“To what extent was Wilhelmine Germany riven by deep, unsolvable problems before the outbreak of the First World War?”

In 1871, once the unification wars of Otto von Bismarck were over and Germany was a newly united nation, Bismarck successfully raised her to the status of a main continental power through industrialisation and an impressively modern constitution for the time. However, it was clear by 1914 that Germany was riddled by political and socio-economic problems that, if not unsolvable, certainly ran deep and remained unsolved by Kaiser Wilhelm II and his five Chancellors.

The constitution drawn up by Bismarck in 1871 was probably the most influential and fundamental problem of Germany prior to the First World War. Bismarck had designed it so that it precariously balanced feudalism, national liberalism and authoritarian rule. This made it extremely complex, and only Bismarck out of the Kaiser’s Chancellors had the character and ability to manage it. Because the Chancellor was constitutionally only answerable to the Kaiser, and therefore not accountable to the elected body of the Reichstag, the illusion of democracy projected was just that, an illusion. Bismarck’s successors were therefore products of this complicated and often contradictory constitution, and from 1890 onwards, chancellorship and indeed most political matters often relied solely on the personal favour of the Kaiser. As Wilhelm II was generally not considered suitable “to rule as well as to reign” (Wilhelm II), this made all political matters extremely delicate, and greatly undermined parliamentary elements of the constitution such as the Reichstag, who became essentially redundant.

The Reichstag was also centre to many problems in Wilhelmine Germany. Under Bismarck, it had usually remained, by one means or another, quite docile, and until Bismarck’s fall in 1890, legislation had not been exceedingly difficult to pass. However, his successors found it much harder to control the Reichstag. Bulow (1900-1909) especially, and matters were made more delicate by the Kaiser’s expectation that his Chancellor should control it. This would not have been a problem if the Conservatives had maintained the support they had enjoyed under Bismarck and were allowed to remain in power, but popular support for the Conservative and the Free Conservatives was in steady decline, while instead support for the socialist party, the SPD, grew dramatically. Further problems in the Reichstag were highlighted in 1912, when the SPD gained the most votes (34%) and a majority, but were still unable to form a government. A political stalemate had been reached, increasing inter-party tensions and rivalries, while increasing the fear of a socialist staatssreich and making legislation even more difficult to pass: even though Bulow and his successor Bethmann-Hollweg were loyal to the Kaiser and hated socialism, they could not fully ignore their voices in the Reichstag. This appeared contradictory, since the Reichstag was essentially purely symbolic of democracy, but the confused elements of the constitution were highlighted by the continuous, uncertain status quo between the Kaiser contemptuous of the “Ape-house”, the Chancellor stretched between his loyalty to the sovereign, and the increasingly divided and rebellious Reichstag.

The nature and personality of the Kaiser were also, undoubtedly, a problem to Germany during his reign. An erratic, essentially pleasure-seeking man and a poor decision-maker, Wilhelm II was not a man suited to ruling as an autocrat. This was made all the clearer when, with the support of Eulenburg and Bulow, he started to establish his own ‘personal rule’ in the 1890s with Hohenlohe as a figurehead and transformed what was initially meant to be a trusting partnership between the Kaiser and his Chancellor into effectively a contest for his personal favour. Even Bethmann-Hollweg in his memoirs later called the Kaiser a “burden”, and his attempts to intervene in policies both domestic and foreign policies reportedly amounted to little more that whimsical actions and “blundering interventions” (Layton). The Kaiser was not unintelligent, but his knowledge of the constitution, which he claimed to have never read, and of the military, which he had full control of, was limited, and he was obsessed