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THE VIEW FROM THE THRONE: THE PERSONAL RULE OF KAISER WILHELM II

Philipp Eulenburgs Politische Korrespondenz.

Band I. Von der Reichsgründung bis zum Neuen Kurs 1866–1891. Edited by John C. G. Röhl. Boppard am Rhein: Harald Boldt Verlag, 1976. Pp. viii + 740.

Band II. Im Brennpunkt der Regierungskrise 1892–1895. Edited by John C. G. Röhl. Boppard am Rhein: Harald Boldt Verlag, 1979. Pp. xx + 723.

Band III. Krisen, Krieg und Katastrophen 1895–1921. Edited by John C. G. Röhl. Boppard am Rhein: Harald Boldt Verlag, 1983. Pp. xx + 918.

I

It has been generally agreed that Kaiser Wilhelm II was impressionable, volatile, and highly unstable. His personality defects made him incapable of managing Imperial Germany's extremely complex policy-making machinery. Moreover, his own political commitments were never particularly coherent and his involvement became increasingly sporadic during the course of his reign, being characterized when it occurred by a 'spontaneous, well-meant, but undiplomatic and unpolitical effusion'.[1] Largely on a foundation of memoir material and biographical work produced between the wars, which we now know to have borne a very loose and disingenuous relationship to the private papers on which it purported to be based,[2] a picture of the Kaiser's personality was built up which became a central feature of the prevailing interpretations of the German government system. Before moving directly to a discussion of John Röhl's work, it is worth saying a few words about this longer context.

There were perhaps two main directions to the older literature. The first, which has largely dominated Anglo-American writing, saw Wilhelm II's intermittent incursions into the decision-making process as essentially irrational. Given the Kaiser-King's large endowment of constitutional authority, such interventions

[1] Bernhard von Bülow, *Memoirs 1903–1909* (London, 1931), p. 118.

[2] E.g. compare the view of Philipp Eulenburg in Johannes Haller, *Aus dem Leben des Fürsten Philipp zu Eulenburg* (Berlin, 1924), with the material presented in John C. G. Röhl, *Germany without Bismarck* (London, 1967), and for a commentary on the reliability of the Bülow memoirs, see Friedrich Freiherr Hiller von Gaertringen, *Fürst Bülows Denkwürdigkeiten* (Tübingen, 1956). Röhl has published revealing commentaries on the doctoring of memoirs and diaries to meet the apologetic exigencies of the situation Imperial statesmen found themselves in after the collapse of 1918, exigencies which continued to be felt long after those immediate circumstances had past, in some cases right up to the present. For discussion of the latest example: Fritz Fischer, *Juli 1914: Wir sind nicht hineingeschlittert. Das Staatsgeheimnis um die Riezler-Tagebücher. Eine Streitschrift* (Hamburg, 1983); Berndt Sösemann, 'Die Tagebücher Karl Riezlers. Untersuchungen zu ihrer Echtheit und Edition', in *Historische Zeitschrift*, CCXXXVI (1983), 327–69; Karl-Dietrich Erdmann, 'Zur Echtheit der Tagebücher Karl Riezlers. Eine Antikritik', loc. cit. pp. 347–402.

represented a disruptive factor in a governing system that was already confused by inadequate constitutional channels between the civil and military powers, between executive and legislature, Kaiser and Chancellor, Reich and Prussia. This is thought to have been particularly deleterious to the proper conduct of government in the sphere of foreign policy. Within this framework, Bülow's claim that 'the pivotal point of my internal and foreign troubles was . . . the personality of the Kaiser' has tended to be accepted.[3] In one of the classic accounts of pre-1914 diplomatic history, for example, the Kruger telegram of January 1896 is described as the product of precisely this kind of irrational intervention. Wilhelm II's desire for practical solidarity with the Transvaal in the aftermath of the Jameson Raid departed from all diplomatic and strategic reality, and 'the contemporary evidence shows that the Emperor was suffering at the time from something very close to hysteria'.[4] Here is Gordon Craig's more recent account:

> William II was at this time not at his best, for the dispute over the Military Justice Bill was at its height and on New Year's Day he had had a discussion with the War Minister that reached such a degree of hysterical acrimony that Bronsart told Hohenlohe that he believed the sovereign was mentally unbalanced. It was while he was in this emotional state that the Emperor heard of Jameson's raid, and it is perhaps understandable that his reaction should have been violent. But even his ministers and military and naval aides were astonished and aghast as they listened to the fantasies that poured from their master's lips – schemes for extending a German protectorate over the Transvaal, of sending troops to South Africa, and, in a mysterious way, of fighting a localized war against the British that would not extend to the seas or affect the European situation – and it was only to prevent the possibility of more drastic action that Marschall agreed to the dispatching of the telegram from the Emperor to the President of the Transvaal.[5]

This instability undermined both the Kaiser's own capacity for government and the overall workability of the system. A. J. P. Taylor answered the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister Leopold von Berchtold's ironic question, 'Who rules then in Berlin?', with the conclusion, 'no one', and certainly not the Kaiser.[6]

The second line of interpretation incorporates the same view of the Kaiser's personality, but to these personal limitations are added others of a political kind, which are thought to have constrained the practical possibilities for any genuine exercise of untrammelled governing authority on the part of the single ruler. Despite the bluster of Wilhelm II and the trumpeting of Hohenzollern dynasticism, therefore, the constitutional scope for monarchical absolutism was consistently militated against by the demands of a complex modern society and the obligations it imposed on government for the representation of socio-economic interests. Though the unreformed 1871 Constitution still allowed the Kaiser latitude for disruption, the practice of government was defined more and more by the logic of managing a modern pluralist society – resolving social conflicts, regulating the economy, developing a modern fiscal apparatus, meeting the needs of social administration in an urban industrial society, and responding to the pressures of the interest groups and parties in the Reichstag. In the 1950s this kind of analysis had a definite apologetic ring to it, playing down the authoritarian roots of National Socialism in Imperial Germany, and suggesting that the governing system was well on the way

[3] Bülow, *Memoirs 1903–1909*, p. 82.

[4] William L. Langer, *The diplomacy of imperialism, 1890–1902* (New York, 1935), I, 235.

[5] Gordon Craig, *Germany, 1866–1945* (Oxford, 1978), p. 246.

[6] A. J. P. Taylor, 'The ruler in Berlin', in *Europe: grandeur and decline* (Harmondsworth, 1967), p. 158.

to 'parliamentarization' before the First World War intervened.[7] In this view, the Kaiser's interventions, in the form of marginalia to documents, public speeches, extravagant indiscretions, and occasional participation in the formal executive process, assume a rhetorical rather than a political significance.[8] The real sources of power were elsewhere.

