

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56504-2 - The Kaiser and his Court: Wilhelm II and the Government of Germany

John C. G. Rohl

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

The eight studies collected together in this book were written at various times and in a variety of contexts over a period of some twenty-five years. They are nevertheless all concerned with the same fundamental theme, the system of government of the German Reich under Kaiser Wilhelm II. The book opens with a character-sketch of this remarkable ruler, who was not merely some exotic ‘Fabulous Monster’, as one British writer dubbed him,¹ but who in a number of ways embodied the split personality of that ‘transitional generation’² which bridged the old Prussian world of Wilhelm I and Bismarck on the one hand and the ‘modern’ world of mass industrial society on the other. It ends with an investigation into the nature and extent of the Kaiser’s anti-semitism which enables us to see how close he came, in the bitterness of exile, to the *Weltanschauung* of Adolf Hitler. Most of the studies in this book, however, are not primarily concerned with the Kaiser. Their main focus is, first, on the mentality of the Kaiser’s friends and advisers; second, on the structural foundations on which his so-called ‘personal rule’ was first erected and then sustained, including the court and court society, the higher civil service and the diplomatic corps; and third, and above all, on the interdependent relationship between the Kaiser, his court and the state. The book is therefore predominantly a work of cultural and social history. It sets out to analyse the structure and the mentality of the German ruling elite in the era of Kaiser Wilhelm II.

The studies are all based closely on original sources. Rather than providing a sweeping essayistic interpretation, each chapter is perhaps more like a pointillist painting, or like a photomontage composed of several individual photographs. Each of these pictures is an independent composition which originated as such and which can therefore be read and judged on its own merits. These individual pictures, however, can and should also be seen as facets of a larger totality. If I may stay with the artistic analogy for a moment longer, this means that the book works in the same way as a Cubist painting in which an object can be seen in several different perspectives simultaneously.

This larger picture has not always been correctly understood by my

critics. As these studies appeared as individual contributions in a variety of publications over a quarter of a century, what was an examination of one feature of a topic has occasionally been regarded as a full-scale treatment of the entire complex, with the result that one study has been criticised as being too ‘psychological’ or ‘personalistic’, another as perhaps usefully ‘multibiographical’ but nevertheless too ‘impressionistic’, a third as exaggeratedly statistical, structuralist or sociological. Only now, when the individual studies are brought together in one book, is it possible to see the connections between them; only here is it possible to offer something approaching a comprehensive answer to the question which informs all eight studies: how adequate was the decision-making process, how good the quality of government in the German Empire under Kaiser Wilhelm II? (Even so, however, there are many aspects of the problem which are dealt with here all too briefly, the army and the navy being two striking examples.)

Why do I speak of the ‘quality of government’, and why has this question pursued me like a recurrent nightmare for more than three decades? Friedrich Stampfer, the editor of the Social Democratic newspaper *Vorwärts*, delivered the retrospective judgment in the Weimar Republic that the German Kaiserreich had been the most economically successful and the best administered but the ‘worst governed’ country in Europe before 1914. Max Weber wrote, some years before the outbreak of the First World War, that he sometimes had the feeling that Germany was being governed by a ‘herd of lunatics’. And Friedrich von Holstein, the ‘grey eminence’ of the German Foreign Office whose political correspondence must rank as one of the greatest literary achievements of the Wilhelmine era, warned as far back as the winter of 1894 that the young Kaiser’s mode of governing was an ‘operetta régime, but not one that a European nation at the end of the nineteenth century will put up with’. Holstein warned that he could not exclude the possibility that ‘the reign of His Majesty Wilhelm the Second’ might form ‘a transition’ either to a dictatorship or else to a republic.³

