

**Martin Kohlrausch.** *Der Monarch im Skandal: Die Logik der Massenmedien und die Transformation der wilhelminischen Monarchie.* Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2005. 536 S. EUR 59.80, cloth, ISBN 978-3-05-004020-2.



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The interaction of the mass media and political leaders is a familiar theme in German history, especially in discussions of Weimar and Third Reich politics, and of Hitler's projection and maintenance of his near-messianic countenance. But the mass media existed in the *Kaiserreich* as well. Martin Kohlrausch's book uses the media's rendering of imperial scandals as a vector for analyzing their interaction with the kaiser. He demonstrates well that this relation was by no means unidirectional; in fact, Wilhelm II and the monarchy were shaped by the media as much or more than they shaped them. In turn, this relationship, he argues convincingly, helped to create the idealized image of a *Führer* for later decades.

Kohlrausch examines the coverage of four scandals from Caligula to the *Daily Telegraph* affair and argues that their developmental significance in German politics is greater than commonly understood. Rather than mere "flashes in the pan," coverage of these scandals by the mass media helped shape the imperial office. The monarchy came to learn that it increasingly had to take public expectations into account, and that it was

losing its ability to shape those expectations. The media's scrutiny of the kaiser's behavior in the end thus helped to tame the monarchy as an institution. It undermined Wilhelm II's prestige and it continued to highlight the gap between Wilhelm II's actual behavior and that of an idealized monarch.

Kohlrausch's work rests on the interplay of two trends: the rise of mass media in the *Kaiserreich*, with its own dynamics and informational appetites, and the expectations made upon a bombastic kaiser coming from the leadership needs of a modern, industrializing society. The mass media naturally reported on the kaiser regularly; such reports boosted circulation. But the nature of the mass media allowed it focus on the smaller and more immediate details of the kaiser's life and behavior if the kaiser permitted it, and such details would be distributed to a wide audience. Kohlrausch notes that Wilhelm II catalyzed this process himself, by portraying himself at the beginning of his reign as having unusually strong character traits, appropriate to lead a nation to greatness. Such image creation, in the hands of a

news-hungry media, made Wilhelm II an unparalleled "public" monarch, subjected to unprecedented levels of scrutiny. But he would not be unique in this regard; indeed, Kohlrausch notes, Wilhelm II was "representative of a new generation of politicians, molded by the media," who, rather than remaining noble and remote from the general public, appeared as "ordinary individuals" (p. 462). Thus, the relationship of the kaiser to the mass media was a two-edged sword. The same public exposure the kaiser so enjoyed brought unprecedented scrutiny, particularly if a scandal arose. Scandals in fact broadened the media's range by bringing previously taboo topics into public discussion, and subjecting previously unsailable personages to increased scrutiny. Indeed, Kohlrausch continues, the range and sharpness of the criticism of the monarchy in the German *Rechtsstaat* increased significantly during the reign of Wilhelm II and he could do little to quell it.

The kaiser's mediocrity might have been more acceptable in a different century, but the *Kaiserreich* was an altogether new cultural and media environment, as well. Germany was industrializing rapidly, and could reflect with some pride on its modernity, which became part of the German identity. The monarchy was subject not only to greater scrutiny, but also to higher standards. To the degree that the monarchy failed to portray itself as equally modern, it failed in its leadership role for the nation. A stubborn, backward-looking monarchy, harkening to feudal principles rather than to modern sensibilities, would be subject to increasing criticism. Scandals provided an occasion for such criticism. Implicitly, as Kohlrausch notes with great insight, such expectations revealed that the media and society in general were placing a greater weight on the prestige and national interests than on the monarchy. If the monarchy undermined the nation's prestige with scandals, the monarchy was delegitimated to a greater degree than it would have been earlier, a development that manifested itself in the mass

media's increasingly critical and sophisticated commentary. The kaiser's increasingly visible failings, depicted by the mass media, pointed out an ever greater contrast to the kaiser's idealized importance, which had been enhanced by the mass media.

Interestingly, Kohlrausch notes, the kaiser's eroded legitimacy did not translate into increased prestige for the Reichstag. Even though the kaiser came to be viewed as mortal and was subjected to extraordinary scrutiny, his change in status did not create more legitimacy for the idea of popular sovereignty. In the final sections of his work, Kohlrausch treats the emergence of the idea of a *Führer* from this media-monarchy dialectic. Despite Wilhelm II's and the monarchy's failures to live up to the expectations they created via the mass media, expectations of an energetic, populist leadership remained as a legacy--and burden--for the Weimar Republic's politics, awaiting someone who could harness them.

Kohlrausch's analysis of the double-edged interaction between the monarch and the media is convincing, particularly in portraying that interaction as an antecedent to mass politics and the mass media in the twentieth century. Even so, we should be careful here not to assign scandal too much credit as a factor in that development. One wonders whether Wilhelm II's recurrent but non-scandalous theatricalities also could have played a role in making the public more jaded. Likewise, the processes of industrialization--which raised bourgeois sensibilities and expectations for a modern monarch--also incubated the SPD and radical-right nationalism, neither of which needed scandals to nurture their own anti- or non-monarchical dispositions. However, Kohlrausch's point about the role of scandals as a wedge is well taken; such affairs broadened the forum of discussion about the monarchy and allowed the mass media to discuss publicly what many might have thought privately. This book provides a valuable perspective on the dynamics of both the rise of

the mass media's political influence and the decline of the kaiser's, of public opinion in the *Kaiserreich*, and of their legacy for Weimar.

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