Despite the successful efforts of the Western Allies to demonize Wilhelm II during and immediately after the First World War, therefore, the general tendency after 1945 was definitely to discount his positive political importance (as opposed to his negative political effects). A lone dissenting voice – Erich Eyck's *Das persönliche Regiment Wilhelms II* (Zürich, 1948) – did little to dent the orthodoxy, and Eyck's contention that the Kaiser really ruled met with general scepticism. There was and could be no personal rule in the Germany of Wilhelm II: his personality militated against it, as did the constitutional and political realities of the Prusso-German Reich. All of this made the appearance of John Röhl's *Germany without Bismarck. The Crisis of Government in the Second Reich, 1890–1900* (London, 1967) such a striking departure. It is important to remember the pioneering status of Röhl's intervention. He was virtually the first person to take advantage of the rich official and private documentary holdings for the Wilhelmine period in the central and regional archives of East and West Germany – after the energizing effects of Fritz Fischer's research on the First World War, but before the first major rush of monographs in the late sixties and early seventies.[9] Röhl's book set a new standard of archival scholarship for work on Wilhelmine political history, and provided an exciting glimpse of research possibilities for younger generations of graduate students.[10]

[7] See e.g. Werner Frauendienst, 'Die Demokratisierung des deutschen Konstitutionalismus in der Zeit Wilhelms II', in *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Staatswissenschaft*, CXIII (1957), 721–46. The incipient pluralism of German society before 1914 was a common theme of writing in the 1950s and early 1960s, even where the explicit parliamentarization thesis was not embraced. E.g. it was very much a part of Gerhard A. Ritter's analysis of the labour movement in the 1890s. It was also implied by some of the earlier work on the problem of the pressure groups in the German political system, until this feature was latched on to as evidence of reactionary corporatism and plebiscitary manipulation in the wake of the Fischer controversy. See Ritter, *Die Arbeiterbewegung im Wilhelminischen Reich* (Berlin, 1959), and compare Gerhard Schulz, 'Über Entstehung und Formen von Interessengruppen in Deutschland seit Beginn der Industrialisierung', in *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, II (1961–2), 124–54, and Wolfram Fischer, 'Staatsverwaltung und Interessenverbände im Deutschen Reich, 1871–1914', in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft im Zeitalter der Industrialisierung* (Göttingen, 1972; orig. pub. 1967), pp. 194–213, with Hans-Jürgen Puhle, 'Parlament, Parteien und Interessenverbände, 1890–1914', in Michael Stürmer (ed.), *Das kaiserliche Deutschland* (Düsseldorf, 1970), pp. 340–77.

[8] Fritz Hartung, 'Das persönliche Regiment Kaiser Wilhelms II', in *Sitzungsberichte der Deutschen Akademie zu Berlin* (1952), p. 15 and passim.

[9] There is not space to burden these footnotes with complete references. Fischer's own book was published in 1961, and was accompanied by those of Immanuel Geiss (1960) and Helmut Böhme (1966). Subsequent monographs included those by Peter-Christian Witt (1970), Dirk Stegmann (1970), Klaus Wernecke (1970), and Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann (1970). All of the preceding were students of Fischer in Hamburg. Other related works included those by Hans Rosenberg (1967), Hans-Ulrich Wehler (1969), Hans-Jürgen Puhle (1966) and Volker Berghahn (1971). Röhl, Pogge von Strandmann and Berghahn coincided in the archives as exact contemporaries.

[10] Here, of course, I speak autobiographically. I read Röhl's book intensively in my final year as an undergraduate in 1969–70, when it was virtually the only book in English based on the kind of extensive archival sources that have since become standard. Aside from Fischer's work, Jonathan Steinberg's *Yesterday's deterrent* (New York, 1965) was the only comparable book.

Röhl's is a classic analysis of high political manoeuvring, in which he resurrected Eyck's thesis, much refined it, and rooted it in the newly accessible archival sources. As he said: 'in Germany . . . there occurred a cyclical development from autocratic rule [that of Bismarck] through collective leadership back to autocratic rule. The process . . . took seven years; the victor was Kaiser Wilhelm II.'[11] Bismarck's removal left a power vacuum in the executive. As one of Röhl's reviewers remarked, 'the confusion of incompatible authorities and functions looked like a government so long as Bismarck directed the mechanism of government'; but once he went, 'a vacuum was created which established legal procedure could not fill'.[12] Röhl tried to show that Wilhelm II and the advisers he gathered around himself for that purpose aimed to fill that vacuum by concentrating authority around the throne. While not denying the Kaiser's personal instability, Röhl questions its relevance to the argument: the motivation and style of decisions should not obscure their effects. For: 'So long as his directives were faithfully carried out by the bureaucracy (and this is a question of fact which can be ascertained by historical research), Wilhelm II must be regarded as the decisive figure in the German Executive.'[13]

Röhl argued persuasively, on the basis mainly but by no means exclusively of the Eulenburg Papers, that the Kaiser entered the 1890s intending to govern by himself. 'The key to his victory was his control over appointments', combined with the skilful use of his personal secretariat (notably the head of the Civil Cabinet from 1888 to 1908 Hermann von Lucanus). Between March 1890 and July 1897 a long series of manoeuvres aimed at the placing of individuals pledged to the implementation of personal rule culminated in a general ministerial reconstruction. The main obstacles to unquestioned imperial control, Adolf Marschall von Bieberstein (Foreign Secretary) and Karl Heinrich von Boetticher (Reich Secretary of the Interior), were removed. Its major exponents, Bernhard von Bülow (who became Foreign Secretary and later Chancellor) and Alfred Tirpitz (Naval Secretary), were introduced. Johannes von Miquel was confirmed in his position as 'manager' of the Ministry of State. General Viktor von Podbielski's appointment as Postmaster-General added a further agent of the Kaiser's will to the government. Prince Chlodwig zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst was kept as a figurehead Chancellor to assuage the disquiet of the parties and press during the transition before personal rule in the full sense could be openly proclaimed. 'Thereafter', Röhl concluded, 'the Kaiser was in complete control of the Executive in Berlin . . . from 1897 until Bülow's assumption of the Chancellorship in October 1900, Kaiser Wilhelm II was his "own Chancellor".' In terms of appointments and of the major legislation of those years (e.g. the navy laws, the so-called hard-labour bill, and the canal bill), he was the moving spirit.

> His power, at least as far as domestic policy was concerned, was not unlimited: his measures still had to gain the acceptance of the legislature before passing into law. But within the Executive itself, his authority was unrivalled.[14]

German historians have not known quite what to make of these arguments. On the one hand, Röhl's evidence for the existence of a 'court party' in the 1890s was very compelling and his discussions of the various contingency plans produced by

[11] Röhl, *Germany*, p. 271.
[12] Theodor S. Hamerow, in *American Historical Review*, LXXIII (1968), 1554.
[13] Röhl, *Germany*, p. 272.
[14] Ibid. pp. 273, 278, 279.

