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978-0-521-81920-6 - Wilhelm II: The Kaiser's Personal Monarchy, 1888–1900

John C. G. Röhl

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Kaiser Wilhelm II (1859–1941) ruled imperial Germany from his accession in 1888 to his enforced abdication in 1918 at the end of the First World War. This book, based on a wealth of previously unpublished archival material, provides the most detailed account ever written of the first half of his reign. Following on from John Röhl's definitive and highly acclaimed *Young Wilhelm: The Kaiser's Early Life, 1859–1888* (1998), the volume demonstrates the monarch's dynastic arrogance and the wounding abuse he showered on his own people as, step by step, he built up his personal power. His thirst for glory, his overweening nationalism and militarism and his passion for the navy provided the impetus for a breathtaking long-term goal: the transformation of the German Reich into the foremost power in the world. Urgent warnings from all sides both about the revival of a semi-absolute Personal Monarchy on the threshold of the twentieth century and about the challenge his goal of 'world power' implied for the existing world powers, Great Britain, France and Russia, were brushed aside by the impetuous young ruler with his faithful military retinue and blindly devoted court favourites. Soon the predicted consequences – constitutional crisis at home and diplomatic isolation abroad – began to make their alarming appearance.

JOHN C. G. RÖHL is Research Professor of German History at the University of Sussex. He is the author of a number of acclaimed works on Kaiser Wilhelm II and the Second Reich. His book *The Kaiser and his Court: Wilhelm II and the Government of Germany* (1994) won the Wolfson History Prize for 1994. His biography of the Kaiser was recently awarded the Gissings Prize.

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The Kaiser in 1891

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WILHELM II

THE KAISER'S PERSONAL MONARCHY, 1888–1900

JOHN C. G. RÖHL

TRANSLATED BY

SHEILA DE BELLAIGUE



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Preface to the English edition

After many decades of neglect, Kaiser Wilhelm II is at last coming to be recognised internationally as the powerful and pernicious ruler that he actually was,¹ a kind of missing link, as it were, between Bismarck and Hitler, thereby helping to render not only the vagaries of his own long reign but also Germany's twisted road to the Third Reich historically a little more understandable. Biographies, monographs and dissertations about him are now appearing thick and fast, including the first-ever study of his life to be written in French,² some penned by the very historians who have hitherto downplayed his significance by emphasising the supreme influence of anonymous structures and social forces. Wolfgang J. Mommsen, one of the leading German authorities on the history of the Wilhelmine era, who only recently proclaimed that those historians who placed Wilhelm 'into the centre of things' were simply 'bad historians',³ has himself now published a biography highlighting the Kaiser's central importance, beginning with a quotation from a letter of 1906 from Max Weber to Friedrich Naumann which could well serve as the leitmotiv for the present volume: 'The degree of contempt heaped upon us as a nation abroad (in Italy, America, everywhere!) – and quite *rightly* so! That is the decisive thing – *because* we are willing to put up with *this* regime of *this* man, has now become a factor of first-rate "world political" significance for us.'⁴

True, Mommsen presents his study as a mild corrective to my own interpretation of Wilhelm's role, arguing that the 'Prusso-German power elites' were sometimes able to manipulate the Kaiser and should therefore be saddled with greater blame than I have allowed, but the observant reader will soon establish that the disagreement between us, at least for the period here at issue, is more apparent than real. For one thing, it is a gross exaggeration to suggest, as Mommsen's title *War der Kaiser an allem schuld?*² seems to do, that I hold the

Kaiser 'alone' responsible for all of imperial Germany's ills. The build-up of his personal power was gradual, and then after a few years of – always dysfunctional – dominance it disintegrated into polycratic confusion. For another, as the following pages will demonstrate, I heap sharp criticism on the 'Prusso-German power elites', though for rather different reasons from Mommsen. Whereas he sees them as at times successfully controlling the monarch in their own interest, I both emphasise the blindness of those at court who assisted the young monarch in his bid for personal power and bewail the political and moral weakness of those in the Wilhelmstrasse and elsewhere who tried and failed to stop him. Mommsen appears to me to overestimate the cohesion of the 'Prusso-German power elites', who were in fact, politically speaking, at each other's throats and allowed themselves all too readily to be controlled by the Kaiser and his court through what Norbert Elias has termed the 'kingship mechanism' – the monarch's ability to choose which of several rival cliques and conflicting courses he preferred at any given moment. The evidence for this interpretation is overwhelming. It is clearly set out in this volume and will, I am confident, prove persuasive in the end. But even now such differences are trivial when compared with the times, not so long ago, when I stood virtually alone and most historians, Wolfgang Mommsen included, banished Kaiser Wilhelm II to the shadows as a political irrelevancy and an embarrassing buffoon.

