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978-1-107-07225-1 - Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1859–1941: A Concise Life

John C. G. Röhl

Frontmatter

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KAISER WILHELM II, 1859–1941

A Concise Life

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 Röhl 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.

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

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)



Wilhelm Imperator Rex: the Kaiser at the height of his personal power.

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[More information](#)

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TRANSLATED BY SHEILA DE BELLAIGUE



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Frontmatter

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

To the memory of my sisters, Angela and Nora

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John C. G. Röhl

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07225-1 - Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1859–1941: A Concise Life

John C. G. Röhl

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Contents*

<i>List of figures</i>	<i>page</i> x
<i>Preface to the English edition</i>	xiii
<i>Preface to the German edition</i>	xvii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xix
<i>Overview: Wilhelm the Last, a German trauma</i>	xx

PART I 1859–1888: THE TORMENTED PRUSSIAN PRINCE

1 The ‘soul murder’ of an heir to the throne	3
2 Ambivalent motherhood	10
3 A daring educational experiment	14
4 The conflict between the Prince of Prussia and his parents	22
5 1888: the Year of the Three Kaisers	34

PART II 1888–1909: THE ANACHRONISTIC AUTOCRAT

6 Divine right without end	41
7 Bismarck’s fall from power (1889–1890)	44
8 The establishment of the Kaiser’s personal monarchy (1890–1897)	53
9 The Chancellor as courtier: the corrupt Bülow system (1897–1909)	63

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07225-1 - Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1859–1941: A Concise Life

John C. G. Röhl

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

Contents

PART III 1896–1908: THE EGREGIOUS EXPANSIONIST

- 10 The challenge to Europe: *Weltpolitik* and the battlefleet 73
- 11 The Russo-Japanese War and the meeting of the emperors on Björkö (1904–1905) 83
- 12 War in the west? The landing in Tangier and the fiasco of Algeciras (1905–1906) 86
- 13 The intensification of the Anglo-German conflict 93

PART IV 1906–1909: THE SCANDAL-RIDDEN SOVEREIGN

- 14 The Eulenburg affair (1906–1909) 103
- 15 Bülow's betrayal of the Kaiser: the *Daily Telegraph* crisis (1908–1909) 110
- 16 From Bülow to Bethmann Hollweg: the Chancellor merry-go-round (1909) 116

PART V 1908–1914: THE BELLICOSE SUPREME WAR LORD

- 17 The Bosnian annexation crisis (1908–1909) 121
- 18 The 'leap of the *Panther*' to Agadir (1911) 125
- 19 The battlefleet and the growing risk of war with Britain (1911–1912) 129
- 20 Doomed to failure: the Haldane Mission (1912) 132
- 21 Turmoil in the Balkans and a first decision for war (November 1912) 135
- 22 War postponed: the 'war council' of 8 December 1912 139
- 23 The postponed war draws nearer (1913–1914) 143
- 24 The Kaiser in the July crisis of 1914 149

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07225-1 - Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1859–1941: A Concise Life

John C. G. Röhl

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

ix

*Contents*PART VI 1914–1918: THE CHAMPION OF GOD'S
GERMANIC CAUSE

25	The Kaiser's war aims	167
26	The impotence of the Supreme War Lord at war	172
27	Downfall: the collapse of the Hohenzollern monarchy	174

