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# Kaiser Wilhelm II and German Politics

**A crucial period in modern German history** has been identified, perhaps justifiably, with the personality of Wilhelm II. His policies have been repeatedly subjected to intensive scrutiny and, in general, historians agree that his impact on post-Bismarckian Germany was devastating. Contemporaries were concerned that Wilhelm II was mentally ill, and recently this assumption has received further support. Nonetheless, there seems to be continuing interest in this pittoresque, though apparently unbalanced personality, more so perhaps in the Anglo-Saxon world than in Germany. John Röhl launched a full-scale assault on social history in the Federal Republic of Germany for failing to give proper consideration to the role of Wilhelm II in German politics, singling out in particular Hans-Ulrich Wehler's history of Imperial Germany for scathing criticism.[1] Somewhat more circumspect was Paul Kennedy's recent assessment of the relative strength of the structuralist and personalist approaches to the history of Wilhelmine Germany, but he also made the point that Imperial Germany's 'world politics' were very much Wilhelm II's own.[2] Impressive new research, mostly from Anglo-Saxon quarters, has considerably increased our knowledge of the personality of Wilhelm II and his friends and advisers. John Röhl's monumental edition of the Philipp Eulenburg correspondence allows new insight into the views and actions of the inner circle of the Wilhelmine ruling élite (who largely dominated the processes of decision-making in Wilhelmine Germany),[3] and Isabel Hull has published a carefully documented study of Wilhelm II's entourage.[4] Recently, Röhl summarized his findings in a collection of essays designed to demonstrate that the German political system must be described as an authoritarian monarchy and that Kaiser Wilhelm II was the decisive element throughout,[5] and Lamar Cecil published the first volume of a comprehensive account of Wilhelm II's life and political role.[6]

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The new emphasis on the personal role of the last Emperor may perhaps be considered a welcome reaction to the approaches to the issue which became fashionable after the publication in 1961 of Fritz Fischer's first book on Germany's drive for world power. Previous generations of historians, notably Hermann Oncken and Werner Frauendienst,[7] had been inclined to put most of the blame for the failure of German politics before 1914 on Wilhelm's 'personal rule'; his bombastic speeches and his irregular and unbalanced interference with the regular process of diplomatic decision-making were considered a primary cause of the disastrous policies which led to the first world war. Wilhelm II's role in German politics was criticized perhaps even more drastically by Erich Eyck in his monumental and at the time trail-blazing book on Wilhelmine Germany.[8]

At the time, this approach produced interesting reactions from, in particular, conservative historians like Fritz Hartung and Ernst Rudolf Huber.[9] Huber argued with considerable acuteness that while there had been many instances of 'improvised personal rule' during Wilhelm's reign, that is to say irregular interference with the process of policy formation, primarily through Wilhelm's public appearances, it was not the system as such which was to blame but rather the personality of Wilhelm himself.[10] This, in part, merely revived the debate about Wilhelm's 'personal rule' started by his contemporaries. The question of whether it was Wilhelm II's personal responsibility or whether the political system was faulty, had already been raised before the first world war. In 1908, Max Weber had put it very strongly: 'There is far too much talk about the "impulsive nature" and the personality of Wilhelm II. The faulty political structure is the root of the evil.'[11] At the time, however, the majority of the parties refused to consider any fundamental constitutional change seriously; a substantial reduction of monarchical power was not thought to be advisable even under such conditions. The post-Fischer school of historians took very much a Weberian approach, searching for the institutional, structural and social causes of the failure of Wilhelmine politics. Röhl and others resuscitated, though on a higher level of analysis, the older approaches.

There can be no doubt whatever that the new evidence accumulated by Röhl, Hull and others strengthens the case for a new critical assessment of Wilhelm's role in German politics. In their studies, Wilhelm II and his entourage appear in an even more unfavourable light than before. Wilhelm's boastful ponderings, his theatrical speeches, often completely out of touch with reality, his

childish jokes and amusements, usually in all-male company, his inclination to take everything personally, his inability to distinguish between personal and public affairs, his tendency to confuse rhetoric and reality — all this appears to be rooted in a personality bordering on the insane. The psychological reasons for such behaviour can be found at least partly in the circumstances of his upbringing, and in particular the rather disdainful treatment, devoid of all emotional attachment, which Wilhelm received in his early years from his mother, Princess Victoria. Victoria considered young Wilhelm who, due to complications at birth, had a crippled hand, on almost all counts a failure, at any rate as measured against the ideal image of his father, Prince Albert. Wilhelm's tutor, Hinzpeter, who represented a very strict form of orthodox Protestantism, imposed upon Wilhelm II a mode of behaviour of extreme rigidity which also must have been detrimental to his emotional development. Thomas A. Kohut even argues that the attempts by Princess Victoria to turn Wilhelm into an English gentleman rather than into a Prussian *Junker* caused a deep split in Wilhelm's national identity.[12] From an early age Wilhelm preferred male company, usually from a military or aristocratic background, and he was particularly attracted by the military life-style fashionable at the time. This may well be seen as a reaction against the way in which he had been brought up. There are good reasons to assume that Wilhelm II subconsciously harboured homosexual inclinations, although he was certainly never aware of this fact himself, all the more so as at the time homosexuality was considered totally immoral.

There are, therefore, sufficient psychological factors to explain the abnormal behaviour of Wilhelm II. However, these aspects must not be overrated. For there are also other, positive features in his personality. He was able to fascinate even those personalities who were not easily taken in by the splendour of the imperial milieu or who could not expect any favours from him. In high aristocratic circles Wilhelm was usually well received and certainly not considered a bore, although at times he conducted himself with an unbearable degree of self-assuredness, rarely respecting the feelings or expectations of his hosts. All the same, he was capable of making a positive impression even upon politicians like the radical English parliamentarian John Morley, who was certainly no monarchist. Whether Wilhelm II really suffered from bouts of mental illness, as John Röhl would have it, is not proven, though there are indications that he did.[13]

But what bearing does this have on the interpretation of German politics during the Wilhelmine era? The key issue is rather why did the German political élite, though fully aware of Wilhelm II's deficiencies as a ruler, never even try effectively to restrain his political activities, let alone make him resign, an idea which seems to have been ventilated briefly in the entourage of the Grand Duke of Baden.[14] During the passionate debate about the system of 'personal rule' in 1906 Max Weber had already put the issue in precisely these terms:

> The measure of contempt which is felt for us as a nation abroad . . . — quite justifiedly so, and this is the important point — because we tolerate this regime by this man, by now has become a power factor of first-rate international importance . . . We are going to be 'isolated' because this man governs us in such a manner and because we tolerate and excuse it.[15]

It goes without saying that within the constitutional system of Imperial Germany the Emperor had to fulfil important functions. This is not to say that he was more powerful than the monarch in a country like Britain. However, the Bismarckian creation was, in strict constitutional terms, a political system with a rather diffuse distribution of effective power, at least nominally, if not in actual fact.[16] The Bundesrat, the Reichstag, the 'civilian' government (or as it eventually came to be called, the Reichsleitung) under the leadership of the Chancellor, the Prussian cabinet, the military establishment, all had a share in actual power, deriving from an independent base. This system of pluralistic appropriation of governmental power with no clearly defined competences between the various institutions participating in the pursuit of political decision-making was, in theory, held together only by the institution of the Emperor, who was *primus inter pares* among the princes and who alone fully controlled, within certain (for the most part purely ornamental) limitations, foreign and military affairs alike. Although it was never clearly stipulated in constitutional law, the Emperor was not supposed to act without 'constitutional clothes', that is to say without a Chancellor and, if the latter were not the same, the Prussian Prime Minister, who were responsible for actual policy decisions.

