The Reign of King George V:
The Genesis of the House of Windsor & the Survival of a Modern Monarchy
Susan Visser

Before the Great War, there were six major powers in the world, all of which were monarchical powers. This was a time in which the few ruled over the many, but revolution was stirring in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Today, five of those world powers have since transformed into republics, and only one of those monarchies stands today: the British monarchy. So, what was so different about this island nation in particular? How did the British monarchy manage to survive the Great War while its fellow royal houses were collapsing around it? This contrast calls for an examination of the House of Windsor and its genesis.

On May 6, 2023, King Charles III will be crowned King of England in a coronation ceremony at Westminster Abbey. He will be the fifth Windsor monarch to take the throne as part of a royal dynasty that has spanned just over a century and, at its peak, ruled over 25% of the world's population. Following the famous 70-year reign of Queen Elizabeth II alone, King Charles III, no doubt, has enormous shoes to fill - an even greater responsibility given today’s political climate. Some have even questioned how much longer the monarchy can survive following the passing of Queen Elizabeth II. The House of Windsor has long been a household name across the globe, and its survival can perhaps be attributed to a long-established precedent for adaptability, duty, and careful political stage management practiced by the English royal family. This was a precedent originally set by the first Windsor monarch, King George V. Scholars of the English monarchy, such as Antonia Fraser, have stated that the level-headed King George V was simply the right man in the right place at the right time.1 Had the throne stayed in the hands of his elder brother, as intended, the monarchy perhaps would not be where it is today. In some ways, the lucky accident is a theme throughout the history of the British monarchy: the unexpected heir bringing about the Empire’s greatest

successes. The first Elizabethan Age could not have occurred without the death of Elizabeth’s elder sister, Bloody Mary; just as the modernizing reign of King George V would not have occurred without the tragic death of his elder brother, Prince Albert Victor.

Unlike his predecessors, King George V did not favor luxury or grandiosity. A newspaper article introducing Great Britain to the new king and queen described the freshly crowned King George V as someone who has "little love for [the] ceremonial and prefers simplicity and privacy." This preference manifested in his personality and was fostered by his extensive naval background. Furthermore, in comparison to his fellow monarchs of the time, King George V was something of a political mastermind. His reign surely survived thanks to his strong commitment to a new kind of democratic monarchy while simultaneously setting a precedent of impartiality, duty, and public engagement that secured the future of the English monarchy. In For King and Country: The British Monarchy and the First World War, Heather Jones argues that the Great War accelerated powerful modernizing trends that helped make the British monarchy democratic and accessible. At the same time, the Great War adapted the popular image of royalty in freshly mythologized ways that contributed to its meaning and purpose, and which were embedded with older concepts of honor, duty, religion, and service. Indeed, at the core of British culture is an inherent obligation to duty and honor. In 1912, the Earl of Meath explained that the British words to live by included responsibility, duty, sympathy, and self-sacrifice. In Meath’s explanation, the national holiday known as Empire Day served as

an organization for the training of character, especially in the rising generation. It is the raising of a Spartan-like, virile race imbued from childhood with the determination to overcome difficulties or die in the fulfillment of duty. In brief, it is a trumpet call to the rising generation of British citizens to make themselves worthy of the great responsibilities which some day will rest upon their shoulders, and a stirring appeal to them to recognize the honor of self-sacrifice for the public good.