PART VII 1918–1941: THE VENGEFUL EXILE

28	A new life in Amerongen and Doorn	181
29	The rabid anti-Semite in exile	185
30	The Kaiser and Hitler	188

	<i>Notes</i>	195
--	--------------	-----

	<i>Index</i>	230
--	--------------	-----

Figures

1	Wilhelm on his tenth birthday	<i>page 5</i>
2	The ‘head-stretching machine’	7
3	Wilhelm with Queen Victoria on the Isle of Wight in August 1864	12
4	The ‘Doctor’: Georg Ernst Hinzpeter, Wilhelm’s civil governor	15
5	Wilhelm and his mother in 1876	23
6	Wilhelm and his bride, Princess Auguste Viktoria of Schleswig-Holstein, known as Dona	26
7	Wilhelm’s father, Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm, in January 1883	29
8	General Count Alfred von Waldersee	31
9	Prince Wilhelm of Prussia in London for his grandmother’s Golden Jubilee in June 1887	32
10	Oil portrait by Rudolf Wimmer of Kaiser Wilhelm II in the uniform of a British admiral of the fleet on the terrace of Osborne House in 1889	42
11	Before the storm: Kaiser Wilhelm II with Otta von Bismarck at Friedrichsruh in autumn 1888	46
12	Count (later Prince) Philipp zu Eulenburg-Hertefeld, the Kaiser’s best friend	47
13	Wilhelm II with his British relations and the newly engaged couple, Nicholas of Russia and Alix of Hesse, at Coburg in 1894	57
14	Wilhelm Imperator Rex: the Kaiser at the height of his personal power	61

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07225-1 - Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1859–1941: A Concise Life

John C. G. Röhl

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xi	<i>List of figures</i>	
15	The statesman as courtier: Bernhard von Bülow, foreign secretary 1897–1900, Reich Chancellor 1900–1909	66
16	The Kaiser making his ‘Hun speech’ in Bremerhaven on 27 July 1900	68
17	Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, Secretary of State at the Reich Navy Office 1897–1916	80
18	Kaiser Wilhelm II in England after the funeral of his grandmother, Queen Victoria, in February 1901, resplendent in his new uniform as a field marshal of the British army	81
19	The Admiral of the Atlantic meets the Admiral of the Pacific in the Baltic	84
20	The fraught ride through the streets of Tangier on 31 March 1905; the Kaiser’s saddle is held by Adjutant General von Plessen, just to be sure	88
21	Uncle and nephew: Edward VII and Wilhelm II in Kiel in June 1904	98
22	Philipp Eulenburg being carried on a stretcher from his hospital bed to the courtroom	105
23	The gathering storm: Winston Churchill with Wilhelm II at the ‘Kaiser manoeuvres’ of the German army in 1909	130
24	‘I’ll stand by you through thick and thin!’: Wilhelm II and his friend Archduke Franz Ferdinand at their crucial meeting at Springe in November 1912	137
25	The cousins Wilhelm II and George V at Potsdam for the wedding of Princess Viktoria Luise, the Kaiser’s daughter, on 24 May 1913, Queen Victoria’s birthday	140
26	Kaiser Wilhelm II with the advocates of war, Grand Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz and the chief of the General Staff, Helmuth von Moltke	146
27	Reich Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, in military uniform, with the foreign secretary, Gottlieb von Jagow, and Karl Helfferich of Deutsche Bank	147
28	Prince Heinrich of Prussia (standing, second from the left) at Maresfield in Sussex on Sunday 26 July 1914	158
29	‘Today we are all German brothers’: the Kaiser proclaims the outbreak of war from the balcony of the Berlin Schloss on 1 August 1914	161

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07225-1 - Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1859–1941: A Concise Life

John C. G. Röhl

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii	<i>List of figures</i>	
30	The ex-Kaiser with his second wife, Hermine von Schönaich-Carolath	184
31	Hermann Göring on one of his visits to the Kaiser at Doorn in 1932	189
32	Wilhelm as ‘the gardener of Doorn’	191
33	The wreath sent by the Führer, Adolf Hitler, for Wilhelm’s funeral at Doorn in June 1941	193

Acknowledgements

Figures 1, 5, 6 and 7 (Hessische Hausstiftung, Archiv und Bibliothek Schloss Fasanerie)

Figures 2, 3, 9, 10, 13 and 18 (The Royal Archives, © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II)

Figures 4, 17 and 20 (Ullstein Bilderdienst, Berlin)

Figure 8 (Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin)

Figure 11 (© Das Bundesarchiv)

Figures 12 and 28 (Author’s private collection)

Figure 14 (Radio Times Hulton / Getty images)

Figures 15 Eulenburg, Philipp zu, *Mit dem Kaiser als Staatsmann und Freund auf Nordlandsreisen*, Carl Reissner Verlag, Dresden