Philipp zu Eulenburg for the realization of the Kaiser's ambitions made for some fascinating reading. His account shed light on a whole range of important subjects, from the School Bill of 1891–2 and the various attempts at naval legislation to the Courts Martial Bill and the complicated inner-ministerial manoeuvring that accompanied them. Remarkably, given the vaunted popularity of the Wilhelmine period during the last two decades, his final chapter on the years 1897–1900 is still the bedrock of our understanding of that period. There have been a few monographs on government economic policy, on Bismarck out of office, and on Tirpitz's naval programme, but what he had to say is still the only rounded account of government politics in those years.[15] On the other hand, despite the evident importance of Röhl's interpretation and the largeness of his claims about the political process, most German historians have remained surprisingly silent on the subject. No one had bothered to dispute his thesis in the form of a serious critique or to explore comparable analyses for the period after 1900. This is partly because the prevailing approaches to the history of the *Kaiserreich* that emerged from the 1960s in West Germany have focused more on processes and structures of corporate interest representation than on Röhl's type of high political analysis. The general turn to social history has also generated a powerful bias against the latter. The result has been a kind of methodological prejudice, which de-legitimizes 'the personalistic research perspective of Röhl' as being self-evidently wrong, and thereby disposes of the need to bother discussing it.[16]

In the meantime Röhl himself has been very far from silent. For more than a decade he has been engaged in an enormous edition of the Eulenburg Papers which has reached its conclusion in three volumes, a prodigious labour of scholarship in the classical tradition of the German *Quellenedition*.[17] Quite apart from the practical efforts required and the sheer detective work involved in tracking down and collating sources, given the Papers' chequered history (the bulk of Eulenburg's original archive was destroyed in 1945 and the correspondence had to be carefully reconstituted from some surviving remnants, an extremely full and largely authentic typescript prepared in 1910–18 and subsequently further corrected by Eulenburg's widow in 1935–6, and additional letters assembled from a large number of official and private collections), the text itself conforms to the highest standards of editorial scholarship, and Eulenburg's centrality to Wilhelm II's first decade will make it one of the few genuinely indispensable published sources for Wilhelmine political

[15] Again, there is no space for complete references. I am thinking of works by Peter Leibenguth (1975), Rolf Weitowitz (1977), Wolfgang Stribrny (1977), Manfred Hank (1977), Ekkehard Böhm (1972), Wilhelm Deist (1976), Berghahn (1971), and Stegmann (1970 and 1973). For my own contribution, see Geoff Eley, '*Sammlungspolitik*, social imperialism and the Navy Law of 1898', in *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen*, XV (1974), 29–63. In many ways the best additional account of the 1890s is a still older work than Röhl's viz. J. Alden Nichols, *Germany after Bismarck. The Caprivi Era, 1890–1894* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958). Ekkehard-Teja P. W. Wilke, *Political decadence in Imperial Germany. Personnel-political aspects of the German government crisis, 1894–1897* (Urbana, 1977), adds nothing new.

[16] The quoted phrase, which has deservedly acquired a certain notoriety, is a good example of the sort of judgemental dismissal by footnote that has become all too common in West German historical writing. It occurs in Stegmann, *Die Erben Bismarcks* (Cologne and Berlin, 1970), p. 14: 'The personalistic research perspective of Röhl is in general untenable, despite all the new results he brings to light'.

[17] For useful reviews of the first of the three volumes, see Volker Berghahn, in *Historical Journal*, XX (1977), 773–6, and Norman Rich, 'Imperial Germany: two views from the top', in *Journal of Modern History*, L (1978), 112–22.

history.[18] In addition, Röhl has published a number of major essays on various aspects of the high-political context of the origins of the First World War, which are also distinguished by their ability to get beyond the manipulated and self-censored publications of the inter-war (and pre-Fischer) periods to the contents of the original documentation beneath.[19] Most recently, he has edited a valuable collection of essays on Wilhelm II (unfairly and misleadingly reviewed by Richard Evans in a recent issue of this journal), has supervised an important dissertation on Bülow's Chancellorship, and is currently embarked on a full-scale biography of the Kaiser.[20] Altogether, this amounts to a very substantial contribution to Imperial Germany's still developing historiography.

To specify the meaning and magnitude of Röhl's claims concerning the Kaiser's 'personal rule' and the character of the political process, we can do far worse than quote the principal bearer of this thesis, Bernhard von Bülow, in advance of the system he is supposed to have been installed to create. On 23 July 1896 Bülow wrote to Eulenburg:

> I would be a different kind of Chancellor from my predecessors. Bismarck was a power in his own right, a Pepin, a Richelieu. Caprivi and Hohenlohe regard themselves . . . as the representatives of the 'Government' and to a certain extent of the Reichstag against His Majesty. I would regard myself as the executive tool of His Majesty, so to speak his political chief-of-staff. With me, personal rule, in the good sense, would really begin.

Several months later, he wrote the following:

> The still latent dilemma between parliamentarism (which the clericals and left liberals want) and a Bismarckian course (which is desired by the National Liberals in the South and the agrarian conservatives in the North of Germany) would then become acute and the Crown would be forced to choose. The majority of the nation has not yet realized, as we have, that our salvation lies neither in the one course nor in the other, but in royalism *sans phrase*.[21]

In the rest of this essay I want to measure these statements of intent against the reality of Wilhelmine politics between the 1890s and the First World War, partly by drawing on the evidence assembled in Röhl's edition of the Eulenburg Papers, partly by drawing more widely on the literature of the last two decades. The completion of Röhl's editorial project (though hardly of his longer-term contribution to these debates) affords a useful opportunity for taking stock in this way. It is sometimes forgotten, under the impression of the dramatic growth of interest in the *Kaiserreich* following the Fischer controversy, just how poorly developed our knowledge of the Imperial polity still is. But in fact there have been very few major works of

[18] For the details of the Eulenburg Papers' (EP) history, see Röhl's excellent introduction to vol. I, pp. 53–73.

[19] E.g. 'Admiral von Müller and the approach of war, 1911–14', in *Historical Journal*, XII (1969), 651–73; Röhl (ed.), *1914: delusion or design? the testimony of two German diplomats* (London, 1973); 'An der Schwelle zum Weltkrieg: Eine Dokumentation über den "Kriegsrat" von 8. Dezember 1912', in *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen*, XVIII (1977), 77–134.

[20] See John C. G. Röhl and Nicolaus Sombart (eds.), *Kaiser Wilhelm II: new interpretations. The Corfu papers* (Cambridge, 1982); Richard J. Evans, 'From Hitler to Bismarck: "Third Reich" and Kaiserreich in recent historiography', part I, *Historical Journal*, XXVI (1983), 487–91; Kathy Lerman, 'Bernhard von Bülow and the governance of Germany, 1900–1909' (D. Phil. thesis, University of Sussex, 1983). See also Isabel V. Hull, *The entourage of Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1888–1918* (Cambridge, 1982).

[21] Bülow to Eulenburg, 23 July 1896 and 4 December 1896, letters no. 1245 and 1281, in *EP*, III, 1714, 1763.

