

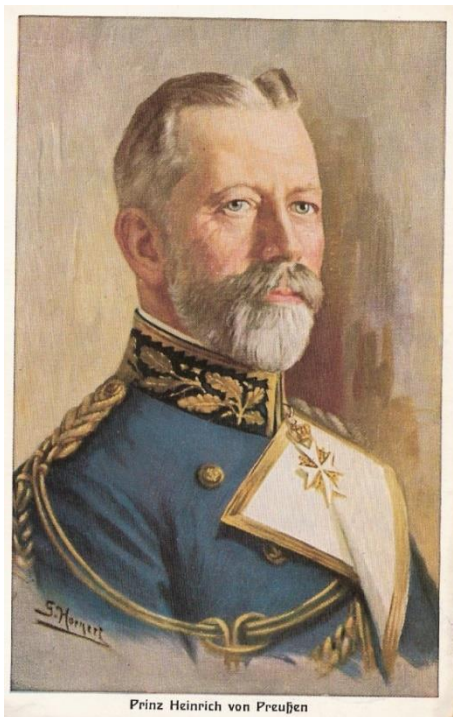
Prince Heinrich of Prussia:

A better William?

Miriam Schneider



In the years 1890-1894, General Albrecht von Stosch (1818-1896), the former chief of the German Admiralty, was frequently asked the same question. As he confided to his friend, the novelist Gustav Freytag, people were worried that the young Emperor William II (1859-1941), who had ascended the throne in 1888 and had since displayed “the restlessness of a maniac”, might eventually become mentally or physically ill. Therefore, they inquired of Stosch “**what kind of man**” Prince Heinrich, the Emperor’s younger brother, was.[\[i\]](#)



Prince Heinrich of Prussia, postcard, c. 1910 (author’s collection)

Humble and unobtrusive, Heinrich (1862-1929) could easily be overlooked. Yet, throughout his youth he was third-in-line to the Prussian throne, and from 1888 to 1900, he was designated to become regent in case the Emperor should die before his eldest son had reached his majority. Some men, like William’s friend Philipp Eulenburg (1847-1921), did not rate Heinrich’s abilities very highly. They worried “**what kind of regent**” he would be if “something, God forbid, should happen to our master”.[\[ii\]](#) Others, however, saw the possibility in a more favourable light. As late as the 1920s, the former chancellor Bernhard von Bülow (1849-1929) mused in his memoirs “whether on balance **the German Empire might not have been better served** if Prince Heinrich had been Emperor instead of his much more talented, yet also much more ambivalent, dreamy and unreliable older brother”.[\[iii\]](#)

All commentators had very particular motives for their musings. Stosch, once a shadow chancellor of the liberal left, was vaguely hoping for a turn in German politics. Bülow, who had decisively shaped William II's foreign policy in the years 1900-1909 but then deserted his master, needed Heinrich as a contrast for his negative depiction of the Emperor. Sober scholars would therefore probably warn us to refrain from the idle question "**What if?**". Yet, with all the contemporary "What ifs?" in mind, it nevertheless seems a worthwhile enterprise to study Prince Heinrich in comparison with his brother and maybe also to ponder some counterfactual thoughts.

Partners in loneliness – divided by destiny

In the first few years of their childhood, Prince William and Prince Heinrich were actually an inseparable **community of shared fate**. With only three years between them, the two boys paired up as a natural study group. This was a common practice among nineteenth-century royal families because it saved valuable teaching resources as well as provided young princes with a sort of substitute peers.

For Heinrich, being together with William primarily meant that he became a silent witness to the **famous educational experiment** that his parents had devised for their eldest son and heir. Determined to raise a new race of monarchs for the modern age, Crown Prince Frederick William (1831-1888) and particularly his clever, ambitious English-born wife Victoria (1841-1901), had drawn up extensive plans for an education according to the latest and highest standards of the age. To achieve their goal, they hired a stern and unforgiving tutor, Dr Georg Hinzpeter (1827-1907). Moreover, they even followed through with the unheard-of experiment of sending William to a public grammar school in Kassel where he had to compete with middle-class peers.