Figure 16 (Landesmedienzentrum Hamburg)

Figures 19 and 33 (J. A. de Jonge, Wilhelm II, Amsterdam 1986)

Figure 21 (*Illustrated London News* / Mary Evans)

Figure 22 (Maurice Baumont, L’Affaire Eulenburg, Geneva 1973)

Figure 23 (IWM London)

Figure 24 (Adolf von Achenbach, *Unser Kaiser: Fünfundzwanzig Jahre der Regierung Kaiser Wilhelms II.*, Stuttgart 1913)

Figures 25 and 29 (Viktoria Luise, Duchess of Brunswick-Lüneburg, *Bilder der Kaiserzeit*, Göttingen 1970)

Figures 26 and 27 (Süddeutsche Zeitung Photo)

Figure 30 (Brigitte von Klitzing)

Figure 31 (Nederlands Filmmuseum)

Figure 32 (Hulton Archive / Stringer / Getty images)

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07225-1 - Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1859–1941: A Concise Life

John C. G. Röhl

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface to the English edition*

This brief life of Kaiser Wilhelm II, Queen Victoria's eldest grandson, who led the powerful German Reich into the abyss of war in 1914, is based on some fifty years of original archival research, the results of which I have published, first in German and then in English, in three large volumes totalling some 4,000 pages.¹ The present book summarises the salient points of the much more detailed biography in miniaturised form and, while providing an interpretation of the last German emperor's personality and policy in its own right, can also be used as a vade mecum to the more substantial work by anyone wanting further information. The notes provide a guide to the relevant pages in the three-volume biography.

Inevitably, given the Kaiser's central role in the decision-making of his powerful empire, the book is also intended as a contribution to the current very lively centennial debate on the origins and nature of the First World War. When this slender book was published in Germany in 2013, historical scholarship had long since reached something of a consensus on the trajectory underlying German history from unification under Otto von Bismarck in 1871 to utter destruction under Adolf Hitler in 1945. In this generally accepted interpretation, the dynamic energy generated by the united Prusso-German empire at the heart of Europe was by the end of the nineteenth century perceived by its neighbours as an existential challenge to the European system of states, to which first France and Russia and then Great Britain responded by drawing closer together, eventually to form the Triple Entente – a development regarded in Germany in turn as 'encirclement' and increasingly as an unacceptable constraint on her rightful future development. To have managed this burgeoning 'German problem' would have

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07225-1 - Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1859–1941: A Concise Life

John C. G. Röhl

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiv

Preface to the English edition

required exceptional wisdom, restraint and tact on all sides, and particularly in Berlin – qualities that were spectacularly absent under the erratic personal military monarchy of Kaiser Wilhelm II. The root cause of the First World War (and, by extension, of the Second World War too) was thus seen to lie, by German historians as well as by British and American scholars, in this fundamental conflict between Germany's elemental drive for supremacy and the determination of Britain along with her continental partners to uphold the existing balance of power in Europe. The decision – which was to have such catastrophic consequences for everyone, and not least for Germany herself – of Kaiser Wilhelm II and his military and civilian advisers to use the growing antagonism between the moribund multinational Habsburg monarchy and her small irredentist South Slav neighbour Serbia in July 1914 as a pretext for a carefully prepared strike against first France and then Russia had all been meticulously documented, and an international consensus along these lines had been reached.²

In the past commemorative year this paradigm has been challenged, by a number of influential accounts of the origins of the First World War that tell a somewhat different narrative, preferring a horizontal (pan-European) rather than a vertical (Germanocentric) perspective in order to highlight the warlike tendencies present in all European societies by 1914, so focusing far less on the intentions of the rulers in Berlin.³ It is as if, after fifty years of preoccupation with Germany's (and to a lesser extent Austria-Hungary's) responsibility for the catastrophe, these historians are returning to the interpretation favoured in the 1920s and 1930s: that in the summer of 1914 the nations of Europe had unintentionally 'slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war', as David Lloyd George famously put it in his memoirs.⁴

