

Historische Kommission bei der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.
Kaiser Wilhelm II. als Oberster Kriegsherr im Ersten Weltkrieg: Quellen aus der militärischen Umgebung des Kaisers 1914-1918, bearb. v. Holger Afflerbach. München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2005. 1.051 S. EUR 118.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-486-57581-1.



Reviewed by Matthew Stibbe (Department of History, Sheffield Hallam University)

Published on H-German (May, 2007)

The problem of how exactly Germany's rulers came to make the disastrous set of decisions which led to the outbreak of the First World War and to the eventual collapse and defeat of the empire in 1918 continues to be the source of immense historical controversy. The figure of Kaiser Wilhelm II looms large in this discussion, not least because historians still cannot agree whether he was a mere "shadow emperor" who left policy making to others, or whether—even in the years 1914-18—he continued to exercise a substantial, albeit negative, influence in his role as "supreme war lord." The question is indeed of more than parochial interest, for it goes to the heart of our understanding of how the war began, the manner in which it was fought, and why it was lost.

Holger Afflerbach, previously known for his biography of Erich von Falkenhayn and his study of the Triple Alliance,[1] is one of the most recent and most convincing contributors to this debate. Building on research for his Falkenhayn book, and his more recent work with John Rähl, he has edited and introduced two new sets of sources that allow a clearer view of Wilhelm II in the final years of his reign. The first of these consists of the letters of Generaloberst Moriz Freiherr von Lyncker, the chief of the military cabinet, to his wife Anna Marie in the period from July 1914 to July 1918, combined with a brief selection of his correspondence with various personalities af-

ter the war. The second is made up of the wartime diaries of Generaloberst Hans Georg von Plessen, general adjutant and commander of the Imperial Headquarters, again interspersed with one or two items from his personal correspondence. Both men were in almost daily contact with the kaiser during the war and were, therefore, in a unique position to offer their personal observations and insights.

Taken together, these two sources complement earlier editions of the papers of Rudolf von Valentini, the chief of the civil cabinet, and Admiral Georg Alexander von MÅ¼ller, the chief of the naval cabinet,[2] providing us with a fascinating glimpse into everyday life at Imperial Headquarters. Both sources were for many years assumed to be lost, but through a series of fortunate coincidences, not least the reunification of Germany in 1990, they have resurfaced either in original form or in the form of subsequent copies, not always complete, made from the originals. What new evidence do they provide?

First, in terms of strategy, they confirm the view that Wilhelm II was wholly incapable of fulfilling the role allotted to him as supreme war lord: to coordinate the combined efforts of the army, navy, and civilian administration in pursuit of a successful outcome to the war.[3] His thinking on key questions like war aims, foreign policy, or domestic political reform was simply too contradictory, too incoherent, and too erratic to make

any sense to the people around him. As a result he was increasingly sidelined by other personalities and institutions, especially the Supreme Army Command, the Reich Chancellery, and to some extent, the Reichstag. His entire behavior during the war was characterized by “Weltfremdheit und Realitätsflucht,” which admittedly were already very much in evidence before 1914 (p. 83). This tendency can also be seen, for example, in the following comments made by Lyncker to his wife on October 24, 1914: “[G]estern Abend sah es leidlich gänstig aus, wenn das, was der Kaiser mir sagte, richtig ist. Leider übertreibt er immer zu unseren Gunsten; ganz merkwürdig! Er belügt sich selbst und dann kommen regelmäßig die Enttäuschungen, die sich bei ihm in ärgerlichen Zornausbrüchen Luft machen ... Wir haben immer gehofft, daß der Krieg ihn ändern würde; aber das ist leider gar nicht der Fall” (p. 185).

