The Hohenzollerns and the Nazis

A HISTORY OF COLLABORATION

'A near-masterpiece … presents a devastating case'
SIMON HEFFER, *DAILY TELEGRAPH*

Stephan Malinowski



PENGUIN BOOKS

THE HOHENZOLLERNS AND THE NAZIS

'A deeply informative book . . . meticulously researched, brilliantly written and passionately argued [which] vividly illustrates the indispensable role of history' Ian Hughes, *Irish Times*

'A landmark study' Samuel Rubinstein, *Engelsberg Ideas*

'As Stephan Malinowski shows . . . there can be no doubt that the Hohenzollerns broadly "collaborated" with the Nazi regime' Brendan Simms, *Financial Times*

'A clear-eyed assessment of aristocratic self-interest leading up to and during the Nazi era . . . Malinowski writes with verve and colour, bringing the period to life . . . [An] enormously rich account for anyone keen to read deeply into German and Nazi history' Frieda Klotz, *Sunday Independent*

'Compelling . . . their later attempts to depict themselves as the last hope of principled resistance is . . . "a final flickering of their impressive talent for creating self-serving legends". Anyone reading this important book will agree' Alexander Larman, *Spectator*

'Stephan Malinowski's brilliant book strikes a balance between the forensic analysis of individual behaviour and a new understanding of how the toxic political culture of a defeated monarchy helped to disrupt democracy in Germany' Christopher Clark

'A masterpiece of historical enlightenment' John Röhl

Copyrighted Material

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephan Malinowski was born in Berlin in 1966 and has studied and taught history in Germany, France, Italy, the United States and Ireland. He is Professor of Modern European History at the University of Edinburgh. He is also the author of *Nazis and Nobles: The History of a Misalliance*.

Copyrighted Material

STEPHAN MALINOWSKI

The Hohenzollerns and the Nazis

A History of Collaboration

Translated by Jefferson Chase



PENGUIN BOOKS

Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com

Penguin Random House UK
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

penguin.co.uk

Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in German under the title *Die Hohenzollern und die Nazis* by Ullstein Buchverlage 2021
This translation first published by Allen Lane 2025
Published in Penguin Books 2026
001

Copyright © Ullstein Buchverlage GmbH, 2021
Translation copyright © Jefferson Chase, 2025

The moral right of the author and the translator has been asserted

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright.
Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes freedom of expression and supports a vibrant culture. Thank you for purchasing an authorized edition of this book and for respecting intellectual property laws by not reproducing, scanning or distributing any part of it by any means without permission. You are supporting authors and enabling Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for everyone.
No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

Typeset by Six Red Marbles UK, Thetford, Norfolk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–1–802–06108–6

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Copyrighted Material

To Béatrice

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Contents

List of Illustrations ix

Introduction 1

1. The Hohenzollerns in Exile: Outposts in the Counter-Revolution (1918–23) 9
2. Guerrillas: The Hohenzollerns Versus the Weimar Republic (1923–31) 93
3. Almost a King 183
4. Collapsing Constraints: The Hohenzollerns in 1933 256
5. Abysses: The Hohenzollerns in the Third Reich (1934–45) 328
6. Tragedy and Farce: The Hohenzollerns and Post-War Germany 391

Conclusion 472

Acknowledgements 483

Bibliography 487

Notes 529

Index 643

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

List of Illustrations

1. The four sons of the Crown Prince and Crown Princess (*INTERFOTO/Alamy Stock Photo*)
2. Princess Viktoria Luise and Crown Princess Cecilie (akpool *GmbH/Abteilung Arkivi/Alamy Stock Photo*)
3. Wilhelm with his entourage (*Süeddeutsche Zeitung Photo/Alamy Stock Photo*)
4. Huis Doorn (*akg-images/arkivi*)
5. Ex-Crown-Prince Wilhelm in Jan Lujit's smithy (*akpool GmbH/Abteilung Arkivi/Alamy Stock Photo)*
6. Crown Princess Cecilie in Zoppot (*INTERFOTO/Alamy Stock Photo*)
7. The ex-Crown Prince *(TopFoto*)
8. 'Stresemann the Bridge-Builder' (*Bibliothek im Archiv der sozialen Demokratie der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung*)
9. The ex-Crown Prince and ex-Crown Princess (*Bundesarchiv, Bild 102-00210*)
10. Emperor Wilhelm II with the Crown Princes (*Selle & Kuntze/ullstein bild via Getty Images)*
11. The Cecilien Palace (*Prussian Palaces and Gardens Foundation Berlin-Brandenburg/Photo SPSG*)
12. Austrian cartoon of ex-King Wilhelm (*ONB Wien, Call number 600.352-C.Per, Die Leuchtrakete, March 1933, page 5)*
13. The ex-Crown Prince with pro-Hitler campaigners (*Pictorial Press Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo)*
14. The ex-Crown Prince and Hermann Göring (*Bundesarchiv, Bild 102-14283*)
15. Adolf Hitler with the ex-Crown Prince and Hermann Göring (*Pictorial Press Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo)*

Copyrighted Material

16. The ex-Crown Prince entering the Kroll Opera House (*Photo by Imagno/Getty Images*)
17. The ex-Crown Prince at the opening of the Reichstag (*Süeddeutsche Zeitung Photo/Alamy Stock Photo)*
18. Meeting of the Queen Luise League (*Bundesarchiv, Bild 102-14605*)
19. Heinrich Himmler, Ernst Röhm and the ex-Crown Prince (*Bundesarchiv, Bild 102-03043*)
20. Ernst Röhm and the ex-Crown Prince *(Bundesarchiv, Bild 102-15027*)
21. The ex-Crown Prince with Heinrich Himmler (*Bundesarchiv, Film: Hakenkreuz am Stahlhelm ID: 24700)*
22. Hitler, the ex-Crown Prince, von Papen and Seldte (*akg-images*)
23. Ernst Röhm with the ex-Crown Prince (*War Archive/Alamy Stock Photo*)
24. Louis and Friedrich with Franklin D. Roosevelt *ullstein bild/ullstein bild via Getty Images*)
25. The wedding of Kira Kirillovna and Louis Ferdinand (*akg-images*)
26. The ex-Crown Prince (*bpk/Deutsches Historisches Museum/Pressebild-Agentur Schirner*)
27. The SA officer August Wilhelm, Prince of Prussia (*Imagno/Getty Images*)
28. The ex-Crown Prince with his sons (*The Frankenhuis Collection, www.frankenhuiscollection.com. Aaron Oppenheim, archivist*)
29. Louis Ferdinand and Kira (*ullstein bild via Getty Images*)
30. Three generations (*akg-images*)

Copyrighted Material

Introduction

In the autumn of 1923, a member of the exiled German royal family set off in his sports car on a long journey. He would have to drive some 1,000 kilometres from the Dutch island of Wieringen to one of his family's ancestral homes, a Renaissance castle in the German province of Silesia. The day before he had started this trip, he had sent his father a letter full of confidence about the family's future prospects. On that very same day a political parvenu, while in hiding in the Alpine village of Uffing on the shores of the Staffelsee, composed his political testament. He even contemplated suicide. Two days later, he was arrested.

Before making his way back to his home country, Prince Wilhelm of Prussia, former crown prince of the German Empire, had posted the letter to his father, Kaiser Wilhelm II, who had for some five years also been living in Dutch exile. In the meantime, Adolf Hitler, the leader of an extreme right-wing splinter party, had gone down to defeat, together with his allies in the Bavarian capital, in a hail of gunfire from the Munich police. This was the end of an early, violent attempt to bring down the Weimar Republic. Both events, the return of the crown prince and the failed Munich putsch, made the front pages of the world's press.

There was no connection between either the events or the men in question. These two enemies of German democracy represented opposed poles of society and came from vastly different social backgrounds. One of the few things common to the Prussian former army group commander and the ex-private from Austria was that they both began agitating against the Weimar Republic at the same time. But their starting points couldn't have been more dissimilar. At this juncture in history, the significance of these two events remained unclear. It would have been difficult to imagine that the

Copyrighted Material

future belonged to the Nazi movement while the German royal family would be left with little more than the past.

This book investigates how the social milieus of Prince Wilhelm of Prussia and Adolf Hitler converged and how various segments of the anti-democratic Right in Germany collaborated with one another. It will tell this story from the perspective of the Hohenzollerns, who before being deposed in November 1918 had been one of the most powerful families in Europe.[1] The focus will be on three generations: that of the Kaiser, Wilhelm II (1859–1941), that of his eldest son, Crown Prince Wilhelm (1882–1951), and that of the crown prince's six children, among whom his second son, Louis Ferdinand (1907–94), possessed the greatest historical significance. The centre of the analysis and the narrative of this group portrait and social study will be Crown Prince Wilhelm.

Post-1789 France is an example of how a nobility toppled by revolution can reinvent itself in 'de-aristocratized society', recasting and relocating itself between adaptation and counter-revolution.[2] After 1918, the same challenge was thrust upon the German aristocratic dynasties and their members, who had lost their centuries-old functions and roles almost overnight. Part of this story is the German nobility's reaction to the extraordinarily deep caesurae Germany went through in 1918, 1933, 1945 and 1990. Every one of these historical ruptures required an immense amount of adaptation and the creation of new figures to publicly represent the Hohenzollerns' self-image as a family. Often, they were accompanied by a new 'Head of the House', as the leading family member was known in aristocratic jargon.

As is the case throughout the history of the nobility, tropes and techniques, and not just bare facts, are what is most interesting. This book looks at specifically aristocratic forms of memory and representation. It is about estates, castles, hunts and memoirs but also paid family advisors and journalists, lawyers, historians, financial consultants, authors of evaluations and pamphlets, consultants, ghost-writers, spin doctors and public relations specialists. The gap between individuals and public personae is greater with aristocrats

Copyrighted Material

than with other social groups – and greatest of all for kings and heirs to the throne. Every biography that goes beyond the private sphere will inevitably place more importance on the figure than the person. Aristocratic personae were created by an effective publicity apparatus and the methods of modern propaganda – and even more by how they were seen and defined by the general public.

The nineteenth-century German poet and critic Heinrich Heine once remarked that aristocracy can only exist if people believe in it. This is only half true. The various instruments of power at the disposal of the nobility were as real as they were lasting, as many contemptuous adherents of democracy who prematurely dismissed the aristocracy would learn to their own, often physical, dismay. Even after 1918, millions of Germans retained the sort of faith that allows kings and noblemen to function as such. In theatre, kings are identifiable because of the deference and servility of the actors around them. No aristocracy can make do without representation, ornament and illusion. If aristocracy is indeed considered a kind of theatrical illusion, then the audience necessarily plays a crucial role. PR work and audience interpretation are crucial factors in whether an individual – be it an heir to the throne or a commoner styling himself as 'the Führer' – is considered a superhuman messiah or a laughable clown. That's another reason why, in addition to offering a portrait of three generations of the German royal family, this book concentrates on the history of communications between the Hohenzollerns and the general public. From its beginning to its end, the dynastic idea of Prussia carried intense, projected emotional energy. The Hohenzollerns' greatest capital was always the rapture they inspired in millions of Germans. That was what granted them special status, which was never fully exhausted.

Before the Wilhelmine Empire collapsed like a house of cards, the Hohenzollerns' power naturally went far beyond just the public imagination. In the midst of the First World War, the Cecilienhof Castle – really more of an estate – was opened in the Neuer Garten park in Potsdam. Symbolically, Crown Princess Cecilie had her youngest child baptized and moved into the new residence named

Copyrighted Material

after her alone. The ceremony took place on 9 November 1917, one year to the day before the Wilhelmine Empire would fall apart. The baptism 'was a private family affair . . . in keeping with the seriousness of the times', newspapers wrote,[3] and thus without the pomp and circumstance for which the Hohenzollerns were alternately admired and mocked around the world.

When construction began on the new residence of Crown Prince Wilhelm and Cecilie, the former Duchess of Mecklenburg, in 1914, it was seen as an intermediary residence for the heir to the throne, whose power and prestige were at their zenith, and his family. Amidst the ups and downs of the decisive year of 1917, many German navy men believed that Reich submarines were poised to bring down the British Empire and to defy the industrial might of the United States in the Atlantic Ocean. After all, Germany had already achieved military victory on the Eastern Front, and the occupation of the vast area known as 'Ober Ost' had German officers and planners dreaming of colonizing Eastern Europe.

At least nominally, Crown Prince Wilhelm commanded Germany's largest army group. And it was the mark of his significance that German newspapers were careful to assure readers that he had only briefly left the field to attend the Potsdam baptism. Part and parcel of the Hohenzollerns' image was the tradition of the Prussian princesses being photographed in military uniforms and the postcards of the prince's four young boys playing with a Gatling gun. But ironically, while the entire Hohenzollern family was at least symbolically at war, a new faux-English royal residence was being built for an heir to the throne who would become one of the most powerful men in the world – but only as long as Germany emerged victorious. This was the role and identity into which Wilhelm of Prussia had been born and for which he had been trained.

The central question of this book is: what was the relationship of the Hohenzollern dynasty to the Weimar Republic and to National Socialism? This question resurfaced in Germany five decades after the end of the Second World War for political and legal reasons. In the early 1990s, the Hohenzollern family filed compensation claims

Copyrighted Material

for the Soviet expropriations after 1945. It was the start of a long process of legal discovery conducted, in part, in the public eye. Historically, this dispute was about the question of whether the last German crown prince had directly or indirectly supported National Socialism. The dispute was the result of a peculiarity of the compensation regulations after German reunification. A 1994 law regulating compensation claims excluded claims if the last owner of the expropriated property had supported the Nazi dictatorship. The total amount in dispute in the case of the Hohenzollerns has been estimated to be in the hundreds of millions. Additionally, historically minded observers were, of course, keenly interested in the question of how one of the formerly most powerful families of the European high nobility had positioned itself in relation to National Socialism.

