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Jan Markert

Wilhelm I.

Review by: Robin Simonow



Authors: Jan Markert

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Jan Markert aims to revise Prussian and German history and deliver historical justice for Wilhelm I, whom he argues has unjustly remained in Bismarck's shadow due to a lasting «chronic Bismarck problem» that persists in research to this day. Markert discredits this as «modern, supposedly critical historiography» plagued by «Bismarck-centrism» and even «Bismarck-worship» (pp. 3 f.). He claims previous accounts of Wilhelm's life fail to meet scholarly standards, especially due to inadequate archival research on Wilhelm's papers. Unlike previous scholars, Markert promises systematic, meticulous research in his brief introduction of just over seven pages (pp. 4 f., 8 f.).

Markert's focus is on Wilhelm's private correspondence, claiming to have analyzed 9,310 letters, including 6,930 unpublished or misrepresented ones, although he does not provide any specific examples. Despite this claim, he primarily uses already published letters, citing 706 edited, 463 historian-made copies, and only 12 original letters, although not all of these were unknown. The reviewer's particular interest in the correspondence between Wilhelm and August von der Heydt led to the disappointing discovery that, although the file was listed as a source, it was not used, reflecting a pattern that applied to about one in seven files.

Markert doesn't cover Wilhelm's entire life but spans over 70 years, trying to dismantle the long-deconstructed myth of Bismarck as the larger-than-life «founder of the Reich». He claims Wilhelm, not Bismarck, was key to Germany's rise, driven by fear of revolution to devise a «coherent, consistent, and persistent agenda» (p. 227). This allegedly culminated in a «multi-level project» (p. 715) aimed at consolidating Hohenzollern rule while averting revolution. When Wilhelm assumed regency in 1858, Markert claims he began

implementing this agenda through a «personal regiment» (p. 397), yet he uses the term without referencing Karl Heinz Börner's 1984 biography,[1] which had previously employed the concept on Wilhelm I. From 1862, Bismarck, according to Markert, served merely as a tool for Wilhelm's will. The nuances of political interactions, such as persuading, negotiating, influencing, and manipulating, are overshadowed by Markert's portrayal of Wilhelm as the central and sole decision-maker. To bolster this view, Markert frequently stresses the truism of the prime minister's dependency on the king's favor, thereby reducing their dynamic to that of ruler and subject (pp. 527 f., 651, 668, 694, 697, 703 f., 719).

Overall, Markert depicts Wilhelm as «Wilhelm the Great», not only a king and military man but also a puppeteer, astute politician, and statesman who was immune to influence, persuasion, or deception, strategically navigating tumultuous political waters domestically and internationally, avoiding rash maneuvers and knowing how to correct strategic missteps in time. This aligns with his repeated use of «Allerhöchster», a term used submissively by subjects to refer to the king, from the contemporary source language (pp. 397, 453, 460, 466, 472, 490, 498, 500). Wilhelm would likely commend this posthumous portrayal, reflected in his repetitive, self-important statements. Markert dedicates extensive space to these, with over 150 lengthy quotes alone, each ranging from eight to 18 lines (pp. 74, 191, 211, 262, 292, 492, 520, 569, 601, 637, 683, 686, 711), yet fails to provide the necessary critical assessment.

Eckart Conze has already critiqued Markert's «excessive revisionism» as counterproductive to his aim for a «total revision» (p. 719).[2] In addition, Markert himself undermines his credibility by presenting known sources as newfound discoveries fitting only his narrative. This often gives the impression he is the first to draw ideas from these sources, due to his phrasing and lack of or sporadic references to existing literature, which he also misrepresents. This is particularly evident where his interpretation of Wilhelm confronts established research, as exemplified by the September crisis of 1862. Markert accuses many historians of «uncritically» «copying» Bismarck's memoirs, perpetuating a narrative of Bismarck as a «messianic savior» who «saved» the crown and gained «political carte blanche» (p. 507, 518). By accusing his predecessors of methodological flaws, Markert largely avoids directly engaging with their arguments.

It is evident that Lothar Gall, one of the historians Markert criticizes, conducted a historically critical, precise, and careful analysis of Bismarck's narrative. Markert's claims that Gall even vaguely suggested «carte blanche» or Wilhelm's straightforward subordination to Bismarck are entirely inaccurate.[3] It is bizarre that Gall's work is not only misrepresented, but his research efforts are also unacknowledged. In his Bismarck biography, Gall emphasized how Bismarck initially underestimated the king's intransigence and the resistance he faced, as well as his ongoing efforts to maintain Wilhelm's favor after his appointment. Markert draws on these insights extensively, dedicating an entire chapter (pp. 524–541) to underscore Wilhelm's autonomy without crediting Gall. Since Markert engages less with existing research and more with Bismarck's memoirs, he easily highlights their weaknesses, even debunking the «periculum-in-mora» legend first refuted by Egmont Zechlin nearly a century ago (p. 517).[4] Nevertheless, Markert, more than he acknowledges, relies heavily on the sources, structure, and interpretative insights of the remarkably perceptive Kurt Promnitz (pp. 518 f.).[5]

It is equally puzzling that Markert begins his supposed reinterpretation of the September 1862 crisis with the well-known account of Bismarck being considered by the king during the early summer of 1862. He presents this aspect as novel despite it being addressed by researchers for nearly a century, whom he criticizes without acknowledgment (pp. 507-509). Markert fails to mention that much of what he offers as corrections was already recognized by these so-called «uncritical» historians, notably Bismarck's tactic of telling Wilhelm what he wanted to hear to secure his appointment (pp. 520 f.).[6] Furthermore, only those familiar with Wilhelm Treue's work can discern that Markert's depiction of Wilhelm's actions and his allegedly feigned readiness to abdicate are heavily reliant on Treue, who is merely cited in a distant footnote and is not clearly linked to Markert's preceding narrative (p. 518).[7] Markert disregards longstanding debates on Wilhelm's willingness to abdicate, devoting only two sentences to his abdication document (p. 520). Wilhelm's numerous statements on conditional abdication are either portrayed as strategic maneuvers (pp. 514 f., 516 f., 519 f.) or omitted entirely, such as in a letter from Alexander von Schleinitz to Queen Augusta (p. 517). Markert leaves no room for doubt regarding Wilhelm's complete control during the September 1862 crisis.

