than previous historians have granted.[37]

Such profound disagreements about who actually ran the *Kaiserreich* are testimony to its highly complex and diversified character. Leaders of interest and agitation groups, political parties, and large businesses did indeed shape prewar Germany. They are part of its reality. The reader, however, will meet very few of these people in the pages that follow, for the entourage was part of a different Wilhelminian reality. It is therefore worth remembering that the entourage is only one piece, albeit an important one, in an ill-understood, fractured mosaic. As much as the *Umgebung* may at times have been a unity, it never operated in a vacuum. Its influence was circumscribed by external forces, for example, by competing groups and institutions, by the political and social demands of economic industrialization, even by the foreign policies of neighboring states. Many of these forces are the subjects of good studies.[38] However, Wilhelm's entourage was also circumscribed by internal factors: caste narrowness, education, isolation, institu-

tional, and personal conflicts. While not ignoring the external, the following pages will concentrate upon the internal forces, upon 'the stratum-specific systems of social values and norms, processes of political socialization, stereotypic word games, in whose codes the convictions and unconscious premises of the group are set down,'[39] and upon the personalities themselves. The entourage is small enough, particularly when limited to its more permanent members, to allow and indeed oblige one to examine personality as well as sociological categories in order to explain who gets chosen as an adviser in the first place and whose advice is likely to be listened to thereafter. While it is true that the pool from which Wilhelm selected his *Umgebung* was severely limited (and one can make justifiable judgments about the behavior of its members based on these limitations), his choices were not necessarily representative of that pool. It will emerge that the men whom Wilhelm chose fell roughly into three personality types. That is, Wilhelm created a kind of structure of personality which constrained and changed the institutions of Court and Cabinet and affected the decisions which these institutions made.

The term *Umgebung* means not only 'entourage' but also 'milieu.' It includes persons who were not officially members of the retinue. Contemporaries variously used *Umgebung* to mean anyone at Court, the military men attached to Wilhelm's person (his military adjutants, Flügel- and Generaladjutanten), the advisers officially attached to the monarch (Cabinet chiefs and head of the General Headquarters), Wilhelm's friends, or a combination of all of these. Thus the word was often used to designate that group which the critic felt was opposed to his own. More important, the word *Umgebung*, when used pejoratively, seldom meant something specific. It was either used to evoke dark, uncontrollable forces (thus releasing the contemporary critic from complicity in his own political failures), or it was used as a shield behind which one could attack the monarch without actually mentioning him. This method of criticism, the 'evil councillor theory,' is of course as old as the institution of monarchy itself.

The focus of the *Umgebung* was the monarch, Wilhelm. It is in relation to him that it must be defined. Thus, as a rule of thumb, one is or is not a member of the *Umgebung* by virtue of one's attachment to the *person* of the monarch. This study considers as part of the *Umgebung* anyone who, either by filling a post attached to Wilhelm's person, or through friendship with him, spent a considerable amount of time in Wilhelm's presence, or who seems to have exercised influence on him. Excluded from consideration are chancellors, ministers and

others whose presence at Court was determined strictly by their position as bureaucrats, unaffected by affectional or personal ties to Wilhelm.[40]

For purposes of analysis and presentation, the *Umgebung* will (somewhat artificially) be broken down into the following groups: (1) those persons who held official posts attached to the monarch, a category which included Court positions (for example, Marshal of the Court, Oberhofmarschall; Master of Ceremonies, Zeremonienmeister; Court Chaplain, Hofprediger; Personal Doctor, Leibarzt), the three Cabinet chiefs (Military, Naval, Civilian), the representative of the Foreign Office, and the adjutants (Flügel- and Generaladjutanten) and occasional military attachés; (2) the intimate friends (for example Philipp Eulenburg and Max Fürstenberg), and those not so intimate (Albert Ballin, Friedrich Krupp); (3) the periodic companions, whose relation might be described as seasonal (participants in the *Nordlandreise*, Kiel Week, hunting trips), technical (naval engineers, archeologists, historians, and others whose interests coincided with Wilhelm's), or artistic; (4) the royal family. Many of these, perhaps the numerical majority, will be dealt with only briefly, because their importance lies merely in the tone they helped to create. The focus is mainly on the persons and institutions in the first two categories, since their presence and effects were long-term.

One cannot begin to consider Wilhelm's *Umgebung* without considering Wilhelm himself. His character and manner of living are therefore the subjects of the second chapter. Wilhelm chose who would surround him according to his own standards. His choices served only so long as they possessed his favor. The peculiarities of Wilhelm's character made demands on his *Umgebung* which were excessive in comparison to the practice in other monarchies of the period. His entourage was forced to spend a huge proportion of its time and energy in efforts to thwart Wilhelm's restless, ill-directed energy, and, where that failed, to undo the effects of his impetuosity. Therefore we will return a number of times to assess Wilhelm's personality, his politics, his prejudices, in order to evaluate to what extent his eccentricities may have caused the *Umgebung* to have been what it was, rather than what many of its critics thought it should have been. The question of who influenced whom in such a symbiotic relationship will naturally be a central one.

Speculation about the possible influence of the *Umgebung* on Wilhelm was rampant almost from the start of his reign. It was a question which sorely exercised contemporaries and upon which they spilled a