Prince William and Prince Heinrich, c. 1886

Heinrich shared his brother's fate, being subjected to the same harsh and frugal regiment of his tutor and to the merciless criticism of his disappointed mother. Considered a mere appendix to the heir to the throne, though, his education was **comparatively neglected**. While William was pushed through to his A-levels, Heinrich entered the *Realschule I. Ordnung* (a secondary school) and obtained his *Zeugnis für Obersekunda-Reife* (intermediate school-leaving certificate) in January 1877 aged fourteen.

Some might see this neglect as Heinrich's misfortune. As Bülow remembered in his memoirs, the "malicious" Hinzpeter once remarked how "by studying Prince Heinrich, one can see what would have become of the Emperor if I had not taken his education into my hands".^[iv] The idea was clearly that Heinrich, pretty much left to his own devices, lacked the education and polish that had turned William into a fit monarch.

One could argue, though, that Heinrich was **extremely lucky**. For while William was forced to endure the psychological pressure of having to overcome the physical disadvantages of a disabled arm, while he had to study Latin and Greek and attend university in order to somehow fit his parents' ideal of a future monarch, Heinrich, for all we know, was allowed to live the life he wanted – a life that William, had he been free, might have chosen as well.

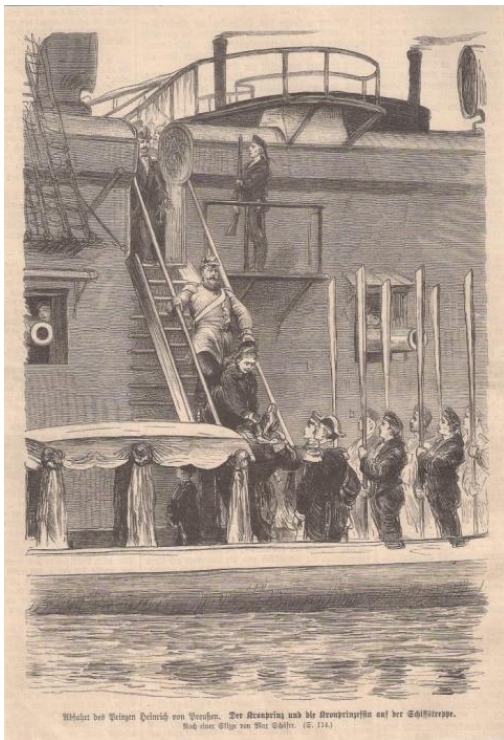
As grandchildren of Queen Victoria, both boys were acquainted from earliest age with the grandeur and beauty of the ships that made up Britain's status as Europe's greatest naval and imperial power. During their holidays in England they frequently visited British sea ports. Back home in Germany they were trained in practical seamanship and learned how to row on the Jungfernsee. Their mother's pride in her home country and their father's desire to turn Germany also into a major global player by way of naval and colonial expansion, combined to inspire both William and Heinrich with a **life-long love for the sea**.

It was Heinrich's wish to join the young **Imperial Navy** – and his parents' realization that this alliance with a powerful symbol of national unity and future imperial greatness was an invaluable career path for a younger member of the Hohenzollern dynasty – that led to his particular school education. The science- and modern-language-based training

of a Realschule provided him with the necessary knowledge and certificates for a career as a naval officer.

Heinrich's naval entrance exam and his subsequent embarkation on-board the cadet training ship Niobe in 1877 marked a **parting of ways for the two brothers**. For one last night, William was allowed to sleep in Heinrich's bunk bed while the future sailor made do with his uncomfortable hammock. Then, on 22 April 1877, they said farewell.

From now on, two thirds of Heinrich's time would be dedicated to his cherished profession. William, meanwhile, would continue his exacting training as a Prussian heir to the throne and eventually only be able to act out his maritime passion as a politicized hobby. In the process, **the lives and characters of the two men diverged**. Heinrich's professionalism, his cosmopolitanism, and the relationships he formed along the way played a major part in this.



