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David and Goliath: The Abdication of a Throne

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David and Goliath: The Abdication of a Throne

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Abstract

The year 1936 would come to be known as the Year of the Three Kings. King George V died as the night was falling to a close on January 20. His oldest son, known as David in the family, became Edward VIII, and would abdicate before the year was out. During those 326 days, it would become apparent to those around him that he was not fit for the throne. His desire to marry Wallis Simpson would be the final straw. His younger brother, Albert, or “Bertie,” became George VI, and Edward became known as the Duke of Windsor. Through declassified FBI reports, years later, it was discovered that Windsor had Nazi ties, and was seen by Nazi leadership as a potential King-in-Waiting for the peace movement. This paper will argue that if King Edward VIII had had his way and stayed King of the United Kingdom, instead of his brother, World War II would have been drastically different.

Once upon a time, there was prince. This prince fell in love with a common woman. When the prince became a king, he wanted to marry this woman. But because she was a divorcee with two living ex-husbands, the king's counsel would not allow the marriage. So, the king gave up his crown for true love. The king's younger brother, who was less charismatic, less *regal*, became the king. Shortly after this, the country went to war. Would this had happened if the younger brother hadn't taken the throne?

Or would things have been much worse?

Prince Edward Albert Christian George Andrew Patrick David was born on June 23, 1894. Known as David to his family, the baby was born in the palatial settings of White Lodge during Ascot Week, the "high point of the English royal social season."¹ His birth was proudly announced by his grandfather, the Prince of Wales and soon-to-be Edward VII, during a fashionable party where all the guests toasted this triumph. This was in drastic contrast to his younger brother, Prince Albert Frederick Arthur George, known as Bertie, who was born on the dreaded December 14, 1895, thirty-four years to the day Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's Consort, died. Though his parents, Prince George and Princess May, apologized for their "solecism," the Queen was magnanimous and viewed the timing of the birth as "a gift from God!"²

While the princes had experienced abuse and a cold childhood, they had learned to live with their disadvantages. By 1934, Bertie had his speech therapist, his wife, and his two daughters. David, on the other hand, had yet to fully settle down. As Prince of Wales, he had

¹ Sarah Bradford, *The Reluctant King: The Life and Reign of George VI 1895-1952* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 19.

² Philip Ziegler, *George VI: The Dutiful King* (London: Penguin Group, 2014), 5.

been consistently touring the world (in the 1920s alone, he had visited “some forty-five countries and travelled an estimated 150,000 miles by sea and train”³), performing his royal duties, or “princing” as he derisively called it.⁴ While he was immensely popular, he “did not believe either in himself or in his future position as sovereign...He balked at the very thought of becoming king and being revered by these adoring millions.”⁵ He was a man expected to give up his privileges and status for a lifetime of duty and service to the crown. The Prince of Wales never wanted to be king.

He looked for comfort in less conventional pursuits. By this time, he had had numerous mistresses, usually married women in whom he could both find a mother figure and “whose affection he could win away from a father-husband figure.”⁶ In April 1931, at a party hosted by his then-mistress, David met the American, Wallis Simpson, the woman who would change his and his country’s fates.

Over the next two years, David gave more and more elaborate gifts to Wallis, such as jewelry worth £110,000 (or \$11 million in today’s money) and large sums of money, including a yearly stipend of £6,000 or (\$600,000 today)⁷. This prompted King George, in consultation with Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, to call in Scotland Yard to lead a team of undercover agents in monitoring the movements of the Simpsons and the Prince of Wales. They found many people in the social set of Wallis and the Prince that raised concerns, particularly in a relationship with

³ Andrew Morton, *17 Carnations: The Royals, the Nazis, and the Biggest Cover-Up in History* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2015), 3.

⁴ Morton, *17 Carnations*, 6.

⁵ Morton, *17 Carnations*, 6.

⁶ Linda W. Rosenzweig. “The Abdication of Edward VIII,” *Journal of British Studies* 14, no. 2 (1975): 107.

⁷ Morton, *17 Carnations*, 44-45.