Wilhelmine political history published in either English or German since the main rush of post-Fischer monographs in 1970–6.[22] In this sense it becomes even more important that Röhl's work – as one of the very few attempts actually to study the formation of Imperial policy in general, as opposed to this or that particular policy (like foreign affairs or tariffs) or the mobilization of economic interests into the public realm – be given its due.[23]

II

Röhl rests much of his case on the constitutional situation in the strict sense, namely the considerable reserves of authority allowed to the King-Kaiser under the Prussian (1851) and Reich (1867/1871) Constitutions. The strongest example of this concerns the position of the army. Article 63 of the 1871 Constitution stated flatly that 'the Emperor determines the peacetime strength, the structure, and the distribution of the army'. This was reinforced by the historic doctrine of the *Kommandogewalt*, the right to command in military and naval matters (what Manfred Messerschmidt calls 'this core of late-absolutist rule'),[24] which was not susceptible to strict constitutional definition. The royal military prerogative was guaranteed by a series of institutional arrangements, from the Kaiser's own military cabinet (controlling all army personnel matters) to the so-called *Immediat-System*, which gave individual commanders and military chiefs direct access to the Kaiser. All of these were devices for circumventing the previous responsibility of the War Minister, which had been created by the reforms of 1807–13 to unify the military administration, but which under the new constitutional conditions of the Reich threatened to expose the army to parliamentary surveillance and even control. In a similar way the General Staff was gradually freed from the War Ministry's nominal authority and acquired its own direct access to the ruler. These relationships were formalized in the reorganization of 1883. With Wilhelm II's accession in 1888 these tendencies were confirmed, partly by the creation of the Kaiser's personal HQ and partly by a general extension of the *Immediat-System* during the reign as a whole. Encouraged by the favourable structural circumstances of the Prusso-German state, there were definite aspirations to go beyond the army's constitutional autonomies to make it an independent force

[22] Of course, there are some important recent exceptions, including Konrad H. Jarausch, *Students, society, and politics in Imperial Germany* (Princeton, 1982); Geoffrey G. Field, *Evangelist of race. The Germanic vision of Houston Stewart Chamberlain* (New York, 1981); James C. Albisetti, *Secondary school reform in Imperial Germany* (Princeton, 1983); Manfred Rauh, *Die Parlamentarisierung des Deutschen Reiches* (Düsseldorf, 1977). Modesty cannot prevent me from mentioning the possible contributions of David Blackbourn and myself in this respect: David Blackbourn, *Class, religion and local politics in Wilhelmine Germany* (New Haven and London, 1980); Geoff Eley, *Reshaping the German Right* (New Haven and London, 1980); Blackbourn and Eley, *The peculiarities of German history. Bourgeois society and politics in nineteenth-century Germany* (Oxford, 1984). Forthcoming books by Stanley Suval (on Wilhelmine elections), James Retallack (on the Conservative party), and Michael John (on law and society) will also be very important in this respect. The Bismarckian years are not much better served. But see Margaret Lavinia Anderson, *Windthorst: a political biography* (Oxford, 1981), and Otto Pflanze (ed.), *Innenpolitische Probleme des Bismarck-Reiches* (Munich, 1983).

[23] Most recent monographs have focused less on the politics of the government than on the actions of the *Verbände*. This is classically true of Stegmann (1970), and also applies to the works of Klaus Saul (1974), Siegfried Mielke (1976) and Klaus-Peter Ullmann (1976).

[24] Manfred Messerschmidt, 'Die politische Geschichte der preussisch-deutschen Armee', in *Handbuch zur deutschen Militärgeschichte*, II, 4/1 (Munich, 1979), 167.

in government and the making of overall policy, a tendency most flagrantly visible perhaps at the start of Wilhelm II's reign under the stewardship of Alfred von Waldersee (Chief of the General Staff 1888–91).

The special position of the Prussian army in the Imperial state was real enough. But it should be said that to a great extent the positions of the army and of Wilhelm II in the state are separate questions. The distinctive characteristics of the army, their internal development (and significant transformations) between the 1860s and 1914, and their powerful institutional autonomies acquired a logic and significance which were quite independent of Wilhelm II's personal influence and political ambitions. In terms of the army's own development, one might even say, the Kaiser's practical use of the *Immediat-System* and the *Flügeladjutanten* was not particularly relevant. It is clear, for instance, that the Imperial entourage was a very specific kind of grouping, with sharp differences of background and mentality from the officer corps at large, let alone the technical elite who attended the War Academy and joined the General Staff. Measured against the technical and organizational compulsions of the modern military machine, which in large part the German army had pioneered – e.g. greater heterogeneity of recruitment to the officer corps, growth of technical specialization, complex divisions of administrative labour, the appropriation of new technologies, criteria of efficiency and managerial expertise, and so on – the cultivated traditionalism and aristocratic amateurishness of the military entourage begin to seem increasingly arcane.

In other words, any evaluation of the Kaiser's constitutional authority must be accompanied by a careful appreciation of its practical limits, by measuring the evolving disposition of social and political forces within and amongst the various governmental institutions and between the latter and German society at large. A good illustration of this is provided by the courts-martial issue in the mid-1890s, a case which received some central attention in John Röhl's earlier book.[25] On the face of it, this seems a perfect confirmation of the personal rule thesis, with the court and the military moving in unison to thwart a measure of significant liberalization and thereby to preserve both an aristocratic tradition and the army's immunity from civilian control. As Röhl showed, the Kaiser also invested a large amount of political capital in fending off the reform, not least because he saw the *Bestätigungsrecht* (the right to confirm verdicts of the military courts or not) as a vital part of the *Kommandogewalt*. Yet an alternative reading of the affair is possible. By contemporary standards the Bavarian Code of 1869 which the reformers planned to extend to the Prussian army was extraordinarily progressive, and it was hardly surprising that elements of the latter should have taken exception to its provisions (e.g. public proceedings, rights of defence, civilian participation, independent due process). What *is* more surprising, perhaps, was the extent of the public debate, which mobilized a majority of the Reichstag, the Chancellor and the Ministry of State, and a sizeable bloc of the Bundesrat for a reform that ultimately passed in a modified form into law. Symptomatically speaking, one might argue, exposure of the issue in this way (rendering military procedure, discipline and jurisdiction accountable to the standards legally constituted for civil society) was more interesting than the modified final outcome (i.e. passage of the reform, but with limitations on publicity and preservation of the Kaiser's formal rights). But even the latter, given Röhl's stress on the Kaiser's ability to obstruct the measure, is worth drawing attention to. In

[25] See Röhl, *Germany*, pp. 178ff., 224 f., 237 f., 242 ff.

any case, as with most aspects of the Kaiser's formal authority, effective Imperial review of the courts' decisions was to prove more honoured in the fevered rhetoric of the 1890s than in the actual practice of the following two decades.