These two versions of how and why the terrible European civil war of 1914–1918 occurred are not entirely mutually exclusive, for, of course, the policies of Germany's leaders cannot be understood in isolation – their mentalities and policies were very much a response to what was going on, and perceived to be going on, around them – and in this sense the new emphasis on Europe as a whole is invaluable. But, even so, there remains an irreducible conflict between the two paradigms. The view that in July 1914 the great

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07225-1 - Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1859–1941: A Concise Life

John C. G. Röhl

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xv

Preface to the English edition

powers all stumbled unwittingly into war like sleepwalkers, none of them more culpable for the disaster that ensued than the other, is in the end irreconcilable with the view that the Kaiser and his paladins conspired with their allies in Vienna deliberately to begin a war in what were deemed to be advantageous circumstances, with the aim of breaking out of the intolerable constraints of the so-called ‘concert of Europe’ in order to establish supremacy on the Continent before it was too late. In this latter interpretation, France, Russia, Great Britain and, of course, Serbia were fighting the war not for some wanton, incomprehensible reason but to safeguard their very existence – and paying an unimaginable price in the process, as they were to do again in the 1940s. It is my contention that the ‘slithering’ into the First World War thesis can be sustained only by the deliberate omission or marginalisation of much well-known, cast-iron evidence to the contrary, striking examples of which I cite in this life of the Kaiser.

Kaiser Wilhelm II, imperious, impulsive, imbued with antiquated notions of the divine right of kings and of Prussia/Germany’s God-given trajectory to greatness, while at the same time insecure and hypersensitive to perceived slights to his imperial dignity or his dynastic mission, was arguably the very last person who should have been entrusted with the immense powers of the Hohenzollern military monarchy at such a critical juncture in Germany’s and Europe’s history. Nevertheless, he stood at the apex of the Kaiserreich’s policy-making pyramid for thirty years, from his accession at the premature death from cancer of his father in June 1888 to his ignominious flight into exile in the Netherlands in November 1918. All the generals and admirals, chancellors, ministers and ambassadors who served under him were appointed by him and dependent on his ‘All-Highest favour’ while in office. Wilhelm followed events at home and abroad with a nervous intensity that on occasions bordered on insanity, issuing orders and covering diplomatic dispatches with often furious diatribes, which have survived in their thousands in the archives. His own words and deeds mark him out as in many respects a forerunner of Hitler, not least in his vitriolic anti-Semitism in exile. And it was of course he, Prussia’s Supreme War Lord, who, having on several occasions beforehand urged the Austrians to attack Serbia, gave the fateful order on the night of 3–4 July 1914 that led to disaster.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07225-1 - Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1859–1941: A Concise Life

John C. G. Röhl

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xvi

Preface to the English edition

This slender volume brings together some of the most striking evidence on Wilhelm's traumatic birth and upbringing, his accumulation of personal power after the dismissal of Prince von Bismarck in 1890 and his dangerous susceptibility to sycophantic flattery and backstairs intrigue, which left him and his court so vulnerable to scandal. Above all, the book traces the Kaiser's breathtaking ambition to lead his country to what he himself termed 'Napoleonic supremacy' – by peaceful means if possible, by war if necessary – that lay at the heart of the great European crisis of the first half of the twentieth century. Looking back at his own reign at the end of his life, the Kaiser in exile greeted Hitler's conquest of Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium and France in 1940 as the fulfilment of his own supremacist ambitions. In jubilation, he exclaimed in English to an American friend: 'The brilliant leading generals in this war came from *my* school, they fought under my command in the [First] World War as lieutenants, captains and 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.' His words speak for themselves.

