

The return of the Hohenzollern imperial dynasty to Germany

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The dispute over the Hohenzollern dynasty's outrageous demands for the return of cultural property and compensation is coming to a climax. A fortnight ago, Eva Schlotheuber, chairwoman of the Historians' Association, made a critical statement about the affair and was promptly admonished by the aristocratic family's lawyer.

For several years, the descendants of the Hohenzollerns, whose family member Wilhelm II was the last Kaiser (Emperor) of Germany, have been negotiating behind closed doors with the federal government and the states of Berlin and Brandenburg for restitution of art objects currently in public hands. These include tens of thousands of valuable paintings, drawings, sculptures, porcelain objects, medals, furniture, books, photographs, historical documents and testimonies. The family is also seeking compensation running into millions of euros for the expropriation of its possessions, which was carried out in East Germany by the Soviet Military Administration (SMAD) after the end of the war in 1945.

Georg Frederick von Preußen, the great-great-grandson of Kaiser Wilhelm II, who calls himself head of the Hohenzollern family and likes to be addressed as "His Royal Highness," is not only demanding the return of many objects to the family. He is also demanding rights of abode and usage at various castles and villas. Several newspapers also report that the Kaiser's heirs are seeking "a say" and the ability to "bring in their own ideas" to exhibitions and publications on Prussian history.

The descendants of the last German emperor are keeping their exact list of demands secret, knowing full well that their brazen claims evoke outrage and opposition from the public. When journalists and historians seek to critically examine their demands and the history of the Hohenzollern, they are met with injunctions and large financial claims. The courts often grant such actions by the "prince of Prussia," as they call him in their official documents, without the defendants having the opportunity to inspect the records and prove their statements.

By their own account, the Hohenzollerns and their legal representatives have already carried out more than 120 injunctions and lawsuits. "At the Berlin Regional Court alone, there are now 47 decisions," the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reported this summer. This involves historians, journalists, news agencies, bloggers and many others. Anyone daring to oppose the reactionary aristocratic clan is targeted for intimidation and silencing.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has also faced legal threats in regard to an article and was asked to sign a cease-and-desist declaration but did not do so. The injunction was rejected and is currently the basis of a legal dispute with the Hohenzollerns.

The WSWS is a thorn in the side of the reactionary aristocracy, above all because it fights for a socialist perspective and vehemently opposes the rewriting of history and return of militarism and fascism. In the legal warning to the WSWS, among other things, the "fight against the capitalist system and for a socialist transformation of society" was described as a "hysterical accusation."

The Office for the Protection of the Constitution (as Germany's Secret

Service is called) argued similarly and described criticism of capitalism as incompatible with the "free democratic order" when it placed the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) on a watch list.

The Hohenzollern heirs can act so aggressively and arrogantly only because they are supported by all of the establishment political parties. Ministers from the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Left Party have been negotiating secretly with the "prince" at the federal and state level since 2014 and have already granted him many concessions.

Only when Georg Frederick von Preußen's demands became more and more brazen did Brandenburg's finance minister, Christian Görke (Left Party), halt the negotiations and allow the matter to go public. However, as soon as SPD politician Katrin Lange replaced Görke, she resumed the secret negotiations with the Hohenzollerns.

But even Christian Görke—like the Left Party in general—does not reject cooperation with the Hohenzollerns. He was involved in the secret talks for five years, from 2014 to 2019, and even now is striving for an amicable solution. During the summer, he appealed to von Preußen to withdraw his legal case against the state of Brandenburg and stressed, "Then, in my opinion, the way would be clear for the other no less important property law issues to be resolved soon."

Militarism and the falsification of history

The impudent demands of the Hohenzollerns aim at not only the shameless enrichment of a family clan involved in countless historical crimes. The former ruling house is also demanding the return to a place "at the top" of German society. There is a deeply reactionary connection between material greed and historical falsification.

Germany's return to great power politics and militarism requires the falsification of history. The monstrous crimes of German imperialism must be played down and glossed over.

As early as 2014, then-Federal President Joachim Gauck, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) and Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen (CDU) announced in unison at the Munich Security Conference that Germany was "too big to comment on world politics from the side-lines," and that it had to act "earlier and more decisively and substantially regarding foreign and security policy."

Only two weeks later, *Der Spiegel* published an article titled "The Transformation of the Past," which advocated a fundamental reinterpretation of German history. In it, political scientist Herfried Münkler defended Germany's role in the First World War, while Nazi apologist Ernst Nolte and historian Jörg Baberowski glossed over the crimes of National Socialism (Nazism). Baberowski even declared that Hitler was "not vicious."

