UDC 930.85(4–12) ISSN 0350–7653

SERBIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES AND ARTS
INSTITUTE FOR BALKAN STUDIES

BALCANICA
XLVI

ANNUAL OF THE INSTITUTE FOR BALKAN STUDIES

BELGRADE
2015

ry great-power pretensions as elaborated in its Balkan policy. From this perspective, they appear to have been more offensive and expansionist, and a crucial reason for Austria-Hungary's staying in the war.[5]

Bled's concluding remarks in the melancholy tone of Zweig's *The World of Yesterday* offer a reflection on Austria-Hungary's fate: although it disappeared in 1918, the Monarchy was by no means artificial. Its historical existence was a "European necessity", "a factor of European balance". Its difficulties of transformation, accumulated problems, progressive agony in the First World War and ultimate dissolution left "a gap at the heart of Europe". Briefly, Jean-Paul Bled wrote a balanced, thoughtful and well-documented book based on his great knowledge and fine analysis. Being an important contribution to the historiography on Austria-Hungary, its translation into Serbian and other languages of the former Danubian Empire would be very welcome.

[5] Marvin Benjamin Fried, *Austro-Hungarian War Aims in the Balkans during World War I* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

John C. G. Röhl, *Kaiser Wilhelm II 1859–1941: A Concise Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 261 p.

Reviewed by Miloš Vojinović*

To say that John C. G. Röhl is an expert in German history would probably be an understatement. His latest book *Kaiser Wilhelm II 1859–1941: A Concise Life*[1] under review here comes after half a century of research into Wilhelmine Germany. After the publication of his three-volume biography of the last German emperor,[2] Röhl decided to do something that historians are not always willing to do: he accepted to make an abridged version and to condense more than 4,000 pages of his magnum opus into a book of less than 300 pages.

When Röhl started his research into Kaiser Wilhelm II in the 1960s the reputation of biography as a historiographical genre was in bruises. The golden days of the great man theory were long gone and the historical science was being shaped by influences coming from other disciplines with their spotlight on the significance of structures and quantification. Social history was gaining momentum and classical political biography was sidelined. Some even expected that historians would become computer programmers.[3]

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[1] Serbian edition: Džon Rel, *Kajzer Vilhelm* (Belgrade: Filip Višnjić, 2015).

[2] The three-volume biography of Kaiser Wilhelm was first published in Germany by C. H. Beck, Munich, and then followed its English edition by Cambridge University Press: *Wilhelm II: Die Jugend des Kaisers 1859–1888* (1993)=*Young Wilhelm: The Kaiser's Early Life 1859–1888* (1998); *Wilhelm II: Der Aufbau der Persönlichen Monarchie 1888–1900* (2002)=*Wilhelm II: The Kaiser's Personal Monarchy 1888–1900* (2004); *Wilhelm II: Der Weg in den Abgrund 1900–1941* (2008)=*Wilhelm II: Into the Abyss of War and Exile 1900–1941* (2014).

[3] R. J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2000[1997]),

Throughout his book, as if he chose to offer a veiled methodological background, Röhl suggests that biography writing is not only justifiable but also that the focus on Kaiser Wilhelm II is crucial for understanding the history of the German Empire in the last years of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth century. This book is not the portrait of just another ruler. It is the biography of an emperor who, as Röhl undoubtedly shows, was the locus of power in the country, who dictated the course of foreign policy and who chose his prime ministers, ministers, chiefs of the general staff and navy commanders. It becomes evident to the reader that Röhl wrote the biography of a ruler whose importance and significance had no match among his European royal counterparts or heads of states. If Bismarck, in his time, had feared that the Hohenzollern king would be reduced to a machine for singing documents,[4] Wilhelm II proved that such fears had been needless.

From the first chapters the author's attention is focused on the formation and evolution of Wilhelm's attitude towards crucial political questions, such as the question of the appropriate way of governing and his own role as a ruler. In the second section of his book, *1888–1909: The Anachronistic Autocrat*, especially in the chapter "Divine right without end", Röhl offers his judgment on Wilhelm II's ruling style: "The conception of the divine monarchical principle that the young Wilhelm had absorbed, not least as a counterweight to his parents' liberal ideas, belonged to the eighteenth century, to the era before the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and Napoleon" (p. 41).