Nonetheless, the new letters and diary entries show that in terms of personal appointments, the kaiser’s influence and through him the influence of his extra-constitutional military, naval, and civil advisors, were still paramount, at least in the first two years of the war. Afflerbach provides three key examples here: the removal of chief of the general staff Helmuth von Moltke and his replacement with Falkenhayn in September 1914; the decision to retain Falkenhayn in January 1915 in spite of substantial lobbying against him, especially from inside the kaiser’s immediate circle; and the final agreement to replace Falkenhayn with Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff in August 1916 (p. 78). Lyncker’s role as chief of the military cabinet was especially important here: “[Seine] Einflußmöglichkeiten ... lagen ... vor allem bei der Ernennung und Ablösung des Generalstabschefs, was gleichbedeutend mit einem Strategiewechsel sein konnte” (p. 87). A similar indirect influence on strategic decision-making can be seen in Wilhelm’s determination in 1915 and 1916 to hang on to “his” Reich Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, who had been the target of a vicious hate campaign led by the Reich Naval Office and the pro-Alfred Tirpitz press because of his opposition to unrestricted submarine warfare. Here the Kaiser was backed by his cabinet chiefs, but not by the arch-reactionary Plessen, who played a key role in the machinations that led to Bethmann’s eventual dismissal in July 1917 and the nomination of his wholly inadequate successor, the largely unknown Georg Michaelis (pp. 620-621).

In tandem with the Müller diaries, we are provided with fresh details of the stifling atmosphere at headquarters, where the daily routine was characterized by

an “entsetzliche, bleierne Langeweile” (p. 613), involving endless games of skat and pointless daydreaming, while outside, in the real world, battles raged and people died from lack of food and medicine. Lyncker was much more scathing in this regard, becoming increasingly impatient with the kaiser, even in his presence, and, like Müller, going to great lengths to persuade him to spend more time in Berlin. For Plessen, on the other hand, “Takt und Einfühlungsvermögen” were the key duties of a courtier, which made him place the “Schonung der kaiserlichen Person” above all other considerations, even in the final days of the empire (p. 592). In particular, like the empress, Auguste Victoria, he was responsible for shielding his master from bad news and building a “chinese wall” around him. This attitude made him, in Afflerbach’s view, “ebenso wie sein Kaiser ... wenn auch absolut gegen seinen Willen, ein Totengräber der Monarchie in Deutschland” (p. 632).

One issue that Afflerbach turns to repeatedly and convincingly in his two character sketches is the question of generational identities. Thus Plessen, born in 1841, was one of the last surviving representatives of an older generation of military leaders who had served at the court of Wilhelm I and represented a link between the younger Wilhelm and the *altpreussisch* traditions of his grandfather. His attitude towards the Hohenzollerns was one of “bedingungsloser Zuneigung und Treue,” and he shared with the old Kaiser an instinctive dislike of the “tactlessness” shown, for instance, by Bismarck in his dealings with the royal household (p. 610). By contrast, Lyncker and Müller, born in 1853 and 1854 respectively, really belonged to the “Wilhelmine generation.”[4] They were less concerned with tact and instead put a higher premium on efficiency and effective leadership. Having realized a long time before 1914 that they were unlikely to get either of these qualities from Wilhelm II, their first concern was to protect the institution of the monarchy rather than the person of the monarch. In particular they did not want to see a revolution in Germany to match those that took place in St. Petersburg in 1905 and 1917. Nor, in spite of their claims to be “non-political,” did they want to see internal reforms of the type that would turn Germany into a constitutional monarchy with ministers responsible to parliament. Rather, in their view, Germany’s greatness rested on its semi-absolutist constitution, which kept matters such as foreign policy and appointments to military offices and high offices of state firmly within the royal prerogative. Such values made it essential that the Kaiser at least be seen to fulfill his function as a “politische

Symbolfigur” through occasional appearances in public, even if he could not be trusted with real responsibility for decision-making (p. 84).

