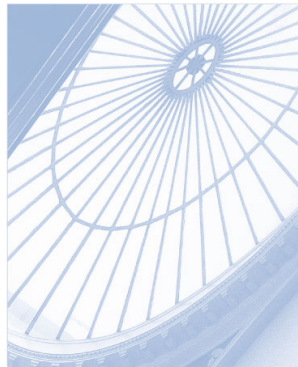


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FRANK LORENZ MÜLLER, *Our Fritz: Emperor Frederick III and the Political Culture of Imperial Germany* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 340 pp. ISBN 978 0 674 04838 6. £33.95

Our memory of German emperor Frederick III today is almost completely limited to the tragedy of his illness and ensuing brief rule of only ninety-nine days in 1888. Closely linked to the fate of this beacon of the liberal minded is one of the main questions of counter-factual history: how would Germany have developed if Frederick had ruled for longer? Would he, as many argued, have transformed Germany into a parliamentary monarchy and steered a course in foreign politics avoiding confrontation with Germany's neighbours? The implications are obvious: they come down to the question of whether German history in the twentieth century would have taken a completely different, much more positive, course if Frederick III's personal fate had been more fortunate.

Frank Lorenz Müller, in what is the first scholarly biography of the Second Reich's second emperor, does not dismiss these considerations as unhistorical. Rather, he deploys the intriguing if-then problem intelligently to structure his narrative into much more than a biographical account. He transposes the subjunctive into the question of how Frederick William, as the future emperor was known as a crown prince, could develop as an individual in the Prussian dynastic context in which he grew up. Secondly, Müller asks what leeway the crown prince had, and a longer ruling emperor would have had. Müller thus opens up what he refers to as the political culture of the Reich, making relevant the long period when Frederick had little direct political significance.

After all, Frederick's years in waiting were spent just one step away from the throne during the decisive period when Prussia was transformed from an ailing semi-great power into the dominant force on the European Continent in its new capacity as a German nation-state. The crown prince was in his early thirties when his father, William I, ascended the throne and, encouraged and pushed by Otto von Bismarck, abandoned his liberal credentials, sidelining parliament in favour of an unchecked expansion of the military. Müller shows that the conflict between father and son broke out as early as this, describing it as a situation in which the son's prospects depended on his father's life.

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The crown prince made public the strong reservations he held about the conservative course taken by his father, and deliberately stopped attending the council of ministers. Yet his opposition did not go beyond these rather symbolic acts. He almost never questioned his loyalty to his father, although their relationship was often troubled. Frederick William explicitly approved of reforming and enlarging the army, and he later never questioned the military's relevance and position. This pattern was repeated at a number of critical moments in Prussian-German history, when Frederick William found himself close to the centre of decision-making but with few means of really exerting power. He clearly held liberal views, at least in his diary, but was neither able nor willing to give his convictions political expression. His lack of talent for politics might have played a part in this. Yet Müller demonstrates that Frederick William actually shared many of the key assumptions underlying the Hohenzollerns' *raison d'être*: the unquestioned role of a strong monarch backed by a strong army and a belief in the Hohenzollerns' superiority over all other German states because of their alleged historical mission and achievements.

Müller lays out his interpretation in thematic chapters. He starts by describing the defining personal relationships between Frederick William and his father William I, his wife Victoria (known as 'Vicky' and daughter of Queen Victoria), and his opponent Otto von Bismarck, although Müller questions this characterization. The image of Vicky obsessed contemporaries and later commentators alike. Müller does not choose the easy option of denouncing the dark myth of the later Empress Frederick as motivated solely by xenophobia and conservative narrow-mindedness. While stressing Vicky's talents and intelligence, he points out that she almost obsessively took every opportunity to let the Prussians and Germans know how inferior she considered everything in her new home by comparison with Britain. Against the background of growing Anglophobia in Germany, this insensitivity increasingly also harmed her husband's public image. He appeared to be a weakling in his wife's hands and, given the close connections which Vicky maintained with her native Britain, also a potential security risk. The latter contributed to the fact that in later years Frederick William was sidelined politically, losing out against his own son.

The crown prince's relationship with Bismarck, Müller points out, was more complex than is commonly assumed. Both believed, or at

least accepted, that a continuation of Bismarck's chancellorship would work under the new emperor. Tellingly, the question of whether the chancellor would stay on was one of the few points on which Frederick William disagreed with his wife who, of course, fiercely opposed this notion. On the one hand, the crown prince clearly understood that Bismarck's almost unchecked executive power and public standing threatened to overshadow the Hohenzollern dynasty; on the other, he had to admit that Bismarck's political experience made him 'more necessary' than the crown prince himself. This was much more than just the question of a personal relationship. Müller provides clear evidence that Frederick William's acceptance of Bismarck meant that the crown prince would not introduce a parliamentary system, the great hope of liberal-minded contemporaries and counter-factual historians alike.