Traditionally, foreign policy had not been a subject to which the Reichstag was supposed to address itself, though this rule was in fact never strictly adhered to. A personal prerogative of the monarch regarding the conduct of foreign affairs cannot be considered intrinsically unconstitutional, even though constitutional jurists and politicians alike soon came to assume that it was. In military matters

the monarch, in fact, enjoyed a sphere of personal influence largely exempt from parliamentary and governmental control — up to a point in accordance with the letter of the constitution. Under Bismarck, the range of affairs to which the so-called *Kommandogewalt* was applicable had already been extended considerably, largely in order to reduce the influence of parliament on military matters. Under Wilhelm II this process continued, though it actually failed to keep parliamentary control of military affairs at bay. The Emperor considered the army as the last bastion of monarchical power in an age of growing democratic tendencies, and he was determined to defend to the end its special status within German society. The question of whether the monarch could act on his own in military affairs, or whether he was subject to ministerial consensus in these matters also, was never systematically raised, let alone decided. Up to 1914 and beyond, an assumption prevailed that the 'civilian government' had no direct say in military appointments, military planning, and, in the event of war, control by the territorial commanders.

Bismarck, with his enormous prestige and his independent standing, had managed to run this complicated system more or less smoothly, keeping its centripetal tendencies in check. When in need, he had always been able to invoke the monarchical prestige of Wilhelm I, but had, in fact, established a kind of caesaristic rule for himself. When Wilhelm II took over with his ambition to be more than just a nominal ruler, the weaknesses of this system became apparent almost at once. Wilhelm II was eager to take on the role of arbiter within the Imperial governmental system himself; his quarrel with Bismarck about whether ministers should have free access to the monarch without prior notification and approval by the Chancellor, that is to say the granting of the so-called *Immediatrecht*, was not surprisingly one of the issues which contributed to Bismarck's fall from power in 1890. Even a monarch of far greater personal standing and sound political judgement might have found the role of arbiter between the different power groupings in Imperial Germany impossible to play; given Wilhelm II's personality it is not surprising that the situation developed into chaos quite soon. Indeed, Caprivi's attempts to heal the rift between Reich politics and Prussian politics, which widened under the impact of the economic crisis of 1895, by leaving Prussia to herself, ended in disaster, and his successor Hohelohe simply allowed things to drift, thereby making possible the eventual rise of Wilhelm's political lieutenants Bülow and Tirpitz to

key positions within the Imperial government. Bülow succeeded to some degree in consolidating the governmental system, by embarking upon an ostensibly imperialist policy which in some ways tried to copy Disraeli's techniques of government. His cultivation of the Imperial idea, his inauguration of a pathetic 'Weltpolitik' with Wilhelm II as its spearhead, and his encouragement of a new nationalism to provide a bond between the bourgeois and the conservative classes were initially successful, though perhaps only in a superficial way. However, the problems were postponed rather than solved, and the cracks in the social fabric plastered over rather than filled in. His successor, Bethmann Hollweg, tried his luck with a policy of the 'diagonal', designed to please everyone to some degree, and to avoid controversial legislative projects for the time being; but in the end Hollweg lost control just the same and in 1914 eventually took refuge in a 'Flucht nach vorn' against his own better judgement.

As a personality, Wilhelm II was certainly not suited to play the arbiter between diverging political sections within the Imperial governmental system, and in particular between the Reichsleitung and the military establishment. His failure in this respect must be considered a major factor in the process which eventually resulted in unleashing the first world war. However, perhaps this would have asked too much of anybody, given the nature of the Wilhelmine political system, especially since the Reichstag elections of 1912 had resulted in a political stalemate between the parties of the left and those of the right, leaving the government without a suitable parliamentary base.[17]

The degree of influence which Wilhelm II actually exercised on governmental policies during the long years of his reign cannot easily be established. His own declarations in this respect, such as, for instance, in 1901 to King Edward VII: 'For I am the sole arbiter and master of German foreign policy, and the government and country must follow me [ . . . ]'[18] cannot be taken as a reliable guideline. There is no doubt that Wilhelm practised 'personal rule', at any rate during the earlier period of his reign up to 1908. But historians disagree a great deal on what this actually implied.

*Did* 'personal rule' mean recurrent arbitrary intervention by the monarch in the process of policy formation, both in domestic and, in particular, in foreign affairs, resulting in confusion, failure, and a loss of respectability by the government at home or abroad? That is how contemporaries saw it, whatever their political persuasion. *Was* it, for that matter, an unconstitutional form of conduct which could be

rectified by subjecting the Emperor's public appearances to stringent control, and by making sure that he would and had to obey the letter of the constitution? As early as 1903 a resolution by the bourgeois and conservative parties was handed to Bülow to the effect that greater care should be taken in this respect and Wilhelm II be advised accordingly.

Or was 'personal rule' tantamount to the effective usurpation of government by the Emperor? This does not necessarily imply that Wilhelm II effectively pulled the strings himself; it was sufficient that he was in a position to appoint to responsible office persons of his own choice, who then, thanks to a 'Königsmechanismus', acted in accordance with the Kaiser's supreme will. Some recent authors, notably John Röhl, believe this to have been the case, though they concede that Wilhelm II himself was totally unfit actually to govern.[19] Apart from anything else, the Kaiser was incapable of hard and continuous work; he suffered from a nervous restlessness which made him spend literally two-thirds of his time travelling from one location to another, with little time left for regular audiences with his political advisers. There certainly existed no continuous 'monarchical' government.

Or, as Isabel Hull suggests, did 'personal rule' amount to the Emperor being surrounded by an entourage that narrowed down the spectrum of policy options to such a degree that he always followed a line close to their conservative instincts, coming as they did, almost to a man, from the agrarian nobility and the officer corps?[20] Indeed, it would appear plausible that the entourage, which Professor Hull admits was more conservative than the Emperor himself, presented the policy options in such a way as to exclude some of them from the start, and, while shifting the balance imperceptibly to the right, put them to the Kaiser in such a manner that he was left with virtually no other choice than to agree, from the vantage point of his own royal perspective. The worst feature of this system was undoubtedly that nobody ever dared tell Wilhelm II the whole truth. Unpalatable matters were always couched in a language which at the same time comforted him; bad news was made bearable by the addendum that the Emperor still enjoyed the respect of the German people. In a way this was not untrue, although the public's respect was directed to an idealized version of the Emperor which did not have much in common with the real person.

All of these interpretations are justified up to a point, although to different degrees. The first, fairly traditional approach would appear

to be too narrow; the second tends to overrate the actual importance of Wilhelm II in Wilhelmine politics, while the third seems, on the whole to be correct. It paints, however, a too conservative picture of events, in particular by not sufficiently taking into account the pressures to which Wilhelm II was exposed by third parties. Furthermore, it tends to neglect the impact of public opinion upon the Kaiser. However fragmented and selected the newspaper reports that were brought to Wilhelm's attention, they carried enormous weight with him, since he wished nothing more than to be popular with his own people, and indeed with the British and other nations as well — a factor which correlated with the intrinsic insecurity of his conduct and the inadequacy of his personality.