Gratifying as the international acceptance of the important if catastrophic role played by Wilhelm II in the history of Germany and the wider world may be, it was by no means axiomatic that a work as voluminous as this should be translated into English. Making my research accessible to English-speaking readers became possible only as a result of the generous financial support I received from the Arts and Humanities Research Board and the Stiftungsfonds Deutsche Bank, together with the award in 1994 of the Wolfson Prize and in 2002 of the Gissing Prize, and I should like to thank Dr Ulrich Cartellieri of the Deutsche Bank and Mr Sean Breslin of Gissing in particular for their extraordinary generosity.

The almost superhuman task of faithfully translating the many hundreds of pages that follow, replete as they are with at times rather idiosyncratic extracts from the letters and diaries of Europe's royalty, aristocracy and political and military leadership of more than a century ago, was undertaken by Sheila de Bellaigue, formerly Registrar of the Royal Archives at Windsor Castle and hence well acquainted with the personalities and issues of that vanished world. Not only did she fulfil the daunting task of translating my German text with characteristic professionalism and selfless commitment, however; she also checked and re-checked many of the quotations from the extensive correspondence held in the Royal Archives to ensure their accuracy. Puzzling archaic phrases, obscure

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PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

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aristocratic titles and arcane terms of courtly ritual were discussed at length between us in the hope of arriving at the closest equivalent in current English usage. I cannot praise or thank Sheila de Bellaigue enough for her uncomplaining dedication during what must at times have seemed a Sisyphean sentence. The footnotes were expertly transformed into English by Anna Menge. The entire text has been copy-edited with admirable virtuosity, sensitivity and devotion to the English language by Karen Anderson Howes. The responsibility for any errors that may remain naturally rests entirely with me.

I have seized the opportunity presented by this happy collaboration on the English edition to review the entire text, to shorten the account where it appeared overloaded with detail and to streamline the argument wherever it seemed unnecessarily serpentine, without, I hope, losing the immediacy and authenticity which it has been my aim throughout to achieve. If nothing else, the plentiful and often previously unknown archival evidence gathered together in this volume should stand as the solid foundation upon which future informed debate on this question of world historical significance, which has, for whatever reason, been obscured for far too long, will be able to build.

John Röhl

Sussex, June 2003

Preface to the German edition

I began the first volume of this biography of Wilhelm II, which dealt with the future Kaiser's childhood and youth up to his accession, with Heraclitus's saying that the soul of another person is a distant continent that cannot be visited or explored.¹ In this second volume on the first half of his long and much-debated reign I am returning to a country I first visited more than forty years ago, some of whose inhabitants seem more familiar to me than my own contemporaries. Both for my first book, *Germany without Bismarck*² and during the many years I spent compiling the three-volume edition of the correspondence of Philipp Eulenburg,³ Wilhelm II's best friend, I studied the events and personalities of the transitional epoch between Bismarck and Bülow and examined the almost incalculable wealth of letters, diaries and notes written by the Kaiser, the imperial family and the statesmen and diplomats of the time, both in Germany and beyond, which has survived in public and private archives.

During my archival research for these early studies it became incontrovertibly clear to me, contrary to the opinion of professional German historians, that Wilhelm II was a key figure in modern German history as it followed its fatal course from Bismarck to Hitler. His narcissistic coldness, his dynastic arrogance, the aggressive attitude he adopted towards the federal constitution of the Reich, parliamentarism, political Catholicism, social democracy, the Jewish minority and the democratic aspirations which were beginning to emerge everywhere, even among the Conservatives, led him from the very outset to use the most wounding terms of abuse against the majority of his own people, thereby very rapidly undermining the stability of the Hohenzollern throne. His thirst for glory, his overweening nationalism, his pronounced militaristic tendencies and his passion for the navy provided the impetus for a breathtakingly ambitious, long-term goal: the transformation of imperial Germany into the foremost great

power – *the* European world power – on earth, an endeavour which represented so mortal a threat to the established and hitherto far from harmonious world powers, Russia, France and Great Britain, that it caused them to unite against the common danger.

