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978-0-521-84431-4 - Wilhelm II: Into the Abyss of War and Exile 1900–1941

John C. G. Röhl

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Wilhelm II

This final volume of John C. G. Röhl's acclaimed biography of Kaiser Wilhelm II reveals the Kaiser's central role in the origins of the First World War. The book examines Wilhelm's part in the Boer War, the Russo-Japanese War, the naval arms race with Britain and Germany's rivalry with the United States, as well as in the crises over Morocco, Bosnia and Agadir. It also sheds new light on the public scandals which accompanied his reign, from the allegations of homosexuality made against his intimate friends to the *Daily Telegraph* affair. Above all, John Röhl scrutinises the mounting tension between Germany and Britain and the increasing pressure the Kaiser exerted on his Austro-Hungarian ally from 1912 onwards to resolve the Serbian problem. Following Germany's defeat and Wilhelm's enforced abdication, he charts the Kaiser's bitter experience of exile in Holland and his frustrated hopes that Hitler would restore him to the throne.

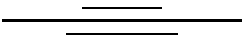
JOHN C. G. RÖHL is Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Sussex. His many previous publications include *The Kaiser and his Court* (1994), which was awarded the Wolfson History Prize, as well as the two previous volumes of his biography of Kaiser Wilhelm II – *Young Wilhelm: The Kaiser's Early Life, 1859–1888* (1998) and *Wilhelm II: The Kaiser's Personal Monarchy, 1888–1900* (2004) – which won the Einhard Prize for the biography of a major European figure in 2013.

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WILHELM II

INTO THE ABYSS OF WAR AND EXILE 1900–1941



JOHN C. G. RÖHL

TRANSLATED BY
SHEILA DE BELLAIGUE AND ROY BRIDGE



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For my grandchildren

BENJAMIN

SEBASTIAN

MAYA

LUKAS

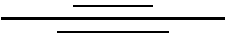
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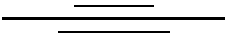
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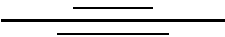
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Preface to the English edition

‘He has been Emperor just over 30 years, he did great things for his country but his ambition was so great that he wished to dominate the world & created his military machine for that object . . . Now he has utterly ruined his country & himself & I look upon him as the greatest criminal known for having plunged the world into this ghastly war which has lasted over 4 years & 3 months with all its misery.’¹ These powerful words, written by King George V on 9 November 1918, the day his cousin Wilhelm II fled into exile, could well serve as an epigraph for this, the third volume of my biography of the last German Kaiser, covering the years from his breakthrough to undisputed power at the turn of the century to his death at the height of the Second World War in June 1941. True, the road from 1900 to the ‘ghastly war’ of 1914–18 was a long and winding one, with many diplomatic twists and turns on the way that might have led to a different outcome, and the Kaiser’s decision for war, though considered frequently and with growing insistence as 1914 approached, was not finally reached until that summer. But the underlying conflict that eventually led to that fateful decision had been at the root of all the tectonic shifts that had transformed the international states system in the decade prior to war: the centuries-old irreconcilability between continental hegemony and the balance of power in Europe, in this case between Imperial Germany’s ambition to ‘dominate the world’, as King George put it, and the determination of Great Britain, republican France and tsarist Russia to combine in an ‘Entente’ to avoid subjugation. Kaiser Wilhelm II and the twenty or so men who shaped Germany’s policy under him in those pre-war years, building up the mightiest army and the second largest naval force on earth, had not by any means always had the intention to launch a war against her European neighbours. But they shared the conviction that their Empire’s current constrained status was unjust and in the longer term wholly unacceptable,

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and in the last years of the armed peace their anger and frustration at being thwarted diplomatically reached boiling point.

The archival evidence for the mounting determination of Wilhelm II, the army and navy leaders and finally the civilian statesmen, too, to deploy military force to achieve their ambitious ends is quite overwhelming, and it is perhaps a measure of the profound and enduring consensus brought about in Germany by the ‘Fischer controversy’ of fifty years ago that these conclusions occasioned little comment there when the German edition of this volume was published in 2008. Instead, the book’s lively reception was dominated by a subordinate question, that of the Kaiser’s personal responsibility for the catastrophe. Had he, rather than ‘the elites’ in general, as structuralist historians had claimed, really wielded such decisive power, particularly after the twin domestic disasters of his reign, the disgrace of his favourite, Prince Philipp zu Eulenburg, in the homosexuality scandals of 1906–9 and the *Daily Telegraph* crisis of 1908?