The starting point of my own involvement with the former crown prince's post-1918 activities was an expert evaluation I was commissioned to write by the Ministry of Finance in Potsdam in 2014. For its part, the Hohenzollern family had engaged and financed renowned historians as experts – including Christopher Clark, Regius Professor of History at Cambridge University, one of the leading historians of Germany worldwide, as well as Wolfram Pyta and Rainer Orth, two excellent historians of the periods under discussion. The Hohenzollern family later also co-financed and provided organizational support for an entire monograph by the historian Lothar Machtan. It was launched at considerable expense in the summer of 2021 at a gala featuring a musical band, the acting German minister of finance and the acting 'Head of the House' at Berlin's Kronprinzenpalais, a symbolic location in Berlin's historic centre.

More than other historical debates, the dispute over the Hohenzollern claims played itself out between historical scholarship, jurisprudence, politics and the mass media. By the summer of 2019, the debate had reached a popular audience, not primarily through the work of historians, but rather through an investigative story in the news magazine *Der Spiegel* and, even more, a satirical

Copyrighted Material

segment by the TV comedian Jan Böhmermann. In a November 2019 programme, Böhmermann delivered an extremely cutting polemic against the family's claims to restitution. On his website, he published the four expert evaluations, which had previously been treated as confidential. This episode of Böhmermann's programme now has over 4 million views on YouTube.

By that point, the debate had attracted the attention of nearly all leading German media – newspapers, magazines, television, radio, blogs – as well as international outlets such as CNN, the *New York Times*, the *New York Review of Books*, *The Times*, *The Spectator* and *Le Figaro*. The regional state parliaments of the cities of Berlin and Brandenburg discussed the case, as did the Bundestag, which convened a commission of historical and legal experts. Meanwhile, Hohenzollern family lawyers sued newspapers, politicians and historians in more than eighty lawsuits.

The nature of German law means that the many court cases associated with the Hohenzollerns' restitution have to be focused on a lone individual, Crown Prince Wilhelm, forcing complex historical questions into an either/or, black-and-white straitjacket. This may appear right and necessary from a judicial perspective. But one task of historians is to try to relocate the individual figure in his proper societal setting. The questions surrounding the crown prince inevitably lead us back to his family and the conservative, anti-democratic segments of German society. There is no way to reasonably assess Crown Prince Wilhelm without placing him in the broader, historical context of post-1918 German counter-revolutionary movements.

The German revolution of 1918 may have done away with one of the most powerful dynasties in Europe, but it also made peace offers German aristocrats never accepted. Their refusal to do so is a key factor when historians consider whether the revolution could have more firmly and consistently established democratic principles in Germany. The figure of Wilhelm inevitably raises the issue of the German nobility, a dramatically under-researched topic, and immediately opens up a historical avenue rarely examined by leading

Copyrighted Material

scholars of the Weimar Republic. The history of the Hohenzollerns after 1918 is by no means *terra incognita*. There is a whole series of older[4] and more recent[5] studies on the German nobility after it was 'abolished' – at least in terms of political power. Nonetheless, and rather inexplicably, the Hohenzollerns and the aristocracy play next to no role at all in the standard histories of the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich.

One reason is that social historians tend to concentrate on group dynamics, whereas the nobility often seems to represent the very essence of stasis. Moreover, history generally tends to favour the victors, and the victors within the radical political Right of the Weimar Republic were clearly the Nazis. When compared to one of the unavoidable fixed points of twentieth-century European history, the darkness and destruction brought about by the Third Reich, the deposed royal family may seem little more than a footnote. Furthermore, after 1918, as in 1945, the aristocracy was indeed largely considered to have been abolished. For most proponents of democracy, which had seemingly emerged victorious, the Hohenzollerns and the rest of the German aristocracy remained an incomprehensible, indecipherable social clique, an 'exotic Indian tribe', as the pro-democracy man of letters and member of 'Young Germany' Heinrich Laube had put it back in 1830.[6] As a rule, adherents of democracy had little contact with this group and its ways of life, values and traditions. The result was that the public attitude towards the nobility in the 1920s was a mixture of contempt, incomprehension and resentment, with some occasional admiration thrown in for good measure. That persists today. But during the Weimar Republic and before the consolidation of the Nazi dictatorship in 1934, the Hohenzollerns remained an important factor in the survival of Germany's fragile democracy.

For a variety of reasons, many of them good, historians in the past few decades have renounced the traditional fixation on great individuals. The major political and cultural histories of the Weimar Republic, even those concerning the radical political Right, read the past in a way that is blind to the German nobility. In an astonishing

Copyrighted Material

parallel, just as post-1945 historians have lost track of the aristocracy and have seldom examined that group systematically, people in the Weimar Republic dramatically underestimated the resources of power of a nobility that had supposedly ceased to exist. Proponents of democracy tended to take parliaments and newspapers most seriously, whereas the aristocracy, at least internally, was thought to be more concerned with balls, horse races, casinos and hunting parties. Few Germans were able to perceive the influence of princes, country estates, clubs, pheasant shoots, salons and aristocratic networks 'not foreseen in the constitution'.[7] But that influence remained considerable until well after the Nazis' ascension to power in 1933.

The following six chapters will cover a century of interaction between the political leaders of the Hohenzollern dynasty and the general public, showing the former's roles in anti-democratic right-wing circles, the deals that they struck with the Nazi state and their attempts since 1945 to convince democratic, post-war Germany to buy into a self-serving, revised version of history.

Copyrighted Material

1.

The Hohenzollerns in Exile: Outposts in the Counter-Revolution (1918–23)

The Kaiser's 'Heroic Death'

What ultimately became known as the Allies' 'Hundred Days Offensive' of August–November 1918 culminated in the collapse of the German lines on the Western Front. The series of attacks that pushed German troops further and further back cost the lives of more than a million people on both sides. On the morning of 9 November 1918, as Germany's decisive military catastrophe was unfolding, a fateful meeting took place at German military headquarters in the Belgian town of Spa. Tersely and soberly, Field Marshal General Paul von Hindenburg told his king, emperor and supreme commander Wilhelm II that he could no longer guarantee his safety. Hindenburg didn't pull any punches. Revolution, he said, was spreading like wildfire from Kiel to Munich, and the Reich Chancellor and his emissaries were demanding that the Kaiser and the crown prince step down. There was no more chance of holding the German capital, Berlin, than there was of maintaining the Western Front, and rebellious German troops had seized control of the bridges across the River Rhine. When asked, thirty-nine German frontline commanders had said that, if Wilhelm II ordered it, they would beat an orderly retreat home with their men. But they would not mete out any counter-revolutionary violence against their fellow Germans.

Proudly and calmly, Wilhelm II dismissed both the idea of doing battle against the German people and concerns for his own security. In an address to his highest-ranking officers, he recalled one of his dinnertime speeches in which he had cited his ancestor Albrecht,

Copyrighted Material

who had some five centuries before said: 'There is no more beautiful death than one surrounded by my enemies.' Without any hesitation or further discussion, the Kaiser summoned four of his six sons and a small cadre of officers – militaristic aristocrats from Pomerania and Brandenburg – for a 'final ride'. A stretch of the front with particularly heavy artillery fire was selected, and, without a word, the men, who had chosen to die, mounted their horses and launched the final cavalry attack of the Wilhelmine Empire with their emperor in the lead.

The military report of the incident read: 'The field marshal moved uphill to gain an overview. Using his spyglass, he could see the small group shrink as the men rode towards the horizon. Suddenly, as though a volcano had erupted, a horrific, massive hedge of rock and earth shot up towards the heavens and descended again. The riders could no longer be seen. Shocked, the field marshal lowered his spyglass. His aged lips murmured: "The end of the Hohenzollerns. Praise God, a worthy end." '

The events just described never happened. On the contrary, this fictional vision of history appeared in the newspaper *Vorwärts*, the central organ of the Social Democratic Party, as a sarcastic lampoon flage of how the German monarchy actually collapsed. It was published on 9 November 1932, the fourteenth anniversary of the Kaiser's flight to the Netherlands and fewer than three months before the reins of power would be handed over to Adolf Hitler.[1] As part of the ruse, the newspaper claimed that Hitler had ordered ten million copies of the historical scene to be handed out in the schools of what would shortly become the Third Reich. The bitter irony was that the Kaiser's alleged desire for a hero's death – the failure of which to materialize was the subject of millions of discussions, particularly within the German nobility and throughout conservative, monarchist society – was just wishful thinking, divorced from reality. The truth was that the Kaiser and the crown prince had fled.

The lack of a forceful response to revolution in Germany and the self-sacrifice the Hohenzollerns *hadn't* made immediately created a need on the Right for vivid conservative fantasies which would

Copyrighted Material

persist for decades. The royal behaviour *Vorwärts* ridiculed with its adroit satire was a deadly serious matter for conservatives. By 1932, the First World War lay fourteen years in the past, but the political Right was still obsessed with the heroic legacy the Hohenzollerns could have, but hadn't, left behind.

The heroic self-sacrifice *Vorwärts* caricatured could have happened in reality. At the very least theoretically, the Kaiser had four options in Spa on 9 November 1918: launching counter-revolutionary operations aimed at Berlin, 600 kilometres to the east; staying put and allowing himself to be captured and prosecuted by the Entente; initiating a targeted 'special offensive' on the front that would end in the spectacle of his death;[2] or fleeing to a neutral foreign country, for instance the Netherlands or Switzerland. These and other courses of action were indeed considered in response to revolution on the home front and calls for the Kaiser to abdicate. The idea of Wilhelm II pre-emptively renouncing the throne, for instance, was debated but discarded, and the suggestion that he could abdicate as German emperor but remain king of Prussia was deemed legally untenable.[3] It is uncertain whether the notion of the Kaiser riding out to meet his death was ever put to the man in question, but many of his underlings certainly discussed it.

Historical reconstructions and bitter debates among the officers and diplomats present about what actually happened on 9 November 1918 began to circulate immediately after the Kaiser's 'departure', as monarchist circles frequently termed it, to the Netherlands. Thanks to indiscretions on the part of eyewitnesses, accounts swiftly flooded the public sphere. In March and April 1919, the German press got hold of letters from the Kaiser to the crown prince and a retrospective written by General Count Friedrich von der Schulenburg, who vigorously advocated putting down the revolution by force.[4] These documents showed that the Kaiser had promised the general chief of staff of the Army Group German Crown Prince to stay 'with the troops' and not to abdicate the Prussian throne. The general's account, as passed on in the socialist press, read: 'I answered, 'If His Majesty would come to our troops at the front,

Copyrighted Material

His Majesty would definitely be safe. Please promise me that His Majesty will stay with the troops come what may.' His Majesty took his leave with the words, 'I will stay with the army. I was allowed to kiss his beloved, strong hand, and I never saw him again.'[5]

Flight and Curse

Revisionist conservative narratives blamed – together with revolutionaries, southern German diplomats and 'weak-willed' civilians – Wilhelm Groener, the lone non-aristocratic member of the general staff, and Paul von Hindenburg for the Kaiser abandoning his troops. On 9 November, Wilhelm II himself sought to shift blame to Jews and freemasons and already foresaw a life as a 'pensioner' in a neutral foreign country as his most likely future. In his final wartime letter to his wife, he wrote about the possibility of 'falling here amidst those who remained true to the very end'.[6] But he didn't do any such thing. Ultimately, those who believed most in the supposed ideals of the monarchy – the nobility, the monarchists and, broadly speaking, the extreme Right – had to admit that the king had failed to anticipate the consequences of his actions and himself bore responsibility for following bad advice.

Crown Prince Wilhelm, who had taken part in the lengthy discussion in Spa and spoken with his father for even longer afterwards, quit the scene after several hours and returned, much to the surprise of various generals, to his own headquarters.[7] He had already been stripped of his command by the revolutionary government in Berlin, and his request to be allowed to lead his troops back to the German capital was denied. So, too, was his wish to return to his castle in Silesia as a 'private citizen'. The rationale given was that, if he did, the local farmers would 'beat him to death'.

Communications between Spa and Berlin made it clear that for domestic and international political reasons the social democrats had no intention of allowing the crown prince to return to Germany.[8] Moreover, the heir to the throne, too, had made promises to

Copyrighted Material

generals and others, one of whom wrote, 'He shook my hand and declared that he would stay with the army.' As early as 1917, he proclaimed that in the case of German defeat he would 'proceed to the head of his troops and seek death'.[9] But on 12 November 1918, two days after his father, he also hurried off the Netherlands.[10] Later on, in conversations with old and new radical right-wing elites, he would follow the Kaiser's lead in blaming 'limp-wristed' civilians, 'big-city rabble' and 'segments of Jewry' for Germany's military demise.[11]

Most of the nobility viewed the prince's flight no less critically than that of his father. It is nearly impossible to overestimate the significance that the two men's 'departure', without a fight, for a quiet life in the Netherlands had for the still-to-be-defined relationship between the political Right in Germany and the Hohenzollerns. The family's standing among broad swathes of the nobility suffered greatly from what was interpreted as a cowardly act of desertion, although the Hohenzollerns' prestige never completely dissipated. Still, although the bonds between the nobility and the royal family were by no means dissolved, the violation of traditional ideals profoundly changed attitudes among the lower aristocracy, officer corps and civil servants towards potential candidates for the throne.

