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**“SOMETHING MUST BE DONE!”:
EDWARD VIII’S ABDICATION AND THE PRESERVATION OF THE
BRITISH MONARCHY**

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To the average Englishman, 1936 appeared to be a good year. Long past were the horrors of World War I, the country was beginning to recover from the depression caused by the stock market crash of 1929, and they had a popular new king. King Edward VIII ascended the throne in January 1936 after the death of his father, King George V. As Prince of Wales, Edward had been a Prince Charming: popular because of his good looks and his friendliness to all he met. As King, Edward VIII had the potential to be a modernizer, earning many accolades for his progressive views of social welfare and insistence that “Something must be done!” after witnessing the deplorable conditions of Welsh miners hit hard by the Depression. However, for the monarchy’s inner circles, Edward VIII’s reign in 1936 was calamitous and almost spelt disaster for the monarchy as an institution. The British monarchy, though lacking any real power by the 1930s, was still desperately trying to preserve its status as figurehead of the British empire after the traumas of World War I, when poor leadership and revolution deposed their royal cousins in Germany and Russia. Part of the reason the Windsors, the British royal house, survived was because of the British tradition of the monarchy being dependent on support from Parliament. Edward VIII threatened the stability of the monarchy when he decided to marry Wallis Simpson, a controversial American divorcee. Edward’s determination to marry Mrs. Simpson alienated the Church of England, Parliament, and the other prominent members of the Royal Family, who for various reasons agreed that Mrs. Simpson was an unsuitable bride for the King of England. Ultimately, the tensions came to a head as the Abdication Crisis, resulting in the abdication of Edward VIII and the accession of his less controversial brother, King George VI. By removing Edward VIII, the monarchy was preserved, since George’s heir, Elizabeth II, remains popular and on the throne to this day. After the fall of many European dynasties due to World War I, the British religious powers, government, and Royal Family sought to preserve

their monarchy by removing Edward VIII, whose choice of spouse was seen as a threat to the royal line and political stability of Great Britain and its empire.

Edward VIII was born into the large, extended royal family of Queen Victoria. On June 23, 1894, Prince Edward Albert Christian George Andrew Patrick David was born to George, Duke of York and Mary of Teck. It was Queen Victoria's fifty-seventh year as Queen, and Edward was third in line for the throne behind his grandfather, the scandalous Prince of Wales, and his more conservative father, George. As a member of the House of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, named after Queen Victoria's late German husband, Prince Albert, Edward's extended family included most of the royal houses of Europe. Through Queen Victoria, Edward's father was first cousins with Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany and Tsarina Alexandra of Russia. George was also first cousins with the Tsar of Russia, Nicholas II, as their mothers were sisters, Princesses Alexandra and Dagmar of Denmark. Though he had a large, prestigious extended family, Edward's childhood was isolated. Later on, Edward would say he had a "wretched childhood."¹ Edward spent most of his formative years with his siblings at York Cottage, where he was closest with his younger brother, Prince Albert, the future King George VI.² Though his grandfather, who would become King Edward VII in 1901, was as indulgent to his grandchildren as he was to his own pleasures, his father was the opposite. George had spent his youth in the Royal Navy and adopted the strict discipline and simplicity of navy life in his parenting.³ In 1911, Edward VII died and his son became King George V. Edward then became Prince of Wales and heir to the throne when he was sixteen years old. As Prince of Wales, Edward left his already limited academic schooling and began his royal duties, including tours of France and

¹ Philip Ziegler, *King Edward VIII* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 10.

² Ibid., 14.

³ Theo Aronson, *Crown in Conflict: The Triumph and Tragedy of European Monarchy, 1910-1918* (Manchester, N.H.: Salem House, 1986), 33.

Germany. On his visit to Germany in 1913, Edward enjoyed the country and there were rumors of him potentially marrying a German princess. However, as much as Edward liked his visit to Germany, all positive feelings towards the country and its royal family would be quelled with the outbreak of World War I.

As Prince of Wales, Edward served in World War I as a soldier and morale booster. Though tensions had been brewing in Europe for years, the immediate cause of World War I was the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in June 1914. In the following months, the countries of Europe were brought into the conflict because of previously signed treaties of alliance. Though Germany, Great Britain, and Russia were not directly affected by the death of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, these nations led the conflict as Europe's preeminent military powers and monarchies. With Germany and Russia already at war, Great Britain declared war against Germany on August 4, 1914, after Germany invaded Belgium, a neutral country.⁴ Two days later, Edward acquired a commission in the Grenadier Guards.⁵ However, before his unit was sent to the front, Edward was transferred to a different unit in London and eventually joined the staff of Sir John French, Commander in Chief of the British Expeditionary Forces. As the trenches were dug, it became increasingly clear that the war was not going to end anytime soon and the death toll quickly rose, it became imperative that the Prince of Wales be "kept from the shells and not well occupied."⁶ Instead of doing any real soldiering, Edward became a booster of morale for the troops. During the war, Edward left his post in France to visit hospitals, the Canal Zone, the Italian Front, and, though rarely and heavily protected, spent time with soldiers in the deplorable trenches on the Western Front. In 1917, the Prince of Wales met with Canadian and American troops, where an unnamed Canadian colonel

⁴ Ziegler, 44.

⁵ Ibid., 45.

⁶ Ibid., 48.

noted, “the Prince had been the best force in real Empire building that it was possible for Great Britain to have, because he absolutely won the hearts of the many he came in contact with.”⁷ The Prince’s popularity with the troops was not only because of his charm. Though relegated to ceremonial functions, Edward felt a bond with men who were risking their lives on the front, which would be reflected later in his continued concern for veterans and their welfare after the war. While Edward was supporting British troops, his father and the other major European monarchs were fighting for survival.

