

A Personal Letter to the Kaiser

From
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A Personal Letter to the Kaiser

My Dear Wilhelm:—This is the second anniversary of the beginning of the war, and we are both of us hoping that the end will come before another anniversary. So I think I ought to write and tell you something of what has been going on in America.

Of course I know that you have been hearing regularly from Ambassador von Bernstorff; but Mr. von Bernstorff is in a difficult place to secure any real information. He is in Washington, completely surrounded by politicians; he never meets us common Americans. It is easy in Washington to get the idea that the American people are very much interested in politics and politicians, whereas the truth is that we care almost nothing about politics and absolutely nothing about politicians. We love our wives and are interested in our business, and want to raise our sons to be a little better men than we are; and while we aren't too proud to fight, as your English cousin George can tell you if you ask him to look up his records, we do think that a lot of fighting can be avoided if one doesn't take politicians like yours and our own too seriously.

You and I were pretty good friends, Wilhelm, before the war. Of course I used to laugh a bit at you, on the quiet. But it was the friendly sort of laughter that I have for Teddy. You and he—painting pictures, writing books, pretending to know more about everything than anybody else knows about anything—you're a good deal alike, you know; I laughed at you, but I liked you just the same. In spite of all your peacock struttiness, you have created and inspired the most marvelously efficient nation that the world has ever seen. You have abolished poverty; you have so arranged your social system as to take care of a very large population in a very small country; you have made it possible for every man to be sure of a job, and of a comfortable instead of a dreadful old age. You have eliminated loafers and made life a happy experience for your people. No other ruler has ever done so much, and my hat was off to you for it.

I was forever writing editorials to point out how much better you run your schools and your cities and your business life than we do.

Now, as we get toward the end of the war, the question is, How can you and I become friends again? For the war has strained our friendship a good deal, Wilhelm; I wouldn't be frank with you if I tried to pretend otherwise.

I'm not going to discuss the beginning of the war, and my advice to you is not to discuss it, either. Most of the fellows over on this side blame you for it, and nothing that you can ever say will change their opinions. They say that the ultimatum which Austria sent to Serbia was a brutal document; that it was meant to be so worded that

Serbia couldn't possibly accept it; *it was meant to start trouble*. They still believe and always will believe that you could have held Austria off if you had wanted to; they think that if you had known that England was going to enter the war you *would* have held her off. And so they blame you, Wilhelm; you got off on the wrong foot with them at the start.

I partly agree with them, but I go back a little farther than they do. I realize the position you were in. There you were with a population that was outgrowing your country. Bismarck never believed in colonies, and shut you off from getting any good ones when the good ones were being given out. And when you did get around to it, all that was left was a few swamps in Africa—everywhere else you looked in the East you found England quietly intrenched; and over here, behind the Monroe Doctrine, were we. You've had diplomatic setbacks right along ever since the Congress of Berlin. Two or three times you've "rattled your shining sword," but each time the Powers have stepped in and made you back down. It just looked to you as if the only way you could get a "place in the sun" was to fight for it. And you thought that 1914 was the time. You were ready; and every year France and Russia were getting readier; every day that passed made you comparatively weaker; 1914 was your year.

But that is past and gone. I'm not going to spend the rest of my life hating you because you started the war. And the best thing you and I can do is not to discuss it.

I'm going to pass over all this stuff about *Kultur*, too. Some of our fellows over here have taken that very seriously, but I haven't. When your professors and preachers and you yourself talk about Germany's *Kultur*, about her divine mission to spread her superior brand of civilization over the world, I just laugh. Because I have heard a hundred freshly picked college graduates talk just exactly like that. Every boy who comes out of college, if he amounts to anything, has a deep-seated conviction that the world is pretty much wrong and that he is peculiarly set apart to put it right. It's because Germany is just a college graduate among the nations that she talks like that—just a vigorous, lusty youngster who has studied a little too hard and not played football quite enough. When Germany is older, she will understand that every nation feels itself divinely ordained to perform a mission in the world; she will know that the highest *Kultur* belongs to that nation which boasts the broadest tolerance. There never was a nation so insignificant or so debased that its people, deep down in their hearts, didn't believe they were a bit better than any other people in the world. The most civilized nation is that one which, without forfeiting its own self-esteem, is quite happy to allow every other nation the same comforting illusion.

When I was a boy ten years old, Wilhelm, each of the families

that lived beside us had one of your fellow countrymen as a coachman. They were Prussians; they had decided they would rather be coachmen in a country where they could walk on the grass if they felt like it than to dwell in a land where too many things were *verboten*. And, generally speaking, they were pretty useful citizens. I remember once, though, that we got into a snow-ball fight—the two men against the ten-year-old boy. And I remember how they chased me across an open lot, throwing hard, icy snow-balls; and how I fell down and cut myself on the crust, and cried; and how they stood one on either side of me and continued to throw, after I was flat in the snow, and how they laughed when they saw me cry.

