

CHAPTER ONE

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The accession

IN PLACE OF A CORONATION

IN any other monarchy the death of two Emperors within three months would no doubt have been followed by the coronation of their successor in a solemn and magnificent ceremony designed to demonstrate the stability of the throne. In the complicated German Reich constructed by Bismarck, with its delicately counterbalanced forces, such a ceremony would have been impossible. The coronation of Wilhelm II as Kaiser was ruled out by the federal structure of the Reich, with its four kingdoms (Prussia, Bavaria, Saxony and Württemberg), six grand duchies (Baden, Hesse-Darmstadt, Mecklenburg-Schwerin, Mecklenburg-Strelitz, Oldenburg and Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach), five duchies (Anhalt, Brunswick, Saxe-Altenburg, Saxe-Coburg-Gotha and Saxe-Meiningen), seven principalities (Lippe, Schaumburg-Lippe, Reuss of the senior and junior lines, Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt, Schwarzburg-Sonderhausen and Waldeck), three free Hanseatic cities (Hamburg, Bremen and Lübeck) and the imperial provinces of Alsace-Lorraine. Nor would it have struck the right note in the new Reich for Wilhelm to follow the example of his grandfather Wilhelm I in October 1861, by crowning himself king of Prussia far away in Königsberg, and this idea was not seriously considered by anyone. Instead, following the disruption which this ‘year of the three Kaisers’ had brought with it, other methods were sought to stabilise the Hohenzollern throne and to legitimise the rule of the 29-year-old former Crown Prince as German kaiser and king of Prussia.

As early as 15 June 1888, immediately after the death of his father, Wilhelm II issued two proclamations which attracted universal attention as indications of what the new regime might bring. In an ‘Army Order’ of the day, his ‘first word’

to 'His Army', Wilhelm emphasised the special relationship which his 'glorious ancestors' had always had with the military. 'In the army', its new supreme commander declared, 'the firm, inviolable bond with the commander-in-chief is the inheritance which passes from father to son, from generation to generation, and for that reason I point to my grandfather, who stands before you all in your mind's eye, the picture of the glorious, revered Commander, and no finer or more stirring picture can be imagined – and to my dear Father, who already as crown prince won himself a place of honour in the annals of the army – and to a long series of renowned ancestors, whose names shine brightly in history and whose hearts beat warmly for the army. And so we belong together, I and the army; we were born for one another and it will be our endeavour to hold together in an indissoluble union, through calm or storm, according to God's will.' The army, he continued, would now take the oath of loyalty and obedience to him, and he on his side would pledge 'always to be mindful that the eyes of my forefathers look down upon me from the next world and that I shall one day have to answer to them for the glory and the honour of the army!'<sup>1</sup>

At the same time Wilhelm – this time in his capacity as German Kaiser – issued a proclamation entitled 'To the Navy!' in which he spoke in similar tones of his particularly close relationship to the fleet. Only the previous year his grandfather had expressed 'in the warmest terms his lively satisfaction and appreciation with regard to the development of the navy under his glorious rule', and his beloved father had also taken 'such great pleasure and such a lively interest in the growth and progress of the navy'. He wished the navy to know that he too, the new Kaiser, had been held by bonds of 'lively and warm interest in the navy, since my earliest youth, in complete accord with my dear brother, Prince Heinrich of Prussia'. Thus he could 'declare with full confidence that we shall stand firm and fast together in good and in bad times, in storm as in sunshine, always mindful of the German Fatherland and always ready to give our life's blood for the honour of the German flag'.<sup>2</sup> This was the first time that a Prussian monarch had addressed the navy as well as the army on his accession, and the warm words of the young Kaiser filled his naval officers, as Admiral Gustav Freiherr von Senden-Bibran later recalled in his memoirs, 'with great joy and raised our hopes for the future'. Even in these circles, however, no one could have suspected – as Senden added – 'that Wilhelm II would see it as his task to raise up not only the army but also the navy, with all the means at his command, with his thorough knowledge of it, his great devotion to it, and his whole personality, and to set it beside the army on as near as possible an equal footing'.<sup>3</sup>

