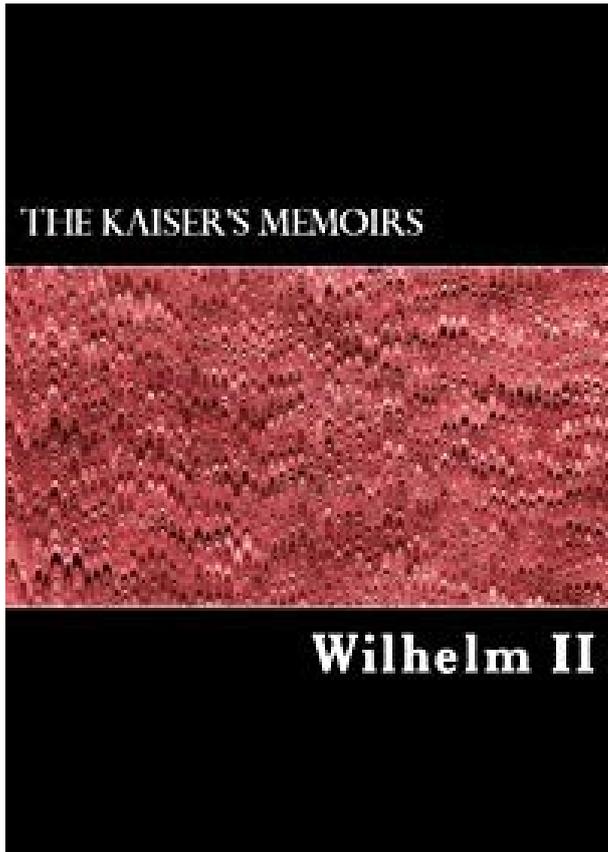


The Kaiser's Memoirs



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In 1922, Wilhelm published his memoirs. Wilhelm II or William II (German: Friedrich Wilhelm Viktor Albert; English: Frederick William Victor Albert) (27 January 1859 – 4 June 1941) was the last German Emperor (Kaiser) and King of Prussia, ruling the German Empire and the Kingdom of Prussia from 15 June 1888 to 9 November 1918. He was a grandson of the British Queen Victoria and related to many monarchs and princes of Europe. Crowned in 1888, he dismissed the Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, in 1890 and launched Germany on a bellicose "New Course" in foreign affairs that culminated in his support for Austria-Hungary in the crisis of July 1914 that led to World War I. Bombastic and impetuous, he sometimes made tact pronouncements on sensitive topics without consulting his ministers, culminating in a disastrous Daily Telegraph interview that cost him most of his power in 1908. His generals dictated policy during World War I with little regard for the civilian government. An ineffective war leader, he lost the support of the army, abdicated in November 1918, and fled to exile in the Netherlands.

Perhaps Wilhelm's most damaging personal blunder in the arena of foreign policy had a far greater impact in Germany than internationally. The episode cost him much of his prestige and power.

The Daily Telegraph Affair of 1908 involved his publication of an interview with a British daily newspaper that included wild statements and diplomatically damaging remarks. Wilhelm saw it as an opportunity to promote his views and ideas on Anglo-German friendship, but instead, due to his emotional outbursts during

the course of the interview, he ended up further alienating not only the British people, but also the French, Russians and Japanese by implying, among other things, that the Germans cared nothing for the British; that the French and Russians had attempted to incite Germany to intervene in the Second Boer War; and that the German naval buildup was targeted against the Japanese, not Britain. One memorable quotation from the interview was, "You English are mad, mad, mad as March hares." The effect in Germany was quite significant, with serious calls for his abdication. Wilhelm kept a very low profile for many months after the Daily Telegraph fiasco, and later exacted his revenge by forcing the resignation of Prince Bülow, who had abandoned the Emperor to public scorn by not editing the transcript of the interview before its publication. The Daily Telegraph crisis deeply wounded Wilhelm's previously unimpaired self-confidence, so much so that he soon suffered a severe bout of depression from which he never really recovered (photographs of Wilhelm in the post-1908 period show a man with far more haggard features and greying hair), and he lost much of the influence he had previously exercised in domestic and foreign policy. British public opinion had been quite favourable toward the Kaiser in his first 12 years in office, but turned sour in the late 1890s. During the World War, however, he became the central target of British anti-German propaganda as the personification of a hated enemy. Wilhelm was at the Imperial Army headquarters in Spa, Belgium, when the uprisings in Berlin and other centres took him by surprise in late 1918. Mutiny among the ranks of his beloved Kaiserliche Marine, the imperial navy, profoundly shocked him. After the outbreak of the German Revolution, Wilhelm could not make up his mind whether or not to abdicate. Up to that point, he was confident that even if he were obliged to vacate the German throne, he would still retain the Prussian kingship. The unreality of this belief was revealed when, in the hope of preserving the monarchy in the face of growing revolutionary unrest, Wilhelm's abdication both as German Emperor and King of Prussia was abruptly announced by the Chancellor, Prince Max of Baden, on 9 November 1918.