Finally, the letters and diaries tell us something of the subjective experience of the war as seen through the eyes of two leading members of the entourage, both of whom lost sons in battle, Lyncker twice and Plessen once. In this regard Afflerbach’s sympathies are very obviously with Lyncker, a man who suffered an enormous personal crisis as a result of his grief, but was just about able to hold things together, at least until the last months of the war, by communicating his feelings in letters to his wife. Here we find a deeply religious man who saw the war and the personal sacrifice of his sons as a consequence of human sin and the need for redemption: “Nie zuvor habe ich solch Schmerz kennen gelernt. Es ist Gottes Wille; er allein weiß, warum er uns dies auferlegte. Durch Tränen hier geht der Weg zu Ihm!” (October 8, 1914, p. 176). This depth of feeling makes him, in human terms, infinitely preferable to men like Falkenhayn or Austrian chief of general staff Conrad von Hötzendorf, whom one can imagine calmly discussing the deaths of hundreds of thousands while remaining seemingly untouched by feelings of inner guilt (p. 117). Even so, politically Lyncker was just as responsible for those deaths. Although he professed a longing for an end to the war and was ready to moderate Germany’s aims to achieve this goal, he too demanded that the Reich should retain Belgium or at least the Belgian ports as minimum conditions, based on his conviction that Britain would remain the *Hauptfeind* in the present and future (p. 102). Like Falkenhayn, he wanted a compromise peace with tsarist Russia and a substantial victory over Britain and France, which led him to support the former’s extremely costly strategy of attrition on the Western Front from 1914 to 1916 (pp. 97-8).

The alternative strategy of a decisive victory in the East followed by a knock-out blow in the West, as put forward by Ludendorff, came close to succeeding in March 1918, but ultimately failed after the Allied counter-offensive of the summer of 1918. Could things have

turned out differently, one wonders, had the Reich made senior military and naval appointments subject to ministerial counter-signature and parliamentary scrutiny as opposed to being the preserve of secret cabinet chiefs? After all, this demand had been raised repeatedly by the SPD and by leading left-liberals like Georg Gothein before 1914 (p. 71). Certainly the economic and strategic challenges facing Germany at the turn of the century were formidable and should not be underestimated. Yet ultimately, after reading through the powerful new evidence of the sheltered life at Imperial Headquarters, one can only agree with Rühl when he writes, with specific reference to the decision to go to war in 1914: “Eine konstitutionelle Monarchie mit einem dem Parlament und der Öffentlichkeit verantwortlichen Kabinett hätte ... nicht in solcher Isolierung und Ignoranz gehandelt.”[5]

Notes

[1]. Holger Afflerbach, *Falkenhayn. Politisches Denken und Handeln im Kaiserreich* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1994); idem., *Der Dreibund. Europäische Großmacht- und Allianzpolitik vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2002).

[2]. Bernhard Schwertfeger, ed., *Kaiser und Kabinettschef. Nach eigenen Aufzeichnungen und dem Briefwechsel des Wirklichen Geheimen Rates Rudolf von Valentini* (Oldenburg: Stalling, 1931); Walter Grotz, ed., *Regierte der Kaiser? Kriegstagebücher, Aufzeichnungen und Briefe des Chefs des Marine-Kabinetts Admiral Georg Alexander von Müller, 1914-1918* (Göttingen: Musterschmidt Verlag, 1959).

[3]. See also Wilhelm Deist’s essay, “Kaiser Wilhelm II. als Oberster Kriegsherr,” in *Der Ort Kaiser Wilhelms II. in der deutschen Geschichte*, ed. John C. G. Rühl (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1991), 25-42.

[4]. On generational identities see also Detlev J. K. Peukert. *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 14-18.

[5]. John C.G. Rühl, *Kaiser, Hof und Staat. Wilhelm II. und die deutsche Politik* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1987), 16.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Matthew Stibbe. Review of Historische Kommission bei der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, *Kaiser Wilhelm II. als Oberster Kriegsherr im Ersten Weltkrieg: Quellen aus der militärischen Umgebung des Kaisers 1914-1918*, bearb. v. Holger Afflerbach. H-German, H-Net Reviews. May, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13141>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.