Kaiser Wilhelm II on his Abdication (Retrospective Account, 1922)

Abstract

On November 9, 1918, at the same time as the double proclamation of the Republic by Philipp Scheidemann and Karl Liebknecht, Reich Chancellor Max von Baden announced the German Emperor's abdication of the throne without the consent of Wilhelm II. Wilhelm then fled to the neutral Netherlands, where he lived in exile until his death in 1941, partly to avoid prosecution by the Entente powers.
In his memoirs, published in 1922, the former emperor denies Germany's guilt in causing the First World War, defends his political decisions and presents his flight as a patriotic act. In this excerpt from his memoirs, Wilhelm takes up the narrative of the "stab-in-the-back legend" and repeats the claim that the German defeat in the First World War was not to be blamed on the military since it was brought about by the revolutionary movements on the "home front".

Source

PRINCE MAX INSISTENT

On the morning of November 9, 1918, the Reich Chancellor, Prince Max of Baden, again informed me—as he had already done on the 7th—that the Social Democrats, and also the Social Democratic undersecretaries, demanded my abdication; that the rest of the members of the Government, who had stood against it thus far, were now in favor of it, and that the same was true of the majority parties in the Reichstag. For these reasons, he continued, he requested that I abdicate immediately, since, otherwise, extensive street fighting attended by bloodshed would take place in Berlin; it had already started on a small scale.

I immediately summoned Field Marshal von Hindenburg and the Quartermaster General, General Groener. General Groener again announced that the army could fight no longer and wished for rest above all else, and that, therefore, any sort of armistice must be unconditionally accepted; that the armistice must be concluded as soon as possible, since the army had supplies for only six to eight more days and was cut off from all further supplies by the rebels, who had occupied all the supply storehouses and Rhine bridges; that, for some unexplained reason, the armistice commission sent to France—consisting of Erzberger, Ambassador Count Oberndorff, and General von Winterfeldt—which had crossed French lines two evenings before, had sent no report as to the nature of the conditions.

The Crown Prince also appeared, with his Chief of Staff, Count Schulenburg, and took part in the conference. During our conversation, several telephone calls came from the Chancellor, who became most insistent; he pointed out that the Social Democrats had left the Government and that delay was dangerous. The Minister of War reported uncertainty among some of the troops in Berlin—4th Jägers, Second Company of the Alexander Regiment, Second Battery, Jüterbog, had gone over to the rebels—no street fighting.

I wished to spare my people civil war. If my abdication was indeed the only way to prevent bloodshed, I was willing to renounce the Imperial throne, but not to abdicate as King of Prussia; I would remain, as such, with my troops, since the military leaders had declared that the officers would leave *en masse* if I abdicated entirely, and the army would then pour back, without leaders, into the Fatherland, damage it, and place it in peril.

A reply had been sent to the Chancellor to the effect that my decision had to be carefully weighed and formulated, after which it would be transmitted to the Chancellor. A little while later, after this had been done, the surprising response arrived: …. my decision had come too late! The Chancellor, on his own initiative, had summarily announced my abdication—which had not happened yet at all!—as well as the renunciation of the throne by the Crown Prince, who had not even been questioned. He had turned over the Government to the Social Democrats and appointed Herr Ebert as Chancellor. All this had been spread simultaneously by wireless, so the entire army could read it.

DENIES HE FORSOOK FOLLOWERS

Thus the decision as to my going or staying, as to my renunciation of the Imperial Crown and retention of the Royal Crown of Prussia, was summarily snatched from me. The army was shaken to the core by the erroneous belief that its King had abandoned it at the most critical moment of all.

If the conduct of the Chancellor, Prince Max of Baden, is considered as a whole, it looks like this: first, a solemn declaration that he will place himself, together with the new Government, before the Emperor's throne, to protect it; then, the suppression of an address which might have made a favorable impression on public opinion; then the removal of the Emperor from all cooperation in the Government; the sacrifice of the respect due to the Emperor by the lifting of censorship; failure to support the monarchy in the matter of abdication; then, attempts to persuade the Emperor to abdicate voluntarily; and, finally, the announcement of my abdication by wireless, whereby the Chancellor went over my head.