When the Socialist Equality Party and its youth organisation, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), criticised Baberowski for this, they were severely attacked by the Humboldt University administration and the media.

The arrogant behaviour of the Hohenzollerns should be seen in this context. Thirty years after the capitalist reunification of Germany, the country's past is coming back with a vengeance. The Bundestag (federal parliament) is now home to a fascist party, whose honorary chairman described the crimes of the Nazis as mere "bird shit" in a thousand years of successful German history. Yet the Alternative for Germany (AfD) is courted by all other parties. In the police, army and secret service ever new and more extensive networks of right-wing radicals and neo-fascists are being uncovered, and the responsible politicians and authorities refuse to act against them.

Given the deep crisis of the capitalist system, which is dramatically worsening because of the coronavirus pandemic, the fragility of the post-war order's democratic façade is increasingly exposed. German capitalism is once again revealing itself as it emerged historically, in all of its aggressiveness, both internally and externally. The federal government is massively increasing military expenditures and continues to restrict civil rights.

In this situation, in which all of the reactionary forces are piping up again, the Hohenzollerns cannot keep quiet. Their push for restitution and compensation is part of the campaign to rewrite history and relativise the crimes of German imperialism and its monarchs. Despite the clear historical record, the close collaboration between the Hohenzollerns and Hitler's fascism is to be "reassessed," i.e., whitewashed.

Weimar and the federal republic: The state protects the Hohenzollerns

The Hohenzollerns' campaign began 30 years ago, immediately after German reunification. In 1991, the then-head of the family, Louis Ferdinand von Preußen, demanded restitution of the Hohenzollern property expropriated by the Soviet Military Administration after World War II.

He failed, however, because it had been agreed in the negotiations on German reunification that the expropriations carried out by SMAD between 1945 and 1949 would not be reversed. The German government feared that otherwise the Soviet Union would not agree to the capitalist reunification of Germany. But only three years later—the Soviet Union had since been dissolved—the position of the German government changed. The so-called Compensation Act granted affected persons the right to compensation.

However, the law had two limitations. First, it stipulated that castles and stately homes, including their inventory, would remain "free of charge for public use or research" for 20 years. This period expired in 2014. Since then, the Hohenzollerns have been negotiating for the restitution of their possessions.

Second, it was laid down by law that no compensation was possible if the expropriated person or the person from whom the rights were derived had given "substantial assistance" to the Nazi system. This "unworthiness clause" is now at the centre of the dispute.

For years, the negotiations were conducted in secret, behind the backs of the public, because the attempt to cleanse the House of Hohenzollern of its historical crimes would inevitably provoke resistance. For it simply cannot be denied that Kaiser Wilhelm II, the last crowned scion of the house, together with his cousins, Britain's King George V and Russian Tsar Nicholas II, were largely responsible for the First World War, up to

that time the worst catastrophe in the history of mankind.

"The three monarchs and their relationship with each other played a far greater role in the outbreak of the war than historians had previously believed," the BBC noted in a television documentary last year. The First World War went down in history as the primal catastrophe of the twentieth century, claiming ten million lives and deeply etching itself in the consciousness of the international working class.

The revolutions of 1917 (Russia) and 1918 (Germany) finally put an end to these terrible events. Fearing he would suffer the same fate as his cousin Nicholas in Russia, Wilhelm fled to Holland and entrenched himself behind his followers. He had to abdicate. But the emperor was never completely dispossessed. Throughout the interwar period, he and his heirs sought to restore the monarchy. They openly supported Hitler as part of this endeavour.

During Germany's November Revolution of 1918, the Hohenzollern assets were confiscated and administered by the Prussian Ministry of Finance. But as early as 1926, the Reichstag (parliament) passed a law that declared a large part of the former imperial palaces and estates to be the private property of the Hohenzollern family. Among them were 39 palaces—the Cecilienhof and the Marmorpalais in Potsdam, Rheinsberg Palace, Monbijou Palace in Berlin and others—as well as several estates. This transfer of ownership is ultimately the basis for the present title claims of the Hohenzollern family.

As early as 1923, Crown Prince Wilhelm, the great-grandfather of today's "prince," received permission to return to Germany from Holland. He held court at Cecilienhof Palace, later the venue of the Potsdam Conference.

The palace quickly became a centre of right-wing conspiracies. As early as 1926, the crown prince received Nazi leaders Hitler, Göring and Röhm there. In early 1932, he received Hitler again and plotted to take power together with him. He was to become Reich president and Hitler, the chancellor.