The resulting power vacuum accelerated the rise of new images and figures of leadership. Long before the appearance of National Socialism, the vacuum was filled by ethnic chauvinists and the radical Right.[12] And the far Right wasn't alone in calling for Germany's figureheads to demonstrate strength and die a hero's death. The lawyer, officer, member of the conservative anti-Nazi resistance and post-1945 advocate for the Hohenzollern family Fabian von Schlabrendorff recalled his father, also a Prussian officer, privately demanding that all the Kaiser's sons should fall in battle. Only the crown prince should be allowed to survive since he was crucial to continuing the monarchy.[13]

Views like this were particularly common among aristocratic women. One week after the Kaiser fled, Princess Rosy zu Salm-Horstmar wrote:

Copyrighted Material

> It's really strange that there are so few true men in Germany! – The whole thing is terrible. But I don't believe that it was His Majesty's idea to flee. I think they must have captured him . . . I think it's much worse that his son followed in his tracks. In this regard, I must praise Prince Eitel! Personally speaking, it's not too bad about the other two. But the issue, the idea is different. It's as though humanity is in the grip of a disease that's twisting its spirit . . . Still, I must admit, the monarchic idea was an illusion and only worked with good monarchs. As soon as the fellow [on the throne] is useless, the cause is doomed. And it's now well and truly doomed.[14]

By the following February, she had subscribed to the popular notion that the bourgeois Wilhelm Groener, in particular, bore the blame for Wilhelm II's flight:

> Groener seems to be primarily the one who convinced Hindenburg to send the Kaiser to Holland. The old fellow [General von Plessen] always advised the Kaiser to ride against either the enemy or on Berlin, even at the cost of his life. That was indeed the only possible path. But His Majesty was no doubt too weak for this! – In any case, the whole thing is horrible, and our enemies are getting more and more impertinent.[15]

Desertion and Internal Sacrifice

The historical record is full of attempts to come up with stories to compensate for what the nobility, in particular, viewed as this blemish on the House of Hohenzollern: the lack of a dramatic final battle during the demise of the monarchy. Again and again, observers speculated about internal struggles and the 'terrible tremors within the Kaiser's soul', essentially positing, in the absence of a short, dramatic final battle, a lifelong internal struggle within the monarch himself. From this perspective, Wilhelm II's flight to the Netherlands was seen not as an act of self-preservation or cowardice but

Copyrighted Material

rather as part of a never-ending, arduous journey and a massive act of self-denial for the benefit of the German people, which the Kaiser would carry around with him for the rest of his life. Apologists for the monarchy credited the crown prince, too, with taking a 'decision' that entailed 'selflessly serving' his people and his fatherland. In this reading, the prince absconded to the Netherlands not to save his own skin, but in a display of 'sacrificing his most personal wishes and his own happiness'.[16]

Monarchist publications would defend this notion for decades, and it was public knowledge the Kaiser amended his last will and testament in 1937 to read, for posterity: 'Out of love for my people, I made the greatest and heaviest sacrifice of which I was capable when I went abroad in November 1918, taking upon myself all the misinterpretations, scorn and mockery this step entailed.'[17] Accompanying the pseudo-religious themes of internal turmoil and self-sacrifice were countless reports of alleged danger the German royals faced in the Netherlands. The Kaiser, it was told over and over, faced the prospect of being kidnapped by commandos, assassinated, subjected to the constant surveillance of patrol boats or falling victim to a carefully planned communist attack. These dangers were either imaginary or grossly exaggerated – they never materialized.

In interviews, the Kaiser and the crown prince sought to encourage the belief in their boldness and courage. As early as February 1919, the crown prince submitted to 'informal' questions and put on a brave face – from the safety of his relatively secure haven – vis-à-vis the demands from the Entente that he be handed over. 'Je m'en fiche,' – 'It's all the same to me,' – he proclaimed, regurgitating the empty slogans of the previous November. 'They'll never take me alive.' The conservative German press praised such posturing as a bold 'challenge' to Germany's recent enemies.[18]

Before revolution erupted in Germany, Wilhelm II had ordered that the New Palace in Potsdam, to which the empress, four of their sons and their wives had retreated, be defended like a fortress. In a combative tirade, the Kaiser pronounced himself ready, in the interest of restoring order, to open fire on his own property, to march

Copyrighted Material

with a single loyal battalion on Berlin, to fight down to the final bullet, to answer his enemies with automatic weapons and to stand by his troops. He also pondered out loud whether he should commit suicide: 'I'm no coward and am not afraid of a bullet, but I don't want to be captured here . . . So, children, arm yourselves! I'm staying in the villa tonight. We cannot afford any more to be unarmed.'[19] On his subsequent flight he was protected by soldiers toting machine guns, and those who accompanied him in his motorcade carried rifles.[20]

It has been plausibly argued that demands for the Kaiser to give his life on the battlefield reflected modern rather than traditional role models. Heroic deaths or militarily staged suicides were by no means Hohenzollern traditions, no matter how often Germans stylized the alleged fearlessness of Friedrich II and the horseback duel and death by sabre in 1806 of Prince Louis Ferdinand of Prussia, after whom Crown Prince Wilhelm named his second son. Author Theodor Fontane had sung Louis Ferdinand's praises in a mid-nineteenth-century poem: 'In stature six feet tall / a god of war to regard / Admired by women beautiful / Beloved by brothers in arms / A blue-eyed, blond with swagger / And clutched in his youthful hand / Was Prussia's venerable dagger / Prince Louis Ferdinand.' When measured against the long tradition of much-ballyhooed Prussian culture and its putative modesty, readiness for sacrifice and heroism, however, the reality of November 1918 was very feeble indeed.

Demands that sacrifices be made and that the king should forfeit his own life were more in line with the modern figure of the charismatic leader, or Führer, than with the dynastic Hohenzollern kings. On this score, historians have correctly spoken of 'a neo-romantic and thus genuinely modern scenario'.[21] In his 1920 book *Storm of Steel*, right-wing intellectual Ernst Jünger rhapsodized about the 'princes of the trenches': battle-hardened, unbending warriors in comparison to whom the Kaiser and his sons appeared pathetic. The new breed of 'princes' could be noblemen, apothecaries' sons or manual labourers. Such stylized figures recur throughout the

Copyrighted Material

radical right-wing literature of the Weimar epoch, first and foremost Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in 1925. A highly decorated and frequently wounded soldier who fought in the trenches of the First World War, Jünger saw it as the prince's duty under certain circumstances to sacrifice himself: 'The prince has a responsibility to die in battle surrounded by the last of his own kind. The countless others who went to their deaths before him have a right to demand that.'[22]

The generations who were given their role models in the German educational system and military academies, where they were introduced to legends like the demise of King Leonidas and the 300 Spartans in the Thermopylae pass in 480 BC, found images of heroic deaths equally familiar and absurd.[23] The German version of the story of how Spartan warriors sacrificed themselves in battle against the Persians – 'Traveller, if you get to Sparta, announce there that you saw us lying here, as our law demanded' – was authored by no less than Friedrich Schiller, and after 1918 not only the aristocracy, but even more so the educated bourgeoisie, enthusiastically embraced the cult of the dead. Moreover, for decades, both the nobility and the educated upper classes had been pumped full of Richard Wagner's intoxicating scenarios of downfall and salvation in words and images.

Conversely, the modes of settling conflict invoked in this context were thoroughly archaic, not modern. In German interpretations of the country's defeat in November 1918, the updated, modern ideal of heroic death gained strength within the military families of the Prussian aristocracy and Wilhelm II's entourage from its connection with a specific cult of falling in battle.[24] Thus, the imperative that the Kaiser and his sons go down fighting is best understood as a hybrid of ancient and highly modern elements – a mixture that would later recur in National Socialism.

The fantasy of the king as a leader who would voluntarily go to his death among his men was ultimately the product of how Wilhelm II had stylized himself in the preceding decades. It's difficult to imagine similar expectations being projected upon Georges Clemenceau, Woodrow Wilson or Lloyd George. As soon as

Copyrighted Material

pretension and reality diverged, however, this bathetic image of military leadership came back to haunt the Kaiser and his sons – and the Hohenzollern family as a whole. After 1918, the anti-democratic movement made much of German soldiers' courage in dying at the front, a bravery the crown prince and his brothers had neither demonstrated nor possessed. To bridge the obvious gap, reactionaries required a host of anecdotes, suppositions and sub-narratives such as that of the crown prince's alleged refusal to disguise himself as a civilian or to remove his bear-skin cap with its death's head when he had himself driven into Dutch exile. Later, in conjunction with a planned attempt to escape back to Germany, the crown prince procured fake identity documentation with the name Johannes Hoogenstein, whose picture showed him wearing a presumably pasted-on moustache and a flat cap.[25] Another element of the motif of the noble, fearless Hohenzollerns consisted of stories of how the empress faced down a group of uncouth revolutionaries with dignity and courage in Villa Ingenheim in Potsdam.[26] For decades, narrative images of the Hohenzollerns' readiness to fight were disseminated and embellished into a determined struggle against a much-feared 'Bolshevik revolution' in Germany. In fact, the machine guns, hand grenades and battalions of guards that defended Potsdam Palais like a fortress conjured up a battle that had never in the event actually needed to be waged.

None of the Hohenzollerns or the other princes were ever threatened physically during the 1918 revolution. Even as people called on social democratic ministers to mow down rioters with machine guns and to attack apartment blocks in working-class neighbourhoods with artillery and warplanes, workers and soldiers' councils provided guards to protect the empress and crown princess. Nonetheless, the national and international media were deluged by hastily cooked-up fables, woven from the thinnest threads of facts, about the constant peril to the Kaiser and the crown prince from Sparticist Youth attacks, intricately plotted kidnappings and imminent revolutions.

Copyrighted Material

In reality, the Hohenzollerns' transition to the Weimar Republic

was as non-heroic as it was undramatic. The Kaiser's sons who had remained in Germany experienced the initial weeks following the overthrow of the monarchy away from home in the Pomeranian forests but nonetheless in the comfort of family estates and aristocratic networks. The crown princess returned with her six children to Cecilienhof guarded by security provided by a workers and soldiers' council. The Kaiser's son Oskar wiled away his time at the country estate of his father-in-law, Count von Bassewitz, in Mecklenburg. Oskar's brother August Wilhelm took up residence in a hunting lodge in Thuringia owned by Duke Carl Eduard of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha. Empress August Viktoria resided with her second-eldest son Eitel Friedrich in Villa Ingenheim.[27]

The empress didn't remain for long in Germany – she left for the Netherlands in late November in a special train escorted by social democratic guards. She wouldn't return to Potsdam until after her death in 1921. But the brief period in which August Viktoria remained in Potsdam, combined with the crown princess staying in Cecilienhof, made the Hohenzollern women into symbols of strength and determination, the role vacated by the Kaiser and the crown prince. In Potsdam, the crown princess acquired a new stature, and not only among monarchists, as a combination of a loyally waiting Penelope, an iron-willed place-holder and an on-the-ground organizer of the battle against those Weimar Republic forces that wanted to seize the royal family's hereditary estates and cancel their entitlements. The figure of a princess steadfastly holding the line in difficult times summoned up the powerful mythology surrounding Queen Luise of Prussia during the Napoleonic Wars. Both were seen as shining examples of strength, hope and resurrection after a national catastrophe.[28]

Fear had initially led the German aristocracy to lie low, but soon there was no need for anxiety. One month after the Kaiser fled, a German princess wrote:

> There we have it! At the start, things will be very bad for us, and some conditions like those in Russia will arrive in German cities.

Copyrighted Material

> Bolshevists – I mean. But after a time, they will be pushed aside by good troops. The republic will have its day, but it won't persist, 2–2½ months at most. Then a king will come again. Maybe not as he used to be, which was in fact quite bad, but a king who's like a king, like the old kings of Prussia. I already know what he'll look like. Things will be 'very bad,' as they say, for us, but it will strengthen us and we will grow old in happiness. No matter how everyone is weeping right now, and no matter dark things may look at the moment, I simply can't believe in Prussia's downfall, and I know it will rise again. There you have it! You see, I'm not worried at all about Prussia. I'm far more concerned with finding a reasonable tutor for the children.[29]

Despite the thoroughly comfortable conditions in which the revolution allowed the German royal family and other aristocrats to exist, they felt that they had undergone a uniquely precipitous fall, an unprecedented caesura and an unspeakable catastrophe. This subjective response deserves to be taken seriously, since, arguably, no part of German society ever fell from such great heights in so short a time as did the nobility in 1918. Nonetheless, only German aristocrats could interpret the revolution as an apocalypse. The first phase of their reaction was one of disbelief, fear of an imagined bloodbath along Russian lines, paralysis and speechlessness. Even twelve years after the fact, in 1930, the crown princess would write in her memoirs:

> Thus came the most terrible blow we Germans have ever experienced in our two-thousand-year history. The revolution was at hand . . . There was a ceasefire and then, ultimately, the dictated peace treaty of Versailles. These events are so tragic that even today I can't bring myself to speak of them.[30]

These statements were manifestly untrue. In fact, from very early on, the crown princess and most of the Hohenzollerns rediscovered their tongues and their ability to organize themselves politically.

Copyrighted Material

Contact with Counter-Revolutionaries

In December 1918, after an unexpectedly and remarkably non-violent first month of revolution, in which none of the deposed aristocrats suffered any physical violence whatever, Germany was sucked into cycles of brutal fighting between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces. By the first days of 1919, the signs of a potential civil war – a scenario that would dog the Weimar Republic until its end – were evident everywhere. Munich and Berlin became the two most prominent arenas of the conflict, which by mid-1919 had claimed 3,000 lives. Recent historians have described and analysed in detail the massive counter-revolutionary violence unleashed in December 1918 against a 'communist revolution' that was more imagined than actual.[31] The courts martial, the political assassinations and the deployment of artillery within the German capital and other events established new levels of tolerance for using violence that would mark an immense change in political culture in Germany.[32] Sharing responsibility for the explosion of brutality were the German military leadership, the Reichswehr, radical right-wing Freikorps militias and associations, segments of the social democratic movement and some other adherents of democracy.