Prince Heinrich leaving for his first world cruise, *Über Land und Meer* 1878 (author's collection)

"You can hardly imagine how glad I am to go to sea again, as a sailor's life on board is too nice and I am so fond of it!"

Prince Heinrich writing to his mother, Crown Princess Victoria, 1 September 1882 (Archiv des Hauses Hessen)

The advantage of a real vocation

Today, Emperor William II is probably most famous for his **love of uniforms and military demeanour** as well as the naval enthusiasm that he displayed throughout his reign. The speed with which he changed his outward garb and his predilection for naval accoutrement were running jokes already in his own lifetime. His biographers agree, though, that his “undoubted attraction to the culture and ambience” of military life was not matched by an internalization of “the values and mental habits of a Prussian officer”.^[v] William did not know discipline nor could he bear criticism. Moreover, his ambitious and troubled education resulted in a sort of **accomplished dilettantism**: a desire to be interested in and informed about everything, to impress people with his knowledge and skills, but lacking true expertise. William loved to see himself as the great helmsman of the German ship of state and frequently took part in the Kiel Regatta with his own yacht. His guests on-board would be nervous, though, until they could return to the safe harbour.

Heinrich, on the other hand, went through all the stages of a vocation-specific education and became a **real professional career officer** after his lieutenant’s examination in 1881. His training was not free of exceptions befitting his social status (he was usually allowed a separate room, was accompanied by a military governor and valet, or received private coaching). Overall, however, the prince had to undergo the same exacting training as any other naval cadet and thus achieved the proficiency necessary for naval command.

Like William, Heinrich never formed close relationships with his peers. The almost equal footing on which he lived with his comrades and colleagues in the cramped space of the ship, however, as well as the daily experience of meritocratic assessment inevitably had an effect: they resulted in a humble self-image, in valuable **social skills** and a more than superficial internalization of the military ethos. These were all qualities which distinguished him from his narcissistic, unapproachable and unstable older brother.

Heinrich’s identification with the naval profession, moreover, meant that he even rejected premature promotions because he wished to avoid superficiality. It would be naïve to believe that his princely naval career was merely the result of talent and performance. Under normal conditions, so the verdict of many naval historians, the

prince who was to become **an admiral at the incredibly early age of 39** would probably never have commanded larger naval units. His nautical talents, though, were certainly sufficient for minor commands.[\[vi\]](#)

His professional know-how, his dedication to the navy and his stable trademarks (naval uniform, captain's beard and the famous Prince-Heinrich-cap) combined to create an **aura of authenticity** around the prince which his "jack-of-all-trades" brother lacked. Heinrich epitomized the public persona of the "**Sailor Prince**", a brand of the nineteenth century which, by embodying promises of middle-class professionalism, imperial greatness and exciting adventure, contributed to the popularization of Europe's monarchies.

Prince Heinrich's naval career in pictures, postcard c.
1910 (author's collection)