It must be said, to start with, that throughout his reign one important, perhaps the most important source of Wilhelm's imperial power remained virtually unimpaired, though in later years it came to be more and more circumscribed by skilful manipulation on the part of the most interested group, namely the 'civilian government'. This was the area of personal appointments to high office, e.g. key positions in the military sphere such as Chief of the General Staff, or, during the first world war, Head of Eastern High Command in the East, though at times the Chancellors found ways and means, however indirect, of getting their nominees accepted in the end, as did Bethmann Hollweg in 1916.[21] It is less well known that Wilhelm II continued not only to appoint Chancellors of his own choice, but to fill many ministerial posts, and above all most of the diplomatic posts, according to his personal preferences, at times against the explicit wishes of the Chancellor or the Foreign Office. It is at this point that the Emperor's personal secretariats, the Civilkabinett, the Militärkabinett and the Marinekabinett, came to play an important role, as they were not subjected to any constitutional, and obviously no public control whatsoever. The criteria according to which people were selected for high office in Wilhelmine Germany were rather diffuse; noble birth was certainly not enough, neither was efficiency. A career in the public limelight, let alone a record as a parliamentary politician, was clearly a negative factor, whereas a previous position in high bureaucratic office or the army was an advantage. Above all, candidates had to be liked by Wilhelm II and his entourage or, to put it the other way round, it was difficult to make a career if one was considered *persona non grata* at court, although Kiderlen-Wächter eventually did make his way to the top despite Wilhelm II's disapproval. However, it would be misleading to assume that Wilhelm II was decidedly against

qualified men from bourgeois backgrounds; in fact, he sympathized with them perhaps more than those in ministerial positions in Prussia and elsewhere. Wilhelm II was proud of his good relations to and indeed his friendship with representatives of the rising industrial bourgeoisie, such as Friedrich Krupp and Albert Ballin. He personally encouraged Althoff in his attempts to create an efficient university system with a new academic élite which represented a science-oriented bourgeois culture.[22] Besides, Wilhelm II took a passionate interest in the arts and acted as a determined defender of the neo-classical aesthetic standards against the artistic avant-garde in Imperial Germany. His attempts to impose his personal, that is to say conventional, aesthetic standards upon Prussian art policy eventually led to a public outcry against official art policy in Prussia, believed to be dependent on the Emperor's arbitrary rule.[23]

Wilhelm II always believed in personal diplomacy on the level of international royalty and was prepared to make good use of his family connections with many European ruling houses, notably the British. He often exploited dynastic connections in order to make Imperial Germany's position on key issues clear to other powers or to solicit support for its policies. However, with but a few exceptions, notably in the earlier years, the Emperor sought to keep in line with the policies of the government. In later years the Wilhelmstrasse succeeded in taming somewhat Wilhelm's diplomatic ambitions, which usually tended to overshoot the mark. On the whole the Emperor's attempts to go it alone in direct negotiations with his fellow monarchs throughout Europe did not get very far. The latter became increasingly reluctant to become engaged in political conversations with Wilhelm II.

Wilhelm's actual influence upon, and participation in, day-to-day policy-making varied considerably according to time and circumstances. His reign can be divided into five different periods: (1) 1888–92: years dominated by Wilhelm's quarrel with Bismarck; (2) 1893–97: the heyday of 'personal rule'; (3) 1897–1908: the Chancellorship of Bülow, who systematically exploited Wilhelm's 'personal rule' for his own purposes; (4) 1908–14: the period of semi-retreat into military affairs, which represented the last reliable royal prerogative, due to shaken self-confidence; (5) the years of the first world war, during which Wilhelm's personal influence was virtually eliminated and which eventually led to the collapse of the monarchical system.

In his early years Wilhelm II was not so much concerned with becoming his own Chancellor. He merely wished to be at the centre of

political affairs, instead of being kept on the sidelines as Bismarck would have it. Above all, he wanted to be a popular monarch, in the eyes not only of the conservatives, but the middle classes also. The influence of his former tutor Hinzpeter and of Stoecker was perhaps more important than that of his entourage, among which ultra-conservative officers certainly played a dominant role. The social legislation which Wilhelm II virtually imposed upon Bismarck in February 1890 (and which failed to receive the latter's counter-signature) was entirely in line with a fashion current among the German educated middle classes in the 1890s; indeed, for a while Wilhelm II enjoyed the reputation of being a progressive monarch who was fully in tune with the spirit of the times, in contrast to the ageing Chancellor. From the start, Wilhelm II wanted to be just that, namely a popular ruler, considered sensitive, up to date, and future-oriented in thought and action. But the political objectives which the Emperor considered popular and therefore worthwhile depended upon circumstances and the influence to which he was subjected and were therefore liable to sudden changes. All too soon Wilhelm came under the influence of industrialists like Stumm and the conservative camarilla whose key figures were Count Waldersee and Botho von Eulenburg; accordingly, only a few years later he rather abruptly changed course in matters of social policy. The pressure exerted by the agrarian conservatives against the government because of Caprivi's tariff policies was an additional factor.

However, it would be misleading to think that Wilhelm II had now definitely joined forces with the conservatives. When, in 1892, the primary school bill presented to the Prussian House of Representatives aroused strong opposition from the National Liberals, and indeed from Protestant middle-class opinion in general, Wilhelm II came down strongly on their side, against Caprivi and the so-called Kartell parties. The bill eventually had to be abandoned, giving rise to a serious political crisis.[24] The conservatives were furious with Wilhelm II who had helped to defeat what was considered a thoroughly conservative education bill, designed to strengthen the influence of the churches in the state school system and bolster Christian morality.[25] Caprivi decided to give up the position of Prime Minister of Prussia and the post was given to Botho von Eulenburg, an arch conservative and intimate friend of the Emperor. These events were tantamount to a partial disintegration of the political system; Wilhelm II was now given a free reign at least in Prussian affairs. The Emperor's appetite for hiring and firing ministers

according to his own preference, whatever the Chancellor might say, was undoubtedly increased by these events, which prompted independent observers to warn that the Emperor should henceforth keep clear of all too direct involvement in party politics.

After the appointment of Botho von Eulenburg as Prime Minister of Prussia, Caprivi conducted a hopeless rearguard fight against mounting pressure from the conservatives, given the fact that by now extreme conservative views had gained the upper hand in Wilhelm II's entourage. Early in December 1893, Holstein made a courageous attempt to mobilize the good offices of Philipp Eulenburg in order to restrain the Emperor from constant interference in governmental affairs, at least in foreign policy. He remarked sarcastically:

> His Majesty's autocratic manner is steadily getting worse. I should have thought that from his vantage point the best argument for keeping Caprivi [as Chancellor] would be that no successor would ever give His Majesty as much freedom.[26]

Caprivi's unwillingness to introduce a new anti-socialist law which he knew was bound to fail in the Reichstag and would furthermore unnecessarily antagonize the liberal parties with which he had re-established a sort of loose working relationship, was the last straw which resulted in his eventual resignation in October 1894.

There can be little doubt that Wilhelm's constant interference in domestic politics, not least by means of public speeches made without any prior consultation with the Chancellor or the ministers in charge, had created a governmental crisis of the first order. The Emperor repeatedly suffered from fits of depression which led Eulenburg to pity the 'poor Kaiser' who had been exposed to so much trouble by the civilian politicians! But for the time being Wilhelm was determined to soldier on, and to find the persons willing to implement the policy objectives he considered to be of prime importance, however hostile the parties in parliament might be. The new Chancellor, Prince Hohenlohe-Sigmaringen, appointed in 1894, was a mere figurehead of what now amounted to unmitigated 'personal rule', not in constitutional terms, but in substance. It is not possible here to embark upon a detailed discussion of the various legislative projects originating with Wilhelm II personally during these years, notably the Zuchthausvorlage and its Prussian equivalent, the lex Arons; they all ended in total failure, and made the Emperor even more weary with the Reichstag than before. Matters came to a head in 1897 with the dispute over the introduction of a new military penal code in line with the principles of the time. The Emperor refused even

to consider allowing court proceedings to be opened to the public, in accordance with constitutional law. For once, Wilhelm II ran into stiff opposition from all his ministers, who had agreed beforehand not to give in this time. Nonetheless, the Emperor got away with his resistance to a modern military penal code in the end, at least in part.