Of the three major European monarchs engaged in World War I, only King George V maintained his crown. While George V and the British monarchy ended the war intact, many European monarchies, including those of Germany and Russia, would be counted among the 17,000,000 casualties of World War I. The first to fall was Tsar Nicholas II and Russia’s Romanov dynasty. Nicholas, though more domestic than political, was deeply devoted to maintaining the autocracy of Imperial Russia, even though he had neither the temperament nor the political skills to rule alone. While his wife, Tsarina Alexandra’s increasing dependence on the scandalous Rasputin alienated the royal family from Russian high society, it was the Tsar’s blunders during World War I that proved his downfall. To support his role as sole ruler of Russia, Nicholas II also made himself the sole commander of Russian Forces, despite the fact that he had no military training of his own.⁸ When the Russian Army crumbled against the more advanced and better supplied German military, the blame rested entirely on the Tsar’s shoulders. With high casualties on the Eastern Front and unrest at home, Mikhail Rodzianko, the Chairman of the Duma, the Russian legislative body, gave the Tsar an ultimatum. Rodzianko pleaded,

⁷ Ziegler, 74.

⁸ “Into the Abyss,” *Royal Cousins at War*, Directed by Richard Sanders (London: BBC, 2014), DVD.

“Your Majesty, do not compel the people to choose between you and the good of the country.”⁹

When Nicholas II still refused to adapt, he was forced to abdicate on March 15, 1917.¹⁰

However, the rift between the Tsar and the country was too great to be peacefully resolved. The Russian Revolution and the rise of Bolshevism led to the execution of Tsar Nicholas II and his family in November that year. Like the Tsar, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany lost his throne, but he did escape with his life. In comparison to the centuries old monarchies of England and Russia, the German monarchy was in its infancy. Germany had only been unified in the last fifty years before World War I. Kaiser Wilhelm was obsessed with proving Germany was just as powerful as its older counterparts. In the early 1900s, the Kaiser began to expand the German navy in an effort to challenge Britain’s naval dominance, which only escalated the tensions that helped create World War I.¹¹ During the war itself, Wilhelm II began as the leader of German troops but by 1916, he was “completely under the thumb of his generals.”¹² Though his generals ran the war effort, it was the Kaiser that was punished at the end of the war. By 1918, the German people were starving and on the brink of revolution themselves. To end the war and the unrest at home, the generals understood a change needed to be made. On March 9, 1918, Kaiser Wilhelm II was forced to abdicate and sent into exile in Holland while Germany became the briefly lived Weimar Republic.¹³

George V was the only one of the three royal cousins to keep his crown because he had no real role in the war. By 1914, the British monarchy had already become constitutional, wherein, “the sovereign reigned above the battle of party, while the Lords and Commons

⁹ Aronson, 147.

¹⁰ Ibid., 149.

¹¹ Ibid., 38

¹² Ibid., 144.

¹³ Ibid., 189.

legislated and the politicians governed.”¹⁴ Like his son serving in the military, George V’s role in the war was a ceremonial one - boosting morale. Unlike Nicholas II and Wilhelm II, George V could not be blamed for causing the war or the severity of it. The British monarchy’s survival during the war can also be attributed to George V’s ability to adapt. George V deliberately dissociated the British Royal Family from the collapsing monarchies of the continent. On July 17, 1917, George V officially changed the Royal Family’s name to Windsor, as a reminder of Queen Victoria and her favorite residence, rather than the name of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, which would remind the public of the Royal Family’s German origins at a time when anti-German sentiment was at an all-time high.¹⁵ George V also dissociated from the Romanovs, even though he and Nicholas II were close friends. In the early days of the Russian Revolution, Prime Minister David Lloyd George offered the deposed Tsar and his family asylum in England but rescinded the offer at the request of the King. George refused sanctuary for the Romanovs and left them to their fate because he feared that by associating his family with the authoritarian Tsar, Bolshevism would spread to Great Britain as well.¹⁶ As the other monarchs were being deposed or worse, George V became a “symbol of all that was best in national life,” by promoting charity work, supporting British troops, and displaying a domestic ideal.¹⁷ After the armistice on November 11, 1918, Nicholas II was dead, Wilhelm II was in exile, but King George V paraded around London for five nights to large crowds.¹⁸ Although the Windsors ended World War I with the crown intact, they knew that monarchy was in decline and they could still easily be deposed.

¹⁴ David Cannadine, "Churchill and the British Monarchy," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 11 (2001): 249-72, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3679423> (accessed September 15, 2017), 252.

¹⁵ Aronson, 39.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁸ Aronson, 190.

Edward became a walking advertisement for the British monarchy during his tenure as Prince of Wales. After the war there was tension not only between social classes at home as soldiers came back to few jobs, but there was also discontent abroad, where colonies and dominions began to question their loyalty to Great Britain. Though the Royal Family had no real power, their symbolic role as heads of state meant they were willing to drum up support for the government's interests. The young, charismatic Prince of Wales was sent across the globe to not only promote support for the British government, but to display the cultural and symbolic influence of the monarchy. On his first tour, Edward traveled the British Isles, particularly the discontented industrial areas like Wales and Glasgow. After the tour, Edward wrote, "I do feel I've been able to do just a little good propaganda up [in Glasgow] and given communism a knock."¹⁹ In the aftermath of World War I, the Royal Family felt the most significant threat to the crown and to the country's stability itself was the quickly spreading communism that killed their Russian cousins. Edward was deliberately sent to areas that were in a state of unrest so he could impress them with the all the pageantry and personality Britain and its monarchy had to offer. On a trip to America to help strengthen the post-war alliance, political advisor, Edward Grigg, noted, "the chief object of the Prince's tour was to persuade Americans that the monarchy was more than a 'feudal anachronism.'"²⁰ Edward met with socialites and politicians, and also paraded for the American masses to show them that an aristocrat could also be democratic and that Britain and America had similar aims and should have a strong alliance. Throughout the 1920s, Edward spent so much time on tour, Ernest Hemingway dubbed him the "Ambassador of

¹⁹ Ziegler, 97.