It was not until three days later that Wilhelm, reverting this time to his capacity as king of Prussia, issued a proclamation to the Prussian people. In it

he invoked dynastic tradition and Christianity in order to weave a special bond between ruler and subjects. ‘Called to the throne of my Fathers,’ he announced, ‘I enter upon my reign with my eyes raised to the King of all Kings, and I have made a pledge to God, following the example of my Fathers, to be a just and merciful ruler of my people, to foster piety and the fear of God, to defend peace, to further the welfare of this country, to be a helper to the poor and oppressed and a true guardian of justice. In asking God for strength to fulfil these Royal duties which His will lays upon me, I rely upon the trust in the Prussian people which I derive from looking back on our history. In good and evil times the people of Prussia have remained ever loyal to their King; upon this loyalty, which has proved an indissoluble bond to My Fathers in all times of difficulty and danger, I also depend, in the knowledge that I return it with all my heart, as the loyal Prince of a loyal People, both equally strong in their devotion to their common Fatherland. This knowledge of the mutual love which binds Myself and My People gives me confidence that God will grant me strength and wisdom to discharge the duties of my Royal office for the good of the Fatherland.’<sup>4</sup>

All three proclamations were received with much sympathy, although the conspicuous singling-out of the army drew criticism from the left-wing liberals and in Western foreign countries.<sup>5</sup> The ‘Army Order’ was greeted with enthusiasm in the Prussian officer corps above all. Helmuth von Moltke, the future Chief of the General Staff, who was serving as personal adjutant to his uncle the old Field Marshal at this time, wrote delightedly to his Swedish wife: ‘You will have read in the newspapers the young Kaiser’s splendid Proclamation to the army. – There is a decidedly new wind blowing in everything. The young Kaiser is in constant activity, he has spent the whole day conferring, issuing orders and signing documents. We received the first Cabinet Order with the signature *Imperator Rex* the night before last [15 June]’ in the General Staff. The younger Moltke was convinced that Wilhelm had composed all three proclamations himself; there was ‘no other hand involved’, he claimed; the ‘young Master’ had ‘rejected all suggestions and seen to the matter himself’.<sup>6</sup> It is more probable, however, that Wilhelm had sought Count von Waldersee’s advice on the composition of all three proclamations,<sup>7</sup> and that Prince Bismarck and his son had also seen and approved the texts in advance; had it not been so, it would certainly have been remarked upon later in the numerous embittered writings of the Bismarcks about their dismissal. At any rate Waldersee, the elder Moltke’s deputy, who in a few weeks would himself be promoted to chief of the General Staff, was more than satisfied when he wrote in his diary on 19 June: ‘The . . . proclamations of the Kaiser “To the Army and Navy” and “To My People” have made an excellent impression; in the army there is general jubilation over the new sovereign. There is a widespread feeling that we have successfully overcome a serious illness and

are now moving forward to good times. The uncertainty, the mistrust, the dissatisfaction were having a dreadfully oppressive effect on everyone's minds. The gentlemen of the Progressive Party and their Jewish hangers-on have certainly been dealt a hard blow.<sup>8</sup>

On 24 June 1888 the new Kaiser and Kaiserin moved out of the small Marmorpalais in Potsdam into the Stadtschloss in Berlin. As their carriage drove through the Brandenburg Gate, accompanied by two outriders and with detachments of the aristocratic Gardes-du-Corps regiment preceding and following the carriage, Unter den Linden was as crammed with onlookers as it had been three months earlier for the funeral of the old Kaiser.<sup>9</sup> The next day the grandiose ceremony of the opening of the Reichstag took place; it was even more effective than the proclamations of 15 and 18 June as a spectacular prelude to the new era. The impetus for it came from a suggestion made by Grand Duke Friedrich I of Baden, who, because of the double change of sovereign, wished to rally the German federal princes demonstratively around the young Kaiser.<sup>10</sup> As there was no precedent for a ritual of this kind the ceremony had to be improvised behind the scenes, which also necessitated – not surprisingly, with such a large number of exalted participants – making allowances for numerous special requests and soothing a series of wounded vanities. The first difficulty arose from the fact that the Kingdom of Bavaria, which as the biggest of the federated states could claim the first place after Prussia in the ceremony, was formally under the rule of the hopelessly deranged King Otto; but the Prince Regent, Prince Luitpold, was of inferior rank to King Albert of Saxony. The problem was resolved by the King of Saxony yielding to Prince Regent Luitpold 'the precedence to which he was unquestionably entitled' for the duration of the ceremony.<sup>11</sup> A comparable problem arose with Württemberg, whose highly eccentric King Karl I had been for some years completely under the influence of two American favourites named Woodcock and Jackson and had not the least inclination to travel to Berlin. He appointed as his representative his nephew, the heir presumptive, Prince Wilhelm of Württemberg, to whom the Grand Duke of Baden – Württemberg being a kingdom – yielded precedence.<sup>12</sup> Thus, with the single exception of Grand Duke Friedrich Wilhelm of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, all of the federal princes (or their representatives) were present at the magnificent ceremony of the opening of the Reichstag in the White Hall of the imperial palace – a fact that made a strong impression on all observers. The Austro-Hungarian ambassador Count Imre Széchenyi reported to Vienna: 'This great act of homage paid by Germany's princes to the youthful Kaiser Wilhelm II acquires increased significance because no invitations of any kind had been sent out for this purpose; the homage arose from a completely spontaneous decision by the German princes, a fact that understandably gave the greatest pleasure in influential circles here.'<sup>13</sup>