Needless to say, this volume pays due attention to the ‘elites’ that governed the Prusso-German Kaiserreich. The testimony of the men in positions of power and of other insiders is liberally quoted and their responsibilities and shortcomings are analysed throughout. But what were the power relationships between them and the monarch? When there was dispute, as there always is in high politics, say between the army and the navy over resources, or between the navy and the Reich Chancellor and his advisers in the Wilhelmstrasse over negotiations with Britain, who had the final say? Who had appointed these army, navy and civilian leaders in the first place, and who had the right to dismiss them at will? The manner in which Wilhelm II operated the ‘kingship mechanism’ in order to dominate decision-making after Bismarck’s dismissal in 1890 is the central issue addressed in the second volume of this biography,² but the distribution of power between the Kaiser and his predominantly military court on the one hand and the Chancellor, the state secretaries and the Prussian ministers on the other is also of fundamental importance in the years under the stewardship of Bernhard von Bülow (1900–9) and Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg (1909–17). So was Wilhelm II’s will to power broken after the scandals surrounding his closest friends and the near-revolutionary public outrage over his ‘interview’ of 28 October 1908 in the *Daily Telegraph*? In August 1913, less than one year before the decision to launch a continental war in the guise of a defensive war against Russia, preferably sparked by a conflict between Austria-Hungary and Serbia in the Balkans, the veteran Austro-Hungarian ambassador Count Ladislaus von Szögyény-Marich confided to his Foreign Minister Count Berchtold in Vienna: ‘If I ask myself the question who now really directs German foreign policy I can only come to one answer, and that is that neither Herr von Bethmann Hollweg nor [the Foreign Secretary] Herr von Jagow but Kaiser Wilhelm himself has his hands on the controls of foreign policy, and that in this regard the Reich Chancellor and the

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Foreign Secretary are not in a position to exercise any significant influence on His Majesty.’⁵ By this time, Szögyény had been in charge of the embassy in Berlin for more than two decades. Would he have been mistaken on a question of such existential importance to his disintegrating multinational Empire at such a critical time?

The issue of how much power and influence is to be attributed to the Kaiser in the system of Personal Monarchy bequeathed to the Hohenzollern dynasty by Bismarck — Wilhelm’s closest associates referred to him proudly as ‘the mightiest ruler on earth’⁴ — has been the subject of numerous monographs and will no doubt go on being debated. One thing is not in dispute, however. As German Emperor, King of Prussia, Supreme War Lord and Supreme Bishop of the German Protestant Church, the hyperactive and hypersensitive monarch could not and would not be bypassed; he had the final say on all significant matters, most notably on all appointments to high office and in decisions affecting war and peace. Even if he was on occasions forced by circumstances to back down, as he was, and even if he sometimes found the task of choosing between contesting advisers irksome and even beyond his ability, as he did, it was nevertheless in his hands that all the threads — the military, naval, foreign and domestic policies being pressed on him for decision — came together. If we wish to see what those policies were, how they were arrived at and on what underlying assumptions they were based, we could hardly do better than to adopt as our vantage point the view from the ‘mightiest throne on earth’. A biography of Kaiser Wilhelm II, based on thorough archival research, can hold the key to understanding how the world came to be plunged into the seminal catastrophe of the Great War one hundred years ago.

As German Kaiser and King of Prussia Wilhelm II held himself accountable only to his fearsome Lutheran–Calvinist God, duty-bound to follow in the footsteps of his illustrious Hohenzollern ancestors the Great Elector, Frederick the Great and his own revered grandfather ‘Wilhelm the Great’ to lead Prussia-Germany to domination in Europe so as to inherit Great Britain’s position as Europe’s global superpower. As the new century dawned and Germany powered ahead to become the most dynamic and successful Great Power on the old continent, he could confidently expect the lesser states to gravitate ever more closely to the imperial sun in Berlin and at the same time to ‘unhinge’ the existing international system — the concert of Europe — by exploiting the supposedly irreconcilable differences between Russia, the great land empire in the east, and Britain, the great oceanic empire in the west — the bear and the whale, as they were thought of. Within just a few years, those ‘irreconcilable’ differences were overcome, first by the Entente Cordiale between Britain and France (which had itself been allied to Russia since 1894) and then directly between Britain and Russia, too, in the Triple Entente of 1907. The Kaiser’s Germany was now ‘encircled’, Bismarck’s ‘nightmare of coalitions’ had become reality. With only the ramshackle Austro-Hungarian

Empire and volatile Italy as allies, Wilhelm's grand ambition of establishing 'Napoleonic supremacy' in Europe 'in the peaceful sense' had been frustrated.