²⁰ Frank Prochaska, "A Prince in the Promised Land," *History Today* 58, no. 12 (December 2008): 14-20, <https://ez-salve.idm.oclc.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=35697253&site=ehost-live> (accessed February 28, 2017), 16.

Empire.”²¹ The Prince of Wales visited North America, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and India. On these tours, Edward became an international symbol of glamour and celebrity, giving the Royal Family a boost in popularity.

As Prince of Wales, it was not unusual for Edward to have mistresses, and Wallis Simpson was not his first. After World War I, the pool of potential brides from European houses had dwindled considerably. Knowing this, George V granted his children permission to marry into British families in 1917.²² Although it was more difficult to find royal spouses, the heirs to the British throne were still expected to marry, not only to provide more heirs, but also to continue George V’s image as a symbol of national morality and domesticity. Until a suitable bride could be found, Edward found comfort with a series of married ladies. Edward’s first mistress was Freda Dudley Ward, whom he met in 1918. Although Mrs. Dudley Ward was married with two young daughters, she was actually quite popular with the Prince’s staff and even the Royal Family because she had a maternal nature and was seen as a calming influence on the Prince, such as helping him cut back on his drinking. Freda Dudley Ward also provided a sympathetic ear when he complained about the exhausting nature of “princing” during his royal tours.²³ While Edward and Mrs. Ward remained close for the next decade, her sense of duty to her family encouraged Edward to seek companionship elsewhere and in the late 1920s, he became involved with Thelma Furness. Mrs. Furness was the American wife of the much older Viscount Marmaduke Furness and her sister was Gloria Vanderbilt. Unlike Freda Dudley Ward, Viscountess Furness was less of a moral influence on the Prince. A socialite of the Jazz Age, Furness encouraged Edward’s more “selfish behavior,” with weekend parties at his private

²¹ Ziegler, 129.

²² Ibid., 91.

²³ Ibid., 84, 96.

residence, Fort Belvedere, taking precedence over his royal duties.²⁴ Although both Freda Dudley Ward and Thelma Furness were married, neither of these relationships caused a scandal for the popular Prince. Edward's own grandfather, Edward VII was a known playboy and had been commonly known as Edward the Caresser. Royal extramarital affairs were forgivable as long as they were not highly publicized, did not interfere with continuance of the royal line, and did not affect the princes' ability to perform royal duties.

Wallis Simpson was entirely different from Edward's previous mistresses. Born Bessiewallis "Wallis" Warfield in 1896, Wallis grew up in a world vastly different than the gilded palaces Edward knew. Though Wallis was linked to two rich and genteel families from the American South, she was surrounded by financial instability. When Wallis was still an infant, her father died of tuberculosis, leaving her and her mother to live off of richer relations' generosity.²⁵ Wallis resented the financial burdens she faced. Making her debutante debut in 1914, Wallis's uncle decided that supporting the developing war effort was more important than Wallis's wardrobe. To reduce expenses, her mother made her coming-out gown, and the indignity stung Wallis, who was determined to avoid financial strains in the future.²⁶ Wallis then began to climb the social ladder. In 1916, she married the attractive pilot, Lieutenant Earl Winfield "Win" Spencer. However, life with Win did not provide the security Wallis searched for. Win turned to the bottle and may have been physically abusive.²⁷ After traveling to China in 1925 as a last ditch effort to save their marriage, Wallis left Win, spending the rest of her trip in the Orient alone and filed for divorce on her return home. However, Wallis was not alone for long, and in 1928, she married the also divorced Ernest Simpson. Mr. Simpson was a dual British

²⁴ Ziegler, 194.

²⁵ Anne Sebba, *That Woman: The Life of Wallis Simpson, Duchess of Windsor* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012), 9.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁷ Sebba, 36.

and American citizen and a wealthy businessman. The couple decided to leave the scandal of their divorces in America behind and joined London high society. Although the Stock Market Crash of 1929 hurt the Simpsons, Wallis was determined to keep up appearances and made out to be a successful society hostess.²⁸ The Simpsons joined a circle of American ex-patriots, including Thelma Furness. Furness and Wallis quickly became close and in 1931, Thelma began inviting the Simpsons to the dinners and weekends she and Edward hosted at Fort Belvedere. While the Prince and the American socialite interacted, they did not become close until 1934, when Thelma left for America to visit her sister and asked Wallis to “look after him while [she] was away.”²⁹ When Furness returned to London, she found that Wallis had looked after Edward a little too well. Both Furness and Freda Dudley Ward were unceremoniously cut out of the Prince’s social life. Wallis was climbing the social ladder again.

