



# THE LAST MONARCHY

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*The German Empire (1871-1918) was an original and effective regime that sank with the continental monarchies in the defeat of 1918, marking the irretrievable end of the "world of yesterday" (Stefan Zweig).*

Proclaimed on January 18, 1871 in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, the German Empire sealed the federal bond, uniting twenty-five states (twenty-two of which had a reigning dynasty and three republics: Hamburg, Bremen, Lübeck), under the preponderance of the most active and powerful of them, the Prussia of the Bismarcks and the Moltkes—which alone covered 65% of the surface area of the new Reich and brought together sixty-two percent of its inhabitants. Moreover, since the emperor was at the same time the king of Prussia, head of the house of Hohenzollern, as in his function, the imperial chancellor, who was also the Prussian prime minister, enjoyed the assistance of his own government, as in the Bundesrat (where the plenipotentiaries, nominated by each of the princes and each of the three cities, sat and voted in their own right), the said Prussia, thanks to its blocking minority, had the leisure to neutralize decisions judged to be inopportune—one can indeed speak of a hegemonic influence.

But it is also necessary to be specific. Having lost their oft-illusory sovereignty, the medium and small federated states enjoyed a large degree of autonomy, kept their own constitutions and governments, and in short, preserved their distinctive features within the Reich—the latter having a constitution and a government common to all. Thus, in addition to the emperor and the chancellor, the Reichstag or Chamber of Deputies and the Bundesrat or Federal Council, there were assemblies which made the law and, like the chancellor, had authority. However, although elected by universal suffrage, the Reichstag could not overrule the chancellor, who was chosen by the emperor and was responsible only to him. As for the Bundesrat, which was charged with arbitrating as the supreme court in disputes between the Reich and the states, its approval was necessary to declare war and dissolve the Reichstag.

In any case, by force of circumstance, and although the princes were allies of the emperor, not subjects, the central government became more complicated, more substantial, and more and more powerful at the expense of the federated states. Initially embodying the entire ministry, Bismarck was led to recruit several senior civil servants from the pool of the senior administration, subordinate to his authority, to whom he entrusted the direction of offices (foreign affairs of the empire, justice, railways, post office, navy, etc.) outside of a close collegial structure. To sum up, as a result of the synchrony between the growing importance of Prussia in the Reich and the development of the latter's competences, the Hohenzollern kingdom tempered unitarism wherever the maintenance of Prussian

prerogative required it, while strengthening it by giving it the management of Germany (increased since May 10, 1871 by Alsace-Lorraine).

## **Social Advances**

Wilhelm I died in his nineties on March 9, 1888, and his son and successor Frederick III, suffering from cancer of the larynx, died on June 15 of the same year, giving way to Wilhelm II. There followed, the presumptive young monarch on one side, Bismarck on the other, twenty-two months of increasingly difficult collaboration which, from January to March 1890, turned into a real crisis, resulting in the forced resignation of the old and illustrious chancellor. A struggle for power? From the very beginning. But it was the social question that was the cause of the rupture. At the Council of the Crown on January 24, Wilhelm, after a series of large strikes, presented two memoranda, forwarding an obligatory weekly day of rest, a number of measures in favor of women and children, the creation of works councils and savings banks, the construction of hospitals, orphanages, etc. Then on February 3, he signed two ordinances, without the chancellor's countersignature, announcing the preparation of a labor law and the establishment of workers' representatives to negotiate with employers and the administration. Indeed, the emperor, taking seriously his Christian duty to help the oppressed, dared to say of the bosses at that time that they only thought of squeezing the workers "like lemons" and that he wanted to be "the king of the beggars."

Opposed to the prepotency of elective assemblies, Bismarck had basically paved the way for the "personal regime" of Wilhelm II, who was now, as he wrote to the princes, "the watch officer on the ship of state." Significant words. Then, the emperor, "an instrument chosen by Heaven" and the supercilious leader of the army, appointed officers, decided on their promotion, punished them, and dismissed them. He was the active head of the military and of naval command, fond of beautiful uniforms, reviews and impressive parades (revenge for a disability—his left arm was too short and ankylosed—which humiliated him); and he was the comrade of soldiers. Nevertheless, despite noisy sorties on dry powder and sharpened sword, for twenty-six years, from 1888 to 1914, the Wilhelmine Reich, except for the expedition against the Boxers, remained at peace with the world.

## **A Tyranny?**

But a tyranny, many have claimed, hidden under a constitutional veneer. Indeed, neither a flat parliamentary monarchy of the dualist type (or a regime with a decision-making body with a simple

monarchic executive), nor, much worse, a spurious regime in monarchic form, an evanescent image, therefore negating royalty, but a system based on *das monarchische Prinzip*, alien to the recognition of a duality of principles and even more to the total sabotage of the royal function. One had thus, in this case, and distinct from the old absolute monarchy, which realized, with the theoretical unity of the State power, the permanent unity of the exercise of this power, a limited monarchy which, while ensuring the supremacy of the king (of Prussia) and the emperor (German) in the exercise of this power, subjected the said exercise (according to a gradation of techniques proper to the kingdom and proper to the empire), initially in the legislative area, to certain dependences likely to obstruct the ruler's will—without ever, essential point, constraining it positively.

Blessed with a very good memory, great facility for learning, real qualities of an orator, Wilhelm II, until the war, had a great influence on his subjects. Proof of this magnetism—on June 15, 1913, during the silver jubilee of his reign, addresses, ceremonies, commemorative works, and erections of statues multiplied. Better than the *primus inter pares* of the Bismarckian era, than the first of all German princes, the emperor henceforth symbolized, in the eyes of the masses, the constancy of a Germanic nation in full development of its economy, in full demographic expansion (67 million inhabitants in 1914), maritime and industrial, almost without unemployment, and benefiting from laws on health insurance, on accident insurance, on old-age insurance, to which nothing in any other country came close (and certainly not in republican France, with its insignificantly low birth rate—41.5 million inhabitants in 1914—the red lantern in terms of social rights).

## **The War**

Unfortunately, then came that terrible conflict, announced on June 28, 1914 by the criminal act of Sarajevo, consequence of the Balkan crises of 1908 and 1912-1913. After that, on July 28, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia; Russia was mobilized from July 29; and on August 1, in the evening, Germany declared war on Serbia, then on August 3 on France. And on August 4 it was Britain's turn to declare war on Germany. Of course, Wilhelm immediately became the prominent figure of the *Burgfriedenspolitik*, cheered on with his wife, as they drove through the Brandenburg Gate on July 31. The next day, August 1, he was cheered on the balcony of the Berlin castle, and his words were reproduced on postcards with his image, which were widely distributed.

But in November 1918 came the defeat. The Emperor and King of Prussia had to abdicate. And so did the kings of Bavaria, Saxony, Württemberg, the grand dukes of Baden, Oldenburg, etc.—in a word, all

the crowned heads of Germania. Final catastrophe, [according to the Italian historian](#) Guglielmo Ferrero, for the principle of authority that dominated the greater part of Europe—for the principle "already shaken by incredulity, rationalism, egalitarian doctrines" and "uprooted completely by the world war."

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*[Featured](#): "Inauguration of the Reichstag, June 25, 1888," by Anton von Werner; painted in 1893.*

