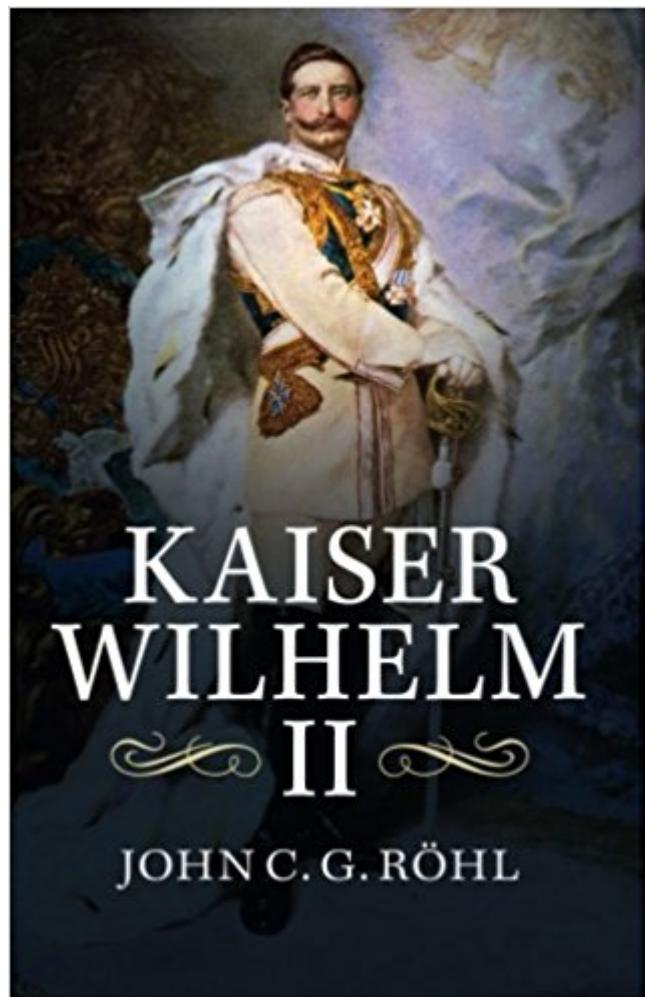


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Kaiser Wilhelm II: A Concise Life



Synopsis

Kaiser Wilhelm II (1859-1941) is one of the most fascinating figures in European history, ruling Imperial Germany from his accession in 1888 to his enforced abdication in 1918 at the end of the First World War. In one slim volume, John Räthl offers readers a concise and accessible survey of his monumental three-volume biography of the Kaiser and his reign. The book sheds new light on Wilhelm's troubled youth, his involvement in social and political scandals, and his growing thirst for glory, which, combined with his overwhelming nationalism and passion for the navy provided the impetus for a breathtaking long-term goal: the transformation of the German Reich into one of the foremost powers in the world. The volume examines the crucial role played by Wilhelm as Germany's Supreme War Lord in the policies that led to war in 1914. It concludes by describing the rabid anti-Semitism he developed in exile and his efforts to persuade Hitler to restore him to the throne.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Professors Räthl and Clark have a fundamental disagreement. It's interesting and unusual that Prof. Räthl mentions both Prof. Clark and his acclaimed book "The Sleepwalkers", and says on occasion "he got this bit wrong". Clark regards the start of the First World War as the world's biggest traffic accident, in which everyone was to blame. On the other hand, Räthl, while not completely blaming Wilhelm II for the war, attributes a sizeable proportion of that blame to him, his attitudes, the positions he took and the atmosphere he engendered. This slender book, a condensed version of Prof. Räthl's definitive three-volume biography of Wilhelm II, makes it clear that Räthl really

doesn't like Wilhem II. This is not surprising; Wilhem II comes across as a most unpleasant individual. It's clear that he was damaged goods, starting with the difficult breech birth, which left him with a crippled arm and possibly brain damage (after some of his more outrageous pronouncements (and there were many), many of his contemporaries, including his own ministers, actually wondered whether he was several fries short of a Happy Meal). The combination of a mother who was repelled by his crippled state (and who couldn't hide it), the treatments bordering on torture to try to correct his deficiencies, the burgeoning nationalistic pride of the unified Germany led by Prussia and his love-hate relationships with his English relatives, especially uncle Bertie (Edward VII), finished the job. Röhl basically saddles Wilhem squarely with much of the blame for the First World War.

John Rohl has condensed his authoritative three volume biography of Kaiser Wilhem II to a mere 194 pages for a single purpose--to refute Chris Clark's argument in *The Sleepwalkers* that World War I was caused by the machinations of the Serbs and their notorious black hand. Rohl's Wilhem comes across as a less innocent, more powerful Kim Jong Un whose rabid hatreds and unbalanced machinations led directly to World War I. Here again is the mad Kaiser urging his troops on the brink of embarking to the Boxer Rebellion to behave like "Huns"; here is the man the Allies wanted to try as a war criminal and escaped at the last moment to fulminate in anti-Semitic ugliness in the Netherlands. Wilhem's life is by turns pathetic, hilarious and horrifying. Born disfigured in a breech pregnancy and alienated from his English mother, he grew to be a brittle unbalanced monarch who, in Rohl's view, had no business being the ruler of a modern European nation. Rohl's short biography has all the information about Wilhem I think I will ever want to know. Rohl's concise book is written in an opinionated and hard hitting style. His style is both direct and clear. Compared to the average academic work, which is written in a passive voice and eschews anything like an opinion, Rohl's work is a breath of fresh air. Unfortunately, I feel the book is too concise. Rohl introduces major international incidents without any additional explanatory material. Most people reading this book (including your favorite reviewer, moi) do not know that much about say, Bismarck's unification of Germany or the Morocco crisis. I would have enjoyed the book more if Rohl lifted his focus from Kaiser Wilhem II to have short explanations of 19th century history.

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