Edward VIII’s brief reign showed he had the potential to be a good king. On January 20, 1936, George V died, leaving the throne to the forty-two year old Edward. The new king began his career by alienating his family and staff. According to his private secretary, Lord Wigram, the new king, “Became hysterical, cried loudly, and kept embracing [his mother] the Queen” when he learned of his father’s death.³⁰ The more stoically grieving members of the Royal Family and their inner circle thought this emotional display of grief was unbecoming of the new monarch and did not bode well for the rest of his career. Meanwhile, the public was very enthusiastic about the new king. Where George V represented the conservative, middle class values of the Edwardian age, Edward VIII was charming and viewed as a modernizer.³¹ Later in life, Edward wrote in his memoirs that his goal upon his ascension was to make the monarchy,

²⁸ Ibid., 71.

²⁹ Wallis Warfield Windsor, Edward Windsor, and Michael Bloch, *Wallis and Edward: Letters, 1931-1937: The Intimate Correspondence of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor* (New York: Summit Books, 1986), 110.

³⁰ Ziegler, 209.

³¹ Ziegler, 210.

“more responsive to the changed circumstances of [his] times.”³² Like George V, Edward understood that the monarchy had to adapt to survive. To cut down on the lavish lifestyle of the monarchy, Edward reduced costs at the royal estates of Sandringham and Balmoral by selling land and firing staff.³³ While his family was less than pleased, this was seen as a positive move by the country, which was recovering from the Depression. As King, Edward also supported appeasement with Nazi Germany. Modern historians, such as Andrew Morton, argue that Edward’s desire to avoid war with Germany meant he was a Nazi sympathizer.³⁴ However like many of the politicians at the time, including Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, Edward’s hope for peace at all costs stemmed from a desire to avoid a repetition of the horrors of World War I. Edward VIII’s philosophy on how to provide for his own country’s welfare was not fascist as some critics suggest.³⁵ During his tenure as Prince of Wales, Edward had been a strong supporter of social welfare, housing reform, and was especially concerned with the welfare of the veterans he had served with during World War I. As King, Edward continued to support these issues that were important to him. Edward’s shining moment as King was less than a month before his abdication. While visiting South Wales, a mining region that was hit especially hard by the Depression, Edward remarked about the unemployed miners, “Something must be done to see that they stay here - working!”³⁶ The public, frustrated by what they saw as a lack of aid from the government, picked up on the phrase, “Something must be done,” which became Edward’s most memorable political contribution, vague as it is. While the public cheered their new, reformer monarch, they knew nothing of the events unfolding behind closed doors. As King Edward VIII

³² Ibid., 218.

³³ Ibid., 218.

³⁴ Andrew Morton, *17 Carnations: The Royals, The Nazis, and the Biggest Cover-Up in History* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2015), 319.

³⁵ Ibid., 320.

³⁶ Susan A. Williams, *The People's King: The True Story of the Abdication* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 1.

spoke to his subjects in Wales, his government, clergy, and family were frantically trying to prevent his marriage to Wallis Simpson, which would turn into the Abdication Crisis.

The Abdication Crisis began with the divorce of Mr. and Mrs. Simpson. Though Wallis would always deny that she had any plans to marry the King and become Queen, rumors of an impending wedding quickly followed Edward's accession.³⁷ In February 1936, less than a month after Edward was proclaimed King, Mr. Simpson approached fellow a Mason, Sir Maurice Jenks, the Lord Mayor of London, for advice. Simpson informed Jenks that the King wished to marry Mrs. Simpson and hoped Jenks would recommend a proper course of action.³⁸ Jenks, alarmed by the possible scandal, went to both Prime Minister Baldwin and Lord Wigram for further instructions. As there was yet no sign of an upcoming separation of the Simpsons, the most solid impediment to Wallis and Edward's marriage, Baldwin and Wigram decided not to intervene.³⁹ However, the Simpsons' marriage deteriorated as the year progressed. As Wallis became a "shadow Queen," acting as hostess for Edward's parties at Fort Belvedere, Ernest Simpson resigned himself to the role of royal subject and let his King have what he desired. In July, Mr. Simpson moved into his gentleman's club and began his affair with his soon-to-be third wife, Mary Raffray, who was also a childhood friend of Wallis.⁴⁰ The first impediment to Wallis and Edward's marriage was removed.

Meanwhile, the relationship between Wallis and Edward was becoming more public. Wallis's activities were reported in the Court Circular, the official record of the goings on of the Royal Family and their court. The affair became even more public after the infamous *Nahlin* cruise that summer when the couple, unaccompanied by Mr. Simpson, went on a luxurious

³⁷ Ziegler, 240.

³⁸ Ibid., 241.

³⁹ Ibid., 242.

⁴⁰ Sebba, 120.

Eastern Mediterranean holiday. While the outside world ate up the scandalous photographs of the couple embracing in revealing bathing costumes, the British press remained silent out of respect for the King.⁴¹ The cruise was also the final blow to the Simpsons' marriage and in September Wallis filed for divorce. While Wallis was able to cite abandonment as her grounds for divorcing Win Spencer, her official reason for divorcing Ernest Simpson was, ironically, adultery. The Simpsons' divorce was a "hotel bill case," a fairly common practice for couples longing for separation at the time, in which Ernest was conveniently discovered spending the night at a hotel with a woman that was not his wife.⁴² The divorce trial was assigned to the Ipswich Assizes, or district court, as the smaller county size and population of Ipswich would allow a quicker trial than in a London court. On October 27 1936, the Simpsons were granted a decree nisi, a legal term for a trial divorce, that would be finalized in six months. However, if it were made public that Wallis had also committed adultery or that someone colluded with the Simpsons to strengthen their case for divorce, the decree nisi would be revoked and the Simpsons would remain married.⁴³ Even though the leaders of British high society and the press knew of Edward's involvement with Mrs. Simpson, the King and his affair went unmentioned at the trial. While staying in Ipswich, Mrs. Simpson was swarmed by the foreign press, but again the British press remained silent in deference to their King. The American press provided full coverage of the divorce, understanding that Mrs. Simpson, as the innocent party, would be free to marry in the Anglican Church in six months and did not hesitate to speculate on her possible marriage to the King. However, they could not understand the British media blackout. The day after the divorce, the *New York Times* released an article criticizing that "the news items on the subject were so perfunctory, so brief and buried so inconspicuously on the back pages that not one

⁴¹ Ziegler, 248.

