



Kaiser Wilhelm II: A Concise Life

John C.G. Röhl

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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.

Kaiser Wilhelm II: A Concise Life Details

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From Reader Review Kaiser Wilhelm II: A Concise Life for online ebook

Jbondandrews says

Well he certainly had trauma as a child and the fact that Vicky could not love him must have greatly contributed to his behaviour in later life though it would seem he developed some bad traits of his own accord.

Diana says

Review to Come

Read as background material for a paper for a German history class.

Peter A. van Tilburg says

Extensively documented story on the life of Wilhelm II. Compared to the book of Christopher Clarke, *Sleepwalkers*, Röhl is much more negative on the role of the Kaiser based on his study of all sources. Wilhelm appeared to have the ideas of monarchy of a few hundred years before.

Dimitri says

Condensing 4,000 pages into a mere 250 is too concise to remain clear: those without prior knowledge of Wilhelm II, most popularly through his vignettes prior to the war, such as his thinly veiled threats to two successive kings of Belgium, will still come away with little more than the image of a sable-rattling buffoon...

Andrew says

John C.G. Rohl's "Kaiser Wilhelm II: A Concise Life," is a book obviously touching on the life and reign of Germany's last Hohenzollern monarch (and it's final monarch to date). Wilhelm II was a polarizing figure, often attributed to grandiose militancy and taste for autocratic rule in an age when many nations were moving toward democratization of their political systems.

Rohl's account of the Kaiser is brief, looking at his troubled birth and childhood, his limp arm (which plagued him for many years) and his rise and reign over the German nation through some of its most troubled years (WWI era).

Even so, Rohl handles the subject well and uses an unbiased approach to this case study. The book is much more focused on the political and historical details of the Kaisers reign, including who he kept around him, who he appointed to certain positions, and who he trusted (and did not trust).

All in all, this is an interesting and well crafted read on one of Germany's most controversial monarchs. The reader can see his obviously troubled upbringing, and the many situations that lead him down the road of autocracy, pettiness and ultimately incessant racism.

Recommended for fans of German/European history, or those who enjoy case studies on dictators and authoritarian figures.

Marie Hew says

Happy that this abbreviated volume exists, otherwise I would never have bothered with the 4,000-page original.

Learned about the broad strokes of Wilhelm II's personality flaws, militaristic fervor and goal of European domination. So glad that most monarchs don't have much power these days.

Mark Blei says

I really enjoyed this book it is definitely concise, but it very well touches on all the important issues and history . It's not as short as a short story, it's probably about 300 pages more or less (I was reading on my kindle) however compared other historical biographies that can go 1500 pages it's concise. The depressing part of this book Is exactly how many direct parallels there are between him and Donald Trump. They are very similar in nature and attitudes, which doesn't bode well for Americans, as an example is this letter which I copied

“Wilhelm II takes everything personally. Only personal arguments make any impression on him. He likes to give advice to others but is unwilling to take it himself.

He cannot stand boredom; ponderous, stiff excessively thorough people get on his nerves and cannot get anywhere with him. Wilhelm II wants to shine and to do and decide everything himself.

What he wants to do himself unfortunately often goes wrong. He loves glory, he is ambitious and jealous.

To get him to accept an idea one has to pretend the idea came from him.

Never forget that his majesty needs praise from time to time. He is the sort of person who becomes sullen unless he is given recognition from time to time by someone of importance.

You will always be able to accomplish whatever you wish so long as as you do not omit to express your appreciation when his majesty deserves it.

He is grateful for it like a good clever child. If one remains silent when he deserves recognition, he

eventually see malevolence in it.

We two will always carefully observe the boundaries of flattery.

Letter from Phillip Eulenberg to Bernhardt Von Bülow regarding Kaiser Wilhelm II"

Jill Meyer says

German historian John CG Rohl has written "Kaiser Wilhelm II: A Concise Life". When I ordered it, I didn't know just how "concise" the book was, but after reading it, I realised that it was exactly what I was looking for. The book is relatively brief, but Rohl does an excellent job in distilling Wilhelm's life to manageable size without leaving much out.

Wilhelm II was a problem-child who grew into a problem-adult. He was born with a withered arm - the result of a difficult birth - and suffered emotionally and physically. His mother - the eldest child of Queen Victoria - was cold to him and Wilhelm intensely disliked her his whole life. He was given a good education but concentrated on military issues. He considered himself a "warrior", despite his physical handicaps. Wilhelm came to power in his late 20's when his father, Frederick, died soon after assuming the throne on his father's death. He was an undisciplined ruler; often asking and then disregarding advise from people who knew far more than he did about the military and economics and politics.