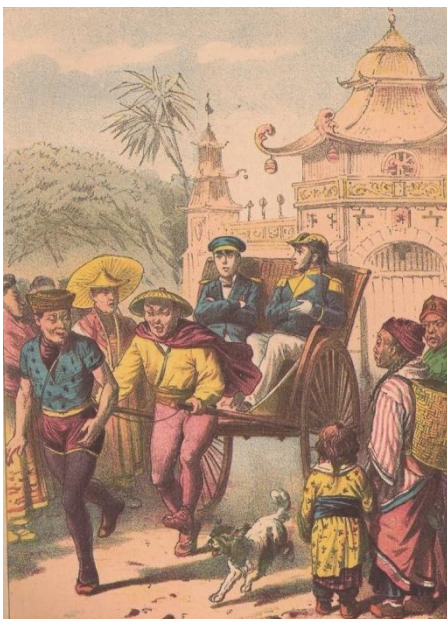
The open mind of a globetrotter

In the assessment of modern historians, Prince Heinrich's image is largely determined by two distinct episodes during which he actively influenced German politics. The first is the famous reply he gave to his brother when he left to take command of the East Asia Squadron following the seizure of Kiautschou Bay in December 1897. When William exhorted his brother to go for the Chinese "with a mailed fist", Heinrich responded with the infelicitous words that he would "**preach the gospel of Your Majesty's sacred person** to all who will hear it". Naturally, this pseudo-religious wording caused great disquiet in the German and European press. The second episode was when Heinrich, shortly before the outbreak of the First World War, allegedly conveyed the wrong impression to his brother that their cousin, King George V, would at all events keep out of a potential war. In the view of some historians, this led to a fateful overconfidence on the part of the German government.

Both episodes were used to represent Prince Heinrich as a naïve, if not ignorant family-go-between and blind admirer of his brother who shared the bellicose militarism and chauvinism of his time and was probably even a worse public speaker than William II himself. Philipp Eulenburg dreaded a Heinrich regency exactly because he feared his lack of verbal tact. And both William and his chancellor Bülow tried to keep the Prince-Admiral away from an active involvement in foreign politics because they thought he was naïve and misguided by a one-sided love for his mother's birth country Britain.

On closer inspection, though, Heinrich probably had a much more differentiated and discerning view of the world than his brother as well as a positive effect on foreign affairs. From his earliest training in the navy, the prince shared the **globetrotting life** of his professional colleagues. In 1878-1880 and in 1882-1884 he undertook two much-publicized journeys around the world, in 1897-1900 he was stationed in East Asia, in 1902 he visited the United States and so on. His border-crossing activities, his contacts with other empire roamers and his diplomatic relations with the representatives of other (non-)European countries resulted in a sort of **nationalist cosmopolitanism**: an attitude combining the inevitable national chauvinism of the time with a certain open-mindedness and even appreciation for other cultures.

While William II tended to file away his brother's reports from East Asia, Bernhard von Bülow thus later admitted that Heinrich's observations were actually not unreasonable, particularly when he advocated good relations with the Japanese Empire. Heinrich's ability to act as an intermediary between the Japanese and German imperial families –



both when Japanese princes visited Berlin or when he attended court festivities in Tokyo – was even a valuable asset in German foreign policy. William II, meanwhile, who had never travelled beyond the Holy Land, preferred to conjure up the spectre of the “yellow peril”.[\[vii\]](#)

Prince Heinrich in Japan, Illustration from the children's book „Des Prinzen Heinrich von Preußen Weltumseglung“, c. 1884 (author's collection)

"One impression remains with all of us – that we are confronted with a very serious, progressive people worthy of close study and equal to any European nation.

We are well advised to get along with them rather than to count them among our enemies."

Prince Heinrich writing to William II, Tokyo, 14 September 1912

(Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg/Br)

During his visit to the United States in 1902, probably his most important mission, Heinrich equally understood how to **win the hearts** of the Americans through his sportsmanlike manner. Countless newspapers, stereographs, moving pictures, commemorative medals, collectible cards etc. celebrated the event on both sides of the Atlantic. Where William II tended to confuse or offend his hosts and audience through his pretentious or erratic behaviour, the straightforward Heinrich was a **welcome guest**.

This was particularly true for the royal and imperial courts of Britain and Russia, where family relations also played an important part. Maybe the most striking difference between Prince Heinrich and his brother – apart from their diverging dynastic destinies – was what one might call the **contingency of romance**. In their early youth, both William and Heinrich formed a lasting love interest in two of their cousins from the grand ducal house of Hesse-Darmstadt, the daughters of Queen Victoria's second daughter Princess Alice. While the beautiful Princess Elisabeth (1864-1918) rejected William's advances, though, went on to marry a Russian Grand Duke and ultimately introduced her youngest sister Alix to the future Tsar Nicholas II, the good-natured Princess Irène (1866-1953) eventually accepted Prince Heinrich's proposal and married him in May 1888.