It's funny, Wilhelm, but I had forgotten all about that boyhood incident until the day when the *Lusitania* sank; and then suddenly, all in an instant, it flashed over me again. We've read very attentively everything that has been sent out from your side about the *Lusitania*, and I think we're broad enough to give you credit if any was coming to you. You claimed the *Lusitania* was armed, which you knew was not true. She *did* carry munitions, but she also carried women and children, and you knew that also. The submarine commander was under orders; he had no discretion; it was not his to ask, but to act.

And yet, Wilhelm, this is the simple truth: If that commander had been an American instead of a Prussian, he might have fired his torpedo, but he would have managed somehow to miss; and he would have come back to port and taken his punishment like a gentleman. You may not believe it; you may not understand; but it's true. No American would have sunk a boat full of women and children; no American theater audience would have cheered at jokes about it; no American school children would have been given a holiday to celebrate such a sinking. We just aren't built that way, Wilhelm, and if you and I are going to be friends again, you've got to make an effort to understand that.

There have been atrocities enough on both sides in this war, God knows, and we, over here, are no Recording Angels, to sit in judgment upon either you or England. We have read everything that you have published about England's atrocities; and we would like to believe that everything England has published about you is untrue. But, unfortunately, Wilhelm, we have the bitter testimony of too many Americans who have been serving the wounded in France. Only a few days ago an American author whose accuracy I have had occasion to test many times, sat and talked with me in my office. He has been working as a stretcher-bearer in France, and he said:

"We don't wear the Geneva cross any more. It makes too good a mark for the German sharpshooters."

Then he told me how he saw a German aeroplane circle over a French hospital tent, glaringly marked on the top with red crosses,

and how the aeroplane descended within a few hundred feet and dropped a bomb into the center of it, scattering its helpless occupants to the four winds.

When a man whom I know as well as I know Dr. Grenfell of Labrador comes back from his hospital in France and makes statements like these in the *Outlook*, we simply have to listen:

One of our doctors who was taken prisoner in the retreat from Mons was allowed to come back after ten months' imprisonment. Among other tales of horror he told us, I remember his saying that for inadvertently neglecting to salute a non-commissioned officer, the officer was ordered to come up and strike the doctor. The officer hit him under the jaw, knocking him right down. The doctor told us that a private had been bayoneted for resisting such brutality, and that he himself offered no resistance.

An old fisherman friend, lying wounded at Yarmouth, told me that after a submarine had sunk his sailing boat and turned the four men adrift at sea, the Germans fired a few shots at them as they rowed away. He was hit through the thigh—an unarmed fisherman.

A little boy of twelve, in a school kept by an American lady near Brussels, cried out "Vive la France" to some passing soldiers he took to be French. They halted and shot him at once.

"Are the Germans cruel?" Dr. Grenfell was asked, and he answers: "Systematically so. It is part of 'frightfulness.'"

Perhaps our reports of your "frightfulness" policy have been colored by the awful tension of men's minds; we hope so, Wilhelm. But we can't forget that after the Boxer outrages you ordered your soldiers so to conduct themselves that no Chinese would ever dare to look a German in the face again. Our own soldiers remember how yours acted in that day; and—I remember my Prussian coachmen.

Putting it as kindly as I can, it still seems to me that in your passion for efficiency you have developed in the Prussian character a certain ruthlessness that gives scant regard to the rights of the weak in the world. And, Wilhelm, it's going to be hard for you and me to become really good friends again until you change that in the character of your people—until I can feel that in my business with them I am going to have a square deal, regardless of my physical power to enforce it.

Of course all the governments have lied a good deal to their people during the war. It will be a pretty good plan if you and all the rest of the kings and czars can work away from that habit after the war, because your people are coming back from the trenches with a good deal more of the "show me" spirit than they had before. You will remember, for instance, that when the war broke out you raised a shout that what you were really fighting for was to save civilization from the devastation of the Russian hordes. It was Russia that had started the war—and your people believed it.

Then, when you were checked at the Marne, it was perfidious England who had leagued the nations against you. To crush England—that was the real reason for the war. And your people believed it.

Now it's for the freedom of the seas that you must take Verdun—and your people apparently still believe.

But in dealing with me, Wilhelm, after the war, if you'll lay the cards face up on the table right from the start, we'll get on a good deal faster.

Business, Wilhelm, is nothing but credit. That's old stuff, of course, but true. Money is only scraps of paper; all I've got to show for my life savings are a few scraps of paper printed in green ink and red. When you were fighting France in 1870, and had her army penned up against the Belgian frontier, she surrendered rather than regard her treaties as mere matters of convenience. That little remark about "scraps of paper" and the careless way in which your press bureau handles facts (that funny note, for instance, about the ship you sunk being some other ship than the *Sussex*—you remember, the note with the foolish little drawing), things like that made me wonder whether you are fundamentally a truthful citizen, or whether you are only truthful in so far as it suits your convenience. I just can't help it, Wilhelm.

