

## **Autumn 1918:** The Abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II and Germany's Loss of the Great War

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“After fifteen hundred and sixty-three days, for the first time, all was quiet on the Western Front.”<sup>1</sup>

At the end of the summer of 1918, the Great War had been ongoing for four years; the German Imperial Army “had spent the last of its strength [and] the Imperial High Command had begun to realize that Sigfried (the victorious peace that would enable Germany to dictate her own terms) was no longer obtainable.”<sup>2</sup> The Great War has been characterized as a war of attrition. After the United States of America joined the war on the side of the Entente,<sup>3</sup> Germany simply “lacked the ability to place enough men [and military resources] on the western front to provide an adequate challenge,”<sup>4</sup> especially in light of the abandonment of Germany by its allies Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire, all of whom began negotiating their own independent armistices in September 1918. Yet, despite losing the war of attrition and facing total defeat, Germany did not lose the war militarily as it was not defeated by a crushing Entente invasion. In fact, by the end of the Great War, Germany still had “troops in foreign lands [and] there was no fighting in

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<sup>1</sup> Ferdinand Czernin, Versailles, 1919: The Forces, Events and Personalities that Shaped the

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>3</sup> The Entente, also referred to as the Triple Entente, consisted of Great Britain, France, Russia, and their allies. In WW1, the Triple Entente fought against the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy, and their allies.

<sup>4</sup> Lamar Cecil, Wilhelm II, vol.2 (Chapel Hill, NC: North Carolina UP, 1996), 482.

Germany.”<sup>5</sup> As such, some historians have maintained that Germany did not lose the First World War, as an armistice is “a cessation of hostilities by common agreement of the opposing sides; a truce,”<sup>6</sup> to be concluded by a peace treaty, not a surrender by either side.

What the Entente powers did not accomplish militarily, however, they accomplished through the diplomacy of the pre-Armistice negotiations, and ultimately, the Treaty of Versailles. In a telegram from United States President Woodrow Wilson to the German Government during the pre-Armistice negotiations it became clear that a peace to end the war could not be achieved without the abdication of the Kaiser. The monarch’s support crumbled among his officials as they came to understand that his abdication was the only way to end the international conflict and quell the increasing threat of revolution in Germany. An examination of the decay of support for Kaiser Wilhelm II during the “abdication crisis” of the pre-Armistice negotiations reveals how his abdication contributed to Germany’s “loss” of the Great War. Germany lost the Great War “diplomatically” by having to agree to the terms of the Armistice, which demanded that the Kaiser abdicate, as this resulted in a loss of a strong national figurehead who might have defended Germany in the ensuing peace negotiations.

The German Empire was a parliamentary system with limited male suffrage that was tiered in favour of industrialists and the landed elite. The Kaiser was the Head of State and was able to appoint and dismiss the Chancellor as well as dissolve the Reichstag.<sup>7</sup> The Kaiser was also the Commander in Chief of the German military. Yet, the Kaiser Wilhelm II was a poor military strategist and a military commander only in theory.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, at the outbreak of the war in 1914, he transferred “the right to issue operational orders in his name”<sup>9</sup> to the Chief of General Staff, the position to which General Paul von Hindenburg was appointed in August 1916. This, combined with the trend of shielding the Kaiser from bad news,

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<sup>5</sup> James M. Diehl, “Germany in Defeat, 1918 and 1945: Some Comparisons and Contrasts,” *The History Teacher* 22, no.4 (1986): 397.

<sup>6</sup> “Armistice,” *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary* (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> The Reichstag was the German Parliament.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher M. Clark, *Kaiser Wilhelm II* (Harlow, England: Longman, 2000), 225 – 227.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

resulted in the Kaiser becoming an increasingly peripheral figure. Moreover, it enabled General Hindenburg and fellow military strategist, Quartiermeister General Eric Ludendorff, to establish a de facto military dictatorship sometimes referred to as “the Duo”. Though the military commanders were to be subjugated to Prince Maximilian von Baden (appointed Chancellor in 1918) by the government restructuring at the end of September 1918, “the Duo” still managed to rival and undermine his authority.