⁴² Sebba, 120.

⁴³ Ziegler, 255.

reader in a thousand would have guessed that there was anything unusual about the case."⁴⁴

While the everyday British subject was kept in the dark, the upper echelons of British society had come to the same conclusions as the foreign press. Soon there would be no matrimonial impediment to a marriage between the King of England and a twice divorced American. Fearing a future with *Queen* Wallis, the Church, Parliament, the Royal Family, and the press would all oppose the King which initiated the Abdication Crisis.

Vocal opposition to the King's relationship with Wallis Simpson started with the morality minded Church of England. Led by Cosmo Gordon Lang, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1928 to 1942, the clergy of the Church of England became increasingly concerned by the King's preference for disreputable company. As Archbishop of Canterbury, Lang represented the strict morality of pre-war Britain. A close friend of George V, conservative and with unbending expectations for behavior, Lang's relationship with Edward VIII as new Supreme Governor of the Church of England was distant and full of mistrust.⁴⁵ The distance between the religious and royal leaders of the Church grew as the King seemed more likely to marry Wallis Simpson. Though innocent parties of a divorce were allowed to remarry in England as early as 1858, the fact that Mrs. Simpson had two former husbands still living and her own disreputable reputation made the idea of her possible marriage to the King of England, who ought to be the shining example of the Church of England's values, horrifying.⁴⁶ The timing for the confrontation between King and Church could not have been worse. Due to dwindling membership, the Church of England was preparing for a "Recall to Religion" campaign in 1937 that would link Edward's

⁴⁴ "British Get Little on Simpson Trial," *Historical New York Times*, October 28, 1936, <https://search.proquest.com/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/101704058/943D2DA31C1047D0PQ/3?accountid=28707> (accessed September 2, 2017).

⁴⁵ Ziegler, 217.

⁴⁶ Williams, 33.

coronation to the moral values and strength of the Church.⁴⁷ As the Church focused on bringing secular Englishmen back to the state religion in an effort to counteract the disillusionment and decay of values that followed the horrors of World War I, the Church distanced themselves from the thoroughly modern monarch. When *The Living Church*, an American Episcopal magazine, published an article claiming that Church of England archbishops were no longer attending royal functions due to the presence of Mrs. Simpson, Alan Don, Archbishop Lang's private secretary, was "inundated" with letters by worried Americans and British subjects who were concerned by the rift between crown and church.⁴⁸ While Don replied that these rumors were untrue and unimportant, he marked the letters as confidential and the Church made no effort to publicly dismiss the claim.⁴⁹

When the Church did make their disapproval public, it was in an attack on the King's suitability as the official head of the Church of England. On November 30, 1936, Alfred Blunt, Bishop of Bradford, sent a copy of his sermon for the Diocesan Conference to the *Yorkshire Post* as usual.⁵⁰ What was unusual about this sermon was the Bishop's critique of the King. On the surface, the sermon appeared to be a reminder of the importance of the Church's role in the Coronation Ceremony, a point that had come into debate when another bishop suggested making the Coronation more secular by removing the service of Holy Communion.⁵¹ However, Blunt really used his sermon to question the King's dedication to the Church and its values, stating, "[the King's] personal views and opinions are his own ... but in his public capacity at his Coronation he stands for the British people's idea of kingship. It has for centuries been, and I

⁴⁷ Ibid., 60.

⁴⁸ Reverend Alan Don, D.D., to Reverend J. E. Macrae, November 17, 1936, *Lang Papers: Coronation 1936-38*, Lang Papers Vol. 22, Lambeth Palace Library, ff 405.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Mary Lister B.D., "Bishop Blunt and the Abdication Crisis," Bradford Historical & Antiquarian Society, <http://www.bradfordhistorical.org.uk/bishop.html> (accessed September 2, 2017).

⁵¹ Ibid.

hope still is, an essential part of that idea, that the King needs the grace of God for his office.”⁵²

Blunt continued to indirectly chastise the King for his lack of piety and virtue. As King and head of the Church, Blunt explained that Edward had a duty to represent the values of his people and of the state religion. Blunt’s sermon marked the public beginning of the Abdication Crisis. With a respected man of the cloth publicly discussing the issue, the floodgates were opened, the press broke its silence, and the matter became front-page news. As the Crisis became more public, Cosmo Lang, as the Archbishop of Canterbury, was expected to make a statement. In “The King’s Matter,” a typed version of Lang’s personal journal from the fall of 1936, Lang recounted meetings with Prime Minister Baldwin about the matter. Cleric and politician were in agreement that a marriage between the King and Mrs. Simpson was out of the question and the King must either give her up or abdicate.⁵³

While the Archbishop and Prime Minister met frequently during this time, Lang never conversed with the King himself to discuss the matter. In a footnote added in 1942, Lang regretted not having tried harder to communicate with the King, but still believed that any advice from him would not have been accepted by the King.⁵⁴ Ultimately, Lang and the Church’s opposition to the King and a possible marriage to Mrs. Simpson was because they saw it as an abandonment of duty. Defending his choice to make a broadcast on the BBC after the abdication, Lang described how he was, “Bound to say something about the surrender of a great trust from the motive of private happiness, and about the social circles in which [Edward VIII] had thought that happiness could be found.”⁵⁵ Lang argued that Edward VIII chose vulgar company and personal happiness over his office as King and head of the Church of England. Archbishop Lang

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Cosmo Gordon Lang, *Lang Papers: Royal Correspondence 1923-1945*, Lang Papers Vol. 318, Lambeth Palace Library, ff 105, 3.