Increasingly a siege mentality, paired with the determination to break out of the 'vice-like' grip of the Entente as soon as favourable circumstances presented themselves, predominated at the Kaiser's court, in military and naval circles and the Wilhelmstrasse. In the Bosnian annexation crisis of 1908–9, the Agadir crisis of 1911 and during the Balkan wars of 1912–13, Europe came within inches of war. In none of these three crises did Kaiser Wilhelm take the initiative, however. His endorsement, the *sine qua non* of their high-risk strategy, had to be 'extracted' by his advisers, who, in spite of the Supreme War Lord's characteristic bellicosity, could never be quite sure that his support would hold at the critical moment. Notably, in November 1912, the monarch agreed to the policy being urged on him by the General Staff, Reich Chancellor von Bethmann Hollweg and the Foreign Secretary, von Kiderlen-Wächter, to stand fully behind Austria-Hungary's plan to attack Serbia even if that conflict were to result in war with Russia and France. But then, in the notorious 'war council' of 8 December 1912, on learning of Britain's determination to prevent France from being 'crushed' by the German army, the Kaiser panicked and ordered a 'postponement of the great fight' until further preparations — among them a huge increase in the army and the completion of work on the Kiel Canal, scheduled for summer 1914 — had been made.

As that time approached, Wilhelm II repeatedly urged his Austrian ally to take the plunge by attacking Serbia. 'Now or never!', and 'I am with you!' he assured Vienna as early as October 1913. If the Russians backed down, as they had in the Bosnian crisis in 1909, the Central Powers would at least have gained predominance over the Balkan peninsula and the eastern Mediterranean; but if the Tsar took up the gauntlet, so much the better, as the time for war on the continent, the General Staff assured him, was now propitious. 'With head held high and hand on sword-hilt', Wilhelm was determined to 'settle accounts' with France and Russia 'once and for all' — albeit again on the assumption that Britain would stay out of the conflict, if only out of respect for 'his' battlefleet. With this hopeful scenario in mind, the generals, admirals and statesmen had little difficulty, when news of the assassination of his friend Archduke Franz Ferdinand reached him on 28 June 1914, in 'extracting' from their Supreme War Lord his 'blank cheque' in support of Austria's planned invasion of Serbia. He agreed to set off on his annual cruise along the coast of Norway to mask the plot that was afoot, but in Balholm, where the imperial yacht lay at anchor, ready at a moment's notice to sail home, Wilhelm was not only kept fully informed of the unfolding crisis, but engaged actively in the diplomatic and military preparations for war, prematurely ordering the bombardment of Russia's naval bases, the return of the fleet to base and the establishment of an exclusion zone in the western Baltic Sea. Not until he

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learnt, back at Potsdam, of Britain's threat to enter the war to maintain the European balance of power did the Kaiser's nerve fail — as it had in December 1912. His desperate last-minute efforts, along with his brother Prince Heinrich, to avert the calamity of an all-out global war, have perhaps not been accorded the recognition they deserve, but they, too, were inspired solely by fear of British intervention, as was shown by his triumphant call for champagne when, for a fleeting moment, it seemed as if Britain would stay neutral after all.

In view of such vacillation, and more especially in the light of the far greater horrors still to come, no one would now describe Kaiser Wilhelm II as 'the greatest criminal ever known'. But in many respects his authoritarian, militaristic, nationalistic and racist mindset, as well as his ambitions to dominate the continent, clearly presaged the calamities of a generation later. His plan to reward his victorious troops by settling them on 'ethnically cleansed' land in Flanders, his demand for almost limitless annexations in eastern Europe, the madcap conspiracy theories he evolved in exile to explain the enormity of the ruin he had brought upon himself, his house and his people — all this, and most particularly his genocidal diatribes against the Jews, is so redolent of Hitlerism that one rubs one's eyes when seeing them written down in the Kaiser's own hand. Those who encountered him even before his abdication in November 1918 — the party leaders in the Reichstag, for example, or Eugenio Pacelli (the future Pope Pius XII) — thought him distinctly unbalanced and wondered whether this condition had come on under the strain of war or whether he had always been this way. It almost goes without saying that Wilhelm hoped to be restored to the throne on the back of Hitler's seizure of power and that he exulted at the *Führer's* diplomatic and military successes. The Second World War was, he wrote in English to an American friend in September 1940, revealing the trajectory of his own life's work, 'a succession of miracles! The old Prussian spirit of Frd. Rex . . . has again manifested itself, as in 1870–71 . . . The brilliant leading Generals in this war came from *My* school, they fought under my command in the [First] Worlds War as lieutenants, captains or young majors. Educated by Schlieffen they put the plans he had worked out under me into practice along the same lines as we did in 1914.'⁵