In July 1918, the Germans’ Spring Offensive that had been launched in March was successfully “withstood” by the Allies who “[began] a counter offensive that steadily pushed the Germans back.”<sup>10</sup> Following this turn of events, the notion that Germany was losing the war and would have to commence peace negotiations with the Entente powers was brought to Kaiser Wilhelm II’s attention for the first time in August 1918. Despite the military setback, General Ludendorff ascertained that “although the military situation was grim, it was not hopeless,”<sup>11</sup> but over the following month the German High Command came to recognize the immense strength and power of the American military. Thus, approaching the Kaiser just over a month later, on September 29, 1918, Ludendorff was certain that Germany’s loss of the war was inevitable and impending. Along with General Hindenburg, he called for the immediate undertaking of armistice negotiations for a peace treaty based on President Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points. Generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff sought an “honourable peace” for the German military and relied on the American President’s call for “a just peace and ‘impartial’ justice.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, though Generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff had not read the Fourteen Points,<sup>13</sup> they requested that the ensuing peace treaty be based on them in order to allow Germany and the German army to escape a “shameful peace”. Beginning armistice negotiations before the military situation became more desperate served two purposes: it would spare the military from the embarrassment of a total defeat,

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<sup>10</sup> Cecil, 272.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>12</sup> Czernin, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Robert B. Asprey, *The German High Command at War: Hindenburg and Ludendorff Conduct World War I* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1991), 471 – 2.

and more importantly, it was hoped that it would give Germany equal negotiating power, as there had been no military victory by the Entente.

The resolution to pursue armistice negotiations also initiated reforms of the governmental system. These democratizing reforms were to be undertaken in order to better Wilson's perception of Germany prior to the negotiation process, as well as to maintain and garner support for the Kaiser, which had been waning for at least eighteen months. It is difficult to gauge public opinion and support of the Kaiser due to wartime censorship, however, as Christopher M. Clark notes in his examination of Kaiser Wilhelm II, the "last eighteen months of the war saw the growth in the circulation of anti-monarchical pamphlets and a drastic falling-away of confidence in the dynasty."<sup>14</sup> The reforms were to democratize government by expanding suffrage, re-subverting military authority (i.e., Generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff) to the Chancellor, and "mak[ing] the Chancellor responsible to the Reichstag."<sup>15</sup> These reforms would have seen the creation of a constitutional monarchy, curtailing much of the Kaiser's power and besting more power in the Chancellor. For the purposes of this article, what is important is that the reforms were an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to save the Hohenzollern Dynasty<sup>16</sup> from the Associated Powers by paying lip service to Wilson's ideals.<sup>17</sup>

Support of these reforms was not unanimous. On September 30, 1918, Chancellor Georg von Hertling, who opposed the democratization of government, was dismissed. On October 3, Prince Maximilian von Baden was appointed the new Chancellor and began his task of, as he would later phrase it, "carrying out the great liquidation with some dignity."<sup>18</sup> Though the military commanders were subjugated to Prince Maximilian von Baden by the

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<sup>14</sup> Clark, 241.

<sup>15</sup> Arno J. Mayer, *Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking: Containment and Counterrevolution of Versailles, 1918-1919* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 62.

<sup>16</sup> The Hohenzollern Dynasty refers to the House of Hohenzollern and the royal lineage of Kaiser Wilhelm II.

<sup>17</sup> To undertake a detailed study of the effects of the governmental reforms is not within the confines of this article. For further discussion on reforms see Mayer or Gordon A. Craig, *Germany, 1866-1945* (New York: Oxford UP, 1978).

<sup>18</sup> Maximilian von Baden to the Grand Duke of Baden, 15 Oct. 1918, quoted in Cecil, 279.

government restructuring, they still managed to rival and undermine his authority. The best example of this was the decision regarding when to send the request for an armistice. The German High Command was adamant about sending the peace proposal to Washington immediately, because though General Hindenburg asserted that the “army could protect German borders until early 1919 [this could not be guaranteed] against a fresh enemy offensive.”<sup>19</sup> Prince Maximilian did not want to dispatch such a telegram so soon after the formation of the new government, as he feared that this would discredit the new democratic government and be “interpreted by the enemy as capitulation,”<sup>20</sup> potentially leading to demands for unconditional surrender,<sup>21</sup> which is exactly what happened. Yet, in spite of Prince Maximilian’s concerns, military pressure prevailed and the armistice telegram was drafted and sent to President Wilson on October 3, 1918.

It was the second American note that the repercussions of the German officials’ unfamiliarity with Wilson’s Fourteen Points became apparent.<sup>22</sup> Over the course of 1918, Wilson had made addendums to his Fourteen Points, creating twenty-four points in total. In his analysis of the Versailles settlement, Ferdinand Czernin characterizes the second American note as being tougher than the first.<sup>23</sup> The note referenced Wilson’s critical nineteenth point: “the destruction of every arbitrary power anywhere that can...disturb the

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<sup>19</sup> Asprey, 471.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Czernin, 4 – 5.

