To what extent was the Germany constitution, 1871-1914, flawed?

Hohenlohe struggled to do so as a result of its complex infrastructure, and their own inadequacy for the post. Their difficulty in running the Reichstag was also in part due to the rise of socialism and the growing unrest among the catholic Centre Party, but such problems would not have been impossible to surmount if the constitution had not been so rigid in face of change and hard to adapt. Arguably the problem of the constitution being susceptible to the personality of its leaders is a little overblown, for there were instances of good working relations, even once Bismarck was gone: Wilhelm II worked well with Bülow and Bethmann-Hollweg, introducing the Sickness Insurance Law in 1903 under the former, and enjoying the unwavering loyalty of the latter. However overall, the Kaiser’s added entitlement to appoint his own chancellors was a major flaw, especially under the autocratic and anti-democratic Wilhelm II. He dismissed possibly the only man -Bismarck- capable of managing the country (1890), and later appointed men who, hard-working and capable in their areas as they certainly were, were simply inadequate, such as the elderly Caprivi, the long-winded and indecisive Hohenlohe, and Bethmann-Hollweg, who was woefully inexperienced in foreign policy matters - as shown by his clumsy handling of the political issues that led to the First World War.

The ambiguous position of the bureaucracy and the army was also a confused and potentially dangerous element of the constitution. Both were left out and were, in effect, “a state within a state” (Bismarck), especially the army, who answered only to the Kaiser. This was proved hazardous at best after the disastrous Zabern affair (November 1913) which着力 damaged Germany’s reputation and international standing. Having no commander in chief but the Kaiser himself, and being obliged to swear their loyalty to him and not to the state, was a distinct advantage for the imperial family, but also extremely dangerous in both domestic and international terms. The Kaiser was extremely competitive and loved all things military: having the world’s best and most modern army and the second-best (after the British) Navy at his immediate disposal was a very good idea. Evidently, Bismarck had not written the constitution thus with him in mind, but the army remained that despite the illusions of democracy and a multi-party parliament, Germany resembled a military dictatorship - an impression reinforced by its occasional use of martial law. The bureaucracy was not as significant as the army in constitutional terms, and as it did not have any real domestic power, their role in domestic policy and the running of the country was limited. However, the army’s position in loyalty and the absence of the bureaucracy in the constitution may also help to explain other odd flaws in it, such as how the state relied on the indirect income of taxes that came in through federal states’ assemblies - a huge economic weakness should any crisis occur.

The fact that the constitution merely upheld the illusion of democracy was a flaw in that despite its universal male suffrage, some states (namely Austria and Prussia) retained an archaic voting system that was distinctly unfair and always ensured that conservatives dominated the assemblies, such as in the Bundesrat, the army, and often the Reichstag. There were at least three conservative parties in the Reichstag (with various aims), and so no matter

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3 Caprivi was full of good intentions, but he could not accept the legalisation of Socialism in 1890, only to draft measures against the very same party in 1894. Hohenlohe’s leadership was too weak and allowed others to exercise influence.

4 Even though he was strongly against the war in 1914, Bethmann-Hollweg obediently made the preparations for it at the Kaiser’s insistence.

5 Although Holstein (1890-1906) had a considerable impact in terms of policy decisions.