



HISTORYMAKERS Wilhelm II

Erratic Kaiser

Section 1

“The sovereign who ruled over [the German people] was busy and dynamic like them, but more restless than thorough. He was into everything and alert to everything, sometimes with useful results.”—Historian Barbara Tuchman

Energetic, ambitious, and sometimes childish, Wilhelm II had no overall plan for governing his country. In fact, he helped lead Germany into a disastrous world war. His country’s defeat saw him lose both his power and his throne.

In 1859, Wilhelm II was born to Frederick III, heir to the throne of the German Empire, and Victoria, daughter of Great Britain’s queen. At military school, Wilhelm learned to prize the soldier’s life. He remained attracted to the army throughout his life and frequently dressed in military uniform. In 1888, when Wilhelm became emperor, his first speech was to his troops. He and the army, he told them, were “born for each other.”

Wilhelm also became accustomed to getting his own way. In school, fellow students fed him with constant praise and obedience. When he ruled, he believed himself to be supreme. “There is only one master in the [the German Empire] and that is I; I shall tolerate no other,” he said. He once told some young soldiers: “If your emperor commands you to do so, you must fire on your father and mother.”

Wilhelm’s mother taught him to believe in the liberal politics of her British upbringing. He flirted with such policies soon after taking the throne and briefly offered a plan aimed at improving the lives of workers. However, when wealthy conservatives voiced their opposition, he quickly dropped the idea.

Kaiser Wilhelm was mainly concerned with Germany’s military might. For example, he once heard that a circus had an efficient method for unloading equipment and animals from trains. He sent aides to study the process. Soon, the circus’s methods were adopted by the army. Similarly, when the kaiser wanted to increase Germany’s influence, he chose military means. For instance, he launched an ambitious program of shipbuilding aimed at challenging the British navy.

The kaiser saw Germany—and himself—as the major power in Europe. “There is no power in Europe but me—me and my twenty-five army corps,” he once said. However, his efforts to assert German authority in world affairs failed. In 1905,

he caused trouble for France in its colony of Morocco, but the international conference that resolved the dispute opposed him. In 1911, trouble again arose over Morocco, and the kaiser had to meekly avoid war with France. His changeable nature showed in foreign policy too. At various times he tried to win both Britain and Russia as allies. At other times, though, he drove them away. The result was that both those nations allied themselves with France and against Germany.

Between 1905 and 1911, Wilhelm’s power at home faded. He made a gross error of diplomacy in 1908, when he told a British newspaper that many Germans were anti-English. Wilhelm’s chancellor—the head of the government—was forced to apologize for the kaiser. There was even talk that he should resign the throne.

In 1914, Wilhelm forced Austria-Hungary to take a hard line against Serbia after the Austrian archduke had been assassinated there. As war neared, the kaiser became frightened and tried to urge peace. However, it was too late, and Europe plunged into World War I. France and England portrayed Wilhelm as the guiding force in German aggression. In truth, the generals took control of the war, and the kaiser had less influence as the war continued. In 1918, he saw disaster coming. He tried to rally Germany with promises of democratic reforms, but the offer came too late. On November 9, 1918, he was forced off the throne and left for exile in Holland. He lived there another 23 years.

Questions

- Analyzing Issues** Do you agree with Tuchman that Wilhelm was “more restless than thorough”? Explain.
- Forming Opinions** Do you think Wilhelm was a good ruler? Why or why not?
- Making Inferences** How did Wilhelm’s character and his statements before the war contribute to France and England seeing him as the supreme leader of Germany during the war?