In foreign affairs the situation was much the same. In December 1895, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Marschall, bitterly complained: 'Things are going badly with His Majesty. The monarch ought to have the last word, but H.M. always wants to have the first word, and this is a grave error.'[27] Marschall and Holstein were doing their best to restrain the monarch's rather emotional meddling in foreign affairs, but under the given circumstances nobody dared oppose him squarely. Instead, the ministers tried to render the Emperor's initiatives as harmless as possible. The famous telegram to Ohm Krüger on the occasion of the Jameson Raid is the most spectacular example of this. It is difficult to say to what degree Wilhelm's efforts at personal diplomacy did in fact interfere in substance with the conduct of foreign policy. Yet certainly his public declarations made Imperial Germany appear less respectable and reliable in international politics. It must be added, however, that in this, as in other cases, the Emperor's attitude, though certainly not prudent in diplomatic terms, was often in line with popular opinion — for example, when a wave of sympathy for the Boers swept through the German middle and upper-middle classes after the Jameson Raid.

His autocratic style of government notwithstanding, Wilhelm II was not a genuine conservative, and by 1901 conservative party politicians were no longer welcome at the court, since the monarch would not forgive them their opposition to various governmental projects, in particular the *Mittellandkanal*. Rather he was constantly in search of popular causes, or, more precisely, causes popular with the educated middle classes. He soon discovered world politics and the idea of building a large navy as projects potentially dear to the hearts of the German middle classes. In order to see these new policies taken up by the government and accepted by parliament he looked for new personalities not yet prepared to put up with the dead weight of the parliamentary process. Parliamentary proceedings had virtually come to a halt, because almost all parties distrusted the policies of His Majesty's government and were little inclined to support any new ventures.[28] It will have to be admitted that Wilhelm II, however much he was enshrined in a rather mediocre and

traditionalist entourage dominated by the military, sensed that the new imperialist nationalism would provide a first-rate opportunity for establishing himself as the nation's undisputed master who would lead it into a new future.

In Count Bülow and Tirpitz, Wilhelm eventually found two personalities who were willing to put his dreams into practice. The story of how Bülow was systematically built up as a future Chancellor largely through the skilful manipulations of Philipp Eulenburg, who for personal reasons enjoyed enormous influence with the Emperor, cannot be told in detail here. Suffice it to say that Bülow had recommended himself as 'Wilhelm's future chief-of-staff'; with him 'personal rule in the good sense would really begin'.[29] In 1897, Bülow was appointed Secretary for Foreign Affairs and three years later he succeeded Hohenlohe, having already been pulling the strings for years.

It is doubtful, however, whether Bülow, even in the first years of his government, was really anything more than Wilhelm II's tool who would implement the latter's policies dutifully in all respects, as he led the Emperor to believe. Bülow was convinced from the start that with an appeal to the nationalist emotions of the bourgeois classes the political fabric could be stabilized again, and he skilfully set out to do so by launching an ambitious imperialist programme. The Emperor was made the prime exponent of this new nationalist imperialism, not only because Bülow's political position largely depended upon Wilhelm's good will, but more particularly because the Chancellor hoped to make use of the imperial idea in domestic politics; the new 'Weltpolitik', with the Emperor as symbolic figure, was likely to rally the bourgeois classes behind the government once again. In order to exploit the imperial prestige of Wilhelm II, Bülow took care to avoid confrontations, even on minor issues with the monarch, while encouraging the latter to speak up in public in favour of the new imperialism and consider himself its spearhead. Initially, this strategy was rather successful; the appeal to national unity and the diversion of public attention to overseas policies, directly engaging the authority of the crown, did in some way stabilize the pseudo-constitutional political system; the bourgeois parties now found it far more difficult to oppose government policies. Initially, even the emerging New Right was prepared to support Bülow's policies, not least because they were presented as those of the Emperor, not just as those of the government. Furthermore, Bülow did everything in his power to manipulate the press in order to get the government's views

across to the public; the newly-established press bureau of the Foreign Office under Hamman did everything possible to establish cordial relations with the leading bourgeois newspapers. This, more than anything else, provided the Chancellor with an indirect leverage vis-à-vis Wilhelm II who, however much he was subject to rapidly changing moods and always good for unexpected decisions insinuated by third parties, was easily swayed in his views by public opinion.

For the time being, this strategy operated well; however, its long-term effects were less positive. For Bülow's strategy of flattering the Emperor whenever possible dangerously enhanced the latter's self-esteem, and this was bound to create problems in the longer term. In a way, Bülow succeeded in exploiting the monarch's passion for 'personal rule' in order to establish a new semi-populist style of government which cultivated the national feelings and the Germans' enthusiasm for the empire which seemingly embodied their desire for a strong, universally respected nation state. 'Personal rule' was informally institutionalized as the attractive face of a nationalist '*Weltpolitik*' primarily designed to impress the public at home. Accordingly Bülow's *Weltpolitik* tended to use pathetic and aggressive verbiage, whereas it lacked clearly defined objectives, neither was it conducted according to a long-term strategy.

In a way, German 'world politics' was not concerned with concrete territorial acquisitions at all, but only with the prestige associated with Imperial Germany's participation in all affairs concerning its overseas empire. Holstein for one doubted that colonial possessions overseas were of substantial value to Germany. Neither were the consequences of Tirpitz's naval policy, which demanded that all colonial ventures which might bring Imperial Germany into conflict with Great Britain ought to be postponed for the time being, correctly assessed by the government of the day. Wilhelm and his government rode successfully on the wave of a popular nationalism. Only slowly were the disastrous consequences of Bülow's foreign policy for Imperial Germany's international position recognized. The new nationalism, which had initially been encouraged by the government itself, soon turned against it; during the South-African War the government found itself in an awkward and rather unexpected position, as the public now demanded strong action in favour of the Boers.

Seen in this light, Wilhelm II bears only limited responsibility for the failure of Bülow's foreign policy. Admittedly, he did carry on

making ghastly, pompous speeches which were bound to offend friends and foes alike. His spectacular appeals to the west to join forces against the 'Yellow Peril' were perhaps the most problematic of all. But initially he had been encouraged by the government to do so, and for this reason little could be done to restrain him now.

Besides, some of the more spectacular failures of German foreign policy during these years, which traditionally appear as negative figures in the balance sheet of Wilhelm II's 'personal rule', had in fact been initiated by the government. The landing at Tangier in 1905 designed to bolster the prestige of the Khedive as sovereign ruler of Morocco, considered by contemporaries as a particularly spectacular piece of 'personal rule', had been Bülow's idea; only after long hesitation had Wilhelm II agreed to let himself be used in such a way by official foreign policy. Likewise the negotiation of the abortive Treaty of Bjorkoe in 1905 had been carried out in full accord with the Chancellor and the Foreign Office, who had thought it advisable to make use of the close dynastic ties between the Czar and the Emperor in order to conclude a German–Russian alliance, even though Russian professional diplomats were sceptical, if not opposed to such a venture from the start.[30] The theatrical coup of Bjorkoe was in part Wilhelm II's own idea, but there is no doubt that Bülow had fully supported this ambitious attempt to forge a continental alliance with Russia against Great Britain during the early stages of the Russo-Japanese war. The fact that the Emperor had conceded a minor modification of the text in order to make the agreement more palatable to Czar Alexander II was later used by Bülow as a rather flimsy pretext in order to dissociate the government from the Bjorkoe agreement, which seemed no longer practical.