Even in the case of the army, therefore, the personal rule thesis has to be tempered by a realistic appraisal of how military affairs were actually conducted. The Kaiser certainly tried to meddle aggressively in military matters. But this was more a matter of bombast and frequently outrageous showmanship than of any genuine political nous – 'self-gratification', as Wilhelm Deist rightly calls it.[26] Despite his emotional involvement in the army, 'he had no appreciation whatsoever of the problems of military leadership in an age of mass armies and rapid technological change'. His presence as a military figurehead – the 'hollow Hercules' borne by the troops as a symbol of their loyalty and solidarity – was characterized by an absence of acumen and consistency – *Schimmerlosigkeit*, as one of his long-suffering War Ministers called it, or 'gormlessness', as it might be translated.[27] Moreover, the military entourage, which if we follow Röhl's argument should have been a vital liaison between the Kaiser's will and military policy-making, did nothing to mitigate these personal inadequacies. Almost all these immediate attendants were appointed at the Kaiser's whimsical behest rather than for ability or technical reasons, and they simply confirmed his practical separation from the real business of military command, pandering to their master's posturing self-delusion. Awareness of the Kaiser's incompetence was widely diffused amongst the officer corps by the outbreak of the First World War and after 1914 he was rapidly displaced to the margins (as Röhl also accepts). As General Karl von Einem (the former War Minister cited above) said in 1915, 'we haven't had a working head of state for the last twenty-five years'.[28]

We can find the same discrepancy, between Wilhelm II's formal reserves of constitutional authority and a daily exercise that was almost completely lackadaisical, in the civil sphere as well. As already remarked, the ministerial reconstruction of summer 1897 is pivotal to Röhl's account. Yet if we look carefully at the changes that took place, they provide only partial backing for the personal rule thesis. In their different ways Tirpitz and Bülow entered office, it is true, as the Kaiser's men, Tirpitz as the architect of the big navy, Bülow as the front man for Eulenburg's private schemes. Yet these individual appointments bore a tenuous relationship to the larger political rearrangement then in train. This concerned a renewed rapprochement of industry and agriculture, partly with a view to the forthcoming 1898 elections and the protectionist reorientation of Germany's tariff policy, partly to provide the government with some much-needed stability in the Reichstag, by 'bringing the parties together in the economic field'.[29] In party political terms this meant reviving the old Bismarckian cartel of 1887 (the Conservative, Free Conservative and National Liberal parties), but without the anti-Catholic animus, and indeed within a broad framework of co-operation that included the Centre party. Ideologically, this harked self-consciously back to Bismarck's anti-socialist and protectionist 'solidarity bloc' of 1878–9. This new policy – a 'policy of rallying' or

[26] Wilhelm Deist, 'Kaiser Wilhelm II in the context of his military and naval entourage', in Röhl and Sombart (eds.), *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, p. 187.

[27] Ibid. The War Minister in question was Karl von Einem, who held the post from 1903 to 1909.

[28] Ibid.

[29] The quoted phrase was used by Miquel in the Ministry of State on 29 July 1897, cited by Röhl, *Germany*, p. 247.

Sammlungspolitik, as it became known after a phrase of its principal author, Miquel – was announced by the Finance Minister Miquel in two speeches in July 1897.[30]

This bears a rough correspondence to the kind of strategy pursued by Eulenburg in the 1890s, with its stress on the centrality of the 'middle parties' for the government's base in the Reichstag.[31] But before assimilating *Sammlungspolitik* too easily to the achievement of personal rule, a number of points should be considered. First, Eulenburg was deeply suspicious of political catholicism, whereas Miquel explicitly included the Centre party in his plans.[32] Secondly, the Kaiser's own obsession in 1897–8 was the Navy Bill, whereas Miquel deliberately excluded the naval issue from the packaging of his new coalition: he argued this consistently in the Ministry of State, negotiated it directly with Tirpitz in autumn 1897, and successfully kept the navy out of the elections in 1898.[33] Thirdly, both of the Kaiser's main appointees stayed out of the general domestic politicking in these years – Bülow to keep himself clean for the Chancellorship, Tirpitz by confining himself (however imaginatively) to the naval sphere.[34] Fourthly, the Kaiser himself seemed completely indifferent to the general political settlement in 1897–8. He left no detailed statement on the subject of *Sammlungspolitik*. He did make a speech on a different subject at Bielefeld which ended in an appropriate peroration ('Protection of the national labour of all productive estates, strengthening of a healthy *Mittelstand*, ruthless repression of all revolutionary activity . . .'). But this was almost certainly at Miquel's instigation, mediated by the shadowy influence of Lucanus.[35]

[30] For a full discussion of *Sammlungspolitik* in 1897–8, with critical commentary on the main secondary sources, see Eley, 'Sammlungspolitik, social imperialism and the Navy Law of 1898', and for a not entirely persuasive critique of the concept in the context of Bismarck, Otto Pflanze, '"Sammlungspolitik" 1875–1886. Kritische Bemerkungen zu einem Modell', in Pflanze (ed.), *Innenpolitische Probleme*, pp. 155–93.

[31] For a good example, see Eulenburg's comment to his cousin Botho zu Eulenburg on 14 April 1892: '. . . the gradually somewhat worn phrase that the King must stand above the parties means, when translated into political terms, nothing more, surely, than that he must depend on the middle parties' (*EP*, II, 850). Eulenburg's own inclinations were solidly Conservative. But he was realist enough to recognize the different exigencies of politics in the new nation-state. Hence (as he put it to Bülow on 8 June 1896) the watchword was 'moderate conservative in Prussia and moderate liberal in the Reich' (*EP*, III, 1697).

[32] Miquel's inclusion of the Centre in his plans is disputed by Berghahn, but in my view the evidence is unequivocal. For a full account, see Eley, '*Sammlungspolitik*, social imperialism and the Navy Law of 1898', pp. 36–9. See also Volker Berghahn, *Der Tirpitz-Plan* (Düsseldorf, 1971), pp. 151 (note 162), 15 ff., 592 ff., and 'Das Kaiserreich in der Sackgasse', in *Neue Politische Literatur*, XVI (1971), 497–501.

[33] This is again contentious, although in my own view the evidence is again compelling. See Eley, '*Sammlungspolitik*, social imperialism and the Navy Law of 1898', pp. 33 ff.

[34] Of course, the Navy Office took great pains in assembling the necessary Reichstag majority for the first Navy Law which eventually passed in April 1898, by assiduously cultivating relations with parliamentarians and the press. But there is no evidence that Tirpitz involved himself in any of the more general political debates of that time. For Bülow's abstention from domestic politicking before he assumed the premiership, see Lerman's excellent account, 'Bernhard von Bülow', pp. 70 ff. See also her essay in the Röhl–Sombart volume (note 20 above), 'The decisive relationship: Kaiser Wilhelm II and Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow, 1900–1905', pp. 221–47.