JOHN RÖHL

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978-1-107-07225-1 - Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1859–1941: A Concise Life

John C. G. Röhl

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface to the German edition

Until not so very long ago Wilhelm II was dismissed as a *Schattenkaiser*, a shadowy figure without power and of little historical significance. The man who, as German emperor, King of Prussia and Supreme War Lord, ruled for thirty years (from 1888 to 1918) over the mighty Prusso-German Reich, at the heart of Europe, was largely ignored by German historians. None of them paid serious attention to this grandiloquent, sabre-rattling monarch with the provocative moustache in his shimmering eagle-helmeted uniform, who sacked Prince Bismarck, the founder of the German Reich, in 1890, built up a gigantic battlefleet against Britain, and in 1914 led his flourishing empire into the First World War. One does not need to be a Sherlock Holmes to get to the bottom of this startling omission: as treacherous as the silence pervading *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the taboo imposed on all mention of Wilhelm II during the Weimar Republic and the Nazi era was part of the campaign in German historiography to reject the ‘war guilt lie’ of Versailles. In the last three decades, however, our understanding of Kaiser Wilhelm II’s place in German history has gained infinitely more depth. His flawed personality, his angry view of the world, his autocratic methods as ruler and his ambitious naval and world power policies now stand at the heart of a lively debate over continuity and disruption in the history of the first German nation state from 1871 to 1945. Biographies saturated with new archival evidence have appeared, together with volumes of documents running to a thousand pages, scholarly editions of his speeches, monographs on his relationship with the armed forces and with religion, art, science, film and the world of industry and technology, and psychological and socio-anthropological examinations of his circle of friends or the scandal-ridden Hohenzollern

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07225-1 - Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1859–1941: A Concise Life

John C. G. Röhl

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xviii

Preface to the German edition

court; all these subjects have been put under the microscope. True, there is still work to do – very little attention has been paid to the evidence on Wilhelm in the Russian and French archives, for instance – and no general consensus has yet been reached: Wilhelm II continues to divide opinion. But anyone who honestly searches for the truth, rather than hankering after an idealised golden age, will find the scope for interpretation severely reduced by the proven facts. This volume attempts to summarise what we now know about the last German emperor and king of Prussia. The picture that emerges from all this research has grown several shades darker.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07225-1 - Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1859–1941: A Concise Life

John C. G. Röhl

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgements

Since this is an essayistic distillation of a lifetime's work on the Kaiser and Wilhelmine Germany, my debt of gratitude to all those friends, colleagues, archivists and critics who have helped to shape my views over the decades is far too great to be itemised here without defeating the book's chief purpose, which is concision. To all of them, and my family, I have expressed my appreciation in earlier volumes. For this slim book in particular I wish to thank the usual experts: my Lektor at the C. H. Beck Verlag, Dr Stefan von der Lahr, who, after guiding all three volumes of the major biography through to publication in Germany, suggested I write a very much briefer survey of Wilhelm II's life for the general reader; Sheila de Bellaigue, who, not content with having translated all of the second and most of the third volume of that massive biography into her elegant English, agreed to translate this short overview as well; and Douglas Matthews, master indexer of the monumental third volume, *Into the Abyss of War and Exile*, who has again worked his magic on this book to guide the reader through the maze of names, places and events. As ever, my thanks are also due to Isabel Hull, Ragnhild Fiebig-von Hase, Annika Mombauer and Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann for their unrivalled knowledge of the sources and their unstinting willingness to share their insights with me over very many years. Finally, I thank all the good people at Cambridge University Press, my English publishers now since 1982, including my copy-editor, Mike Richardson, for his forbearance in accommodating my whims, and my production editors, Caroline Mowatt and Amanda George, not least for tracking down the resplendent portrait of the young Kaiser by Ferdinand Keller that adorns the cover.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07225-1 - Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1859–1941: A Concise Life

John C. G. Röhl

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

*Overview: Wilhelm the Last,
a German trauma*

Kaiser Wilhelm II was born on 27 January 1859 in Berlin and died on 4 June 1941, at the age of eighty-two, in exile in the Netherlands. Chronologically, therefore, his life coincided almost exactly with the rise and fall of the first German nation state, which Bismarck founded through the wars of 1864, 1866 and 1870–1 and which came to a dire end with the catastrophe of the Second World War. Wilhelm II was anything but a silent spectator of the momentous events of his lifetime. From his accession in the so-called Year of the Three Kaisers in 1888 until his abdication and flight to the Netherlands on 9 November 1918 he ruled the German Reich and its hegemonial constituent state, the powerful military monarchy of Prussia, not only as its figurehead but in a very direct and personal manner. Indeed, given his parvenu insecurity, aggressively inverted into a superiority complex with an unbounded craving for acceptance, Wilhelm has seemed to some as a ‘representative individual’, a personification of the newly united German Reich.