However damaging the personal role of Wilhelm II in the diplomatic arena had been, it must be realized that at least in these two major instances of royal diplomacy the authority of the Emperor had been used by the government; only after things had gone wrong was the blame for its failure unfairly attributed to the Emperor's meddling in foreign affairs. The Emperor was naturally shocked when in 1906 he was reprimanded by Bülow on this count, in reaction to a resolution in the Reichstag condemning Wilhelm II's interference in foreign policy. He naturally believed such criticism largely unjustified. Two years later, however, things came to a momentous culmination point. Wilhelm II's self-confidence was severely shaken by the crisis known as the *Daily Telegraph* affair. Wilhelm II had agreed that his views on British–German relations which had been the

subject of several private conversations with Colonel Edward Stuart Wortley, an English country gentleman on whose estate, Highcliffe Castle in Surrey, Wilhelm had stayed privately after his visit to Windsor in 1907, were to be published in the form of a fictitious interview in the *Daily Telegraph*. This rather naive, though well-intentioned 'interview' was received in Britain with considerable irritation, mixed with amusement. But in Germany it caused a full-scale political storm. All the Reichstag parties condemned the Emperor's conduct, while Bülow, who had technically been responsible for failing to prevent publication of the article, preferred to stay on the sidelines rather than face the public outcry, thereby letting Wilhelm down badly. Initially it was almost unanimously demanded that the constitution be changed in order to forestall such events once and for all in the future; but the eventual result of the crisis was nil. None of the parties, with the exception of the Social Democrats and the Liberal Left, dared to push for a formal restriction of the prerogatives of the crown and the introduction of full parliamentary responsibility of the government. They were eventually content with Bülow's mere verbal promise that the Emperor would henceforth keep within the limits of constitutional law. Together with the Eulenburg trial, the *Daily Telegraph* affair had a lasting effect on Wilhelm II. He no longer dared to meddle in domestic or foreign policy with the same degree of self-righteousness which had been so typical of him hitherto. On the other hand, Wilhelm II came to distrust the idea of constitutional reform more than ever before; certainly he was not prepared to have his royal prerogatives restricted any further.

In the last years before the first world war, the Emperor's public appearances became less frequent and he no longer interfered with policies in the same manner as before. To some degree Bethmann Hollweg, assisted by von Valentini and Admiral von Müller, the secretaries of Wilhelm II's 'personal cabinet', managed to restrain the Emperor's natural inclination to meddle in diplomatic affairs and to voice his own views on political issues publicly. On the other hand, Bethmann Hollweg took care to heed the dynastic preferences of Wilhelm II, in particular on the Balkans, whenever possible. Wilhelm's idea of creating a bulwark against the alleged Panslavic danger by forging an alliance with Turkey, Romania and Greece was taken up by the Foreign Office, even though it was at variance with Austro-Hungarian policy which set its hopes on a close collaboration with Bulgaria, the loser in the Second Balkan War.

During these years, dynastic wishes played an insignificant role in the formation of German foreign policy. By now the Emperor could no longer be considered a dynamic force in German politics. His primary concern was to defend the last bastion of royal influence against the onslaught of democracy and the alleged socialist danger, namely the privileged position of the military establishment in German society. This, however, was bound to have grave consequences, given the fact that the differences between the so-called 'civilian government' and the military establishment over rearmament and the conduct of foreign policy in general became more marked than ever. The growing tensions between the military authorities on the one hand and Bethmann Hollweg and his advisers on the other coincided with an increasing polarization of the political spectrum both inside and outside parliament. The second Moroccan crisis in 1911 had been widely considered in Germany as a shameful retreat by Imperial Germany under British and French pressure, and had caused a new upsurge of nationalist agitation. The Reichstag elections of 1912 made things worse, as they resulted in a substantial shift to the left. The government now had to soldier on without any reliable majority.

Under such circumstances, the constitutional function of the Emperor as arbiter between the different factions within the governmental machinery was more important than ever. Again and again the naval authorities or the General Staff tried to outmanoeuvre the government by enlisting the support of the Emperor for their own policies, but Wilhelm II was quite unable to keep them in check, even if he had wanted to. This may be illustrated by referring to a number of instances in which conflicts of this nature emerged: the second Moroccan crisis of 1911; the negotiations with Lord Haldane in the spring of 1912 regarding a reduction of naval armaments and an Anglo-German rapprochement; the so-called War Council of 8 December 1912; and last but not least, Wilhelm's II role in the fatal decisions which led to the outbreak of the first world war in July 1914.

During the second Moroccan crisis, Wilhelm II had taken a rather moderate line. He objected from the start to the idea of even considering the acquisition of Moroccan territory by Imperial Germany. In principle he did not wish to challenge French paramountcy in Morocco, possibly in view of his fairly good relations with Krupp, who was a partner in a Franco-German commercial group operating jointly in Morocco (and therefore not interested in any change in Morocco's political status). Only with considerable

reluctance did the Emperor allow Kiderlen-Wächter to go ahead with his ambitious diplomatic plan, according to which the French were to be pressurized into conceding the French Congo in exchange for German acquiescence to their paramount position in Morocco. Eventually Kiderlen-Wächter's strategy failed badly. Popular disappointment with the outcome of this affair was high, partly due to the inflated expectations which had been nursed by a skilful manipulation of public opinion, a game in which even the Pan-German League had been allowed to play a part. The popular outcry was in part directed against Wilhelm II personally; many people, among them Moltke and Falkenhayn, blamed the Emperor for his alleged timidity, as he seemed to have made Germany climb down when things became really rough.

The negotiations with Great Britain early in 1912, in which the Germans hoped to trade in a neutrality agreement, however muted, for a reduction of naval armaments, were conducted by Wilhelm II with very high expectations. He flattered himself that on the occasion of Lord Haldane's visit to Berlin in early February 1912, he had talked the British Secretary of War into full consensus about a far-reaching political agreement between the two countries. When he learned that the British government was not in the least prepared to accept these proposals as a basis for further negotiations, let alone to consider them as the basis for an agreement, he reacted violently, taking it as a personal affront. This rather unfortunate piece of personal diplomacy was, however, not as much of Wilhelm's own making as he himself believed. In fact, both the warring parties, that is Bethmann Hollweg and the Foreign Office on the one hand, and Tirpitz and the Reichsmarineamt on the other, had hoped that they would get their way by personally engaging Wilhelm II. The Wilhelmstrasse acted upon the assumption, not entirely without justification, that the Emperor would be carried along with them, once concrete talks about a political agreement of some sort with Britain really got under way, even though he would then have to make substantial concessions on the naval issue. Accordingly, they were rather disappointed when they learnt that Haldane had not put the British position to Wilhelm II with the utmost rigour, thus allowing the Emperor to get away with what he considered a major diplomatic victory. During the talks, Wilhelm had largely supported Tirpitz's position, in the mistaken assumption that a mere reduction of the speed of naval construction would be a sufficient quid pro quo for a political agreement coming close to a neutrality agreement with

Great Britain. This was a typical case of dynastic diplomacy and yet, given the calculations of the rivalling factions within the governmental machinery, it cannot, under the circumstances, be attributed to Wilhelm's craving for 'personal rule'. Rather it amounted to the partial abdication of statecraft in a situation of almost insoluble dissent between the civilian government and the naval authorities of Imperial Germany over general policies vis-à-vis Great Britain. This was in fact a classic case in which 'personal rule' was used by competing power groupings within the Imperial policy élite, and not a case of Wilhelm II's alleged 'personal diplomacy'.