⁵⁴ Ibid., ff 110, 12.

⁵⁵ Ibid., ff 115, 14.

and the Anglican Church could not support what they viewed as the ultimate act of selfishness by the King and therefore supported abdication.

Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin was supported by Parliament in his desire for abdication because Edward was threatening the balance of power between Parliament and the monarchy. Initially, Baldwin disapproved of the King's relationship with Mrs. Simpson for similar reasons as Cosmo Lang. Baldwin feared the inevitable scandal of the King having an affair with a twice divorced American would damage the reputation of the King and the country for which he was figurehead.⁵⁶ On October 20, as the Simpsons were about to be granted their divorce, Baldwin visited the King at Fort Belvedere to request that the King and Mrs. Simpson be more discreet.⁵⁷ The King's refusal to give up Mrs. Simpson put him in direct opposition of Baldwin. While Parliament's political superiority over the monarchy is what saved George V's throne during World War I, it is what ultimately forced Edward VIII to abdicate. In an attempt to compromise with Baldwin, Edward proposed the idea of morganatic marriage on November 25. If the King and Wallis were to have a morganatic marriage, Wallis "would remain a private citizen, and any children they might have would not be in the line of succession."⁵⁸ Though the practice was uncommon in Britain, it did have some precedent in the royal courts of continental Europe. The King's own mother was the granddaughter of a morganatic marriage.⁵⁹ However, Edward's attempt to compromise actually destroyed any power he had over the situation. Since morganatic marriage would call into question the legitimacy of any offspring, Baldwin convinced the King to agree to put the decision to Cabinet and the Dominions, particularly Australia and Canada, as the Statute of Westminster, 1931 states, "any alteration in the law touching the Succession of the

⁵⁶ Ziegler, 254.

⁵⁷ Ziegler, 254.

⁵⁸ Williams, 86.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 87.

Throne of the Royal Style of Titles shall hereafter require the assent as well of the Parliaments of all the Dominions as of the Parliament of the United Kingdom.”⁶⁰ On top of Parliament and the Dominions’ power to alter royal succession, Baldwin presented the following choices to the leaders of the Dominions to decide on:

- (1) - The King’s marriage to Mrs. Simpson, she to become queen.
- (2) - The King’s marriage to Mrs. Simpson without abdication but on the basis that she should not become Queen, and accompanied by the legislation on this basis.
- (3) - A voluntary abdication by the King carried out in favor of the Duke of York.⁶¹

Overwhelmingly, the Dominions chose the third option. The most vocal opposition to morganatic marriage was the Prime Minister of Australia, Joseph Lyons. Lyons agreed with the Anglican Church that Mrs. Simpson was an unsuitable wife for the King of England.⁶² The overwhelming consensus was that if Mrs. Simpson was not an appropriate wife for the King and the King refused to give her up, the only remaining option was for Edward to marry Mrs. Simpson but to no longer be King of England.

The largest crisis of the abdication was the result of the vocal minority that thought Parliament did not have the right to force the King to abdicate. The debate over Edward VIII’s marriage had the potential to cause a major power struggle between King and Parliament. Edward’s two most prominent supporters during the affair were Lord Beaverbrook, a newspaper tycoon, and Winston Churchill, then a Conservative Member of Parliament (MP). After World War I, Churchill became an “ardent admirer of the institution of monarchy” and had become close to Edward in the 1920s while helping the then Prince of Wales with his public speaking.⁶³ As a staunch monarchist and loyal friend, Churchill became Edward’s lone supporter in the halls

⁶⁰ *Statute of Westminster, 1931*, Legislation.gov.uk, http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1931/4/pdfs/ukpga_19310004_en.pdf (accessed October 28, 2017), 1.

⁶¹ Williams, 96.

⁶² Ziegler, 265.

⁶³ Cannadine, 249.

of Westminster. Both Churchill and Beaverbrook advocated delaying talks of the King's marriage until after the coronation so the King could have time to gain support for his cause.⁶⁴ Beaverbrook went so far as to recommend that the King go around his enemies in Parliament and use the Statute of Westminster, 1931 to pose his own question to the Dominions to contrast the biased questionnaire sent by Baldwin.⁶⁵ However, the idea of a King pushing his own agenda against the wishes of Parliament was, in 1936, considered a huge breach of power and the idea was dismissed. Even so, rumors quickly spread that the King was going to betray Baldwin and his government, using Churchill to form a King's Party, a group of MPs that would support the King over the decisions of Parliament. Using these rumors, Stanley Baldwin, as a Conservative, or Tory, Prime Minister, was able to gain support from the Liberal and the Labour parties in his opposition to Edward and Mrs. Simpson's marriage. If Baldwin chose to resign his post, the leaders of the Liberal and Labour parties agreed not to replace him with a new government.⁶⁶ The united threat meant that if Edward decided to marry Wallis and remain King, he would be seen as a dictator that had ignored the wishes of his government and by extension, his people, and would have been the direct cause of a national political crisis. Even in 1936, the fear of conflict between Parliament and monarch that resulted in the Civil War in the seventeenth century was still very real. As journalist John Gunther tried to describe to his American readers, "[the] power [of] Constitutionalism is entrenched in England, and with what horror the possibility of a King's Party was greeted by a great majority of the House of Commons. Parliament is supreme over the King. Charles I paid with his head for defying it ... very few

⁶⁴ Williams, 135.