This book is not an exact translation of the volume that was published in Germany in the autumn of 2008. I have restructured the section on the First World War, turning two chapters into three by devoting one to the Kaiser's war aims. Much new material has appeared which I have tried to take into account without altering the essential character of the text. The Kaiser's political speeches have been published in a critical edition, as has his obscurantist correspondence in exile with the anthropologist Leo Frobenius. I am indebted to Dr Peter Winzen for his revealing research on the many

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homosexual men — Eulenburg, Bülow, Friedrich Alfred Krupp and others — whom Wilhelm II counted among his closest friends. Dr Annika Mombauer has kindly made her invaluable edition of the diplomatic and military documents on the origins of the First World War available to me for cross-referencing. Not everything has been a gain: the diary of Dr Alfred Haehner, the Kaiser's physician, which proved to be such a rich source for the first five years of his exile in Holland, was lost when the entire Historical Archive of the City of Cologne was swallowed up by the earth in a rainstorm in April 2009, but copies are preserved for inspection in my private collection.

Translating this large book has necessarily been a joint enterprise and I have been more than fortunate in being able to work alongside two brilliant wordsmiths who brought so much more to the task than linguistic skill, impeccable though that was. Lady de Bellaigue had already translated the entire second volume of this biography and was therefore thoroughly at home in the arcane world of the Hohenzollern court and Wilhelmine high politics. As a former Registrar of the Royal Archives at Windsor Castle she was able to ensure that everything in that marvellous treasure-house pertinent to this biography, most especially the then still unsorted papers of Lord Knollys, King Edward VII's Private Secretary, was made available to me. Our close collaboration has been a very long one, and I am overwhelmed by her devotion to this project and proud to think of her and her late husband Sir Geoffrey de Bellaigue as my friends. Once again I am deeply grateful to Her Majesty the Queen and the staff at the Royal Archives for the unrestricted access I have enjoyed over so many years. In Professor F. R. Bridge, Professor Emeritus of International History at Leeds University, I found a distinguished colleague with whom it was a delight not only to spar over the appropriate rendering of many an obscure German phrase but also someone able to put me right on the more esoteric aspects of Habsburg diplomacy and Balkan railway networks. Professor Matthew S. Seligmann piloted us safely through the treacherous reefs of German naval terminology. The translation was made possible by a grant from the City firm of Gissings, and I thank Mr Sean Breslin and his board once again for their most generous support. Sarah Turner has copy-edited the finished manuscript with meticulous accuracy while taking care to preserve the Kaiser's own idiosyncratic English style, and that master indexer Douglas Matthews has rendered my dense text more accessible not only by providing the reader with a myriad of individual threads to follow but also by cutting great swathes through the forest with general entries such as 'Wilhelm II', 'Germany' and 'Great Britain' to let in the light.

There have been times over the past four years when serious illness made the completion of this translation seem an unattainable goal. For their unfailing support in those troubled times I thank my friends Professor Holger Afflerbach, Dr Ragnhild Fiebig-von Hase, Manfred Graf von Roon, Prince

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Rainer von Hessen, Professor Isabel V. Hull, Dr Annika Mombauer, Professor Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, and not least, Mr Alec Nesbitt of Larkspur, Colorado, for riding shotgun on the gallop through death valley. It is impossible to find words to express my gratitude to our three children and their families. My most heartfelt thanks are once again due to my wife Rosemarie for the patience with which she has endured four further years of my dark obsession with the Kaiser when we could have been out on the Downs together in the sunshine.