[35] Although Stegmann, *Erben*, p. 66, refers to this as Wilhelm II's 'great *Sammlung* speech', the description seems somewhat overstated. Lucanus seems to have been working closely with Miquel at this time, but in the absence of his private papers or other biographical materials

Of course, Röhl has argued that the Kaiser's direct involvement in affairs is unnecessary to the argument. So long as he controlled appointments, he could safely leave the detail of governing to his servants – 'the less the Kaiser felt obliged to intervene, the better the system was working'.[36] In itself this is a curious argument. But even in its own terms it seems less than persuasive. In domestic politics the crucial governing axis for the years 1897–1900 was that of Miquel and Arthur von Posadowsky, who moved from the Treasury to the Office of the Interior in 1897, and while Miquel was careful not to lose the Kaiser's ear, 'personal rule' was certainly not the organizing priority of his politics. The only other person cited by Röhl for 1897, Podbielski, was by no stretch of the imagination a key figure, and Röhl provides no evidence that he behaved in the attributed fashion.[37] Once Bülow assumed the Chancellorship, the rules of the game certainly changed. But as Kathy Lerman shows,[38] Bülow paid far less attention to building an apparatus for the enforcement of the Kaiser's will than to consolidating his own ascendancy over the ministers. Posadowsky remained the key liaison with the parties, but Bülow's relationship with him was not personally all that close, and he had little compunction in ditching him after the turn against the Centre in 1907. After 1900 the personnel question in Röhl's sense became a little beside the point – some ministerial appointments originated with the Kaiser, some not – because Bülow increasingly short-circuited the usual ministerial procedures by means of his own secretariat. Henceforth, the Reich Chancellery acquired a new importance in the governing system, orchestrating relations with parties and press, and rationing ministers' access to the Chancellor. To this extent Friedrich Wilhelm von Loebell (Chancellery Chief, 1904–9) and Otto Hamman (Head of Foreign Office Press Department, 1894–1916) were more important than any minister or secretary of state. The 'government' as such had little collective existence under Bülow, and he counted on this to maintain his authority.[39]

we remain very ignorant about his role. Hull's view that he had no coherent politics reflects this lack of evidence as much as the real situation. See Hull, *Entourage*, p. 28. There is no evidence that either Eulenburg or any other exponent of personal rule in Röhl's sense played any part in the drafting of the Kaiser's Bielefeld speech (if indeed the relevant part of it was drafted at all).

[36] Röhl's 'Introduction' to Röhl and Sombart (eds.), *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, p. 15.

[37] In fact, Podbielski's position provides a good example of the Kaiser's essential inconsistency and political frivolity. He was a known exponent of the agrarian interest, with close links to the Agrarian League. Lerman observes that after 1901 he formed 'an agrarian opposition to Bülow' in the Prussian Ministry of State with the Finance Minister Georg von Rheinbaben. Now, Wilhelm is well known to have been incensed by the Conservative agrarian opposition to the Prussian Canal Bill in 1899–1901, to the extent of taking strong disciplinary measures against Conservative civil servants known to have opposed the Bill. Yet at the same time Podbielski was retaining his standing as one of the Kaiser's favourite ministers. See Lerman, 'The decisive relationship', pp. 232–4.

[38] Partly in 'The decisive relationship', partly in her excellent dissertation, which eminently deserves a publisher.

[39] There is a judicious survey of the various ministerial appointments between 1900 and 1905 in Lerman, 'The decisive relationship', pp. 228–35, while Lerman, 'Bernhard von Bülow' is now the best source for the internal governmental relationships during Bülow's Chancellorship. See also Peter-Christian Witt, 'Konservatismus als "Überparteilichkeit". Die Beamten der Reichskanzlei zwischen Kaiserreich und Weimarer Republik 1900–1933', in Dirk Stegmann, Bernd-Jürgen Wendt, Peter-Christian Witt (eds.), *Deutscher Konservatismus im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Bonn, 1983), pp. 231–80.

At one level Röhl is right: Bülow never doubted that his authority derived ultimately from the Kaiser. As Eulenburg had stressed in the 1890s, he was extremely adept at lubricating the All-Highest goodwill, and while in the end these powers of flattery and ingratiation failed him, in a process which seems to have begun in 1905, he still survived in office for a further four years (the length of a US presidential term, it should be said). It is important to realize just how divorced from serious political affairs the Kaiser had become. Isabel Hull makes this clear from her description of his daily and annual routines, which reveal an almost precipitous decline from the exacting business schedule of 1888 to the frenetic leisure pursuits of only two years later. By 1890, in Waldersee's view, Wilhelm 'no longer has the slightest desire for work'. Soon he was rising late, lingering over breakfast, riding and walking, paying visits, holding court, and generally having a good time, closing the day with a dinner and the inevitable inconsequential conversation, which invariably lasted till the early hours. Any political business was squeezed hurriedly into the middle of the day. Moreover, for over half the year the Kaiser was resident in neither Berlin nor Potsdam, a pattern of absenteeism that was already well established by 1894. When we put all this evidence together, it is hard to see why we should be expected to take Wilhelm II seriously as a political figure. After the first few years of the reign he was woefully ill informed, totally irresponsible (in the most literal of senses) in his approach to the business of governing, and temperamentally incapable of sustained application.[40]

Nowhere was this clearer than in the *Daily Telegraph* affair in autumn 1908, the furthest-reaching crisis in the German monarchy's public status before the First World War. Without going into the details of the affair – it was provoked by the publication of an interview with a British journalist, in which the Kaiser's undisciplined indiscretions were thought by German public opinion to have brought German policy and reputation into disrepute – its most salient feature was the total political isolation of the Kaiser.[41] Almost without exception, the parties, the press, the Ministry of State, the Bundesrat, and even the entourage lined up against him, urging Bülow to use the occasion to assert his own moral and political authority and shock the Kaiser into a more acceptable pattern of public comportment. As for Wilhelm himself, the crisis left him completely bewildered, hopelessly marooned on his own political innocence, bereft for once of the sycophants and accomplices who usually sustained his confidence. This was accentuated in early November by his physical absence from Berlin (at Donaueschingen) and by the acute personal depression into which he relapsed. As the executive cranked itself into action to deal with the crisis, 'personal rule' was exposed for little more than the rhetorical miasma of an earlier aspiration, the mock-heroic posturing of the 1890s. No 'court party' rallied together to protect the authority of the Kaiser. In fact, the entire executive, including the Kaiser's three cabinet heads and his adjutant-general, was organized behind Bülow and against the Kaiser. Bülow himself, who in 1896 had declared his intention of being 'the executive tool of His Majesty, so to speak his political chief-of-staff',[42] was now cast in a very different role, the voice of constitutional rectitude, who was called to protect the monarchy against the frivolity of the

[40] For an account of the Kaiser's routines see Hull, *Entourage*, pp. 31–44.

[41] I have discussed the *Daily Telegraph* affair in more detail in *Reshaping*, pp. 285–90, and in an unpublished paper, 'The political reality of personal rule in Germany, 1908–14'.

[42] Bülow to Eulenburg, 23 July 1896, in *EP*, III, 1714.

monarch. That he failed this calling was testimony to the Kaiser's personal imperviousness to criticism and the exalted conception of royal authority from which this derived. But to call this a 'system of personal rule' seems a palpable misuse of terms.