<sup>22</sup> The first correspondences between the Germans and the Americans served largely to clarify what each party meant before beginning to negotiate the conditions of the armistice: The American reply on October 8, 1918 to the first German note clarified, “Does the Imperial German Chancellor mean that the...Government accepts the terms laid down by the President in his addresses to the Congress of the United States on the eighth of January last and in subsequent addresses...?” And that Germany would have to withdraw from the territories it had invaded before “a cessation of arms” could be suggested to America’s Entente allies. The German government made sure in its reply to this note, on October 12, 1918, to state that the American’s allies must also agree to “accept the position taken by the president in his addresses.” Deutsche Reichkanzlei, *Preliminary History of the Armistice* (New York: Oxford UP, 1924), quoted in Czernin, 6 – 7.

<sup>23</sup> Czernin, 7. Asprey suggests that the tougher tone of the second American note, which is dated October 14, 1918, was due to a German submarine sinking an Irish ship two days prior (Asprey, 473).

peace of the world.”<sup>24</sup> This was a direct reference to the destruction of the Hohenzollern monarchy, which also conveyed that “justice might not be the ‘forgiveness’”<sup>25</sup> that the Germans had envisioned.

Though the Americans had alluded to the necessity of the Kaiser’s abdication in their previous note, the “abdication crisis” truly began on October 23, when it was made clear by Wilson in a third note that peace could not be attained without the abdication of the Kaiser.<sup>26</sup> As Prince Maximilian had suspected, having sent the request for peace so soon after the formation of the new government had caused “Wilson and his allies...[to believe] that Germany was defeated and should be shorn of all its power,”<sup>27</sup> beginning with the removal of the Kaiser. Furthermore, the failure of the German officials to read the Fourteen Points, instead relying on the points’ hearsay, and the military’s insistence on starting peace negotiations, is indicative of how desperate the German position in the war of attrition had become. Had the German officials taken the time to familiarize themselves with Wilson’s points, they would have known the significance of the nineteenth point demanding the Kaiser’s abdication and perhaps decided against utilizing the Fourteen Points as the basis for peace. Instead, the Germans appeared desperate to Wilson, giving him the unquestionable authority to dictate that Wilhelm II must abdicate. This negligence thus began Germany’s diplomatic loss of the Great War.

The Abdication crisis can be divided into two related parts: that of the Kaiser’s officials, and that of the German People.<sup>28</sup> At the start of the war in 1914, there was widespread support for both the war and the Kaiser, both of which were linked to German nationalism. Four years later, the war was taking a toll on most German people and the Hohenzollern Dynasty was falling into disfavour. The soldiers fighting at the front shared

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<sup>24</sup> Czernin, 21.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>26</sup> As Czernin writes, “Short of saying in so many words that ‘the Kaiser must abdicate before we will sign an armistice,’ Wilson’s note could not have been more explicit” (Czernin, 9).

<sup>27</sup> Cecil, 282.

<sup>28</sup> I am aware of the pitfalls of using “the German people.” The matter of public opinion has been addressed previously.

this disheartened feeling, information that the generals included in the arguments they made to the Kaiser for an armistice.<sup>29</sup> As Ralph Haswell Lutz argues in his analysis of the German Revolution, “not even...military defeats...demoralized the nation as much as did the publication of the first note to Wilson.”<sup>30</sup> As opposed to wartime censorship laws that had caused dissent to go underground, censorship was relaxed in mid-October 1918 and many German people discussed the Kaiser’s abdication freely. Many Germans were now aware that the Kaiser was abhorred “everywhere in Europe [and] America,” and came to see Kaiser Wilhelm II as a symbol of militarism, “an impediment to...peace...but also the logical scapegoat.”<sup>31</sup> In this manner, foreign sentiments regarding the Kaiser were not only echoed by many Germans, but influenced German discontent. As the month of October wore on, people’s cries for the Kaiser’s abdication grew louder and the threat of internal revolution increased.

As for the Kaiser’s officials, merely three weeks after having called for an armistice, Generals Ludendorff and Hindenburg reneged. The terms of the third note, the demand of abdication, were unacceptable to them and instead they argued that Germany should fight to the glorious end. This change in policy was not in accordance with the rest of the government.<sup>32</sup> Yet, rather than lose Prince Maximilian, the Kaiser kept General Hindenburg, but “allowed” General Ludendorff to resign, thereby ending the military-civilian “double government”.