John Röhl
Sussex, July 2012

Preface to the German edition

‘How small a thought it takes to fill a whole life!’ Wittgenstein remarked.¹ The small thought that has filled my professional life came to me half a century ago when it dawned on me, in the course of my archival research for my first book, that Kaiser Wilhelm was *the* central political figure of the Wilhelmine epoch. At the height of his powers he controlled every fundamental decision on matters of personnel, foreign and armaments policy, and in the first half of his reign the same was true also of domestic policy; it followed that his conception of his role as sovereign and the manner in which he exercised his power were immensely significant, far more so than had been acknowledged by historians of his era. The implications of this simple thought were momentous. All at once I recognised the historical significance of this powerful and controversial monarch’s childhood and youth, on which very little research had ever been done. The difficult birth and its unfortunate medical consequences, the failure of the educational experiment attempted by his liberal-minded parents and the reactionary and militaristic spirit which began to develop in the young Prince Wilhelm of Prussia from an early age became the central theme of the first volume of my biography. My next task was to investigate and describe how Wilhelm II built up the position he inherited at the age of 29 as Kaiser and King, Supreme War Lord and Summus Episcopus of the Evangelical Church, to the point where he became the decisive factor in the increasingly strong German Reich which Bismarck had established by force of arms in the heart of Europe. His bitter battles for power — first with Bismarck, then with the latter’s successors, Caprivi and Hohenlohe, and with the Prussian ministers of state — in which he was ably assisted by his favourite, the fawning Count (later Prince) Philipp zu Eulenburg, formed the principal subject of the second volume.

The present volume continues this investigation of the distribution of power. For which decisions taken under the Reich chancellors Bernhard von

Bülow (1900–9) and Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg (1909–17) was Wilhelm II personally responsible? In which areas of public life could the monarch successfully assert his authority, and in which did conflicts arise – with whom, and with what results? These are the questions that will be asked; and the sources, of which thanks to the admirable letter-writing and diary-keeping culture of Wilhelm’s times there is an abundance, provide clear answers. They show that although Wilhelm’s opportunities to control domestic policy diminished after the turn of the century and even more so after the major scandals and crises of 1906 to 1909, there is absolutely no doubt that despite the deeply dysfunctional state of the late Wilhelmine system of government, in the sphere of foreign and military policy he remained the decisive power until the outbreak of war in 1914.

This discovery leads compellingly to the perception that has shaped this third volume: if we are to understand the motives of German foreign policy and the accompanying military and naval preparations in the critical years which preceded the First World War and which were to lead to catastrophe in the summer of 1914, it is not enough to study the plans and strategies of the Reich chancellors, secretaries of state and diplomats of the Wilhelmstrasse (not to mention the Prussian ministers of state). Rather, we must direct our gaze above all at the mentality, motives and machinations of Kaiser Wilhelm II, his court clique and his paladins in the army and the navy, who chose the fatal course they steered through the rapids of the numerous pre-war crises into the vortex of the world war.

The biography of such a powerful, hyperactive ruler, who imagined himself entrusted by his fearsome Germanic God with a mission to perform great deeds for the land of his illustrious forefathers, who believed he knew better on every subject than civilian statesmen and diplomats, who insisted on making all important decisions himself – the biography of such a man rapidly becomes a kind of world history. The biographer is confronted with the – albeit attractive – challenge of describing the major events taking place in the world and setting them in their international context while at the same time not losing sight of the link with his subject. In this third volume, as in the others, I have tried to solve this problem by allowing Wilhelm II, his friends and his closest collaborators, as well as opponents bound up in the machinery of politics, to speak for themselves as often as possible. The reader will find scarcely a sentence in this volume that neither contains nor is based upon a written or spoken quotation from the time. Thus we see historical developments through the eyes of contemporaries and learn about their world from their words. This has meant that the concluding volume of the biography has had to be even longer than its two predecessors. But it has gained enormously in immediacy from the richly faceted and vivid nature of the documentation, and this sharpens our picture of Wilhelm’s contemporaries

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and of their perception of the dramatic happenings of the Wilhelmine epoch, which is surely of inestimable value.

If we briefly survey the terrain that is to be examined in this third volume, the path leading into the abyss of war and exile can already be easily detected. As the second volume was able to show, even before the turn of the century the Kaiserreich, under its youthful, militaristic monarch, was preparing to make a breathtaking attempt to overturn the existing international balance of power in order to raise itself to a position of supremacy on the continent of Europe, thereby acquiring the status of a global superpower — becoming a *Weltmacht*, a World Power, in the parlance of the day. Grand Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz's accelerated fleet-building programme was to be the means by which Great Britain would be neutralised as guarantor of the European balance. The present volume begins with an examination of the ambivalent state of Anglo-German relations at the turn of the century, when Wilhelm II tried to make the most of his close connections with the British royal family in order to compensate for the hardening of public opinion on both sides of the North Sea during the Boer War. The assurances of friendship expressed by Queen Victoria's grandson were not taken at face value in London, however, and this was due partly to the expansionist ambitions in the Orient that Wilhelm manifested during the Boxer Rebellion in China and through the Baghdad railway project (Chapter 4), but also, and much more importantly, to the far from misplaced suspicion that the Kaiser's only reason for seeking better relations with Britain was to gain time to build his battlefleet and unite the continent under German domination (chapters 1–3). This suspicious interpretation of his intentions was confirmed by the deceitful policy that Wilhelm simultaneously pursued towards Russia: he tried to induce Tsar Nicholas II to break off Russia's alliance with France, turn his back on Europe and find his historic mission in becoming the defender of Christendom and the 'white race' against the heathen 'yellow peril' in the Far East (Chapter 7). With the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War in February 1904, Wilhelm II's great goal seemed to be within reach. Plans for the occupation of Denmark were prepared, the Netherlands and Belgium each received an extraordinary ultimatum from the Kaiser — everything was ready for a military defeat of France (Chapter 12). Then for the first time the mobilisation of Britain's superior naval power acted as a deterrent. And in the end the trustful Tsar, enlightened by his ministers about the disastrous consequences of giving in to the Kaiser's blandishments, refused to exchange his alliance with France for a new *Dreikaiserbund* with the Central European Powers, Germany and Austria-Hungary (Chapter 11 and Chapter 14 on the Treaty of Björkö).

