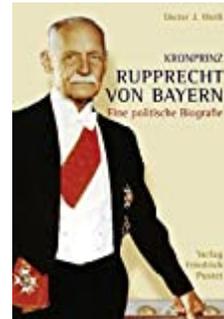




Dieter J. Weiß. *Kronprinz Rupprecht von Bayern (1869-1955): Eine politische Biografie.* Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet Verlag, 2007. 464 pp. ISBN 978-3-7917-2047-0.



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“Uncrowned, and Yet a King”

This new book explores the life of a man whose political career was defined by not being king of Bavaria. Crown Prince Rupprecht was robbed of that opportunity by the revolution in Bavaria after the First World War, and all his subsequent efforts toward restoration were frustrated. In spite of having never achieved his primary political goal, however, Rupprecht was not irrelevant to the political history of Bavaria, or of Germany, as his birth, popularity, and position guaranteed him influence during democratic governments, particularly within conservative circles, and made him a suspicious enemy in times of dictatorship. Writing on this intriguing subject, Dieter J. Weiß has produced a book that will be of interest to anyone studying the political history of the time and place, giving us insight into an area often neglected by Anglophone scholars.

Weiß has researched the history of southern Germany, knightly orders, and Catholicism for the past two decades.[1] For this project, which touches on these themes, he made extensive use of family archives, ego documents, and correspondence, as well as wide-ranging

secondary source materials. The notes are well organized and useful, the bibliography partial but adequate. The book includes twenty-four pages of beautifully reproduced photographs (four in color), and a family tree, both of which assist the reader in recalling the identities of the most important individuals in the subject’s life. The book is well written and engaging, with a style that does not lose sight of maintaining reader interest even while adhering to the standards of German academic scholarship. Researchers at every level should find it useful and enjoyable.

Rupprecht was born in 1869, and spent nearly his entire early life in a Bavaria that had integrated into the Wilhelmine Empire, but which remained fiercely protective of its autonomy as laid out in the constitution of the German Empire. His education and upbringing were in many ways typical—military training was emphasized, and Rupprecht was expected to serve as an officer—but in others quite innovative: he was the first royal Bavarian to attend a public *Gymnasium*, and his interest in natural science and art were cultivated at the university.

Rupprecht's grandfather, Luitpold, never held the title of king, serving instead as regent to the mentally incapacitated kings Ludwig II and Otto. Rupprecht's father, Ludwig III, was installed by the Bavarian parliament, effectively deposing the still-living Otto only in 1913, shortly before the outbreak of the war that would end the Bavarian monarchy.

In an interesting parallel to the more familiar life of Crown Prince Rudolf of Austria, Rupprecht's youth and early life was overshadowed by his bad relationship with his conservative father, and characterized by his belief in liberal constitutionalism, which he saw as the only way for monarchy to survive in a changing world. Unlike Rudolf, however, Rupprecht found it possible to remain optimistic or at least hopeful for change without reaching despair. Once his years of schooling were at an end, Rupprecht dedicated much time to foreign travel and art collecting, visiting India, China, and Japan, as well as European art centers such as Florence and Paris. During this period he made what seems to have been a happy marriage, in spite of the health problems of his wife, Marie Gabriele, and the deaths of four of their five children (one in childbirth).

During the First World War, Rupprecht commanded the Sixth Army in Lorraine, achieving promotion to general field marshal. His accomplishments as commander were in some dispute in early histories, especially those written by other commanders during the Weimar years wishing to place blame for the German military defeat, but Wei's evidence confirms the more recent view that Rupprecht was among the very best royal commanders in the German army at the time. His success in holding back the French at the Battle of Lorraine earned glory for both him and the Bavarian Army, disproving the Prussian claim to a monopoly on military prowess in Germany. Rupprecht was an early critic of the unrealistic war aims of the kaiser and high command; although at first he supported territorial acquisitions in the West that could accrue to Bavaria, he quickly renounced such aims as he perceived the folly of a war of position. Rather than blindly pursue an impossible victory, Rupprecht favored negotiating a peace from a position of relative strength before it was too late.