Furthermore, the German people would not have supported the abandonment of armistice negotiations; “[a]s in Russia, the one thing which the majority of people wanted was peace...A fight to the death, as an alternative to capitulation, had little attraction for

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<sup>29</sup> Wilhelm II, *The Kaiser’s Memoirs*, trans. Thomas R. Ybarra (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1922), 274.

<sup>30</sup> Ralph Haswell Lutz, *The German Revolution 1918 – 1919* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1922), 24.

<sup>31</sup> Cecil, 282.

<sup>32</sup> Some historians argue that General Ludendorff was plotting to have the civilian government shoulder the blame for the loss of the war. This is known as the “myth of the stab-in-the-back.” See Sebastian Haffner, *The Failure of a Revolution: Germany 1918 – 1919*, trans. Georg Rapp (Chicago: Banner Press, 1986).

anyone.”<sup>33</sup> In this way, like in Russia, the revolutionary movement in Germany garnered support by calling for peace. Contrary to Russia, however, the threat of revolution had yet to materialize as a concrete movement. The German government, already committed to negotiating an armistice, had to follow through lest the country be devoured militarily by its enemies, as well as by internal revolution. General Ludendorff’s call to keep fighting, while it appeared patriotic, actually represented his loss of support for the approved plan, and thus the Kaiser.

Prince Maximilian’s government was formed not only to carry out the armistice negotiations, but also to re-establish government by putting an end to the military dictatorship. As previously noted, Generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff’s influence only ceased with the end of the double government, marked by Ludendorff’s dismissal on October 26, 1918. Despite this change, the Kaiser remained a peripheral figure. The armistice negotiations were entrusted to the government, which was hesitant to relay bad news to the Kaiser, possibly due to fragile morale.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Kaiser Wilhelm II isolated himself. During the crucial month, he “made few speeches, failed to attend a number of important meetings, and ratified...whatever [Prince] Max[imilian] told him needed royal assent.”<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, though Kaiser Wilhelm II was stubbornly opposed to relinquishing his throne, Prince Maximilian accepted the necessity of the Kaiser’s abdication. Thus, in pursuit of the armistice, Prince Maximilian no longer supported the Kaiser (in light of President Wilson’s ultimatum).<sup>36</sup> Kaiser Wilhelm II became further isolated and, feeling betrayed by his Chancellor, identified him as the leader of the abdication party.

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<sup>33</sup> Michael Balfour, *The Kaiser & His Times* (London: Cresset Press, 1964), 400.

<sup>34</sup> Clark, 227.

<sup>35</sup> Cecil, 281. Wilhelm’s withdrawal was due to his “nursing both his sciatica and his resentment at the diminution of his authority...[which] suited the Chancellor, who...[hoped] that this would lead to less talk of abdication” (Cecil, 281).

<sup>36</sup> “Although Maximilian’s cabinet had agreed...in early October, that any Allied demands for Wilhelm’s abdication would be resisted ‘to the utmost’,...Scheidmann [leader of the Social Democratic Party and member of Prince Maximilian’s government] pointed out that if the question – peace or the Hohenzollern dynasty? – was put to the German people, they

On October 29, despite Prince Maximilian's protests, Kaiser Wilhelm II returned to the military headquarters at Spa. This decision is considered controversial, as many historians consider this to be the fatal mistake that Kaiser Wilhelm II committed against the Hohenzollern Dynasty' it is surmised that had the Kaiser stayed in Berlin the throne might have been saved. Nonetheless, Kaiser Wilhelm II returned to Spa in hopes that his presence on the front would resuscitate the soldiers' morale and encourage them to maintain the offensive. Kaiser Wilhelm II understood that Germany's impending loss of the war was not only due to attrition, but also to low morale. In turn, support for the Kaiser depended on morale. He hoped high morale at the front might spread inwards, perhaps quieting his people's call for his abdication.