Although in this particular instance the Emperor was deeply offended by what he considered foul play on the part of the British (being totally unable to see the British point of view in these matters), he continued to favour an Anglo-German rapprochement. Largely for this reason, he loyally supported the anglophile government of Bethmann Hollweg against mounting opposition from conservative quarters, notably the military establishment. Admittedly he had rather simplistic views on Anglo-German relations which, for understandable reasons, Bethmann Hollweg was little inclined to rectify.

Early in December 1912, when the Balkan Crisis was at its peak, the British government sent a formal warning to Berlin, stating that if there were a general war involving France, caused by inconsiderate German support of an intransigent Austria-Hungary, Britain would not be able to remain neutral. Wilhelm II panicked. He summoned his supreme military leaders to a 'crisis conference' on 8 December 1912, without consultation with or even prior notification of Bethmann Hollweg and Kiderlen-Wächter. This conference has been the subject of considerable controversy amongst historians ever since Walter Görlitz published an abbreviated version of von Müller's account of its proceedings in the 1960s.[31] We know fairly well what happened, but there is disagreement about the evaluation of the events and their immediate consequences. Wilhelm II, Tirpitz, Moltke and von Müller had discussed the eventuality, even the likelihood of a general war. Moltke clearly opted for a preventative war 'the sooner the better', on the grounds that the strategic position of the central powers was deteriorating. Tirpitz, on the other hand, pleaded for at least a year-and-a-half's further delay. In the end, the Emperor and his supreme military commanders did not arrive at a concrete decision. Fritz Fischer, John Röhl and more recently Bernd Schulte, have argued that Wilhelm II and his military advisers had decided to

prepare the country systematically for a European war to be launched at the first convenient opportunity and to prepare the public immediately for a major war.[32] Other historians maintain that the 'Crisis Conference' amounted to little more than another storm in a teacup, of the sort which occurred frequently at the Imperial court and were usually of little consequence.[33] If the former assumption were true, then this would have to be considered as a major instance of 'personal rule', since neither the Chancellor nor the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs were consulted. Indeed, neither Bethmann Hollweg nor Jagow were ever officially informed about the conference, and it was only with considerable delay that they were told that it was the Emperor's view that the government should do something to make the German public aware that a European war in support of Austria-Hungary's Balkan policies, which appeared to be imminent, would certainly be in Germany's national interest.[34]

In fact, this so-called War Council or, as Schulte would have it, 'Crisis Conference' did not lead to a large-scale official campaign to prepare the public for a major European war, either an imminent one, or one to be launched at a later stage; neither was it the starting- point for systematically putting the country onto a war footing.[35] Rather the conference produced no consistent policy decisions at all. Nonetheless, it had far-reaching repercussions. It revealed that there was an influential faction within the ruling élite which considered a major European war inevitable sooner or later, and seriously contemplated the idea of a preventative war — being, as the General Staff argued, the only viable solution to Imperial Germany's strategic dilemma, caused by the re-emergence of Czarist Russia as a great military power closely allied to France. Furthermore, the last remnants of resistance to a far-reaching increase of the army, which had been under discussion since October 1912, were overcome. The reluctance of Heeringen, the Minister of War, as regards a new enlargement of the army which would endanger its internal cohesion and strict royalist orientation, was finally overcome by the personal intervention of Wilhelm II. In this case, however, the Emperor was acting as a catalyst rather than an innovating force. A policy of re-armament enjoyed considerable support in German society, notably among the upper-middle classes. On the other hand, by the ill-advised and nervous convocation of a 'War Council', the exemption of the decisions of military authorities from governmental control was corroborated once more.

Wilhelm II was, in fact, no warmonger, neither in December 1912 nor later, as is borne out by his repeated intervention in favour of moderation in 1913 and 1914, his frequent aggressive statements to members of his entourage and foreign diplomats or heads of foreign governments notwithstanding. Late in 1913, for instance, General Gebsattel presented a memorandum to the Emperor, forwarded to the latter through the Crown Prince, who was known to be closely associated with right-wing circles. In this memorandum, Gebsattel demanded that Bethmann Hollweg be replaced by Tirpitz, and pleaded for a preventative war, as the deteriorating international situation would allow no other solution. Wilhelm II acted fully in line with constitutional practice. After consulting Bethmann Hollweg, he refused to contemplate the idea of a preventative war. The Crown Prince was reprimanded for having given Gebsattel access to the Emperor, as well as for lending support in public to the Pan-German League.[36]

However, there can be no doubt that by 1912 Wilhelm II was swept along by the current of public opinion which assumed that a European war was not only inevitable but in the offing. He agreed with the more radical elements of German public opinion who argued in a social-Darwinian fashion that a world historical confrontation between the Slav and Teutonic peoples was on the cards. His conclusion from the press feud in German and Russian newspapers in May/June 1914 was totally at variance with the assessment of his own diplomats: 'As a military expert I have not the slightest doubt . . . that Russia is systematically preparing for war against us; I conduct my policy accordingly.'[37]

However, as a matter of fact, Wilhelm was by no means so sure about the imminence of a European war. As late as 21 June 1914, he consulted his friend Warburg as to whether, in view of Russia's alleged preparations for war, 'it would not be better to attack rather than to wait', and even though we do not know the latter's answer, it certainly was in favour of peace.[38] Neither did the Emperor support Moltke's plea for a preventative war. Right up to the very last he vacillated between the 'hawks' and the 'doves', though it can be safely assumed that his entourage sided with Moltke. It seems that Wilhelm favoured a swift Austrian military action against Serbia, not least on personal grounds (only a fortnight before he had been the guest of Francis Ferdinand at Konopicht!). But he apparently assumed initially that this would not necessarily lead to a major European war. It is most likely that he was never fully informed about the

Machiavellian calculations of Bethmann Hollweg, Jagow and Riezler which determined the course of German diplomacy in July 1914. In any case, the Emperor was but one factor among many which eventually made Bethmann Hollweg opt for the policy of backing Austria-Hungary's action against Serbia, as recommended by the 'hawks', as a test case of whether Russia was prepared to go to war sooner or later.

After the outbreak of war, Wilhelm II immediately transferred his prerogatives as supreme commander of Imperial Germany's armed forces to the Chief of the General Staff; in this respect he proved totally incapable of fulfilling the role assigned to him by the constitution. During the first world war, the Emperor almost completely withdrew from active participation in politics. This was indirectly supported by the Empress who demanded from the authorities that her husband be spared the distressing news from the front, which he could not master mentally. His regular visits to Supreme Headquarters were largely ceremonial; he never interfered with the conduct of military operations. Besides, in co-operation with the Chief of the Zivilkabinett, von Valentini, Bethmann Hollweg largely succeeded in controlling access by third parties to the Emperor. All the same, numerous attempts were made to enlist Wilhelm II's personal support behind the back of the Chancellor for specific political objectives, notably extreme war aims, but their impact was negligible. The only instance in which Wilhelm II was forced onto the political arena was the bitter quarrel about the issue of whether Imperial Germany should take recourse to unrestricted submarine warfare which arose in March 1916. In spite of Tirpitz's and Falkenhayn's plans for submarine warfare, the Emperor by and large supported the policies of Bethmann Hollweg, in view of the danger that the United States would then join the Allied Powers. On the other hand, Bethmann Hollweg found it very difficult to obtain Wilhelm II's approval to have Falkenhayn replaced by Hindenburg and Ludendorff after the Chancellor had lost confidence in Falkenhayn's military judgement following the disastrous failure of the Verdun campaign late in 1916.[39] But on the whole, Wilhelm II no longer meddled in day-to-day affairs.