In a chapter entitled 'Liberalism and Empire' Müller looks at how substantial these liberal hopes were. He provides ample evidence that Frederick William shared the liberal, often left liberal (*freisinnig* in the German terminology) convictions of his time and generation. Publicly, the most marked expression of this may be found in the clear stance he took against the growth of anti-Semitism in the 1870s. He did not, however, question the essentials of Hohenzollern rule. The crown prince made it very clear that he considered it a bad idea to appoint party leaders as ministers, which would establish the link between democratically elected politicians and the government so desperately lacking in Germany. He also held strong views about the necessity of strong monarchical rule and wanted to see the restricted influence of the Reichstag curtailed even further. Both the chancellor and the German princes were to be strictly subordinated to the office of German emperor.

In opposition to his father, Frederick William enthusiastically endorsed the main ideas of developing Reich nationalism, at least after 1870. This culminated in hyperbolic but concrete plans to evoke the medieval empire and place the Hohenzollern dynasty in an artificial line of continuity. In this, he was even more detached from modernity than his more sober, Prussian-minded father. The crown prince saw himself as a future Frederick IV in succession to the medieval emperor Frederick III rather than the Prussian king Frederick II. While this plan was eventually deflected by Bismarck, the crown prince certainly played a large part in the whole concep-

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tion of the new German Kaisertum. He initiated a number of specific projects to commemorate Hohenzollern glory which were later taken up by his son. In stark contrast to his son, however, Frederick William evoked strong loyalties in southern Germany based on his command of Bavarian troops during the French campaign of 1870. There he was seen as the embodiment of Germanness rather than as a Prussian prince and later king, thus demonstrating the potential of the new office of German Kaiser.

It is a strength of Müller's study that he points to the strong but often still neglected resources of monarchical power upon which Frederick William could draw. This gave him popular appeal, summed up in the almost mystical figure of 'Our Fritz', a public persona shaped largely on the battlefields of Bohemia (1866) and Alsace (1870) and further enhanced by many anecdotes about how easily the crown prince related to his subjects from all strata of society. All this added up to Frederick William as a 'paragon of bourgeois virtue' and made him, as Müller puts it, a true 'super-Bürger' (p. 121). Personal character traits and talent certainly played a crucial part here, but the transfer of monarchical knowledge from Victorian England, where such patterns had been established successfully, and references to the powerful myth of Queen Louise, Frederick William's grandmother, also played an important role. Bourgeois devotion certainly helped the monarchy, but it also reflected growing Hohenzollern dependence on the support of the *Bürgertum*—plus the new phenomenon of the media.

The public success and high-flying plans of Frederick William, who had given up hope of ever exerting political influence long before he fell victim to cancer, eventually came to nothing with his tragic end in 1888. The ninety-nine days to some extent encapsulated the many frustrations of preceding decades. Müller highlights the petty role played by those at the centre of power, in particular, the new strong man of the Hohenzollern dynasty, William II. Frederick III and his wife, trying to seize the opportunity, were limited to taking negative action against conservative politicians with almost no opportunity to put through their own schemes. Müller shows that Bismarck retained full control of political affairs throughout Frederick III's short reign.

Müller provides new details of the last, dramatic phase of Frederick III's life and their political implications. So far, we have mainly

been aware of these from the perspective of Bismarck or, through the works of John Röhl, William II. Yet even more than the many new insights gleaned from the meticulous reading of a vast array of sources, their interpretation in context makes for the high quality of this book. During Frederick III's last days, committed supporters offered to donate their healthy larynxes as transplants to save their political hero. Here, as in many other instances, Müller links biographical detail with a more complex discussion of the transformation of the Hohenzollern monarchy from Prussian to German, from mid-nineteenth-century detachment to the intense public interchange of unleashed modernity. While some familiarity with nineteenth-century German history is assumed, Müller presents complex matters in an admirably accessible and elegant style. Had 'Our Fritz' lived longer, he would, according to Müller, almost certainly not have been a great reformer working towards a more liberal Germany. Yet there is much to suggest that he might have been a more effective monarch than his son, perhaps addressing the many internal cleavages with greater ease and tact.

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