The German challenge soon led to a diplomatic revolution (Chapter 10), which Bismarck had always feared as the *cauchemar des coalitions* — the nightmare of encirclement of the German Reich by the outer ring of

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European Powers. During the first Moroccan crisis (Chapter 13) and at the subsequent Algeciras conference (Chapter 16) Germany's isolation became clear for all the world to see: not only Great Britain, Russia, Italy, Spain and the smaller European states, but also the United States of America — which had long since grown suspicious of German intentions in the Caribbean and Latin America and not least of the Kaiser's bombastic utterances (Chapter 9) — made it plain that they would not accept the humiliation of France.

Inevitably, the setback at Algeciras had serious consequences for the prestige of the Crown in the Reich itself (chapters 20–5). The painful loss of face drew the attention of critics on both the Right and the Left to the dilettantish and peace-endangering way in which the Kaiser and his courtiers were gambling away Bismarck's heritage. This middle section of the book shows how, from then onwards, Wilhelm II's 'Personal Rule' was criticised quite openly and with a ferocity that had previously been heard only among the tiny handful of those in the know. This hostile atmosphere formed the background to the embarrassing sex scandals that shook the Hohenzollern court around 1906, as also to the *Daily Telegraph* crisis of November 1908, which provoked a real nervous breakdown in Wilhelm: he was haunted by paranoid delusions and began to believe that 'the Jews' were taking control of his country.

In the November storm of 1908 the Kaiser had found himself compelled to give a solemn assurance that he would in future conduct himself in accordance with the constitution. Where foreign and military policy were concerned, however, his decision-making power was in no way reduced; quite the contrary. Under the 'civilian Chancellor' Bethmann Hollweg, Wilhelm II's personal control of the course pursued by the Reich in foreign and armaments policy continued undiminished (Chapter 28). With an alarming lack of reflection, a reckless desire for prestige, a militaristic aggressiveness, a temperamental instability and emotionalism that bordered on the pathological, he talked in these years of the necessity of a great war in order to break out of the irksome ring of encirclement and bring about Prussia-Germany's rise to World Power status. As early as in August 1908, during negotiations at Kronberg, he openly threatened the British with war. In the Bosnian annexation crisis of 1908–9 (Chapter 26) he assured his intimate friend Archduke Franz Ferdinand that he would stand by Austria-Hungary 'through thick and thin' if the Habsburgs were to invade Serbia, in spite of the danger of a general European war. Meanwhile, in the spring of 1909, he gave orders for an extremely stern ultimatum to France to be drawn up. Only the fact that Russia backed down, still weakened by war and revolution as she was, prevented the outbreak of the great war in 1909 (Chapter 26).

Two years later, war in the west came within a hair's breadth when Britain again undertook to defend France with her still superior navy during the Agadir crisis (Chapter 30). As in the first Moroccan crisis, Britain's readiness to

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go to war proved a deterrent in the short term — Germany was again forced to give way humiliatingly — but with the Navy Bill ordered by Wilhelm II in the heat of the moment in the autumn of 1911, the Anglo-German antagonism became so intense that it seemed to many people to be only a matter of time before the conflict would have to be settled by force of arms. Where the Kaiser's interests in this conflict lay becomes clear in the negotiations conducted by the British Minister of War, Lord Haldane, in Berlin in February 1912. His goal was not the 'fantasy' of a colonial empire overseas, he declared, but a fundamental diplomatic revolution through which he would become 'leader of the United States of Europe' (Chapter 32). Great Britain was to be compelled by the murderous arms race to give up her ententes with France and Russia and to undertake to remain neutral in any war on the continent — even in the eventuality of a German attack on France. Wilhelm's expectations suffered a severe setback when it became apparent that Britain would not under any circumstances be prepared to expose her allies to attack by entering into an unconditional neutrality pact with the Kaiserreich.