⁶⁵ *The Beaverbrook Papers: The Abdication of Edward VIII*, BBK/G/6/1-13, House of Parliament Parliamentary Archives, 1936-1966, 35.

⁶⁶ Ziegler, 264.

indeed would have been willing to envisage a royal dictatorship.”⁶⁷ Even nearly two hundred years after Charles I’s execution, England was still struggling with the balance between Constitutionalism and the monarchy.

For the English MP, the biggest threat to stability in England in late 1936 was not the continuing effects of the Depression or the rising fascism abroad, but was the King threatening a centuries old tradition of Constitutionalism, where Parliament was more powerful than the monarch. As such, Baldwin and Parliament had to quell any thoughts of the King gaining the upper hand over the elected government. In a speech given to the House of Commons, Baldwin described the King’s dependence on the will of Parliament and his people by quoting a line from *Hamlet*, wherein Polonius, a government official, says the unfortunate Prince of Denmark’s “will be not his own ... For on his choice depends/The safety and the health of the whole state.”⁶⁸ The seventeenth century description fit Baldwin’s image of the twentieth century King, that Edward could not choose his bride without the consent of his government and without threatening the stability of England. The majority of Parliament supported Baldwin and his opinion that Parliament’s superiority over the monarchy was necessary to preserve the country’s stability. When Churchill tried to make a rebuttal to Baldwin’s speech on December 7, he was booed and shut down by all sides of the House of Commons.⁶⁹ Parliament opposed the King and Churchill to preserve its power and the status quo of the British government.

To the other leading members of the Royal Family, Edward VIII’s relationship with Wallis Simpson was seen as an abandonment of duty. After World War I, George V and his family worked to portray the monarchy as a symbol of English virtues and tradition. This included royal tours, charity work, and settling down to have a family. Edward’s younger

⁶⁷ Williams, 156.

⁶⁸ Vernon Bogdanor, *The Monarchy and the Constitution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 137.

⁶⁹ Williams, 151.

brother, Albert, Duke of York continued in their father's footsteps. In 1923, Albert married Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon and the couple became popular after successful tours abroad and with the arrival of their two daughters, Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret. Meanwhile, George V was concerned about the increasingly promiscuous behavior of his heir, stating in 1935 that "[Edward] has not a single friend who is a gentleman. He does not see any decent society."⁷⁰ A year later, the man who did not see any decent society was King. Though Edward VIII began his reign with the cautiously optimistic support of his family, the differences between his high society lifestyle and the rest of the family's traditional values caused irreparable rifts. The family had always been disapproving of Edward's relationship with Mrs. Simpson, but they came into open conflict in 1936. On September 23, during the King's annual summer visit to Balmoral, Edward backed out of a public engagement at the new Aberdeen Infirmary, citing his official period of mourning for his father. The Duke and Duchess of York attended in his place.⁷¹ Meanwhile, it was discovered that the King was picking up Mrs. Simpson from the Aberdeen railway station at the same time as the event. Additionally, when Edward went against tradition and did not invite the Archbishop of Canterbury to Balmoral, the Yorks invited him to their own Scottish residence. While the King saw himself as a modernizer who was simply making his own decisions, it appeared that he was breaking the cherished traditions of the monarchy and offended many in the process. In contrast, the Yorks gained popularity because the common view was that they "had chosen to follow the traditions established by [George V] and in doing so appeared to be setting up a rival court to that of the King."⁷² As the Crisis developed, the Yorks appeared to be a more stable option as they, like George V, understood the value of tradition and ceremony in maintaining their popularity and position. The Royal Family feared

⁷⁰ William Shawcross, *The Queen Mother: The Official Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 357.

⁷¹ Shawcross, 367.

⁷² Williams, 77.

that Edward's challenging of convention and Parliament's authority threatened their position and popularity. On the eve of the abdication, Lang observed that Edward's mother, Queen Mary, was "much moved and distressed about her son; but as usual wonderfully self-controlled and inflexible in her judgement that it had to be done."⁷³ Queen Mary's determination that Edward could not remain King and marry Mrs. Simpson too stemmed from an understanding that the crown was under the control of public opinion and if the royals lost public support they could be removed by force like their German and Russian cousins twenty years earlier. The Royal Family supported abdication because Edward's sense of duty and respect for tradition were not strong or consistent enough to keep the monarchy popular and in power.

The public's views of the crisis was dependent on the information they were provided. On December 3, the British press, which had previously kept silent on the affairs of the King out of respect, broke the story of the unfolding crisis. For the first time, the average British citizen became aware of the existence of Mrs. Simpson and the rift her relationship with the King had created in society's uppermost circles. The *London Times*, *Morning Post*, and *Daily Telegraph* all supported the government's position that Mrs. Simpson was unsuitable for the role of queen and the King would either have to give up her or the throne. Beaverbrook's *Express* papers and the *Daily Mail* supported the King and had a bigger circulation than the other papers, however they were less prestigious and less trustworthy sources of information.⁷⁴ While the uninformed public initially was in favor of Edward, private secretary Alec Hardinge warned him that "judging by the letters from British subjects living in foreign countries, where the press is outspoken, the effect will be calamitous."⁷⁵ In countries like the United States where the press

⁷³ Lang, ff 113, 12.

⁷⁴ Williams, 105.

