Wilhelm II (1859 - 1941)

Wilhelm was the last German emperor (kaiser) and king of Prussia, whose policies helped to bring about World War One.

Wilhelm was born on 27 January 1859 in Berlin, the eldest child of Crown Prince Frederick of Prussia and Victoria, daughter of Queen Victoria. A difficult birth left Wilhelm with a withered arm, which he always tried to conceal. In 1881, after a period of military service, Wilhelm married Augusta Victoria, princess of Schleswig-Holstein, and they had seven children.

In 1888 Wilhelm's father succeeded as Frederick III. However, he died shortly afterwards and Wilhelm was Kaiser aged 29. Although he had previously admired the great German statesman Otto von Bismarck, within two years Wilhelm had forced his resignation. He was a strong believer in increasing the strength of the German armed forces, particularly the navy. His policies towards Britain were contradictory. He alienated Britain with his naval expansion and a policy of aggressive German colonial expansion, and also supported the Boers in their fight against the British. However, he was also closely related to the British royal family and was particularly fond of his grandmother, Queen Victoria.

Following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914, Wilhelm encouraged the Austrians to adopt an uncompromising line against Serbia. He appeared not to realise the chain reaction this would trigger, bringing Russia and her allies France and Britain to war against Germany and Austria. Wilhelm tried to scale back the mobilisation of Germany's armed forces but was prevented by the German military. While theoretically supreme commander, Wilhelm found himself excluded from military decisions, but crippled chances of a compromise peace by encouraging the grandiose war aims of certain generals and politicians.

In 1918, America's full scale entry into the war combined with severe German shortages of men and materials, led to Germany's military collapse. Wilhelm was forced to abdicate and went into exile in the Netherlands. Attempts by the victorious allies to extradite and try him for war crimes came to nothing. With Hitler's rise to power Wilhelm had hopes of being restored but they came to nothing and he died on 4 June 1941.