That same year, Crown Prince Wilhelm personally intervened with the Reich government to prevent the ban on Hitler's SA (Storm Troopers) and SS (originally formed as a bodyguard), which the government had just initiated. In a letter to Reichswehr (Army) Minister Wilhelm Groener dated 14 April 1932, the prince wrote that he could describe the ban, effected by Reich President Hindenburg, only as "a serious mistake." It was incomprehensible to him that former Army General Groener, in particular, wanted to declare illegal "the wonderful human material united in the SA and SS and enjoying a valuable education there."

When the aged Reich chancellor, Paul von Hindenburg, handed the baton to Adolf Hitler at the "Day of Potsdam" in March 1933, Wilhelm endorsed the act of state with his presence.

Wilhelm's brother, August Wilhelm von Preußen, the fourth son of the deposed monarch, was himself a fervent Nazi. He was an Obergruppenführer of the SA and regularly appeared for the NSDAP (Nazi Party) as a speaker at election ceremonies alongside Hitler, whom he adored. He led the party's efforts to win support among the upper-middle class and aristocratic classes, and in 1932 was the NSDAP's lead candidate in the Prussian state elections.

Right-wing historians defend the Hohenzollern

When Eva Schlotheuber, chairwoman of the Historians' Association, recently stated in an interview with *Der Spiegel* that "the source material is depressingly clear," she was undoubtedly right. However, a right-wing group within the association immediately spoke out and insisted in an open letter that Schlotheuber could not make such statements on behalf of

the association, as there were certainly other opinions.

One of the leading voices of the opposition against Schlotheuber is Jörg Baberowski, who trivialised Hitler in *Der Spiegel* at the same time the Hohenzollerns began their restitution campaign in 2014. Historians Sönke Neitzel and Michael Wolffsohn, who had vehemently defended Baberowski, also signed the letter.

Another historian who supports the Hohenzollerns is Christopher Clark. He wrote a friendly report, which concluded that the crown prince was an insignificant marginal figure and did not substantially support National Socialism. Clark had already portrayed the Hohenzollern monarchy and its crimes in a rosy light in his bestseller about Prussia and the First World War (*The Sleepwalkers*).

The Stuttgart historian Wolfram Pyta, director for 10 years of the Ludwigsburg Research Centre for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes, also sided with the Hohenzollerns in an expert opinion. However, his report contradicts Clark's assessment.

Pyta claims that Crown Prince Wilhelm did not play a subordinate political role, but "an extremely active part in preventing Hitler from becoming chancellor in the final phase of the Weimar Republic." He had rejected the Nazi system, Pyta asserted, and been "close to the emerging resistance networks from the beginning." Pyta thus contradicts many of his own earlier assessments.

On the other hand, the opponents of the compensation claims rely on expert opinions by historians Stephan Malinowski and Peter Brandt, son of SPD Chancellor Willy Brandt. The Berlin historian Malinowski has traced the political crimes of the Hohenzollerns in detail in his book *Vom König zum Führer: Deutscher Adel und Nationalsozialismus (From King to Führer: The German Aristocracy and National Socialism)*.

The Hohenzollerns took legal action against him. The director of the Leibniz Centre for Contemporary Historical Research, Martin Sabrow, condemned this as the "negative culture of intimidation" and a "threat to academic freedom."

There is no lack of clear historical facts. But history has become a political battlefield. The return of militarism and great power politics is a declared goal of the German government and has a relentless political logic. It is not compatible with democracy and inevitably leads to the strengthening of the most reactionary political forces.

It is not only the AfD—whose emergence is closely linked with the demand for compensation and the reconquest of the "German eastern territories"—which is campaigning for the Hohenzollerns. The SPD also stands on the side of the aristocratic opponents of democracy. The state of Brandenburg, which has been conducting secret negotiations with the imperial heirs for over five years, has been ruled by the SPD without interruption since the fall of the Berlin Wall, currently in a three-party coalition with the CDU and the Greens.

Social democratic subservience to the Hohenzollerns has a long tradition. It was SPD leader Friedrich Ebert who, in 1918, worked with the imperial troops and called upon the monarchy for help in crushing the revolution in blood. When his party friend Philipp Scheidemann felt compelled to proclaim the republic, under conditions of a growing revolutionary workers' uprising, Ebert reacted with a hysterical fit because he saw his collaboration with monarchical reaction threatened.

That is how it was then, that is how it is now. On the 30th anniversary of German reunification, the central celebrations took place in Potsdam, the state capital of SPD-ruled Brandenburg.

Over the years, the Garnisonkirche in Potsdam has been rebuilt at a cost of many millions of euros. In March 1933, it was the venue for the Nazis' grand celebration to mark the opening of the Reichstag, in the presence of Hitler, Hindenburg and Crown Prince Wilhelm of Prussia. The Garnisonkirche is being rebuilt under the patronage of Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD).



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