The Emperor sadly failed in what was, according to the Imperial constitution, his prime duty, namely to mediate between the political and the military authorities. A stronger and more determined personality might have spared Imperial Germany the strife about unrestricted submarine warfare which was allowed to drag on for

many months. More serious was that the Emperor proved unable to restrain Ludendorff and Hindenburg when they began to interfere directly in domestic politics; largely due to their machinations Bethmann Hollweg was dismissed in July 1917. In the ensuing conflict with the Supreme Command about almost all major political issues, the 'civilian government' could no longer rely on the support of the crown. After Valentini had been dismissed at the behest of Ludendorff early in 1917, Hindenburg and Ludendorff were able to dictate to the Emperor even major personal decisions. The political vacuum at the centre of German politics which had been created by the inability and ineffectiveness of Wilhelm II in exercising his constitutional functions was then filled by the informal 'dictatorship' of the Supreme Headquarters. A special staff section at the Supreme Headquarters under Colonel Bauer now sought to control domestic policies on an ever-increasing scale in order to maximize Germany's war effort. The Supreme Command regarded a victorious peace associated with large-scale annexations and financial reparations to be the only acceptable outcome of the war; it assumed that in the event of a negotiated peace, let alone military defeat, neither the privileged status of the officer corps, nor the monarchy, nor the social fabric, would survive.

The military war policies of Imperial Germany eventually collapsed in November 1918 under the onslaught of mounting mass protests by soldiers, sailors, and workers alike. Within days this protest turned into a political revolution, which in its initial stage was directed solely against the military authorities, and, in the second place, against Wilhelm II himself, who was widely believed to stand in the way of immediate peace negotiations. Wilhelm II was incapable of facing reality; he fled from Berlin to the homely environment of the Supreme Headquarters at Spa, and failed to understand that the only thing to do in order to avoid the worst and to rescue the monarchy as an institution, would have been to resign immediately. A proud and ambitious ruler thus ended his reign in utter disdain and complete degradation.

Wilhelm II was not the strong personality that he paraded in front of his entourage and the public. His pathetic statements were not mere empty phrases, but to a large degree were intended to hide the weakness of his personality. He certainly was not fit to fulfil the functions assigned to the Emperor within the constitutional system of Imperial Germany. From the start, the statesmen and generals had been fully aware of the Emperor's deficiencies. Why then did they

never try to see Wilhelm II replaced by the Crown Prince, or his influence restricted to a ceremonial role? Why instead did they work hard to play down or to cover up the fatal consequences of Wilhelm II's 'personal rule'? Certainly they were not afraid to oppose Wilhelm II. Rather, they wished to maintain and to exploit the Imperial idea so popular with the public, regardless of the personal deficiencies of its present holder, in order to have the given system of power preserved in the face of the rising tide of democracy. In fact, the different groupings among the German ruling élites found it quite convenient to mobilize the Emperor's support in order to gain the public's acceptance of their own political objectives. In spite of his grand postures, the Emperor could be easily manipulated for particular political objectives, if this was done skilfully and with due respect for his personal preferences and inclinations. Besides, it did not seem advisable to fiddle with the institution of the Imperial monarchy and to infringe upon the traditional prerogatives of the crown, as this would have played, so they believed, into the hands of their democratic adversaries. Rather, the prestige of the institution of the *Kaisertum* ought to be used in order to forestall further advances of the democratic forces, and in particular the Social Democrats, in spite of the shortcomings of its present holder.

The monarchy, as a symbol of stability, order and grandeur, was immensely popular; few people wished to do without it or seriously to reduce its standing. Furthermore, in many ways Wilhelm II stood for popular causes, however extreme the language in which he sometimes presented them. His views usually corresponded to the dominant currents in public opinion, for instance his views on a battle fleet, on world politics, on national grandeur, his engagement for the promotion of the sciences, his ambivalent attitude towards the British, to mention but a few. In the last resort it was the semi-constitutional system of Imperial Germany which made it possible for this weak, emotionally unstable personality, who often could not distinguish between wishful dreams and reality, to exercise an influence which far exceeded his capability of conducting public affairs in a proper and rational manner.

Wilhelm II's 'personal rule' resulted above all in a lack of co-ordination of policies, and the more so the more time went on. But perhaps worse than that, it led to a dilution of political responsibility. This was aggravated by the fact that the Imperial government was confronted with public pressures of various sorts, in particular a new, aggressive nationalism which engulfed the lower middle classes and

parts of the intelligentsia. Wilhelm II himself was known for his inclination to succumb to wishful thinking; in many ways he was a symbol of what may be considered a general feature of Wilhelmine Germany in the last decade before the first world war, namely the loss of a sense of reality.

Compared with these long-term effects of 'personal rule', Wilhelm II's actual influence on political decision-making was comparatively unimportant. His personal impact on the course of German foreign policy must not be overestimated, particularly as after 1908 his influence on policy-making gradually diminished. On the other hand, the Emperor's influence tilted the fragile internal power balance, however slightly, in favour of the military against the 'civilian' authorities, although the general trend of the time pointed the other way. Wilhelm II was less of a conservative than one might have thought, given his authoritarian views on how to run the government and in particular on how to deal with the Social Democrats. Things worked out so badly largely because the Emperor tended all too willingly to identify with the political views fashionable among the upper middle classes and the intelligentsia. He did little to alleviate the complaints of the conservatives that they were losing their battle against the tide of democracy. Certainly in the last years before the first world war the Conservative Party had come under considerable pressure; the Prussian conservatives believed themselves to be in a beleaguered position, and they were aware of the fact that time was working against them. All in all, Wilhelm II — with his ideals as well as his prejudices and faults — had more in common with the German people than was acknowledged at the time or even today. In a final assessment, it has to be said that it was the insufficiencies of the political system and the authoritarian political culture in Germany which must be blamed for the disastrous consequences of Wilhelm II's reign.

## Notes

1. John C.G. Röhl, 'Der "Konigsmechanismus" im Kaiserreich' in *Historische Zeitschrift*, vol. 236, 539–77; now included in John C.G. Röhl, *Kaiser, Hof und Staat. Wilhelm II und die deutsche Politik* (Munich 1987), in particular 118f.

2. 'The Kaiser and German *Weltpolitik*: Reflections on Wilhelm II's place in the making of German foreign policy' in John C.G. Röhl and Nicolaus Sombart (eds.), *Kaiser Wilhelm II. New Interpretations. The Corfu Papers* (Cambridge, MA 1982), 143–69.

3. John C.G. Röhl (ed.), *Philipp Eulenburgs Politische Korrespondenz*, 3 vols. (Boppard 1981–83).

4. Isabel V. Hull, *The Entourage of Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1888–1918* (Cambridge 1982).

5. He presented his case for a reassessment of the role of Wilhelm II as autocratic ruler forcefully in a collection of essays, *Kaiser, Hof und Staat* (see note 1). John Röhl is preparing a new biography of Wilhelm II.

6. Lamar Cecil, *Wilhelm II: Prince and Emperor, 1859–1900* (Chapel Hill 1989).

7. See, for instance, Frauendienst's textbook presentation 'Das Deutsche Reich von 1890–1909' in Leo Just (ed.), *Handbuch der deutschen Geschichte* (Frankfurt 1972); also Werner Frauendienst, 'Demokratisierung des deutschen Konstitutionalismus in der Zeit Wilhelms II' in *Zeitschrift für die gesammte Staatswissenschaft*, vol. 113 (1957), 721–46.