Although these perceptions gained acceptance in the wake of the great controversies over the work of Fritz Fischer in the 1960s and 1970s as far as Wilhelmine Germany in general was concerned, the decisive role which Wilhelm II played in introducing this illusory and self-destructive *Weltmachtspolitik* and naval policy was not recognised, and was even – despite the overwhelming weight of documentary evidence – vehemently denied. The last Kaiser, so the argument ran, had been no more than a *Schattenkaiser* – a shadow Kaiser – too impulsive to be able to intervene effectively in politics, too ridiculous to be taken seriously by historians.⁴ The practical result of this neglect, however, was a virtual exoneration of the Kaiser, for in the absence of critical research the ample documentary evidence which could have thrown light on his true character and his disastrous political activity remained undiscovered. Diametrically opposed judgements on Wilhelm II were left abruptly juxtaposed in a limbo of unexplained contradiction – always a sign that the research essential to the furtherance of consensus has not been carried out.⁵ For many years I was almost alone in my views on the true nature of the monarchical constitution which Bismarck had created – even at the moment of his dismissal in 1890 the founder of the Reich proudly described the system of Personal Monarchy, in which the King and Kaiser actually ruled, as one of his greatest achievements – and on the overriding decision-making power of Wilhelm II.⁶ It is true that, especially in the English-speaking world, several other studies based on empirical archival research had reached similar conclusions.⁷ But the general revision of the historical picture of this era that should have followed on from these findings was still lacking.⁸

In this volume I therefore return to the land I know so well, the Prusso-German Kaiserreich of the 1890s. With the benefit of richer sources than were available to me on my first expedition, and from a higher vantage-point – that of the imperial court rather than of the bureaucracy in the Wilhelmstrasse – I have set out to describe in detail the way in which Kaiser Wilhelm II's personal power grew within the monarchical and militaristic structures provided by the Bismarckian constitution and to point to the consequences of such a regime. Clearly, what is in question here is much more than the history of personalities; indeed we are dealing with some of the most fundamental issues of history in general. For there is no doubt that German policy would have taken a different course if the power struggle between the Kaiser and the leading German statesmen, which forms the main theme of this biography, had turned out differently. This book is therefore concerned not only with Kaiser Wilhelm II but also with

the question of who controlled the powerful machinery of government in the German Empire at the heart of Europe, and how the guidelines of domestic and foreign policy were decided upon. It is concerned with the conditions necessary for the survival of the monarchical form of government in the twentieth century. And it is concerned with the question of the continuity, or inevitability, of German history in the course it followed from the foundation of the Second Reich by Bismarck to the Third Reich of Adolf Hitler.

For the gradual assumption of power by Wilhelm II in the period from 1889 to 1896, as this volume very clearly demonstrates, was anything but inevitable or predestined. Rather, it was the result of innumerable crises and machinations at the Hohenzollern court, in the officer corps and in the administrative offices of the Wilhelmstrasse, and it had to be more or less forcibly carried through against the growing democratic spirit of the time. From the earliest days urgent warnings came not only from members of parliament and journalists but also from the Reich chancellors, Prussian ministers, Reich secretaries of state, privy councillors, diplomats, generals, federal princes, foreign monarchs and ambassadors and even members of the Kaiser's own family. They all cautioned against the reintroduction, a hundred years after the French Revolution, of a semi-absolute Personal Monarchy in the federalist Reich, in an age of industrialised and urbanised mass society with unrestrained freedom of thought and expression. Everywhere, and with increasing alarm, comparisons were made with the fall of the Stuarts in England in the seventeenth century and of the Bourbons in France in the eighteenth century. The end of the Hohenzollern monarchy, the encirclement of the Reich and a war that would destroy everything were widely predicted. Not long after Wilhelm's accession there was already widespread speculation as to whether an All-Highest Sovereign who made such anachronistic and megalomaniac claims to power could still be in his right mind, and a few years later, as the last chapter shows, serious consideration was being given to the idea of a forced abdication. But in vain. In the end all his opponents, numerous, prominent and influential though they were, proved helpless against the elemental will to power of their young ruler with his faithful military retinue (the Flügeladjutanten), cunning court officials and blindly devoted favourites. From mid-1896 the dramatic power struggle behind the scenes was as good as over, with only the two Berlin parliaments, the Reichstag and the Prussian Landtag, still providing some constraint on Wilhelm II's decision-making power, but only in domestic and armaments policy. In accordance with the Bismarckian system of Personal Monarchy their opinion was not even sought where foreign and military policy were concerned. It was not long before the anticipated consequences began to show themselves.

In view of the unresolved state of research and of the controversy still surrounding the fundamental questions involved, I have again opted for a narrative

style in which the very expressive letters and diary entries of the main protagonists are quoted extensively. In this way the reader can get to know the archival sources which have led me to my own view of the growing power and the pernicious influence of Wilhelm II. From these it should become plain that the interpretation offered here of the dramatic developments behind the glittering scenes of imperial Germany is not mine alone, but was also very much that of the people directly involved. Through the documents on which this biography draws heavily, long-forgotten expressions of opinion by Wilhelm II's contemporaries, kept secret at the time for good reason, are brought back to life, enabling us a hundred years later to enter into the thought patterns, convictions, passions, intrigues and human weaknesses of that generation. They should help to deepen our understanding of the vanished civilisation of the last days of the Hohenzollern throne, with a Kaiser who either could not or would not understand what was required of monarchy if it were to survive in a modern pluralist society.