Most of the Rohl's book centers on the pre-WW1 and war years. Wilhelm had been preparing for war against Russia, France, and England since the late 1800's. The Balkans - that "tinderbox" - had been waiting to explode long before the Austrian heir Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in June, 1914. Building up his army and navy, as well as his delusions of what he wanted after defeating England and France and Russia, Wilhelm was outplayed in the Great War. He abdicated and went into exile in the Netherlands in 1918. He lived until 1941 and was a great proponent of Hitler and his Nazis.

John Rohl's shortish book gives you a good look at Wilhelm. But if you'd like a longer book, order his three-set volume of Wilhelm's life. That set of books has 3884(!) pages and is available on Amazon/UK. I think this "concise" version might be more "doable".

F. X. says

Excellent summarized version of Rohl's massive multi-volume, 4000 page biography of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Rohl clearly disagrees with Christopher Clark regarding the culpability of the Kaiser in starting World War I. Very interesting quick read.

Joel says

Too short! May need to also check out Rohls three volume biography. An anachronism in an age of emerging democratic rule he dreamed of a German Empire and autocratic rule. Sarajevo was a convenient excuse rather than an accidental trigger for a war.

Jean Mehochko says

As the title says, it was concise, but I learned quite a bit from it. Note that it was translated from German, so I felt the author had a different viewpoint from other biographies of Wilhelm II that I've read. I liked the writing style.

Geoff says

Like some other reviewers, I find this biography a little too concise. Certain events - notably the 1st Moroccan Crisis, the Kruger Telegram, the Daily Telegraph Crisis - seem to assume knowledge of the reader beyond what is on the page.

I have been reading extensively on WW1 and wanted to expand my knowledge of this key figure. Although this book helped, I still feel I would have been better served by 400-500 pgs not 250. I'm not prepared to tackle 4000 pgs in 3 volumes.

Debra says

Wilhelm has long been viewed as rather unbalanced and largely blamed for the Great War starting in 1914. That is reflected here, but most interesting to me is the info on his childhood, and the treatment (torture, really) for his stunted, useless arm, which had been damaged in childbirth.

One can't help but wonder how this informed his personality and different he may have been absent that experience.

Gumble's Yard says

Short single volume summary of a lengthy multiple volume study - which therefore addresses the key issue with almost all historical non-fiction of the length being much longer than is of interest to the general reader.

The brevity means that some elements are not fully explained - especially for example the history of German unification and the German system and at other times the account concentrates on the role of the Kaiser in an incident rather than the incident itself, however on this basis this works very well as a complement to other accounts and additional detail can easily be sourced elsewhere.

Roehl's portrayal of the Kaiser based on extensive research of his own writings, marginal notes and the contemporaneous accounts of others is not a pretty one. Inevitably influenced by his upbringing: physically handicapped and with an English mother who reacted to this handicap with disappointment and the imposition of a severe physical and teaching regime, he reacted against his parents' liberal views to believe absolutely in his divine rights and develop a reactionary approach to monarchy which Roehl says even contemporaries felt more suited to the 17th or 18th century than the Germany and world situation of the early 20th century.

Roehl casts severe doubts on the Kaiser's mental sanity and again sets out that many (for example those around him as well as leaders of competing countries) had the same doubts at the time, particularly around his pronouncements on and schemes for foreign policy.

In the build up to war Roehl paints a slightly more nuanced position - the Kaiser at crucial points acted as a break on war especially when fearing that Britain might intervene, so as to maintain their alliance.

Roehl's contention is that the war party around the Kaiser (all of whom the Kaiser personally appointed for their views) withheld crucial information from him at key points in 1914 and/or downplayed the strength of British conviction, allowing the Kaiser to fool himself that with what he believed to be his excellent understanding of and respect by the British he would be able to persuade them against intervening on the behalf of the fundamentally declining Slavic and Latin races in what the Kaiser believed to be a racial struggle with the up and coming Anglo Saxon races.

Finally Roehl makes it clear that in his view the Kaiser was a rabid anti-Semite and expansionist despot, determined to impose German hegemony in Europe even late on in the First World War, that the Kaiser saw Hitler as achieving what he had failed to achieve (due to the frustrations of the system around him) in the First World War and that the First World War was as much an existential battle for England as the Second World War. Several times even in the condensed volume Roehl refers to the revisionist review of German war guilt encapsulated in *Sleepwalkers* how Europe went to war in 1914, and states firmly that such a view can only be held by deliberate obfuscation of some critical pieces of evidence.

Overall an excellent book due to the combination of brief focused chapters and strongly argued opinions evidenced from primary material.

Stewart Cotterill says

A reminder of the excesses and fragility of mind of the last Kaiser and his autocratic exercise of power which would ultimately lead to his downfall.

A good book to read to refresh the memory of books read in the past, to keep the interest in Late 19th century/early 20th century alive.

Frightening to read that the Kaiser wrote about a United States of Europe as his ultimate aim.
