



The Last Kaiser: The Life of Wilhelm II

Giles MacDonogh

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Prussia's last king and Germany's last Kaiser was born in Potsdam on January 27, 1859, the son of Prince Frederick of Prussia and Princess Vicky, Queen Victoria's eldest child. William was born with a withered arm and suffered from cerebral palsy; many historians have sought in this clue a clue to his behavior later in life. He was believed mad by some, eccentric by others. Possessed of a ferocious temper, he was prone to reactionary statements, often contradicted by his next action or utterance. He was rumored to have sired numerous illegitimate children and yet was by all appearances a prig. A severe Calvinist tutor brought him up, but his entourage spoiled him, allowing him to win at games and maneuvers to compensate for his deformities. This gave him a sense of inherent invincibility.

William became Kaiser at age twenty-nine. Two years later, he drove Bismarck out after the latter had blocked his social policy. He destabilized the Iron Chancellor's foreign policy by failing to renew the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia, a decision that opened the way for Russia's alliance with France in 1894. He denied that the fleet he built was targeted at Britain, but there is evidence that German domination of the seas was the aim of William's secretary of state, who was altogether less anxious to please the British than the grandson of Queen Victoria. William idolized the Queen. As soon as he heard she was dying, he rushed to Osbourne House to be at her bedside. His own daughter later said, "The Queen of England died in the arms of the German Kaiser."

William II is widely perceived as a warmonger who seemed to delight in power grabbing, blood-shed, and the belligerent aims of his staff, yet the image he carved out for himself and posterity was that of "emperor of peace." William has historically been blamed for World War I, although he made real efforts to prevent the conflict. He has been branded an anti-Semite, but ironically the Nazis wrote him off as a "Jew-lover." In this fascinating, authoritative new biography, MacDonogh, widely praised for his life of Frederick the Great, takes a fresh look at this complex and contradictory statesman and the charges against him to find that many can no longer be upheld.

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