There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that His Majesty, King George V, subscribed to the very same philosophy regarding the honor culture of his Empire. Reportedly, a common saying from the King was, “England expects every man to do his duty.”⁵ When his elder brother, Prince Albert Victor, died from an unexpected illness on January 14, 1892, the life of George V changed forever. Despite this sudden alteration in his life’s plans, however, his circumstances were much more favorable than that of heirs’ past. His training had been the same as that of his brother, as the Daily Mail had reassured its readers, and there existed between father and son a harmonious relationship.⁶ Truth be told, George V was rather fortunate in his upbringing as a future monarch. Throughout the history of the British monarchy, the relationship between sovereign and heir was rarely so warm and affectionate as George’s relationship with his father, King Edward VII. The training of Edward VII, as Antonia Fraser puts it in her book The House of Windsor: A Royal History of England, was practically nonexistent. During the reign of Queen Victoria, the Queen tended to keep her heir far from official obligations.⁷ Following her death, however, there was a significant shift in sovereign-heir relationships in which the current monarch more often involved the heir in state business. As heir apparent, George V worked closely with his father, saw all state documents, and even regularly attended meetings of the House of Lords.⁸ This training certainly aided in shaping George V and allowed him to become a well-prepared monarch.

King George V could easily be described as a British nationalist in that he identified as an Englishman through and through even despite his family’s strong ties to Germany. His devotion to the mother country certainly did not go unnoticed by his people. It was “his earnest desire to promote the welfare and happiness of his country,” and he demonstrated this loyalty throughout his journeys to nearly every part of the empire, as well as encouraging speeches.⁹ During his travels across the empire in 1901,

⁵ “The New King and Queen,” The Daily Mail May 7, 1910.
⁷ Fraser, The House of Windsor, 19.
⁸ Fraser, The House of Windsor, 19.
George V who was at the time still a Prince, made perhaps his most famous speech at Guildhall that December. His so-called, "Wake up, England!" speech, pleaded to his country to make a change to ensure the strength of the empire.

To the distinguished representatives of the commercial interests of the Empire, whom I have the pleasure of seeing here to-day-to-day, I venture to allude to the impression, which seemed generally to prevail among their brethren across the seas, that the old country must wake up if she intends to maintain her old position of pre-eminence in her colonial trade against foreign competitors.\textsuperscript{10}

Fortunately, the Prince had a solution that would both re-establish their economic position against foreign competitors, but also offer an opportunity to improve the quality of life for citizens of the old country.

No one who had the privilege of enjoying the experiences, which we have had during our tour could fail to be struck with one all-prevailing and pressing demand - the want of the population. Even in the oldest of our colonies, there were abundant signs of this need - boundless tracts of the country yet unexplored, hidden mineral wealth calling for development, vast expanses of virgin soil ready to yield profitable crops to the settlers. And these can be enjoyed under conditions of healthy living, liberal laws, free institutions, in exchange for the overcrowded cities and the almost hopeless struggle for existence, which, alas, too often is the lot of many in the old country.\textsuperscript{11}

It can then be inferred that the adaptability and modernization of his reign were not simply to ensure his survival, but also to serve the duty he felt he owed to his countrymen and women. Such speeches, however, likely won him a great deal of favor among his subjects which provided him with some security throughout the First World War. By the time George V came to power in 1910, he had experienced many political crises. Movements such as organized labor, Irish republicanism, Indian nationalism, foreign protectionism, militant suffragettes, and anarchist revolutionaries now threatened British policymakers in a way that previous generations hardly considered.\textsuperscript{12} The new King generally met this series of revolutions, so to speak, with an attitude of conciliation and appeasement- a go-to political strategy for maintaining royal popularity in the House of Windsor. His political strategies of people-pleasing demonstrated his knowledge

\textsuperscript{10} George V. \textit{The King to His People: Being the Speeches and Messages of His Majesty George V as Prince and Sovereign} (London: Williams and Norgate, 1911), 88.

\textsuperscript{11} George V. \textit{The King to His People}, 89.

\textsuperscript{12} Fraser, \textit{The House of Windsor}, 2.
that his power was highly dependent on popular support. Walter Crick made this concept clear in an article published in the *Daily Mail* in 1917, serving as a sort of warning to foreign royalty:

History will decide this point, but meantime the opinion may be hazarded that in the twentieth century a monarch who strains his prerogative like Constantine of Greece or relies like the Kaiser himself upon the literal interpretation of the ancient theory that 'the King can do no wrong' can hardly expect his throne to be secure. The safest throne in Europe is probably that which is occupied by King George V, in the most democratic country in the world; the explanation of its security is, I believe, to be found in the fact that it is 'broad-based upon the people's will.'