To unsuspecting readers, Markert presents well-known sources as if they were new discoveries, purportedly offering eye-opening insights. For example, the marginal note on the State Ministry report from September 21, 1862, where Wilhelm withdrew his abdication after speaking with Bismarck, is presented as novel, despite its 96-year familiarity (pp. 519 f.). Similarly, Wilhelm's letter to Augusta dated September 23, 1862, known for 95 years, receives the same treatment. Markert fails to acknowledge that these sources have been thoroughly reviewed and well-integrated into historical discourse on Wilhelm and Bismarck's relationship for almost a century. Additionally, he interprets an undated note by Wilhelm, written in pencil and consisting only of bullet points, as a «government program» that purportedly imposed a «programmatic straight-jacket» on Bismarck (pp. 520, 523). This mirrors Andreas Kaernbach's cautious thesis from 1991 based on the same source. Markert minimally acknowledges Kaernbach's contributions and neglects crucial aspects like material and context, avoiding meaningful comparisons with previous programs. Whether Bismarck or Wilhelm referenced this alleged «government program» in their disagreements is unaddressed; instead, Markert cites vague third-party statements (pp. 520 f.). On top of that, he omits key points like «no Jews as judges» from this supposedly significant «government program.»[8]

Particularly challenging for non-specialists are Markert's arguments, which initially seem plausible but crumble under closer scrutiny of the sources. For example, Markert attempts to demonstrate royal governance and decision-making authority by claiming that Wilhelm ordered Bismarck, in the council of October 5, 1862, to declare the regime without a budget in his own name rather than the king's,

supposedly carried out by Bismarck on October 13 (p. 529). However, Markert not only misinterprets the council minutes – it was not about declaring a regime without a budget, and Bismarck was instructed to issue a statement in his name but not that of the government – but also incorrectly associates this instruction with the wrong speech, despite editor Rainer Paetau's clear explanations. In fact, Bismarck defied the royal instruction on October 7 by explicitly stating in Parliament, «not solely in my own name but in that of the State Ministry.»^[9] Thus, the event directly contradicts Markert's claim.

Markert initially promised systematic and meticulous research, aiming to set himself apart from predecessors in Prussian and German history. However, he fails to deliver on these promises. Thoroughness and transparency are crucial for scholarly credibility, yet his book is rife with overstatement and poorly substantiated arguments. Although its accessible main theses make it an easy read, the sheer volume of monotonous Wilhelm quotes becomes tedious. The cross-references to other European monarchies provide some research value. Nevertheless, readers who can navigate the frequent biting polemics and sensationalism, and who are not deterred by the outlined criticisms, might still find it interesting. It remains perplexing why an academic thesis, published in a respected series and aimed at revising interpretations by an allegedly «Bismarck-worshipping» profession, would skimp on a comprehensive scholarly apparatus and solid engagement with the research it aims to challenge.

This review originally appeared in German in the «Jahrbuch zur Liberalismus-Forschung» and has been abridged (<https://www.recensio.net/rezensionen/zeitschriften/jlibf/2025/1/wilhelm-i-vom-kartaetschenprinz-zum-reichsgruender>).

[1] *Kaiser Wilhelm I. 1797–1888. Deutscher Kaiser und König von Preußen. Eine Biographie*, Köln, Pahl-Rugenstein, 1984.

[2] «Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung», 62, 14.3.2025, p. 12.

[3] Cf. Lothar Gall, *Bismarck. Der weiße Revolutionär*, Frankfurt a.M., Propyläen, 1980, pp. 244–247.

[4] Egmont Zechlin, *Review of: Bismarck, Die Gesammelten Werke. Politische Schriften. Bd. 3, bearbeitet von Herman von Petersdorff. Berlin 1925*, in «Historische Zeitschrift», 138/2, 1928, pp. 383-388: 387 f.

[5] Cf. Kurt Promnitz, *Bismarcks Eintritt in das Ministerium*, Berlin, Verlag Emil Ebering, 1908, pp. 225-235.

[6] Cf. e.g. Erich Eyck, *Bismarck*. Vol. 1, Erlenbach-Zürich, Rentsch, 1941, p. 416; Otto Pflanze, *Bismarck*. Vol. 1, München, C.H. Beck, 1997, p. 181.

[7] Cf. Wilhelm Treue, *Wollte König Wilhelm I. zurücktreten?*, in «Forschungen zur Brandenburgischen und Preußischen Geschichte», 51, 1939, pp. 275-310.

[8] GSStA PK, VI. HA, NI Karl Ludwig Zitelmann, Nr. 2, Bl. 15.

[9] Cf. Rainer Paetau (ed.), *Die Protokolle des Preußischen Staatsministeriums 1817–1934/38*, Vol. 5, Hildesheim-Zürich-New York, Olms-Weidmann, 2001, No. 258; *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Preußischen Hauses der Abgeordneten. 7. Legislaturperiode, 1. Session*, Vol. 4, Berlin, W. Moeser, 1862, p. 2127 (quote).