

Wilhelm II, German Emperor

By [John C. G. Röhl](#)

Hohenzollern, Friedrich "Wilhelm" Viktor Albert
German Emperor, King of Prussia, Supreme War Lord
Born 27 January 1859 in Berlin, Germany
Died 04 June 1941 in Huis Doorn, The Netherlands

Kaiser Wilhelm II's ambitious policies played a major part in bringing about the First World War, yet with the onset of hostilities he was sidelined by his generals. In certain key areas, however, notably in appointments to top positions and in the conduct of naval warfare he continued to have the decisive say. He ultimately lost touch with his people, coming to be seen as an impediment to peace. He abdicated in November 1918.

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Decisions for War

Wilhelm II, German Emperor (1859-1941) acceded to the Prusso-German throne on 15 June 1888. He established a system of personal monarchy in which he, his courtiers and military entourage determined policy and he alone held responsibility for the appointment and dismissal of civilian statesmen.^[1] He abandoned [Otto von Bismarck's \(1815-1898\)](#) policy of "satiation" in favour of *Weltpolitik* and he supported Admiral [Alfred von Tirpitz's \(1849-1930\)](#) [battlefleet building programme](#), placing [Germany](#) on a collision course with [Britain](#). On 8 December 1912, in the aftermath to the [First Balkan War](#), when [Austria-Hungary](#) secured Germany's support to attack [Serbia](#), he summoned a "war-council" of his top generals and admirals to discuss how Germany should respond were this to lead to war not just against [France](#) and [Russia](#), as seemed likely, but against Britain as well. The meeting, to which the Reich Chancellor was not invited, decided to avoid war for at least one to two years, by which time Germany would have a larger army and further naval preparations would be completed. By spring 1914 the Kaiser was urging the Austrians to subjugate Serbia or eliminate it altogether. After the [assassination](#) of his friend [Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este \(1863-1914\)](#) in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914, Wilhelm scribbled on a diplomatic report from Vienna: "now or never! The Serbs *must* be swept away *and* that right *soon*!"^[2]

Chancellor [Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg \(1856-1921\)](#) took this as a signal to set in motion the steps that led to war. On 5 July 1914 Wilhelm assured the Austrian ambassador Count [Ladislaus von Szögyény \(1841-1916\)](#) that Germany would fully support Austria should Russia come to the aid of Serbia. On 6 July he left for his annual cruise to avert suspicion of [German war planning](#). At this juncture Wilhelm II seemed ready to support a major war with the aim of establishing German control over the European continent. He knew that Germany had only one military plan – the revised [Schlieffen plan](#) – and he understood that its

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realisation would result in a two front war. Therefore, his support for Austria in a war against Russia also implied his readiness for a war against *both* of Germany's neighbours. This must have been his expectation if not indeed his hope.

Instead of sailing into the Arctic Circle as usual, the imperial yacht *Hohenzollern* anchored just north of Bergen, from where it could return to Germany within a day or two to allow the Kaiser to sign the mobilisation order. In [Norway](#) he engaged in feverish activity to secure the support of [Italy](#), [Greece](#), [Romania](#), [Bulgaria](#), [Sweden](#), and – most important of all – the [Ottoman Empire](#). On leaving for home on 25 July, Wilhelm ordered the bombardment of the Russian naval bases of Reval (Tallinn) and Libau (Liepaja) together with a blockade of the eastern Baltic Sea. His orders were ignored – an early sign of his marginalisation during the war.^[3]

On 28 July, after his return to Potsdam, Wilhelm was suddenly alarmed at the prospect that Britain would enter the war in support of France and Russia. Briefly, he tried to avert the wider conflict by proposing a halt to the Austrian invasion of Serbia at Belgrade. His, albeit momentary, change of heart was scorned by the Prussian War Minister General [Erich von Falkenhayn \(1861-1922\)](#) and ignored by the Chancellor. He was reassured that Britain would stay [neutral](#) following a meeting between his brother [Heinrich, Prince of Prussia \(1862-1929\)](#) and their cousin [George V, King of Great Britain \(1865-1936\)](#) at Buckingham Palace on 26 July. Immediately after the hoped-for news of Russian mobilisation reached Berlin, Wilhelm, his brother, and his six sons left Potsdam for Berlin, where he signed the orders initiating the attack on France through [Luxembourg](#) and [Belgium](#). Once war had been declared he appeared on the balcony of the royal palace in Berlin, where on 1 August he declared that he saw “no more parties...only Germans.”^[4] Furious at Britain's declaration of war on 4 August, in one of his most notorious marginal comments he railed against his mother's homeland, accusing the English of hypocrisy and demanding that German agents and consuls “in Turkey and India...fire the whole Mohammedan world to fierce rebellion against this hated, lying, conscienceless nation of shop-keepers; for if we are to be bled to death, England shall at least lose India.”^[5]