Prince Heinrich und Princess Irène
on-board SMS *Schneewittchen*
(author's collection)



"Indeed I may be called happy, as Niny is really as true and honest as gold! [...]"

To think, that one so dear and good can love a monster like me, makes me mad..."

Prince Heinrich writing to Crown Princess Victoria of Prussia, 4 February 1887

(Archiv des Hauses Hessen)

This humiliation, for all we know, increased William's feelings of being rejected by his critical British mother and relatives and fostered a life-long love-hate-relationship with Britain. Heinrich, meanwhile, once again allowed to live the life that William had secretly dreamed of – in a happy marriage with a clever, supportive wife – was **drawn closer to the English camp** of his mother as well as his British and Russian relatives. He regularly spent his holidays together with Irene's family and, as a beloved in-law, also became a diplomatic envoy of sorts with exclusive access to the secret circles of the Windsor-Glücksborg-Romanov clan. His reports about British and Russian (public) moods were generally very accurate. William II and his advisors only discarded them for one flaw: that Heinrich, as Bülow put it in whitewashed retrospective, "did politics with his **heart rather than calculating brain**" and therefore was too one-sided in his judgement. His big fault in both of the above-mentioned infelicitous episodes was that, although he "did not lack common sense [...]" his innocent and simple mind did not always anticipate the wickedness of human beings and the evilness of the world".^[viii] In 1897, Heinrich had yet to learn his lesson about the negative impact of speeches. And regarding the fateful events of 1914, there are good reasons to believe that King George V really did not express himself clearly to his German cousin.

A loyal heart

Heinrich's simple, good nature meant that his brother could order him about **like a puppet** for much of his reign. He would treat the Prince-Admiral as his operative arm with the navy and as a figurehead of his extensive fleet-building programme, dispatching him for representative functions like ship launches, but keeping him away from the

decision-making process. He would send Heinrich on royal tours to Germany's large diaspora communities in the New World or to new model colonies like Kiautschou, using him to represent the idea of a Greater German Empire to German citizens and foreign publics alike, but forbidding all political initiatives. And he would delegate his brother to attend all major court festivities, thus frequently calling him away from his residence, the imperial war harbour Kiel, although Heinrich wished to dedicate his life to his professional duties.

Only once the resolute Princess Irène intervened, did Heinrich protest against his brother's high-handed commands. It was also Irène who would write an angry letter to William in July 1912, when Heinrich felt slighted by his brother's personnel decisions in the naval command.



Emperor Wilhelm II and his brother, the Prince-Admiral, c. 1916

"William, you cannot do it, you cannot hurt him so much! Heinrich, who has worked for you in silence and in public all his life. You grew up together – you are brothers, after all, and love each other dearly!"

Princess Irène writing to William II, 19 July 1912
(Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg/Br)

Probably reminiscent of his own first love, the Emperor never turned down his sister-in-law's wishes. Privately, however, his saddest betrayal of his brother's loyalty was the way in which he would frequently make fun of Heinrich or speak contemptuously about him in front of advisors, friends and family members.

An entry from the journal of William's aid-de-camp in his Dutch exile, Sigurd von Ilseman (1884-1952), about Prince Heinrich's last visit to Huis Doorn in February 1928 reveals the **entire tragedy of this fraternal relationship**. Following the disastrous First World War, both Heinrich and then William had been forced to flee from the

revolutionary forces in November 1918. While Heinrich spent the rest of his life on his family farm near Schleswig, William had to seek exile in the Netherlands. Heinrich would visit him once or twice a year.

On taking leave in February 1928, the prince, marked by illness and close to tears, was shocked about the delusions that William still entertained regarding a possible return to the throne. "The Kaiser is so astute in his judgement of so many things", he sighed, "[...] and then, in these things, he suddenly fails". He was unable to get through to his brother, though. As the loyal Ilseemann observed, William was unapproachable, a "species of his own" who did not even realize that he did not have any close confidants.