However that may be, Wilhelm was not a dictator. He was always obliged to come to an accommodation with the incumbent Reich Chancellor and minister-president of Prussia, the Prussian Ministers of State, the Reich secretaries, the Reichstag and the Prussian parliament, as well as the allied governments of the other German kingdoms, grand duchies, duchies and free cities in the federation. Increasingly, too, public opinion, as expressed through political parties, churches, trade unions, special interest groups, pamphlets, press criticism and popular demonstrations, acted as something of a brake on his personal influence. But at the centre of power, and above all in the conduct of personnel, military, foreign and armaments policy, Kaiser Wilhelm’s was very much the determining voice

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07225-1 - Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1859–1941: A Concise Life

John C. G. Röhl

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xxi

Overview: Wilhelm the Last, a German trauma

until the decision to go to war in 1914 – a decision in which he took a leading part. It is true that during the First World War his role was quickly overshadowed by that of the generals, but even then he retained the last word on all matters of importance.

The young Wilhelm II inherited the basis of his power from his grandfather and father when he acceded to the throne on 15 June 1888, not long after his twenty-ninth birthday, for Bismarck had succeeded in preserving the ‘personal monarchy’ of the Hohenzollerns, as he boasted, from the ‘constitutional thumbscrews’ that had condemned the crowned heads of the monarchies of northern, western and southern Europe to being mere ‘signature machines’ under parliamentary control. Wilhelm went much further, however. Not only did he ‘drop the pilot’ – Bismarck – in 1890 so that he could take the wheel himself, but in the course of the 1890s he steadily built up his personal power to the most astonishing extent, secretly advised by his fawning favourite, Philipp Count zu Eulenburg-Hertefeld. At the same time, despite his wide-ranging interests and his undoubted gifts, this highly emotional and restless monarch quite simply lacked the sense of proportion, the judgment and the shrewdness to provide reliable leadership for what was rapidly becoming the most dynamic and powerful empire in Europe. His antiquated insistence on his divine right, his ostentatiously autocratic rule, his sabre-rattling militarism, his startling narcissism and the obsequious servility to which it gave rise at court (and even among the most senior public servants) all created the impression of a throwback to the eighteenth century, and were widely felt to be an affront to his own people. The scandals and crises that many had predicted at the very outset of his reign did not take long to materialise. Equally doomed to failure were Wilhelm’s sly attempts to use his blood relationship with the British royal family on the one hand and the Russian imperial family on the other in order to disguise his hegemonial ambitions in Europe. Via the Kruger telegram of 1896, the seizure of territory in north-eastern China in 1897, the battlefleet building programme initiated in 1898, the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–5, the first Moroccan crisis in 1905–6, the Bosnian annexation crisis of 1908–9, the Agadir crisis in 1911 and the two Balkan wars in 1912–13, the twisting road led finally into the abyss of the First World War.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07225-1 - Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1859–1941: A Concise Life

John C. G. Röhl

Frontmatter

[More information](#)xxii *Overview: Wilhelm the Last, a German trauma*

With his ignominious flight into exile in the Netherlands in November 1918, Kaiser Wilhelm lost every shred of influence over the formulation of German policy. He fought successfully against being handed over to be tried as a war criminal at a tribunal of the victorious powers, which would have condemned him, if not to the death penalty, then at least to banishment on Devil's Island or the Falklands or the Dutch East Indies. In the twenty-three years of his exile the embittered ex-Kaiser developed a paranoid racial delusion and an anti-Semitism so intense that it ranks with the savagery of the National Socialists' hate campaign against the Jews. He would have joined Hitler with all flags flying, had the Führer only been prepared to put him back on the throne. Thus the chapter on the Kaiser's powerless years in exile also provides a lesson on continuity in German history in the first half of the twentieth century. But let us begin at the beginning, with the fateful birth of the future sovereign on 27 January 1859.