Herr Joachim von Ribbentrop, Hitler's Special Commissioner for Disarmament. Wallis and David had met von Ribbentrop at a dinner specifically organized by the German ambassador to London, to introduce Hitler's representative to the future king. At another dinner party, political and social diarist Chips Channon noted, "Much gossip about the Prince of Wales' alleged Nazi leanings; he is alleged to have been influenced by [the hostess] who is rather *eprise* [in love with] Herr Ribbentrop through Mrs Simpson."⁸

Herr von Ribbentrop was immediately charmed by Wallis, and for a brief time, he would send seventeen carnations every day to her apartment. During an interview with the FBI, a cousin of David's would claim that von Ribbentrop was Wallis's lover and that the number of carnations signified the number of times they had slept together. "Whatever the subsequent sexual shenanigans between von Ribbentrop and Mrs. Simpson," writes Andrew Morton, author of *17 Carnations*, "von Ribbentrop's primary task was to encourage [David] to take the hand of friendship proffered by the new German regime. He proved to be a willing acolyte."⁹

David had always been an enthusiastic Germanophile even before the Great War, which he attributed to the "madness of their leaders."¹⁰ Even before meeting von Ribbentrop, David is noted to have confided to the former Austrian ambassador that "he had much sympathy with the Nazi regime."¹¹ Multiple times he expressed his pro-German, pro-Hitler, and pro-Fascist views, both in public and in private, and like many of his class, he was also anti-Semitic. Diplomat and former British spy, Sir Robert Bruce Lockhart recorded in his diary that "The Prince of Wales

⁸ Morton, *17 Carnations*, 54-55.

⁹ Morton, *17 Carnations*, 57.

¹⁰ Brian Inglis, *Abdication* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), 117.

¹¹ Morton, *17 Carnations*, 58.

was quite pro-Hitler and said it was no business of ours to interfere in Germany's internal affairs either re Jews or re anything else and added that dictators are very popular these days and that we might want one in England before long."¹²

On January 20, 1936, as night was drawing peacefully to a close, so too was the life of David's father, King George V. David became King Edward VIII, and Bertie was next in line to the throne. Charles Edward, the Duke of Saxe-Coburg, one of Queen Victoria's German grandsons and thus a cousin to David, was already spying for Hitler at the time. He probed the new king, and informed Hitler that David was "quite prepared to take matters into his own hands rather than work through his ministers."¹³ When Charles pushed David on this issue and suggested that a meeting between Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin and Hitler would be productive, David snapped, "Who is king here? Baldwin or I? I wish myself to talk to Hitler, and will do so here or in Germany. Tell him that please."¹⁴ It is clear from this dialogue that either David did not understand how his government worked, or he did not care.

Just days after George V's funeral, various officials of the British government met in Baldwin's office to discuss the new king and his handling of red boxes, the daily collection of important Cabinet and Foreign Office documents that the sovereign must sign and give royal assent to before they can become law. It seems that David had little time for the daily reading of these documents, and many were left scattered about, some with cocktail glass stains, many late or even missing entirely. According to an American military attaché who was staying at Fort

¹² Morton, *17 Carnations*, 60-61.

¹³ Deborah Cadbury, *Princes at War: The Bitter Battle Inside Britain's Royal Family in the Darkest Days of WWII* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2015) 53.

¹⁴ Cadbury, *Princes at War*, 53.

Belvedere, the king's favorite royal residence, Wallis was the only one to take notice of these sensitive documents.¹⁵ It is believed, through a network of spies employed by the Foreign Office under-secretary that both the French and Swiss governments knew that David was discussing "everything" with Wallis and showing her State papers.¹⁶ These spies and their boss also believed Wallis to be "in the pocket of Ribbentrop," and with her "partiality for Nazi Germans," there was no telling what was or wasn't being said to the wrong ears.¹⁷ When Baldwin was informed of these concerns at this meeting, he did not confront the king, but the most sensitive documents were taken out of the daily boxes before they were sent to David.