Although they didn't assume leadership positions of any sort, members of the Hohenzollern dynasty joined counter-revolutionary organizations at an astonishingly early stage – a fact registered throughout Germany. On 11 December 1918, when the First Regimental Guards returned on foot to their Potsdam garrison, the troops were inspected by Prince Eitel Friedrich, and their commander Count Eulenburg delivered a monarchist speech.[33] Several days later, addressing the newly formed, ultra-right-wing German National People's Party (DNVP) in Berlin as the main speaker, Siegfried von Kardorff excoriated the revolution as 'the most terrible crime ever committed against the German people'.[34] The crown prince established initial contact with military leaders of the

Copyrighted Material

counter-revolutionary movement in the Netherlands before 1918 was even over. In articles by right-wing and anti-Semitic journalists in the US, the royal family commenced an overseas public relations campaign that also featured in the German media. Family ghost-writers fed the growing myth that Germany had been 'stabbed in the back' by leftist traitors.

The first revisionist monarchist pamphlets and brochures began to appear, obscuring the actual behaviour of the Kaiser and the crown prince in the final days of the war. In the summer of 1919, German national parties disavowed any responsibility for the First World War and Germany's defeat and demanded 'the restoration of the monarchy under the Hohenzollern sceptre'.[35] Around that, anti-democratic protest marches, often led by General Erich von Ludendorff, called for a return to the 'spirit of Potsdam', the seat of monarchist power. Such demonstrations were common in Berlin and Potsdam, particularly in the area around the latter city's Garrison Church, where the great German national symbol Friedrich the Great was buried.[36] In the central Berlin district of Mitte, the royal family's main administration – the so-called 'Ministry of the Royal House' as it was known until 1925 – resumed its work. In Bonn, the former royal family lawyer and constitutional expert Philipp Zorn, who would later re-enter the Hohenzollerns' service, composed the first of numerous briefs arguing that Entente demands for the ex-Kaiser and crown prince to be handed over were illegal.[37]

By that time, the Hohenzollerns had also already found legal experts to argue for distinctions between family and state property that would influence public German attitudes for over a century.[38] When the Weimar Constitution was ratified on 31 July 1919, the royal family had already started to redefine its role within the convoluted and organizationally still quite fluid anti-democratic camp in various forums. But, in the early days, their search for a new function and new allies took place outside Berlin. Two of the most important locations were in the Netherlands.

Copyrighted Material

Leading Lights of Monarchism

During the 1923 fruit-picking season, Wilhelm II had himself driven in an open car through the municipality of Betuwe in the Dutch province of Gelderland. Whenever a pig came into view along his route, the 63-year-old is reputed to have doffed his hat and repeated three times: 'Good day, my dear little swine.'[39]

Viewed superficially, this anecdote might seem to suggest that the exiled former monarch had disengaged from the world he had lost in 1918 and was now just a peaceable nobleman who delighted in gazing upon the cherry blossoms and greeted the pigs amidst replendent Dutch fruit gardens. Upon closer inspection, however, this bizarre scene wasn't necessarily one of flowers and peace. Greeting pigs was a relic of a wartime superstition according to which the supreme commander could ensure victory in battles to come by issuing greetings every time he saw a pig behind German lines on enemy territory.[40] The story actually suggests that from the Kaiser's perspective the war still wasn't at all over in 1923. This was precisely the view adopted, perhaps out of necessity, by the politically relevant members of the Hohenzollern dynasty and the far Right during the Weimar Republic. That segment of society refused on principle to accept the outcome of the war and thought it was only a matter of time and organization before the conflict would be continued. Most members of this milieu still conceived of politics and Germany's future in military and martial terms. Meanwhile, the new rules of democracy remained equally alien to the Hohenzollerns, most of the nobility and a significant portion of the entire German population.

Two locations predominate in this chapter of Hohenzollern history: Doorn and Wieringen. Both offer insights into the two most important early political transformations the family was undergoing: the Kaiser's gradual drift into insignificance and the attempt to reinvent the crown prince as a leader who championed the

Copyrighted Material

opposition to the Weimar Republic. The Hohenzollerns' days in exile were simultaneously both a farce and a serious threat to the infant German democracy. In these two Dutch hotspots of German conservatism, the borders between reality and theatre, fact and rumour, flights of fancy and recurring themes and clowns and leaders were quite permeable. Correspondingly, there are two ways to interpret this mixture of the risible and the genuinely destructive: as a curiosity on the margins of the main history of the Weimar Republic or as a complex of contradictory impulses typical of the time, one which would recur in many twentieth-century dictatorships, including the Nazi movement and regime.

Theoretically, the monarchy, the higher nobility and the aristocracy had ceased to exist with the founding of the Weimar Republic. But it was naive to think that the aristocracy could be simply abolished by decree: the attempts to do so were toothless. In the reality of the Weimar Republic, German aristocrats retained their estates, castles, titles and most of their positions of authority, and it soon become clear that many were still a force to be reckoned with.

The story of the Hohenzollerns as part of the counter-revolution began almost immediately after the royal family arrived in Dutch exile and had multiple high points and more than one main protagonist. In the family logic, the 'head of the house' was considered the unchallenged leader, and the Kaiser's authority, based as it was on 'house rules', was binding not only on his sons, but on his grandchildren as well. This was explicitly described in the 1952 memoirs of Prince Louis Ferdinand of Prussia, the crown prince's second-oldest son and the 'head of the house' at the time, in which he tried to pass himself off as a supporter of democracy and an adversary of Prussian militaristic tradition and National Socialism. In Louis Ferdinand's retrospective telling, his grandfather in Doorn was the one who decided whether he as a young man would be allowed to travel the world, including the United States, write a dissertation, quit his jingoistic student fraternity, get married or fight a duel while enrolled at Bonn University.[41]

Copyrighted Material

But after 1918 it was impossible to ignore the cracks that had

opened in the family hierarchy. Although the Hohenzollerns remained firmly embedded in the anti-democratic camp, the authority of the 'head of the house' was now split between various centres of power. The German higher nobility and the historians who have chimed in to support the royal family's demands for the restitution of confiscated assets have perennially focused on the dynasty's oldest son, but a balanced historical analysis has to acknowledge a multitude of significant players. The Kaiser had seven surviving children and four siblings in the 1920s. All told, the crown prince and his six brothers and sisters had nineteen children, and their spouses also must be considered when taking stock of the three active adult generations of Hohenzollerns in the 1930s.

The Kaiser's children and their families continued to reside in various estates and villas in Potsdam, Silesia and elsewhere after 1918. Thus, any talk of the 'eradication' of the German nobility was as spurious concerning the Hohenzollerns as it was with any other aristocratic German family. Neither the individuals nor their codes, traditions, identity or political influence ceased to exist. Outside the authority of the democratic constitution, a parallel aristocratic world of antiquated titles, terminology, internal rules and rituals survived.

These three generations of Hohenzollerns played a role during both the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich. The Kaiser in Doorn, the crown prince in Potsdam and Silesia, the remaining princes in Potsdam and the Kaiser's second wife, who constantly shuttled between castles, salons, country estates and party headquarters throughout Germany, all remained people of consequence who were taken seriously at home and abroad, particularly in right-wing circles. Whether they were always visible to the public or not, the family continued to exercise important functions.

The defenders of the early Weimar Republic considered it sufficient to restrict what they regarded as the two potential aristocratic leaders of a counter-revolution to specific locations outside Germany – the Kaiser in Doorn and the crown prince on the remote Dutch island of Wieringen to the north – and to ban them from

Copyrighted Material

coming home. Female members of the royal family were granted greater freedom of movement. In late November 1918, the empress was allowed to return from the Netherlands to Germany. She was escorted by soldiers and travelled under the personal protection of a leading social democrat in a special train with three brand-new sleeping cars and two carriages full of luggage.[42] Other members of the Hohenzollerns were given full freedom of movement, as was the case for all members of former ruling dynasties deposed after the First World War. There was thus a constant stream of visits and communication between Doorn, Wieringen and Germany, which meant that the two Dutch towns became dual centres of German counter-revolutionary power between 1918 and 1923. They also unleashed different dynamics and have been documented by different levels of historical evidence. Whereas the crown prince's years in exile have had to be reconstructed like a puzzle from scattered sources, the Kaiser's exile in Doorn was unusually well documented. So this is the place to start.

Rumours and Counter-revolution: Doorn

In a moment of desperation in September 1919, the most loyal servant of the Kaiser in exile, Sigurd von Ilsemann, wrote in his diary: 'To sit for hours and hours as though nailed to one's chair and have to listen to the same old stories from the Kaiser is becoming intolerable.'[43] The author of these words was a highly decorated 33-year-old officer and lieutenant general's son who had accompanied Wilhelm II on his flight to the Netherlands and become his de facto right-hand man in Doorn. When he jotted down those lines, he had no way of knowing that his lamentable condition would last for another twenty-two years. As Ilsemann would note a decade later, 'Yes, it certainly isn't fun to chop wood, collect hay, pick flowers and water them for ten years in a row – God knows, it's sometimes barbarically difficult for me.'[44]

Again and again, the scholarly literature has portrayed the

Copyrighted Material

ex-Kaiser as a duck-feeding, wood-carving curiosity.[45] But there is ample reason to look beyond the ducks, the forest, which was razed to the ground after two decades, and the Kaiser's hand-signed woodwork. Doorn was both a reflection and a major foreign outpost of the German far Right during the Weimar Republic.

In retrospect, the Dutch town appears like a dead-end road that diverged from the rest of the twentieth century or, as one observer described it, a 'brackish pool at the edge of lively current'.[46] But Doorn was anything but an insignificant backwater in the history of German hostility towards democracy. Like many aristocratic hubs, Doorn was part of the shadowy world of the counter-revolution, which adherents of democracy at the time weren't always able to adequately read and upon which historians up to the present day have rarely focused. The Kaiser, stranded like a castaway in the 'dismal landscape of the rain-soaked Dutch plains', was a symbol of the emasculation of the entire German nation. Doorn was like a never-ending puppet show depicting how a former world power shrank to miniature dimensions. As one contemporary wrote, 'The German eagle that once spread its wings and flew across the lands now sits in a tiny golden cage – he can't take flight because his chain is too short.'[47]

Early satirical caricatures depicted the Kaiser and crown prince as a pair of rats hiding in a Dutch barn and eating their way through wheels of cheese until they are discovered by three Hohenzollern-hunting enemies: a Dutchman with a cudgel, a socialist cat and an Entente bulldog. 'Get them!' the caption reads.[48] An American cartoon from the time renders the militaristic Prussian eagle as a helpless, plucked chicken tied up by international treaties. The caption reads 'Nothing left but the squawk.'[49] The combination of mockery with a residual underlying fear that the chicken could one day turn back into an eagle was typical of many caricatures of the day.

The isolated and psychologically broken Kaiser, for quite some time incapable of comprehending the world in which he now lived, may have seemed to have no major influence on right-wing

Copyrighted Material

organizations in Germany. But, upon closer examination, this view reflects our democratic biases one hundred years after the fact. Millions of people at the time saw the situation otherwise, and the monarchist camp certainly viewed Doorn and its exiled inhabitants in an entirely different light. Huis Doorn was, as many contemporaries pointed out, both a 'cloud cuckoo land' of German monarchism[50] and a fulcrum for the entire anti-democratic movement. Descriptions of the Kaiser greeting pigs and the impressive collection of curios he assembled during his Dutch exile only told one side of the story. Doorn was also a hub of the counter-revolution, a location where serious political work was done and a place from which the Weimar Republic would be attacked until its dying day. We have little cause to regard it with anything resembling nostalgia or romanticism.

In the form of a largely unedited diary, Ilsemann, who never departed from the Kaiser's side, left behind one of the most remarkable post-war sources of information on German monarchism. Ilsemann was married to the daughter of Count Godard van Aldenburg-Bentinck, in whose baroque, moated estate south-east of Utrecht, Kasteel Amerongen, the Kaiser spent the first one-and-a-half years of his exile, and he wrote his journals very much as a protocol for subsequent generations. When the invading Wehrmacht approached Doorn in 1940, he hid the documents in the walls of the estate, and fifteen years after he died his widow released them to the public. In 1967 and 1968, part of the diaries was published in two volumes by Harald von Königswald, a writer of pro-aristocratic works and a man with connections to the conservative resistance to Nazism.[51] Although Königswald made a number of editorial interventions to present the Kaiser more positively, there is no doubting the basic authenticity of Ilsemann's descriptions of events, constellations and statements – especially as they conform to his own biography and information from other sources, for instance the extensive diary kept by Wilhelm II's personal physician Alfred Haehner.[52]

Copyrighted Material

Ilsemann, who took over the management of Huis Doorn in 1945

at the request of the crown prince, shot himself in the gatehouse of the estate in June 1952. His diaries attest to his keen powers of observation, sober judgements, great honesty and impressive if old-fashioned loyalty and fidelity to his 'lord'. These two volumes, accurately described as an 'involuntary cultural history',[53] are significant not so much for their reconstruction of Wilhelm II's hatreds and delusions as for their minute documentation of the aristocratic extreme Right, including eating and speaking habits, temper tantrums and personal animosities. With almost anthropological precision, Ilsemann reveals the codes and rules that governed this segment of society during the Weimar Republic.