Following the failure of the negotiations with Haldane, Wilhelm's attention was again drawn towards the east, where in late 1912 the war between the Christian Balkan states of Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro and Greece and the decaying Ottoman Empire promised to open the door to far-reaching expansion for Germany and Austria-Hungary. As if intoxicated, Wilhelm II dreamed of the Central European Powers enjoying 'preponderance' over the eastern Mediterranean and 'the whole Mohammedan world! (India)'. For obvious reasons, in this volume particular attention is paid to German policy in the eighteen months between the beginning of the Balkan wars in October 1912 and the outbreak of the First World War in the summer of 1914. The extent to which the Kaiser and his generals (in close cooperation with their allies, the statesmen and generals of the moribund Austro-Hungarian monarchy) were ready — indeed increasingly determined — to go to war is documented in detail (chapters 33–7). Several times during these months, as will become clear in these pages, a Balkan war was in imminent danger of breaking out. Such a war, it had to be assumed, would develop via the mechanism of the European network of alliances into a continental war, and in the event of Great Britain intervening, a world war. In December 1912, uncertainty over the still unsettled question of British neutrality had its deterrent effect for the last time (Chapter 34). In the summer of 1914, on the other hand, Wilhelm and his brother Prince Heinrich of Prussia kept their eyes firmly shut and pinned their hopes on a few casual remarks which Heinrich had elicited from King George V during a brief visit to Buckingham Palace. 'I have the word of a King, and that is enough for me!' Wilhelm exclaimed on 29 July 1914. Naturally, this volume also examines in detail the controversial role played by Wilhelm in the crisis of July 1914, which is the subject of no less than four chapters (38–41). Thanks to the unusually full source material, his conduct

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and the decisions he took during these weeks can be reconstructed from day to day, often from hour to hour, and his mood swings between determination to go to war and panicky readiness to negotiate can be shown in the context of the rapidly escalating crisis.

With the outbreak of the world war, power passed from the Kaiser to the generals with astounding speed. During the war Wilhelm II, as Supreme War Lord, was still institutionally the highest authority and could not be bypassed. As before, in accordance with the principles of the kingship mechanism, the Reich Chancellor and the leaders of the army and the navy still had to seek his approval if they wanted to carry through their chosen course of action. In sharp contrast to his almost manic activity in the pre-war period, however, Wilhelm now took a far more passive attitude to his role. The pitiful part he played in political and military affairs in the world war foreshadowed the complete collapse of the monarchy in November 1918 and the ex-Kaiser's years of embittered exile in Holland, which are the subject of the last three chapters of the book.

Just as for Wilhelm II's long reign, I have been able to draw on revealing new sources for his years of exile which throw a sharp light on his life and his psychological state in Amerongen and Doorn. The diary kept by his personal physician Dr Alfred Haehner, the records of conversations with him made by numerous visitors from Germany, his own letters to relations and well-wishers, together with the well-known diary of his adjutant, Sigurd von Ilseemann, bear witness to an appalling refusal to face up to reality. In Holland, Wilhelm denied any responsibility for the disaster of his thirty-year rule and built up a fantasy that the world war and the downfall of the Hohenzollern Monarchy were the result of an international conspiracy hatched by the Jews, the Freemasons and the Jesuits. His offensive hatred for the Jews – and for the modern democratic world in general – took on such a psychopathic nature from 1917 onwards, as will become clear in these last chapters, that visitors wondered in alarm, and not without justification, whether the Kaiser had been quite in his right mind when he still held the reins of power. It would not surprise me if readers of this book, on studying some of the outbursts of the last German Kaiser quoted in it, found themselves asking similar questions.

As in the preceding two volumes, I have wherever possible checked the quotations from the printed primary sources with the archival manuscript originals for their authenticity. Details of their provenance and of any discrepancies in the records are to be found in the notes section. The reader should regard these quotations as the forensic evidence that they actually are: in the same way as fingerprints or DNA evidence in a criminal case, correctly interpreted and seen in their context they testify to the actual motives and actions of Kaiser Wilhelm II, members of his family, his circle of friends, the generals and officials of the court, the statesmen and diplomats, as well as of

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the observers and critics inside Germany and abroad from the turn of the century to the First World War and beyond. The incontrovertible value of contemporary sources as evidence needs to be pointed out here in order to prevent the impression arising that the observations made in this book, some of which will undoubtedly be regarded as very controversial, are merely the subjective opinions, or even the prejudices, of the author. I am concerned only with finding out the truth; should I have overlooked relevant documents giving a different picture, or placed a wrong interpretation on the sources I have quoted, I would be glad of any correction.

