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978-0-521-56504-2 - The Kaiser and his Court: Wilhelm II and the Government of Germany

John C. G. Rohl

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Kaiser Wilhelm II, Queen Victoria's eldest grandchild, took over the running of the powerful German Reich from Bismarck and within a couple of decades had led it into world war and collapse. How did the Kaiser come to have so much power? Why was there no-one to help him steer a less disastrous course? This book analyses these crucial questions with the help of a wealth of new archival sources.

The book begins with a character-sketch of the Kaiser which provides new and alarming insights into his personality. It then looks, crucially, at the Kaiser's friends and favourites, at the neo-absolutist culture of the court and of Berlin court society, and at the nature of his relationship with the court on the one hand and with the administrative 'pyramid' in Prussia and the Reich on the other. The book makes clear that these bureaucrats and diplomats had neither the means nor the will to oppose the overwhelming determination of the Kaiser and his close friends and advisers in directing the policies of the most dynamic and volatile state in Europe. The dangerous consequences of this situation led to the brink of world war as early as December 1912. A final chapter reveals for the first time the appalling extent and nature of the exiled Kaiser's anti-semitism.

JOHN C. G. RÖHL is Professor of History at the University of Sussex.

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Translated from the German by Terence F. Cole



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For my daughter
Stephanie

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Preface to the English edition

When this book on the political role played by Kaiser Wilhelm II and his court was published in Germany in 1987, it quickly went through three editions, selling over 15,000 copies in the space of a few years. This fact alone suggests that its subject, which had for decades been marginalised by professional German historians, was held to be of some interest and importance by a wider German public. Very few people in the English-speaking world will share or even understand the view which until recently predominated in German historical circles that Wilhelm II was a mere 'shadow emperor' who played no part in shaping the policies of the Kaiserreich, and that the Imperial court, too, could safely be ignored when analysing German decision-making in the crucial quarter-century between Bismarck's dismissal and the First World War. There (and elsewhere outside Germany) the reverse assumption has always prevailed that 'the Kaiser' (as he is known *tout court*) was an aggressive autocrat who must bear a large degree of responsibility for plunging the Old Europe into war and catastrophe. Some readers of the English edition of this book, while finding such assumptions largely confirmed, may therefore be especially interested to see how frighteningly chaotic and corrupt behind the resplendent façade the governmental system of imperial Germany really was.

For this edition, those chapters not originally written in English have been faithfully translated from the German by Terence F. Cole, himself an expert on the history of the Second Reich. The final chapter, which reveals for the first time the dreadful extent of Wilhelm II's anti-semitism, was written at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington DC in the summer of 1990 and did not therefore form part of the original German edition. With this one exception, I have by and large resisted the temptation to add new material to old and established texts except where important new evidence on very specific points has come to light. Since I began to study the history of the Kaiser's Germany as a doctoral student at Cambridge in 1961, the scholarly literature on the period has grown to the point where it is almost impossible for one person to absorb; I have not tried to bring up to date the references to all such work in the footnotes.

JOHN RÖHL
Sussex, November 1993