When Germany invaded the Rhineland on March 7, 1936, just five weeks after George V's funeral, Britain and France famously did nothing. Not so well known was the king's response. Morton writes, "Four days after the invasion, on March 11, von Ribbentrop reported to Hitler that the king had issued a 'directive to the British Government that no matter how the details of the affairs are dealt with, complications of a serious nature are in no circumstances to be allowed to develop.'" Hitler's architect, Albert Speer, later recalled that the Führer declared, "At last. The king of England will not intervene. He is keeping his promise."¹⁸

For months, those around King Edward VIII, such as Prime Minister Baldwin and Bertie, saw that the king was speeding toward an unknown fate without any regard to the consequences for his country. When Wallis's husband, Ernest, confronted David in February about marrying his wife, the king stood and declared, "Do you really think that I would be crowned without

¹⁵ Morton, *17 Carnations*, 73.

¹⁶ Morton, *17 Carnations*, 73.

¹⁷ Morton, *17 Carnations*, 73-74.

¹⁸ Morton, *17 Carnations*, 76-77.

Wallis at my side?”¹⁹ His infatuation, however, was intense and only got more so the longer he was on the throne. The king grew increasingly weary of his royal duties, never being a fan of these even as Prince of Wales. He believed, “he had the right to a private life and that what he did with it was his own affair.”²⁰

“There were more serious grounds for complaint,” writes Sarah Bradford, author of *The Reluctant King*. “Not only was he [David] impatient of tradition, which in some cases was to give deep offence, but he seemed to be both ignorant and careless of his constitutional powers and their limits.”²¹ He also didn’t regularly attend church or take communion, which, as Head of the Church of England, was seen as quite a faux pas. “Social convention regarded adulterous affairs as infinitely preferable to divorce; [David], with his straightforward attitudes, saw this as hypocritical. Hypocritical it may have been, but, as Head of the Church and pillar of society, he was bound to abide by its rules.”²² Divorce would remain unthinkable for another generation in the royal family, much less marriage to a divorced party.

That summer, Wallis went on a cruise with the king to the Adriatic Sea. Afterwards, Wallis was made aware of how the press outside of the UK saw her relationship with David. The negative coverage convinced her that she needed to break things off. Her letter broke the king’s heart. He threatened suicide and vowed to follow her should she leave the country.²³ By the end of the episode, Wallis had an emerald engagement ring and David had met with Prime Minister Baldwin on November 16 to declare “that marriage had become an indispensable

¹⁹ Morton, *17 Carnations*, 86.

²⁰ Ziegler, *George VI*, 30.

²¹ Bradford, *The Reluctant King*, 161.

²² Bradford, *The Reluctant King*, 163.

²³ Morton, *17 Carnations*, 94-95.

condition to my continued existence.”²⁴ If the government was opposed to the marriage, “*then I was prepared to go*” (his italics).²⁵

The rest, as they say, is history. David ended an unimpressive not-quite-a-year reign with a childish proclamation. He had finally gotten his wish. He had never wanted to be king and he found the perfect opportunity to push the responsibility off his shoulders, uncaring of the brother whose duty it was to pick up that burden. Unfortunately, this wasn’t the end of the drama. David and his new wife would go on to make unwise decisions and unreasonable demands of the royal family, guaranteeing his place as an unfit would-be monarch.

On Friday, December 11, 1936, King Edward VIII abdicated the British throne. Bertie became king and took the name George VI. The ceremony was simple and brief. That night, the now Duke of Windsor made his now famous address to the nation: “I have found it impossible to carry the heavy burden of responsibility and to discharge my duties as King as I would wish to do without the help and support of the woman I love.”²⁶ It is noteworthy that von Ribbentrop, who had taken over as German ambassador to Britain, told Hitler that the “whole marriage question was a false front,” and that Baldwin “schemed to get him off the throne...because of his open support of Germany.”²⁷

In September 1937, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor arranged a State visit to Hitler’s Germany. It is hard to say whether the visit was, as it was advertised, a good will trip to see the working man in Germany and to show Wallis what living like royalty was really like, or if it was

²⁴ Duke of Windsor, *A King’s Story: The Memoirs of the Duke of Windsor* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1947) 332.

²⁵ Windsor, *A King’s Story*, 332.

²⁶ Windsor, *A King’s Story*, 411.

²⁷ Cadbury, *Princes at War*, 54.

all a front for pro-Nazi sentiment.²⁸ The Germans certainly saw the visit as a "propaganda triumph,"²⁹ and the image of the ducal couple receiving Nazi salutes does not withstand the test of time.