Depicting the era after Bismarck in his *Diplomacy*, Henry Kissinger titled the chapter "*Realpolitik* turns on itself". Similarly, Röhl believes that it was Bismarck who "had put an axe to the roots not only of his own position of power but also of the entire Reich structure he had built up. By ignoring the constitutional aspirations and the centuries-old experience of Europe, he had opened the door to arbitrary rule, sycophantic favouritism and strutting militarism at the court of Hohenzollerns" (p. 41).

In the following chapters, "The establishment of the Kaiser's personal monarchy 1890–1897" and "The Chancellor as courtier: the corrupt Bülow system 1897–1909", the author shows how the Kaiser established his personal rule over the years. The third section *1896–1908: The egregious expansionist* focuses on the ever more important questions of foreign policy and the growing antagonism between the countries ruled by the late Queen Victoria's son and grandson: Great Britain and Germany.

In the chapter about the Bosnian crisis Röhl writes that Wilhelm, even though initially dissatisfied with the Austrian decision to annex Bosnia and Herzegovina, eventually changed his mind and supported Austria-Hungary until the very end of the crisis. Röhl believes that a European war was only avoided due to Russia's diplomatic withdrawal in the spring of 1909. Wilhelm learned two lessons from the Bosnian crisis: he came to believe that cooperation with Austria-Hungary would bear fruit and that Great Britain would not get involved in the European conflict that would start in the Balkans.

Perhaps John Röhl's greatest contribution to the historiography on the First World War is an insight into both how close to war Europe was in Novem-

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21; P. Burke, *History and Social Theory* (London: Polity Press, 2005[1992]), 34.

[4] *German Diplomatic Documents: Volume 1: Bismarck's Relations with England 1871–1890* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1928), 366.

ber and December 1912 and how these events put an illuminating light on understanding the events from the summer of 1914. The chapters "Turmoil in the Balkans and a first decision for war (November 1912)" and, especially, "War postponed: the 'war council' of 8 December 1912" outline the reasoning behind the Kaiser's decisions and point to the striking similarities between the July crisis and the crisis of November and December 1912. Both in 1912 and in 1914 an Austrian emissary was sent to Berlin to request German support for war against Serbia. In both cases, the Kaiser initially granted the request. It was the Kaiser's fear of Britain's involvement in war that had inclined him to revoke his support in early December 1912.[5] Although Wilhelm had never looked forward to the prospect of a confrontation with the British navy, the fears he had had in 1912 did not have the same effect in the 1914.

The Kaiser's only dilemma was what Great Britain would do should a European war break out. What can also be said is that Britain was the only power that Wilhelm did not want to have as Germany's enemy. Röhl points to the fact that even few weeks before the Sarajevo Assassination Wilhelm was eager to find out what stance London would take in case of a war between Austria-Hungary and Russia. Röhl believes that Wilhelm "bears a heavy responsibility – perhaps the heaviest overall – for having brought about Europe's great catastrophe" (p. 163). He also believes, and he offers strong arguments for his view, that the July crisis marked the point when the Kaiser's authority began to erode. His officers were upset because of his volatility and they were determined to keep him away from Berlin until his presence was needed for signing mobilisation orders.

In the author's view, until the August of 1916, when Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff took command, the Kaiser still had a decisive influence in several fields, but his influence was diminishing. The collapse of Germany in the autumn of 1918 meant that the Hohenzollern monarchy was doomed. On 10 November 1918 the Kaiser was on his way to the Netherlands, where he was granted asylum. On 29 November he renounced "for all time his rights to the Crown of Prussia and thereby the right to the German Imperial Crown bound to it" (p. 181).

Despite the fact that thanks to the Weimar Republic Wilhelm lived a life without financial worries, and he kept ownership of numerous family estates in Germany, he called the new Germany the "swinish" republic. Wilhelm never stopped thinking of returning to Germany and even hoped that Adolf Hitler would restore him to the throne. He greeted the news about the Munich Agreement. In 1939 he glorified the invasion of Poland, and a year later congratulated Hitler on his conquest of France. The last German emperor died on 4 June 1941.

John Röhl is an experienced chronicler and his style and sentence fluency make this book a very pleasant read. The book is an authoritative overview of the life and times of one of the most important figures in European history at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Having read it, one is tempted to take in all 4,000 pages of the unabridged three-volume biography.

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[5] See also J. C. G. Röhl, "'*Jetzt oder nie!*' The Resurgence of Serbia and Germany's first 'blanque cheque' of November 1912", in *The Serbs and the First World War*, ed. D. Živojinović (Belgrade: SASA, 2015), 57–78.