Particularly noteworthy in the light of today's debates is the helpless rage with which conservative aristocrats reacted to the publication of the two volumes of Ilsemann's memoirs in 1967–8. If the author's son is to be believed, members of the royal family tried to suppress the second volume, which shed light on individual Hohenzollerns' relationship with National Socialism.[54] Numerous passages from Ilsemann's original manuscript in which the Kaiser raged against 'caste comrades' and common people were also stricken from the published volumes.[55] After its publication, criticism of the book took on bizarre dimensions. Some eagle-eyed critics wrote letters to newspapers disputing the idea that the Kaiser could have chopped down 13,000 trees a year. Calculations of this sort sought to undermine the credibility of the entire text[56] and led the sports section of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* newspaper to publish a debate about the Kaiser's performance with his saw.[57] Somewhat more interestingly, a former diplomat attacked Ilsemann and other advisors to the Kaiser for their 'servility',[58] while a conservative navy historian felt called upon to dismiss the value of the diaries as a whole.[59] The Kaiser's grandson Wilhelm Karl publicly stated that Wilhelm II had been the smartest and best educated person he had ever met, pillorying the diaries as a 'felony' and a 'violation of trust' that exposed private matters to an 'all-too-critical public'.[60]

In the end, Ilsemann's son remarked drily that the man 'sitting

Copyrighted Material

behind the walls in Doorn' had been exactly the person his father had described. '[This] was no enlightened old gentleman who had grown wise, acknowledged his own failings and saw new ways forward for his fatherland,' the son wrote. 'The letters to newspapers and the personal attacks against the diaries' editor of the preceding weeks show how powerful the hopes are in conservatives circles that the opposite was the case, hopes that live on – you would almost think – despite the authors' knowing better.'[61]

His Majesty's Perspective

The 678 pages of published Ilsemann diaries document Wilhelm II's at times farcical narcissism, a mixture of infantile fantasies of omnipotence and aggressive self-overestimation with an almost incomprehensible refusal to acknowledge reality. For the former Kaiser, the German people were 'utterly pathetic, a gang of scoundrels', who deserved what they got for 'hounding him out'.[62] Consumed by nebulous notions of widespread betrayal, the ex-monarch took every opportunity to speak, lecture, curse and write about almost every target under the sun, attacking his children, the German people, his advisors, the aristocracy, the tsars, the Italians, Austrian Emperor Karl I, his generals, Hindenburg, Groener, ungrateful German workers, cowardly German bourgeois, German civil servants, freemasons, conservatives, the British, his officers, pro-democracy liberals, Jesuits, Catholics, southern Germans and – increasingly and by way of shorthand for all other traitors – 'the Jews'. At table in 1921, he informed his fellow diners that

> the Jews have driven the 'German hare' back and forth between them . . . All they are interested in is established Jewish world dominance . . . If the tide turns in Germany, it will be the Jews' turn to suffer . . . They'll be forced to surrender everything – their accumulated wealth, their homes and everything they own.

Copyrighted Material

Wilhelm II didn't stop there. 'Once and for all, they must be removed from their civil service positions,' he raged. 'They have to be brought down.'[63] Deeply religious and increasingly interested in theology, the former Kaiser became more and more susceptible to ethnically chauvinist interpretations of Christianity – a line of thought indebted to the racist theories of Houston Stewart Chamberlain among others. In 1923, Wilhelm arrived at the conviction that Jesus was 'a *Galilean* and thus *not a Semitic Jew*'.[64] Thanks to the mediation of the anti-Semitic, German-American journalist and publisher George Sylvester Viereck, the ex-Kaiser's theological 'insights' found an audience in the US, causing Wilhelm II to moan that it was impossible to get the 'truth' out in Germany because the entire press was in the hands of Jews and Jewish capital.[65] The ex-Kaiser manically edited and published 'historical tables' intended to show that he had been innocent of provoking the First World War. Ilsemann's diaries and other sources overflow with examples of Wilhelm calling for retributory blood to be shed, pathetic scoundrels punished, and his adversaries hanged or beheaded.[66] In future, he fantasized, no one but himself would have a say in anything. All the traitors, failures and advisors were to be done away with, and after his restoration he would have to wield 'the power of a shogun'.[67] The Kaiser's inflated self-image made itself felt even in those forums that, however significant they may have been for internal aristocratic communication, were far removed from the intellectual focus of the times. For example, in the hunting magazine *Deutscher Jägerbund*, a certain Count Finck von Finckenstein informed his readers how 'assiduously' Wilhelm was working to combat 'the lie of German culpability for the world war'.[68]

As abiding as the Kaiser's significance for the German Right might have been, it remains incomprehensible how he envisioned himself becoming a 'shogun'. The idea was as ridiculous as Prussian field marshal August von Mackensen, whose moustachioed, hypermasculine visage and characteristic gigantic hussars' busby made him one of the most photographed figures on the far Right in Weimar Germany, who wrote to the Kaiser in 1924 that 'Sharpened

Copyrighted Material

on my desk lies my sword / and all you have to do is give the word.' The laughable posturing of the field marshal, born to a bourgeois family and seventy-five years old, epitomized the fantasies of the Kaiser and his minions at this juncture.[69]

One of the best-known statements from Doorn, not made public until Hindenburg's death in the summer of 1934, sums up the world-view of this dotty, bitter former monarch throughout his exile. Upon hearing of his former military commander's passing, Wilhelm proclaimed: 'Blood must flow, lots of blood, above all from the nobility, from all who deserted me.'[70] This statement was suppressed at the request of the Hohenzollern family from the 1968 published edition of Ilsemann's diaries.[71] Other passages read like previews of the horrific abyss into which Germany would in due course descend. In August 1921, the Kaiser uncorked a bottle of champagne to celebrate news of the murder of former German finance minister Matthias Erzberger of the Centre Party. His reaction to the killing of the Jewish-German foreign minister Walther Rathenau the following year was similar.[72] In the summer of 1922, American newspapers asked why the Hohenzollerns had not officially denounced those who had assaulted the journalist Maximilian Harden, one of the Kaiser's fiercest critics. (In fact, there were suspicions, never proven, that the family had approved or even been involved in the murder.)[73] Wilhelm called Harden a 'loathsome, dirty Jewish fiend' and Rathenau a 'mean, deceiving, racial traitor'. In a similar context, the former Kaiser attacked the idea of 'world citizenship' and the Enlightenment of Goethe and Schiller as particularly corrupting.[74]

For several months before he was killed, the Jewish-born Harden, who had once been considered for the post of American ambassador, had spoken out against the crown prince, the Kaiser and the violence emanating from monarchist groups.[75] In early July 1922, Harden counted 317 victims of anti-democratic assassinations, writing that only intervention by the victorious Entente powers could stop the spread of massive monarchist brutality. One day later he was attacked in front of his villa in Berlin's leafy Grunewald

Copyrighted Material

neighbourhood by a 'hired gang' of radical right-wing thugs and beaten to within an inch of his life with metal bars. Harden never fully recovered from the attack and could no longer work as a journalist. 'You Germans will perish because of your solidarity with murderers,' he later said in court concerning the open and tacit support received by his attackers and those who had ordered the assault. Left-wing writer and editor Kurt Tucholsky would quote those words in the influential weekly *Die Weltbühne*.[76]

The situation was much the same with Erzberger, one of the German signatories of the ceasefire in Compiègne in November 1918. Long a target of far-right hatred, he had already survived one assassination attempt before he was murdered by the right-wing terrorist organization Consul. The champagne uncorked in Huis Doorn was part of a general drift towards brutality among parts of the German nobility.[77] Kurt Eisner, the Jewish-German socialist leader of the post-war revolution in Bavaria, had been shot twice in the back of the head in February 1919 in Munich by a young Bavarian count, who was subsequently celebrated as a hero by some aristocrats. Rumours spread that the Kaiser's youngest son, Joachim, had been involved in the assassination. Shortly before the murder, Joachim had been arrested in conjunction with an attempted putsch against the new, left-wing Bavarian government.[78] Wilhelm II also reacted with glee to the death of the German president, Friedrich Ebert. 'We'll drink some bubbly to that, eh, Ilsemann, right now while the paper is being read aloud!' he exclaimed. This was another passage censored from Ilsemann's diaries.[79]

The Kaiser was originally only supposed to reside at Kasteel Amerongen for three days, but his stay eventually turned into eighteen months. By the time the former monarch finally began looking for a suitable residence in Holland, fierce debates were already underway concerning the disappropriation of, and possible compensation to, the Hohenzollerns.[80] In the summer of 1919, the finance minister Albert Südekum, a member of the conservative wing of the social democrats, caused a stir with his proposal that the royal family should be given 10 million marks with which to

Copyrighted Material

acquire property. The notion met with considerable resistance from both the Right and the Left, as did a subsequent suggestion in 1920, which Südekum defended, that the Hohenzollerns should receive a blanket pay-off of 100 million marks. Both ideas were quickly abandoned.[81] Belying early fears about Bolshevik conditions in Germany, significant sums did regularly appear in the royal family's Dutch bank accounts. This significantly eased financial pressure on the Kaiser. By May 1921, the German government had transferred some 76 million marks to the Hohenzollerns.[82]

Nonetheless, the gap between the Kaiser's actual and putative wealth remained great and was obscured by assumptions and false information. Whereas Wilhelm II was considered even in the late Weimar Republic to be 'one of the richest Germans, if not *the* richest',[83] he himself continually complained about financial constraints and repeatedly considered selling off his valuable art collection. In 1929, his 'Berlin manager', as the *New York Times* reported, moaned about the vast expenses of maintaining the royal estates, the alleged losses generated by royal forests and the size of the extended royal family itself.[84]

In August 1919, Wilhelm II had enough money to acquire the property in which he would live out his life, purchasing Huis Doorn for 500,000 guilders. After carrying out extensive renovations costing a further 850,000 guilders, the Kaiser and his wife moved into their new home, located only a few kilometres from Kasteel Amerongen and some sixty kilometres from the Dutch–German border, in May 1920.[85] Huis Doorn was actually too small to accommodate the reported sixty-four freight train cars and thirty-six removals vans full of German royal belongings that arrived in the Netherlands.[86] But the advantages of the grounds, which had been redesigned in the late eighteenth century and included a moat, a large park and fifty-nine hectares of land, won over its new owners. The smoking room looked out on a pond and beds of irises, and for two decades the fallen Kaiser would receive navy officers, local generals, his children, grandchildren and relatives, race theorists, apocryphal ethnologists, anti-Semitic professors and writers, artists, historians, princes,

Copyrighted Material

admirers, delegations of aristocratic associations and, in 1931, Hermann Göring beneath a portrait of Friedrich the Great.

Nonetheless, Wilhelm didn't enjoy his early years of exile in Amerongen and Doorn. In his eyes, those years unfolded under the cloud of the terrible catastrophe of the German revolution. The Kaiser's radius in the Netherlands was restricted to one district of Utrecht province. The grounds of his estate were subject to constant surveillance, so that whenever he went out, he was trailed by a Dutch police vehicle. Even the airspace over Huis Doorn was closed.[87] From the Hohenzollerns' perspective, this was a time of real and perceived threat to their very existence. In 1920, his personal physician Haehner revealed that the former monarch always kept a loaded pistol on his bedside table.[88] Wilhelm lived in constant fear of being assassinated or, above all, of being handed to the victors in the First World War. In July 1919, the British prime minister David Lloyd George had repeatedly insisted in the House of Commons that the Kaiser and crown prince be extradited,[89] and segments of the Left in Germany supported the idea of the pair of royals having to answer to the Entente powers in court. For example, the pacifist Hellmut von Gerlach and the seventy-year-old theoretical patriarch of the Social Democratic Party Eduard Bernstein warned at a rally in 1920 of the dangers that the reactionary forces posed to the Weimar Republic and its 'new spirit'.[90]

For these reasons, Wilhelm and his advisors drew up a series of contingency plans for him to flee incognito by ship, car, ambulance or aeroplane to other parts of the Netherlands, the Black Forest, a monastery or a country estate in East Prussia.[91] The royal entourage was intensely worried that the former monarch could be paraded through the streets of Paris or London, beheaded or sent away to a prison in Algiers or St Helena or Peru. For a long time, the possibility of Wilhelm being extradited was real, as speculative plans were laid to have an American commando abduct the Kaiser and put him on trial in front of an international court. Protection from the Netherlands was Wilhelm's most effective defence.[92] Cartoons from the time show him cowering behind the voluminous

Copyrighted Material

skirts of a stereotypical Dutch woman who shelters him from the searching eyes of armed Entente officers.[93]

Such worries proved as unfounded as the fears that the German revolution would turn extreme, and Wilhelm II soon developed a rigid daily routine that included reading the newspaper, sawing tree trunks, prayer, lectures, receiving guests, long monologues, walks, dictation, correspondence and feeding the ducks. Ilsemann described the 'torment' of this unvarying sameness.[94] But routine could never relieve the permanent insecurity felt by the Kaiser and his entourage after their unprecedentedly precipitous fall. Rumours in the press about assassination plots in 1922 and 1932 highlighted the former monarch's tenuous position.[95] The Kaiser's inflated opinion of himself compensated for his vulnerability without doing anything to lessen it in reality.

One of the curiosities that best illustrates how Wilhelm gradually drifted off into a fantasy world was his passion for certain forms of archaeology and ethnology, particularly his enthusiasm for the teachings of the influential autodidact Leo Frobenius and his theory of cultural morphology. A 'working group' founded by the Kaiser himself combined top-class scientific research with shallow politicization and instrumentalization.[96] In October 1923, after a lecture by Frobenius, Wilhelm asked him to stay on in Doorn, enthusing:

> It's as though I've been redeemed! Finally, I know what future we Germans have and for which we are still called! All these years after the revolution, I racked my brains, but now I know: we will be the leaders of the Orient against the Occident! . . . We belong on the other side. Once we have taught Germany that the French and English aren't white people at all, but rather blacks, the French, for example, Hamites, they will go after these gangs.[97]

But even this statement, which combined the grotesque absurdity of earlier proclamations by Wilhelm and presaged his racist boasting to come, cannot be entirely dismissed as the rambling of an

Copyrighted Material

addled aristocrat. Back in Germany at the time, many intellectual elites were discussing similar ideas advanced by Oswald Spengler, and a bewildering number of 'barefoot prophets' from various ethnic-chauvinistic and racist movements had already begun to influence the political attitudes of millions of people.[98] The Kaiser's musings may have revealed his distance from reality, but they were typical of the self-deception of an entire caste, the intellectual fault lines of a shaken nation, and the radicalization, confusion and hatred growing not just in Huis Doorn but in an entire country.