Faced with such acute judgments, the observer interested in the historical past (or indeed concerned for the future) finds himself confronting a multiplicity of questions – questions which have if anything grown in their explosive potential in the seventy-five years since the Kaiser’s abdication. Was the much criticised ‘personal rule’ of Kaiser Wilhelm II really as bad, as anachronistic, as insane, as the judgments of Stampfer and Weber referred to above would suggest? How was it possible for such a highly developed European people as the Germans to tolerate such an ‘operetta régime’ until well into the twentieth century, indeed not just tolerate but in many cases support it with great enthusiasm? What is the relationship between the ridiculous but also terrifying incompetence of this régime and

the unleashing of the First World War, that basic catastrophe of our century in whose beginning – as Thomas Mann so presciently wrote at the beginning of his novel *The Magic Mountain* in 1924 – ‘so much began which has scarcely yet left off beginning’? What place should we assign to Kaiser Wilhelm II, and to the thirty-year epoch that bears his name, in the brief and cataclysmic history of the German nation-state from 1871 to 1945? What inferences should we draw from the evidence – clearly discernible during the Wilhelmine era itself – that the deployment of the phenomenal power created by modern industrial technology depends in the final analysis on the decisions of a small number of not always very competent ‘statesmen’?

So far as the first question is concerned, it would clearly be absurd to claim that Kaiser Wilhelm II ever established full-scale autocracy. When contemporaries spoke critically of his ‘personal rule’, they were expressing disapproval of his too frequent and too sudden interference in the affairs of state, of the emphasis he placed on his Divine Right, which was perceived as an insult to the nation, of the speeches and interviews which had such a disastrous impact on the foreign policy and the international standing of the German Reich. Wilhelm II might have dreamed of establishing absolute rule for himself, but it remained no more than a dream. Even his severest critics did not believe that he ever practised such a form of rule. As this point occasions so much misunderstanding in the present day, it would perhaps be wiser, wherever possible, to avoid the use of the Wilhelmine polemical term ‘personal rule’ and to deploy in its stead the more neutral concept of ‘kingship mechanism’ elaborated by the sociologist Norbert Elias. The use of this concept should help to distract attention from the deeds and misdeeds of ‘Wilhelm the Sudden’, thus enabling us to concentrate on the more significant and interesting question of the interplay of the Kaiser, his court and the state bureaucracy in the exercise of power in Wilhelmine Germany.⁴

All the same, the central thesis of this book is that the political system of the German Kaiserreich is to be understood in essence as a *monarchy*, and that consequently the Kaiser, the royal family, the Kaiser’s circle of friends, the Imperial entourage and the court form the heart of this system on which the very highest officials of the Reich and state bureaucracy (as well as the leaders of the army and navy) were psychologically and politically dependent. In this crucial sense the system of government under Wilhelm II can be distinguished from Bismarck’s Chancellor-dictatorship, even though no constitutional changes giving formal recognition to the new situation were effected after Bismarck’s dismissal in March 1890. Such constitutional changes were in fact not necessary as Bismarck, despite his monopolistic exercise of power, had consistently maintained the fiction – the word is used

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56504-2 - The Kaiser and his Court: Wilhelm II and the Government of Germany

John C. G. Rohl

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 The Kaiser and his Court

here in both its meanings – that in Prussia the King gave the orders and the ministers obeyed. ‘In this country . . . the King himself governs’, Bismarck proclaimed in a speech in the Reichstag in 1882. ‘Ministers no doubt edit [*redigieren*] what the King has ordered, but they do not govern [*regieren*].’⁵ After Bismarck’s dismissal, all that Kaiser Wilhelm II needed to do was to transform Bismarck’s political fiction into fact, though this could not be accomplished overnight, nor without severe internal crisis. Yet in the course of the 1890s a new system of power relationships *was* created, a genuinely monarchical régime in which the Kaiser and his court, rather than the Chancellor and ‘his men’, exercised political power and decision-making authority and thus laid down the fundamental guidelines of domestic, foreign and armaments policy. Kaiser Wilhelm II created this system on the basis of his constitutional authority as King of Prussia, which gave him unrestricted power of command in all military matters, and on his right to appoint, promote and dismiss all officials in both Prussia and the Reich – a right of which he made the fullest use. In the years after Bismarck’s fall and with the help first and foremost of his best friend Count Philipp zu Eulenburg, and also with the aid of the chiefs of his three Secret Cabinets for Military, Naval and Civil Affairs, Wilhelm was in fact able to construct a system of what Bernhard von Bülow called ‘personal rule in the good sense’. In this system the Reich Chancellor, as Bülow revealingly expressed it in 1896, would simply regard himself as ‘the executive tool of His Majesty, so to speak his political Chief of Staff’.⁶ This was the system which produced the decisions and the avoidance of decisions which led, via *Weltmachtpolitik* and Tirpitz’s gigantic battleship programme, to internal crisis and external isolation, until at the last this tiny elite, increasingly dominated by military elements at court, came to regard a short, sharp, ‘fresh and joyful war’ as the only exit from the blind alley into which it had manoeuvred itself.