Another reason for adopting a closely source-based narrative form is that several printed editions of letters and diaries which were published after the trauma of 1918 – Article 227 of the Treaty of Versailles stipulated that Wilhelm, who had taken refuge in Holland, was to be handed over to an international tribunal and tried as a war criminal – can be shown to have been corrupted by omissions from and distortions of the authentic text calculated to gloss over the truth. As a result of this falsification a highly inaccurate historical picture, above all of Kaiser Wilhelm II and the manner in which he ruled, has been perpetuated until this day. It can be corrected only by returning to the original sources. This is particularly true of the diaries of the ambitious, arch-conservative and always well-informed General Count Alfred von Waldersee, which were published in 1922–3 in a scandalously expurgated version.⁹ The original text of the diaries, with his scathing comments on Wilhelm II, has been fully utilised for the first time in this biography; the disparities with the printed version are indicated in the notes.

A further important source, but one to which little attention has been paid in Germany, provides striking evidence of the extent of Kaiser Wilhelm II's power, and that is the correspondence of his British relations which is preserved in the Royal Archives at Windsor Castle. In drawing on these papers and in giving them their due place in the narrative I hope to have been able to throw more light on the personality of the last German Emperor, and above all to have contributed to our understanding of the international implications of his restless and scheming political activity. I thank Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II for again allowing me to make use of the Royal Archives for this part of my biography.

As I stated in the preface to the first volume, I began the archival research for this book more than twenty years ago, after I had finished editing Eulenburg's

correspondence. The work has required many visits to a variety of archives, and in this I have been greatly helped by generous grants from the British Academy, the Robert Bosch Foundation and the Robert Bosch Jubilee Foundation 1986 in the Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft. Once again I thank the archivists of the then Central State Archives of the German Democratic Republic in Merseburg and Potsdam (both now in Berlin) for their help, above all in assisting me to consult the holdings in the Brandenburg–Prussian House Archive and the records of the Kaiser's Civil Cabinet. The Bundesarchiv in Koblenz, the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv in Freiburg and the Politisches Archiv of the German Foreign Office, then in Bonn and now also back in Berlin, also hold important collections – papers of major statesmen and military figures, diplomatic reports and the secret reserve collection with the Kaiser's outrageous marginal comments, which had to be locked away on the orders of successive Reich chancellors and foreign secretaries – all of which I was able to consult for this biography, for which I wish to express my thanks. I am most particularly grateful to HRH Landgrave Moritz of Hesse and Prince Rainer of Hesse for permission to work for several months in the Hesse Family Archives in Schloss Fasanerie near Fulda and to make unrestricted use of the extensive papers of Wilhelm II's remarkably progressive mother Victoria, the Empress Frederick, for this volume as for the previous one. My thanks are also due to HH Prince Ferdinand von Bismarck and the Director of the Otto von Bismarck Foundation, Dr Michael Epkenhans, for making available the secret file at Friedrichsruh on the purchase of Wilhelm II's embarrassing letters to Miss Love. And last but not least, the archivists of the Royal Archives, particularly Sheila de Bellaigue, have earned my thanks for their enduring support for my work, both in making material available to me and through their expert knowledge and wise advice, and have saved me from many an error.

In addition, many private individuals have given me access to papers in their possession relevant to this biography. In this connection my particular thanks go to the Earl of Lonsdale, at Lowther, Cumbria; Ramona Countess von Oeynhausen-Sierstorpff and Peter Count von Wedel, at Bad Driburg; Gustav Count von Wedel, at Frankfurt am Main; Hermann Count Stolberg-Wernigerode, at Frankfurt am Main; Karl-Wilhelm Freiherr von Plettenberg, at Essen; Herr and Frau Joachim von Natzmer at Munich; Frau Margot Leo-Hoffmann at Freiburg; Frau Ruth von Santen at Wennigsen, Lower Saxony; Adrian Freiherr von Holzing-Berstett, at Bollschweil, Breisgau; and Freifrau von Seyfried-Marschall at Oberkirch, Baden. My thanks for information and material of great value to this book are also due to Professor Dr Margarete Jarchow, Dr Anastasia Hackett, Dr Ragnhild Fiebig-von Hase, Hagen Count Lambsdorff, Dr Thomas Otte, Dr Roderick McLean, Dr Annika Mombauer, Dr Matthew

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PREFACE TO THE GERMAN EDITION

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