III

What can be salvaged from Röhl's thesis? Röhl himself provides part of an answer by distinguishing different phases of the reign: 1888–90 (the conflict with Bismarck); 1890–7 ('transition from an "improvised" to an "institutionalized personal rule"'); 1897–1908 (the Bülow era of 'personal rule in the good sense'); 1908–14 (a period of indeterminancy opened by the twin traumas of the Eulenburg scandal and the *Daily Telegraph* affair, in which the degree of the Kaiser's withdrawal has yet to be empirically established); 1914–18 (the war years of the 'shadow Kaiser').[43] This is an advance on the analysis in *Germany without Bismarck*, which left the years after 1900 completely open and dealt with 1897–1900 in far less narrative detail than the years before. But at the very least the case for 'systematic' personal rule after 1897 remains non-proven. I would go much further: my own knowledge of the sources and the evidence assembled by Lerman, Hull and Röhl himself shows the Kaiser to have been uninterested and uninvolved in the practice of governing in anything but the most sporadic, arbitrary and whimsical of ways. It is no accident that the three major Imperial interventions Röhl cites – the early enthusiasm for working-class social reform and the subsequent recourse (when this failed to stop the rise of the SPD) to abortive repressive legislation, the naval expansion, and the Prussian Canal Bill – all came from the 1890s.[44] Even these were ill considered and without any underlying coherence, and after 1900 we are hard put to find equivalent examples, aside from the impulsive intrusions into foreign policy (like the Björko Treaty of 1905 or the so-called war council of 5 December 1912). Towards the major political questions of the period, such as the tariffs or the finance reform, the Kaiser could not have been more indifferent.

This recession in Wilhelm II's real political weight receives much support from Röhl's edition of the Eulenburg Papers. In his careful summary of Eulenburg's political career, Röhl confines his 'independent political activity' to the period 1894–7, arguing that before that time he had exercised his influence 'principally in the service of Holstein', who was his closest associate in the upper echelons of the foreign service and one of the ringleaders in the attempts to place Wilhelm II under stricter ministerial constraint during the Chancellorships of Caprivi and Hohenlohe. After 1897 Eulenburg withdrew rather quickly into the background, partly because his goal of placing Bülow had been met, partly for reasons of health (in 1902 he retired from his ambassador's post in Vienna), and partly (Röhl suggests) because of the scandal surrounding his brother Friedrich's homosexuality in the autumn of 1897.[45] This analysis is reflected in the distribution of materials in Röhl's edition of the Papers: around 300 pages for the years up to 1890, with a definite quickening in the later 1880s; around 1,500 pages from 1890 to mid-1898; and not much more

[43] John C. G. Röhl, 'Kaiser Wilhelm II., Grossherzog Friedrich I. und der "Königsmechanismus" im Kaiserreich', in *Historische Zeitschrift*, CCXXXVI (1983), 554 f.

[44] Ibid. pp. 558–62.

[45] For the details of this affair, which seems to have produced a definite cooling in the relationship of Philipp Eulenburg and the Kaiser, see Hull, *Entourage*, pp. 109 ff., and Röhl's Introduction, *EP*, I, 35 ff.

than 400 pages for the rest (of which around a quarter deal with the years 1917–21). In fact, after the baptismal conflict with Bismarck, it was largely Eulenburg's relentless politicking that kept Wilhelm politically involved in any full sense, so much so that he was virtually a cipher for Eulenburg's pet schemes. Röhl is right to call Bülow's ascendancy – 'the only instance of a considered, well-thought-out, and well-planned Chancellor appointment in the Wilhelmine epoch' – 'Eulenburg's real political achievement', and one is tempted to think that it was only Eulenburg's guidance that lent Wilhelm's restless energies any kind of coherence.[46] Otherwise, his involvement amounted to a series of directionless and ephemeral intrusions (as in the School Bill crisis of 1892, the conflict surrounding Ernst von Köller's tenure of the Interior Ministry in 1894–5, the various anti-Socialist initiatives of the middle and later 1890s, the pre-Tirpitz naval demands, the Kruger telegram, and so on), appalling obstacles for his ministers to surmount.

Once Eulenburg retired from the scene, any sense of political direction seems to have gone with him. It was certainly not supplied by other members of the Kaiser's immediate circle, whether the cabinet chiefs, the adjutant-general, the *Flügel-adjutanten*, Eulenburg's cronies in the Liebenberg circle, or newer favourites like Maximilian Egon zu Fürstenberg (who to some extent took Eulenburg's place as the Kaiser's personal but not political confidant after 1900). Moreover, after 1900 even the Kaiser's disruptions became less frequent, whether in the form of unexpected policy demands on his ministers or of the embarrassing impromptu speeches that inflamed domestic and foreign public sensibilities (like the so-called 'Hun-speech' delivered before the troops departing for China from Bremerhaven on 27 July 1900).[47] Bülow was extremely sensitive to such possibilities and did his best to create buffers between the Kaiser and the public realm (e.g. by elaborate mechanisms for checking the Kaiser's statements before they reached the press). Wilhelm's erratic temperament had not changed (if anything his excesses became worse), but the brutal spontaneity of his political outbursts was usually contained within his own immediate circle and in any case (as with his private diatribes against the socialists) was well out of tune with the prevailing public sentiment.[48] Publicly, the reins were being drawn ever more tightly around him. In January 1903 a delegation from the Centre, Conservatives and National Liberals had asked Bülow to press Wilhelm 'to transgress less frequently the limits of the position which the Reich Constitution had created for the German Kaiser', and in this respect the

[46] *EP*, I, 33.

[47] See Bernd Sösemann, 'Die sog. Hunnenrede Wilhelms II. Textkritische und interpretatorische Bemerkungen zur Ansprache des Kaisers vom 27. Juli 1900 in Bremerhaven', in *Historische Zeitschrift*, CCXXII (1976), 342–58.

[48] E.g. at the time of the SPD's successes in the 1903 elections, 'the Kaiser outlined how he would deal with the coming revolution. He would, he said, mow down all Social Democrats, "but only after they had first plundered the Jews and the rich"'. He had also ordered the Commanding General of Berlin in two separate telegrams to fire on the people. See John C. G. Röhl, 'The emperor's new clothes: a character sketch of Kaiser Wilhelm II', in Röhl and Sombart (eds.), *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, p. 31, quoting Eulenburg's report of the conversations to Bülow, 9 August 1903, published in *EP*, III, 2096–9. It should be noted that the Kaiser's statements occurred at a time when Bülow was fending off Conservative calls for a new Anti-Socialist Law as politically impracticable, and when the dominant voices on the party-political right were also opting for a course of propagandist as opposed to state-repressive anti-Socialism. See Eley, *Reshaping*, pp. 226–35.

public outcry of 1908 seems finally to have had the necessary chastening effect. After this time, Wilhelm II's public utterances seem to have been the object of parliamentary criticism on only one further occasion, that of an address in Königsberg on 25 August 1910.[49]

Of course, we should not go to the opposite extreme (which Röhl criticizes in the so-called 'critical social history' of the post-Fischer literature on Imperial Germany) of arguing the Kaiser's importance completely away. His decisive impact on the course of ministerial politics for most of the 1890s (though mediated through the directive influence of Eulenburg) cannot any longer be disputed. That impact also extended for most of the reign in certain specific areas, which are usefully summarized by Paul Kennedy: a general endorsement of expansionist foreign policy; an equally general legitimation of 'the illiberal, anti-parliamentary and anti-SPD forces within the domestic establishment'; a tendency to complicate the execution of German foreign policy by his own unpredictable and changeable interventions; an unfavourable and disquieting impression on Germany's neighbours; consistent support for Tirpitz's naval policy; equally consistent failure to curb the operational war plans of the military; and 'very strong support for Austria-Hungary in the years following 1908'.[50] Similarly, the negative effects of both the Kaiser's constitutional latitude and his deliberate fostering of alternative lines of communication and responsibility within the government – what Röhl, borrowing a concept from work on the Third Reich, calls 'polycratic chaos' – must also be acknowledged, as must the so-called 'kingship mechanism' (a concept Röhl takes from Norbert Elias), 'both as a means of regulating the access of rival groups to the throne and as an instrument of legitimation and mediation' through 'medals, titles, ennoblements, imperial favours, promotions, banquets, parades and festivals'.[51] These points are best brought together under the heading of 'negative personal rule', a concept Röhl has introduced more recently and which potentially provides a way out of the impasse between the 'personal rule thesis' and the extreme 'structuralist' (or 'anti-personalistic') view of the *Kaiserreich*.[52]