His suggestions were ignored, criticized, refuted, and sometimes suppressed by the kaiser, the General Staff, Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff, and also his father. The consensus was that he was "pessimistic" due to personal disposition. As the situation worsened, he foresaw the possibility of the collapse of German federal-

ism and Bavarian monarchy—the two things he believed in most—but he was powerless to act as the revolution brought it about. Naturally critical of the revolution that dethroned his father in 1918, Rupprecht remained a dedicated monarchist throughout his life. During the Weimar Republic, he maintained a "court" with money from his estate, and gave audiences to those who respected his position. He moved in national conservative circles, but refused to support any party—believing that it was necessary for a monarch to remain aloof from parliamentary politics, even once dethroned. Rupprecht's friends included Gustav von Kahr, who Adolf Hitler hoped would support the putsch attempt in 1923, but Rupprecht himself regarded Hitler as irresponsible, untrustworthy, and possibly mad. Approaches by monarchist sympathizers within the National Socialist Party such as Ernst Röhm tended to alienate Rupprecht further, as when Röhm theatrically humbled himself on his first visit, much to the embarrassment of the crown prince.

Rupprecht's cool relations with the Nazis only worsened after their seizure of power in 1933. The political police suspected monarchists like Kahr to be enemies of the state, and Rupprecht found his opportunities for political action and economic freedom shrinking. Finally, he found it wiser to spend more and more time abroad, emigrating to fascist Italy rather than risk arrest at home during the Second World War. By the time of the fall of the Salo Republic, this was no longer a safe refuge, although Rupprecht himself was fortunate enough to be captured and treated well by the British. His family was not so fortunate, however, and his wife and children were arrested as suspected enemy sympathizers by the Gestapo in the final months of the war. The last years of Rupprecht's life were increasingly embittered, as he saw Bavarian particularism finally eradicated by the occupying powers and the new Basic Law, and as efforts to build sympathy for monarchism were banned by law.

Biography often runs the risk of passing into hagiography, particularly when the scholar is dependent upon the good graces of the family to gain access to vital archival materials. At any rate, one cannot expect an exposé under such conditions. At times, the story presented here of Rupprecht seems in danger of being too uncritical and too supportive, particularly in terms of his service during World War I. Apparently he never condoned an improper action by an inferior or supported a tactically questionable move by the General Staff, in spite of his position of responsibility on the western front (and particularly in view of his responsibility for the occupying powers of Belgium). The documentary evidence may

well support this position, but at times it seems improbable that Rupprecht had such astonishing insight into the errors of imperial German policy, yet no power to alter it.

That said, the book does not completely ignore Rupprecht's faults. Although highly critical of his own father's stubborn conservatism, Rupprecht attempted to block his son's marriage to a woman of lower noble status. This marriage could have been seen as endangering a possible restoration after the fall of the monarchy, as it went against the traditional requirement for an heir to the Bavarian throne to marry royalty, but with the benefit of hindsight, it seems old-fashioned and foolish to worry about an inheritance that was never restored (doubtless *Erbprinz* Albrecht saw it this way at the time). His refusal to immigrate with his family to the United States ultimately resulted in the internment of his wife and daughters in concentration camps at the end of the war, creating a rift from which the family never recovered. Finally, although he eschewed putschism and especially Nazism, Weiß does not deny that Rupprecht was active among the anti-republican forces that paved the way for "national revolution" and dictatorship, or that Rupprecht himself was at times antisemitic. This error in judgment cost Bavaria, and the Wittelsbachs, dearly, for support from a popular figure such as Rupprecht for the Weimar constitution could have been very influential, at

least in his *Heimat*.

Implicit in the political life of Crown Prince Rupprecht is an argument never openly stated by the author or by Rupprecht himself: that perhaps a continued or restored monarchy in Germany during the interwar period could have provided a conservative constitutional counterweight to extremism and prevented the "national revolution" that brought the Nazis to power. Such an argument is, of course, counterfactual, not provable, and perhaps far-fetched, but certainly no more so than speculations from the Left that Germany "lost its chance" through the suppression of revolutionary movements in Bavaria and elsewhere in 1918-19. What Rupprecht did argue, consistently through his life, was that a monarch could serve as a responsible, super-parliamentary force for stability and reason in the life of the nation, and that monarchy was necessary to preserve Bavarian sovereignty and particularism. These arguments, however historians choose to evaluate them, represent an important, interesting part of the historical record.

Note

[1]. See, for example Dieter J. Weiß, *Das Exemte Bistum Bamberg: Die Bischofsreihe von 1522 bis 1693* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), published as part of the *Germania Sacra* series of the Max Planck Institut.

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