For these reasons the reign of Kaiser Wilhelm II should be seen as a discrete epoch in the constitutional history of the German nation-state, one with its own distinctive power structures and behaviour patterns. It cannot be understood, as Hans-Ulrich Wehler has claimed, as the mere continuation of the ‘Bonapartist Chancellor-dictatorship’ of Bismarck by ‘the anonymous forces of authoritarian polycracy’. Seen in this light, as a new and unique system of rule, the fierce campaign against the new régime by the Bismarckian ‘fronde’ after the dismissal of the ‘Iron Chancellor’ becomes readily understandable. Given that Bismarck’s successful 28-year period of office could not be obliterated from the memories of the German people overnight, and that on the contrary with each foolish new act on the part of the Kaiser it shone more gloriously than ever, the Bismarckian campaign constituted a dire threat to the Hohenzollern monarchy. Bismarck’s system had, it is true, been established in the 1860s against the ‘spirit of the times’,

but the restoration under Kaiser Wilhelm II of a genuinely functioning monarchy claiming legitimation by Divine Right one hundred years after the French Revolution was even more forced, artificial, anachronistic, reactionary, grotesque. Despite its populist and plebiscitary elements, it was bound to lead to severe tensions in a country where there was universal male suffrage and in which increasingly the dominant forces shaping society and its attitudes were urbanisation, industrialisation and democratisation. Historically speaking this attempt by the Wilhelminians to introduce, on the threshold to the twentieth century, a monarchy by the grace of God with a neo-absolutist court culture can probably be compared only with the absolutist designs of Charles I of England, who was beheaded in the middle of the Civil War in January 1649, or with Charles X of France, who had to flee abroad after the bloodless revolution of July 1830, however wanting such comparisons are bound to be.

By emphasising the unique character of the Wilhelmine system of government as the re-establishment of a pre-Bismarckian monarchical régime in the era of mass industrial society, I do not wish to preclude consideration of the question of continuity in the history of the German nation-state between 1871 and 1945: quite the reverse. But the question of continuity turns out to be more complicated – and more open – than first appears to be the case. Certainly the appointment of Bismarck as Prussian Minister-President and Minister for Foreign Affairs in the autumn of 1862 was a decisive turning-point which had implications for the Wilhelmine period and far beyond it. Yet, however significant the events of 1862 to 1871 were for the future development of Germany, the role of chance, of personality, of political decision-making in the broader course of German history should not be underestimated. What would have happened, for instance, if Kaiser Wilhelm I had died when he was seventy or eighty rather than when he was over ninety years of age? Without doubt a reign of ten or twenty years by the liberal-minded Kaiser Friedrich III and his English wife, Queen Victoria's eldest child (with or without Bismarck as Chancellor), would have fundamentally re-orientated the system of government along the lines of a constitutional or even parliamentary monarchy. It would have created a situation which their son Wilhelm II would have found difficult if not impossible to reverse.