8. Erich Eyck, *Das persönliche Regiment Kaiser Wilhelms II. Politische Geschichte des Deutschen Kaiserreichs von 1890 bis 1914* (Erlenbach, Zürich 1948).

9. Fritz Hartung, *Das persönliche Regiment Wilhelms II. Sitzungsberichte der deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, No. 3 (1952); Ernst Rudolf Huber, 'Das persönliche Regiment Wilhelms II' in *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, vol. 3 (1951), 134–48.

10. Ernst Rudolf Huber, *Deutsche Verfassungsgeschichte*, vol. IV (Stuttgart 1969), 332–47.

11. Letter to Friedrich Naumann, 12 November 1908, *Max Weber Gesamtangabe II, 4, Briefe 1906–1908*, ed. M. Rainer Lepsius and Wolfgang J. Mommsen (Tübingen 1990), 694.

12. Thomas A. Kohut, 'Kaiser Wilhelm II and his parents: an inquiry into the psychological roots of German policy towards England before the First World War' in *Kaiser Wilhelm II. New Interpretations*, op.cit., 77–9.

13. Röhl, *Kaiser, Hof und Staat*, op.cit., 29–33.

14. Rudolf Vierhaus (ed.), *Das Tagebuch der Baronin Spitzemberg, geb. Freiin von Varnbühler. Aufzeichnungen aus der Hofgesellschaft des Hohenzollernreichs* (Göttingen 1976[4]), 496–7; cf. 20.11.1899, Hohenlohe an Grossherzog Friedrich in Walter Peter Fuchs (ed.), *Grossherzog Friedrich I. von Baden und die Reichspolitik 1871–1907*, vol. 4 (Stuttgart 1980), 203–4 and 31.3.1901, Grossherzog Friedrich an Bülow in ibid., 301–2.

15. Letter to Friedrich Naumann, 14 December 1906, *Gesammelte Politische Schriften*, op.cit., 452.

16. On this point see Wolfgang J. Mommsen, 'Die latente Krise des Wilhelminischen Reiches' in *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen*, vol. 1 (1974), 7–28.

17. Cf. Wolfgang J. Mommsen, 'Domestic Factors in Imperial German Policy before 1914' in James Sheehan (ed.), *Imperial Germany* (New York 1976), 244–5.

18. December 30, 1901, *Grosse Politik der europäischen Kabinette*, vol. 17, 111.

19. See Röhl, *Kaiser, Hof und Staat*, op.cit., 126–8 and passim.

20. Isabel V. Hull, *The Entourage of Kaiser Wilhelm II*, op.cit., 304–5.

21. A good example is the way in which Bethmann Hollweg, after months of intrigue, finally convinced Wilhelm II to give Hindenburg and Ludendorff the supreme command in the East against Falkenhayn's wishes. See Karl-Heinz Janssen, *Der Kanzler und der General. Die Führungskrise um Bethmann Hollweg und Falkenhayn (1914–1916)* (Göttingen 1967), 214–37.

22. See Bernhard vom Brocke, 'Hochschul- und Wissenschaftspolitik in Preussen und im Deutschen Kaiserreich 1882–1907: Das "System Althoff"' in Peter Baumgart (ed.), *Bildungspolitik in Preussen zur Zeit des Kaiserreichs* (Stuttgart 1980), 9–118.

23. Cf. Wolfgang J. Mommsen, 'Kultur und Politik im Deutschen Kaiserreich' in idem, *Der autoritäre Nationalstaat. Politik, Gesellschaft und Kultur im deutschen Kaiserreich* (Frankfurt 1990, forthcoming).

24. See Kurt Richter, *Der Kampf um den Schulgesetzentwurf des Grafen Zedlitz-Trützschler vom Jahre 1892. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der inneren Politik des 'Neuen Kurses' und zur Parteigeschichte* (Halle 1934), 87–9.

25. Ibid., 93–4.

26. *Philipp Eulenburgs Politische Korrespondenz*, vol. II, 1156.

27. John C.G. Röhl, *Germany without Bismarck* (London 1967), 161.

28. At the time this was a view commonly held among the ruling élite. See, for instance, *Das Tagebuch der Baronin Spitzemberg*, op.cit., entry for 30 October 1908, 489: 'Der Kaiser ruiniert unsere politische Stellung und macht uns zum Gespött der Welt [. . . ]'.

29. The details are given in Röhl, *Germany without Bismarck*, op.cit., 175ff. The famous declaration of Bülow's in a letter to Eulenburg dated 23 July 1886 in *Philipp Eulenburgs Politische Korrespondenz*, vol. II, 1714–5.

30. For this and the following, see Barbara Vogel, *Deutsche Russlandpolitik. Das Scheitern der deutschen Weltpolitik unter Bülow 1900–1906* (Düsseldorf 1973), 107ff.

31. Walther Görlitz (ed.), *Der Kaiser. Aufzeichnungen des Chefs des kaiserlichen Marinekabinetts Georg Alexander von Müller über die Ära Wilhelms II* (Göttingen 1965), 124–7; for important passages omitted by Görlitz, see John C.G. Röhl, 'Admiral von Müller and the Approach to War 1912–1914' in *Historical Journal*, vol. XII (1966), 651–89. The full text of the conference appears in John C.G. Röhl, 'An der Schwelle zum Weltkrieg. Eine Dokumentation über den "Kriegsrat" vom 8. Dezember 1912' in *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen*, vol. 21 (1977), 100.

32. See Fritz Fischer, *Krieg der Illusionen. Die deutsche Politik von 1911 bis 1914* (Düsseldorf 1969), 231–5; John C.G. Röhl, 'An der Schwelle zum Weltkrieg', op. cit., 77–80; idem, 'Die Generalprobe. Zur Geschichte und Bedeutung des "Kriegsrates" vom 8. Dezember 1912' in Dirk Stegmann, Bernd Jürgen Wendt and Peter-Christian Witt (eds), *Industrielle Gesellschaft und politisches System. Beiträge zur politischen Sozialgeschichte* (Bonn 1978), 366ff.; Bernd F. Schulte, *Vor dem Kriegsausbruch 1914. Deutschland, die Türkei und der Balkan* (Düsseldorf 1980), 77–80, 86–93, though with inconclusive evidence. The papers of Kapitän Albert Hoopmann, 'Kaiserliche Marine und Kriegsausbruch' ed. by Wilhelm Deist in *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen 1* (1970) also support the view that there was no deliberate planning for war in 1913 and 1914, although there was an increasing inclination to consider an early war as a solution to Imperial Germany's external and internal problems.

33. See Wolfgang J. Mommsen, 'The Topos of Inevitable War' in Volker R. Berghahn and Martin Kitchen (eds), *Germany in the Age of Total War* (London 1981), 33–4.

34. See the letter from Admiral von Müller to Bethmann Hollweg of 8 December 1912 in Röhl, 'An der Schwelle zum Weltkrieg', op.cit., 100.

35. See Mommsen, 'The Topos of Inevitable War', op.cit., 34.

36. Documented by Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann in H. Pogge von Strandmann,

Immanuel Geiss, *Die Erforderlichkeit des Unmöglichen. Deutschland am Vorabend des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Frankfurt 1965), 15–26.

37. *Grosse Politik der europäischen Kabinette*, vol. 39, 554.

38. Cf. Alfred Vagts, 'M. M. Marburg & Co. Ein Bankhaus in der deutschen Weltpolitik' in *Vierteljahrsschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, vol. 45 (1958), 353.

39. See Janssen, *Der Kanzler und der General*, op. cit., 244–51.

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