In retrospect, General Hindenburg concluded that there were three courses of action that the Kaiser could have undertaken to deal with the "abdication crisis": "[1] to fight his way back to Germany with loyal regiments; [2] to die at the head of his troops on the front; [3] to go abroad."<sup>37</sup> Returning to Spa was indicative that Kaiser Wilhelm II may have been undertaking either of the first two options, but there is no evidence that he would have deliberately arranged his murder-suicide (option 2). While the Kaiser was at Spa, there was a naval mutiny in Kiel on October 30 that caused the threat of revolution to boil and spread throughout Germany. During the time the Kaiser spent at Spa from October 29 to November 9, 1918, Prince Maximilian and other officials tried to convince Kaiser Wilhelm II to abdicate, but he would hear nothing of it. By November 8, Berlin "appeared to be on the eve of a serious revolt."<sup>38</sup> On November 9, a general strike broke out, the scene becoming reminiscent of Russia's March 1917 revolution. In response, the Kaiser attempted to gather a small group of soldiers with which to march into Berlin (option 1 outlined by Hindenburg). Similar to the Romanov's crisis the year before, the Kaiser was told by one of his generals

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would opt for peace" (Cecil, 283). This was precisely the question being put to Prince Maximilian.

<sup>37</sup> Lutz, 44.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 48.

that the army was “not under the command of Your Majesty, whom it no longer supports.”<sup>39</sup> Therefore, the Kaiser exercised the remaining option available to him (option 3, according to Hindenburg). At 2 o’clock in the afternoon of November 9, the Kaiser was prepared to abdicate and subsequently flee to Holland, when he was given word that Prince Maximilian had abdicated on his behalf an hour earlier. The situation in Berlin had become so grave that “the masses might have proclaimed the deposition of the Kaiser and established a provisional government.”<sup>40</sup> Given this crisis, Prince Maximilian was “determined to give the crisis a constitutional solution.”<sup>41</sup> In this sense, domestic and international pressures combined to bring about the Kaiser’s abdication. Though Wilhelm did not abdicate himself, his acceptance of the abdication showed that he had done what was perceived as being best for his country; rather than let a revolution overthrow the monarchy in a potentially violent uprising, he had seemingly provided Germany with a more favourable position in the eyes of the Associated Powers going into the peace negotiations. On November 11, 1918, the Armistice was signed; “after fifteen hundred and sixty-three days, for the first time, all was quiet on the Western Front.”<sup>42</sup>

In late 1918, Germany’s military was near the exhaustion of its capabilities. Though the army may have been able to fight longer, as suggested by General Ludendorff, its collapse was quickened due to a loss of morale. Loss of morale on the front and loss of the war of military attrition directly influenced civilian morale in Germany, as evidenced by the publication of Wilson’s telegram. The war and the Associated Powers’ demand for abdication was the catalyst for ending the Hohenzollern dynasty. It was President Wilson’s firm insistence that led the Germans to believe that Wilhelm’s abdication was the only way to achieve peace, thereby encouraging calls for his abdication, and weakening support for the Kaiser. However, as Michael Balfour writes, “the number of people who wanted radical

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<sup>39</sup> General Wilhelm Groener, quoted in Asprey, 479.

<sup>40</sup> Lutz, 50.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Czernin, 43.

recasting of society was infinitesimal.”<sup>43</sup> The Hohenzollern dynasty would have likely survived the Great War had it not been for the influence of the domestic and international pressures active prior to and during the Great War, the attrition factor, and Wilson’s dominance of the pre-Armistice negotiations.

Contrary to what many Germans believed, the Kaiser’s abdication did not result in Germany being treated more favourably during the peace negotiations. Following the abdication, a provisional government led by the Social Democratic Party was formed before the establishment of the Weimar Republic government in early 1919. These governments were necessarily less stable than the established Hohenzollern monarchy, and were further weakened because they inherited the responsibility for Germany’s defeat. Although the nature of the Paris Peace Conference and the Treaty of Versailles was that of a dictated peace, a weak government, such as the new-born Weimar Republic government, had even less authority to protest the conditions being imposed. As Wilhelm II wrote in his memoirs, “the Entente would never have dared offer such [harsh] terms to an intact German Empire.”<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, until the imposition of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, “it was easy for Germans to imagine that they were...undefeated.”<sup>45</sup> In this way, the deposition of Germany’s monarch meant its loss of a strong, established central actor that embodied the nation and, had he been supported, could have defended Germany in the peace negotiations. Without the Kaiser, Germany was made vulnerable, allowing for its defeat in the Armistice and peace negotiations. Thus the nature of Germany’s loss of the Great War, while intrinsically tied to its inability to continue the war of attrition, was diplomatic.

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<sup>43</sup> Balfour, 403.

<sup>44</sup> Wilhelm II, 321.

<sup>45</sup> Diehl, 397.

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