



Eulenburg-Hertefeld, Philipp, Prince zu (1857-1921)

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Philipp zu Eulenburg.
Archiv und Bibliothek des
Schwulen Museum,
Berlin.

Although Philipp zu Eulenburg began his career inauspiciously as a merely adequate member of the German diplomatic corps, his fortuitous meeting with Crown Prince Wilhelm, soon to be Kaiser Wilhelm II, and the subsequent close friendship between the two men catapulted Eulenburg into a position of enormous personal influence over German politics and policy.

While enjoying the Kaiser's unquestioning confidence, Eulenburg formed the center of an extensive group of men who, if not outright homosexual, were at least immersed in a heady world of homoerotic sensibilities.

Born on February 12, 1857 into a noble family, Eulenburg grew up under a customarily harsh Prussian regimen that extolled the manly virtues of militarism while dismissing artistic endeavors. His cold, distant father steered the boy towards military service; however, young Eulenburg showed promise as a musician, poet, and songwriter--proclivities his mother encouraged. He formed a Platonically idealized relationship with his mother, the only woman for whom he ever genuinely cared.

Like most of his close male friends, Eulenburg married in his twenties; he behaved indifferently toward his wife, a Swedish countess. Like his friends, he did not allow his marital status to squelch his "individuality," their code word for homosexuality.

In 1886 a school friend invited Eulenburg to his estate where he was introduced to the Crown Prince. Wilhelm, twelve years younger than the 29-year-old Eulenburg, immediately fell under the spell of the charming, entertaining, and cultured older man. Many believe that Wilhelm, who had an aversion for his own parents, found a surrogate in Eulenburg.

When Wilhelm became Kaiser in 1888, Eulenburg's rise began. He received promotion after promotion until in 1892, he was appointed ambassador to Austria-Hungary, Germany's closest ally. In 1900, he was given the title of prince. Eulenburg's influence smoothed and soothed Wilhelm's tendencies toward irresponsible and inflammatory pronouncements that frequently set shaking the rickety edifice of alliances among the European nations.

Eulenburg also steadily encouraged Wilhelm to assume "personal rule," that is, rule without being fettered by the Reichstag (parliament). So far as possible, Wilhelm followed Eulenburg's advice. With an intelligent and reasonable ruler, the plan may have succeeded. Unfortunately Eulenburg realized too late that he had overestimated Wilhelm's abilities.

By the time Eulenburg concluded that Wilhelm might not be entirely sane, troubles in his own life began to surface. In 1900, his brother was exposed as a homosexual and the Kaiser insisted that Eulenburg renounce all contact with his sibling. Eulenburg refused the Kaiser's order, yet managed to retain his friendship.

Eulenburg resigned his post in Vienna in 1902, citing exhaustion as the cause, and retired from politics almost entirely. Evidence suggests that blackmail prompted his sudden departure; he was faced with

possible exposure. In that same year, Germany reeled from the shocking revelation that Friedrich Krupp, owner of the nation's largest industry and the Reich's richest private individual, regularly cavorted with young men in Capri and Berlin.

From 1902 to 1905, Eulenburg maintained a low profile. But in 1905, he became publicly linked with the Kaiser once more. Widely viewed as the architect of Wilhelm's personal rule, Eulenburg was targeted by his enemies. Friedrich von Holstein and especially Maximilian Harden, a newspaper editor and cultural critic, initiated a campaign, subtle at first, to force him back into retirement. Holstein sent him libelous letters to which Eulenburg responded by challenging Holstein to a duel--at which point, Holstein apologized.

When Eulenburg remained steadfast, Harden published accusations of homosexuality aimed at Eulenburg and other close and high-ranking friends of the Kaiser, including Kuno von Moltke. Genuinely shocked, Wilhelm reacted with rage, forcing the accused men to fight these accusations in open court.

Moltke sued Harden for libel. Several sensational trials spewed the sexual escapades of Wilhelm's circle of friends before an astonished and disapproving public. When the trials resulted in unfavorable verdicts for his friends, the Kaiser summarily ordered the cases retried.

In 1908, Eulenburg was arrested for perjury based on his denial of having done "anything dirty" in the Harden-Moltke trial. The prosecution originally claimed to have over two hundred witnesses prepared to testify against Eulenburg, but produced only two witnesses willing to take the stand. Both men were involved with Eulenburg twenty-five years earlier, well before he began his diplomatic career.

Early into the trial, Eulenburg collapsed in the courtroom. After a period of medical treatment, the trial resumed and Eulenburg appeared in court on a stretcher. Ultimately, the trial was suspended because of his poor health. From that time on (1908), until the dissolution of the German Empire (1918), doctors periodically examined him to determine if he was fit for the case to resume; the trial never was concluded.

When the scandal of the "Liebenberg Round Table" --as the circle of homosexual men close to Wilhelm was dubbed--became public, Wilhelm distanced himself from them and moved toward men who were unquestionably more manly, the military leaders of Germany. Some believe that Wilhelm's knee-jerk reaction to avoid the taint of homosexuality only exacerbated Germany's hyper-militaristic leanings, thus helping set the stage for the disaster of World War I.

Eulenburg lived in retirement without further contact with German government or the Kaiser until his death in 1921.

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About the Author

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