

Germany in the Age of Kaiser Wilhelm II

(Studies in European History)

Basingstoke, London, New York:
Macmillan Press UK (now Palgrave), co-published by St. Martin's Press USA, 1996

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Abstract

This book uses a dual approach to introduce students and non-specialists to Wilhelmine Germany (1888-1918). It surveys social, economic, political, cultural, and diplomatic developments in an age of tumultuous upheaval. Yet it also explains why historians have so often reversed the interpretative 'switches' guiding research on this period. By highlighting the breadth of historical change under Wilhelm II, stressing the evolution of opposing viewpoints about its significance, and explaining why new research is keeping the Wilhelmine age exciting as a field of study, this book helps the non-specialist reader to reflect critically on discrepancies between standard textbook accounts and a growing body of specialized literature. It thus provides easy access to an epoch – and a debate – characterized more by controversy than consensus.

Key developments in the Wilhelmine era have often been read backwards from the disaster of Nazism after 1933. Bismarck also casts a long shadow on the period. This book nonetheless seeks to consider the Wilhelmine age as meaningful and comprehensible in its own right. An overview of Germany's economic and social transformation provides the basis for an examination of the rise of mass politics and new currents in cultural life. The deep divisions of German society and politics are also examined in the light of new research, partly in order to consider whether they led to political polarization, stalemate, and the decision for war in 1914.

This book uses straightforward prose to translate complicated historical debates into clear and understandable language. Simple charts allow the reader to gain an overview of important statistical trends. A detailed map illustrates the federal structure of the Empire. And references in the text are keyed to an up-to-date bibliography of 300 books and articles, which offers a wide range of starting points for further reading.