Until the last moment, however, organisational blunders threatened to upset the ceremony. When the two Moltkes, the Field Marshal and his nephew, returned to Berlin from Ratzeburg on the evening of 24 June, they discovered that the old Chief of the General Staff, victor of three wars of unification, was not mentioned anywhere in the programme for the opening ceremony. The 88-year-old was, as his nephew remarked, ‘deeply hurt and declared at first that he wished to leave at once’ and to hand in his resignation. The following morning he sent a letter to the Flügeladjutant (aide-de-camp) on duty, in which he announced that ‘since he, as the most senior Field Marshal, Chancellor of the Order of the Black Eagle etc. might well have expected to find a place in His Majesty’s suite, namely directly behind the Reich Chancellor, but is not in fact mentioned at all in the programme, and finds it incompatible with his military dignity to appear as a member of parliament, he would request that His Majesty be informed that he found himself obliged to absent himself from the ceremony’. The younger Moltke attributed the blame for this omission entirely to court toadies who, he suspected, wished to be done with the old man and attach themselves to the new stars. But the Kaiser, beside himself with anger, sent a Flügeladjutant to Bismarck immediately before the ceremony to ask whether it would be permissible to have the old Field Marshal appear together with the federal princes, to which Bismarck assented. Moltke, however, who was still in the palace, declared ‘no, he did not belong there’, and chose for himself the place behind the crown insignia, directly in front of the Kaiser.<sup>14</sup>

The impressive festivities of 25 June 1888 in the White Hall of the Stadtschloss in Berlin reminded many of the proclamation of the Kaiser in the hall of mirrors at Versailles nineteen years earlier, which had been immortalised – as this ceremony was to be – in a celebrated group portrait by Anton von Werner.<sup>15</sup> The ceremony began at 12 noon with a service in the chapel of the imperial palace. The text of the court chaplain’s sermon was ‘By God’s grace I am what I am’ and had been selected by Wilhelm himself.<sup>16</sup> After the service the members of the Reichstag, almost four hundred in number – only the eleven Social Democrats had refused to take part in the ceremony – the members of the government of the Reich and of the Prussian state government, and finally the court, assembled in the White Hall, which had been decorated under the direction of Anton von Werner. ‘The throne richly draped with yellow velvet, the red velvet dais for the Kaiserin, the seats right and left of the throne for the princes’ – everything made a magnificent impression, Moltke recorded.<sup>17</sup>

Particularly impressive was the entrance of a company of the Palace Guard, marching with shouldered arms, the officers with drawn swords. Bismarck, clad in his cuirassier’s uniform, led in the members of the Bundesrat ‘like a flock of lambs’. When they were all assembled he announced to the Kaiser

that the members of the court could now enter. 'First pages in black breeches with mourning ribbons at the knee, then the insignia of the Reich', followed by Field Marshal Count von Moltke with his marshal's baton supported on his hip, then the Kaiser with the Prince Regent of Bavaria on his left and the King of Saxony on his right, followed by the remaining German princes, twenty in number, all in the great red velvet mantles of the Supreme Order of the Black Eagle, the highest Prussian honour.<sup>18</sup> Behind the Kaiser the new, six-year-old Crown Prince took his place with the young Kaiserin, pregnant with Prince Oskar; next to them sat the Hereditary Princess Charlotte of Saxe-Meiningen, the Kaiser's eldest sister, and a handful of other ladies, all still dressed in black. Facing the Kaiser were ranged the highest court officials, the Reich Chancellor, his son Herbert and the other secretaries of state of the Reich, together with the Prussian ministers of state and the remaining members of the Bundesrat. The people's representatives, the elected members of the German Reichstag, the opening of which was the ostensible reason for the ceremony, stood in the background and melted into the obscurity of insignificance. The speech from the throne, which the young Kaiser was thus to address both to all the federal princes and to the elected members of parliament, and which was seen as a kind of programme for the coming reign, was received 'with breathless attention'.<sup>19</sup>