In this respect, too, Huis Doorn was a mirror as well as just an oddity. The 'nightmare-like otherworldliness' of the place[99] and the copious evidence of how the Kaiser saw the world make it hard for observers today not to engage in psychological diagnosis. Reasonable arguments have been made that the countless remote diagnoses of the Kaiser as 'degenerated', insane, abnormal or lunatic often say more about those who made them than the object himself.[100] Nonetheless, while British historian John Röhl's view that Wilhelm suffered from paranoid delusions may overshoot the mark in the medical sense, [101] the closer one looks at the situation in Doorn, the harder it is to characterize the fallen leader's massive distance from reality, radical egotism and immense aggression in neutral terms.

The New 'Empress'

Doorn was also where the deepest rupture in the Kaiser's personal biography, one which would also have political implications, took place: his marriage to his second wife, Princess Hermine Reuss von Greiz. Nearly twenty-nine years his junior and a widow with five children, Hermine was five years younger than the Kaiser's eldest son. Empress Auguste Viktoria had died in 1921, and Hermine and Wilhelm married the following year. American newspapers reported that the Kaiser had married a 'lover of pomp and display', entirely dissimilar to level-headed Auguste Viktoria. 'Wilhelm has chosen

Copyrighted Material

second bride with temperament like his own,' wrote the *Evening Star* in Washington.[102] In later years, Hermine more than anyone else sought to steer Wilhelm towards National Socialism.

To legitimize his relationship with a much younger woman, embarked on so soon after the empress's death and much criticized among monarchists, the Kaiser put out a story in an interview that was, in the words of the periodical *Tage-Buch*, 'so awful you want to believe that the interview was invented or at least falsified'. In Wilhelm's telling, when Auguste Viktoria died, 'her maternal love . . . alone among women . . . flowing over the hospital gown of every wounded soldier', God had directed his attention to a letter written by a small boy, whom the Kaiser immediately recognized as a 'comrade'. He invited the child and his mother to Doorn, and in this fashion God led his new bride to him. 'I often felt that Romeo and Juliet didn't know the true meaning of love,' he pontificated. 'The "love that moves the sun and other stars" is the love between ripe men and women in whom knowledge has killed off romance.'

That was the tone in which the Kaiser had his ghost-writer Sylvester Viereck commune with his followers.[103] The 63-year-old Kaiser's unexpectedly quick remarriage elicited mockery among democrats and horror among monarchists. Like most members of Wilhelm's entourage, including all the royal children[104] and the crown princess,[105] Ilsemann opposed the marriage. The crown princess, who now found herself competing more or less openly with someone her own age, pointedly referred to the Kaiser's second wife as 'the new woman'.[106] The disruption of the Kaiser's relationship with the traditional nobility was registered as far away as the east coast of the US. The *New York Times* ran a story with the headline 'The Old Nobility Is Peeved', which contended that an aristocratic delegation, led by the influential landed nobleman Elard von Oldenburg-Januschau, was trying to persuade the exiled monarch to change his mind.[107]

Such efforts came to naught, but among the German nobility the Kaiser's second marriage was another permanent black mark against him after his flight to Holland. A substantial public relations

Copyrighted Material

offensive was launched to make Hermine palatable to conservative circles. Third-rate commissioned pamphlets written in the style of kitschy courtly romances praised her positive qualities and sought to elicit sympathy for the 'lonely' Kaiser. The pathetic level of texts with titles such as 'The Kaiser's Bride' only underscored what a thankless task it was to try to make the Kaiser's marriage to the young widow appear seemly.[108]

Hermine's ambitions for influence, power and a serious, public role quickly became the stuff of gossip and rumours in Germany and gave rise to an entire subcategory of jokes among pro-democracy segments of society. After their marriage, the 'Kaiser's bride', whose husband still used the signature 'Imperator Rex', tried to get the German consulate in Amsterdam and authorities in Berlin to change her passport to read 'Empress of Germany'.[109] In an English-language self-portrait of the 'imperial couple', produced in 1928 as a special PR measure for the British and American markets, she was referred to as 'empress in exile'.[110]

Around this time, in the satirical magazine *Simplicissimus*, the gifted caricaturist Olaf Gulbransson depicted the would-be empress trying to scale the outside wall of Kaiser Wilhelm's palace. Entitled 'The Climbing Hermine', the image showed the Kaiser's wife contorting her limbs and clawing at the 'historic corner window' in an attempt to hoist herself into Wilhelm II's former office, which was familiar to everyone in Berlin. Dangling from her left hand was Friedrich the Great's famous marshal's baton.[111] Playing on the fact that her marriage contract with Wilhelm spelled out where she was to reside, and the rooms had been equipped especially for her in the palace, sharp tongues around Germany mocked Hermine as the Kaiser's billeting officer.[112]

Despite the mockery, however, Hermine immediately established herself as a force within the microcosm of Doorn and within the royal family. This educated, ambitious and very energetic young woman became one of the most important emissaries of German monarchism both in the Netherlands and on her countless trips and visits abroad. Several rooms in Huis Doorn, most of them smaller

Copyrighted Material

guest bedrooms, were put at the disposal of the 'empress' and the five children she brought with her from her first marriage.[113]

From the moment Hermine arrived in the public eye until her death in 1947, the foreign press took a constant interest in her. Despite intense efforts to keep her wedding to Wilhelm in the autumn of 1922 private, the event was besieged by as many as 300 journalists seeking to get a look into the estate and the park.[114] The big American newspapers constantly reported on the Kaiser, Doorn and the royal family's estates, children and political activities. Papers in Albuquerque, New Mexico, ran photographs of the bride, while the New York press shared details about the colours of the wedding bouquets and ran pictures of hordes of reporters in front of Doorn's front gate and photographers balancing on the roofs of cars, and shots of the crown prince's arrival in an open car. Even the motorcade in which he left the island of Wieringen was deemed worthy of a pictorial feature. The *New York Times* reported that the Kaiser sold the rights to an exclusive picture of his wedding for $10,000.[115]

In a 1923 interview, the Kaiser described Doorn as a 'glass house' – both a panopticon where the Entente nations and the world press kept him under constant surveillance and a harmless place where he could maintain his external image of an apolitical patriarch going about his harmless hobbies and occasionally receiving his children and people wishing to speak with him. This was the way the Hohenzollerns would often be depicted,[116] and investigations of even the most minor changes in the royal circumstances became something of a journalistic sub-genre in the global press during the 1920s. In 1927, for instance, the *New York Times* found it fitting to interpret the installation of a new bathtub in Wilhelm's Berlin palace as evidence of an imminent royal restoration. That newspaper also followed stories about the ex-Kaiser losing weight and quarrelling with his wife as well as the fashion details of the overcoat worn by the crown prince to his father's seventieth birthday.[117] No sooner had the crown prince settled in Wieringen than reporters with hidden cameras began to track him, and the first stories about the 'celebrity prince' made their way across the Atlantic. But the international media

Copyrighted Material

and paparazzi kept a constant eye on all members of the royal family wherever they went. The result was stories with headlines such as 'Honeymoon Walks Have Ceased and William Appears Much Older and Thinner' and 'First Exclusive Picture of Ex-Kaiser and His Bride!'[119]

A Parallel Universe

The miniature court societies assembled from old retinues and eighteenth-century furniture in Amerongen and Doorn were bizarre microcosms,[120] and it required an anthropological acumen to decode the rules, rituals and language of this monarchist parallel universe similar to that of Clifford Geertz's famous analysis of Balinese cockfighting. Both the cockfights and the imaginary aristocratic oases featured 'deep play', the performance of actions that external observers would have considered 'irrational'. But, for initiates in both cases, such rituals followed their own logic, whose meaning could only be understood within the system.[121]

This was true of even the most minor, ancillary customs in the anti-democratic outpost and mecca that was Doorn-Amerongen. A conflict in November 1919 shed light on the extent, contours and abstruseness of the attempts to carry on an *ancien régime* in exile. The empress's lady in waiting, Countess Mathilde Keller, nicknamed 'the hallelujah aunt' by mocking contemporaries,[122] insisted that, as a court marshal, the Kaiser-in-exile's host, Count Gontard, walk backwards before His Majesty with a gold-tipped staff whenever the ex-Kaiser entered the salon or the dining room. Keller rejected a compromise, suggested by the young Countess Bentinck, of using a bell to announce the arrival of the Kaiser instead – calling this an expression of 'socialist ideas'. A short time later, the older countess launched a campaign to prevent the tablecloths printed with the Prussian eagle from being used on inappropriate occasions.[123] Such minutiae might appear ridiculous. But they were part of the same battle over symbols, colours, standards, memorials and

Copyrighted Material

flags that was waged on the streets of 1920s Germany with fists, batons, daggers and firearms that continued throughout the history of the Weimar Republic.

Huis Doorn seemed to many observers to be frozen in time. It was a place where a fallen king could stand in front of gigantic military maps as his generals dozed off and retroactively won the battles of the First World War, where he could vanquish the republicans in the Spanish Civil War and where he could drive the occupying French army from German lands with the weapons allegedly concealed in the castles and manors of the Prussian nobility.[124] Or he could simply while away his evenings with endless monologues about his own infallibility and the shortcomings of others. Not coincidentally, Wilhelm II's entourage in Doorn consisted largely of old men, retired high-ranking officers who took turns 'performing their duty'.

Every day the Kaiser sat upon a saddle-shaped desk chair, cutting articles out of third-rate newspapers as though assembling a self-made collage to prop up his absurd view of the world. All the while he would 'drink his two glasses of port wine, one with water, and eat his seven or eight small sandwiches'. Cigarette in hand, he would ask his adjutant Ilsemann: 'So, my boy, what's new today?'[125] The majority of the entourage were more interested in shielding the Kaiser from reality than confronting him with it.

Wilhelm II never had any lasting contact with the language that expressed the political order of a new, radically different world. Ilsemann recorded in detail how stiffly members of Doorn society communicated. For example, in 1932, one of the Kaiser's stepsons withdrew from the Kaiser's presence with the words, 'Father, will you permit me to obediently take my leave?'[126] Two years later a grandson greeted him by saying: 'Grandpapa, I report for duty.'[127] Another eighteen-year-old grandson asked him in 1935: 'Dear Grandpapa, may I be allowed to express my most obedient congratulations on the occasion of your birthday?'[128] Wilhelm's children typically kissed his hand by way of a greeting.[129] His brother Heinrich referred to him in the presence of others as 'my

Copyrighted Material

most merciful lord'.[130] His son Oskar, a member of the right-wing paramilitary Stahlhelm (i.e. the Steel Helmet, League of Frontline Soldiers, Germany's largest conservative and anti-democratic veterans' organization), greeted his father with military stiffness,[131] and the greetings offered by his brother were so 'cold that Empress Viktoria Auguste began to weep'.[132]

In 1919, the Kaiser's 35-year-old son Prince Adalbert complained that he was still treated like a schoolboy.[133] Three years later, in his first volume of memoirs, the crown prince wrote about his father's 'hypercritical coldness', telling readers that of all the children only his much younger sister Viktoria Luise had been able to touch 'a warm place in the Kaiser's heart'.[134] Indeed family correspondence was also carried out in the harsh tones of Wilhelm's domination, in which his sons, even when high-ranking officers in their fifties, got dressed down like naughty children. In 1923, the Kaiser's second wife addressed him with the words, 'Would you allow me, exalted lord, to speak with [State Secretary] Kan for a moment in your presence?' Both in writing and orally, members of Wilhelm's retinue addressed him habitually with sobriquets such as 'exalted master'.