There are a half dozen little things, Wilhelm, that have sort of estranged me from you; but I'm going to pass them over, because I want to get the big things set right first of all. And the other big thing that sticks in my crop is this: I can't understand at all why a nation which professes to want peace as much as you do should have to fill the houses of its friends so full of spies. When your troops marched into Belgium, the well-to-do Belgian women looked out of their windows and saw in the front ranks, leading the way, the very men whom they had entertained as guests. They had used the sacred cloak of a guest's privilege to ferret out and report to you all the household secrets of poor little Belgium.

How far does this system extend in the world, Wilhelm? I don't know; and the very fact that I don't know makes me afraid. Our factories have been blown up and our ships sunk, our bridges and railroads menaced. Of course, you have explained through von Bernstorff that this was done by fanatics and not at all by your orders. Yet why did the explosions cease all at once after we had finally given von Bernstorff notice that our patience was exhausted and that we were on the point of sending him home? If nobody ordered them to start, who ordered them all of a sudden to cease?

If you really wanted our friendship, Wilhelm, was it tactful to blow us up? And if you really want us to take you at face value hereafter, won't you have to begin right away to throw this spy system out? It puts the poison of suspicion in my heart, Wilhelm. How can I

know who is a spy and who isn't. It makes me wonder every time a man named Schwartz or Hinderburg calls on me whether he is going to lift some private papers off my desk when he goes out. And when my friend Hensel comes over to have dinner at the house—though I've known him for years—I just can't help wondering, when he admires my new rug, whether he's thinking how nice it will look in his house when his friends in uniform arrive.

It may be a foolish way to feel, Wilhelm, but I can't help it. I've got some dandy German friends over here. I love them! I want to keep on loving them. Don't you see what a terrible injustice you are doing them, when you make me wonder all the time whether they are, in fact, all that they seem to be, whether they are really and truly *my* friends, or only pretending to be my friends because it will boost your game? For the sake of our future business relations you simply must let me know where you stand on this spy question. Life is too short to do business if one must keep one hand on a revolver and be looking into a mirror all the time.

It isn't I alone who feel this way. All over the world people are feeling nervous because of the wonderful efficiency of your system of spies. Only last night I was reading about the fight in Holland's Parliament over the admission of twenty-six Germans to citizenship. Holland has always been proud of her hospitality; she has opened the doors of her citizenship freely. But these twenty-six applicants were your countrymen.

"We have a right to know the real motives of these men for requesting a change of nationality," said Mr. Van Doorn, the leader of the opposition.

Was it because they really wanted to become citizens of Holland, or was it a part of a well worked out plan of "peaceful penetration"? Holland wouldn't have asked that question before the war; she took your countrymen at their face value. It is the revelations of your spy system that have changed her attitude from frankness to suspicion. Don't you see what an injustice such a system does to Germans in every corner of the world? Can't you understand how it is going to make it hard for them to do business anywhere? Don't you owe it to them, Wilhelm, to put all your efficiency at work now in cleansing that suspicion from the thought and memory of the world?

I know that I shouldn't call you Wilhelm; the proper formula, of course, is Your Majesty or something like that. But I've called you Wilhelm deliberately, for your own good. I want to get you used to it. For when your men get back from the trenches, Wilhelm, and see you all nice and warm and cozy in Potsdam, you're going to notice something in their attitude that wasn't there in 1913. They're going to be a little restless and shuffle their feet a bit when you tell them how God has called you to rule over them; and they are going to

want to know whether God didn't call them also for something better than merely dumbly doing what they are told.

It's coming, Wilhelm; I'm trying to get you prepared for it by easy stages. *I* call you Wilhelm. But some private soldier is like as not to walk up to you and slap you on the back and call you Bill.

I've tried to keep hate out of my heart in this war. I don't hate you; but we aren't the friends we once were. I—speaking for myself and my crowd of about a hundred million—used to buy a lot of goods made in Germany, and I *can* buy a lot more. I want to be friends. I don't want to hand down to my son a distrust or bitterness against any nation in the world. But, Wilhelm, right now, before the war is over, I think you ought to begin making up with me. If we're going to do business together as we used to, I've got to know that you're telling me the truth; I've got to know that you are going to be just to me in accordance with deserts, not merely in proportion to my weakness; I must know that while you are calling on me in my parlor your friends aren't around at the back door corrupting my cook.

I don't suppose Mr. von Bernstorff has ever told you about me at all. But there are a great many million of me, and the subjects that you and von Bernstorff correspond about—politics, internal or foreign—really don't amount to a hill of beans with me. What I'm interested in is, How are you and I, Wilhelm, going to be friends again?