The Kaiser as Supreme War Lord

With few exceptions, from August 1914 to November 1918, the Kaiser was present at the German Supreme Headquarters. However, even though he was nominally titled the “Supreme War Lord” he played virtually no part in determining military operations and was deliberately kept inadequately informed. He was subject to extreme mood swings, needed distraction, stayed away from Berlin and made little attempt to show, at least symbolically, that he shared the sufferings of his people. In this way the Hohenzollern monarchy came to seem irrelevant the longer the war continued. Nevertheless, his role should not be underestimated.^[6] Until the appointment of the third [Supreme Army Command](#) under [Paul von Hindenburg \(1847-1934\)](#) and [Erich Ludendorff \(1865-1927\)](#) in August 1916, he had a decisive influence both on appointments and on the conduct of the war at sea. He chose Falkenhayn in September 1914 to replace [Helmuth von Moltke \(1848-1916\)](#) as chief of the General Staff and, much to the fury of Tirpitz, refused to allow the High Seas Fleet to risk engagement with the Royal Navy except at [Jutland](#) in 1916. In January 1917, after months of uncertainty, the Kaiser finally decided in favour of unrestricted [submarine warfare](#), provoking the [USA](#) to declare war on Germany a few weeks later as Bethmann Hollweg had warned.

German War Aims

Real power may have passed to the generals at the outbreak of the war, but Wilhelm II remained convinced that the peace terms would be negotiated by himself and the other crowned heads of Europe as of old. His ambitions for what he called the “German God-given peace” that would follow victory were in line with the annexationist aims of the military and far exceeded the [war aims](#) listed in Bethmann Hollweg's notorious memorandum of 9 September 1914. He proposed that deserving non-commissioned officers and men be rewarded with land grants in those parts of Belgium and France along the Channel coast that were to be annexed to Germany. Wilhelm designated the ports of Antwerp, [Zeebrugge](#), [Ostend](#), Dunkirk, Calais and Boulogne as “the objective of my Navy,” to serve as a base for the future invasion of England and the domination of the seas. In addition, as early as July 1914 he declared it to be his goal to found a Polish state at Russia's expense that would be nominally independent but in reality aligned with Germany – he personally would hold the supreme command of the Polish military forces, and [Poland's](#) foreign policy and economic affairs would be directed by Germany. In April 1917 he demanded the capture of Malta, the Azores, Madeira, and the Cape Verde Islands as naval bases for his fleet, the acquisition of the Belgian Congo, all of the French colonies, and the French ore field of Longwy-Briey together with the annexation of Poland, Lithuania, and Courland (southern Latvia) to the Reich. Furthermore, [Ukraine](#), [Livonia \(northern Latvia\)](#), and [Estonia](#) were to become German satellite

states. Reparations in terms of billions were to be demanded from Britain, the USA, France, and Italy. Such demands were not the Kaiser's alone; a few days later at a conference in Bad Kreuznach they were formally adopted as Germany's war aims. All of these measures were part of a broader programme that would have reduced Britain to an insignificant island under constant threat from the German navy.^[7]