On his entrance into the White Hall the Kaiser struck the younger Moltke as 'extraordinarily dignified and deeply serious'. The manner in which Wilhelm 'walked with a firm step up to the throne dais and greeted the assembly with a solemn inclination of the head' had been 'truly majestic'. Once complete silence was established, the Reich Chancellor handed him the text of the speech from the throne. Wilhelm grasped the manuscript, set the helmet on his head 'with a resolute gesture' and threw his mantle back, 'his head held high, allowing his glance to roam over the silently waiting assembly'. Although his hand did not shake – Moltke watched closely for this – his voice was at first 'muffled and unclear. The sentences came out jerkily and with difficulty, and in spite of the dead silence he could hardly be understood. But gradually the voice rose, the delivery became fluent, and when he came to the words: I am resolved to maintain peace with everyone, insofar as this depends on me, he emphasised the word *me* so loudly and clearly that it flashed through all his audience like an electric spark, it was so charged with meaning, the full consciousness of the ruler's power, while at the same time there resounded in it the warning: but woe to him who dares to tread too close to me; an extraordinary strength and confidence lay in that one word, so that everyone broke out spontaneously into loud and enthusiastic applause. He spoke the last sentences of the speech in a fine, penetrating voice, every trace of self-consciousness had vanished, and he stood there, strong and proud, the powerful, self-confident ruler of a mighty empire.'<sup>20</sup>



Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-81920-6 - Wilhelm II: The Kaiser's Personal Monarchy, 1888–1900  
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Excerpt  
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1. The young Kaiser surrounded by the German princes, Bismarck and the ministers at the opening of the Reichstag on 25 June 1888

After a few introductory sentences expressing his grief at the loss of his grandfather and father Kaiser Wilhelm II's speech declared: 'I have called you together, gentlemen, to announce to the German people, in your presence, that as kaiser and king I am resolved to follow the same path by which my late, revered grandfather won the trust of his allies, the love of the German people and the goodwill of other nations. Whether I too shall succeed in this lies with the Almighty; I will strive towards it with earnest endeavour. The greatest tasks of the German kaiser lie in safeguarding the military and political position of the Reich with regard to foreign relations, and, in internal matters, in watching over the execution of the laws of the Reich. The chief of these laws is the constitution of the Reich; to guard and defend it, in all the rights which it vouchsafes to both legislative bodies of the nation and to every German citizen, but also in those vouchsafed to the kaiser and to each of the federated states and their rulers, is among the foremost rights and duties of the kaiser. In the legislation of the Reich, according to the constitution, it is my duty to act more in my capacity as king of Prussia than as German Kaiser; but in both roles it will be my endeavour to continue the work of the legislation of the Reich in the same way as my late, revered grandfather began it. In particular I adopt in its entirety the declaration issued by him on 17 November 1881 [concerning social policy], and I shall continue to work in the spirit of this declaration, to ensure that the legislation of the Reich strives further to give the working population the protection that it is able, in accordance with the principles of Christian morality, to provide for the weak and the oppressed in the struggle for existence. I hope that in this way we shall succeed in bringing closer the elimination of unhealthy social differences, and I am confident that in my care for the internal well-being of the nation I shall receive the unanimous support of all true adherents of the Reich and of the federated governments, support undivided by party differences. At the same time I consider it imperative to maintain our national and social development on the path of the law, and to take firm action against all aspirations which have the aim and effect of undermining national order. With regard to foreign policy I am resolved to maintain peace with everyone, insofar as this depends on me. My love for the German army and my relationship with it will never lead me into the temptation of depriving my country of the benefits of peace unless war becomes a necessity forced upon us by an attack on the Reich or on its federated states. Our army shall safeguard peace, and if in spite of it our peace is breached, it shall be ready to fight for it with honour. This it will be able to do with God's help, thanks to the strength which it has been given by the recent legislation on national defence, passed unanimously by you. To use this strength in wars of aggression is far from my intent. Germany needs neither new military glory nor any conquests, having finally won itself the right to



exist as a single and independent nation. Our alliance with Austria-Hungary is publicly known; I hold fast to it with German loyalty, not only because it has been entered into, but because I see in this defensive bond one of the basic elements of the balance of power in Europe, as well as a legacy of German history, the sense of which is shared today by public opinion throughout the German people, and which accords with traditional European international law as it stood, undisputed, until 1866. Similar historical links and similar national needs of the present bind us to Italy. Both countries desire to hold fast to the blessings of peace . . . Our existing agreements with Austria-Hungary and Italy allow me, to my satisfaction, to nurture my personal friendship with the Tsar of Russia and the peaceful relations which have existed for a hundred years with the Russian Empire, as is consistent both with my own feelings and with the interests of Germany. Both in the conscientious preservation of peace and in caring for our army I place myself willingly in the service of the Fatherland, and I rejoice in the traditional relations with foreign powers through which my endeavours towards the former goal will be furthered. Trusting in God and in the valour of our people I am confident that it will be granted to us for the foreseeable future to preserve and to consolidate what was won in battle under the leadership of my two predecessors on the throne, who now rest in God.<sup>21</sup>

