Kaiser Wilhelm II

Attracted and impressed by the pomp of military heraldry, his theatrical posturing as 'supreme warlord' served only to disguise his unpredictability and ineffectiveness as a war leader, and proved a gift for Allied satirists and caricaturists. During the First World War his image was exploited as the personification of evil and ultimate source of all German 'frightfulness'.

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| Figure 1Portrait of Kaiser Wilhelm II  wearing the parade uniform of a Garde  Heim officer in the Prussian Kurassier  (Heavy Cavalry) Regiment No. 1,  Imperial German Army in Berlin, circa 1905. |

The reign of Kaiser Wilhelm II as King of Prussia and Emperor of Germany (1888-1918) witnessed the meteoric rise of Germany as an economic and military power. It also saw the fragmentation of Europe into opposed camps of mutually-mistrusting alliances, a world war ending in Germany’s humiliating defeat and the abolition of German monarchical rule. Wilhelm’s life, actions and complex character played a significant part in this destructive process.

Utterly convinced of his right to rule, Wilhelm early on overestimated his capacity for wise political judgment. His dismissal of Chancellor Bismarck in 1890 and ambitious aim to make Germany a world power served to disrupt the established balance of the European order. As Queen Victoria’s first grandson, his ambivalent, love-hate, attitude to Britain, strained relations between the two countries. An obsession with the enlargement of the German Navy, pro-Boer stance during the Second Boer War and blustering claims for German colonial expansion merely served to bring Britain and France closer together. Wilhelm’s paranoid perception of a deliberate encirclement of Germany served only to increase her isolation.

During the July 1914 crisis Wilhelm’s rash assurance of unlimited support to Austria-Hungary opened the floodgates for bloody conflict. He proved indecisive and ineffective as a war leader and increasingly strategic and political power devolved on the German High Command. By late 1918 Wilhelm’s presence proved an obstacle to peace negotiations and, forced to abdicate on 9 November 1918, he was bundled off to neutral Holland, where he remained until his death in 1941.

"Kaiser Wilhelm II." *Imperial War Museums*. Imperial War Museums, n.d. Web. 20 Oct. 2013. <http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/kaiser-wilhelm-ii>.