Furthermore the Wilhelmine era itself cannot be seen simply as the forerunner of the Third Reich, at least not without severe qualification and differentiation. Certainly features exist in the personality and in the *Weltanschauung* of Kaiser Wilhelm II which anticipate many terrible things which were to come much later. These include not only the 'world power' strategy with its battlefleet programme directed against Britain, and the war aims in the First World War so tellingly analysed by Fritz Fischer, but also

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56504-2 - The Kaiser and his Court: Wilhelm II and the Government of Germany

John C. G. Rohl

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 The Kaiser and his Court

demands to 'gun down' such 'unpatriotic fellows' as the Social Democrats and the Catholics, to 'sweep away' that 'pigsty', the Reichstag, to defend the 'peoples of Europe' from the 'yellow peril', to have German troops behave as mercilessly 'as the Huns' towards the rebellious Chinese, to bring about the 'final struggle between the Slavs and the Teutons', to drive 90,000 Russian prisoners of war to death by starvation, and even – this soon after the First World War – to 'wipe out from German soil and exterminate' those 'parasites', the hated 'tribe of Juda', 'this poisonous mushroom on the German oak-tree'.⁷ And much, much more besides. Yet increasingly, and especially among contemporary critics of the form of rule practised by Wilhelm II and among the opponents of such appalling aggression, we find those forces – liberal political commentators, Catholic Centre party members, Social Democrats and others – which were to establish the rich political culture of the Weimar Republic, for a while at least, until the great silence descended.

What should have happened, what could have been done, to avoid the unspeakable catastrophes which lay in wait? At first sight, the astonishing answer is: nothing. If Germany had not opted for war in 1914, there would have been no war, because Austria-Hungary would certainly not have dared risk a war without Germany's support, and the Triple Entente would not have attacked the Central Powers then, nor three years later (nor indeed later still). Imperial Germany would have continued its unprecedented economic, scientific and cultural progress, and soon, in its own right and without war, it would have become the natural leader among the European powers. The dissolution of the Habsburg Empire, that 'prison of the nations', was almost certainly inevitable by then, but did that constitute a reason for Germany to 'leap into the dark' in an act of Dark Ages tribal fidelity? Was there no conceivable 'diplomatic revolution' which, without war, could have provided the German Reich with the requisite 'security and guarantees' which Reich Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg sought to enforce in his infamous 'September programme' of 1914 by means of annexations, revolutionisation and economic measures? An understanding with the British Empire could have been achieved up until the last moment. The British War Minister Lord Haldane had offered Germany an agreement as late as the spring of 1912. The price? Berlin was to slow down – not stop entirely – the rate of battleship construction, which made no strategic sense in any case,⁸ and it had to promise not to attack France or Russia. Reich Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, the 'responsible leader' of German policy and 'first adviser to the Crown', wanted to accept. But, even in this most critical question, he was overruled; the Kaiser listened to Tirpitz and abruptly rejected the proposal. In this light it is not surprising that, only ten months later, Bethmann was excluded from a 'military-politi-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56504-2 - The Kaiser and his Court: Wilhelm II and the Government of Germany

John C. G. Rohl

Excerpt

[More information](#)

cal discussion' at the royal palace in Berlin, at which the highest-ranking generals and admirals discussed, under the direction of the Kaiser, the question whether a world war against Britain, France and Russia should be unleashed immediately (by urging Austria to attack Serbia), or whether it would be more advantageous to 'postpone the great fight for one and a half years', i.e. until the Kiel Canal was finished in the summer of 1914.⁹ Prince Lichnowsky, the last Imperial German ambassador in London, understood clearly what was happening and warned against it. No-one listened. This German patriot and citizen of the world was forced to observe, with a bleeding heart, how a handful of men in Berlin, without valid reason, without really understanding what they were doing, hurled the old Europe into the abyss.