"How easy it could be for the Emperor to come closer to his brother, this man who adores him like a god. Never could there be a better brother. But no, there never was and there never will be a human being that he completely opens up to [...] Brother Heinrich has striven so hard for his trust, but he has not achieved it this time, nor will he ever achieve it. Luckily, he does not know how his imperial brother sometimes makes ironic remarks about him and derides his flaws to the gentlemen in his company."[\[ix\]](#)

Although they had spent the first one and a half decades of their childhood and adolescence together, William somehow never seems to have been able to feel true affection for his brother. The good-natured Heinrich thus once again left with his attentions unrequited. One year later, he was dead.

Like his father, the ill-fated Emperor Frederick III, Heinrich died of cancer of the throat on 20 April 1929, aged 66. Ironically, many of Heinrich's contemporaries had already throughout his lifetime observed a **close similarity between father and son** (both in physiognomy and temper). Some had even seen this as one of the most striking distinctions between William and his brother. "He has a simple nature, which follows unconditionally where he trusts", was how Albrecht von Stosch described the prince to those who enquired about a possible regency in 1890-1894. "He is more of a Hohenzollern than his brother und he much takes after his father." Bernhard von Bülow, following the guideline *de mortuis nil nisi bene*, likewise remarked that "Prince Heinrich not only inherited his wonderful father's handsome external appearance. He also, like him, was of thoroughly noble nature. He had a golden heart."[\[x\]](#) And even the many

ordinary citizens who would write fan mail to Prince Heinrich when he left for East Asia in 1897 frequently referred to the “noble Frederick’s son” who was “the darling of your people / more even than your father was”.[\[xi\]](#)



The „Sailor Prince“, postcard, c. 1900
(author’s collection)

The public persona “Sailor Prince” – combining the aura of the aristocrat with the humble, yet exciting life of the seafarer – indeed resembled the persona “Our Fritz” that Emperor Frederick III had fashioned for himself – combining the aura of a military hero of the German Wars of Unification with the charm of a bourgeois family father. The connection established thus draws our attention to **another, corresponding “What if?” of Prusso-German history**. From the moment of his premature death in 1888,

Frederick’s memory was suffused with

reflections about the possible alternative course that German history might have taken if he had lived. There were some vague ideas that Frederick would have advocated a policy of liberal domestic reform and of close foreign political ties with his wife’s birth country Britain. Thus he would have prevented his son’s autocratic diversion tactics and the diplomatic tensions which eventually led to the outbreak of war in 1914.

The idea of Prince Heinrich’s regency or alternative succession was a natural extension of these wishful musings. It implied that the humble, stable, cosmopolitan “Sailor Prince” might have made a good constitutional monarch appealing to his people’s emotions and enjoying good relations with Europe’s other powers. Heinrich’s biography seems to confirm that – at least in terms of temper and feeling – he might indeed have been a

better William. But, then again, just as historians have begun to doubt whether Emperor Frederick III would really have been the liberal, appeasing monarch of our dreams, so the question remains in how far Heinrich would have altered the course of history at all. Idle as it may be, though, the idea remains tempting.

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[ii] Philipp von Eulenburg, summer 1896, cited by Röhl, vol. 2, 706.

[iii] Bülow, Bernhard von, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, vol. 1, 205.

[iv] Bülow, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, vol. 2, 204-5.

[v] Clark, Christopher, *Wilhelm II*, 6.

[vi] Witt, Jann Markus, 'Prinz Heinrich als Marineoffizier', in: Hering, Rainer/Schmidt, Christina, *Prinz Heinrich von Preußen: Großadmiral, Kaiserbruder, Technikpionier* (Neumünster, 2013), 51.

[vii] Bülow, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, vol. 1, 436-38.

[viii] Bülow, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, vol. 1, 204 and 548.

[ix] Sigurd von Ilseman, 27.2.1928 and 28.2.1928.

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