

## Failed Monarch

Kaiser William II (Wilhelm, “Kaiser Bill” to the Americans) must be considered a monarch who failed, despite his high opinion of himself.

William hoped to outshine Bismarck and win a place in the sun for Germany. He was the grandson of Queen Victoria of England, the son of her eldest daughter Princess Victoria and Crown Prince Frederick of Prussia. William was born in Berlin on January 27, 1859, with a useless, withered left hand. With training, he seemed to overcome the physical result of this handicap, but there remains suspicion that it left psychological scars and contributed to his bombastic, vain personality. His parents gave William a liberal education, but perhaps under the influence of Bismarck, he grew up a conservative who, as he matured, developed into an anti-Semite and militarist drawn to power politics. In 1881, he married Augusta Victoria, duchess of Schleswig-Holstein, and had seven children.

William’s father Frederick, a liberal whom Bismarck feared, became emperor in 1888 but died of throat cancer after three months. Although only 29, the new Kaiser chafed at Bismarck’s tutelage and dropped him as chancellor in 1890. William hoped to run German affairs on his own, believing that he had a right to rule with minimal input from Parliament. His domestic policy contributed



to Germany's failure to develop into a parliamentary democracy. In foreign affairs, he devalued the Russian connection that Bismarck held dear because it avoided the possibility of a two-front war. When the Russians joined up with the French, the Germans sought a military solution to their encirclement—the Schlieffen Plan that contributed to the outbreak of World War I—with William's complicity. William's diplomacy was noteworthy for its clumsiness and alienated the other great powers.

During World War I, William faded into the background as the army took effective control of Germany and his popularity dropped. After four years of war, the Allies made it clear that William himself was an obstacle to peace and on November 9, 1918, his country in turmoil, William abdicated. He fled to Doorn, in the neutral Netherlands purchasing an estate where he lived until his death. The Dutch consistently refused to hand him over to the Allies for trial as a war criminal.

In exile, William worked for his restoration and briefly flirted with Hitler when he thought that the Nazis might accept him as emperor. His second wife, whom he married in 1922, was pro-Nazi, as was a son who joined the SA (Storm Troopers). William received Nazi leader Hermann Goering but relations with the Nazis cooled. When France fell in 1940, the old Kaiser sent Hitler a congratulatory telegram because the Fuehrer's generals had received their training under his rule, but this incident did not result in a rapprochement. When William's grandson died in combat, Hitler resented the show of sympathy



Berliners demonstrated at his funeral and secretly ordered all Hohenzollern relatives drummed out of the armed forces. When the Germans took over the Netherlands, the British offered William asylum, but he refused. After the former emperor died on June 5, 1941, Hitler hoped to hold a funeral in Germany for propaganda purposes, but William's will stipulated that there should be no swastikas at his funeral. In retaliation, Hitler ordered that no German military officers attend the services (some defied the order) and buried news of William's death in the back pages of the newspapers.

William II lies buried in a small mausoleum on his estate, now Dutch government property. He is the object of veneration by German monarchists who periodically visit, marching to military music and carrying banners. The emperor who failed awaits his return to Germany—as he ordered in his will—when the monarchy is restored.