The continuing use of such formal language indicates a growing gap with reality that is better measured in anthropological observation than pro-democratic mockery. In 1934, Prince Friedrich zu Solms-Baruth began a letter to the Kaiser: 'Most serene emperor and king! Most merciful emperor, king and lord!' That piece of correspondence, written by a man who, ten years later, would be arrested in conjunction with the 20 July 1944 attempt on Hitler's life, ended with the words:

> If it be not impertinent, my sister or I would propose reporting back to you soon. My mother has charged me with telling Your Majesty that she forever thinks of Doorn with gratitude and loyalty. I would like to bow down once more and present my most obedient thanks to Your Majesty for the gracious sympathy He has shown. I remain His Royal Majesty's most loyal servant, Friedrich Solms-Baruth.[135]

Copyrighted Material

Historian Percy Ernst Schramm, one of Germany's most internationally respected medievalists at the time, who visited Doorn in 1930 with his wife, wrote with dismay about one of the Kaiser's frigid, 'servile' adjutants:

> He was the pure embodiment of a 'court flunky'. He only moved when the Kaiser wanted something brought to him. In effect, he was the extended index finger of his lord, in front of whom he removed the monocle from his eye. The fact that the Kaiser puts up with such people is also characteristic.[136]

The tone that ran through the letters, postcards and tributes addressed to the Kaiser was typified by a missive sent in September 1933 by Paul von Hindenburg, who, despite having fallen out of favour with the royal family, was still, after all, the president of the German Reich: 'Deeply moved, I bow down and present Your Imperial and Royal Majesty with my most respectful gratitude for His most gracious interest in my affairs.'[137]

As surreal as it may seem today, the Kaiser and the crown prince spent a lot of time having photos taken of themselves that they then sent, often autographed, to admirers. Grown men and women collected these images like icons.[138] The need to be visually represented went hand in hand with the constant urge to issue pronouncements. By May 1919, the crown prince had already been dubbed the 'most-interviewed man in Europe' and the 'most-photographed of all fallen luminaries'.[139] A bewildering array of photos, portraits and likenesses of Crown Prince Wilhelm, mailed all over the world together with letters and in postcard form, have thus been preserved for posterity. The stream of images of various sorts that continued until the prince's dying days can't help but remind observers today of the innumerable selfies taken by twenty-first-century teenagers.[140] One obvious explanation would be a need for reassurance that he existed in the political realm and continued to be publicly perceived as an important figure.[141]

Among the Hohenzollerns' loyal followers, the act of preserving

Copyrighted Material

and responding to such images was a ritual way of proclaiming their undying loyalty. For example, in 1936, the cavalry captain and writer Adolf Victor von Koerber wrote to the crown prince: 'I would like to express my most obedient gratitude to Your Royal Majesty for the excellent picture of Yourself in a sports shirt that I was allowed to receive into my possession on 24 August.'[142] Three years later, Prince Max Egon zu Fürstenberg thanked the Kaiser for another image: 'The lovely picture Your Majesty bestowed upon me on my birthday hangs before me, and over and over my eyes rest upon the beautifully captured features of Your Majesty in inconvertible love.'[143]

The Kaiser frequently added eccentric comments to the countless variously shaped and sized photographs and busts of himself he presented to others. In 1927, he gave a former commander of an elite German military regiment, Hans von Tschirschky und Bögendorff, a photo of himself with the words, 'He who does not parry gets dismissed!' Ilsemann noted in his diary: 'Tschirschky is saddened because this inscription ruined the picture for him. He intends to cut it out, as he has no idea what the Kaiser's statement refers to.'[144]

Such incidents appear ridiculous today, and they also elicited scorn in the 1920s. Such laboriously maintained theatrical rituals were obviously and completely out of step with the times. A figure like Ilsemann, who challenged a man who insulted him to a duel in Huis Doorn's park[145] and who never wavered from the side of his lord despite his own better judgement, often seemed like a knight from a long bygone era: a north German Sancho Panza stoically accompanying his deranged master as he tilted against windmills in the Netherlands. Pro-democracy camp Germans were not the only ones who viewed the cabinet of oddities in Doorn with a mixture of scorn and pity. The contrast between past military glory and the aged Kaiser feeding ducks was also fuel for conversation among the nobility and the German Right. In public as well as privately, many conservatives cited four lines from Goethe's late poem 'Tame Invectives': 'Why is it that a single king / Is swept out as though with a

Copyrighted Material

broom? / Surely they'd still be standing / Tall, if it was a matter of more than one.'[146]

Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, one of the major prophets of the new Right in Germany, employed a variant on this motif in his 1923 bestseller *The Third Reich*. 'Royal majesty,' wrote van den Bruch 'had already disappeared from those who ascended to the throne, long before the loss of their crowns confirmed that they were no longer princes but eminently human beings.' It was down to this weakness alone that 'these representatives of royal majesty ended up as very common citizens, having emerged from the general tragedy without tragic greatness and departed the preserve of enigma for the most banal sort of private life'.[147]

Leading Lights and Military Colours

Nonetheless, Doorn was more than a museum of bizarre wax figures. It was there that a defence was mounted of a social milieu that decisively rejected the democratic German mainstream and that served as a beacon to all Germans seeking to restore a lost past. Doorn was a signalling station for the right wing and, directly or indirectly, its messages reached millions of people in Germany. Moreover, Doorn preserved and embodied the vivid splendour those millions of Germans remembered from the putative good old days.

An example of this language of symbols was the memorial ceremonies, documented for posterity in minute detail, in Doorn and Potsdam after Empress Augusta Viktoria's death in April 1921. In Doorn, a small circle of aristocrats and high nobility escorted the casket, which the Kaiser and the crown prince were not allowed to accompany to Germany, on the first leg of its journey to its final resting place. This scene was reminiscent of one of the most famous artefacts of Wilhelmine self-depiction: a photograph of the ceremonial issuance of watchwords on 1 January 1913 on the Schlossbrücke bridge in Berlin. It showed Wilhelm II and his six sons, with waving plumes attached to their pointed Pickelhaube

Copyrighted Material

helmets, in front of rows of military officers – a careful staged symbol of the majesty of the late Wilhelmine Empire. Eight years, a world war and a revolution later, the crown prince, his brothers, his brother-in-law and his father recreated this moment of splendour with the help of the other aristocratic mourners. In the dining hall of Huis Doorn, which had been transformed into a funeral parlour, 'four heavy silver candelabras' created a 'magical light'. At the start of the ceremony, Count Gontard, who bore the title 'court marshal', knocked with his sword against the oaken floor of the Dutch house. 'With firm steps' and, dressed respectively as a naval officer and a cuirassier, a hussar and a life hussar, the crown prince, two of his brothers and the Duke of Braunschweig descended the podium steps, 'all with sabres drawn, between them black-veiled ladies-in-waiting and courtiers, everything surrounded by wreaths and flowers – it was an arresting, truly Prussian image'.

The family would long retain its habit of attending weddings and funerals in military uniforms, even if the armies from which they originated had ceased to exist. Even the Hohenzollerns' house physician, otherwise a cool and critical observer of royal rituals, was very impressed by this spectacle, writing in his diary:

> The scene was splendid, when these four tall, well-built figures strode gravely and proudly into the room of mourning with their swords drawn. It was truly a source of joy and satisfaction to be able to show the Dutch in attendance, with their customary louche bearing and mostly small statures, this glorious image of Germany's former military greatness.

The Kaiser stepped forward, pale and dressed in the field grey of the First Infantry Guard Regiment. Kneeling down, the widower laid his head upon the casket and didn't move for several minutes of silent prayer. 'As though on command', the princes saluted the deceased empress by lowering their swords. Accompanied by the tolling of bells, the makeshift hearse – a military vehicle which the Kaiser had used to visit the front during the war and which had been painted

Copyrighted Material

black – rolled slowly over the gravel of the dark park of the estate. 'The way was illuminated by torches, and from the heavens the moon shed its bright light on this sad milestone in world history.'[148]

The casket was then taken by train to Berlin, now the capital of democratic Germany. Thousands of onlookers lined the rail tracks along the way, and hundreds of thousands followed the funeral procession to the park of Sanssouci Castle in Potsdam, where 6,000 officers formed a guard of honour at the neo-classical temple. Even a pro-democracy newspaper wrote, 'For a few short moments in Potsdam, the Wilhelmine era was revived into a ghostly, radiant existence,' although the paper also dismissed the spectacle as 'the parading of a corpse from an extinct era'.[149]

Months prior to the empress's death, the suffering of the 'mother of the nation' driven into exile had already been staged in a fashion that overtly referenced the popular myth of Queen Luise of Prussia, mother of Wilhelm I, who was seen as a martyr of the Napoleonic Wars and a symbol of German national renaissance.[150] Augusta Viktoria, whose youngest son had committed suicide in 1920, was also lionized as a woman who struggled through personal tragedy, the humiliation of her nation and the malice and hardship visited upon all of Germany under the yoke of foreign domination.

The plight of the Hohenzollerns in exile and the parallel physical suffering of the empress formed a narrative that was deeply and emotionally anchored on the German Right.[151] Even in transit from Doorn to Potsdam, the funeral party had been 'received with honours reminiscent of the bridal journey made by Marie Antoinette from the royal Hofburg in Vienna to Louis XVI in Versailles 150 years previously'.[152] In the first German city after the funeral train crossed the border, the local mayor presented the princely escorts with a laurel wreath. Upon the mourners' departure, they were also given a 'wreath into which a crown of thorns was woven as a symbol of the empress's suffering' and a hand-tied bouquet from the committee of the Women's Patriotic Association.[153]

The carefully staged ceremony in Potsdam, which superficially resurrected the Wilhelmine Empire for a day, was interpreted in

Copyrighted Material

various ways, depending on the observer's politics, but it was remembered, then and today, by people throughout the political spectrum. The German socialist press wrote of a 'Hohenzollern commotion the likes of which the post-war era had never seen before' and a 'monarchic review of the troops' – hardly an adequate interpretation given the military trappings of the event.[154] In the subsequent Prussian regional elections, left-wing parties criticized the Right for tugging at German heartstrings, and leading Social Democrats in the Reichstag objected to political parties instrumentalizing the funeral.

For people at the other end of the political spectrum, the veils, lowered swords, piles of red roses, bodyguard regiments, uniforms, funeral marches, flags, officers, clergy and princes projected dignity and strength and provided a visible demonstration that those qualities had not been lost to Germany but only concealed – and could thus be reactivated. The left wing of the socialist movement saw the spectacle as a 'belated Carnival parade', which is probably the impression most people today would get if they viewed the film footage of the event. *Weltbühne* pundit Hans Siemsen skewered the pompous spectacle with particularly incisive turns of phrase, one of which would be used over and over in the following twelve years to pillory monarchist rallies:

> It is revolting to see older, adult men stuff themselves into such clownish jackets, hang pounds of medals from their chests and don the sort of helmets people no longer even wear in variety shows . . . They're not even officers any more. The uniforms they sport no longer exist. They retrieve them from their closets like people buying costumes from a second-hand shop, and they attend funerals as if they were masked balls. Just imagine if an everyday widower wore pink jerseys or a knight's armour to his wife's funeral.

Siemsen's text ended in a flurry of anger, however futile, at that significant part of the German population that didn't share his social democratic norms:

Copyrighted Material

> What kind of a people are we who applaud the men who have lied to us, sold us out and brought us ruination just because they misuse the burial of an old woman to stage a monarchist demonstration and a military masquerade? How tactless, cold-hearted, brutal and dumb.[155]

For impassioned democrats the pompous spectacle might have been farcical and overblown, but on the Right it was regarded as a dignified reinvocation of old traditions. The funeral procession behind the casket, borne on a carriage pulled by four black Trakehner horses, with the veiled crown princess and Prince Eitel Friedrich behind it, his sword drawn and in uniform like all the men, included at least seven of the princes from the regional states that made up Germany, representatives from practically all right-wing associations in Prussia and – in Hans von Seeckt – the head of the army command of the at least nominally democratic Reichswehr.

Although estimates vary as to how many people took part in total, there is no question that turnout was massive, with as many as a quarter of a million people making their way to Potsdam.[156] The ceremony turned into a powerful demonstration of monarchist power, but it didn't feature any concrete political demands. Rather, it mobilized emotions that undercut the Weimar Republic. This was one of the last great moments of Hohenzollern 'emotional politics', understood as a theatrically staged exchange in which the monarchy demonstrated its love for the people and received popular love and legitimation in return.[157] The funeral must clearly be seen as a significant indicator of the free-floating monarchist loyalties and emotions that could be harnessed in millions of Germans.[158] The dual events in the Netherlands and in Potsdam in April 1921 showed that Doorn, despite the wishful thinking of pro-democracy forces, was more than just a graveyard of decommissioned ideas and emotions. The empress's funeral demonstrated how little those forces understood the emotional household of Germany's anti-democratic Right.

Huis Doorn was a symbolic centre of the old world, and from

Copyrighted Material

there disruptive signals were broadcast out into the Weimar Republic. The Kaiser, who would never again leave the Netherlands, remained a key figure until his death in June 1941. Together with his second wife, and sons and advisors who came and went from the estate, he was a leader who could not completely be ignored by the anti-democratic Right. Wherever principles of legitimacy were taken seriously, and particularly among older monarchists, the Kaiser remained a focus of attention. And within the Hohenzollern family, Wilhelm II's often brusquely issued commands to his sons and the clan as a whole were still considered just as binding as a superior's military orders.

The Crown Prince on the Isle of Wieringen

The Hohenzollerns also had a second counter-revolutionary outpost with its own accents: a brick house on the desolate island of Wieringen, about 150 kilometres or a half day's journey from Huis Doorn. Here the crown prince lived in exile until November 1923. It was more the antithesis to than a poor man's version of Huis Doorn and utterly unlike Cecilienhof, the estate built especially for him, in which his wife still resided, making her the highest Hohenzollern representative on German soil. It was said of Cecilie's post-war lifestyle in Potsdam that she existed 'unrepentantly according to her whim', altering nothing of 'the overall contours of her life of luxury'. As one contemporary observed, 'there are still the same number of ladies-in-waiting, court functionaries, maids and servants as before the revolution'.[159] That was anything but true of the crown prince. After fleeing Germany, Wilhelm arrived on the island of Wieringen on 22 November 1918. Press photographers captured him disembarking from the small ferry, and the images were published the world over. 'On his way to oblivion' was the caption in a Chicago newspaper.[160]

There, Crown Prince Wilhelm moved into an austere, decidedly unglamourous, two-floor parsonage, where he began to fashion a

Copyrighted Material

political identity of his own. Pictures of the island taken by non-journalists show it to be rainy, barren place of simple houses standing in mud.[161] Mockingly compared by caricaturists to Napoleon in his final place of exile, Saint Helena, the crown prince existed behind a wooden fence in this dull rural landscape. Today a landfill connects Wieringen to the Dutch mainland, but until 1924 it was a roughly 10-kilometre-long island in the Zuider Zee populated by dairy farmers and fishermen. A 1919 caricature in postcard format juxtaposed two images. One showed the prince in 1914 with a drawn sabre and a death's head cap, leading German troops to the front. It was captioned: 'We battle [German: *Wir ringen*] to the end; we battle to the death.' The other image depicted him in 1919 wearing his uniform with ridiculous large wooden shoes and staring at an hourglass in the light of a petroleum lamp. The caption there: 'Wieringen to the end, Wieringen to the death.'[162] Like his father, Wilhelm was banned from returning to Germany, but he was able to reach Wilhelm II's estate in exile in a few hours by ferry and car. The crown prince maintained many of his political contacts with Germany via an older officer named Louis Müldner von Mülnheim, one of his closest and most influential advisors. A cadre of officers, civil servants, photographers, journalists and writers performed what today would be called the prince's PR work, creating the basis during his years of exile for the narratives and images that would later be employed politically.