Revolution

The Kaiser opposed all of Bethmann Hollweg's proposals for the reform of the antiquated Prussian-German constitution, preferring instead to rely upon the authority of the generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff. On 13 July 1917, he finally gave in to the relentless insubordination of the generals and dismissed the Reich Chancellor. At the end of September 1918, following the failure of his summer offensives, and under the influence of heavy German losses during the subsequent allied counter-offensives of August and September, Ludendorff told the Kaiser that the war was lost and that power must be transferred to civilian statesmen. Wilhelm accepted Ludendorff's demands and appointed Prince [Max von Baden \(1867-1929\)](#) as Chancellor.^[8] On 3 October 1918 Prince Max sent a peace note to American President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#). Once the German public sensed that they would obtain a better peace if they sacrificed the Kaiser, Wilhelm's days on the German throne were numbered. On 1 November 1918 the Prussian Interior Minister [Bill Drews \(1870-1938\)](#) was sent to Supreme Headquarters in Spa to urge the Kaiser to abdicate in the hope of saving at least the institution of monarchy, but Wilhelm refused with fury. On 3 November 1918, as [revolution](#) broke out in [Kiel](#), he remained determined to answer the revolutionaries "with machine guns in the streets" and said he would not dream of quitting his throne "on account of a few hundred Jews or 1,000 workers".^[9]

At Spa, a poll of commanders revealed that the soldiers would be unwilling to march on their homeland to keep the Kaiser on his throne. Alternative proposals, such as allowing Wilhelm to relinquish the imperial crown but remain as King of Prussia were dismissed. Faced with revolution across Germany, close to midday on 9 November 1918, Prince Max announced Wilhelm's abdication as Kaiser and King in a desperate attempt to keep control. A few hours later the Social Democrat [Philipp Scheidemann \(1865-1939\)](#) proclaimed the German Republic to pre-empt a Communist coup. On 9-10 November 1918 Wilhelm fled to neutral [Holland](#) and on 28 November abdicated both as German Kaiser and King of Prussia. Despite a British electoral campaign promising to "hang the Kaiser," Wilhelm managed to avoid extradition and trial as a war criminal. He failed in his bid to be restored to the throne by [Adolf Hitler \(1889-1945\)](#) and died in exile at Huis Doorn, his home in the province of Utrecht, on 4 June 1941.^[10]

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Notes

- ↑ Röhl, John C. G.: *Wilhelm II. The Kaiser's Personal Monarchy, 1888-1900*, Cambridge 2004.
- ↑ Röhl, John C. G.: *Wilhelm II. Into the Abyss of War and Exile, 1900-1941*, Cambridge 2014, pp. 874-1028.
- ↑ *Ibid.*, pp. 1029-1045.
- ↑ *Ibid.*, pp. 1109-1112; Obst, Michael A. (ed.): *Die politischen Reden Kaiser Wilhelms II.* Paderborn 2011, pp. 362-366.
- ↑ Kaiser Wilhelm II, marginal note to Pourtalès' report from St. Petersburg of 30 July 1914, in Kautsky, Karl (ed.): *Die deutschen Dokumente zum Kriegsausbruch*, 4 vols., Charlottenburg 1919, No. 401, English translation in Mombauer, Annika (ed.): *The Origins of the First World War. Diplomatic and military documents*, Manchester 2013, p. 457f.
- ↑ For Wilhelm's role during the war see the papers of his Adjutant General [Hans von Plessen \(1841-1929\)](#) and the head of his Military Cabinet [Moritz von Lyncker \(1853-1932\)](#) in Afflerbach, Holger (ed.): *Kaiser Wilhelm II. als Oberster Kriegsherr. Quellen aus der militärischen Umgebung des Kaisers 1914-1918*, Munich 2005. Also Holger Afflerbach, *Wilhelm II as supreme warlord in the First World War*, in Mombauer, Annika and Deist, Wilhelm (eds.): *The Kaiser. New Research on Wilhelm II's role in Imperial Germany*, Cambridge 2003, pp. 195-216.
- ↑ Röhl, *Abyss* 2014, pp. 1135-1163.
- ↑ Machtan, Lothar: *Prinz Max von Baden. Der letzte Kanzler des Kaisers. Eine Biographie*, Berlin 2013, pp. 400-469.
- ↑ Bill Drews, report of his reception by Kaiser Wilhelm II in Spa on 1 November 1918, Matthias, Erich & Morsey, Rudolf (eds.): *Die Regierung des Prinzen Max von Baden*. Düsseldorf 1962, No. 115.

10. ↑ Röhl, Abyss 2014, pp. 1188-1267.

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