

TASK TWO

EXAMINING THE EVIDENCE

William II: personal ruler or shadow emperor?

English historians of the Second Reich - led by John Röhl - have maintained that there is still a great deal to learn about William, and that his personal neuroses must have had a direct impact on the decision-making process in pre-war Germany. They claim that William stamped his personality on the period 1890-1914, and that therefore their 'palace perspective' - concentrating on the Emperor and his court - is the correct one. They believe that the more light they can shed on William's personality the better our understanding will be of German society in this vital period.

However, a group of German historians led by Hans-Ulrich Wehler offers a totally different viewpoint. Wehler has described William as a 'shadow emperor' (*schattenkaiser*) without say or influence in pre-war Germany. Wehler says that William reigned but did not rule. His contention is that William simply lacked the ability to direct policy, command the army or influence the real decision-makers. Wehler believes that in 1890 the Kaiser launched a brief, unsuccessful bid to establish personal power but that after this date he abandoned this 'anachronistic game' and contented himself with

making outspoken yet ultimately irrelevant speeches. Wehler argues that after the departure of Bismarck a power vacuum existed which William II was unable to fill. His thesis is that the glamour of the Berlin court and its trappings of power represent a powerful illusion which has beguiled historians fascinated by the Kaiser's personality. Beneath this veneer, he claims, the Emperor was increasingly out of touch and isolated. From this it therefore follows that the Kaiser's personality is also irrelevant, he exerted no real influence whether he was in a good mood or a bad mood. Wehler states that there is nothing more of interest to be discovered about the Kaiser. Historians like Röhl, who continue to search the archives for further information on the shadow emperor, are - according to Wehler - wasting their time in writing 'personalistic' accounts.

Wehler prefers a 'structural' approach. He contends that real influence was in the hands of powerful elite groups, members of which did not necessarily hold elected office but pulled strings behind the scenes. Such groups consisted of influential industrialists, agrarians, pressure groups and press barons. The objective of these rich landowners and businessmen was to prevent Germany's rapid industrialisation being accompanied by genuine democracy. In particular, they feared the growth of left-wing political parties and the participation of the working classes in the political system. For this reason they carried out a programme of social integration or *sammlungspolitik* by which they manipulated German society into accepting their continued domination. It worked in the following way. They used their influence to steer Germany towards a programme of colonial expansion for overseas markets (world policy or *weltpolitik*). This was sustained by the construction of a huge battle fleet and ultimately led to war and attempts at overseas conquest. The massive production of ships was intended to boost the economy, reduce unemployment and persuade the working class to remain loyal to the ruling elite rather than voting for the socialist parties. For their own self-preservation and personal profit, the elite favoured an increasingly ambitious armaments programme and aggressive foreign policy. They believed that success in this area would satisfy the population at large and preserve their position. The Kaiser, Wehler maintains, was merely a mouthpiece for this policy and, when it failed, a scapegoat.

In Röhl's words, Wehler is engaged in 'writing the history of the Kaiserreich without the Kaiser' or 'Wilhelmine Germany without William'. He argues that the reality is that William established an autocratic, semi-absolutist state in which his personal influence was paramount. Who is closer to the truth? Are there elements of the real answer in each of these verdicts? Consider the evidence that follows and see if you can reach a conclusion.