The speech, the beginning of which was received with complete silence, was interrupted several times by cheers from all sides. When it was over the Kaiser handed the text back to Bismarck and held out his hand to him. The Chancellor, deeply moved, kissed the hand of his Kaiser and King. Bavarian Minister-President Freiherr von Lutz called for three cheers for the Kaiser, with which the assembled company joined in; then the monarch and the remaining ruling princes left the hall in the same order as that in which they had entered.<sup>22</sup>

The ceremony with the carefully considered speech from the throne made an excellent impression in all circles in Germany and almost everywhere abroad.<sup>23</sup> Wilhelm himself could look back on this favourable beginning to his reign with satisfaction. 'The first days left nothing to be desired in the way of impressive moments', he wrote delightedly to his grandmother Augusta, 'and the gift of God which was bestowed on me in the gathering of the German princes by common consent must surely be the most magnificent gift that He has given to a young sovereign! May he continue to stand as graciously by my side! Uncle Fritz [of Baden] and Uncle Albert [of Saxony] above all showed themselves quite outstandingly excellent and kind in their longstanding loyalty and friendship; may Heaven reward them both for it. They can both count on me.'<sup>24</sup> With similar enthusiasm Hildegard von Spitzemberg wrote: 'The most magnificent thing of all was the opening of the Reichstag with the German princes!' It was an act 'which must fill every German heart with joy and pride and which vis-à-vis

foreign countries is the equivalent of winning a war . . . It filled the eyes of all with tears, who saw the young ruler standing in his place of great responsibility, surrounded by all the German princes, Moltke behind him, the Iron Chancellor before him, bending over his hand, the young Kaiserin with child, beside her the little Crown Prince!<sup>25</sup>

Only in the Progressive camp, in London and in the British royal family were critical voices heard. The Empress-Mother Victoria – she now took the title Kaiserin Friedrich or the Empress Frederick – pronounced the whole ‘pageant and pomp’ of the opening of the Reichstag ‘very silly and absurd and out of place’. She was indignant that her daughter Charlotte had attended the ceremony in spite of being in deep mourning. In the eyes of the widowed Kaiserin the true meaning of the opening ceremony lay in Bismarck’s wish to demonstrate to the world his pleasure at the beginning of a new era which was incomparably more congenial to him than the short reign of Friedrich III. She was bitter in her condemnation of the initiative taken by the Grand Duke of Baden, who had taken a fancy to the role of protector of the Reich and could not see how much he was playing into the hands of Bismarck.<sup>26</sup> ‘The opening of the Reichstag with this completely unnecessary pomp hurts me *deeply*!’, she wrote in her diary. ‘Calling together of all German Princes – a *demonstration* in favour of the present system! . . . It was Prince Bismarck who wanted this farce! And Fritz v. Baden whose idea it was for the Princes to come here. All this will go to Wilhelm’s head even more! Anton v. Werner has been brought here to decorate the White Hall as if for a *celebration*! How *cruel* and unfeeling, with the grave only just sealed! What absence of dignity and decency! – if the German Reich needs such an artificial *mise-en-scène* and hocus-pocus to prove to the world that it is not breaking up, then I am *sorry* for it! Quiet, solemn silence, and *mourning* . . . would have been more dignified and fitting than this childish haste to create a spectacle.’<sup>27</sup>

Two days later the ritual was virtually repeated in the same place, only this time without the participation of the federal princes, when Wilhelm opened the Prussian parliament in his capacity as king of Prussia, with a speech from the throne in which he took the oath on the Prussian constitution. In this speech, which had been communicated to the Prussian ministers and approved by them that morning at the first Crown Council at which Wilhelm presided, he again emphasised his wish to carry on quietly pursuing the same policies as his grandfather. ‘I have no intention’, he declared, ‘of shaking the confidence of our people in the permanence of our legislative system by attempting to broaden the rights of the Crown. The legal position as regards my rights, so long as it is not called into question, is quite sufficient to secure the measure of monarchical intervention which Prussia requires in accordance with her