King George V’s recognition of the people’s will was a strategy not necessarily practiced by his peers. Six monarchs dominated Europe before the early 20th century, all of whom could make for an interesting comparison against the Royal House of Windsor. For this study, however, this comparison will be limited to just two of the major monarchies: the noted cousin-rivalry between King and Kaiser, King George V, and Kaiser Wilhelm II. The British royal family has long held close familial ties with the aristocracy of Germany. King George V and Kaiser Wilhelm II were cousins, as they shared a grandmother in Queen Victoria of England and a grandfather in Prince Albert of the duchy of Saxe-Coburg. One, however, was quite the opposite of the other.

Kaiser Wilhelm II had a reputation for being very domineering in his “personal rule.” In terms of foreign policy, the accession of Kaiser Wilhelm II disappointed British desires. If the British had their way, Germany would have remained under the leadership of Kaiser Wilhelm’s predecessor, his father Friedrich III. The British royals had placed high hopes in the short rule of Friedrich III. He was considered a political liberal in Prussia, and this led the British Royal family to expect the dismissal of the reactionary chancellor Prince Otto von Bismarck and the institution of a pro-British foreign policy upon Friedrich III’s accession.

In 1858, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert orchestrated the marriage between Friedrich III and Princess Victoria to pave the way for a strengthened Anglo-German alliance, a plan that did not work out as intended.

---


The reign of Friedrich III was cut short prematurely when he succumbed to throat cancer in June 1888. Serving only 99 days as Kaiser, Friedrich III did not have time to establish his court party or set any liberal political policies in motion, and the Anglophobia in Germany was too strong.\textsuperscript{15} Instead of the liberal German government for which the British had hoped, according to British historian John C. G. Röhl, the political system under his son, Kaiser Wilhelm, can best be described as an authoritarian monarchy with the Kaiser being the decisive element throughout.\textsuperscript{13}

Wilhelm II certainly did not share the political views of his predecessor. He rejected the political liberalism of his parents and instead held on tight to old Prussian traditions. Indeed, Wilhelm’s relationship with his English relatives was rocky. Queen Victoria resented the Kaiser’s disrespectful conduct toward his parents, and like many of her contemporaries, questioned his mental stability. This instability was foreshadowed in his well-known “Hun Speech” of 1900. To the German troops departing to suppress the Boxer rebellion in China, he said this:

Should you encounter the enemy, he will be defeated! No quarter will be given! Prisoners will not be taken! Whoever falls into your hands is forfeited. Just as a thousand years ago, the Huns under their King Attila made a name for themselves, one that even today makes them seem mighty in history and legend, may the name German be affirmed by you in such a way in China that no Chinese will ever again dare to look cross-eyed at a German.\textsuperscript{17}

From this fiery and rather reckless rhetoric alone, scholars can reasonably regard Kaiser Wilhelm as a metaphorical bull in a China shop. The rule of Kaiser Wilhelm inevitably led the German Empire into political ruin on the world stage up until his abdication at the end of the Great War. According to the historian Wolfgang Mommsen, Kaiser Wilhelm’s “policies have been repeatedly subjected to intensive scrutiny and, in general, historians agree that his impact on post-Bismarckian Germany was devastating.”\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15} McLean, “Kaiser Wilhelm II and the British Royal Family,” 479.
\textsuperscript{18} Mommsen, “Kaiser Wilhelm II and German Politics,” 289.
His was a dangerous personality to sit on any throne. Previous generations of historians, including Hermann Oncken, Werner Frauendienst, and Erich Eyck, have observed a personality in Kaiser Wilhelm II bordering on the insane through his boastful ponderings, theatrical speeches (often out of touch with reality), childish jokes, his inclination to take everything personally and his inability to distinguish between personal and public affairs.¹⁹