It is for this reason that I write 'at first sight', for in the last analysis a peaceful policy could not have been ensured by doing nothing, but only by a change of personnel and of structure at the top, and neither Lichnowsky nor anyone else had the intention, far less the power, to bring about such a drastic transformation. By 1914 it was in any case already far too late for that. But did the opportunity present itself at any time during the era of Wilhelm II to bring about significant changes in the system of government, was there an historical turning-point at which history failed, in fact, to turn? Perhaps in 1888, if Kaiser Friedrich III had not been so terribly weakened by cancer when he mounted the throne, if he had reigned longer than ninety-nine days, there could have been a move in a liberal direction, but this was only a very fleeting possibility. If Bismarck had succeeded in 1890 in making himself indispensable by deliberately provoking domestic and foreign crises, and thus checkmating the young Kaiser, German history would also have taken a different course, though whether it would have been a better one in the long term is more than doubtful. If Friedrich von Holstein had succeeded in 1895 and 1896 in persuading Reich Chancellor Prince Chlodwig zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst and the Prussian Ministers of State to establish a determined and solid opposition to the ever-growing power of the Kaiser and his courtiers, an eleventh-hour move in the direction of constitutional government might still have been possible. But Hohenlohe, the Kaiserin's uncle, was too old, too soft and too venal, and the ministers had the instincts of public officials rather than politicians, with the result that very few among them could stand up to the elemental will-power of the Kaiser and the lures of the 'kingship mechanism'. If the army had managed to push through its plans for a *coup d'état* in 1890, 1894 or 1897, political power would have slipped into the hands of the generals much sooner, but that would only have meant, as Holstein rightly observed, 'an early war'.¹⁰ In 1897 and 1900 there were repeated rumours to the effect that the federal princes – the rulers of the individual German States –

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56504-2 - The Kaiser and his Court: Wilhelm II and the Government of Germany

John C. G. Rohl

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 The Kaiser and his Court

together with the Reichstag and even some members of the Kaiser's family, wanted to force the abdication of the Kaiser in the national interest, but nothing came of these moves. Then came the single and, as it turned out, last real chance to introduce a system of government fitted to the needs of the times, one which would have been able to deal with the dangers facing the Reich. This was when in November 1908, following the painful revelations arising from the Eulenburg–Harden trials and the publication of a typical series of indiscretions by the Kaiser in the *Daily Telegraph*, the Reichstag unanimously demanded that the monarch should behave in a more constitutional fashion. But there it remained: a change in the system was neither seriously desired nor effected, and behind the scenes the same old operetta régime was allowed to continue.

The First World War did not have to come. While the dreams of 'world power' among wide sections of the German population must not be ignored nor made to sound harmless, the fact of the matter is that the people, the parties, the pressure groups could not have *forced* the government to unleash a world war. In Berlin, as in other capitals, there were enthusiastic demonstrations in favour of war, but there were equally large street processions demanding peace. Both took place towards the end of July 1914, in other words, when the die had long since been cast. And even if this pressure from below in favour of war had been much stronger, the obvious truth has to be remembered that the German Kaiserreich was not a plebiscitary democracy forced to accede to the demands of an angry crowd! Nor was it a parliamentary monarchy in which the government depended on the will of a majority in the Reichstag! No: the decision for war against the three world empires of France, Russia and Britain was taken by a tiny group of men who seem to have had hardly any idea of the shattering consequences that their decision would have for Germany, for Europe and for the world, right down to the present day. I am convinced that a constitutional monarchy with a collective cabinet responsible to parliament and the public would not have acted in such isolation and ignorance and, for this reason alone, would have decided differently. The German people did not unleash the First World War, but they did tolerate an absurd 'operetta régime' which in 1914 could think of nothing better than by unsheathing the sword to solve all the internal and external problems which had piled up over a quarter of a century, not least as a result of their own misjudgments and omissions. In this 'unpolitical' acceptance, in this blind faith in the authoritarian state – still being celebrated by Thomas Mann in his *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* in 1918 – lay the fault and the tragic fate of the German people.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56504-2 - The Kaiser and his Court: Wilhelm II and the Government of Germany

John C. G. Rohl

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I Kaiser Wilhelm II: a suitable case for treatment?

I have the feeling that we are being governed by a herd of lunatics

Max Weber

At the outbreak of war in 1914, a Prussian officer in Brazil wrote to a friend in Germany that people were at last attributing to Kaiser Wilhelm II ‘more greatness than Bismarck and Moltke put together, a higher destiny than Napoleon I’, seeing in him the *Weltgestalter* – the ‘shaper of the world’.

Who is this Kaiser [the officer exclaimed], whose peacetime rule was so full of vexation and tiresome compromise, whose temperament would flare up wildly, only to die away again? . . . Who is this Kaiser who now suddenly throws caution to the winds, who tears open his visor to bare his Titanic head and take on the world? . . . I have misunderstood this Kaiser, I have thought him a waverer. He is a Jupiter, standing on the Olympus of his iron-studded might, the lightning-bolts in his grasp. At this moment he is God and master of the world.