This sequence of events shows the course—a perilous one for the nation—followed by Scheidemann, who held the Chancellor in the palm of his hand. Scheidemann left the ministers, his colleagues, in the dark as to his real purposes, drove Prince Max from one step to another, and finally summoned Ebert, declaring that the leaders no longer had the masses under control. Thus he caused the Prince to sacrifice the Emperor, the princes, and the Empire, and made him the destroyer of the Empire. After that, Scheidemann overthrew the weak princely "statesman."

After the arrival of the wireless message, the situation was difficult. To be sure, troops were being transported to Spa for the purpose of proceeding undisturbed with work at the main headquarters, but the Field Marshal no longer thought it possible to absolutely count on their reliability in the event that rebellious forces should advance from Aix-le-Chapelle and Cologne and confront our troops with the dilemma of whether or not to fight against their own comrades. In view of this, he advised me to leave the army and go to some neutral country, for the purpose of avoiding such a "civil war."

I went through a fearful internal struggle. On the one hand, I, as a soldier, was outraged by the idea of abandoning my still faithful, brave troops. On the other hand, our foes had declared that they were unwilling to work with me to conclude any peace endurable to Germany, and there was also my own Government's statement that civil war as to be prevented only by my departure for foreign lands.

In this struggle I set aside all that was personal. I consciously sacrificed myself and my throne in the belief that, by so doing, I was best serving the interests of my beloved Fatherland. The sacrifice was in vain. My departure brought us neither better armistice conditions nor better peace terms; nor did it prevent civil war—on the contrary, it hastened and intensified, in the most pernicious manner, the disintegration of the army and the nation.

PROUD OF THE ARMY

For thirty years, the army was my pride and joy. For it I lived, upon it I labored. And now, after four and a half brilliant years of war with unprecedented victories, it was forced to collapse by a stab in the back from the dagger of the revolutionaries—at the very moment when peace was within reach!

And the fact that it was in my proud navy, my own creation, that the first open rebellion occurred, cut me most deeply to the heart.

There has been much talk about my having abandoned the army and gone to neutral foreign parts.

Some say the Emperor should have gone to some regiment at the front, and, together with it, hurled himself upon the enemy, seeking death in one last attack. That, however, would not only have rendered impossible the armistice, so ardently desired by the nation, and concerning which the commission sent from Berlin to General Foch was already negotiating, but it would have also meant the useless sacrifice of the lives of many soldiers—of some of the very best and most faithful, in fact.

Others say the Emperor should have returned home at the head of the army. But a peaceful return was no longer possible; the rebels had already seized the Rhine bridges and other important points in the rear of the army. I could, to be sure, have forced my way back at the head of loyal troops transferred from the fighting front; but, by so doing, I would have put the finishing touches on Germany's collapse, since, in addition to the struggle with the enemy, who certainly would have pressed forward in pursuit, civil war would have also ensued.

Still others say the Emperor should have killed himself. That was made impossible by my firm Christian beliefs. And would not people have exclaimed:

"How cowardly! Now he shirks all responsibility by committing suicide!" This alternative was also eliminated because I had to consider how to be of help and use to my people and my country in the evil time that was to be anticipated.

I knew also that I, in particular, would be called upon to champion the cause of my people in clearing up the question of war guilt—which was increasingly becoming the decisive point in our future destiny—since I better than anyone could bear witness to Germany's desire for peace and to our clean conscience.

After unspeakably arduous internal struggles, and following the most urgent advice of the highest ranking counselors who were present at the moment, I decided to leave the country, since, in view of the reports provided to me, I believed that, by so doing, I would most faithfully serve Germany, enable better armistice and peace terms for her, and spare her the further loss of human lives, distress, and misery.

Source: Wilhelm II, *The Kaiser's Memoirs*. English translation by Thomas R. Ybarra. New York and London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1922, pp. 285–91.

Translation: edited by GHDI staff