Queen Victoria, however, was able to stifle the storm that was her grandson for some time by feeding his ego with such important titles as Admiral of the Royal Navy, and Honorary Colonel in the British Army. By treating him as a fellow monarch, the Kaiser came to respect her.²⁰ This Anglo-German friendship would only last as long as the Queen lived, however, and upon the accession of King Edward VII, the Anglo-German rivalry resurfaced yet again. Edward VII recognized his nephew as an unsavory and untrustworthy character, just as his mother did before him: “On one occasion, Albert Edward observed that he was inclined to agree with his private secretary, Sir Francis Knollys, that ‘All public men in Germany, from the emperor downwards, are liars.’”²¹

His distrust of the Kaiser was not unreasonable, however. Members of his cabinet recognized that Germany was building a navy to rival the naval strength of Britain to impose their will on other world powers.²² The British believed that, with their new naval force, the Germans intended to wage war against Britain to deprive the royal navy of its maritime supremacy. George V had a similarly rocky relationship with his cousin the Kaiser, but he did not actively pursue a personal feud with Wilhelm as his father had. The Kaiser, however, with his unpredictable temperament, criticized George pointing out that he had not visited the German regiment of which he had been appointed colonel-in-chief in several years. To that,

¹⁹ Mommsen, “Kaiser Wilhelm II and German Politics,” 291.
²⁰ McLean, “Kaiser Wilhelm II and the British Royal Family,” 481.
²¹ McLean, “Kaiser Wilhelm II and the British Royal Family,” 482.
George V responded, “it is a pity that the emperor should always go out of his way to find fault and make complaints.”

King George V's most prominent wartime role was his frequent visits to the front lines - inspecting regiments, visiting the wounded in hospitals, feeding soldiers at recreation huts or train stations, and providing his soldiers with recognition of their self-sacrifice. The goal of these royal visits, according to Heather Jones, was to represent reassuring continuity during the war. “Even the royal wartime acceptance of the need for greater democracy,” Jones writes, “was based upon an ideal of the king treating all his loyal subjects equally and a concomitant promotion of the monarchy as the core foundation of the empire.”

This ideal of equality for all subjects was demonstrated on many royal tours. While on a Royal Tour of India, then Prince of Wales, George illustrated this ideal for equality in his first speech on Indian soil:

We both hope to carry home with us, not only warm sympathy, and affection for the people of India, but an increased and abiding interest in India's wants and problems, and an acquaintance with the various classes, official and non-official, British, and Indian, which, under God's providence, are laboring [sic] to one end - the well-being of India and the happiness of her peoples.

During the First World War, the royal family showed a sense of duty to fight in the war alongside their troops rather than simply allowing their people to fight the war on their behalf. By 1914, the relationship between honor and kingship had evolved. Honor, a sacred concept in British culture, now meant something different than it had before. Now the royal and elites could no longer be given special treatment. The honorable thing for the royals to do was to share in the dangers of war. In this regard Edward VIII, then Prince of Wales, was quite eager to perform his duty to the monarchy. He reportedly felt an overwhelming need to fight as all other Englishmen were at the time. His presence among them was appreciated by the troops and served a grand purpose to his father, the King. The Prince of Wales acted as

---

24 Jones, For King and Country, 26.
26 Jones, For King and Country, 283.
a source of information for the King regarding British army generals, their performance, and military attitudes to British politics. Additionally, Edward's continued presence on the battlefield projected the favored image of a democratic monarchy that helped to distance the British royals from the vilified German Kaiser.  