Like the Kaiser, the crown prince feared for a long time that he would be assassinated or extradited to the Entente nations. In 1919 and 1920, he offered to sacrifice himself on behalf of the other individuals wanted by the victors, writing to King George V: 'If the allied and associated governments require a sacrifice, let them take me instead of the 900 Germans whose only fault was that they served their fatherland in war.' Previously the Kaiser's brother and other princes had offered themselves up in open letters 'Take us in his stead. Or along with him!' [163] But these suggestions were cleverly calculated but ultimately empty displays of nobility and courage.

The crown prince's public gesture elicited no response and

Copyrighted Material

worsened his conflicts with his father.[164] Wilhelm's fall from grace was just as steep as the Kaiser's, but the depths to which he fell were far lower – at least in terms of material conditions. In the winter 1918–19, he took refuge in a 'worrisomely primitive house' whose rooms could hardly be heated, living a life of waiting, reading, writing, conversing with followers, mostly from the military, and taking walks through the cold, 'impenetrable fog'. In the autumn of 1919, the *New York Times* ran a profile of the crown prince, contending that he was so impoverished he had been forced to sell his fur coats in Amsterdam.[165] The American press, which can be said, without exaggeration, to have developed a decades-long obsession with the Hohenzollerns, was full of detailed 'home portraits' with headlines such as 'The Crownless Crown Prince and His Island'.[166]

Gradually, Wilhelm succeeded in setting up a household that included a chef and a maid from Cecilienhof as well as motorized transport. In 1920, American newspapers reported that the crown prince's 100-horsepower Benz was one of the fastest cars in the world. If he so desired, Wilhelm could reach even the faraway Spanish border in no time, within two days at most.[167] Two former officers who lived at least some of the time in the two-storey house served the crown prince as adjutants, private secretaries, servants and social companions who helped him with his 'work'.

After the initial waves of rubberneckers, photographers and journalists had subsided, the prince was visited by members of wealthy families from Amsterdam and elsewhere, who occasionally sailed to Wieringen in their yachts. Wilhelm borrowed money from his mother, and the wife of an Amsterdam jeweller furnished his house for him. The Kaiser's personal physician reported in 1921 that the island's famous guest was very popular among the natives and was well looked after.[168] Wilhelm regularly called at Doorn and received increasing numbers of visitors, once in a while his wife and children. Still, when one thinks of the halls of mirrors in the royal castles in Potsdam and other examples of pre-1914 Prussian pomp, it's hard to imagine the crown prince sitting at a wooden table in the parlour of his brick house over a glass of beer with the former

Copyrighted Material

general chief of staff Count Friedrich von der Schulenburg, future army general chief of staff Ludwig Beck, Dresdner Bank director Eugen Gutmann, Field Marshal General Hans von Plessen, Count Heinrich zu Dohna, Prince zu Solms-Baruch and the Duke of Braunschweig.[169]

But that was undoubtedly what his reality was really like. Wilhelm learned 'tolerable' Dutch, speaking with the fishermen and farmers in their homes every day, and wrote letters in an endless series of variations on military staccato concerning the same basic topic: 'I'm suffering from this nameless filth in Germany. I lack anything genuine to do. I miss my family, my house, the soil of March Brandenburg, my thoroughbreds and my old friends.'[170] In February 1919, after only a few months in exile, he wrote to an officer with whom he was cordial: 'I live here in part like a fisherman or farmer, read, write a lot, play music, draw and work in the village smithy. You can't let yourself be dragged down.' He signed off the letter with the words 'Your old commander', adding in parentheses, 'How is the expansion of the rear positions?'[171]

Throughout his exile, the crown prince was able to keep in contact with old and new German military elites. With outmoded arrogance, he wrote to Ludwig Beck in 1921 of the newly reconstituted Polish state: 'Poland is nothing but a bad joke of world history that will disappear again when the time is right.' Along with maintaining such friendships, Wilhelm also made connections to influential German right-wing militia leaders. Among the visitors to Wieringen was the former navy officer Hermann Ehrhardt, one of the best-known and most charismatic figures in the paramilitary Freikorps, who led the national German counter-revolutionary movement and would later make a name for himself as a planner of political assassinations.[172]

The brusque tone for which the crown prince was known throughout Germany continued in his correspondence in exile, as did the simplistic mindset that thought complex political issues could be solved by sufficient demonstrations of force. In 1921, for instance, he wrote that all it would take to resolve all Germany's

Copyrighted Material

border conflicts with Poland was to 'bring together all Germany's regular military and volunteer associations and give the Poles a proper thrashing'.[173]

The crown prince shared the opinion with military elites and most of the German right-wing camp that the world war wasn't truly over and would be continued by a new leader in a new form. This idea was less the wishful thinking of a prince in exile than a *sine qua non* for Wilhelm to earn his place on the recoalescing German Right. In a major 1919 interview with the *New York Times*, the crown prince declared that there would be another large-scale war within a decade. The *New York Tribune* quoted this statement, noting sarcastically that its author had to know what he was talking about since starting wars, after all, was one of his specialities.[174] The spectacle of a fallen crown prince in wooden clogs vowing from his little island house that renewed world war was inevitable once again combined ridiculousness with a harbinger of darkness to come. Even in clogs, the seemingly laughable crown prince remained part of the forces that were about to redefine the political Right in Germany.

The Resentment of the Socially Demoted

In the early phase of the German counter-revolution, various ideologically and organizationally fluid circles overlapped. There were no hard-and-fast distinctions between monarchist intransigence, paramilitary cults of violence, racist esoterica, global anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, terrorists, assassins and would-be putschists. The fluidity within the political Right as a whole made it easier for the Hohenzollerns to make connections to significant new figures and their ideas.

A decade before the Nazi movement established itself as the leading right-wing force in Germany, unprecedented bridges that would become a reality in 1933 were already under construction. One notable example of the openness of early German counter-revolutionaries to new forms of collaboration was the unlikely

Copyrighted Material

biography of the spy and global adventurer Ignaz Trebitsch-Lincoln,[175] whose 'secret' and 'mysterious' connections to the crown prince's cadre of advisors was controversial enough in 1919 to attract intense interest abroad.[176] A series of more or less sensationalist reports portrayed Trebitsch-Lincoln as a mediator in early plans for a putsch. One plot envisioned the Kaiser being declared mentally incompetent and Hindenburg elected German president, whereupon he would step down so that that Crown Prince Wilhelm could be crowned.[177] Like much that emerged from the early counter-revolutionary movement, such ideas may have sounded like penny-novel fantasies, but there was some astonishing substance at their core.[178]

Upon his release from a British prison, where he had served three years for fraud, the former British member of parliament and con artist Trebitsch-Lincoln meandered, hungry and penniless, through the streets of post-revolutionary Berlin. There, in a grotesque political match-up, despite being born a Hungarian Jew, he won the trust of the racist writer Reinhold Wulle, one of the leading lights of the radical right-wing press. Trebitsch-Lincoln, who was known in Germany for his scathing anti-British texts, impressed the anti-Semite Wulle with his claim to have connections with no fewer than 320 American publications. Wulle introduced Trebitsch-Lincoln to one of the top figures of the anti-democratic movement, the Ludendorff intimate and former artillery officer Max Bauer.[179]

Bauer and Trebitsch-Lincoln both regarded Crown Prince Wilhelm as a legitimate candidate for the throne, which made it necessary to bypass the Kaiser.[180] Trebitsch-Lincoln was able to get various American newspapers to report rumours that the Kaiser had lost his mind, wandering through Amerongen Castle screaming, incapable of recognizing his surroundings.[181] Trebitsch-Lincoln failed in his attempt to meet Wilhelm II at the castle, but he was received on Wieringen by the crown prince's adjutants, whom he informed about his ideas for restoring the monarchy. The advisor in question had little time for his insistence that the prince would have to assert himself like Caesar and Jesus.[182] Nonetheless,

Copyrighted Material

Trebitsch-Lincoln continued to enjoy Bauer's trust, retained contact with leading monarchist insurgents and even played a not unimportant role in the Kapp Putsch.

In 1919, the crown prince had articulated his wish to create an instrument of 'massive propaganda' that would constantly remind people everywhere of what he saw as the Social Democratic movement's culpability in Germany's defeat. The former colonel Bauer was among the most powerful of the German putschists when he swore his unqualified loyalty to Wilhelm in early 1920. The time wasn't ripe for the heir to the throne, Bauer conceded, but his propaganda was starting to work. Bauer gave the prince a plan drawn up by Trebitsch-Lincoln, saying how they shared 'professional interests' with the former spy.[183] The scenarios envisioned in that document, in keeping with its peripatetic author, freely mixed fantasy and reality. Long before the Kapp Putsch, fantastic visions of the restoration of the German monarchy ghosted around the global press. Some reports claimed that the crown prince had secretly returned to Germany a while ago and was already at work steering the counter-revolution, which would involve two million men, from his Silesian estates. Fantasies of the Kaiser's son assembling a million-strong army 'like Caesar in Gaul' and leading it against the Weimar Republic would recur in later radical right-wing pamphlets.[184]

As things turned out, once the Kapp Putsh had failed, it didn't take long for both the Kaiser and crown prince to distance themselves rhetorically from the attempted coup d'état, although it had initially put the Hohenzollerns 'in a very happy mood'.[185] This was hardly surprising. One of the two men's primary concerns was not to lose the protection of the Dutch government. The crown prince's position was worrisome enough to British and Dutch authorities that they temporarily prohibited him from leaving Wieringen and deployed a torpedo boat to monitor his activities.[186]

The extensive travels of Trebitsch-Lincoln, who was manic-depressive,[187] took him to many places, but he never personally met the crown prince. A windbag and wanderer between worlds, he

Copyrighted Material

would heap public scorn ten years later upon the 'stupidity' of putschist circles who could not even agree on a pretender to the German throne.[188] This three-chambered burlesque of princes, putschists and confidence men was no secret to Germans at the time. In 1928, the star director of German avant-garde theatre Erwin Piscator used the figure of a highly strung spy to depict a 'society of scoundrels'. Played by Curt Bois, the Trebitsch-Lincoln character was paired with Ludendorff in an 'international farce of cheats and criminals', written by Leo Lania and scored by Kurt Weill, which mixed post-war German reality and grotesque exaggeration.[189]

At first glance, the encounter between one of the leaders of the militarized far Right in Germany and an imaginative Jewish conman who was trying to win the crown prince's support for a putsch may seem like the stuff of fiction. But, as with other historical episodes, this was more than a mere oddity. In her seminal analysis of totalitarian movements, Hannah Arendt describes a constellation that has existed since the late nineteenth century and whose basic contours were also visible in Weimar Germany: the cooperation between members of a fundamentally threatened or simply fearful elite with picaresque adventurers, would-be visionaries and self-proclaimed dragon slayers from well outside respectable bourgeois society. As Arendt tells it, elites may begin to openly admire people from gangster and criminal milieus in situations of economic and political upheaval. The result is new subcultures that bring together people from all walks of life who feel socially demoted.

First published in 1951, Arendt's analysis examined the examples of the militaristic far Right in 1890s France, the brutally racist African colonists around 1900 and the rise of fascist movements after 1918. Arendt described these new constellations of people with the word 'mob'. But they didn't consist solely of the lower classes. On the contrary, they were like a caricature of society in its entirety: alliances of people who had been pushed down the social ladder, the angry and the avaricious, individuals from all classes who had been rendered superfluous and who were now reconstituting themselves in a new type of group.

Copyrighted Material

Alliances arising at key historical junctures between the high nobility, the military, armed militias and disreputable mediators and agents often remained quite unstable and ended up amounting to nothing. So did many of their principal figures. In the years that followed, Trebitsch-Lincoln's German patron Wulle vacillated between collaboration with and opposition to the Nazi regime and was arrested in 1940. He survived the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, where he was held under special conditions that included permission to receive cigars sent by the crown prince.[190] Following his career as a putschist and a global counter-revolutionary advisor, Bauer died in Shanghai in 1929 while working for Chiang Kai-shek.[191] Trebitsch-Lincoln himself, who by that point was ordained as a Buddhist monk, met his end in 1943 as an agent of the Japanese secret service, also in Shanghai. This picturesque, enigmatic middleman and trickster, whose biography defied alignment with any usual twentieth-century political categories, seems to have absconded to China all the way back in 1921.

The partial opening-up of elite segments of society and their partnerships with figures with whom they would have by no means consorted before the war were both a novelty and a model for the future – one which is frequently present at the beginnings of twentieth-century dictatorships. While Trebitsch-Lincoln was shuttling between Berlin, Doorn, Wieringen and other parts of the world, a painter of postcards from Austria in post-revolutionary Munich was discovering his talents as a radical right-wing orator and his appeal as a guest, whip and holster on full display, in the homes of wealthy patrons.[192] When seen in the context of Hitler's early contacts to leading political, military and social circles in Munich, Trebitsch-Lincoln's presence on Wieringen seems much less implausible and bizarre. It was an expression of the anti-democratic Right's willingness to experiment and of the new social alliances that soon played a central role in the rise of Nazi movement.

The realities of the crown prince's first five years after the First World War have been buried under 100 years of romanticization. While Wilhelm undoubtedly led a stark life of relative privation

Copyrighted Material