Even if Germany were to lose the war, the officer predicted, ‘the figure of Wilhelm II will stand out in history like a colossus’.¹ He was mistaken. To this day not a single full-scale biography of Kaiser Wilhelm II has come from the pen of a German historian in a university position. Worse still, the prevailing tendency of historical research among the younger generation in Germany precludes any treatment of him – or indeed of the role of any individual in history. That, they declare, is *Personalismus*, the relapse into a ‘personalistic’ historical methodology which has long since been superseded. The ‘new orthodoxy’ insists on writing the history of the Kaiserreich without the Kaiser, that of Wilhelminism without Wilhelm.²

And yet, for a number of reasons, there could hardly be a more suitable case for treatment than ‘The Incredible Kaiser’, the ‘Fabulous Monster’, this ‘most brilliant failure in history’.³ For one thing, the Kaiser’s curious character poses a fascinating riddle in its own right, as we shall see in a moment. Second, it must be remembered that Wilhelm ruled not over Bayreuth, Bremen or Bückeburg, but over the most powerful, dynamic and volatile state in Europe, and he did so for no less than thirty crucial years, from 1888 to 1918 – that is to say for even longer than Bismarck, and two

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56504-2 - The Kaiser and his Court: Wilhelm II and the Government of Germany

John C. G. Rohl

Excerpt

[More information](#)

and a half times as long as Hitler. And while no-one would wish to claim that his power quite matched that of the Iron Chancellor or the Führer, it is absurd to suppose that the complex decision-making process in this 'heroic-aristocratic warrior state'⁴ can be understood without paying due attention to the monarch who was in theory and in practice the pivot of the whole system of government, to the man who was *summus episcopus*, who had absolute powers of command in the military sphere and total control over all official appointments. His contemporaries, in stark contrast to historians writing later, were at any rate agreed in seeing the Kaiser as 'the most important man in Europe'.⁵ 'There is no stronger force in the Germany of today than Kaiserdom', wrote Friedrich Naumann in 1900.⁶ Two years later Maximilian Harden, one of Wilhelm's fiercest critics, stated that 'the Kaiser is his own Reich Chancellor. All the important political decisions of the past twelve years have been made by him.'⁷

A third justification for undertaking a study of the Kaiser lies in the extraordinary extent to which Wilhelm personified and symbolised the political culture of his epoch. He was a monarch by Divine Right yet always the parvenu; a medieval knight in shining armour and yet the inspiration behind that marvel of modern technology, the battlefleet; a dyed-in-the-wool reactionary yet also – for a time at least – 'the Socialist emperor'. Like the society over which he ruled, he was at once brilliant and bizarre, aggressive and insecure. Wilhelm was what most Germans at that time wanted him to be. During the Silver Jubilee celebrations of his reign in June 1913, Friedrich Meinecke declared before the assembled members of the University of Freiburg: 'We need a Führer . . . for whom we can march through flames.'⁸

Even beyond the span of his reign, Wilhelm can be seen as a 'key figure' for understanding the hubris and the nemesis of the German nation-state as a whole. His life spans, almost exactly, the history of the German Reich from its unification by Bismarck to its self-destruction under Hitler. His love-hate for his mother, Queen Victoria's eldest daughter, exactly mirrors the Anglo-German antagonism which culminated in the naval arms race and the terrible European civil war of 1914–18. Defeat, revolution and abdication in 1918–19 produced in Wilhelm a fanatical radicalisation of his hatred for his enemies, real and imagined, at home and abroad, which left little to choose between his attitudes and the supposedly more revolutionary anti-semitism and racial nationalism of Adolf Hitler. If Wilhelm had lived only a few weeks longer he would undoubtedly have sent the Führer an enthusiastic congratulatory telegram to mark the attack on Russia, just as he had after Germany's victory over Poland in 1939 and France in 1940.

The best reason of all for studying the Kaiser, however, is simply that the archives of Europe are full to bursting with letters from him, to him and