This model of the British royal family sharing in the hardships of war extended to their home life. The royals strove to practice the wartime frugality that their subjects were similarly condemned to during wartime. This voluntary royal belt-tightening came at the time of an official proclamation by the King in 1917, encouraging his subjects to practice voluntary rationing in this time of crisis:

> We, being persuaded that the abstention from all unnecessary consumption of grain will furnish the surest and most effectual means of defeating the devices of Our enemies and thereby of bringing the war to a speedy and successful termination, and out of Our resolve to leave nothing undone which can contribute to these ends or to the welfare of Our people in these times of grave stress and anxiety, have thought fit, by and with the advice of Our Privy Council, to issue this Our Royal Proclamation, most earnestly exhorting and charging all those of Our loving subjects the men and women of Our realm who have the means of procuring articles of food other than wheaten corn, as they tender their own immediate interests, and feel for the wants of others, especially to practice [sic] the greatest economy and frugality in the use of every species of grain.  

The royal family limited the use of flour, eschewing pastry, and renounced theater. They practiced these limitations even before rationing was officially introduced in 1917, at which point they were issued ration cards along with their subjects. One such sacrifice that was particularly celebrated, however, was King George V's vow for total abstinence from intoxicating liquors for the duration of the war following several exaggerated reports of excessive drinking among the troops. A contributor to the Daily Mail reviewed the remarks of Mr. Runciman regarding the King's abstinence.

> ...there never was a King who more quickly or more truly interpreted the inner feelings of his people than King George V... There was [sic] a great many people who would cheer for a political doctrine, vote for a Bill in Parliament, or sign a petition at a church door, but who would


29 Jones, *For King and Country*, 303.
not think of altering their own personal habits. ‘Thank God,’ exclaimed Mr. Runciman, ‘our Sovereign is not one of those.’

By comparison, King George V's wartime performance puts Kaiser Wilhelm's to shame. While George V's visits to the front were spontaneous, Kaiser Wilhelm's visits were far more carefully staged if he visited the front at all. Kaiser Wilhelm's visits with the German troops were notably sparse. Despite his title of Supreme War Lord, he spent most of that war at least one hundred kilometers away from the front lines. At a safe distance from the dangers that his troops faced on the front lines, Wilhelm spent these so-called visits at his “Great Headquarters” where it is said he took “leisurely pleasure drives every afternoon, as well as walk in the woods and was visited regularly by the Kaiserin.” Indeed, Kaiser Wilhelm II was observably detached from the true conditions of the Great War that his government was historically blamed for starting.

Kaiser Wilhelm’s approach to these visits contributed to diminished respect from and later power over his military. In his absence, that esteem went to the de facto military leader, Field Marshal Hindenburg. This loss of his subjects’ faith and loyalty was yet another step toward the end of monarchy in Germany. In the end, the Great War led to the Kaiser’s abdication. He did not know what the British royals knew: for a modern monarchy, public image was critical to its survival. Gone were the days of absolutist rule in which a ruler’s actions faced little to no public consequence. Now, the power of the monarchy is determined by the people. Nothing angers the proletariat quite like a royal living in luxury as everyone else suffers. The House of Windsor well knew that if their institution was to survive the war, they would need to mold the royal family’s public image to match popular ideologies throughout their domain. Molding this image in the Windsor’s favor took a bit of historical invention. In her book Thinking About History, Sarah Maza briefly discusses the invention of tradition that has contributed to the modern British identity. Today, the grandiosity of royal pageantry is considered a staple of modern British culture. For decades, spectators have

30 “The King’s Lead: Mr. Runciman & Exaggerated Reports of Drinking,” The Daily Mail April 20, 1915.
31 Jones, For King and Country, 223.
been invited to join in these ceremonies, including royal weddings, coronations, jubilees, and funerals. Maza claims that "in the latter part of Queen Victoria's reign, the British began to fabricate and market royal ceremonies…used strategically to build support for the monarchy…all of which would have been unrecognizable to the British two centuries ago."32 By including the public in royal ceremonies, the royals were inviting the public to be a part of the family.