⁷⁵ *The Beaverbrook Papers: The Abdication of Edward VIII*, BBK/G/6/1-13, House of Parliament Parliamentary Archives, 1936-1966, BBK/G/G/6, November 13, 1936,

was not bound by a sense of honor to protect the King's reputation, the public had been aware for months of Mrs. Simpson and her questionable morality and suitability to be Queen of England. Hardinge's warning suggests that as more details came out about Simpson's personal life, the King would lose public support. Baldwin, however, was confident Parliament would have the support of the public as they were their elected officials.⁷⁶ The uncertainty brought about by the crisis was not only damaging the relationships between Britain's governing bodies, but it was also hurting trade and the year's Christmas sales.⁷⁷ A decision had to be made soon to keep the country and its monarchy stable.

Ultimately, the power struggle between Edward and the opposition led to his abdication and accession of his brother. On December 9, in an attempt to separate herself from the King and end the crisis, Wallis Simpson, offered to withdraw her petition for divorce from her hideaway in Southern France.⁷⁸ Even if her offer had been accepted and she had been again unable to marry Edward, the gesture was too late. By December, the rift between King Edward VIII and the monarchy's support system, the Church, Parliament, and the Royal Family, was beyond repair. Understanding that it was the speediest way to return Britain to normalcy, Edward agreed to abdicate. On December 10, 1936, he and his brothers, the Dukes of York, Gloucester, and Kent, signed the Instrument of Abdication, wherein Edward abdicated in favor of the Duke of York.⁷⁹

No longer King, Edward was now His Royal Highness, the Duke of Windsor and was not in the line of succession. Before he left England, the Duke of Windsor wished to address the public in a wireless address. Though Edward's Abdication Speech is most remembered for the regretful tone in which he declared he gave up the throne for "the woman [he] loved," it also

⁷⁶ Williams, 86.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 46.

⁷⁸ Ziegler, 271.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 286.

included a message to the British people about the crisis in general.⁸⁰ In his speech, the new Duke admitted, “I have found it impossible to carry the heavy burden of responsibility and discharge my duties as King as I would wish to do,” acknowledging that his interpretation of being King, which included Wallis as his queen, was so different from that of his adversaries that he could not continue to be King and be successful.⁸¹ Even still, the former King insisted that Baldwin and the Royal Family only did their duty during the whole episode and graciously wished them well. The speech ends with resounding support for his brother, Albert, Duke of York, now King George VI.

As Edward left for exile in Austria as he awaited the finalization of the Simpsons’ divorce, George VI was establishing himself as the successor of the popular and stable George V. By choosing the same regnal name as his father, George sought to “strengthen the sense of continuity,” between the two reigns and to dissociate himself from the struggles of his predecessor.⁸² George was a popular alternative, with “thousands of Londoners” greeting him in front of his home upon his return from Fort Belvedere on December 10, where he had just signed Edward’s Instrument of Abdication.⁸³ The *New York Times* described why George was so popular, noting,

He has never made a slip in his private or public life. Above all, he has been what the home-loving British people call a happy ‘family man.’ He has been modest in his personal life, careful in the choice of his friends, devoted to his British-born wife and a perfect father of two little princesses, one of whom may rule one day as another Queen Elizabeth.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Edward Windsor, *Abdication Speech By Edward VIII* (London: British Pathé, 1936), [http://www.britishpathe.com/video/abdication-speech-by-edward-viii/query/"edward+vii](http://www.britishpathe.com/video/abdication-speech-by-edward-viii/query/) (accessed February 28, 2017).

⁸¹ Windsor.

⁸² Shawcross, 379.

⁸³ “York Gets Ovation at Home in London,” *Historical New York Times* (December 11, 1936) <https://search.proquest.com/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/101776814/fulltextPDF/29EEF795550D4F20PQ/3?accountid=28707> (accessed September 10, 2017).

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Like his father, George VI used his image as a humble family man to garner public support. In the years following the abdication, particularly during World War II, George VI and his family cultivated themselves as the epitome of British values to keep public morale and enthusiasm for the monarchy high (See Figure 2). George VI did what Edward VIII could not; his reserved demeanor allowed him to exist in harmony with the Church and Parliament and to maintain popularity with the public.

Edward VIII had to abdicate his throne because he was a controversial figure at a time when the British monarchy needed a traditional leader to preserve its power. The Windsors' royal cousins lost their thrones through mismanagement and by alienating their subjects. Twenty years later, Edward VIII faced a similar dilemma. By fraternizing with Mrs. Simpson and other friends with questionable morals while also breaking traditions set by his predecessors, Edward alienated the Church of England, Parliament, and the Royal Family, the three organizations that most supported the monarchy as an institution. Without their support, Edward, a constitutional monarch with no real authority of his own, could not sustain his position. Fortunately, his younger brother, George VI, was up to the task. By emulating the traditional domestic values and deference to Parliamentary authority used by his father to survive World War I, George VI steered the monarchy through the biggest threat to it and Britain's existence: World War II. The monarchy's position in the modern world was further preserved by his daughter, Elizabeth II, who, with sixty-five years on the throne, is the longest reigning monarch in English history. However, there is some speculation about what will happen when her son, Charles, inherits the crown. Like Edward VIII, Charles married a divorcee, and Charles is even a divorcee himself. Unlike his great-uncle, Charles will not have to combat the same moral stigmas against divorce and will follow a sixty-five year reign of relative political stability in Britain. Edward VIII's

abdication led to the accession of George VI and his descendants, whose dedication to the British people and their traditions has preserved the monarchy to the present day.

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