Once war was declared on September 3, 1939, the game changed drastically. David was keen to prove his worth, but he was a strong vocal advocate for peace efforts. While he did have a minor position in the war effort in France, in 1940, after much back and forth, the Duke was given a position as governor of the Bahamas. This was an out-of-the-way position, mostly made to appease the Duke and to keep him out of Europe. His peace talks and German sympathies were a cause for concern, especially once France fell and the Germans tried their hardest to keep him in Spain and Portugal, a task made easier by the Duke and Duchess. They would regularly meet with the Germans and Spanish Minister of the Interior, and took their time leaving the continent. If the Duke had hesitated for much longer and the Germans had had their way, David would have been kept as a King-in-Exile or King-in-Waiting for when England finally surrendered. German telegrams alleged that while David was in Spain, he was "in strong terms against Churchill and against this war,"³⁰ and "was considering making a public statement and thereby disavowing present English policy and breaking with his brother."³¹ The Germans tried their hardest to get the Duke and Duchess to stay in Spain, and David hesitated even to the last

²⁸ Morton, *17 Carnations*, 127-128.

²⁹ Morton, *17 Carnations*, 129.

³⁰ Eberhard von Stohrer, *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918-1945*, ed. Paul R. Sweet (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1957), 97.

³¹ Stohrer, *Documents*, 277.

moment. In the end, the Duke left for the Bahamas, stating that it might be possible for him to “step in at the decisive moment” from the there.³²

But what would have happened if David had remained king? Regardless of whether he would have bowed to the Prime Minister’s wishes and given up Wallis, or if he had stayed his ground and caused a constitutional crisis by giving his Prime Minister and his cabinet no other choice but to resign, let us imagine that he remained on the throne. Lord Beaverbrook, a newspaper publisher and backstage politician of the time, wrote that “The King wanted to stay. He also wanted to marry.”³³ At the end of the day, while David did not like many of the duties attached to the role of being King of the United Kingdom, he enjoyed the status and the power. While king, he was seen by his supporters as “the most modernistic man in England.”³⁴ He regarded his closest advisors as enemies and strived his best to separate his public and his private life, a task that would prove to be impossible. It is doubtful that he would have cut ties with Wallis, even if he was forced to give up the idea of marriage. And she still had ties to various Nazis and Nazi sympathizers.

If David remained as King, would he have made that wished-for trip to visit Hitler, as he voiced to his cousin, the Duke of Saxe-Coburg? How would the British press see such a move? Would he have been lauded as a peacemaker or branded as a traitor? The government at the time certainly wouldn’t have stood for it. An election would have had to take place, and then what? At the time of David’s reign, Churchill was not popular. Would he have won that election and

³² Stohrer, *Documents*, 409-410.

³³ Lord Beaverbrook, *The Abdication of King Edward VIII* (Massachusetts: Halliday Lithograph Corporation, 1966) 13.

³⁴ Philip Ziegler, *King Edward VIII: A Biography* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990) 217.

become the leader Britain needed during World War II? How would Britain declare war on Germany if her figurehead was opposed to the idea and even had Nazi sympathies? How much farther would Germany have gone before that inevitable declaration? And does that mean that David would have finally turned against Germany, or would he have gone against his advisors and government, as past actions would suggest? How difficult it would be when Britain was alone against Germany when the British King would be torn between duty to his country and duty to his heart, one of which snarls that Germany is the enemy and the other cries that Germany is a friend, if not family? How much support would a known anti-Semitic give to the Jewish people when they claimed their lives were being taken by their governments?

Would Britain have surrendered?

These questions are interesting to think about. But David did not stay. Bertie became King George VI. Unlike his brother, he was comfortable and encouraged tradition. Though his stutter gave him much grief throughout his life, especially at the beginning of the War, he overcame these difficulties and was one of the most influential and inspiring speakers of his time. Bertie would stick by his government and by Churchill through thick and thin, the highs of victories and the lows of defeats. This “Reluctant King” would go on to be one of Great Britain’s modern heroes, while his brother wiled away his time and money in the outskirts of society. No matter the what ifs, it is safe to say that the world is in a better place because Edward VIII gave up the throne “for love.”

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