Several actions that the royals took during the Great War helped to maintain the public image of British Royals and keep the people loyal to the monarchy. King George V determined that with anti-German sentiment rising throughout the island, the royal family must distance themselves from their former ties to Germany- starting with their name. Before the reign of King George V, the family name held under Queen Victoria was that of her German husband, Prince Albert: Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. Naturally, in a country at war with Germany, a German King of Britain simply would not be appropriate. Recognizing this concern, in 1917 King George V officially proclaimed that the royal house would henceforth be known as the House of Windsor. In turn, other British noble houses followed suit, with the House of Teck (Queen Mary’s house) taking the name Cambridge and the Battenberg’s taking Mountbatten.33 This strategically timed gesture would shift the royal family's origins to match the British national identity.

These actions were consistent with the ideal that the English monarch must lead by example and represent themselves as the living embodiment of the cultural ideals of Great Britain, a role that extends to the entire royal family. The House of Windsor has always gone to great lengths to try and portray itself as the perfect family unit (though history may note that they were far from it). Before the accession of King George V, Queen Mary (1867-1953) was formerly betrothed to his elder brother. After his passing, Queen Victoria felt it necessary to keep young Mary of Teck in the running to become Queen. By British cultural standards, Mary was indeed the ideal counterpart for the next King of England.

As Antonia Fraser explains, Queen Mary "proved the personification of royal rectitude, an impossibly grand and even terrifying figure who yet also provided genuine domestic tranquility for her husband and rescued the popular conception of royal family life from its louche Edwardian image."34 The royal family would continue such a campaign for popularity by showing support for their much larger family: the British people. Over the years, for example, charitable contributions increasingly became a royal obligation. In her book, Heather Jones briefly describes a bureaucratic initiative to disseminate letters of praise from “the King” to individual subjects whose children were serving in the military effort abroad. Jones describes these letters as:

Formulaic reproduced texts sent out by the Keeper of the Privy Purse on the King’s behalf to families the monarch did not usually know, they were culturally received and understood by recipients and the broader public as sent personally by the monarch in an act of individual royal recognition…The fact that such wartime letters were also preserved by families after the war substantiates the argument that monarchical culture played a role in wartime patriotism.35

Consider for a moment, this letter of thanks from the King to one of his soldiers returning home. The message is short, sweet, and simple. It appears to be the sort of message that can be applied to any one of his subjects that served in the war effort. Using this calculated message, the King could provide equal praise and recognition to his army in a time-efficient manner. After all, what common man wouldn't welcome a letter of recognition from the King himself? The King's letter of thanks reads as follows:

The Queen and I wish you Godspeed, a safe return to the happiness and joy of home life with an early restoration to health. A grateful Mother Country thanks you for your faithful services. George R.I.36

One of the more personal decisions the King made in the end came at the cost of extended family members. Most notable, perhaps, was the issue of granting political asylum to his family members and fellow royals abroad. King George V was also the cousin of Tsar Nicholas II of Russia. When faced with

34 Fraser, *The House of Windsor*, 18.
35 Jones, *For King and Country*, 163.
the Bolshevik revolution, Tsar Nicholas II pleaded with his English counterparts to grant him safe passage to flee to England with his family. Reading the political climate in England at the time, King George V ultimately decided to deny his cousin's political asylum, fearing the potential inflammation of a socialist and republican outcry amongst the industrial working classes should he send a British battleship to rescue the Tsar. Consequently, Nicholas II and his family were murdered by Bolshevik revolutionaries in Yekaterinburg on the night of July 17, 1918.

At the time of the Great War, the west was prepared to make a drastic change. Those monarchs who failed to modernize were destined to perish. Based on this examination, the survival of the royal House of Windsor was not a matter of luck but rather an accurate reading of public opinion followed by an expertly executed response. King George V was truly the right man for the job at the right time. He was able to understand how he needed to adapt to the modern era at a time when his peers, such as his cousin Kaiser Wilhelm II, did not. The performance of King George V during his reign as the quintessential Englishman, acting on behalf of family, duty & honor, portraying himself and the British royal family as being one with the British people, involved his subjects in the institution in such a way that allowed the majesty of the House of Windsor to stand to this day.

---

Bibliography.