Such a formula has the advantage of both allowing for the effects of the Kaiser's position and personality – all the ways in which they structured the governing possibilities for successive Chancellors and their colleagues – and yet of recognizing their rather limited constructive or systematic importance. However, such a modified thesis (which, as Röhl notes, is not incompatible with the view of the Imperial polity presented in Hans-Ulrich Wehler's *Das deutsche Kaiserreich*)[53] also tends to undermine the stronger claims Röhl has wanted to make, and in this sense he may have brought a conceptual trojan horse into his own argument. Moreover, ultimately the latter has to meet the demands of a searching *theoretical* argument about the nature of the state, a dimension of the problem which has not been raised

[49] See Elisabeth Fehrenbach, *Wandlungen des deutschen Kaisergedankens 1871–1918* (Munich, 1969), pp. 133, 143; and Bülow, *Memoirs 1897–1903*, p. 590.

[50] Paul Kennedy, 'The Kaiser and German *Weltpolitik*: reflections on Wilhelm II's place in the making of German foreign policy', in Röhl and Sombart (eds.), *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, pp. 157–64.

[51] Röhl's 'Introduction', ibid. p. 17.

[52] Ibid. p. 15, and in 'Kaiser Wilhelm II., Grossherzog Friedrich I. und der "Königsmechanismus" im Kaiserreich', pp. 555 f.

[53] Röhl's 'Introduction' to Röhl and Sombart (eds.), *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, p. 6; Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Das deutsche Kaiserreich 1871–1918* (Göttingen, 1973), pp. 63–72.

explicitly in this essay.[54] In this sense, we may accept Röhl's view that 'above the economic and social structures, but also above the executive bureaucracy. . . there was a further structure without which the system as a whole cannot be understood, namely that of the court society',[55] but only as a spatial or physical metaphor. To go further and say that 'the Kaiser had the entire civil and military power apparatus fast in his hand', or that 'the entire government in the Reich and Prussia, the entire higher bureaucracy, and indeed ultimately the entire political class of Wilhelmine Germany were shot through with the desire to win and to hold the favour of the All-Highest Person', is to go too far.[56]

In a complex social formation state power was not – could not be – structured in this straightforward pyramidal way, least of all in the dynamically expanding capitalist society that Imperial Germany was in the process of becoming. It was constituted not just in the actions and intentions of a set of visible rulers, or in the collectively willed domination of a ruling class, but in a much broader field of socio-economic and politico-cultural intervention encompassing a range of complicated tasks: economic management and social administration in the stricter technical sense; organizing the co-operation of the dominant classes at the political level and mediating the economic interests of their various fractions into a workable general policy; regulating the relations of dominant and subordinate classes; maintaining the basis of social cohesion through a broadly constructed popular consent; integrating the relations between state institutions in the narrower sense and a richly textured civil society. Now, as part of this agenda it is clearly important to know about the high-political process in Röhl's sense – about the actions and interactions of his governing oligarchy 'of some fifty men' (now expanded from the 'some twenty' he preferred in his earlier book)[57] – and given the constitutional setting of the *Kaiserreich* 'negative personal rule' was bound to have some fundamental effects (e.g. in the failure to co-ordinate the civil and military arms of government, which had a key bearing on the origins and course of the First World War).[58] But we cannot confine our vision here. It has to be extended to what in his earlier book Röhl called 'the relationship between the Executive and the Legislature and, on a wider plane, between the State and society'[59] – not just in a simple additive sense, but in a way which decisively reorders our conception of that high-political analysis and its range.

On this basis alone, the stronger version of the 'personal rule thesis' would have to fall. But, as I have tried to suggest, the empirical justification for seeing Wilhelm II as controlling the executive, or steering a 'system of personal rule' at one remove through Bülow (a far more dubious version), is simply not present, even within the more limited compass of 1897–1900. The manoeuvring of the mid-1890s, vicariously manipulated through the ephemeral attentions of Eulenburg, is well attested. But

[54] To have done so would have overburdened an already lengthy text. I have discussed the problem of the Imperial state in this more theoretical way in my contribution to Blackbourn and Eley, *Peculiarities of German history*, pp. 127–43.

[55] Röhl, 'Kaiser Wilhelm II., Grossherzog Friedrich I. und der "Königsmechanismus" im Kaiserreich', p. 572.

[56] Ibid. pp. 568, 567.

[57] Röhl's 'Introduction' to Röhl and Sombart (eds.), *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, p. 17; Röhl, *Germany*, p. 271.

[58] This is a point made by Wolfgang J. Mommsen in his review of Röhl and Sombart (eds.), *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, in the *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute*, London, XI (1982), 18.

[59] Röhl, *Germany*, p. 10.

after 1897 first Miquel and then Bülow established a political regimen that owed very little to any coherent or directive vision on the part of Wilhelm II, and from Zmarzlik's account it seems that after 1909 Bethmann-Hollweg achieved a similar approximation, though far less completely and under incomparably more difficult circumstances.[60] All this makes the exaggerated enthusiasm of Röhl, Hull and others for the importance of personalities and the ramifications of sexual scandals in the entourage somewhat misplaced. Symptomatically, this can tell us much about the official culture and dominant morality of the period. But its political relevance is anything but clear. In the end, it would be better to abandon the chimera of personal rule and concentrate more systematically on the broader ideological front – on representations of the *Kaiser* and of *Kaisertum* in the official ideologies and popular cultures of the time. There are some hints of this in the Röhl–Sombart volume, but there is scope for taking the analysis much further.[61] We may thank John Röhl for his magnificent edition of the Eulenburg Papers and for working through the high-political narrative of the 1890s with such exhaustive care. We may also be grateful for his finds of private papers, his authoritative knowledge of Wilhelm II's life and career, and his sensitive explorations of court society and its ambience. His recent statements have been extremely nuanced and judicious. His concept of 'negative personal rule' should prove particularly fruitful. It would be best if he rested his case there.

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN GEOFF ELEY

[60] Hans-Günther Zmarzlik, *Bethmann Hollweg als Reichskanzler 1909–1914* (Düsseldorf, 1957).

[61] See Elisabeth Fehrenbach, 'Images of Kaiserdom: German attitudes to Kaiser Wilhelm II', in Röhl and Sombart (eds.), *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, pp. 269–85. See also Field, *Evangelist of race*, pp. 248–61, for Houston Stewart Chamberlain's impact on the Kaiser.