Through my own archival research, which has now extended over more than half a century, I have in many instances been able to add considerably to the printed sources which have since become available in great quantity. As ever, the holdings of the Royal Archives in Windsor Castle proved a real treasure trove, and I again thank Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II for allowing me the freedom to carry out research in this superb archive. My gratitude is due to the archivists, above all Lady de Bellaigue and Pamela Clark, for their friendly assistance over more than twenty years. An indispensable source for the life of Wilhelm II from his birth in January 1859 until his death in June 1941 is provided by the papers of his parents and of his youngest sister Margarethe, Landgravine of Hesse, preserved in the Hessisches Hausarchiv at Schloss Fasanerie near Fulda. I thank the archivist, Dr Christine Klössel, who has been constantly helpful; and above all I thank Prince Rainer von Hessen, who opened the doors of his family's archives to me many years ago and who has always supported my work in a spirit of friendship and trust. Special mention must also be made of the astonishingly frank letters which Wilhelm II wrote to his friends Max Egon II, Fürst zu Fürstenberg, and Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary, which I was able to consult in Donaueschingen and in the Magyar Orszagos Levéltar Budapest respectively, and from which I have quoted extensively. The papers kept in the Military Archives in Freiburg, the Bundesarchiv in Koblenz and Berlin, the Geheimes Staatsarchiv at Berlin-Dahlem and the Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv and the Kriegsarchiv in Vienna are almost inexhaustible sources for the biographer of Wilhelm II, and I thank the staff of these archives too for their help. The political archives of the German Foreign Office, the Auswärtiges Amt, formerly in Bonn and now in Berlin, contain countless autograph documents and marginal notes by the Kaiser, some of which I have been able to quote to complete and correct the officially published documents; I owe thanks above all to Dr Gerhard Keiper for his patience in answering my questions.

Many of the sources cited in this volume I did not find myself; they were sent to me by friends and colleagues from all over the world. I have acknowledged their help in the corresponding reference notes. In addition, however, I wish to express here the deep gratitude I feel towards a number of friends and colleagues for the selfless support that they have given me, often over

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decades, through word and deed. They are, above all, Professor Holger Afflerbach, Professor Dr Wilhelm Deist†, Dr Michael Epkenhans, Dr Ragnhild Fiebig-von Hase, Professor Dr Stig Förster, Dr Christoph Johannes Franzen, Manfred Graf von Roon, Professor Dr Lothar Machtan, Dr Annika Mombauer, Dr Stephen Nicholls, Professor Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, Professor Dr Wolfram Pyta, Professor Matthew Seligmann and Dr Karina Urbach.

During my work on the text over the years help was always available to me thanks to the generosity of the British Arts and Humanities Research Council, the endowment fund of Deutsche Bank and Mr Sean Breslin of Gissings in London, so that this book could almost be regarded as a kind of communal enterprise, although the responsibility for the end product and any mistakes in it naturally remains entirely mine. When I set out upon the third volume Markus Bussmann, Dr Robert Gerwarth, Dr Anna von der Goltz and Björn Hofmeister assisted me in its formulation. In writing the chapters on Bülow's Chancellorship I was able to rely on the expert support of Dr Gerd Fesser with his specialist knowledge of Bülow. In the final stages I was helped by Bernhard Dietz and Dr Michael Obst to shape the over-long manuscript into its present form. Dr Obst, himself an authority on Kaiser Wilhelm II, deserves my very particular thanks; without him this book could not have appeared for a long time yet. Last but not least I thank Dr Stefan von der Lahr at C. H. Beck, who has now been editing my volumes on the Kaiser for fifteen years, giving my German the final polish and saving me from many mistakes.

I have now worked on this three-volume biography for exactly as long as Kaiser Wilhelm sat on the throne of his forefathers. Throughout all these years my wife has borne with good cheer and stoical calm the sacrifices that are the other side of the coin to my imperial preoccupation. She more than anyone else will be relieved that the biography is at last complete. I thank her and our children for their understanding. During my work on this volume, eight grandchildren have come into the world. They have often kept me from working but they have filled my whole life with light and happiness. To them — the future — this last volume is dedicated.

John Röhl

Sussex, April 2008